

COVER
INTERVIEW

man in the mirror

Many companies have washed themselves in the principles of black economic empowerment, but mining and energy resources company Tranter Holdings has embraced the concept somewhat differently. By KERRY DIMMER

'I like what I see when I look in the mirror,' says Joshua Ngoma, CEO of Tranter Holdings, and he's not talking about his good looks. 'It's important that you have a true reflection of yourself not just as a person, but as someone who can make a difference to the empowerment of others and society as a whole.'

Ten years ago Exxaro CEO Sipho Nkosi introduced Zambian-born mining engineer Ngoma to two other like-minded businessmen – Humphrey Mathe and Mxolisi Mgojo.

The four of them had much in common. All had served as Eyesizwe executives and each had built a career in mining or energy resources. Their bond was strengthened when they explored the opportunity of building a company that would facilitate sustainable black-owned or -managed companies within the mining and energy sector. They shared the sentiment that in terms of sustainability, broad-based black economic empowerment (BBBEE) was simply not doing enough.

Although they registered a company in 2002, it only became operational in 2007 with the development of Tranter Holdings, which Ngoma describes as 'an incubator of sorts'.

'We realised that our experiences of BBBEE could be used effectively to enable

more people to participate in the economic activities of the country and its communities. And not only through job creation, but by providing opportunities for people to have a controlling interest in an entity.'

Four such entities are presented in the form of subsidiary companies – Tranter Kismet Investments, Tranter Exploration, Tranter Gold and Tranter Energy and Mining Services (TEMS).

Through them, Tranter has acquired shares in Johannesburg Stock Exchange-listed Wits Gold and Toronto Stock Exchange-listed Great Basin Gold. Tranter Kismet, incidentally, is a totally woman-driven initiative and was the first of Tranter's subsidiaries to address this previously disadvantaged group.

Ngoma says that all things considered, in just two years, the Tranter Group's performance has been 'very satisfactory', having grown along with its subsidiaries, to include two large engineering manufacturing plants in Johannesburg. TEMS is also displaying growth with the recent acquisition of the sub-Saharan operations of Boart Longyear, renamed Tranter Rock Drills, which compliments the controlling and management stake that TEMS has in Amazwi Power Products.

The group has a significant impact on the lives of its 500 employees and their dependants, as well as having a trickle-down effect on local communities.

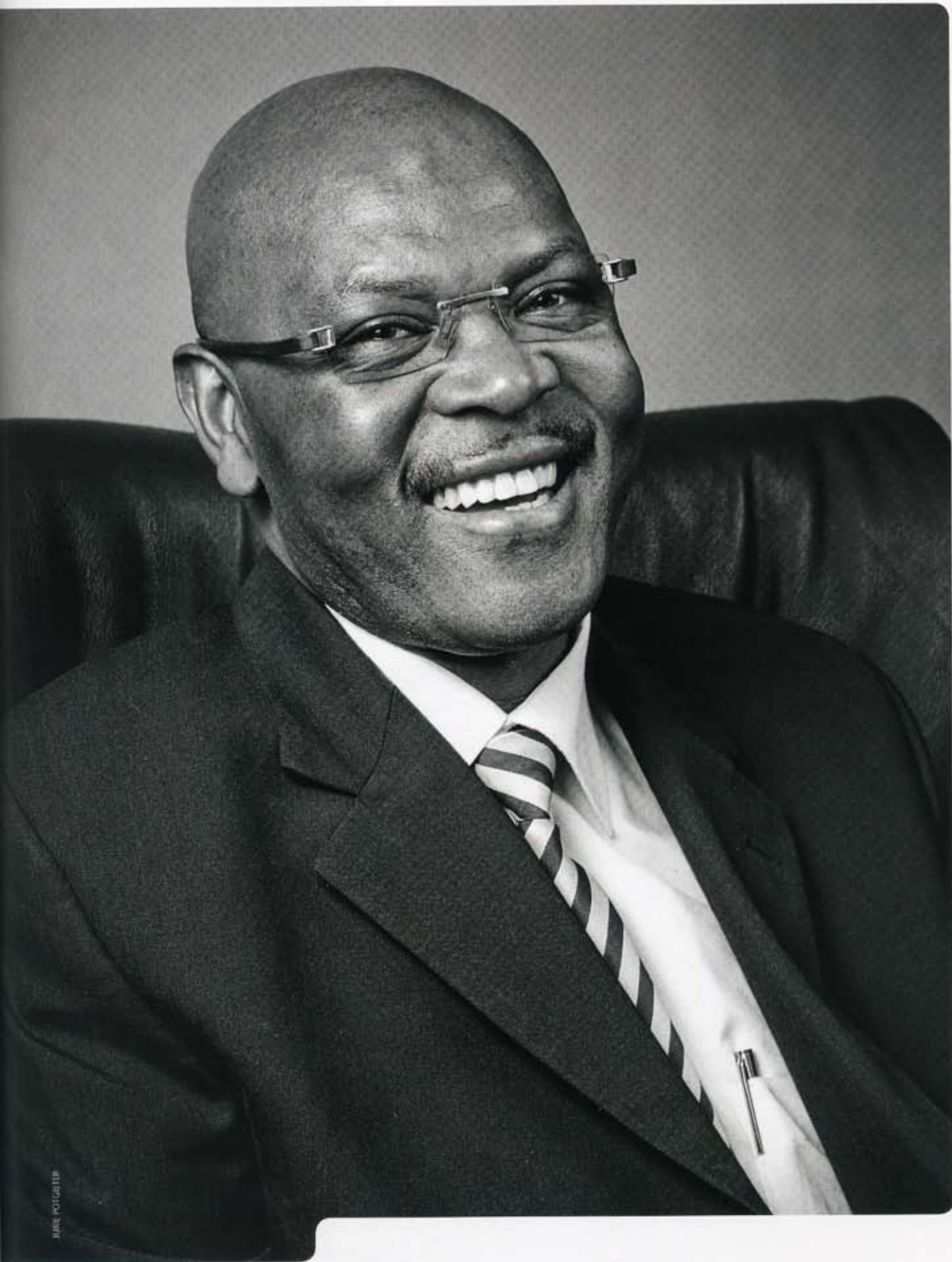
Through its partnership with entrepreneurs in the Bafokeng and Greater Lonmin communities, TEMS is in the process of building satellite workshops to be jointly owned with, and managed by, the local communities. This is in addition to a similar project in Steelpoort, Amazwi Otex.

Well-established mining houses Lonmin, Anglo American and Impala Platinum, among others, have also partnered with TEMS in the establishment of satellite workshops that will enable local communities to provide equipment repair and refurbishment services to mines.

'We will be rolling out this concept in all the areas where we have operations,' says Ngoma. 'It has great benefits for the mines, in that downtime is reduced by having repair centres on their doorsteps. The surrounding communities also benefit and although we feel this isn't enough, it's definitely a start.'

'We may not have the kind of resources other established businesses have, but we have a big heart to share whatever we can with those who have very little or nothing. You see, it's not really just about money at

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the end of the day. Sure, money helps you keep score and in most cases businesses make money first and think of people later, but we've found that if you put people first – and provided you have a solid foundation – everything else will fall into place.'

What has fallen nicely into place is Tranter Rock Drills allowing employees the opportunity to be shareholders of 25% of the business. The Rock Drills division is responsible for bringing Boart Longyear's percussive range of rock drills and hard-rock tools back to South Africa after Anglo American sold it.

'We are also the original equipment manufacturer of the Seco range of rock drills, which makes us one of the major suppliers of pneumatic rock drills in sub-Saharan Africa. What is particularly significant is that we also have a two-year contract with Boart Longyear to distribute to North and South America.'

Does this mean the company is going global? 'Not right now, although it is part of our 10-year plan,' says Ngoma. 'Right now we are focused on consolidating our foundation across the SADC region and we don't want to spread the business too thinly. If our growth is steady and an opportunity presents itself we will obviously colour our plate.'

'However, if we concentrate where we are most resourceful, then we already have a diverse range of opportunities to bring to the table. But we are moving north. Using the same model we've used in South Africa, we have established Tranter Zambia, a vehicle we're using in our mineral exploration and exploitation

activities there. Along with our Zambian partners we have started manganese exploration in the Luapula province.'

If there is one thing Tranter Holdings insists on when considering business ventures, it is that the individuals concerned have something to contribute: be it technical, educational, managerial or entrepreneurial knowledge and skills.

'It's what drives us,' insists Ngoma. 'The transfer of wealth through the interchange of abilities means that although we may not own 100% of what we operate, we are a catalyst for economic development.'

Tranter Holdings has been addressing the current economic slump in its usual style – by putting people first. 'When one of our Johannesburg plants felt the effects of the recession, retrenchment was not an option,' Ngoma stresses.

'There is so much loyalty and commitment from our employees that it was not conscionable to put anyone out on the streets. Instead, we offered a shortened week so that our people could continue to have some form of income until the situation stabilised and by the end of 2009 we were able to reintroduce a five-day week for many of them – a sign that things are picking up.'

Ngoma believes that South Africa still has a large degree of untapped potential. 'Infrastructure is in place, there are resources, but what I find frustrating is that so many individuals expect handouts. These people are not prepared to get their hands dirty. Handouts may provide some relief but will not alleviate poverty.

'If we're really serious about aid, then our focus, as the idiom says, needs to be on teaching people to fish, instead of just giving them fish. This is why what we do is such a great concept ... we're saying to those who are willing to grow, that we'll work with you to get you where you want to be.'

Just how did Ngoma get where he is? His late mother was certainly inspirational, encouraging him to value honesty, hard work and develop a love of people.

Alastair Douglas, one-time CEO of Cementation Mining was another mentor who was particularly influential in Ngoma moving to South Africa, which he has come to love as much as his birth country.

'I hope I can touch people's lives in a similar way to those who have contributed in some way to my success. It's a "pay it forward" process.'

'If those who have been helped keep forwarding upliftment, we would all feel the effects of living in a better place. It does not make sense to see children going to bed hungry in a place of abundance,' Ngoma says.

With his wife and two teenage children, Ngoma has travelled extensively. 'We see ourselves as citizens of the world and it has taught us to understand and respect the unfamiliar. Experiencing different cultures opens our eyes to see things in a completely different way.'

Tranter's success is measured not only by the account books but by the number of individuals it has helped to prosper. Perhaps Ngoma's mirror is one worth borrowing so we can all take a long hard look at ourselves. **AD**