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Investing for a
world of change

Notes from the road: Walking with Bulungula

POSTCARD

Wild Coast, Eastern Cape

- On a recent site visit to the Bulungula Incubator in the Eastern Cape, Ninety One's project champion reflects on the power of long-term, community-rooted development.
- From healthcare to education, this firsthand account highlights the resilience of a village transforming its future, and the value of investing in impact that compounds over time.

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In one of the most remote corners of South Africa, nestled along the Wild Coast of the Eastern Cape, sits a quiet revolution: Bulungula Incubator. For 20 years, this community-led organisation has been rewriting the story of rural development – slowly, steadily, and with deep integrity.

I recently had the privilege of visiting Bulungula as Ninety One’s project champion – a site visit that left me both humbled and hopeful. What I saw and experienced was not just inspiring; it was transformative. A grassroots model of education, health, and economic development built on trust, co-creation, and staying the course. It was, quite simply, a masterclass in patience, purpose, and long-term thinking.

This is not charity. It’s generational change.

JuJurha Pre-school (powered by solar)



Source: Ninety One.

Who is Bulungula?

But to understand what makes this place so remarkable, you first need to understand who Bulungula is.

Founded in 2004, the Bulungula Incubator operates across four rural villages in the Xhosa Mouth Administrative Area – a region long excluded from basic services, healthcare, and access to education. Their approach is holistic, deeply embedded in the community, and rooted in the principle that lasting change only happens with, not to, people.

From an employment perspective, Bulungula is one of the most vibrant villages in the region, with Bulungula Incubator employing 180 people – 90% of whom are local. This not only creates economic opportunity but reinforces their philosophy of building with the community, not just for it. Their success is built on local leadership, dignity, and trust.

Bulungula College



Source: Ninety One.

When Bulungula first began, only three learners in the region had completed Matric. Over 200 have matriculated today, and one of those original three is now the organisation's Finance Manager. That full-circle moment says everything about Bulungula: invest in people early, walk the journey with them, and watch what's possible.

The numbers tell a story of resilience:

98%

matric pass rate in 2024.

100%

pass rate in key subjects like English, Mathematics, and IsiXhosa, up from just 7% in 2021.

180+

people employed by Bulungula, unlocking meaningful work in a region with few formal opportunities.

These aren't just statistics; they're proof of what happens when you commit, consistently, over time.

What stood out?

Some of the most memorable aspects of my visit included:

- A team of 20 community health workers (oNomakhaya) serving five villages, equipped with everything from pregnancy tests to MUAC tapes, supporting mothers and tracking childhood development through home visits.
- A free, independent high school, Bulungula College, that eliminates the need for students to leave home to access education beyond Grade 9, a reality that led to massive dropout rates in the past.
- A 95% COVID vaccination rate, thanks in part to a youth-run community radio station, which delivers credible health messaging alongside local news and cultural programming.
- A fully functioning health point, staffed with trained nurses offering support to health workers, proving that decentralised, community-based healthcare can deliver real impact.
- And perhaps most powerfully, a sense of pride and ownership that threads through every initiative. You feel it in the classrooms, health visits, and in how team members speak about their work. This is not charity. This is long-term social infrastructure.

What this means

At Ninety One, we talk often about long-term thinking, discipline, and conviction-led investing. We don't chase short-term wins. We back what matters, and stay the course.

Bulungula Incubator is a living example of this mindset.

They aren't looking for quick fixes. They've stayed the course for two decades, working quietly and consistently, to deliver real, systemic change.

Visiting Bulungula reminded me that social impact, much like investing, requires patience, belief, and time.

Bulungula community radio station DJ in action



Source: Ninety One.

Bulungula community health point



Source: Ninety One.

A model for the future

Bulungula's model is built from the ground up. The team lives where they work. They know every name, every story. Their projects span health, education, livelihoods, and youth development, but always through a deeply collaborative, hyper-local lens.

Sitting in the boardroom with the team, walking through the school grounds, and watching health workers move from door to door – I saw what development looks like when it's embedded, not imposed, when it listens before it acts, when it builds from the inside out.

Ninety One's ethos is investing for a better tomorrow, not only for our clients, but for the world we're part of. This visit reaffirmed that commitment.

Bulungula is a perfect example of this thinking in action.

There are no shortcuts here. Just patient, consistent, disciplined investment in people and place. It echoes our belief that real progress is built over time.

Thank you to the Bulungula team for your openness, dedication, and proof that brilliance is waiting to be unlocked even in the most forgotten corners of our country.

And thank you to Ninety One, for backing this work and reminding us that the best investments we can make are in the people, places, and futures worth believing in.

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