MMA TSHEPO – celebrating a life dedicated to water

The South African water sector has a few endearing personalities, who have dedicated their lives to ensuring the conservation of this precious resource and the reform of the sector for the benefit of all. A new publication celebrating the life and work of one of these personalities, grassroots activist Tshepo Khumbane, is now available from the Water Research Commission (WRC). Compiled by Lani van Vuuren.

In many especially poor communities water remains a limiting factor, especially for small-scale agriculture and other productive enterprises. Rainwater harvesting, where rainfall is stored for times of need, has the potential to transform the lives of such communities that experience protracted periods of low rainfall. One person who has recognised the advantages of rainwater harvesting and has used it successfully to not only enhance people's lives economically but also to uplift their spirits and self-esteem is Tshepo Khumbane.

Mma Tshepo as she is affectionately known is a well known woman in rural development and food security circles. As a renowned grassroots activist, she has worked with, mobilised, and inspired people on both local and international soils. In the last decade she has specialised in development strategies focusing on nutrition and home food production, and is a founding member of the Water for Food Movement. Her understanding of poverty and the institutional, psychological and technical pathways out of poverty, determine her place as an invaluable resource on any developing, planning and policy formation team.

Her life and work has now been captured in a new book available from the WRC. *The Journey of Mma Tshepo Khumbane* was written by Jaqui Goldin and Tiffany Gorden and provides some insight into the history and workings of this stalwart social activist.

"While her achievements and awards reflect her well deserving acclaim and applaud her achievements, it is the emotional responses that she elicits from those she has touched, that truly reveal who Mma Tshepo is," note the authors. "She mesmerises people and commands their attention. She crafts her message through poetry, physical touch, emotive speech, appropriate and original technical designs that she follows through with practical action. A character that enthrals, she is volatile, emotional, energetic and irrepressible."

Born on 26 April, 1937 in the rural area of Tšhukudung, Limpopo, Mma Tshepo, showed herself to be a pioneer from an early age. The first in her family to matriculate and go to university, she first studied teaching before turning to social work. Her mother passed away while she was still a child, and her grandmother played an important role in her upbringing.

Despite her poor background, she thinks back fondly of that time: "The community members of Tšhukudung raised all the children in that small village as a big extended family; guiding us and protecting us to grow up with a deep sense of human values and norms, that have shaped us to be responsible citizens of our communities and country, enhancing ubuntu

with clear commitment for peace at all times. I sometimes wish I could turn back the clock to those days when I see crime and conflict ruling our communities."

Her non-conforming nature made it difficult for her to feel comfortable working as a social worker. For her, it was a restrictive work space that inhibited her and she revolted against the principles that citizens were treated as objects and were dependent on handouts from the State. It was her opinion that the educational system as well as the social work environment were unhealthy because they fostered dependence and operated in such a way that development of people was not advanced but hindered.

As an independent spirit, her role was to inspire, empower and mobilise communities around her. Her choice was to treat people as equals and to get them to determine their own destinies and be active agents in their development path, not passive recipients of State grants and handouts.

Today, she lives and breathes this philosophy from her plot outside Cullinan, near Pretoria, which was purchased in 1996. From this base, with very little donor or government funds, she mobilises community participation, tackling poverty issues and inspiring people to help themselves. She works as an independent development activist and is a Board member of the Mvula Trust.

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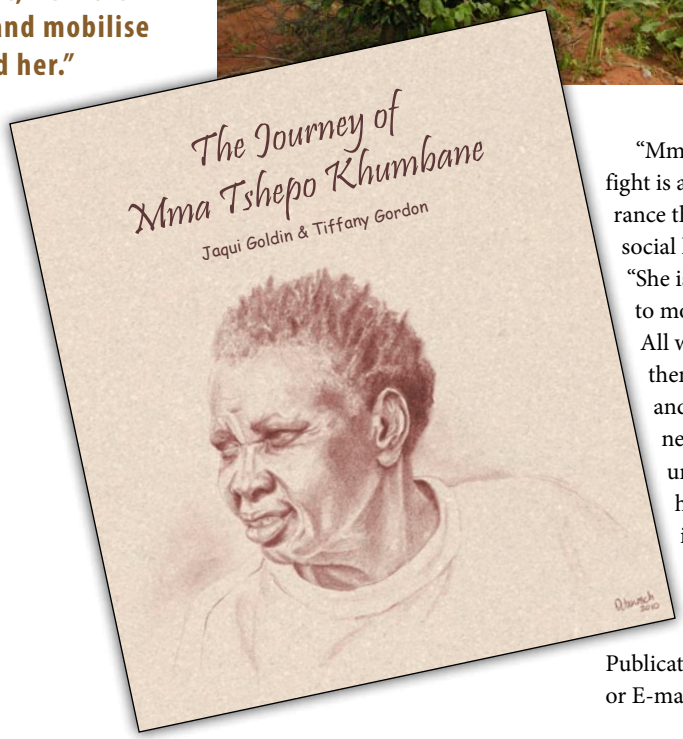
Mma Tshepo teaches communities, mostly women, about organic gardening, waste management, food storage and processing, time management, recordkeeping of crop production, self reflection and vision building, among others. Her rainwater harvesting methods that have been put in place are unique and they are 'best fit' for the communities where they have been applied.

Mma Tshepo's house and garden in Cullinan, outside Pretoria.



"Mma Tshepo is a fighter and her fight is against impotence and ignorance that undermines natural and social landscapes," say the authors. "She is single minded in her quest to mobilise grassroots women. All women must be able to feed themselves and their families and water and food should never be in short supply. Her unique approach to rainwater harvesting has made its mark in South Africa and beyond."

To order the booklet, *The Journey of Mma Tshepo Khumbane*, contact Publications at Tel: (012) 330-0340 or E-mail: orders@wrc.org.za. ❑