

How the RACR Learning Festival Is Empowering Rural South Africans to Tackle Climate Change



Sinegugu Zukulu, sustainability champion and star of the award-winning documentary Wild Coast Warriors, captivates participants at the RACR Learning Festival in Johannesburg with his firsthand account of successfully challenging Shell's seismic blasting plans along the Eastern Cape coastline.

On the beaches of the Wild Coast, where cattle wander to the water's edge, a community stood between a global energy giant and the ocean they depend on. Their battle to stop Shell from seismic blasting along the Eastern Cape coastline became the subject of *Wild Coast Warriors*, an award-winning documentary released in 2024, a David and Goliath story filmed on these beaches, in boardrooms, in lawyers' chambers and ultimately in court.

It was the perfect opening act for the RACR Learning Festival's advocacy drive. Participants watched the film the night before sustainability champion and community activist Sinegugu Zukulu, one of its stars, took the floor. When he did, the room was riveted.

Climate justice, advocacy and campaigning were key themes at the 2026 learning festival in Johannesburg, for which 35 participants were selected from the Eastern, Western and Northern Cape, Limpopo and the Free State. Zukulu reinforced these themes in his presentation and engagement with them.

At the forefront of the successful campaign to stop Shell from seismic blasting in the ocean, he shared his actions and personal insights to which the participants from rural

communities, like his own on the Wild Coast, could relate. The threat of unregulated mining exploration and pollution affecting rural communities is common and poses a risk to their environments and livelihoods, the festival heard.

More than half of the participants were women (25), and younger than 35 years old (24), and they left the event fired up with ideas for actions, even campaigns, to protect their communities from harm. The festival ran from 19 - 21 May in Johannesburg, organised as part of the RACR project's ongoing work building climate resilience in rural South Africa.

A 16-page resource booklet, bright with infographics illustrating key content, was shared with participants at the start, and the organisers distributed RACR T-shirts and tote bags, with information about making mulch since many of them grow food.



Participants work together during Day 1's card game activity, devising solutions to climate challenges such as water scarcity, one of several hands-on exercises designed to build practical advocacy and campaigning skills.

Day 1 focused on climate justice and the just energy transition: away from fossil fuels towards a cleaner, greener future with jobs that do not compromise the health of those who pursue them. Following the presentations on these themes, participants engaged in a card game, which was a huge hit.

Three different sets of cards were distributed: the first set showed a protagonist posing a danger to their way of life, following a tarot-style design; the second, a set of actions

communities could take; and the third set, a range of tools that could strengthen their efforts, were dealt out to the participants. Working in five groups, participants had to devise solutions to the challenge set out on their protagonist card, such as water scarcity and more.

The afternoon was as active with the groups designing and making a social media video to create awareness about climate-related issues. The results were outstanding, with teams conveying clear and vivid messages, captured by their original acting and choice of props to make points creatively.



A participant engages in discussion during Day 2's advocacy and campaigning sessions, led by Sinegugu Zukulu and the RACR facilitation team, where groups worked through real South African community case studies to develop their own action plans.

Day 2 centred on advocacy strategies and campaigning, led by Sinegugu Zukulu alongside the RACR facilitation team. Participants were encouraged to apply what they had learned through a series of practical exercises.

Each group got a case study based on a challenge that a South African community had confronted in the past, with details of the context and problem. Between them, they worked out strategies to find solutions. Once they had developed action plans, the facilitators joined the group and revealed what steps these communities had taken in real life and the outcomes.

In the third session, the groups had time to build their own community advocacy campaigns. Participants energetically debated their priorities - water recurred more than once, the scarcity of water, access to water and water pollution - and how to get results. This exercise prepared participants to advocate for solutions when they return home around climate justice and related issues.



Participants get hands-on experience at The Compost Kitchen in Kyalami, Midrand, on Day 3, exploring how earthworms transform organic household waste into vermicompost, a nutrient-rich fertiliser that supports water conservation, improves soil health, and boosts food production.

Day 3 took participants from theory to action with a visit to The Compost Kitchen, a sustainable waste management initiative in Kyalami, Midrand — a step outside their comfort zone, particularly for those not fond of worms. An environmental enterprise, The Compost Kitchen, recycles organic waste using earthworms (yes, even bones and pizza crusts).

They turn the household food waste into a treasure, a nutrient-rich fertiliser known as vermicompost. This supports water conservation and improves soil conditions, boosting food production.

As visitors, we got to plunge our hands into compost piled hip-high outside to feel the heat inside, then to hold worms, turn soil and even plant a handful of seedlings, which were donated to The Compost Kitchen, which hosted us pro bono.

The start-up costs of a green business like this are relatively low - their red wigglers are cheap, and they multiply rapidly (doubling in number every two to three months) - and the organic waste is readily available.

Waste and the collection of rubbish are massive problems across the country, and this is a practical way to reduce what ends up in landfills and boost the circular economy. These are priorities for RACR and the Rural Eco-Empowerment and Advocacy Project (REAP), a new initiative also jointly run by SCAT and SAFCEI.

The final day brought the festival full circle, with reflections on the field visit, a review of the resource booklet, and a chance to screen the social media reels produced earlier in the week. Voting for the two winning videos, judged on both content and creativity, was tight, but two well-deserved groups claimed the honours. Feedback from participants was overwhelmingly positive, with the only wish being that they'd had more time to learn together.

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 supports the social, economic and environmental well-being of rural populations across the Eastern, Western and Northern Cape, Limpopo and the Free State. The project is funded by the Embassy of Ireland.