Upping the game in rural development:

An interview with **Gloria Serobe** (Part 1)

Gloria Serobe is a founding member and the executive director of Women's Investment Portfolio Holdings Limited (WIPHOLD) and CEO of Wipcapital. Ben Turok interviewed her in Johannesburg on 5 May 2014

WIPHOLD, the women's investment group, has boldly struck out on its own to help address the crisis of hunger and food insecurity in South Africa's impoverished rural areas. Innovative use of corporate social investment provides a 100 percent subsidy to bring uncultivated fields into high-yield agricultural production.

Ben Turok: I've heard that WIPHOLD is now involved in rural development projects. In that work, did you get government support of one kind or another? Or ANC support?

Gloria Serobe: No. We decided that we are going to interpret "rural development" our way and we have directed ourselves to food security. How did we get there? We went to the rural areas to say, "We have a corporate social responsibility (CSR). Our mandate is to look after women and children. We are here now. We want to see what you are doing here, how you live, what things we can get into. As long as the mandate for women and children is followed, that's what we can do."

The response of the women in the rural areas was a simple one: "It is okay for the urban areas to talk about 'women and children', but we are *all* hungry here. We are all poor. We are all dying for food. We are not at a stage where we can separate these two groups, male and female. Starting with that, if you want to help us, there are our fields. They are not fenced. We used to farm; we don't farm any more."

When you ask them why they are not farming – because maybe you sit here, thinking they are so lazy! – their response is that, before the new government, they had herd-boys: a child who stands between the animals and the crops to make sure these animals don't get into eating those mielies. Under the new government, it is compulsory to send children to school. Therefore, they do not have the herd-boys. And so the only people who can plough are the ones who are able to fence their fields. You wouldn't think about that, but it is part of the reason this land is lying fallow.

FARM FOR FOOD, EXCESS TO SELL

BT: So the ANC wanted to abolish child labour and it led to the breakdown of farming? It's extraordinary.

GS: We sit here wondering why people aren't doing what they used to, why farming is not being done. It turns out that fencing is important. Of all the things in the farming areas, fencing is the most expensive. We said, "Go ahead and fence. We are going to give you poles and fencing. You tell us how much and you do the work." We wanted to test their commitment as well. Oh my word, and they did fence! You can imagine having to fence a hundred hectares. It's a lot of space. But a whole village comes out and does it…

BT: This is communal land?

GS: It belongs to different families but it is one place. Then we thought, "*Sjoe*, they are committed." We've paid nearly R2 million for this fence. It can go wrong, it can be stolen, whatever. But no, they fenced. Okay. We were encouraged by that. As soon as they finished fencing, our CSR brought in contractors to plough for them.

BT: But rural people use the hoe.
GS: Farming is complicated now! We wanted to do it the proper way for high yield – we're talking 5- or 6-tonne yields per hectare. The ploughing is professionally done with tractors, but not just tractors…

BT: It's fertiliser, seeds, everything?
GS: The whole thing.

BT: But let me interrupt for a moment. I was in Tanzania for three years in the 1960s, when Julius Nyerere was in power. Under his *ujamaa* development programme, they built 57 farming villages and each village got a tractor. Those tractors didn't last nine months. They were neglected; they rusted; there were no spare parts. That failed. Why did you succeed?
GS: Firstly, we didn't go the route of owning the tractors. We hired from Barloworld. We paid R1 million for them to plough those 100 hectares of land.

BT: So you subsidised the whole agricultural project?
GS: Hundred percent. This year, we've done 500 hectares, and this July, we'll plough 1 000 hectares of land.

BT: Who are the beneficiaries? What do they do?
GS: Up to now, all of it was CSR. Remember, at the beginning, we asked, "How can we help you?" and they said, "Food." That's what we're doing; we're not doing other things, like HIV programmes. It comes in the form of food security. There is food. The money, for all intents and purposes, is theirs.

BT: Do they do all the work?
GS: The mechanisation is done for them. Seeds and fertilisers are done. Soil testing, to say that you need this much lime, this much phosphate, and so on. And when that is done, because the area is large, they also spray weed-killer to kill the weeds.

BT: Who harvests?
GS: When the harvesting comes, they say how many families own this land…

BT: Do the people harvest themselves, or is this a machine operation?
GS: Here is [a photograph of] the harvesting machine. You see, it's a very large operation.

BT: Now what do the people do? You're giving them free food.
GS: Even though you are using machines, as these contractors are, people have to come and load

> To leave it as subsistence farming means exactly that: for people to plough for their own consumption. That's all it is. That is where I think the government can come in, and develop some kind of commercial line so that people can consume and they can have an excess to work with.

things, bag mielies, do other things. There is work to be done. But the biggest thing they have to look after is security. There are stories and stories of animals being stolen…

BT: Do they consume what they produce or do they sell?
GS: It got too big for them to just consume, so the bulk is being sold to traders and some to the provincial government, because the government didn't have enough to feed their own livestock. They sell; they have an account; they have a committee; they manage the money; they've built their own storage. They are very busy. I will take you there

to meet this community. It's amazing. Even the language that you get from them.

And that goes back to why we took this route, and the development aspect of it. You've moved them from "Please, we are hungry" to "We've got mielies that we don't know what to do with!" and "Oh, we are so wealthy. Oh, we have R100 000 in our account now. We must keep it back so we can buy fertiliser next year." The language is changed completely. It's a language of responsibility and a language of self-esteem, of dignity. Part of the problem with giving hand-outs is that you sometimes take away self-esteem in the end. In this case, they are in charge.

BT: How many people, how many women, are involved in all this?
GS: Land does not belong to women only; it belongs to that family, to that house. In this project, there are 220 families. We found that 50 percent of these are women-headed households.

RECOGNISE LAND ASSETS

BT: Would you be in favour of giving title deeds to the land, or not?
GS: Title deeds, yes.

BT: There is an argument about communal farming in tribal areas, that if people have title deeds to the piece of land they own, then they might sell out to a big landowner.
GS: Here is where I stand with this. In the rural areas, once they have been given that land to build the house and that land to plough, it is for life!

BT: It can never be taken away?
GS: No.

BT: The chief can't take it away?
GS: No.

BT: And the descendants?
GS: And the descendants. We spoke of women-headed homes. That's because the husband died and the wife remains with the children. You can have a difference when the patriarchy comes into it, where, instead of the wife owning, the son owns. But it remains in that family. It goes from the one generation to the next generation.

BT: If one of those women goes to the bank and says, "I want to build an extra house on my land. Will you give me a loan?" The bank will ask for surety.
GS: Because there is no title to the land, that is a problem. Or they might want to borrow money to send children to school.

This thing of not giving title to land, not recognising livestock, is ridiculous! The people in the rural areas are not children. They are not children. They are adults with pride.

Let me take it further. This is why I have a problem with the attitude of "it can't be done". One of the reasons for rural poverty is that the assets they own are not recognised by the banks. You sophisticated people talk about the capital market, but here everybody lives off that land. So there's no lending, no selling. It's an asset for consumption. But if you're in trouble, this asset can never get you out of trouble.

I'm also on the board of a bank. If I'm going to lend you money, it's not the bank's money. The depositors want to make sure I don't lend you money that you can't return, so that when the depositor wants it, we don't have it. The security issue is important.

This thing of not giving title to land, not recognising livestock, is ridiculous! The people in the rural areas are not children. They are not children. They are adults with pride. Few men will sell their houses simply because they want a bottle of brandy. No! People have pride in their families and homes; they have a wife and children. They are not this wild bunch of people in the rural areas who will *sommer* just leave their homes and go to live under a tree.

WHAT ROLE FOR THE GOVERNMENT?

BT: Let me go back to the question of why farming did not take place. Your experience was that the fencing is the critical issue, but it seems that many areas of the former homelands have given up agriculture. What are the factors other than fencing?
GS: There are too many. Firstly, fencing. Secondly, those areas depended a lot on the mining workers

and now people are at home with no work. Farming demands capital. Whether you're planting cabbages or whatever, you need the initial money. Thirdly, the work ethic comes into it. Even in the rural areas, even with this problem of lack of fencing, you can see houses where a husband and wife like farming anyway, and you can see they are beautifully maintained. But most of them are not. Fourthly, is to "up the game" to commercial agriculture, which is what we did here. To leave it as subsistence farming means exactly that: for people to plough for their own consumption. That's all it is. That is where I think the government can come in, and develop some kind of commercial line so that people can consume and they can have an excess to work with. Consume – excess – invest – plough again.

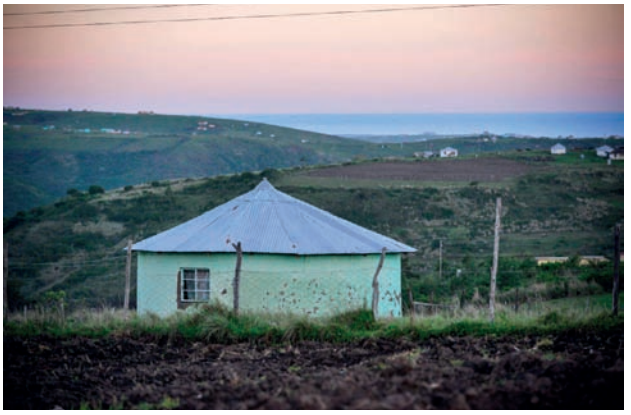
BT: Is there no fund in government to subsidise this?
GS: The Jobs Fund? The Land Bank was meant to help with farming, but no. I do think there's funding lying all over the place in government, but the people who need it are not linked to it.

BT: We've got a minister of agriculture and a minister of rural development. Surely, it's not somebody in Pondoland who can go and find the Land Bank – the Land Bank must go and find them, through the ministers. That's the way it should be.
GS: It's actually the local management. Between the local authority and the municipalities and province, they must decode that. If a councillor is effective – because she's someone from this area, this municipality – she would look for money. And of course the municipality doesn't have the money for this, so either she goes to the province or the national department of co-operative governance and traditional affairs …

BT: I'm reluctant to put the responsibility on individual councillors, because there is a national context. It seems to me that you're saying there is no adequate national agenda to ensure that Land Bank money gets to subsistence farmers. Am I wrong?
GS: I'm struggling to load it to national government. Like all things that have local implementation, given the big country that we've got, I would still send it back to the local government. They are the ones who know.

BT: Why don't they do it?
GS: I don't know. I've never been in that world of theirs.

BT: Shouldn't somebody do research to say why there is this gap between the subsistence farmer and authority?



We said to the traditional leaders that WIPHOLD is a women's company and, yes, we respect the formation here, but as long as we do not understand why girls cannot be given land, we will not be here.

GS: (laughs) So you're taking it to the university now?

No. I truly think that the representatives of these areas can translate their area into a fundable project, either to the municipality or to provincial government. If it goes up from there, then that is fine. Let me give you an example. I spend a lot of time in the Eastern Cape and I think, naïvely, that the Eastern Cape will only survive if it works with agriculture; with tourism; and it must go back to what it used to do best, which is education. Let it be the producer of educated people for the country and make money out of this. Those three things for the Eastern Cape will make it work.

But somehow we want to be Johannesburg. Now, Johannesburg has no land to farm, but we have.

Vegetables are plenty! Johannesburg is landlocked. We have the natural endowment of sea, the Wild Coast and good rain. They have the mines. What I'm saying is this: the provincial leadership can decode this thing to the national programme and say, for the Eastern Cape, "This is who we are, and this is how it's going to work".

But the Eastern Cape government also has a very big province to cover. By the time they get to the little towns like Centani or Mqandula, their five years in office have come and gone, because there are so many places. For me, the pressure and the push can only come from the people who naturally come out of those places and make the link.

ENGAGING TRADITIONAL LEADERS

BT: What about the traditional leaders? Do they have a role in this?
GS: As WIPHOLD, we've worked very, very closely with the traditional leaders in the area.

BT: Are they very helpful?
GS: Extremely helpful. To do what we have done in these rural areas, we will go to that town, find out how many traditional leaders are there. In Centani, there are 65. We sit with them, we chat about what they think about this town, asking where does livestock work here, where do you breed cattle, where do goats work, where in these parts can you plough mielies or beans. And they know it, because they are generational leaders.

That's exactly what we've done. We've localised. We're not going to put pigs in a place that doesn't take pigs. The knowledge is with the traditional leaders, and you have no idea how much pride they have in this.

BT: Some people say that traditional leaders are very conservative and anti-women. Is that not a problem for WIPHOLD, as a women's organisation?
GS: We have not experienced the anti-women thing. That's number one. Number two: they have their baggage, just like we have ours, and there is no reason why those things should not be spoken about. Let me give an example. At a certain age, children are given land for residence, grazing and ploughing, and they give this to boys only. When we asked about this, they responded that they expect girls to get married. We said to them that WIPHOLD is a women's company and, yes, we respect the formation here, but as long as we do not understand why girls cannot be given land, we will not be here.

That conversation has moved to the Eastern Cape House of Traditional Leaders. They are discussing this matter as we speak. Up until this question was put to them, it just happened on its own because it was what has been done before. Now we're working with them, we are respectful of them and we are facilitating them as well. We want this place to work and we are saying to them we have this challenge with girls who cannot depend on marriage. When they get married and the marriage doesn't work, what does this girl do now? She comes back home and becomes a child again to the brother, or what? We are saying that when girls turn 18 or 19, they too must be given a piece of land.

> The main thing for us is our desperate need to show that it *can* be done and extremely successfully.

BT: What does the ANC Women's League in the Eastern Cape say about this?
GS: We have not engaged them.

BT: And they have not engaged the chiefs on this issue?
GS: I'm not aware; we haven't asked. But I'm just raising this as an example that there's nothing

wrong with saying, "Can we look at this now? Yes, it's been a practice for the last hundred years, but this is the downside of it. Mr. Chief, if all you had were ten girls in your house, what have you done to them? What if five of them don't get married? All you've done is to suffocate them in your one house, simply because you say they should be wives somewhere." That's an old historical thing. We have to understand, but we have to engage in it.

BT: This is the heart of what I wanted to talk to you about. WIPHOLD does many other things, but in a way, this is its mission. You've opened up a whole terrain that people never talk about, especially this business of the chiefs. Are you expanding this programme?
GS: We're hoping to expand it quickly. We have put more budget into it. We now cover four provinces – the Eastern Cape, Limpopo, Mpumalanga and some parts of KwaZulu-Natal – working on the same scale and now going quite commercial. Our main thing there is to turn communal land into a bankable asset. By "bankable", I also mean it can never be used as collateral. People must never lose it. But like any farm, the funding comes behind the crops. The produce can be used as security for a loan – but not the land itself. It's too sensitive. You cannot re-arrange that way of life to such an extent.

BT: I'm surprised that government doesn't play a role in this at all.
GS: I wouldn't say that government is not playing a role. It might just be that where we play, they are not there. But there are lots of things they're doing.

BT: I cannot imagine that the minister of rural development would not come in to support.
GS: Maybe now that we have a track record they can come behind.

By "bankable", I also mean the land can never be used as collateral. People must never lose it… The produce can be used as security for a loan – but not the land itself. It's too sensitive.

BT: Did you ask?
GS: Not yet. We haven't asked.

BT: Why not? I find that very strange.
GS: We have this excitement to change the conversation our way first. Those who think that they fit into our model and think they can help, they can come on board. But the main thing for us is our desperate need to show that it *can* be done and extremely successfully.

BT: A very individualistic approach, isn't it?
GS: No, I don't think so. Remember, we are powered by 18 000 women. You know when you come to a place as an uninvited person? As women in business, we are uninvited. We are invading this space and we want to do it our way. The main thing is to say this: "By the time you chase me out again, I must have left a mess. You must find it difficult to undo what I've done." It's not stubbornness so much as leaving a track record everywhere, because just now maybe it will change the way the world works.