

MAVERICK CITIZEN OP-ED

How civil society is stepping in when small-town Karoo municipalities fail



Ecobricks makers are rewarded with a bicycle sponsored by the Karoo Chasing Zero project. Vaslin Maritz, left, (16) and Gideon Baardman (16) were two of the first volunteers to help clean up Loxton by making ecobricks. (Photo: Ingrid Schöffman)

Poor local government service delivery characterises South Africa's rural landscape. This bedevils water provision, sanitation, environmental health and waste management. These problems make the towns unsightly and demoralise the townsfolk; they also endanger livestock.

Municipalities fail to address these pressing issues with effective planning, staffing, financial management and budgeting. This undermines the quality of life of their poorest citizens profoundly, while many mayors, councillors and municipal managers are earning large salaries.



The litter problem at the start of the operation at the intersection of Loxton/Williston roads in Carnarvon. (Photo: Johann Kirsten)

The Karoo towns of Carnarvon, Loxton, Murraysburg and Philippolis offer hope, as local communities proactively tackle their water provision, waste management and recycling challenges. Murraysburg's citizens decided to revive their town's historic water scheme, themselves. Very soon their success drew new investment, created new job opportunities and [improved the local quality of life](#) (DM168, 5 December 2020). Philippolis residents have cleaned up the waste dump site and the entrances to the town, and this is contributing to significant tourism investment.

The non-profit Karoo Development Foundation (KDF) is increasingly concerned with poor waste management and widespread littering in Karoo towns. It provided financial and management assistance to facilitate a clean-up of Carnarvon's entrance roads and contributed a local recycling initiative in Loxton. KDF is a civil society organisation including among its trustees a range of foremost academic specialists in fields such as agriculture, palaeoarchaeology, archaeology and social science. It includes innovators in education and proactive community developers, all with a personal link to the greater Karoo region.



Volunteers help with the clean-up operation in Carnarvon. (Photo: Johann Kirsten)

On 21 November 2020, KDF co-founder and chairperson Professor Johann Kirsten worked enthusiastically with commercial and emergent farmers in the Carnarvon district to clean up all entry points to the town. Forty locals collected the litter. It was a massive project, well organised by Dirk Sacco, a local farmer, who registered every participant. The Kareeberg Municipality provided a truck which removed many bags of litter. The local Spar supermarket contributed a pair of gloves for each helper.

Although seven teams participated, the organisers soon realised that they had totally underestimated the extent of the litter problem. Much more follow-up work is needed. The main culprits littering the Karoo roads, it seems, are truck drivers and minibus taxi passengers and drivers, and therefore public awareness of littering needs to be addressed.



An example of plastic pollution next to the road between Carnarvon and Williston. (Photo: Johann Kirsten)

Local farmers and businesses expressed their great appreciation to KDF for this initiative. The support of the Kareeberg Municipality has laid a sound basis for future collaboration. Since Carnarvon is geared for an important astrotourism role, linked to the Square Kilometre Array project, this clean-up could not have come at a better time.

In the attractive, tree-lined neighbouring town of Loxton, the community has registered a recycling co-operative and is currently in negotiation with Ubuntu Municipality to take over the daily management of Loxton's solid waste disposal site. Ingrid Schöfmann, a local resident and a KDF Trustee, has initiated the Loxton Ecobrick Project. Ecobricks are created by local residents with plastic bottles stuffed with clean litter mainly consisting of plastic bags, wrapping papers and bags of snacks and sweets. The ecobricks are used for building housing.



A typical example of a road leading to the municipal refuse dump outside a Karoo town. (Photo: Johann Kirsten)

Ecobricks makers are rewarded with a bicycle sponsored by the [Karoo Chasing Zero](#) project. Gideon Baardman and Vaslin Maritz (**see image provided**) were two of the first volunteers to help clean up Loxton by making ecobricks. The local Ubuntu Forum for Socio-Economic Development (UFSED) and its Loxton Transformation Hub has to date manufactured three hundred ecobricks.

A further proposed project earmarked for Loxton is the upgrade of the municipal community campsite, in association with the Community Works Project (CWP) of the Department of Public Works. The campsite will be managed under a mentorship scheme, similar to community campsites in Namibia, with skills training and community-managed profit-sharing. The ecobricks will also feature in the local infrastructure.

These initiatives show how clean towns can contribute to building materials, employment and tourism. KDF is now contemplating creating a “League of Clean Karoo” towns to support other towns and create greater momentum. **DM/MC**

Professor Johann Kirsten is Chair of the Karoo Development Foundation and Ingrid Schöffman is a KDF Trustee.