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Energy messages on the move

During October and November this year, more than 2 000 grade 8 to grade 11 learners from 17 schools in the Northern, Eastern and Western Cape became much better acquainted with renewable energy as a climate change mitigator, thanks to the EnergyDRIVE project.

South Africa's large renewable energy facilities are in fairly remote and rural parts of the country. This means they are not constantly in the public eye, but also that they have the potential to help make rural communities more aware of renewable energy and the issues that drive it.

Turning this potential into reality was the thinking behind the EnergyDRIVE project. Launched in 2016 by the Durban University of Technology and the South African Wind Energy Association (SAWEA), the project entails a bus jampacked with renewable energy and energy efficient technologies visiting high schools in communities close to the country's large wind farms.

Building on its existing relationship and collaboration with SAWEA, the South African National Energy Development Institute (SANEDI) decided to join the EnergyDRIVE in 2021. "Our motivation was to see how the project and SANEDI's school programme could benefit one another and to raise SANEDI's profile in the Eastern, Western and Northern Cape," says Bongani Xakaza outreach officer at SANEDI.

Having completed the third EnergyDRIVE in early November this year, Xakaza says that the project's impact is already visible. "Students are asking for advice on subjects to take to prepare them for a career in the energy space, and there is a general improvement in awareness of and knowledge about renewable energy and climate change."

A typical school visit includes presentations from the three project partners – SANEDI, SAWEA and the Durban University of Technology – and the school's science and/or career guidance teachers, as well as representatives from the neighbouring wind farm. A highlight is the visit to the wind farm where learners get to tour the facility and understand how electricity is generated.

This year, Xakaza also issued a challenge to the students to contribute to climate change initiatives in their schools and even communities. "I 'appointed' a learner at each school to coordinate small, practical actions, such as planting trees and finding ways to reduce electricity consumption. Often it's as simple as making sure all the lights are switched off at the end of the school day. I was pleasantly surprised at how eager and excited the learners were to take up my challenge and step into this informal leadership position. It bodes well for our efforts to make climate change mitigation practical and relevant."

The EnergyDRIVE aims to reach different schools every year, but schools often invite the project back for a return visit. The project team now has its sights set on expanding beyond communities that are close to wind farms by, for example, targeting those in the vicinity of South Africa's numerous solar energy facilities.

"Expanding the project's reach will also give us the opportunity to educate communities on what they need to do to make the best use of renewable energy technology, notably the solar geysers that are installed in many housing projects," says Xakaza. "We often find that ignorance leads to incorrect use and then the technology gets a poor reputation."

To achieve this goal, Xakaza hopes to secure support for the EnergyDRIVE from renewable energy stakeholders such as the CSIR, the Department of Science and Innovation and the Energy and Water Sector Education Training Authority (EWSETA). "The more partners we can bring on board, the bigger and more impactful the EnergyDRIVE can be. As it is the project gets bigger every year. Given the momentum that is building, now is a good time for more stakeholders to join."