

Inclusive infrastructure development impact – leading the charge, changing the mindset

The Bigen Group, a recognised infrastructure development activist with a reputable 46-year footprint throughout Africa, is leading the charge in infrastructure development inclusivity by empowering the women of Africa.

“While investing in women empowerment may be recognised widely today as integral to pursuing Africa’s inclusive growth agenda, the reality is that the majority of women across the continent are still active in low-skilled jobs that offer them and their families little hope of improved livelihoods or sustainable income security,” says Bigen CEO, Anton Boshoff.

“Inclusivity is high on our agenda and if there is one thing that we have learnt as a company at age 46, it is that ‘*we rise by uplifting others*’. I believe that our focus on translational leadership and leadership development is not only empowering our future business leaders but is also spearheading gender empowerment with a meaningful and lasting impact on women, the backbone of societies.”

After almost half-a-century in the business of delivering efficient and cost-effective infrastructure solutions to clients in more than 19 African countries, socio-economic empowerment has become integral to Bigen’s role as a development impact activist in Africa. The relaunch of its brand recently highlighted the expansion of its core capabilities in transportation, energy and health to complement the Group’s traditional range of services in water, sanitation and real estate. This realignment is geared towards greater inclusivity and beneficiation, especially for women and the youth, in the communities affected by Bigen’s infrastructure development activities.

“Our approach to inclusivity is ensuring that women benefit more directly from infrastructure development. This is exemplified internally by a dynamic and fast-growing group of influential and insightful women executives who are spearheading our socio-economic development initiatives,” says Boshoff.

Further testimony to this is Bigen’s support for the Women Investing in Infrastructure (WII) initiative, a joint venture between Bigen and other role players in which Bigen has a minority shareholding. WII’s drive to empower women affected adversely by a lack of infrastructure, specifically those in rural areas, is finding traction through Bigen’s job creation and skills transfer opportunities in water, sanitation, transport, energy, health and real estate.

“Including women in these areas through Bigen projects will also help governments in Africa to achieve their 2030 sustainable development goals (SDGs). Our collaboration with WII and other like-minded partners in the infrastructure development industry supports Bigen’s commitment to creating a legacy that is sustainable and empowering for the women in Africa,” says Nangamso Mankai, Principal Investment Officer at Bigen. As a chartered

Women Investing in Infrastructure (WII) undertakes comprehensive groundwork that includes stakeholder engagement, public policy development, project research, risk and financial analyses and modelling, the mobilisation of development finance and post-project analysis. Throughout this process, the WII team encourages community participation and communication and works closely with women to ensure that projects are delivered with the optimum and mutual benefit to the client and the affected communities.

accountant and non-executive director at Bigen for more than five years, she sees her role as helping to increase Bigen's balance sheet through strategic investments and concessions in its five key areas of operation. "Bigen's strategic approach to blended funding through investments and concessions is creating an enabling springboard for the Group's pursuit of becoming one of Africa's top five activists in infrastructure development," she says.

Bigen's newly established African Infrastructure Preparation Facility (AIPF), a first of its kind on the continent, supports the Group's focus on blending social and financial value to attract investment and further assist in achieving Africa's 2030 SGDs.

"Evidence links socially responsible business practices to improved financial performance and returns for investors. The fast-growing pipeline of bankable projects that the AIPF is creating makes it an attractive investment destination for funders," says Sulette van Graan, Bigen's Chief Financial Officer and member of the AIPF Board. Her areas of expertise are in internal and external auditing, strategic financial planning, execution and reporting, people management and consulting.

Bigen is the founder investor in the African Investment Preparation Facility (AIPF) to the value of R70 million, with the aim of creating a pipeline of fundable infrastructure projects across key sectors in Africa. The projects are identified and prepared by a fully-resourced project development company with the technical, financial, environmental, socio-economic and institutional and legal expertise to take opportunities to financial close.

"Bigen's approach to blended funding enables us to intentionally address exclusion, vulnerability, unemployment and the lack of basic services in our infrastructure development projects. This philosophy also informs our Vision 2021 strategy, which gives impetus to our pursuit of social betterment and has become ingrained in Bigen's corporate culture as the essence of improving the quality of life of Africa's people," adds van Graan.

Mankai and van Graan are joined by fellow female colleagues at Bigen - Rhulani Matshidze, Managing Director of Bigen's Energy directorate, Fatima Collins, Profit Centre Manager for Socio-Economic Development (SED), Rineshree Naicker, Profit Centre Manager: Contract Administration and Construction Monitoring and Hayley van der Merwe, a Profit centre Manager in the Water Directorate, in driving Bigen's inclusivity and gender empowerment initiatives.

According to Matshidze, seeing first-hand the beneficial impact of well-planned and effectively executed infrastructure development that includes improved healthcare, education, food security, sustainable enterprises and employment, gender equality and, especially, unhindered access to water and energy, is gratifying and energising.

Before joining Bigen, she spent 17 years at Eskom where she managed a vast operating unit and emerged as an accomplished leader and strategist, as well as a key player and recognised specialist in the local infrastructure development industry. An ECSA-registered Engineering Technologist with an MSc in Electrical Engineering, Matshidze was the founder and CEO of KPR Engineers and Associates, an EPCM company that involved in the discovery of new engineering concepts.

"Increasing positive socio-economic outcomes for communities affected by infrastructure development projects is a key goal for Bigen's Energy directorate. We intend to deeply understand how our projects can achieve greater inclusivity and sustainably improve livelihoods in Africa," she says.

Fatima Collins is passionate about transforming the social and economic landscape of the communities in and around Bigen’s infrastructure development projects. This, and her expertise in socio-economic development, enables her significant contribution to the company’s socio-economic development activities.

“Bigen sees its responsibility as extending beyond commercial gain and poverty alleviation to addressing exclusion, vulnerability, unemployment and the lack of basic services. The design and implementation of our projects focus intentionally on sustainable impact by empowering people, especially women and the youth, through training, skills development and gainful employment. In this way, we are *doing good while doing business* and helping Africans to build resilient and self-sustainable communities,” she says.

The ImpactPro App’s seven key areas are:

- Economic inclusion
- Community social investment
- Environment
- Health and safety
- Infrastructure investment
- Service delivery
- Skills development

During 2017, Bigen developed and ImpactPro Mobile Application to measure the social and economic impact of its projects in key areas that are linked to its related SDGs. “The performance indicators for each key area are complemented by a robust electronic capturing platform to measure the impact of our projects. We look forward to implementing the ImpactPro App in 2018,” adds Collins.

According to Naicker, a civil engineer and registered project management professional imminently competent in the project management of township services and housing developments, “Bigen’s social consciousness entails project planning that deliberately builds community inclusivity into infrastructure development projects. This includes a consultative community assessment of opportunities for training and skills development, on-site job creation, local supplier and business develop and contributing to socio-economic infrastructure.”

Having previously served in a number of management positions at Bigen, Naicker is currently also a socio-economic development representative for Bigen’s Real Estate directorate and a mentored board member. She sees the contribution of her current role at Bigen as a profit centre manager responsible for contract administration and construction monitoring as directly influencing Bigen’s ability to create sustainable economic development in marginalised communities through, *inter alia*, skills transfer that enables communities to maintain projects and create employment beyond the life of the project.

“Bigen’s inclusivity and gender empowerment focus means that in delivering infrastructure development solutions, such as in managing scarce water resources, we also impact community health, safety and general well-being, areas in which women especially are expected to lead the way,” says Hayley van der Merwe, whose role at Bigen includes water and wastewater purification and project management.

As a registered professional engineer, van der Merwe’s significant expertise in the design of water, wastewater treatment plants, water reclamation facilities as well as other bulk water and sanitation infrastructure, contributes richly to Bigen’s leading role in the infrastructure development landscape on the continent.

“Driving socio-economic inclusiveness, indigenisation and development impact are central pillars in Bigen’s business excellence trajectory. At the core of every Bigen project is a focus on long-term

social impact. Wherever we operate, our intent is to help transform communities for the better. I find it invigorating and rewarding to be part of a team that is helping to change lives for the people in our region,” says van der Merwe.

And according to Bigen’s Executive Chairperson, Dr Snowy Khoza, who continues to be a significantly inspirational influence for and among her fellow female executives, her interaction with women in many communities in Africa have indicated unequivocally that, despite a lack of direct benefits from infrastructure development in most instances, they remain confident of Africa’s potential for growth. “Their eagerness to take advantage of the opportunities we offer speaks to a determination to emerge as successful participants in an industry in which, historically, they have been under-represented. This is truly inspiring,” she says.

Khoza’s resilient and insightful leadership over the past eight years has spearheaded Bigen’s transformation from an engineering and management consultancy to a respected infrastructure development activist in deliberate pursuit of social upliftment across the continent. Her significant contribution, along with that of her executive colleagues and the unwavering commitment to inclusivity and gender empowerment from all Bigen’s female employees is helping to address inequalities on the continent.

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