

# Cleaning Africa's waterways from source to sea

**When Kim Kieser set out to establish the SOUL Foundation ten years ago, South Africa was just starting to get wind of terms like 'triple bottom line' and 'sustainable development'. Yet, ten years on, her entrepreneurial and innovative approach to the age old problem of waste has outlasted and outperformed so many of the so called experts.**

**Today, not only is Kim and her organisation regarded as the local authority on urban river cleanups and integrated waste management, but a global fellowship of social entrepreneurs has made her the lead architect of a plan to replicate her success across Africa.**

## Putting the soul back into the river

What makes a successful entrepreneur give up a thriving business in fashion to go and dredge dirty urban rivers may not make sense to most, but if the hundreds of lives that have been positively changed by Kim

Kieser's innovative approach to river rehabilitation are anything to go by, there should be no doubt the shift was a good one.

It was August 1998, when Kim received a spiritual message urging her to unite South Africans through cleaning up their natural environment. As Kim recalls, it was a time characterised by crime, poverty and human suffering. The new government was still coming to terms with its inherited backlog of services. Informal settlements on the hemline of major cities swelled as people from rural areas arrived in droves looking for jobs. Violent crime was rampant. But it was the image of a woman's dead body tossed onto a garbage heap that proved the final tipping point for Kim. Things had to change.

Finding the first challenge for the newly formed SOUL (Save Our Universal Land) Foundation was easy. As more and more people clambered to work in the new economic hub of Sandton, Alexandra – the nearest township at just 3 kilometres away – was groaning under the pressure. Originally designed to house just 70 000 people when it was established nearly a century ago, Alexandra at the turn of the millennium was reported to be home to 370 000 people.

Virtually cutting Alexandra in two, the Jukskei River - that separates Old

Alex from the East Bank - had become the seam where all the neglect of the past had begun to unravel. As thousands of squatters erected shacks along the riverbanks, the river became increasingly used as a human waste dump.

The first toxicity tests revealed the levels of bacteria in the water to be 240 times higher than safely permitted for domestic use. "The river was ecologically dead. There were no fish and no vegetation that could survive in that water," says Kim. But refusing to be beaten by what seemed like insurmountable odds, she fought back with tenacity and humour. "It was the first time I had heard the phrase 'flying toilet' but after I saw the first missile being flung out of one of the shacks and into the river, we decided to rename the river 'Yuk! Skei'."

The very apt nickname, however, was soon to be banished. After a successful pilot in 2000 that trained 50 community members on how to clean a short stretch of the Jukskei River and recover any recyclable waste, funding was finally secured for a year long project that strived for more permanent results.

## From river of death...

The timing could not have been more critical. By 2001, the Jukskei was fast earning a reputation as a river of death and destruction. Floods had

washed away hundreds of shacks that had been erected too close to the riverbanks and cholera was detected for the first time. In an effort to ease the density of people living along the river and now under threat from flooding and disease, the Government's Department of Housing spent R35 million relocating 3 500 families to Diepsloot. But the process largely failed as many came back to be close to their place of work and new squatters - mainly economic refugees from Zimbabwe - simply took their place.

For just over a tenth of the government's spend, the SOUL Foundation undertook to clean 27 kilometres of the river and provide jobs for 144 previously unemployed people.

The R4 million-project was completed **3 months ahead of schedule** and just in time to be showcased as one of the country's environmental success stories – a convenient 10 minute drive away from where the World Summit on Sustainable Development was being held. But for Kim, the recognition of a job well done by environmental delegates from all over the world was not nearly as important as what had been achieved for the people of Alexandra.

## To river of life...

"The result of the Jukskei's first river cleanup was one of my proudest moments" says Kim. "Not only did we

exceed our target and end up cleaning 48 kilometres of the river, but we also removed 12 000 tons of solid waste that had been choking the river. Up to 10 small businesses were created by people who were guided on how to make a living from recyclable waste and almost half of the entire budget was paid out in wages to people who had not had jobs before.”

It had taken six months before the attitudes of indifference and glazed over looks had shifted. One of the converted was former Alexandra resident, Dickson Monare. Dickson lived in a shack in the notorious squatter camp of S’wetla. “I really cared about state of the river, so when these people came looking for workers to do the river cleanup I was very interested,” says Dickson. “When the people from SOUL explained to us that our rubbish was going into the Hartebeespoort Dam, it really helped us understand our part.

On the opposite side of Johannesburg, Rodrick Salani was reading about the Alex river cleanup in ‘The Sowetan.’ “I was so inspired by the community helping themselves I wanted to get involved. I had just finished a diploma in Project Management and needed some experience. Kim took me on and got me involved with training clean up teams and team leaders. We’ve even

managed to get a SETA approved Certificate in Community Health, so these people are getting skills that are accredited.”

By 2003, the SOUL Foundation had tackled the Jukskei’s notorious pollution right from its source at Ellis Park through to Bruma Lake and into Alexandra via several corporate funded cleanups. Along the way, hundreds of people had been empowered by being able to develop small enterprises that either utilised alien felled tree stumps for fire wood or recyclable waste to earn an income. But despite Kim’s efforts to lobby the government on introducing a waste policy that would separate at source and reduce the pressure on landfills, her ideas fell on dead ears, or so it seemed.

One global organisation with projects in 60 countries was already supporting 2000 social entrepreneurs just like Kim. Ashoka’s work is about empowering social entrepreneurs capable of effecting massive social change to help spread and implement their ideas. In 2003 Kim was elected as an Ashoka fellow.

Looking back on the lessons dealt during all the river cleanups, Kim’s partner Greg Steenveld calculated that if all the waste that had separated at source rather than being dumped in the river, it would have had a worth of R5 million. “A lot of the waste is not salvageable because

it becomes contaminated,” explains Greg.

In 2007 SOUL launched their ‘Waste-From-Home Project at Toyota’s Head office in Johannesburg. . With 1000 people employed, just twenty percent of the staff with access to their own private transport managed to bring in 4 tons of waste. A similar pilot was set up with Wits Medical School to reach 3500 students and 1500 employees. “The project has massive potential to reduce the university’s waste disposal costs and set an example for learning institutions around the country,” says Kim.

Today Dickson Monare is a project manager for the Soul Foundation and a shining example of an empowered citizen. When he is not coordinating river cleanups, he is collecting waste from the various corporate clients SOUL has enlisted to support their new ‘Waste from Home’ recycling system. After nine years of steady employ, he now owns his own home in Tembisa

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