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Green paper generates national employment

In poverty-stricken rural areas across South Africa, local unskilled people have learned how to craft high quality paper by hand using the agricultural plants that grow in their provinces.

They use the fibres of bananas, pineapples, mielies, river reeds, hemp, sisal, ficus, cotton and grass, along with agricultural and other waste, to make their uniquely South African paper.

This product has gained popularity in the form of conference notepads and folders, gift packaging, cards and stationery as well as arty "lifestyle" items such as picture frames, bowls and other trendy decor.

"We are the only producer in South Africa manufacturing this unique range of superior quality paper," said Phumani Paper project manager Mandy-Lee Pietersen.

She said the eco-friendly paper and paper products, which take on the earthy colour and feel of the vegetation from which they are made, were sold countrywide, with one of their biggest clients being a national designer homeware and furniture chain.

"Our conference range is popular among our corporate clients and we supply paper to a number of galleries and artists, who use the paper for some of their artwork.

"Given that our products are 100% 'green', from the local vegetation used to produce them to the chemical-free manufacturing process, and that they are customised to suit our clients' needs, they are priced higher than typical off-the-shelf paper merchandise.

"However, those who invest in our products gain from the uniquely South African flavour they add to any conference or special event, and the knowledge that they are also investing in the development of South Africa's people."

The Phumani Archival Mill, situated at the University of Johannesburg, is the only handmade archival papermaking unit in the country.

"Our archival paper is non-acidic, does not discolour as fast as commercial paper, and can thus be used to safely store important documents. Archival packaging can be custom-made, in terms of size and colour, to best-fit the documents to be preserved," said Pietersen.

Meaning "reach out" in isiZulu, Phumani Paper was established in 1999 as a partnership between the Department of Science and Technology and the University of Johannesburg. The aim was to create hand-crafted paper enterprises in the poorest areas across the country, where communities are severely affected by unemployment and other social and health factors.

Today, there are six such enterprises – in Limpopo (Polokwane), Gauteng (Johannesburg and Midrand), North-West Province (Lehurutshe and Winterveld) and the Western Cape (Cape Town) – although hand-papermaking machinery has also been set up in several other provinces.

As it lacks accessibility to indigenous fibres due to its location, Phumani Paper's Western Cape producer unit uses recycled paper and other waste to produce its paper range.

The company's philosophy is to maintain existing employment levels while constantly identifying and exploiting future job creation opportunities. "We strive to maintain superb product quality and provide the best assistance possible to each producer group and client," said Pietersen.

To buy paper or paper products, phone 011 559 6534 or order online at www.phumanipaper.org.

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CAPTION: Phumani Archival Mill product developer and papermaker Sipho Mabaso fits the handmade archival packaging he crafted for an artist's limited edition sketchbook range. Photo: Supplied

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