

from the heart

Bigen Africa is positioning itself as a premier infrastructure developer and social upliftment engineer under the guidance of Dr Snowy Khoza. By KERRY DIMMER

A hungry young woman sits under a street light outside her home that has no electricity. Her school books are spread around her unshod feet, which are exposed to the bitter winter elements. She's been chucked out of school for not wearing a school uniform. Or is it her unpaid fees? Or maybe for not wearing shoes because she doesn't own any. Nevertheless, she is determined to get out of abject poverty.

Africa is peppered with similar stories. But this is how Dr Snowy Khoza experienced early life in Mamelodi, Pretoria. Years later, with a PhD and an MBA, Khoza has changed her circumstances and is determined to transform the lives of impoverished Africans in her role as CEO of Bigen Africa.

Khoza joined Bigen Africa in 2010. Her career has spanned mainly social and financial development work with the South African government, the Development Bank of South Africa and the country's National Energy Regulator. Khoza gained extensive experience across the continent through her various executive roles.

To some it may have appeared strange that an engineering company (as Bigen was perceived at the time) would appoint a development activist to the position of CEO, especially during a time when the company was riding high at the top of an S-curve.

'What the outgoing CEO and founder, Francois Swart, and the board envisaged was a new landscape for the company to create another upward S-curve. Given my background, I could see that the true essence of Bigen Africa was that of an infrastructure development organisation rather than just another engineering company,' says Khoza.

'It was also well established and ideally aligned to influence the metamorphosis of how infrastructure is applied so that economic benefits would have a significant impact on the social wellbeing of those in need. It just needed to reposition itself.

'The first challenge lay in encouraging engineers to move away from concentrating only on blueprints and technical drawings to introducing the element of beneficiation for those who live on the periphery of a project. This required enormous and deep interrogation of all our processes, our strategies and, more importantly, our thinking.

'What birthed as a result is S-Vision 2016, a full-value chain of infrastructure development activism, which has been created by engineers with a conscience.'

This means that all development must have some benefit to local communities beyond the commercial value or demand. For example, if a mine requires a water reservoir, piping water through communities means locals are rewarded with clean water

and the end-user – the mine – will process the resulting grey water for use, instead of the reverse. A bridge becomes a multi-purpose facility when it includes cycle paths, can accommodate donkey carts and pedestrians, while disguising water drainage.

The contractor also benefits. Instead of building a local school or hospital almost as an afterthought in compliance with corporate social responsibility programmes, such efforts are now included during the initial development with, where possible, government support.

'If a government is going to build electrical infrastructure to support an agreed-upon commercial activity, why not push it through to the local township?

'It is very distressing for a mother to gaze upon a nearby fully-electrified operation while her children huddle around a candle for light,' says Khoza.

'Our formula works particularly well for governments in that by using the "user pays" principle for services, the income from enterprise and communities can be fed back. It goes into further community upliftment, but only on condition that – under Bigen Africa's management, policy and consulting advice – there are agreements on how the development is structured, implemented funded, maintained and operated to ensure sustainability.'

'If there is a justification for our presence anywhere on the continent, we will put down roots'



PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRETT RUBIN

'I could see that the true essence of Bigen Africa was that of an infrastructure development organisation rather than just another engineering company'

This strategy has enormous value for African governments desperate for infrastructure development, but who lack the funds or are attempting to do so from a balance sheet that has competing priorities such as food, housing, health, education, water and power.

Bigen Africa facilitates the most viable planning environment for governments to raise funds by seeking authentic partnerships. It also provides these governments with the chance to partner with Bigen Africa and tap into its development finance institutional partnerships – of which there are 22.

Bigen Africa has operated successfully, largely in South Africa to date. However, in devising its S-Vision 2016, the company is ready to expand its activities into Africa – and not as a token presence.

The first phase involves growing Bigen Africa's portfolio into the SADC region with offices established in Namibia, Botswana and Zambia. The balance of its activities are conducted from the company's head office in Pretoria.

The second leg is underway to broaden Bigen Africa's reach into West Africa and the company plans on establishing a branch in Ghana. Four sectors are targeted for development: roads and transport; industrial and mining; water and sanitation; and housing and commercial buildings.

Partnerships are also being sought in regions such as Senegal and Mali where Bigen Africa already has established projects in place.

The third phase is to develop East Africa through Kenya, but only once the western and central areas have a strong foothold. Northern Africa will follow.

'It must be made clear, however, that we take direction from the projects that we work on,' says Khoza. 'If there is a justification for our presence anywhere on the continent, we will put down roots.'

'To do what we want to do is impossible on our own,' she continues, 'which is why our partnership strategy focuses on six alliance categories: project-based; joint ventures; mergers and acquisitions; virtual liaisons; working agreements without any common interest; and social/enterprise portfolios inclusive of public-private partnerships. It is critical, however, that any partnerships we form must satisfy our indigenisation policy.'

Bigen Africa first needs to establish that any credible partner has the welfare of the country in which it intends to work at heart. The partner must understand policy and regulatory frameworks while having a sincere interest in the economic and social growth of a nation. It must also agree to source any resources locally, such as materials, labour and training.

'Only then can we all make a conscious, proactive contribution in terms of social and economic upliftment.'

Bigen Africa's management consulting philosophy is also proactive – not reactive – Khoza emphasises. 'We do not wait for governments to approach us seeking help

in formulating policies or the interpretation or implementation thereof. We engage with them to consider the potential of commercial development as a solution to social upliftment.'

'So ultimately instead of companies just amassing great wealth from their activities on African soil, their presence has rewards beyond capital investment.'

On the threshold of incredible investment opportunities from the global arena, Bigen Africa wants to keep African development in the hands of locals so that the continent can maintain its uniqueness and provide stable ownership for future generations.

'This continent has solutions, but it often seems we just lack the confidence. I believe that if, as Africans, we actually experience and see the impact that individuals and organisations such as Bigen Africa make, then before and after scenarios will be completely different pictures.'

And Khoza is determined to make a change on the continent, not only because of her childhood.

'I am also a mother and a woman,' she says. Khoza is a stimulating example to the youth that all things are possible. And she demonstrates this in many ways. She continues to interact with struggling communities and has created the Snowy Khoza Trust. The organisation helps children as well as child prisoners gain access to an education.

Simply put, Snowy Khoza has the biggest Bigen heart. **AD**