

Africa

In Mozambique civil society has partnered with the government to change laws and mindsets, writes **Fikile-Ntsikelelo Moya**

Fighting poverty by another name



Workshops that empower women are important because there is no point in having rights if you do not have the self-esteem to demand those rights

It is not that Terezinha da Silva does not like what she is doing. She would just prefer that it be given another name. "I don't like the phrase 'fighting poverty' or 'alleviating' it. I prefer 'programme for development', like they call it in countries like Botswana. Poverty is too wide a topic and it can mean different things to different people."

By whatever name, Da Silva, the president of Forum Mulher (Women's Forum), is involved in efforts aimed at ensuring that the number of poor people in Mozambique continues to decrease.

During the war, says Da Silva, women were most often the victims. In 1991 and 1992, all organisations working with women's issues came together to share their experiences and resources. In 1992, Forum Mulher was established and has since worked with other NGOs, trade unions, women's wings of political parties and representatives of government ministries, donor organisations and academics.

Though the forum still lobbies for women's "needs and rights", it now partners with the Mozambican government in its poverty eradication efforts.

The Forum Mulher is an active member of the national Poverty Observatory, an initiative that provides a platform for the government, NGOs, business and the donor community to evaluate and monitor the implementation of the country's first plan of action for the reduction of poverty.

"The situation was not always like this. We did not always have agreement with the government," says Da Silva. "Sometimes the government felt threatened. But we always argued

that, while they were working at a macro level, we were on the ground and working on areas that we knew very well. The government has since realised that the NGOs and civil society can go to areas that it cannot."

According to Da Silva, most disagreements were based on the government's belief that it could initiate projects and policies and then get civil society to comment on their efficacy. Civil society, however, wanted to be consulted in the policy formulation process itself.

To date, the women's lobby counts its greatest victory as being the amendment of land laws.

As in many African states,

Mozambique recognised customary law practices that allowed for the primogeniture rule — whereby firstborn sons or other male heirs inherit their parents' land — and did not extend land ownership rights to women. If a married woman inherited land, the title deeds were conferred on her husband.

Landlessness among women was further compounded by practices which demanded that a woman return to her ancestral home if her husband died. This meant that a household that had hitherto

owned land — with food and other inherent securities — died with the male head of the family.

With the rampant spread of HIV/Aids in Southern Africa, more and more women found themselves suddenly disenfranchised.

As a result of lobbying by Forum Mulher and other organisations, the law has been changed to allow women full title to land.

A large part of Forum Mulher's work now involves empowering women and encouraging self-esteem among them.

"It does not mean much to have rights if you don't know how to exercise those rights, or don't have the self-esteem to demand your rights," says Da Silva.

In terms of maintaining women's rights, Da Silva says: "We have to continue with advocacy work reminding the government that it is a signatory of various international

obligations. We have ratified the Southern African Developmental Community Convention on Gender Equality — the African Charter that highlights women's rights."

Other feathers in the cap for the woman's movement have been the abolition of polygamy as a legally recognised form of marriage and raising the legal age for marriage from 14 for girls and 16 for boys to 18 for both.

Women can also, under certain circumstances, get a legal abortion, a scenario that Da Silva hopes will reduce the numbers of fatalities caused by "backstreet" abortions.

There were many occasions when women who fell pregnant as a result of rape or who were economically unable to raise children opted for unsafe abortions. Da Silva says unsafe abortions are the third-highest killer of Mozambican women.

A relationship that started with the government and the NGO sector being doubtful of each other's intentions has grown into a national effort to eradicate poverty and its social consequences.

Says Da Silva: "The church has done a lot of work in fostering national reconciliation. That is why we needed to do our part and do a lot of work in health, education and social welfare."

Official statistics say poverty has decreased by 15% in the past year. But don't expect to see Da Silva dancing in the streets of Maputo just yet. As she says, reducing poverty is only a short-term solution; the main aim is development so that it can be completely eliminated.



Before the law changed, many women who lost their husbands to HIV/Aids were also left homeless

An all-seeing eye on policy

The national Poverty Observatory is an initiative by the government of Mozambique. It is an inclusive and structured mechanism for all government and non-government role players to talk, plan, monitor implement and review national poverty reduction strategies. It aims to provide an ongoing platform for serious consultation on the country's plan of action for the reduction of absolute poverty in a way that is transparent and

treats all stakeholders as equals. Barbara Kalima-Phiri, policy analyst for poverty reduction strategies at the Southern Africa Trust comments: "It has become apparent that for meaningful civil-society engagement in national policy processes to be realisable, effective and responsive, mechanisms such as the Mozambique Poverty Observatory have been created. But what is also clear is that such policy spaces are not neutral and can sometimes be highly political.

They thus require that civil society organisations develop their capacities to effectively occupy this space through evidence-based advocacy — without necessarily being antagonistic — and do proper analysis that will ensure that their policy demands do not end up generating unintended negative impacts, but reinforce other efforts to fight poverty."

This is an edited extract from the Poverty Observatory report



Like seeds, good ideas can't remain small



DRIVERS OF CHANGE

Three years ago, Pula Kgomotso started a youth gardening project where people in impoverished communities worked with NGOs, local businesses, and the government to have access to tools, seed and manure to grow their own vegetables. Within three years, the scheme has grown to provide access to food and an income for several families in the area. The same innovative attitude in policymaking can drive down poverty on a much bigger scale in southern Africa.

Nominate innovators!

The Drivers of Change award honours people like Pula; individuals and organisations who, in their thinking and action for better poverty reduction policies, are going beyond the conventional to make a real and lasting difference in the lives of people living in poverty.

We invite you to nominate individuals or organisations of civil society, business, and government in any southern African country who are doing things differently to overcome poverty. The winners will be honoured at a gala event in Johannesburg in October this year.

The closing date for entries is Friday 25 August 2006.

Contact **Sudley Adams** on +27 11 250 7300 or +27 82 900 0776 or go to www.southernafriatrust.org for more details.

