From lockdown to community action: Petunia Ntombifuthi Mabuza and the Asivikelane campaign in Phomolong, Tshwane, South Africa

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Petunia Ntombifuthi Mabuza**

In this interview, Petunia Ntombifuthi Mabuza, a resident and community activist in Phomolong, Tshwane, and community facilitator for the Asivikelane Campaign, spoke to Priscila Izar, from the Centre for Urbanism and Built Environment Studies (CUBES) and the School of Architecture and Planning at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) in South Africa, about her experience during the COVID-19 pandemic and afterwards.

Priscila Izar and Petunia Ntombifuthi Mabuza have been working together since 2022, through Priscila's postdoctoral research work at Wits University. Constructed in partnership with residents and local leadership, the research investigates women's activism and struggles in peripheral territories of African cities through a feminist lens, based on experiences in Tshwane, South Africa and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania (Izar, 2025). They also collaborate on collective projects funded by the Urban Studies Foundation (USF) and Volvo Research and Educational Foundations (VREF) (Izar et al, 2025; Rubin et al, 2025).

Phomolong is an informal settlement with an estimated population of 10 to 15 thousand people, adjacent to the Mamelodi township in the East of the city of Tshwane. Asivikelane is a coalition of non-governmental organizations working in partnership with residents of informal settlements to improve delivery of basic services in their communities across South Africa (https://asivikelane.org/). Projects and initiatives under Asivikelane in Phomolong unfold through the engagement of community volunteers, whom Petunia coordinates, and organizations such as Planact (https://www.planact.org.za/) and the Tshwane Leadership Foundation - TLF (https://tlf.org.za/).

Priscila Izar: Thank you for this interview, Petunia. Please tell me a bit about yourself.

Petunia Ntombifuthi Mabuza: My name is Petunia Ntombifuthi Mabuza. I'm 45 years old. I am a single parent. I am a community activist and community facilitator of Asivikelane. My community is called Phomolong. Phomolong is very big, it is separated into sections, there is section A, section B, section C and C - shacks. Section A has been formalized since 2017. The City of Tshwane has installed sewer lines and electricity there, but the work is not completed

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yet. A lot of people don't have water at their houses yet, and don't have toilets. In sector A, the City brings in chemical toilets to the residents, while there is no permanent infrastructure. But in the other parts of Phomolong there are no services, because these areas are not being formalized yet.

I lead close to 200 volunteers to work in sanitation in Phomolong. I started doing this type of work in 2019, just before COVID. Then, during COVID, we worked even more to improve our situation, which was very bad. First, we worked on water and chemical toilets. Now we are working with waste management. Today we are cleaning the neighborhood and making gardens. We are also working with security. These are projects that I helped create in our community because I saw a big gap there.

Priscila Izar: How did you get involved in this type of work?

Petunia Ntombifuthi Mabuza: I moved to Phomolong in 2003, with my mother. We were coming from Mpumalanga. My mom was looking for a job in Tshwane and I wanted to study acting. We went to Phomolong because we could live in a shack, without paying rent. A few years later, she went back to her home in Mpumalanga, but I stayed. I lived in Phomolong until 2023, then I moved nearby to Mamelodi Section 6, where there is basic infrastructure and services. I was tired of living in Phomolong. When it rained, we would be up all night because our house could be filled up with water. But I didn't stop working in Phomolong, I continue to work there, the same way I did before.

When my first child was born, I was working and trying to be involved in acting, but it didn't work. So, I decided to start something else. I went to work at the Stanza Bopape Community Center. This is when I learned about community work and I loved it, I didn't want to stop anymore. After that I went to the Asikhulume organization, and they were the ones who referred me to Planact.

In 2019, I was part of EPWP [Expanded Public Works Programme]. We cleaned streets and did other jobs. Then when COVID started, you remember, everyone had to stay home. I went back to my mother's place in Mpumalanga, but then we were called to come and do street cleaning, because this was essential work during COVID. We were essentials.

Because of COVID, no one was coming into our neighborhoods. Phomolong was like a ghost town, nobody came to talk to us. And the condition of the chemical toilets was very bad. The units were dirty. Some of the toilets were made of a plastic material that got very hot, so people felt like they were suffocating.

Then Planact called me and asked if I wanted to work with them, and I said, sure, I can work with you. [At the time Planact was working in partnership with other organizations to set up Asivikelane. The campaign was implemented locally through the work of Community Facilitators like Petunia, and residents]. When I joined Planact and Asivikelane, they asked me to check if water was being delivered in our community and if the toilets were being cleaned. We formed a group of volunteers and started taking photos of toilets, and all the problems that we saw in the neighborhood. We were given a little bit of money to buy data to send the photos [to Asivikelane's partners]. They used our photos to put pressure on the government to improve our situation. We also went around the community to find out if they were satisfied with the level of services provided. Many residents were complaining that the toilets were not good and had a terrible smell.

When the City of Tshwane got this data, they started to engage with us and to hold the service providers accountable. After that, we did a social audit, and we showed that the chemical toilets that we had here did not work for our community. It was after our social audit that the City of Tshwane changed our toilets. They brought better toilets and made sure that the toilets were

cleaned every week. They installed some special toilets for people with special needs, who need wheelchairs. Then, they also brought water. But these services are only in the area that is being formalized. We asked them, why not give other people toilets? And they said that's because they are not permanent. There is a plan to develop and formalize Phomolong almost completely, but we are still waiting, and it is not happening.

Priscila Izar: So would you say that the sanitation conditions in Phomolong, at least in Section A, improved during the COVID pandemic?

Petunia Ntombifuthi Mabuza: Things were going well now in water and the chemical toilets, but in waste, we were struggling.

Priscila Izar: When we first met, in 2022, there were large dump sites in Phomolong. You were looking for ways to clean up these areas. What happened?

Petunia Ntombifuthi Mabuza: Something happened during the pandemic that waste increased everywhere. The waste management was not working as it was supposed to. Even in the formalized areas, in those massive dumpsites, they were not working. So, people decided to dump it everywhere. Others, they decided to start dumping in Phomolong. And then, when the people here saw others were dumping in Phomolong, they started dumping too. We were also dumping. It grew so massively. Because, before the pandemic, we didn't have massive dump sites in Phomolong. I remember we had a soccer field and a netball field for the kids. But after we didn't have that, we needed to start again. And then when I called the waste collectors, they didn't come, or they came but did not remove all the waste.

I wanted something to happen in Phomolong because people were getting sick with those massive dump sites. I wanted them to see that our place was not nice, it was very dirty. Then, with Asivikelane, we started to focus on waste. Tshwane became a waste hub for Asivikelane, and Phomolong became a waste hub for the City of Tshwane's Waste Department. We were invited to a big meeting with the Mayor's office and the Waste Department. So, they said, okay, let's sit down, give us ideas. That's what they said when we met with them. And they said, let us start a strategy to make Phomolong a waste free place. But I was the only one speaking to them. So, I said, if you give us time and work with us you will see that this is going to happen. I gave them my ideas. I said, I will bring my own people, and you can start working with them. Because in Phomolong we have TLF, we have Planact. TLF brought the Social Employment Fund to pay volunteers for some of the community work [Social Employment Fund - SEF - is a national program that uses direct public investments to support local employment opportunities].

We started working on cleaning and they saw that what we were saying was true. And then I was pushing them to bring the trucks to remove the trash. And when the trucks came, I was pushing them to do their work right. If they wanted to leave early, I would say, okay, it is fine, you can leave, but I am going to call your boss. So, it started working. It started working like that because we were following those trucks. And now the truck drivers, they know me.

We did more than we were supposed to do with the waste. Now we've got gardens, we've got people who are recycling. We have done so much since we started working with waste.

Priscila Izar: How do you relate what is happening today in Phomolong with the times during the Covid Pandemic?

Petunia Ntombifuthi Mabuza: Today, what we are doing in Phomolong, is no longer about COVID-19. It is about basic services in informal settlements. But, all of this started when Covid started, and I don't think that the City of Tshwane would be working with us or wanting to do what they are doing right now in the community of Phomolong, if that hadn't happened.

Priscila Izar: Thank you so much, Petunia.

Petunia Ntombifuthi Mabuza: Thank you, Priscila and Sandra [Professor Sandra Momm], for this opportunity to tell my story.

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