

# Soul City: making a difference, changing lives

Soul City Institute CEO Lebogang Ramafoko on her organisation's role in creating healthier, safer and productive individuals and communities

**Can you tell us more about the Soul City Institute? How long has it been active and what is the main role of the Institute?**

Soul City Institute came into existence in 1994 at the birth of South Africa's new democracy. We celebrated 20 years in 2014. The Institute focuses on Social Behavior Change Communication, where through mass media, social mobilization and advocacy we influence and change the lives of millions of South Africans. We use media to communicate to a wide audience, work with communities to inform and stimulate behavior change and use advocacy to influence government policy to create a supportive environment for behavior change. Basically we create healthier, safer and productive individuals and communities.

**Can you tell us more about your role and what your main responsibilities are?**

My main responsibility is to ensure that the organisation is run efficiently, that it achieves its strategic objectives, that it has the resources (financial and human) to deliver on all its activities, that it is accountable to funders and other relevant stakeholders and that it remains relevant in what it aims to do.

My job can therefore be divided into a few categories. While I do not perform any of my functions alone, as an accounting officer, my responsibility is to make sure that each of the categories mentioned below functions well.

These are 1. Financial Management—we are a donor funded organisation. We have a responsibility to account for every cent that we receive from each funder. It means good governance processes must be in place to manage this aspect of the organisation. It also means making sure that the organisation achieves what it sets out to do with the funds and if there are problems they are dealt with timeously and effectively. 2. Program implementation—we exist because of

the communities and different people we serve. We must ensure our programs reach them and make a difference in their lives. It means making sure that we have processes that help us develop evidence-based and sound programs. We must be willing to evaluate our programs, modify them and change them according to the needs of the people. 3. Stakeholder Management—this is an important aspect of the work of a CEO. We have various stakeholders that must be kept informed and engaged with regularly.

**How long have you been with the company? Can you give us some background on yourself, your education, previous work experience etc?**

I hold a Masters in Public Administration degree, obtained at Harvard University, Postgraduate Diploma in Ethics, obtained at WITS University and a BA (Education) obtained at Wits University.

I joined Soul City Institute in 1995 as a young graduate and social activist who was keen to contribute to the rebuilding of a country that was ravaged by the Apartheid legacy. Armed with a degree in Education and a passion for youth, I loved the opportunity that Soul City offered me to create life skills learning materials for youth in order to build their self-esteem, prevent illnesses like HIV and build the resilience they need to live to their full potential.

Before becoming the CEO at Soul City, I worked in different capacities in the organisation, giving me practical skills and experience in the actual development of various social and behaviour change tools that included television dramas, print booklets specially designed for low literacy end-users, radio dramas and talkshows.

I also pioneered a world first community reality show, which challenged members of communities to work together to make their

communities look better, feel better and work better. This show became one of Soul City's flagship programs and brought together various partners from government, civil society and business to help 5 communities in South Africa transform themselves.

Apart from my work at Soul City, I became a household name amongst youth through the role I played in a daily youth magazine show as an "Agony Aunt". In this role, young people would write to me and ask advice on various topics ranging from sexuality and career guidance to dealing with their parents.

I am an outspoken gender activist and in my work at Soul City have become the voice for issues facing women and young girls. Apart from my work, I am a passionate and proud mother to my two beautiful children who inspire me to work tirelessly to make South Africa a better and more equitable place to live in.

**What is the aim and vision of the Institute?**

The aim of the institute is to make a measurable difference in the health of the people of South Africa.

Inequalities in South Africa continue to grow and health disparities remain one of the biggest development challenges. Fundamental to addressing health disparities and achieving health rights for all necessitates addressing the social determinants of health and tackling social injustice.

- Meaningful change requires
- Creating an enabling environment
  - Collective action
  - Strengthening services
  - Developing skills and Agency
  - Healthy public policy

Soul City addresses these by enabling people to increase control over and to improve their health and quality of life. It is in a unique position to

shift public debate and engage citizens to take action, in order to achieve these goals.

This uniqueness is because Soul City:

- Is research and evidence based
- Is a trusted brand that resonates across the country.
- Listens to and reflects the voices of marginalised communities
- Uses media, advocacy and social mobilisation in synergy to achieve critical mass and effect change.
- Produces high quality, creative, responsive materials
- Works collaboratively with government and civil society

**Can you explain what edutainment is and the effect that it has had?**

Edutainment incorporates social issues into popular, prime time entertainment formats informed by comprehensive research. We developed popular vehicles that have become hugely popular brands across the country that have reached over 80% of South Africa through a range of television and radio dramas, talk and magazine shows, social media and reading and training materials. These are linked to social mobilization and community development initiatives on the ground. Independent research has identified it as the most evaluated programme of its kind in the world with measurable impact.

**Can you tell us about a few of the social and behavioural change programmes and initiatives that the Soul City Institute is involved in?**

Our flagship, the Soul City television drama that has dealt with priority health and development issues in South Africa since 1994. Also, using mass media as a tool to implement on the ground concepts such as jamborees, which we pioneered in 2001 in support of orphans and vulnerable children. We helped communities to bring services closer to them and in return helped the Department of Social Development to register children for grants. We advocated with other child rights NGOs for the extension of the child support grant and provided a lot of research and advocacy to argue why this was imperative.



In 2014 we launched a new brand and campaign called Rise, that seeks to motivate young women aged 15-24 years to make healthy lifestyle choices and to overcome the constraints of their socio-economic settings. The campaign includes social mobilization elements and a 26 episode talk show, currently broadcasting weekly every Tuesday on SABC 1 at 6.00pm. Social mobilisation consists of Young Women's Clubs, introduced to create a platform for young women to support each other, learn together and build social capital to create a safe and healthy future, particularly in relation to preventing HIV infection.

**What drives your passion for helping the youth of our country, increasing education and awareness of important topics and helping people in general?**

I am driven by a deep sense of social justice. Growing up under Apartheid in Munsieville, a small township in the West Rand (Mogale City) and realizing that a few streets away white children were living in big houses with fancy cars gave me a clear picture of what injustice looks like. Growing up in South Africa in the 1980's was an education in itself. The communities

were vibrant and active. This gave me a sense that I can make a difference in whatever little corner I am in. I was also fortunate to continue my education and attained a University degree in 1993 just before democracy. It was a great time to align oneself with rebuilding South Africa and the spirit of freedom in the air was a great inspiration for me.

**You are involved in skills training through workshops and other initiatives. Can you tell us about these?**

In 2009 Soul City launched an innovative initiative called Kwanda—Communities with Soul, designed to inspire communities to help themselves and collectively transform their communities to look better, feel better and work better. Kwanda is implemented as a partnership between the Department of Social Development (DSD), Soul City Institute and Seriti Institute.

My personal success indicator is to make sure that when I am no longer CEO of Soul City the organisation continues to thrive and meet its mission and vision. I hope that in whatever it does it continues to serve the needs of the people, and that it is run efficiently and can account for all the funds it uses. ▲