

# The South African Green Revolutionary Council

Sunday 30 July 2023, by [HLABANE Matthews](#) (Date first published: 27 July 2023).

**SAGRC is an environmental and social justice organisation based in Emalahleni. It started in the 1980s. Emalahleni is surrounded by mines. At that time, as the police were busy chasing activists, shooting around, and people were running away, into the bushes. They were not aware that some of these bushes were actually part of abandoned mines. Most of the activists that run away, and people that are running away into these bushes, even women that are collecting wood, fell into these sinkholes. Others came back; others were never found; they disappeared. Those who survived, came back with their legs burned.**

Amandla!: SAGRC has been going for nearly 40 years. Tell Amandla! readers who you are and what you have been doing.

Matthews Hlabane: SAGRC is an environmental and social justice organisation based in Emalahleni. It started in the 1980s, when most of us, as youthful as we were, we were politicised. And we became anti-apartheid activists, in our numbers. So what then happened is that Emalahleni is surrounded by mines. At that time, as the police were busy chasing activists, shooting around, and people were running away, people ran into the bushes. People were not aware that some of these bushes were actually part of abandoned mines. And there were people that have fallen into sinkholes, which we called isiboboza. So as an activist, as an anti apartheid activist, I called upon other friends and said to them, let's go and investigate what is the cause of this isiboboza. Most of the activists that run away, and people that are running away into these bushes, even women that are collecting wood, will fall into this isiboboza. Others came back; others were never found; they disappeared. Those who survived came back with their legs burned. So as activists, we decided to investigate the cause of these isiboboza.

So we started investigating. We set out to raise awareness, telling people, look when you are chased by the police don't run into that particular area. So we established a small community that sought to investigate, and the more we investigated, we gathered knowledge. Then we discovered that the main cause of this was actually mining. And from there on, we sought to find out how does mining cause this? Why is mining not closing these sinkholes? We came across quite a lot of this information and that required us to even talk to some of the activists who were mine workers, who were very active as anti-apartheid activists, but also were mine worker leaders, mineworker shop stewards. They actually helped us to gather information.

We then established ourselves into a small committee, which eventually became the SAGRC in 1986. The main purpose of the SAGRC was to raise awareness. And we've created quite a lot of awareness about sinkholes and dams and how mining even affects the atmosphere. How it affects the water sources. How the soil becomes sterile because of the acidic water, the acid mine drainage (AMD) that comes out of the mine and is actually used by subsistence farmers and commercial farmers for irrigation. In fact we discovered that it has got a huge impact in that it depletes biodiversity. We also discovered that it has got a serious impact on the health of the people.

And as we were busy gathering information, we started interacting with other environmental organisations, who also assisted us to gain more knowledge. And since then, the SAGRC has remained an organisation that creates awareness and assists communities to challenge some of these injustices. So our starting point was to confront some of these mining companies from a long time ago.

A!: What would you say are your main achievements, the highlights from this long period of activism?

MH: I think key to all of them is gaining the knowledge of how mining impacts on the environment, society and the economy at large; how these mining companies are impacting on the social fabric of our communities. That knowledge became very powerful and important for us, in that it served as a basis for our existence. Now we are able to share. Now everybody in Emalahleni knows about the impact of mining. Everybody can talk about the environmental impacts of mining in Emalahleni. This is simply because of the work that we have done over the years.

Everybody in South Africa, in Mpumalanga and internationally, knows about how coal mining impacted on Emalahleni, how it impacted the lives of the people, the health of the people here, how coal mining impacts now on food production. In this particular area, how coal mining contributes to instability within our communities. Everybody knows about that. It all started with the work we did then and the work that we continue to do until today.

And we have created a pool of knowledgeable activists around Emalahleni. The knowledge that we have generated and the exposure that we have created has contributed in building the capacity of many activists within the organisation. Even the municipality will tell you that the only thing that they want is rehabilitation as part of a just transition.

And people will talk about alternatives in Emalahleni. Through the one million climate jobs campaign, we pioneered the whole issue of alternatives. And this led us to be the first organisation in this coal mining area of Mpumalanga to roll out an agroecology initiative, with an intention to demonstrate that it is not only mining that people can rely on. So there is a paradigm shift.

Even though it is very slow, there is a change in attitudes in as far as the government officials are concerned. In Emalahleni, there is a change in how the municipality deals with the water. Before, the water was just pumped into people's houses, so people received contaminated water through the taps. Now, the municipality is taking serious precautionary measures, and making sure that the purification of the water is done in such a way that such elements as the heavy metals in the water are isolated; such elements as AMD. Particularly the acidic level. The pH is raised to an acceptable level.

So that's what we have - the changes in terms of the attitude, the changes in terms of our government and policymakers. So I think we have done something good, even though it is not sufficient.

**A!: And you have developed an alternative: the agroecology project.**

MH: The SAGRC undertook an initiative and secured a farm in Emalahleni. The intention was to first shift the thinking of the people towards agroecology or subsistence farming or farming, rather than them depending on mining. We also rolled out this agroecology as part of job creation, that we are going to create work as an alternative. We also undertook this initiative to say we are going to use organic material, as opposed to chemical fertilisers, to actually rehabilitate the soil and produce from the soil. We are going to share the skills, we are going to learn from others and share with

others.

So, this is precisely what we are doing. We are trying to demonstrate that Emalahleni can actually roll out initiatives that are not destructive to the environment.

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We are actually saying that if people are given enough opportunity and resources, including land, people can actually create work for themselves rather than them depending and going to the mining companies to beg.

This initiative is the only one which seeks to also absorb the unemployed youth, unemployed women, and the ex-mine workers who have lost their jobs. These mining companies are no longer able to employ people. As people are participating in this project, the only thing that they gain is not in monetary terms. It's the knowledge most of the time. And they can go and implement such a project wherever they stay. So they are getting trained, equipped with the technical know-how to actually produce food in an organic way, without destroying the soil or adding more chemicals to the soil.

We are also trying to demonstrate that there are other ways in which you can save water, such as when we have irrigated. We make use of the grass or the tree leaves as mulching, which then becomes our compost at the same time. So far, out of the 20 hectares, we have done one and a half hectares. At the moment we are selling to the public because where we are, we are surrounded by over 12,000 units or houses. The people are predominantly unemployed. People come in to buy. But we have situations where some people don't have anything. They don't have the money to buy. We simply donate vegetables to them.

It's hard to make enough from the vegetables we sell to buy the seed and the inputs for the next crop. It is not enough. It's still a struggle. Now we're into our second year. We took it that we will start seeing good results after three years. Because the soil itself still needs to be rehabilitated after being so damaged over the years. So it's only now that we are beginning to see good results, and it's promising, and we can now sell okay.

A!: And what have the key challenges been that you have faced over the years? And the key lessons you have learned?

MH: Well, our key challenge has been that you cannot do anything if you do not have the financial means. Because the majority of the members happen to be unemployed, it becomes a challenge to sustain the activities of the organisation. So we've become too dependent on financial grants, or support from partner organisations. So, the issue of setting up this centre, and moving towards our self-reliance, is quite key. But it is still a struggle for us to break with that dependency.

And sometimes you feel very hopeless. Sometimes you see your plans not being realised. And you go back, sit down and plan again, and start doing something. If you realise this does not work, try that. And lots of activists don't have time for that learning. They will then lose hope and jump off. Then they come back again, after the realities of living in Emalahleni have sent them back. So they participate ... disappear ... participate ... disappear. It's very much uneven in terms of the participation. And the manner in which we have set up as an organisation is that we cannot chase them away.

As far as the alternatives that have been pioneered, there isn't enough support, and people still don't have confidence that the alternatives can be the way. That is why people in Emalahleni in large numbers are unemployed.

As to the main lessons, the main lesson is that you operate under a capitalist system, which is basically dictating for you. You can set up plans, goals, and you can set up timeframes and everything. But it will be the conditions that are going to dictate for you. Especially if we don't have the finances. Under capitalism, there is no guarantee that you will achieve your plans. So it becomes a big challenge.

A!: Have you developed any particular strategies or tactics to keep going over these many years?

MH: I think one is that the farm became one of our focus areas. If we concentrate on setting up this farm, if we reduce our overreliance on financial resources coming from outside, very slowly, then one day, we'll be able to stand up and support our own work. But at the moment, I must say that one of the strategies that we use is coming together on a voluntary basis, asking comrades to actually contribute some resources to some of the meetings. And from there, we are able to plan and implement some of the projects. So activities such as your pickets, asking other organisations to partake and support, became one of the key strategies. We partner with other community organisations around.

A!: In 2022 you had an extremely successful shutdown in Emalahleni. How did you achieve that?

MH: We never anticipated such a huge turnout during the shutdown. We never anticipated that the whole township and the city will be on a standstill, we never anticipated that. But it happened.

It was about service delivery. It took us to have community meetings in each and every ward. It took us to have radio slots, for a period of more than two months, asking questions and engaging with some of the issues that are confronting the communities.

And it took us to establish ward coordinators in each and every ward. It took us to establish WhatsApp communication groups, Facebook pages. It took us to produce flyers and posters that we circulated around the community. It took us to do door to doors and block meetings. And there was then a decision-making meeting after all these engagements. And we set up a day and we agreed all of us to declare it a shutdown. And it was highly supported. And no matter how many people you reach in a particular ward, in your community, we have discovered that information flows. If you've got coordinators in each and every ward, if these coordinators have their own WhatsApp groups in each and every ward. If you've got posters that you circulate on Facebook and on WhatsApp, they get circulated and they get shared amongst community members. And everybody starts talking about this. If you talk about the issues on radio, everybody listens and everybody start following. If you write about that in your local newspapers, in regional newspapers, people start following. If you post something on Facebook about the challenges that you have got in your community, people are following that and it builds up. And at the end, you might not see it as something big, but the impact will be that the information will flow and reach to as many people that you will not even be able to calculate. We never anticipated such a huge turn out during the shutdown. We never anticipated that the whole township and the city will be on a standstill, we never anticipated that. But it happened.

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- Amandla 88 - Jul 27, 2023:  
<https://www.amandla.org.za/south-african-green-revolutionary-council/>
- Matthews Hlabane is a founding member of SAGRC.