

A Zulu Village Looks to the Sun

Interview with Thandizwe Frank Gwala

Maphephethe means "land where the sun rises" — an appropriate name for the first village in South Africa to launch an ambitious solar power electrification plan.

An interview with the region's Inkosi (Chief), provides a personal perspective as to how electricity is changing the lives of his people.

Siemens Review: *Inkosi, do you have a vision for the future in terms of bringing electricity to your community?*

Inkosi: Yes. We've been waiting for electricity for a long time. But it will never come because it is very expensive in the country. Instead, we can have the solar systems now. They will make an honest difference in people's lives. They will give people independence. And I'm really concerned about the young ones because they live in darkness. The children will be able to go to the school to study for exams in the evening. The problem in many homes is that they have to save candles, and children are not allowed to use up the candles to study late into the evening. Solar power will also bring us television. There are quite a lot of educational programs on television — mathematics, science. These too will help our children.

SR: *Are people here afraid or distrustful of technology?*

Inkosi: It's very hard to say. But I don't think the people here are afraid of technology; they just have not had much exposure to it. People are curious though to learn about these things, and the younger generations are more receptive. Some of our children are now starting to go to technical colleges. So attitudes will change.

SR: *Solar panels were recently installed at your court-*



Thandizwe Frank Gwala

Known as one of KwaZulu Natal's most progressive and powerful "Inkosis" (chiefs), Mr. Gwala is promoting energy independence and improved education for the 20,000 people of Maphephethe.

house. What has this meant for you?

Inkosi: Now we can have meetings in the evening with proper lighting. We also use the electricity to charge batteries, and can hold sewing classes at more convenient times.

SR: *Your plans also call for a clinic to be outfitted with a solar power system...*

Inkosi: Yes, we have plans for a clinic with one treatment room, two examination rooms, nurses' quarters, a staff room, a shower, and storage facilities. But our problem is electricity. We could have a gasoline-powered generator; but it would cost too much to run, and a clinic without electricity is useless. Solar panels are the only solution we can afford.

SR: *How have the young people here in Maphephethe reacted to the introduction of solar power in the school?*

Inkosi: They tell me they are very happy with it because they no longer must use candles, which can cause fires. Also, they now use TV and videos for learning.

SR: *At other schools not far from here, the solar panels and batteries have been stolen. Why has that happened elsewhere and not here?*

Inkosi: The electricity company has installed solar systems at three schools. They installed the systems and then left. They never spoke to the people. But here, the families feel that the building belongs to them. People have respect for the school because they are involved.

SR: *The plan you've worked out with the Solar Electric Light Fund and with the KwaZulu Finance Corporation calls for the installation of solar panels on the roofs of up to 100 homes. How have people reacted to the idea of having electricity?*

Inkosi: I've lived here all my life. I know the attitude of people here in Maphephethe. It takes time for them to realize that these systems are a benefit to us. People from the urban areas watch television; but here, only a few who have car batteries and generators have TV. So, what we must do is to explain new concepts directly to the

community. We are setting up demonstration solar systems on some dwellings so that people can see for themselves. And the Solar Electric Light Fund is helping by providing a magazine with illustrations that show how the solar systems work.

SR: *How will people pay to get the solar panels installed on their houses? Is that something they can afford?*

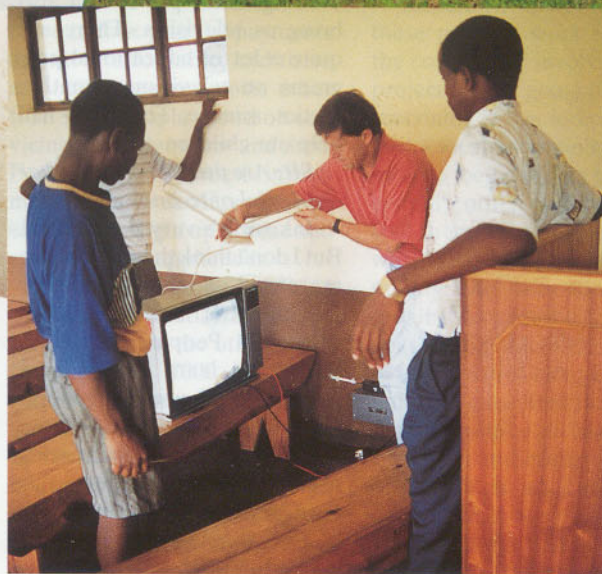
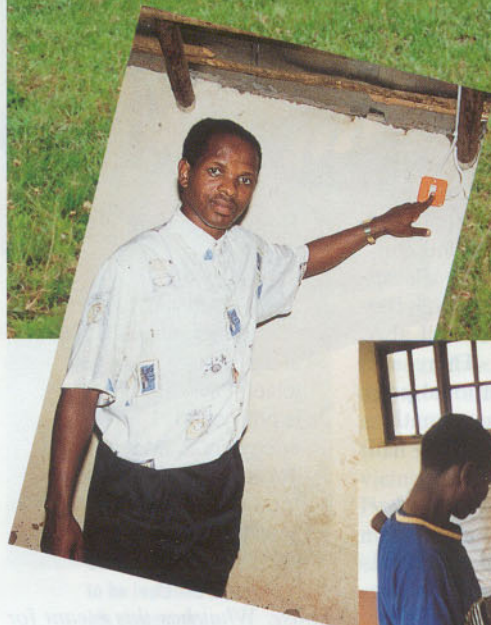
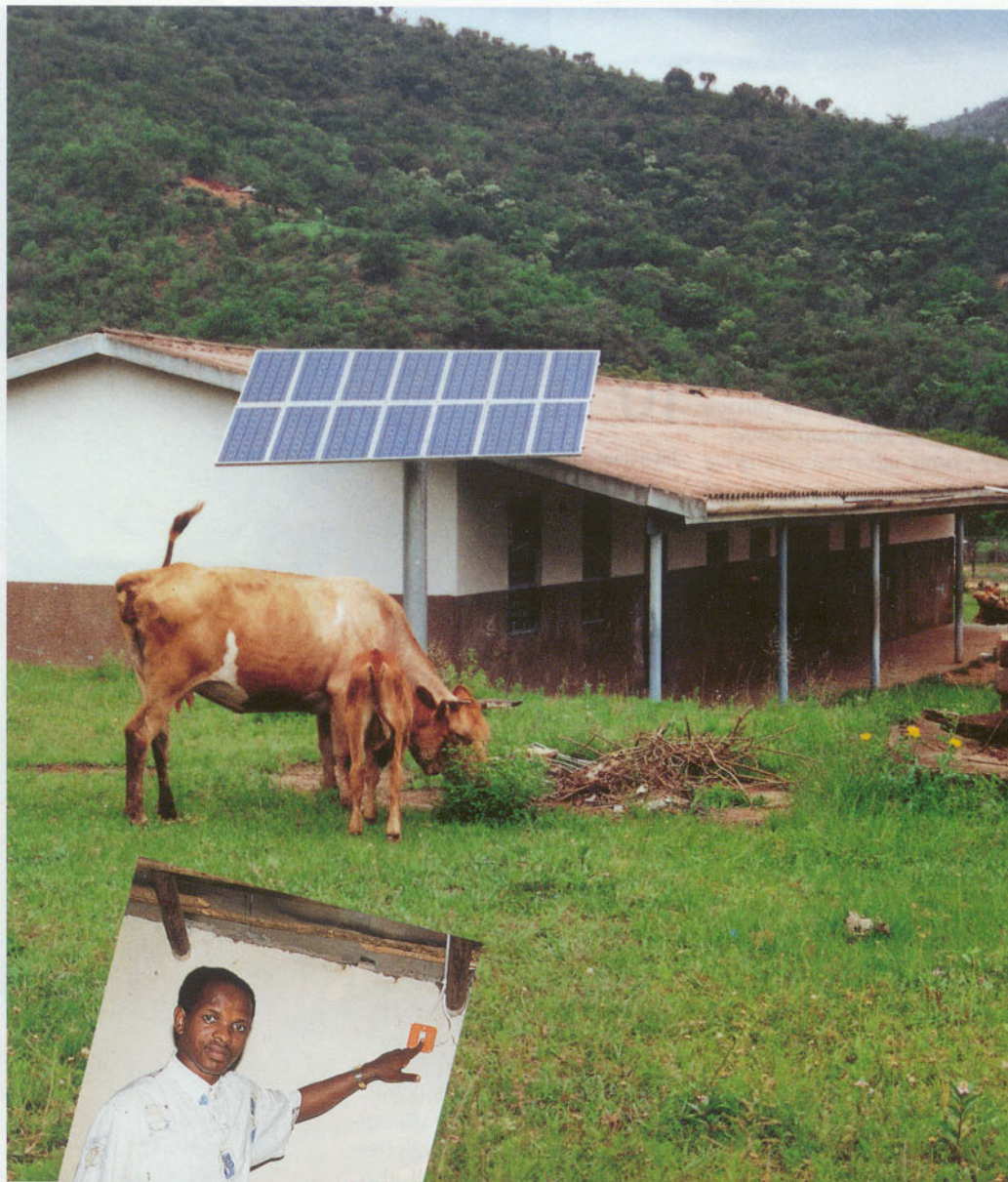
Inkosi: They will pay about 52 Rand every month for three or four years for the solar systems. I think this is an amount most of our people can afford because it is about what they would spend anyway on candles and liquid paraffin. Most need about a liter of fuel per day, which costs them 1.50 Rand. But the paraffin fuel is sooty, so I believe that eliminating it will lead to health benefits and fewer fires.

SR: *What do people do to make money?*

Inkosi: Most of the people work in big towns. Some have jobs working on the roads, others raise vegetables, but they don't have a means of selling their produce. People produce just enough for their own families.

SR: *Do you think that as electricity is introduced here, people will be able to make a livelihood without going so far away?*

Inkosi: Yes. Many men who work away from the home only see their children on weekends. This is not good for family relationships. Right now, people go to town to work. They bring the money back here. The money is then taken back to town to buy groceries and other goods. All of this can be changed if businesses are opened up locally; but we must have electricity to do that. •



Solar power is transforming the lives of Maphephethe's people... at school (top), at home (middle), and in the courthouse, where a large AC color television set was recently demonstrated.