



← FROM PAGE 59

**LEFT FROM TOP:**

• A cock with good conformation – showing correct shape and musculature. Course participants are shown how to select superior, healthy cocks and hens.



• Clementine Chiya, vice-chairperson of the Umzimkhulu village chicken improvement project. Her flock has doubled in size from about 30 birds to 60.

• Farmers are encouraged to provide nests for their chickens.

BELOW:

Participants are taught to provide protection for chicks during the first four to five weeks of their lives to reduce mortality rates.

PHOTOS:
DR ED WETHLI



Chickens are a common sight on rural homesteads across South Africa. These are so-called ‘village chickens’, also named ‘indigenous foragers’ or ‘Zulu chickens’. Yet although these birds are so common, families seldom eat them and almost never eat the eggs.

According to Dr Ed Wethli, a poultry expert and the former head of training of the KwaZulu-Natal Poultry Institute (KZNPI), the main reason for this is that the birds’ mortality rate is high and few eggs are produced. So it’s difficult to increase the average family flock of about five hens and one or two cocks.

Yet with a little money, time and attention, it’s possible to improve the productivity of these chickens – providing not only a ready source of meat and eggs for families, but extra birds for sale and barter.

CHICKEN PROJECT

With this in mind, Dr Wethli launched the Umzimkhulu village chicken improvement project in May 2010 in conjunction with Zweliphi Sithole, an extension

officer from the provincial department of agriculture, and Ndumiso Khumalo of the KZNPI. The venture was financially supported by ABSA Corporate Bank.

“Village chickens have the genetic potential to respond favourably to better management. The idea is to transform village farmers from passive to active chicken producers using basic chicken management skills,” says Dr Wethli.

A total of 14 participants – 10 of whom were women – were chosen from three villages in Umzimkhulu. They began by attending a one-day workshop at the KZNPI in Bisley, near Pietermaritzburg, at which they learnt the basics of record keeping. This was followed by a one-week course, at which they were taught management techniques that covered diseases, pests and parasites, and chicken housing. Each participant was then given building materials to construct a simple chicken house to protect the birds at night.

After the course, Dr Wethli and Zweliphi paid regular on-site visits to the farmers.

BETTER ALL ROUND

Six months later, every aspect of chicken production had improved. The average flock size had increased from 19 to 29 birds per household, mortality had been reduced in 62% of households, and disease control showed an 82% improvement. Just over a third of the participants had started collecting eggs and many were using selective breeding.

A year later, towards the end of 2011, the situation looked even better, with an average of 43 birds per household.

