Port St Johns Legal Advice Centre Leads On Climate Change Awareness

The Port St Johns Legal Advice Centre, a women-led organisation, is at the forefront of climate change awareness and empowerment for their community. Dedicated to addressing human rights violations in their area, the centre ensures that communities have access to vital legal information and support. Beyond offering free legal advice, it conducts workshops that promote access to justice and resilience. As a member of the Rural Action for Climate Resilience (RACR) project, the centre aims to educate rural communities about climate change and ways to build their resilience.

While climate change was initially a challenging topic due to limited knowledge, the centre has made significant progress in educating the community through conducting workshops using RACR project popular education materials, online webinars, and climate change workshops.

Tackling Climate Change at a Local Level

Port St Johns is particularly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change and has been severely affected by increasingly extreme climate impacts. The region has experienced increasing droughts as well as severe flooding. In 2023 alone Port St Johns had multiple severe flooding instances, in March and in October, damaging houses, roads and public infrastructure, with many of the same flood victims experiencing flooding in 2024 again. Poor service delivery, outdated drainage infrastructure, and inadequate urban planning have worsened the situation, leading to raw sewage running through the streets. The majority of those who lost their homes due to flooding over the past three years have not yet received assistance from the municipality.

The centre recognised the urgent need to empower its community to adapt to climate challenges using practical, sustainable methods rather than solely relying on government intervention.

Many residents rely on streams for water, but these sources are often contaminated due to poor sanitation practices. The centre has taken steps to raise awareness

about the impact of pollution on water quality. They promote sustainable practices such as composting and permaculture farming. Their initiative includes four communal food gardens where community members are trained in organic farming techniques, reducing reliance on chemical fertilisers and pesticides.

Resilience Through Community Action

Nomboniso Gaya, the centre's coordinator, emphasised that climate change and gender-based violence are interconnected, as women and girls are the most affected by climate-related disasters due to their roles in the home and in caring for their families. The recent collapse of the Port St Johns bridge due to floods has left many villages isolated, preventing access to food, healthcare services, schools, and funerals.

The centre also runs programmes that focus on establishing food gardens and addressing gender-based violence through community education and advocacy. Their food garden is producing herbs such as thyme, sage and rosemary, as well as other foods. A shift in awareness has taken place—thanks to the education on resilience, the community now actively prevents littering. People stop others from throwing trash around and pick up trash themselves, understanding the negative impact it has. There are no longer any dumping sites.

The Road Ahead

The Port St Johns Legal Advice Centre advocates for improved policies and municipal accountability. They urge the government to enforce building regulations, maintain drainage systems, and increase funding for climate resilience projects. The lack of proper urban planning has led to conflicts between the municipality and environmental authorities regarding land use and infrastructure development.

Thembakazi Mthembu, the climate change programme coordinator, stressed the need for more climate education. She criticised the Department of Agriculture for promoting chemical-based farming, which has degraded soil quality. "Instead, the centre trains farmers in sustainable agricultural practices to restore soil fertility."

By implementing permaculture farming, promoting water conservation and management, and fostering community participation, the Port St Johns Legal Advice Centre is making strides in building climate resilience in eight of the 20 wards around Port St Johns. However, they stress that government support is essential to expand their reach and ensure long-term sustainability. They call for climate change education to be included in school curricula and for greater collaboration between government agencies, local organisations, and traditional leaders to tackle environmental challenges effectively.

As climate-related disasters continue to impact the town, the centre remains steadfast in its mission to support the community, advocating for sustainable solutions and better governance.

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The Rural Action for Climate Resilience (RACR) project empowers rural communities in South Africa to build resilience against climate change. By partnering with community-based organisations and faith leaders, RACR enhances the social, economic, and environmental well-being of rural populations, particularly in the Eastern, Western, Limpopo, Free State and Northern Cape provinces. The project is funded by the Embassy of Ireland.