

VICE CHANCELLOR'S DISTINGUISHED AWARD
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The engaged research project into climate change and adaptation in rural contexts - where vulnerability is exacerbated by multiple stressors - undertaken by the group involved the participating communities of Lessyton and Willowvale from the conceptualisation stages of the project, and the research project was named Jongaphambili Sinethemba (looking forward, we have hope) by the communities involved. During their research into various aspects of food security, health, vulnerability and adaptation to climate change under multiple stressors, the group facilitated a ground-breaking social learning process in both communities which highlights a best practice model for engaged research that has attracted national and international attention and recognition. The social learning process was developed and implemented through the research project to ensure that the communities' concerns and voices were heard in the research project not only to build capacity to adapt to climate change and other stresses that people in the Eastern Cape face, but also to establish platforms for co-learning. The social learning process was therefore not only focused on climate change and adaptation as identified by the researchers, but rather on the contextualised vulnerabilities that people in the communities themselves identified as important. Their aim was not simply to build an understanding of community capacities for adaptation together with community partners, but also to expand on and strengthen existing practices within communities, while at the same time developing insight into what a social learning approach means for how participatory processes utilised in engaged research are designed in the future.

The social learning process was designed as an intensively reflexive one, with community members and facilitators involved in on-going reflection of the process itself. This shared monitoring yielded insights from both the facilitators' and communities' perspectives, and it is on this rich source of insight that a social learning handbook was developed by the group. Key outcomes of the project have included several examples of community participants either

gaining employment or realising dreams of self-employment and explaining their success as being directly linked to their involvement in the project. Importantly, longer term relationships between NGOs and local community groups identified during the social learning process have been directly facilitated by the project team to ensure that sustainable community development can continue to take place in Lessyton and Willowvale long after the engaged research project has ended. But capacity building through this project was not limited to the community level: once the handbook had been developed, a short course was offered free of charge to grassroots NGOs and community workers throughout the Eastern Cape to support them in their further work with other communities in adopting a social learning approach to climate change and other stressors.

The communities and facilitators were not the only individuals that benefited from the Jongaphambili Sinethemba social learning project. Whilst communities may have grown better adapted to climate change during the project, the researchers themselves emerged more adapted to the demands of knowledge production in a society with pressing social, ecological and economic needs. Through their engaged research, the project team ultimately developed into researchers better equipped to co-produce the kind of knowledge required to build a more resilient South Africa. The Jongaphambili Sinethemba project represents a model for deeply engaged research and a shining example of what this means in practice. This research project has improved our academic understanding of climate change and adaptation in rural contexts—the project produced several tangible academic outputs, including 9 PhD and masters students, 9 Journal articles and book chapters and 53 conference presentations. And the project has improved adaptation strategies and the social development of the communities of Lessyton and Willowvale, where community facilitators whose social capital was operationalised through the social learning processes have become lasting champions of resilience in the face of vulnerability in their communities. Finally, the project has radically advanced our understanding of the methodologies, implementation and practice of engaged research more generally.

