

'Start small, but start doing something' - Prof Elain Vlok, Clover Mama Afrika Trust

By  Sindy Peters

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Running successfully since 2004, Clover Mama Afrika's community-led approach aims to reduce poverty in South Africa by empowering women through skills development. The project recently appointed its 57th mama, highlighting its effectiveness in guiding and supporting women in making a positive impact wherever they live.



Source: Supplied

This Women's Month, Professor Elain Vlok, Clover manager, Clover Mama Afrika Trust, shared with us more about the project, how it persevered through the pandemic, and what it takes to become a mama.

■ ***Clover Mama Afrika has been running for over 20 years now - to what do you attribute its longevity?***

Prof Elain Vlok: Hard work by not only the Clover Mama Afrika team, but also by every single Clover Mama Afrika. Their dedication and selflessness is what makes this all possible. We are also very grateful for all the sponsors, partners and wonderful facilitators that we have as part of the project, making every training course, event and donation a possibility.

■ ***How did the Clover Mama Afrika initiative persevere through the pandemic?***

Vlok: The pandemic certainly did not stop us, we stepped up and found ways to continue. As soon as the restrictions were put into place during Covid-19, we made a plan and started with virtual training to ensure that we could still carry on as normal and bring new skills to all our Clover mamas.

All courses were done virtually, namely quilting, mosaic, biscuit baking, big cake baking and decorating, cooking and every day baking. The training was filmed, put onto memory sticks and sent to every single Clover mama, along with necessities such as recipes, ingredients and instructions. The Clover mamas then had to send back photos and feedback of their training and this was evaluated by myself and feedback was given to the Clover mamas.

I found it a lovely way to still communicate and improve the standard of baking, mosaic and/or quilting. The Clover mamas kept saying that by looking at the info on the memory stick, it felt as if I was with them and they loved the new method and appreciated that they were still able to make goods and food that they could sell in their communities. There were still funerals that needed food and flowers, and birthdays and other celebrations in the communities which meant that the Clover mamas' skills were still needed.

■ ***Share with us some of the programme's outstanding successes.***

Vlok: Over the years the project has hosted an incredible 440 training sessions with over 2,313 beneficiaries. Clover Mama Afrika aims to teach and guide strong females (lovingly called 'mamas' due to their standing in their neighbourhoods) in communities all over the country, in order to build their skills and sustain and improve their own community projects.

Fifty-seven mamas form part of the Clover Mama Afrika project, making a difference in 57 different communities. Among all the 57 Clover Mama Afrikas, there are many centres that are providing to various communities:

- Sewing - 24 centres
- Quilting - 13 centres
- Cooking and baking - 24 centres
- Bread baking - 22 centres
- Food gardens - 18 centres
- Beadwork - nine centres
- Crocheting / Knitting - 12 centres
- Flower Arranging - 12 centres
- Pottery - one centre
- Hairdressing - five centres
- Egg Laying / poultry project - five centres
- Welding – two centres

All these skills were taught by and freshened up by the Clover Mama Afrika project.

■ ***Clover Mama Afrika recently appointed its 57th mama. What kind of support do the mamas receive?***



Professor Elain Vlok, Clover manager, Clover Mama Afrika Trust

Vlok: The goal of Clover Mama Afrika is to empower, guide and support South African females who have already made a positive impact within their respective communities, in order for them to further develop their communities. Through the project, they are given the physical and emotional tools such as: training for cooking, baking, sewing, crocheting, business/financial management, food gardening, bread baking skills, welding assistance and egg-laying project training, amongst others.

Through training and support, they're able to uplift their lives by generating a regular income and bettering lives for themselves, the children they care for and their communities. These women then need to share their newly-found skills with others.

I visit every Clover mama's centre more than once each year to see how the mamas are doing, how they are running their centres and where they need assistance. Clover Mama Afrika hosts various training and upskilling sessions throughout the year that the mamas attend to fine tune their skills and learn new skills.

■ ***How do others become mamas - what are the criteria to join the initiative?***

Vlok: From the very beginning, when Clover Mama Afrika started, which was over 21 years ago, we knew that we wanted to find individuals who would become self-sustainable.

Over the years, I have learnt that you can't just tell women what to do. You need to show, guide and teach them. In order for someone to qualify as a Clover Mama Afrika, they must have been doing the work at their own centre for three to five years for us to be able to consider them as a mama. By selecting women who are already hard workers, we know our training and assistance is less likely to go unused. The women should also feel that they want to be empowered in order to succeed as a Clover Mama Afrika.



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■ ***Are there any long-term growth plans for the initiative that you can share?***

Vlok: Right now we are focusing on the Mama Afrikas we currently have, their staff, and those in their care. By upskilling these groups, they are able to better care for others, and transfer skills to better their communities.

■ ***Do you have any pearls of wisdom to share this Women's Month or words of encouragement?***

Vlok: Hard work pays off! It's so important to not 'work within the lines' but rather to push yourself to learn more and be better every single day. Always challenge yourself and keep growing. Don't worry about where to find money or a building, etc. Rather start small, but start doing something.

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