

*In the lead up to International Women's Day on 8 March, we are profiling some of the women involved in EU projects in South Africa who make a difference in their communities.*

### **Chrisma Bredenkamp**

Chrisma Bredenkamp was born in Cape Town and worked for Sasol for 15 years as a systems analyst before deciding to take on the management of a fruit factory just outside Tzaneen two years ago. "The model wasn't working here and the government asked me to come and change the model. So I did," she explains of the factory which was previously extracting oil from nuts for use in the cosmetics industry, "It was not sustainable and the community was not benefitting from it. So I looked at the model and thought – what does the community have? Fruit."

Funded as part of a Development Cooperation Programme between the Department of Science and Technology and the EU, the factory now produces dried and pulped mango and guava products. Not only does Chrisma buy the fruit directly from the community and small-scale farmers, she also employs many local people to work in the factory itself.

"The first year I went into the community to tell them what I was doing, now they just come and line up outside my gate," Chrisma explains, "The best part is that they start talking to you so you become friends".



Chrisma believes that the secret to her success was to reassess the business model on which the factory was operating and that the same needs to be done in many rural businesses. "This

is a first and now this factory is one of the biggest in SA," she explains, "Last year we produced the most pulp in the valley, now I want to export 60/70 tonnes to Europe."

Chrisma maintains that the heart of the business is the local community and believes she is living out her purpose there helping people, "It's about job creation and skills transfer," she says, "It must be about people. You can't change the world but you can make a difference".

Chrisma says that she has never experienced as much love as she has in the community who have nicknamed her Javusa (meaning fast in Shangaan). "It's because I talk fast, I walk fast, I work fast," she laughs, "But I love it, this is my home".



The mango season lasts 107 days and during that time local people line up outside the factory waiting to sell their mangoes to Chrisma. She has also created hubs in other communities where locals can bring their mangoes and trucks then take them to the factory. "The community bring the mangoes, everyone – men, women and children," she says, "They come every day and I pay fair trade. I'm not buying a person, I'm buying a fruit so I buy from everyone."

Chrisma is concerned that in the near future there will not be enough mangoes for production and so also makes sure trees get planted in the community. "We use everything, even the pips – I put them in compost and grow trees which I give to the community for free to plant and that comes back to the factory," she explains, "It's about sustainability and teaching people that [the trees] are assets".



Production at the factory has gone from strength to strength and Chrisma has great plans for it in the near future. "In 2013 we made R379 000, last year R7 million, this year we're chasing R20 million," she explains, "At the moment I have orders for 100 tons but I can only export 20 tons because of lack of equipment. So next year I will build a bigger factory. I can grow this to six times the size and employ six times more people. It's not charity, not a hand out, it's very hard work". Chrisma knows first-hand how hard the work is, putting in 18 hour days during mango season. "You won't see CEO's at other companies looking like this," she laughs wiping down her overalls, "But we're a team".



Chrisma takes great pride in employing people from the local community and 80% of her workforce is women. "It takes lots of mentorship and patience, that's the biggest challenge but also the biggest fulfilment," she says, "You've got to give people ownership and make them responsible for their own achievements. That works the best".

Chrisma maintains a database of workers and a lot of her time is spent training and mentoring her staff. "The staff changes a lot, some go to other places, some also get too sick to work," she says, "Whenever people come to ask for work, I put their details in the database and contact them when I need them".



There is a special place at work where Chrisma visits when she feels overwhelmed and needs motivation – the first fridge they had in the factory. "When I started here they said if I could fill this fridge with 35 drums in a season I would be doing well and we just managed it," she says looking at it proudly, "Now we're filling 100 times this fridge every day".