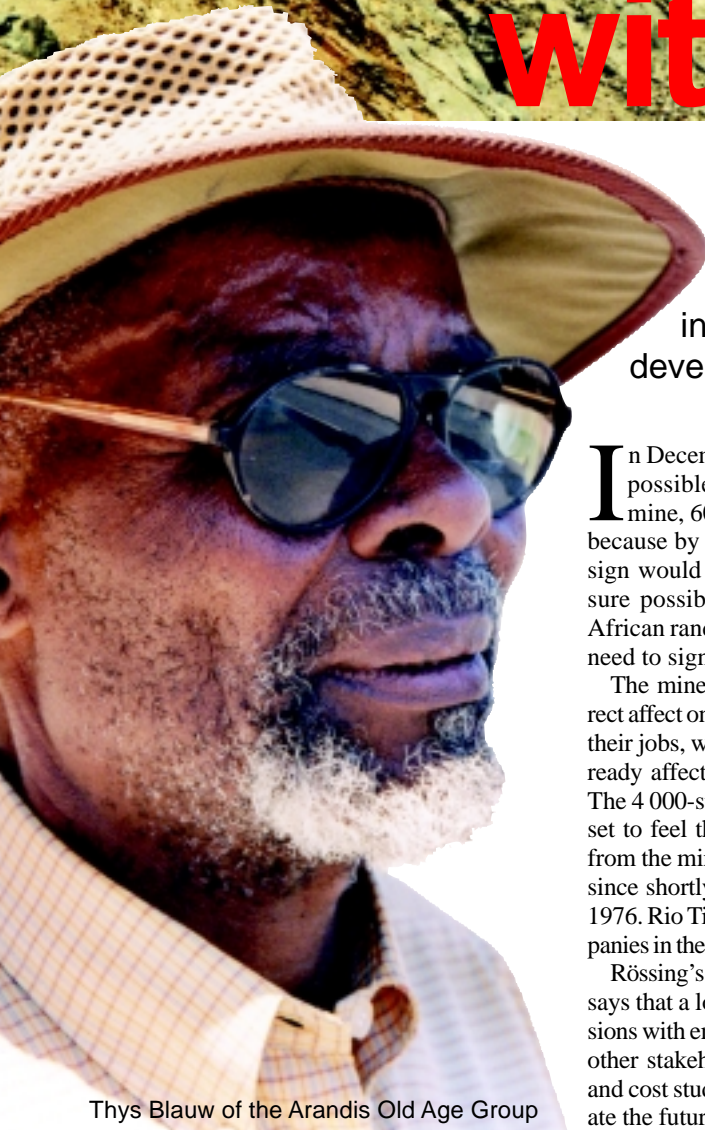




Facing the hard reality with a vision



Thys Blauw of the Arandis Old Age Group

The Rössing uranium mine may have to close at the end of 2007, but the company has a plan not to leave the Arandis community, home to many employees, out in the cold. **SARAH TAYLOR** reports on strategies to develop a sustainable future for those affected by the move

In December 2003, Rössing announced the possible closure in 2007 of its uranium mine, 60 km east of Swakopmund, mainly because by then the open pit in its current design would be mined out. Adding to the closure possibility is the strength of the South African rand against the US dollar, driving the need to significantly reduce production costs.

The mine's eventual closure will have a direct affect on about 820 employees who will lose their jobs, while cost cutting initiatives have already affected about 200 labour hire workers. The 4 000-strong community of Arandis is also set to feel the impact. Arandis, located 10 km from the mine itself, has only been in existence since shortly after mining began at Rössing in 1976. Rio Tinto, one of the biggest mining companies in the world, owns 69 per cent of the mine.

Rössing's Managing Director David Salisbury says that a lot of information gathering, discussions with employees, community members and other stakeholders as well as many feasibility and cost studies have been undertaken to evaluate the future of the mine.

"No stone will be left unturned to keep the mine open through an extensive investment programme to upgrade equipment and the mining process. However, we have to face realities such as the exchange rate and escalation of production costs over the past two years."

Rainer Schneeweiss, Superintendent of Sustainable Development at Rössing Uranium, tells *The Big Issue Namibia*: "In the past, mining companies around the world caused 'boom and bust' economies, coming into an area with no history of industry, employing local people, mining the resources, and then pulling out when mining was no longer possible, with little consideration of the affect on the community."

This is what Rössing wants to avoid, by providing additional training to its employees so they can obtain employment elsewhere, and helping the community develop projects supported by the Rössing Foundation – the company's corporate social responsibility arm.

"We want to help bring sustainability to this town to make the people resilient to the economic changes. We want to minimise the negative im-

pacts of a closure – be they economic, environmental or social,” says Schneeweiss. “There is also a shortage of technical people in Namibia, so we are concentrating on training local people in these fields.”

He says that since February 2003 regular consultations have been held directly between mine personnel and the community through ‘open house days’ to gauge their feelings and needs, and which will be incorporated into the company’s 2004 programme.

Marilyn Eibes, Programme Manager for Schools, Local Government, Infrastructure and Community Development at the Rössing Foundation in Arandis, says that “when the mine was fully operational in the 1980s, many of the 3 600 employees of Rössing and 1 000 contractors lived in Arandis”.

She says that while most of the 820 people currently employed at the mine live in Swakopmund and commute to the mine every day, about 300 employees and 100 contractors live in Arandis, which has a population of about 4 000.

“This means that about 30 per cent of the households in Arandis are supported by the mining employees’ salaries, while the town’s other residents benefit indirectly from the mine through business,” Eibes says.

Other employment opportunities are created through training offered by the Namibian Institute of Mining Technology (NIMT), as well as two clothing factories, a bakery, three supermarkets and a number of small-to-medium enterprises (SMEs). A 2003 study on the socio-economic situation in Arandis showed that the town’s unemployment rate was 36 per cent.

“There is also a very high ratio of bars to the number of people in this town, which is sig-

nificant because there is not much else to do. Even the kids go drinking there. Through youth groups and community projects we want to reverse this trend,” she says.

In 2001 the Rössing Foundation opened an office in Arandis with the specific task of addressing the future sustainability challenges of the town and the Erongo region. Particular emphasis has been placed on building local capacity around citizenship, education, enterprise development and supporting the community toward achieving their goals. Programmes are sourced and implemented with the community members so that they are in the driving seat of their development.

Rössing began to feel the pinch of market forces in the early 1990s, when the world market for uranium opened to materials coming from the ‘eastern block’ of Europe, especially Russia.

“This led to a tremendous drop in the price of uranium, and Rössing was forced to begin cost-cutting measures,” says Schneeweiss. This included, selling off the Rössing Golf and Country Club, donating NIMT and Arandis to the government, and retrenching 800 people. The uranium price (US\$40 a pound in the 1970s and 80s, just US\$7 in 2001 and now around US\$15) has never truly recovered and a further two downsizing exercises have been carried out.

The effect this had on Arandis is that the town’s population dropped continuously, and business pulled out of town.

The Rössing Foundation has assisted with the establishment of a church group, women’s group, elderly people’s group and a youth group, each of

which is tasked with identifying potential projects. The Foundation is also now renting from the town council the former Sunset Club, from where community programmes will be run, including typing and computer classes, and recreational activities.

Reginald Sawab is the Co-ordinator of the Goanikontes Youth Project, which is involved in raising awareness among the youth on issues such as HIV-AIDS, teenage pregnancies, and the environment, as well as looking for ways to tackle unemployment.

“We want to rid the youth of negative activities so they can be more involved in the social and economic development of our town. The Foundation, too, is looking at alternative futures for Arandis and we are pleased with these developments,” says Sawab, adding that the



Marilyn Eibes of the Rössing Foundation and youth group leader Reginald Sawab.

Foundation recently conducted a tourism workshop in the town and is helping to get children off the streets by involving them in sport.

“We need to stand together, take ownership of the town and be creative about ways forward. There are three schools here and NIMT, and a huge demand for education in Namibia. Arandis could become an educational town: the infrastructure is available,” he suggests.

Thys Blauw chairman of the one-year-old Arandis Old Age Group, is brimming with ideas

for developing the town. Last year his 44-member group started a vegetable garden on ground donated by the municipality. Blauw, now 69,

has lived in Arandis since the late 1970s, when he began working on the mine as a contractor, then as a boiler maker. In 1991 he suffered a spinal injury and took an early pension.

“I love Arandis and have a deep understanding of this place. It was built up by Rössing but now we must develop it ourselves,” he says. “We old people are battling with the N\$250 government pension every month. And life is hard here, but the vegetables we grow give us good food to eat. When we are growing enough, we can also sell them to make some money.

“We also have ideas of farming ostriches here and opening up a café, where tourists and locals can eat and socialise. We are looking into breeding chickens, too, because why should we buy chickens from South Africa?”

“I am thankful to Rössing, because they have taught us – people of all cultures from all over Namibia and even South Africa – how to work together in a decent way.” **BI**

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Tekla Kavari (23) worked at a fuel station in Swakopmund after finishing school. In 2001 she starting to train at Rössing uranium mine, and now prides herself on being Namibia’s first woman blasting technician.