

## STM Case Study

---

# Klipkop, Sebokeng, South Africa

### A. TIA!

The busses were now well past three hours late and people were starting to panic. “What do you mean the busses are not here?! Don’t you realize that I have a plane to catch in four hours?” The disgruntled Westerner was eventually ushered off by a soft-spoken Botswanian volunteer, gently patting his shoulder and whispering that everything would be alright. “TIA!” another debater exclaimed. We were roughly 600 debaters, standing around at 6:30 am at the University of Botswana in Gaborone, waiting to get on a six-hour bus ride to the international airport in Johannesburg where we would all disperse back to our home countries to retell exotic stories about our time in Africa. This scenario epitomized the cultural divide between Africa and the West: As with most of the logistics during the tournament, the busses were running very late, and typical of the Western response to poor time management, people were disgruntled.

Yet amidst the incredulous debaters and mounting chaos, the twenty or so Botswanian volunteers remained tranquil. Two days prior, sincere in her empathy, one of the volunteers told me that she cried when the debaters had to wait an hour for food, asking, “Don’t you know how painful it is to be hungry?” Almost in disbelief, I told her not to worry about the self-involved foreigners: Waiting an hour for food would not kill anyone (even if some of the debaters did look

rather fragile). Pleadingly she responded, “But these are my children! I can’t let them go hungry, even for an hour!”

Surveying the mad scramble before me, I thought back to that conversation and sure enough, each volunteer responded to the angry complaints as if they were grievances from a personal family member or close friend. “It’s going to be OK. We’ll get you on a bus and everything will be fine.” The funny part was, no matter how much they cared for their Western ‘children,’ it never induced the Botswanians to do things on time or concede to the Western format; things were always late, up to the final exit. Even in their condolences, there was a manor of nonchalance that connoted, “What’s the big fuss? Why take life so seriously?” This, of course, did not meet the highly rigid expectations of the debaters, who seemed to value punctuality over personal interaction.

Eventually, a bus did come, everyone made their flights, and in turn, everything ended up being alright. And so it was on this final telling note that I rode off for the primary purpose of my trip to the motherland: to take a small step to bridge the gap between Africa and the West. Or more specifically, to represent Second Table Ministries, a small non-profit located in a remote corner of the Northwest United States, in a joint venture project with a United Reformed South African Church to build a community center in a squatter town an hour south of Johannesburg. And, of course,

in telling African fashion, the family hosting me for the remainder of my trip arrived late to the airport to pick me up. Yet also in telling African fashion, when they did arrive, they greeted me with open arms and embraced me as if I was a long lost child finally returning home.

### B. The Bethas

Mike Betha has been the pastor of Maranatha Church for over fifteen years. His short, stout build is eclipsed by his beaming smile, which seems to be permanently fixed on his face. Ordained in the late '70s, Pastor Betha originally hails from Gaborone, Botswana, but has lived most of his life in South Africa. When Maranatha was looking for a new pastor circa 1994, Maranatha’s administrator, Petrose Segele, recommended a jubilant young Reverend doing great work in the Free State, the bordering province south of the Transvaal. Maranatha followed Petrose’s advice and sent a contingent of elders down to meet Mike. The decision was almost immediate for both parties. As Mike Betha recalls with a chuckle, “Before I could even begin to start negotiating, my wife exclaimed, “We’ll take it!”

Standing in the bustling Johannesburg airport, Pastor Betha quickly spotted me and approached with four smiling accomplices close behind (The accomplices, all male Maranatha elders, accompanied me throughout most of my trip. When talking with Pastor Betha’s kids, I referred to them as the OG Crew ).

After hugs and warm introductions, we piled into a grey Camry and headed off to Sebokeng. Our journey had begun!

Sebokeng is a small suburban-like town situated about 45 minutes south of Johannesburg, adjacent to the infamous town of Sharpeville, the site of the '60 Sharpeville massacre. For the most part, the community is comprised of medium-income families working at the nearby petroleum plant, energy plant, or working as a teacher or police officer. It is sectioned off in cookie-cutter blocks, and categorized into zones. For example, Pastor Betha's family lives in Zone 10 ext. 2, and Maranatha is located roughly four blocks away in Zone 11.

Driving to Sebokeng, I contemplated the purpose of my stay. I knew that Maranatha had been doing great work, and that STM had supported Maranatha in expanding their church to build a second wing, as well as some other miscellaneous projects. Furthermore, I knew that the people involved at Maranatha were extremely efficient and produced tremendous results. But the current project under consideration, a community center near Maranatha's daughter church, Klipkop, was a rather ambitious project. My role, more or less, was to spend eight days with the Betha family and the Maranatha community, strengthening the relationship between STM and Maranatha while also evaluating the feasibility and pertinence of the Klipkop project.

Even though I was only a representative of STM, I was anxious about the outcome of this trip. What if I found the Klipkop project to be an inefficient waste? What type of expectations did Maranatha have of me? Could this trip be damaging for the STM-Marathana partnership? All of these thoughts whirled in my head as I sat in the back seat of the Camry with the OG crew. Even though I had only been in their presence for all of an



hour, they were already treating me like family, going as far as giving me an official nickname—Ike. "Ike! Everyone is so excited that you're here! Shooo! This is surely a blessing!" Pastor Betha repeated over and over. I smiled back, silently praying that his proclamation would prove true.

When I first arrived at the Betha house, I didn't know what to expect. I had first communicated with Mike roughly three weeks prior, and thus did not know him or anyone in his family. And yet, in typical South African custom, they had gra-

ciously insisted that I stay in their house my entire nine-day stay. I quickly found out that this entailed sleeping in the same bed as Mike's son, Molemo. "Well," I thought, "Sure hope we get along!"

Mike's house lays adjacent to a dirt road, with similar looking houses lined up neatly on either side. As you might imagine with a straightforward name like Zone 10, ext. 2, Mike's neighborhood was organized in blocks, and is best described as the equivalent to a western suburb. Lines of small to medium, single story houses lined the streets, and most



## Sebokeng is a township in southern Gauteng, South Africa

---



of the houses had erected fences. From my little exposure in South Africa, I could tell that this was a relatively nice neighborhood—nothing extreme, but each house was well-maintained and most of the homes had cars. When I entered Mike's house, I was greeted with warm smells and warm faces. Each member of the Betha family welcomed me as if I were one of their own, although I would find out later that they were still skeptical of the stranger who was to occupy their house for over a week. Molemo—my bed partner, that is—gave me a particularly suspect look.

Not knowing the size or lifestyle of the Betha family, I was instantly pleased to find that Mike had five kids, four of which were roughly the same age as me. His oldest daughter, Moipone, is married to a soldier and lives in Pretoria. She, her husband, and her young daughter had made the hour-long trip down to her father's house to welcome me. It was the only time that I saw her or her family on my trip, but I was honored by their graciousness nevertheless. Mike's 29-year-old daughter, Lerato, his 28-year-old son, Molemo, his 24-year-old daughter, Mpelegeng (Mpele for short) and his 19-year-old daughter, Tshegatso, each lives at home with him and his wife, Welma. Lerato works in the Department of Education. Molemo works at a petroleum factory. And Mpele works for Virgin Atlantic. Mike's youngest daughter, Tshegatso, is currently studying at the nearby North West University.

I will not bore you with the details, but I feel that it is important to say that within nine days the Bethas became a

second family to me. Indeed, each of Pastor Betha's children, with the exception of Moipone who I only saw once, became an extended sibling. Their kindness, generosity, sincerity, and love blew me away. In contrast to the American mindset, which idolizes individualism and instills a me-first attitude, Molemo, Lerato, Mpele, and Tshegatso embody STM's motto: "Love your neighbor as yourself—Mark 12:31." In a three-room house with six people, a reasonable person might anticipate animosity to surface, if not often then at least occasionally. Yet the Bethas never as much as rolled their eyes at one another. Instead, they laughed, teased, supported each other, and laughed some more, carrying the other's dinner plates away or folding someone else's clothes without any verbal prompt. It would almost be noxious if it wasn't contagious; if deep down your bones didn't ache to be a part of such a loving family.

### C. The Settlement of Klipkop

Someone once wrote that love cures all ailments, and I quickly realized why the Bethas were full of such love: their lives were also full of hardship.

Klipkop is a small community located about 5 kilometers away from Maranatha. It is a squatter town that is roughly 12 years old and is approximately two blocks by one block, holding 600 families. Each family's home is a shack, a makeshift structure pieced together

from any scrap metal and other materials that can be found.

Maranatha has operated a daughter church, named after its town, in this community ever since the provisional town emerged. Like most squatter towns—which are prolific in South Africa—Klipkop developed when people moved close to a pre-established neighborhood and set up house as an attempt to pressure the government into building up community infrastructure. Unfortunately, in South Africa there are millions of people in this situation and government resources are thin. Thus, the unsanctioned camps often endure life spans longer than the inhabitants expect, and so people live years in environments devoid of electricity, running water, and proper sewage.

Since the main purpose of my trip was to evaluate the plan to build a community center within Klipkop, I was taken to the town on the second day of my stay. Leaving Pastor Betha's residence, the quasi-medium income housing soon deteriorated as I drove about half a mile South from Zone 10. On the right side of the road, brick houses gave way to small tin blocks, oddly misshapen and quite unstable looking. The tin blocks were locally known as shacks, and when enough shacks were grouped together, they were collectively called a shantytown. As I took in my first glimpse of what I soon was told was Klipkop, the

reality of my trip sunk in. Again, I felt anxious about Maranatha's expectations for my role in alleviating the devastating difficulties of the people of Klipkop. The jovial spirit in the car transformed into a collective pain, the pain associated with looking at such human suffering. "Lord," I thought, "what can I possibly do to help these people?"

As our car inched forward on the dirt road, I asked Pastor Betha if it was appropriate to take pictures. Even as he encouraged me to document my trip to Klipkop, it felt rather hollow to snap shots of abject destitution, every flash shouting out, "Your personal plight is entrancing," as the people of Klipkop's mundane existence became my awe. I dutifully rolled the window down and pressed down on the circular button, attempting to justify my actions with thoughts of American donors who might be moved by the photos. Yet, as I began to capture an old woman hanging clothes on a tattered line, her neck arched up to level her eyes with mine. One look said it all. I instantly recoiled my arm back into the car, feeling cheap and impotent. For all of my perceived life struggles, nothing I had endured compared to what that woman lived. If life is relative, Klipkop extended the spectrum.

## Matlakala (mother) and Agnes (daughter)

While the hope is that the community center in Klipkop would benefit each member of the community, it would surely have a profound impact on Matlakala's life. Matlakala is 26 years old and has been a leader at both the Klipkop church and in the community for the past five years. Matlakala was on her way to a high school diploma but her academic promise was squandered when she had to become her mother's primary caretaker. Furthermore, her husband left soon after her daughter's birth, leaving Matlakala a single mother still taking care of her mother. Matlakala never got the chance to live her own life or seek the individual fulfillment that we Westerners value and often take for granted. At Pastor Betha's recommendation, Matlakala will be one of the directors of the new community center. Matlakala could gain a full-time job, a direct influence in her community, and a new lease on life.





### Mabetty (mother) and her three children

None of these “homes” have electricity. Besides the fact that when the sun goes down, all light within the houses is gone, the families of Klipkop have no way to refrigerate any goods. I asked Mabetty about this when I visited her family’s home and saw her drinking milk. She laughed at my question, which seemed as foreign to her as warm milk to me. “We drink it quickly,” she replied with a witty smile. Mabetty had a special spirit that I cannot fully articulate. Just as you meet someone that inexplicably touches you in your everyday life, Mabetty stood out to me. And her family situation made her welcoming nature even more special. While I was able to photograph most of her family in one frame, I had to take a separate picture of her son, Samson. Samson has a learning disability, yet as evidenced by his ear-to-ear grin, young Samson didn’t let his disability affect his demeanor. But his cheerfulness made meeting him a harder experience. I know that as the community stands now, there is little hope for his development. He will need to be taken care of for the rest of his life, but who will do it? No one is trained to help him, let alone financially stable enough to devote time to him.



My visit to Klipkop was planned so that I could familiarize myself with both the church and the people of this shantytown in order to assess the project and its future. So when I got to Klipkop, I first wanted to visit the church structure itself. Not surprisingly, Klipkop’s church, like its community’s houses, is a shack. Calling it a “church” is generous. Almost anyone that saw the Klipkop church building would not be able to distinguish it from the countless other tin shacks that comprise the small squatter town. This church, which has been standing for about 10 years, is only big enough to hold roughly twenty people—if everyone stands and doesn’t mind an occasional elbow or knee from a neighbor. Even more, the word church connotes a building for congregation, rejoicing, and worship. Nothing about the feeble hovel, a mixture of scrap metal and tortuous wood, resembles a convening spot for God. It’s not hard to imagine obscure unofficial worship center of the Old Testament putting this shack to shame. Yet through Maranatha’s love for the people of Klipkop, they made it a church. The same love Pastor Betha’s family exhibited at his home existed within this small shack. God’s presence was palpable!

## D. The People of Klipkop

After a brief tour and some ceremonial pictures, I got down to what I was supposed to do: understand the need of the community and what if any help a community center might provide. My plan was to visit individual family homes and document what I saw by taking notes and pictures, by capturing as best as I could the conversations and experiences I had with the people of Klipkop.

As I wandered in and out of house after house, meeting each family and hearing their stories, I was struck by a deep discrepancy: The houses, from the outside, are indistinguishable, and in some ways, the stories of the people of Klipkop blend together as well. But inside, each structure was its own, made into a home by its residents, with personal touches and a sense of family.

Almost no one in the community has a job, and they rely on Government rations and the generosity of a Maranatha food program for survival. Maranatha provides 3000 Rand a month, which covers a soup distribution every Thursday and the distribution of a 10 kilogram bag of milled, 5 kg of sugar, and 500 milligrams of salt every first Sunday of the month. Most of the residents of Klipkop used to work for white farmers whose land was purchased by the government in hopes of redistributing it to black farmers. Unfortunately for the people of Klipkop, this changing of hands is still a distant dream and so they are left unemployed and remarkably poor. Yet, their farming backgrounds have allowed these 600 families to maintain a level of self-sufficiency, living off of personal gardens that almost everyone cultivates.



### Mama Sophia, six daughters, including the one present—Gumaiaama

Next, I met a family of women. Mama Sophia and her daughter, Gumaiaama, live in Klipkop, and like most of their friends and neighbors, neither has a job. Gumaiaama is in the tenth grade, and like nearly every other resident of the shanty town, when she is finished high school she will likely move on to a life of unemployment. The future is bleak for Gumaiaama. It is a continuation of the present, which is a continuation of the past. For all the people in Klipkop, time stands still. Most haven't seen any consequential change in their lifetimes. When asked what could be most helpful in their immediate future, they quietly whispered "electricity, toilets, and ... work." I instantly looked down at my notebook, attempting to conceal my visceral reaction. They wanted electricity, toilets and work while I was thinking about her lack of long-term career prospects. Again, the heart-wrenching reality of their situation settled in.



### Aaron and Maria Neose

Aaron and Maria are another of Klipkop's couples. Aaron, unlike many of his fellow Klipkop residents, has found a way of making even a little money; he attempts to support himself by chopping wood from the surrounding, undeveloped areas and selling it. In this squatter town with no infrastructure or formal commerce, Aaron has little opportunity to make money from his work. While speaking to Aaron and Maria, I couldn't get my eyes off of the "wallpaper" behind their heads. The balloons covering the walls of their makeshift home seemed to be staring at me, reminding me just how hard their lives are.



**Dora (mother), Gilbert (father),  
Seipeti, Mapifasion, and Somalision**

Dora, Gilbert and their three kids were one of the last families I met, and their faces are still at the front of my memory. Gilbert is one of the countless Klipkop citizens who used to be a farmer, and who is stuck in the South African land transition. While working on a farm, Gilbert got into an accident and lost his leg. For compensation, Gilbert received four months pay from the farmer and compensation for the medical expenses when they amputated his leg. He's lost the ability to support his family and his wife has small children to care for. Prospects for employment for Gilbert are even slimmer than those of the rest of Klipkop's men. As you can see, the members of this family are not smiling in their picture. I could never expect them to and yet I was taking their pictures anyway and then walking away without doing anything for them. As the rain poured down outside, beating against the fragile roof and walls of their shack, I was overwhelmed by how much help they need and how alone they must feel.

In this small community of 600 families, almost everyone knows each other. So when I arrived in Klipkop, knowledge of my presence spread quickly. Upon first introduction, people were hesitant, unsure of me as an outsider and as an American. With my camera and notebook in hand, though, they began to see me as a source of potential help. This made me uneasy. Yes, I was there to help, I guess, but my pictures and questions wouldn't provide them with the immediate financial or circumstantial help that I sensed they perceived I represented. So I was invited into home after home with the hope that I could help this family after that one. Unexpectedly, the hopeful faces felt no better than the distrusting ones.

So I resorted to focusing on following through in my task: to learn about the community so that STM can help it with an enormous project of building a community center to augment the Klipkop church. The new center would in fact host the church, and as well might possibly serve multiple other community initiatives including a crèche, job training programs, and more. This center would be the community's main space and main organizer.

Learning about the community meant, quite simply, meeting people. I met countless families in Klipkop, all of whom deserve space on this page and time in our thoughts and prayers. I chose to represent a few in this story, to show both a range of experiences and yet a similarity in circumstance among the people of Klipkop.

## E. What Now?

When I left Klipkop that day, I didn't feel good and I didn't feel bad. I felt welcomed by new families and faces; I felt disappointed that I couldn't do anything for them; and I felt anxious that my presence in their lives would turn out to be meaningless. But then I remembered something: This is just the beginning of my relationship with Klipkop—hopefully. And that word—hopefully—is the key. I need to have hope, hope that STM will be able to make the impact I know it wants to and can. Hope, faith, and hard work, and a better life will come. With renewed hope, and the self-determination to do whatever I can to make that hope come true, I left Klipkop and later the country, determined to come back with more than just a camera next time.

So what did I learn from my recent trip? What did I take out? Well first and foremost, the experience led me to completely endorse the Klipkop community project. Horrible conditions aside, it is clear that Maranatha has the managerial skills and human resources to effectively launch the community center. More importantly, the community center would be an invaluable resource for the community. The center would give Klipkop residents a loving, safe place where their spiritual needs can be met and where they, with their families and neighbors, can work together, developing services that allow them to help themselves. The center would enable the Klipkop community to improve the conditions of their own lives. The center is also a place where others like STM, Western churches, and even the white Dutch Reformed



Church in South Africa, who following Christ's mandate to love our neighbor as ourselves, can join hands with Klipkop's people to work for improvement.

Yet, the community center represents even more! Outside of a building that provides basic essentials—water, electricity, and sewage—it also symbolizes an act of God's love, tangible evidence that God has heard the Klipkop residents' daily prayers and has physically produced an answer, albeit a small but significant one. Furthermore, the community center would have the capacity to facilitate educational projects like sewing seminars, or chicken farming, and service opportunities such as a crèche or food programs. Yet the biggest residual effect of the community project, the reason that I will do every-

thing in my personal power to support Klipkop's vision, is to re-instill the ever elusive ideal of hope - that convoluted idea that humanity consistently undervalues and so often takes for granted. When I looked into that old lady's eyes who was hanging up clothes on the tattered line, I witnessed a woman without hope, a woman without the satisfaction of believing that tomorrow might bring something new, something better than yesterday and the day before. Hope is hard to measure, hard to quantify, and the benefits of hope are equally hard to grasp. How can you assess the value of a single person believing that the future might be better than the past? I cannot say that I have the answer, but I do know that the community center would re-instill hope—fleeting, maybe—but perhaps, just perhaps, it could be the catalyst for something greater.

Which brings me to my final conclusion. As I reflected on my trip, it dawned on me why I was involved, what I believe STM brought to South Africa. More than the community center, more than any physical capital or monetary support, STM's involvement in South Africa has led to the forging of new relationships, new families under God. During my nine-day stay, I witnessed DRC and URCSA churches working in unison on a shared vision, white and black men only decades out of Apartheid referring to each other as brothers. I heard pastors at other STM partner URCSA churches, located hundreds of miles from Maranatha, speak with Pastor Betha about an upcoming conference, where three congregations would unite and share ideas and church strategies. Each new place I entered, I was bombarded with questions asking about former STM travelers—not broad, vague questions,

but rather personal, detailed questions, all of which ended with, "Please, please give my love to ..."

It dawned on me that STM's capacity is limited and will always be such. Our resources are modest, both human and fiscal. We will never turn the tide in South Africa, nor is that our role. But personally, I can attest that through my involvement with STM, I have made friendships that will exist until death. I have new teams to root for (Chiefs!), new families to pray for, and new locations to call home. It's comforting to know that my community has grown, that although I will attempt to do everything I can to support my brethren in South Africa, they, too, will do everything in their power to help me. God has brought our goals together, and indeed, the world has become a little bit smaller.

As soon as I arrived in the States, I discussed my trip with fellow STM members. "Betha said what? Did you make sure to tell Eifram ... She is precious, isn't she? I can't wait to see them in two months!" Yes, STM's role, although small, is God's work. And while we are officially a ministry, a non-profit dedicated to helping others in South Africa, I can't help but believe that we are the ones really receiving God's blessing. With each new relationship, each new partnership forged in God's name, we are blessed, blessed with love, blessed with family, blessed with a new understanding of this world and God's plan, and blessed with a renewed faith to believe that through the Lord, everything and anything is possible.

***Until next time  
South Africa, stay well.***

**Learn how you can help:  
[www.seconddableministries.com](http://www.seconddableministries.com)**