



MAINTENANCE

'Courts are withholding our money'

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SINGLE mothers who have gone for months without receiving child maintenance payouts from the courts and are struggling to put food on the table have accused the Department of Justice of violating their children's rights.

The mothers said they had heard enough excuses from officials and wanted monies owed to them paid out since garnishee orders on their ex-partners salaries were carried out monthly without fail.

A Pinetown mother of four, who has not received any maintenance money for the past four months, said she was tired of eating noodles for breakfast, lunch and supper. She said she had incurred too much debt and was unable to provide anything else for her children.

She said she had approached the Pinetown Magistrate's Court to no avail and had escalated the matter to the South African Human Right Commission (SAHRC).

"I have had to stop paying creditors in order to put a roof over our heads and keep the lights on. My ex-husband cannot afford to help us because the money he has for the children is taken by the courts. He can't pay twice."

In a desperate attempt to get the court to release the money, her ex-husband threatened the court with a case of theft and fraud and, to her surprise, their response was that the money had not left his employer.

"They came with that clever response to silence me. They said with Covid-19 my ex-husband's employer had closed and payments were suspended," she said. "They are passing the buck. Their explanations don't pay for the children's accommodation or put food in their mouths."

They came up with a clever response to silence me

A mother of a 4-year-old boy said she had been forced to consult a lawyer after the Pietermaritzburg maintenance court was dragging its feet to pay out. She said there was a great level of unprofessionalism, blatant disregard and inconsistency from the court and was yet to receive some monies still owed to her.

She said the court issued a garnishee order in October 2017 but no money was received that year though it was being paid into the court's account.

"I have been having problems since then and rumour has it that officials sometimes help themselves to our children's monies," she said.

Felicity Guest, founder of Child Maintenance Difficulties in South Africa (CMDISA), said the department of justice was not ensuring the best interests of the children.

Guest said she knew of a woman who had to bribe a court official for her garnishee order to be paid out.

"She had been waiting for months for her children's maintenance and she was told to pay 'cold drink' money. I emailed senior officials at the department and no one got back to me."

Lloyd Lots, an advocate at the SAHRC, said the commission had received a complaint relating to the non-payment of child maintenance at the Pinetown Magistrate's Court despite the maintenance amount having been paid by the father. He said the commission was in a process of engaging the department in order to resolve the matter.

"The commission is extremely concerned by the non-payment and or delay in processing the payment of child maintenance," he said.

Chrispin Phiri, spokesperson for the department of justice, said the allegations were a cause for concern and that should the department receive detailed information or specifics, they would not hesitate to act.

"These allegations concern fraud that has serious ramifications for the children concerned," he said.

EDUCATION



PUPILS embark on an environmental clean-up in the grasslands near Mzamba gorge.

Pupils pen poignant prose

Art of the matter: children living on the Wild Coast reveal their life under lockdown in writing competition

RACHEL MOORE

EAGER to get back to their books, primary school pupils from a standout school on the Wild Coast have been writing about lockdown life in their cash-strapped village.

Their stories – entries in a writing competition – are part of a broader fundraising drive to ensure an inspiring, education success story in Mzamba does not become a coronavirus casualty.

The community is situated on the northern extremity of the Eastern Cape. It is home to more than 100 families who were relocated from traditionally-owned land to make way for Sun International's Wild Coast Sun Casino in the apartheid era.

Mzamba was a typically small rural settlement then. In the past five years, it has mushroomed in size, with the government providing subsidised housing. Besides jobs at the casino, work is scarce. Most residents depend on social welfare grants.

Amid this, the Ithuba Wild Coast Community College, founded by a former leader of the Austrian Green Party, Christoph Chorherr, stands as a beacon of hope.

The private, not-for-profit primary school offers high-quality education with English as the medium of instruction. Unlike the often grossly overcrowded government schools in rural Eastern Cape, Ithuba's classes are limited to 35 pupils.

Ithuba means hope or opportunity in Zulu and Xhosa.

Pupils participate in a range of extracurricular activities as well as a Sprouting Entrepreneurs' programme supported by the Austrian ministry of education. This includes



THE UNIQUE architectural design of Ithuba Wild Coast Community College creates a pleasant learning environment.

vegetable gardening with grades 4 to 7 pupils growing produce for mini-market days.

"This is part of our drive to reintroduce agriculture as a subject in primary schools in the area," said the school's general manager, Jackie du Toit.

The school's overall site plan was conceived by German architect Markus Dobmeier in 2010. Over the next seven years, more than 300 Austrian and German architectural students designed and built classrooms, toilets, a library, a kitchen, a staff room, an open hall and playground. They hired Mzamba people to help as part of a "build together – learn together" skills development programme.

As new classrooms were built each year, the Founders Golf Tournament, a sporting and charity initiative with close ties to the casino, provided funding to kit out the classrooms, and buy stationery, textbooks and

office equipment.

The end result: a design-savvy, creative learning environment.

Cultural exchanges between the Austrian volunteers and pupils add to the educational experience. Every year, volunteers assist with basic literacy, reading skills, maths, arts, sports and maintenance.

"The intended impact of Ithuba is more than providing an education," said Matthias Forcher-Mayr, the Austrian ministry of education's representative in South Africa.

He said Ithuba's founding ethos was to successfully navigate the transition from school to work. In doing so, the fortunes of entire households would be lifted.

Entrepreneurial thinking was instilled at an early age, he added.

But the good work that's gone into growing the school – and its parent college in Gauteng – was now threatened by a worldwide economic crisis, brought to a head by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Even before the onset of Covid-19, a funding shortfall had cast doubts on the school's future.

Its cash-strapped Austrian backers enforced a no work, no pay policy for April – a blow for teachers who are already earning less than their counterparts at public schools. "Government subsidies cover only one-fifth of the education and operating costs. Parents also battle to pay even the nominal school fees levied," said Du Toit.

Amid these difficulties, the Life in Lockdown in Mzamba writing competition has sparked the imagination of pupils and teachers.

"We have been astounded by the quality of entries received from more than 30 learners at such short notice," said Fred Kockott, director of Roving Reporters, which helped organise the competition. "It will be a travesty if a school like this collapses."

Tyna Charter, a leading representative of the community-based education organisation, Smile, agreed. Smile focuses on interactive learning experiences.

"Ithuba's learners showed a mature understanding of the situation and

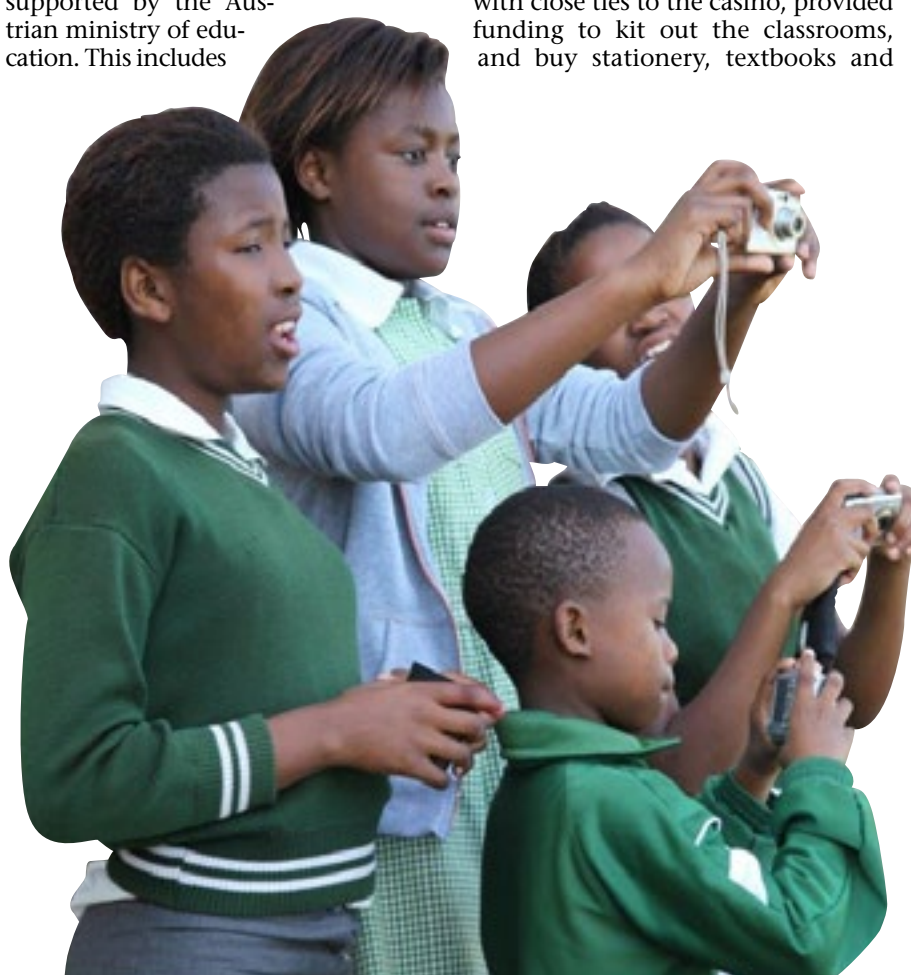


Photo project: Ithuba pupils, Zamangwana Sikhosana, Sinegugu Simamane, Khusele Mntonga, and Noluthando Matshicela got to discover the world through a lens in photographic workshops held by Markus Dobmeier in 2017.

ON THE BALL

ROVING Reporters' Life in Lockdown in Mzamba story writing competition is sponsored by the Founders Golf Tournament.

The tournament has been held every year in May since the Wild Coast Sun golf course was established 38 years ago by Charles Fiddian-Green, who invited 25 friends to become founder members.

Founders chairperson John Cheshire said what had started as a fun event had turned into a fundraiser of sorts when members got wind of a primary school being built off the back of the golf course.

"For us, the Ithuba Wild Coast Community College ticked all the boxes," said Cheshire.

"We were inspired by the people and energy driving it. We said: 'Right, we are onto a good thing here. Let's make a grand effort!'"

He said close to R2 million had since been raised in association with the Wild Coast Sun Casino to support the school's development.

"We are very proud of this association. The school has become an absolute gem in the community, but given the worldwide impact of Covid-19, it's going to be less and less aided by its international donors. So we feel the responsibility to ramp up support." Covid-19 forced the cancellation of this year's tournament but had inspired the Founders to up their game on the fundraising front.

"Amid this crisis, we need to do our bit. There are some influential businessmen in our ranks. Sponsoring this writing competition helps us get the message out that this school deserves all the support we can give it."

were able to express their thoughts and feelings poignantly," said Charter, an adjudicator of the competition, who also helped formulate questions to guide the young writers.

"Children are wonderfully refreshing in their ability to observe their environment without the filter of preconceived attitudes and to express themselves without artifice," she said.

Onele Dimane, a Grade 7 pupil, is a case in point.

"We have never suffered from hunger, but now people can't work. There is no money for medicines or food. So we use herbs for stomach aches and rely on what Granny plants," wrote Onele, who misses the daily hot, nutritious meals at Ithuba WWV.

Mfundo Tshezi had particular sympathy for street vendors. "They can't sell and provide for their families," he wrote.

On the up side, Mfundo's colleague, Ntando Mngoma, was relieved that a local tavern had closed. "There is no more crime that is reported or noise," wrote Ntando. "But the bad thing is we cannot go shopping in Port Edward (5km away)."

Ntando was referring to lockdown regulations prohibiting people from crossing over from the Eastern Cape to KwaZulu-Natal. Lockdown life had deprived Sibahle Mabude of privacy. "We share the room. Even if I sometimes want to be alone, I can't," she wrote.

But Sibahle said it had also made her appreciate life and family more, as well as "my mom's cooking".

Sisona Mthini cut straight to the chase. "I feel like I'm in prison in my own life," wrote Sisona. "We are living in fear (of people dying). Who is next?"

A few sentences later, Sisona expressed appreciation for the lessons learned. "We don't always have what we want. It's taught me to be satisfied with what we have."

In almost every entry, pupils wrote about their desire to be back at school.

Forcher-Mayr welcomed the competition as an innovative intervention.

"Teaching should focus on the life-worlds of learners. Life happens here and now. Learning must connect to the here and now," he said.

Principal Tembekazi Makedama said the competition was also, in its own modest way, a step toward introducing technology-based learning at Ithuba – something sorely lacking in the country's rural schools.

Most pupils, she said, had managed to submit their entries via WhatsApp – no small sacrifice considering the price of data and the financial strain many families were facing.

Du Toit said support from cellular network companies, like MTN, would go a long way to helping.

"Although Ithuba already has fibre optics, thanks to Founders and Dimension Data, we need unlimited wi-fi access to introduce e-learning and get help from outfits like iLeadlab in providing IT training and education software to our teachers."

Meanwhile, with the pilot writing competition having already proven a success, plans are afoot for a follow-up competition, "Life after Lockdown: The Future We Want". It caters for Ithuba graduates now in grades 8 and 9 at other schools in the area.

Noneka Mthwa, the school's first dux and Grade 9 pupil at a nearby private high school, is helping organise this next writing competition.

"My friends are very excited. Most of us are all from Ithuba which has enriched our lives. Some that I know are interested in journalism, and getting this chance to put our thoughts out there makes us feel good about ourselves, especially at a time like this," said Mthwa.

● www.rovingreporters.co.za
Rachel Moore is a Roving Reporters intern. | Roving Reporters

● All photos were taken by German architect, Markus Dobmeier, who helped design the school and document its development.