



HEROINE

NICOLE-MARIE IRESCH

This design entrepreneur's vision for economic empowerment has seen her launch an ethical fashion label, transforming the lives of township women.

BORN IN ALGERIA and raised in France, Nicole-Marie Iresch's life path was transformed on her first visit to South Africa in 1987, when she was approached on a Cape Town street by a group of women looking for work. She felt an instant connection with them and, after listening to their stories, was invited to visit their homes in Khayelitsha. Here, Nicole-Marie says she discovered the hidden beauty of the townships. "The shacks were decorated with 'wallpaper' from well-known brands. I was impressed with the vibrant creativity, and wanted to share it."

A desire to create opportunities for these women inspired Nicole-Marie to set up a social enterprise with the aim of creating economic empowerment. She moved from France to South Africa in 1997 and returned to South Africa to start Afrique du Sud, Bidonvilles (ASB), a non-profit organisation that sets up independent sewing co-operatives in Cape Town's townships. Each co-op gets 17 weeks of sewing, accounting and business training and, after six months, becomes an autonomous entity registered with the Department of Trade and Industry.

ASB's Township® has become a strong trademark, with ecofriendly bags stocked at retailers across the country, conference bags shipped worldwide, and a fashion collection at Cape Quarter's Township boutique.

NICOLE-MARIE ON...

→ **Confronting major challenges:**

"Many people told me that the Township project would fail. But I had a strong vision of creating a social business model that could change lives. When I felt anxious about approaching our first client to stock our ecofriendly hessian bags, I shared my fears with the women. 'Just go, we'll pray for you,' was their response. Their support helps me overcome any obstacles I face."

→ **Ending poverty:** "We cannot continue to see the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer. All industries should reinvent themselves by implementing new social-enterprise business models that create meaningful development."

→ **Changing perceptions:** "Many people associate South Africa's townships with crime, poverty and other serious social issues. Yet these are vibrant communities where residents are ready to accept opportunities to improve their lives."

→ **Embracing discoveries:** "My experience has taught me to have faith; that magical experiences are around every corner. I am a rational person, but my work with Township has taught me to be more intuitive."

—As told to Vivian Warby

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