

NELSON MANDELA
UNIVERSITY

A black and white photograph of a person wearing a wide-brimmed hat, seen from behind, standing in a field of tall corn plants. The person is looking out over the field towards a cloudy sky. The corn stalks are tall and dense, with some leaves showing signs of being eaten or damaged.

MANDELA UNIVERSITY FOOD SYSTEMS NEWSLETTER

DECEMBER 2021 | ISSUE TWO

CONVERGING ENGAGEMENT AND TEACHING & LEARNING

WHAT WE LEARNED WHILE COLLABORATING TO RETHINK VISUAL STORYTELLING

by Nicole Collier-Naidoo, Nandipha Ntengenyana and Ntombovuyo Linda



Over the course of September and October 2nd and 3rd year Graphic Design and Photography students visited the five local Community Kitchens, accompanied by Photography and Design lecturers, and members of the HoC and Ikhala Trust. Here, 3rd year Photography student, Shuaib Agnew, shows youngsters in Booyens Park the pictures he has taken.

Photo: Jade Williams (Photography 3rd year)

In its relatively short existence, the Hubs of Convergence[1] (HoC) has encountered some of the most inspirational community projects: people and initiatives that would restore one's faith in humanity yet are almost invisible to anyone beyond their immediate location. How is it that this work can begin to be represented with the care and admiration it deserves?

This is the question the HoC team had been pondering as they received and shared the few pictures that were available to document their collaborations.

At the same time, Nii Botchway, Glenn Meyer, and their colleagues in Graphic Design and Photography were searching for ways to

connect their students' learning to meaningful real-world initiatives. While Design sought to add engagement projects to the predominantly corporate-focused curriculum, Photography found that their efforts to resume engagements with local communities and projects was made impossible during the COVID-19 pandemic.

While the pandemic has created extra pressures for universities, and limited students' access to in-person learning environments, it has also laid bare the precariousness of the livelihoods of so many people worldwide. Our university's response to the crisis was manifold and sought to shift resources towards initiatives which would not only respond to some of the most urgent issues, but also contribute towards building resilience for the longer term. In the Community Convergence Workstream[2], for example, Mandela University has made efforts to lean in towards its communities to better understand their needs and to co-construct mutual and

reciprocal programmes responding to these needs.

It was one of the initiatives within this workstream that provided an opportunity for convergence between community groups and NGO partners working with the HoC, and the Graphic Design and Photography Programmes in the Department of Visual Arts. An opportunity to explore the possibilities for collaborative, interdisciplinary and mutually beneficial work that connects the worlds of teaching and learning with those of engagement. Seen through the lens of Mandela University's Vision 2030, this collaboration signifies an important moment of converging strategic focus areas (see Figure 1).

The particular initiative is the Sustainable Food Relief project, in which the HoC has worked with local NGO, Ikhala Trust, and six community groups to support the development of



In Moeggesukkel, on the outskirts of Kariega, community members provide hot meals, a safe place for children to play and learn, and tend a vegetable garden. Here they are shown holding an alternative fire extinguisher called FireKilla, as part of a pilot project alongside a local SMME, as well as Mandela University's eNtsa, Emergency Medical Services and the HoC.

Photo: Dion Nonyane (Photography 3rd year).



We brought with us the ingredients for Umpokoqo with Amasi and Imifino and concluded our visits with a shared meal – a valuable moment to connect and debrief.

Preparing imifino at Kuyga, Greenbushes.

Photo: Diana Lendrum (Photography 3rd year)

“The Community Kitchen provides an opening towards an alternative: an invitation to the table, to eat, yes, but perhaps more so to imagine and to bring about together, a new system premised on the foundation of a dignified life for every one of us.”

Community Kitchens in Moeggessukel (Kariega), Jacksonville, Booyens Park, Wells Estate and Kuyga (Greenbushes). This exploration has been made possible by funding from the Mandela University Convergence Fund, and has involved both material support and capacity-building. It is an ongoing process of clarification, shaped by

our engagements and our reflections.

The “Community Kitchen” speaks to the reimagination of soup kitchens as more than just sites of charitable food aid, but dynamic, community-owned, problem-solving spaces, distinguished by their collective, solidaristic nature and the empowered effort to use existing assets and resources to address local challenges. One might say that Community Kitchens as concept are premised on the notion of food as a powerful connector which strengthens community relationships. Indeed, the need for such spaces is itself a critique of a system defined by massive hunger for many in the face of an abundance of food (and concomitant waste) for a few. The Community Kitchen provides an opening towards an alternative: an invitation to the table, to eat, yes, but perhaps more so to imagine and to bring about together, a new system premised on the



Unathi Meslane (right) from Ikhala Trust chats to Bulelwa Sinethemba Phathikhala, who grows vegetables amidst herbs and fruit trees, in her front and back gardens, and is one of the network of home food growers connected to the community kitchen in Kuyga, Greenbushes.

Photo: Yente Retief (Photography 3rd year).

foundation of a dignified life for every one of us. This collaborative work, we realised, provided fertile ground for exploring how the University – and these disciplines in particular - could contribute towards the Community Kitchen as material space and as concept.

What we have learned thus far:

- Careful consideration of the ways in which this work impacts on and benefits each collaborating member is essential. Reciprocity - as a key principle guiding the work of the HoC - emphasises the exchanging of co-created knowledge and resources through the principles of generosity, solidarity, co-creation, responsiveness, and inclusion for the mutual benefit of all stakeholders.
- Moments of convergence like this are the product of numerous preceding interactions and engagements that build relationships
- Willingness to embrace uncertainty is so important: for the academics, in particular, and even students to some extent, the willingness to adjust curricular plans, schedules and expectations and to accommodate changing variables is valuable.
- For the students, this has allowed an opportunity to learn about the conceptual underpinnings of the HoC's particular approach to engagement as an expression of aspects of the University's Vision 2030. It has allowed students to meet

between the University and its partners in NGOs and CBOs, between university entities, and even with the students who will be involved. These take time and commitment, and flourish within an ongoing cycle of stakeholder engagement, action and reflection.



Breaking new ground at Moeggesukkel.

Photo: Hannah Rumbelow (Photography 2nd year).

and collaborate with their peers after close to two years of pandemic-induced isolation and provided an opportunity for collaborative shared outcomes between not only the Photography and Graphic Design Bachelor of Visual Arts students, but between other entities in the University, and outside of it.

- Participating students have demonstrated a genuine interest in connecting themselves and their learning to the real-life experiences of communities, which they too both belong to.

An unexpected opportunity emerged following this, when we were invited to a workshop by Mandela University Post-Doc, Dr Busisiwe Lujabe. This workshop gathered together the members of Yizani Sakhe, other members of the Wells Estate community, along with a number of students from a variety of disciplines and staff members from the University, Ikhala Trust, and a representative of the NMB Municipality. It was simultaneously a celebration of transdisciplinary possibilities for co-creating solutions as it was a brainstorming session responding to the scourge of hunger afflicting marginalised communities.

This was an invaluable moment of convergence, presenting a deep learning opportunity for

every person in the room, to understand something about different areas of study and what they could offer to this effort to improve food security, about the work and the visions of different entities within the University, about what socially meaningful post-doctoral research can look like, and about how the municipality relates to this work. Most valuably, it was an opportunity for the community members of Wells Estate to hear and respond to other stakeholders ideas and offering, to challenge all of us to turn ideas into practical possibilities.

For the Hubs of Convergence, this is no less than an opportunity to explore what it means to be a university in service of society.

The Hubs of Convergence extends deep appreciation to our community partners and the students and staff at the School of Visual and Performing Arts for their commitment and dedication for making this project a creative success.

[1] The Hubs of Convergence (HoC) is located within the Engagement and Transformation Portfolio

[2] A workstream consisting of projects located within various ETP (what is ETP?) units, coordinated by Hubs of Convergence



Figure 1



Ntombozuko Mdingi, a member of Yizani Sakhe in Wells Estate

Photo: Azola Fumba (Photography 3rd year)