RuralRevive – Building a Desert-Based Economy
‘RuralRevive – Building a Desert-based Economy’ is an initiative of the Wolwedans Foundation’s ‘Vision 2030 – The AridEden Project,’ which fosters sustainable tourism and conservation based on a business philosophy that balances people, planet and profit. Since 1992, Wolwedans has been part of a habitat conservation drive that resulted in the consolidation of 17 former farms and ranches to create the NamibRand Nature Reserve, a 200,000 ha private reserve dedicated to restoring southwest Namibia’s biodiversity. Five low-impact ecotourism sites in the Reserve generate revenue to ensure its economic sustainability and jobs to ensure a brighter future for the region’s remote communities.

RuralRevive focuses on the marginalised Nama community of Maltahöhe District to the east of NamibRand Nature Reserve. Extended drought as a result of climate change, as well as the collapse of the sheep farming industry, have hastened Maltahöhe’s economic decline. Social upheaval, in the form of rural exodus and hopelessness, has ensued.

Guided by the ‘5Cs’ of the AridEden Project – Conservation, Community, Commerce, Culture, and Consciousness – RuralRevive has developed an inclusive, multifaceted, and resilient economic diversification concept to integrate community members into the destination’s sustainable tourism activities. Special emphasis has been placed on empowering Maltahöhe’s women, smallholder farmers, and entrepreneurs. Meeting the demands of tourists to the iconic Namib Desert will drive RuralRevive’s success, and will link the ‘have-nots’ with the ‘haves’ of the commercial tourism sector, bridging the wealth gap.

The Julius Baer Foundation has made it possible for RuralRevive to launch five ‘work packages’ in Maltahöhe that focus on skills development and economic empowerment.
development, knowledge transfer, and establishing the necessary infrastructure to create jobs and entrepreneurial opportunities:

- a laundry service powered by renewable energy and equipped with a wastewater recycling facility;
- a distribution hub, known as ‘The Barn’;
- capacity building in horticulture and organic food production methods for youth and local resettlement farmers;
- ‘EconoMix’ training in business basics for horticulture entrepreneurs; and
- networking, advocacy, and communications to create local market awareness and buy-in.

Sustainable waste management, including recycling and up-cycling, will be a natural next step for this project.

Resilience and Replicability

By design, RuralRevive is intended as a blueprint for transparent, replicable economic revitalisation of communities across Namibia and perhaps even the continent. It begins by:

- identifying entry-level/lower-skill opportunities that can serve as the foundation for future economic development;
- building capacity in key areas; and
- ensuring linkage with an existing market demand.

RuralRevive’s innovative, holistic approach aims to demonstrate that simple, accessible skills and livelihood opportunities can sustainably reduce wealth inequality.

Facts and figures: Namibia

The Republic of Namibia is ranked second in the world when it comes to the income inequality between rich and poor. This is perhaps most evident in rural districts, particularly in Maltahöhe, which is home to both Wolwedans and the targeted participants of RuralRevive. Data from outreach programs in 2018–19 and regular consultation with community leaders, educators, and the Town Council of Maltahöhe have provided further insight into the extent and impact of unemployment amongst community members (most of whom are historically disadvantaged persons):

- With an overall population of approximately 6,500 people, only an estimated 500 people have meaningful employment and with few business or industrial activities, opportunities arise very infrequently. COVID has further exacerbated this unfortunate situation.
- In addition to extreme rates of unemployment, Maltahöhe suffers from ‘youth drain’, whereby young people leave the rural community for urban centres in search of work, and often ending up eking out a living in the most destitute of circumstances.
- Longer-term implications include the erosion of the community’s social fabric and disappearance of local knowledge and traditions.

For more information about The AridEden Project and RuralRevive, visit arideden.org.

“Sustainability was infused into our DNA from the word ‘go’.”

Stephan Brückner, Chairman, Wolwedans Foundation

Julius Baer Foundation

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