

JCB is a game changer for women's brickmaking cooperative



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Bafana Mokwena

The village of Mabitsi lies in a rural area in the Limpopo Province just north of Marble Hall and the area surrounding it is dotted with rocky hills, so typical of the northern bushveld area where one can imagine leopards keep watch from the outcrops.

With many of its men working in the larger cities to the south, it's an area which offers little economic growth with subsequent few employment opportunities; that is until a group of mothers decided to take matters into their own hands.

In April 1999, a group of 20 women got together around a small brick-built shed on the banks of the Motsephiri River and decided to start making concrete bricks. The objective was to create local employment but, more importantly, create an income stream for themselves, while working in a cooperative fashion.

And so, the Reamogetse Thakgalang Brickmaking Cooperative was born. The name in the Sepedi language means: “We have accepted, and we are happy.” Some members have left, and others passed away, and now the group consists of seven members. They are Elizabeth Mohlala, Segakwe Bogopa, Paulinah Maelane, Meriam Matlala, Polinah Masehla, Sehurane Malata and Ramosegeng Maredi.

While they at first operated out of the small shed on the riverbank, the cooperative showed steady growth and by 2007, were recognised by the

Limpopo Provincial Government's Department of Social Development. The Department helped them to buy a used agricultural tractor and trailer combination to haul sand from the Motsephiri riverbanks to premises they had secured in the Mabitsi village. The river where the sand is extracted is about 5km from the village.

In addition to selling concrete bricks, the cooperative sells building and plaster sand and hires out the tractor to local farmers on a plant hire basis to do land preparation, ploughing and planting. The tractor, being old and well used, started breaking down a lot which hampered the cooperative's production of bricks and sand and by 2021 an urgent need for a solution was felt.

Reamogetse Thakgalang was adopted by the National Movement of Rural Women in the 1990s. The NMRW is a non-profit, grassroots organisation founded in South Africa in 1990 with the purpose of giving rural women in South Africa a voice. The NMRW at a later stage handed over the project to its beneficiary organisation, Nozala Trust, to continue supporting Reamogetse Thakgalang cooperative through their technical support, capacity building and financial support approach.



Pictured with the Reamogetse Thakgalang Brickmaking Cooperative's new JCB Backhoe Loader are (from left): Ledile Bopape (Nozala Trust), Carel Venter (Bell Equipment), Segakwe Bogopa, Meriam Matlala, Bafana Mokwena (Dikwena Trading), Paulinah Maelane, Ramosegeng Maredi, Elizabeth Mohlala and Jan Malatji.

Bafana Mokwena from Dikwena Trading CC was appointed by Nozala Trust to provide technical support to Reamogetse Thakgalang Brickmaking Cooperative given his experience in construction, working with Ms Ledile Bopape, the National Capacity Building specialist from Nozala Trust, and Mrs Elizabeth Mbiza, NMRW coordinator.

According to Mokwena, he had researched the yellow metal machine market and when he learnt that Bell Equipment was now the distributor for the most popular Backhoe Loader range in the country, namely JCB, he contacted Bell Equipment's office in Jet Park. From here it was suggested he speak to Carel Venter, the company's sales representative in Middelburg, the Bell branch closest to the Mabitsi village.

"When meeting Carel Venter, my first impression was that I was being taken seriously and that is something I so appreciate," Mokwena says. "I explained that the cooperative needed a JCB Skidsteer Loader, but Carel convinced us, backed up by facts, that a JCB 3DX Eco Backhoe Loader with additional forks would be much better suited to the tasks at hand."

The Nozala Trust provided the funding for the JCB 3DX Eco Backhoe Loader, which was delivered to the project in mid-November 2021. The Nozala Trust also funded the purchase of a 3-ton tipper truck and a multi-brick mould to speed up the production cycle.

"On 17 November 2021, Thabang Thankge, Bell Equipment's Customer Support Representative from Middelburg did the machine handover and operator orientation," Mokwena says. Thabang was responsible for getting the two operators familiarised with the machine and understanding the benefits of daily maintenance checks to ensure the upkeep of the machine.

The JCB 3DX Eco Backhoe Loader is used to dig out and stockpile sand on the riverbank, which is then loaded onto the tipper truck. This has shortened the process of hauling sand to the area in the village where the concrete bricks are cast with ten truckloads of sand now possible in a day compared to a maximum of three when using the older tractor-trailer combination, which was loaded manually.

When working at the cooperative's premises in the village, the JCB 3DX Eco Backhoe Loader is used to convey materials when mixing concrete and the fork attachment is proving a valuable time saver to safely move pallets of concrete bricks. The machine will also be hired out on a plant hire basis when not in demand by the cooperative, which will mean an additional and welcomed income for its owners.

The seven members of the Reamogetse Thakgalang Brickmaking Cooperative expressed their joy and gratitude to firstly the Nozala Trust, NMRW and to Bell Equipment for providing them with a piece of equipment that is improving their working lives with an immediate increase in production of their products to a captive and growing market.

