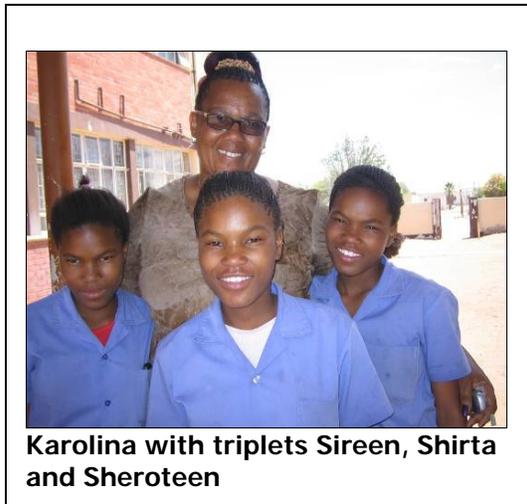


Oasis in the desert - Concepts and methodology

"Politics is about life, so how can women not be a part of it?" - Woman councillor, Tshwane

If you are contemplating a trip to the Namib desert, the chances are that you will pass through the 4000-strong village of Maltahohe in the dry and desolate Hardap region of southern Namibia. If you stop long enough in this village, you will most definitely be accosted by the Ama Buruxa (Nama for *"Simply Amazing"*) Culture group comprising abandoned children whose beautiful moves are choreographed by their champion, the soft spoken but also "simply amazing" Councillor Karolina Pieters.

Like the proverbial oasis in the desert, the children spring out of the dusty planes in their colourful traditional patchwork outfits, their melodious voices rising above the scorching heat as their bodies sway back and forth to the clicks and rhythms of the desert tunes. Pieters has some 382 OVC's (Orphans and Vulnerable Children) under her care; nearly ten percent of the village population. Most have lost one or both parents to HIV and AIDS or gender violence. Cultural activities, Pieters explains, help to make sure the children never forget their roots and remain firmly grounded. They are also a form of healing. As Pieters introduces each child by name, she recounts their story without ever once mixing up the details.



The triplets, Sireen, Shirta and Sheroteen came to the home (a dilapidated old building that has been renovated by volunteers to provide shelter for as many of the children as possible) at the age of six. Now they are going 16. Six year old Paul Swartbooi who clings to Pieters and hides shyly behind her skirts witnessed his father stab his mother to death. Paul Hanse saw his mother kill his father in a drunken stupor in an area renowned for its high level of alcoholism. She is out of jail but the boy is afraid to go home.

Somewhere in the sea of faces that rush around Pieters as the dance troupe finishes its last act and the school bell signals a lunch break is Raphaelia Pieters, Karolina's youngest daughter. She is so integrated into the crowd that you would not guess she is any different from the rest. According to Ivan Pieters, the eldest of Pieter's six children and a teacher at the school, "from the time I was a child I knew I shared my mother with other children; I knew she belonged to everyone."

A loyal member of the ruling Swapo Party who stopped short of going into exile to join the liberation army because her parents did not want her to "run around with the boys

in politics" Pieters has been a teacher for 25 years and a community activist for as long as she can remember.

When the 2004 local government elections came around and the party scouted about for women candidates to make good its promise of a "zebra" list (one woman, one man) Pieters came under pressure to run for public office. She did so on one condition: that I "bring my children into the Council with me" and make them part of the Council's business.

Only six of the OVC's on her books are sponsored through the government's social welfare programme. When the older children perform for tourists, they charge R450 per show; the main source of income for the home. Many of the tourists have been so touched that they have sent clothes, computers and other helpful items from Austria, Germany and the other European countries from which most of them hail.

Leveraging her position as deputy chair of the council, Pieters has persuaded the nearby lodge to provide a soup kitchen twice a day, five times a week. The Council now assists with transport to get supplies from the Catholic Aids Council based in Mariental, 111 km away.

Pieters has formed and chairs a council HIV and AIDS committee that brings together 25 Community Based Organisations (CBOs) with Council members once a month and is spearheading an awareness programme in the community. She has trained as a counsellor and is negotiating with the Ministry of Health to establish a programme for administering anti retroviral drugs for those living with AIDS.

Men and women interviewed as part of focus groups in the community cited Pieters as the most effective member of the council that comprises four women and one man (Joseph Jacobus, the chair of the council) because she "worked in the community before and she takes that with her."

They argued that Pieters, rather than Jacobus, should be the chair of the council. In Namibia, chairs of councils are elected by the councillors. There are three Swapo Party and two opposition members of the Maltahohe council. Pieter's husband, the school principal and leader of the local Swapo Party branch, is said by community members to have engineered the chairing of the council, sidelining his wife to appease party bosses.

Pieters agrees that it is ironic that out of five members of the council, only one of whom is a man, the man should have been elected chair. But she insists that the reason she did not campaign for the post of chair is that as a full time teacher she would not have had the time to be chair as this frequently involves attending meetings during school times.

Pieters stressed that as a community activist she is less concerned about power than about making things happen. She reels off a long list of what needs to be done: the upgrading of the squatter camp to an informal settlement; getting sponsorship for the children's education and welfare; preparing for the regional dance competition; unemployment; HIV and AIDS; a campaign against the high levels of alcoholism, the

council's seemingly intractable debt, the lights that get turned off and the water level in the area that is always too low. How can a flitting one day visitor contribute? "Some toiletries for the children," she is quick to reply as we drive off to the nearest grocery store.

Welcome to Maltahohe and to the Namib desert; to the multiple challenges of every day life in a rural community in Southern Africa; to a society that still defers to men even when women clearly have the qualities to lead; to one woman who prefers to ignore the politics and use whatever space she has for the good of her community. Welcome to gender at the coalface of service delivery.