Entrepreneurship as a Tool for Making a Difference
The Southern Africa Innovation Support Programme (SAIS 2) acknowledges the work that all the startups mentioned in this booklet do to provide innovative solutions for societal challenges in Southern Africa. Thank you to: Piet Mashita (Abiri Innovations), Bless Mgongolwa (AGROBOT), Johnson Mosikare (Agua Contada), Boniswa Bayani and Kabelo Julius Morokotso (Cyber Kajumo Rigs), Pious Musokoshi (Eastern Manual Drilling), Jane Nakasamu (Greenbelt Energy), Xabiso Lombo (Guardian Gabriel), Pieter Moller, Alex Courtney-Clarke, Barry Scheepers (IoT Radar), Joseph Singano (JointPesa), Mavis Nduchwa (Kalahari Honey), Thato Kasongo (Mohiri), Jacqueline Rogers (My Pregnancy Journey), Bernard Sebakile (Sakab Holdings (Pty) Ltd), Bethane Wheeler, and Helvi Itenge-Wheeler (The Lab/Yambeka Children Media).

SAIS 2 would also like to thank the Connected Hubs members who co-organised the BOOST UP startup support programme in 2019: Botswana Innovation Hub; Nest Hubs; the National Commission on Science, Research, and Technology in Namibia; Dololo Operations (Pty) Ltd; the Namibia Business Innovation Institute; the Technology Innovation Agency; mLab Southern Africa; the Tanzania Commission on Science and Technology; Buni Hub; the National Technology Business Centre in Zambia; WEAC; and BongoHive.

A special thanks goes to the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland; the Governments of Botswana, Namibia, South Africa, Tanzania, and Zambia; and the Secretariat of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) for making SAIS 2 possible.

SAIS 2 would like to acknowledge the invaluable training and advice provided to the startups by the following: Aalto University, Courage Ventures, Demola, Funzi, Futurice, Helsinki Think Company, Leidenschaft, Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland (MFA), Pitching for Life, Siili Solutions, Sitra, The Shortcut, Troy Woodson, Urban Lab/Smart Kalasatama, Vertical, World of Insights, Zachariah George, Samuel Masholoko, Mwila Kangwa, and Tumelo Mapila.

The final BOOST UP Scale Up Pitch Competition was held in Helsinki as a Slush 2019 Side Event, and brought together startups, investors, and other ecosystem players from the Finnish and African innovation ecosystems. This would not have been possible without the support of partners Think Africa, Futurice, and the United Nations Technology Innovation Labs (UNTIL).

SAIS 2 would also like to acknowledge the creative work done by Clara Mupipiwa-Schnack in designing this publication.

**GENERAL INFORMATION**

**Startups as the New Superheroes Vol 2**

**Date:** August 2020

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Innovative startups are playing an increasingly important role in economic development, job creation, and meeting the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). Entrepreneurship can be a powerful tool for making a positive impact on society, especially in the societies where youth unemployment is a challenge as in the SADC Region.

At the Southern Africa Innovation Support (SAIS 2) Programme and the SAIS 2 Connected Hubs, we believe inspirational role models are important to anyone considering the entrepreneurial path, and for startup ecosystems to flourish. This publication is follow-up to SAIS 2 first edition of Startups as the New Superheroes published in 2019 and presenting cohorts of entrepreneurs supported by programme in 2017 and 2018. The role models and thought leadership provided by startups to their aspiring peers is a critical component in building startup ecosystems. Thus, SAIS 2 is proud to be able to use this publication to showcase an additional 14 brilliant startup role models that are solving societal challenges in Southern Africa: Abiri Innovations, AGROBOT, Agua Contada, Cyber Kajumo Rigs, Eastern Manual Drilling, Greenbelt Energy, Guardian Gabriel, IoT Radar, JointPesa, Kalahari Honey, Mohiri, My Pregnancy Journey, Sakab Holdings (Pty) Ltd, and The Lab/ Yambeka Children Media.

These startups are the national finalists of the BOOST UP startup support programme in 2019, organised by SAIS 2 and the Connected Hubs. They participated in the BOOST UP Scale Up incubation programme, which included the BOOST UP Bootcamp in Finland that culminated in Slush, one of the leading startup conferences in Europe.

We hope these startups’ stories will serve as an inspiration and a learning tool for other early-stage entrepreneurs or people curious about becoming an entrepreneur. The startups’ experiences can also provide insight to funders, sponsors, and policymakers on the challenges faced by early-stage startups in Botswana, Namibia, South Africa, Tanzania, and Zambia.

The Southern Africa Innovation Support Programme (SAIS 2) is a regional initiative supported by Finland’s Ministry for Foreign Affairs (MFA) in partnership with the Ministries responsible for science, technology and innovation of Botswana, Namibia, South Africa, Tanzania and Zambia, and the Secretariat of the Southern African Development Community (SADC). The programme supports the growth of new businesses through strengthening innovation ecosystems and promotion of cross-border collaboration between innovation role-players in Southern Africa. It applies three tools: innovation funding, capacity building and knowledge exchange.
The Southern Africa Innovation Support Programme (SAIS 2) is a regional initiative supported by Finland’s Ministry for Foreign Affairs (MFA) in partnership with the Ministries responsible for science, technology and innovation of Botswana, Namibia, South Africa, Tanzania and Zambia, and the Secretariat of the Southern African Development Community (SADC). The programme supports the growth of new businesses through strengthening innovation ecosystems and promotion of cross-border collaboration between innovation role-players in Southern Africa. It applies three tools: innovation funding, capacity building and knowledge exchange.

SAIS 2 facilitates networking between innovation actors in Southern Africa through a community of practice called Connected Hubs. Connected Hubs is a network that connects SAIS 2 and innovation support organisations from public and private sector on the basis of a joint cause: enhanced entrepreneurship support and regional connectivity. The network’s main purpose is to build a regional community and facilitate knowledge exchange by sharing best practices on what works and why when supporting entrepreneurs and startups in SADC (and beyond).

THE CONNECTED HUBS MEMBERS IN 2019:

Botswana: Botswana Innovation Hub; Nest Hubs
Namibia: National Commission on Science, Research, and Technology in Namibia; Dololo Operations (Pty) Ltd; Namibia Business Innovation Institute
South Africa: Technology Innovation Agency; MLab Southern Africa
Tanzania: Tanzania Commission on Science and Technology; Buni Hub
Zambia: National Technology Business Centre in Zambia; WEAC; BongoHive
The BOOST UP regional innovation competition is the Connected Hubs network’s main activity. It is a three-part series of startup events supported by SAIS 2 and the SAIS 2 National Focal Points together with the Connected Hubs members in Botswana, Namibia, South Africa, Tanzania, and Zambia.

BOOST UP targets early-stage startups that use technology to solve societal challenges in Southern Africa.

The BOOST UP 2019 comprised Set Up training events (June–August 2019), Stand Up pitch competitions (August), and the Scale Up incubation programme.
SETUP
BOOST UP Set Up open training provides entrepreneurs with practical tools to package their business idea and develop a pitch to attract their target market. The Set Up training sessions were organised separately in each of the BOOST UP countries.

STANDUP
At BOOST UP Stand Up, approximately 10 carefully selected startups competed in national pitch competitions in each country. A panel of judges selected the startups to advance to interviews, after which two to four promising startups per country were selected to participate in Scale Up.

SCALEUP
BOOST UP Scale Up is an incubation programme for impact-driven startups eager to become more investable. Scale Up included an online incubation programme (September–November) and an on-site bootcamp in Helsinki, Finland. BOOST UP Bootcamp culminated in a pitch competition organised by Connected Hubs together with Think Africa, Futurice, and UNTIL (United Nations Technology Innovation Labs), followed by participation at Slush, one of the leading startup conferences in Europe.

- 9 events were held with about 500 attendees
- 5 national pitching competitions
- 14 impact-driven startups trained
- 5 Number of female founders in Scale Up
- 25 Number of female team members in Scale Up startups
- 9 Number of male founders in Scale Up
- 55 Number of male team members in Scale Up startups
We are trying to solve the lack of digital maps in semi-rural and rural settlements. I came to recognise the problem when going into townships. I assumed I could use established navigation methods in these areas, but none worked. I had to stop to ask for directions, which is not safe. This issue of not being able to safely navigate these areas leads to many services being unreliable. For example, ambulances are unable to identify the location they need to reach to help someone. Having access to reliable digital maps would also have economic benefits as many services, such as food deliveries, would become more accessible.

Piet Mashita

The Abiri App provides customised regional and provincial digital maps, which are enhanced by an advanced maps intelligence system offering useful road and trip information such as toll gate prices, fuel consumption per vehicle for the journey, and road condition information.

WHICH PROBLEM DOES YOUR STARTUP LOOK TO ADDRESS AND WHY?

When we first started, we were focusing more on villages and rural areas. Based on the early feedback, we shifted our focus to townships. After that, we started to get a lot of positive feedback. People in townships love the idea and get excited about the positive impact the solution can have on their lives. When we completed our first prototype, the results of the early adopters’ beta test were great. Also being accepted to incubation programmes such as BOOST UP and winning the BOOST UP 2019 Final Pitching Competition was an important success. That also helped us to identify potential partners at Slush and to get recognised by the Chivas Venture Challenge, in which we were among the three finalists.

HOW DID YOU BUILD YOUR TEAM AND HOW HAS YOUR TEAM GROWN DURING YOUR STARTUP JOURNEY?

Building the team has been one of the most challenging parts of the journey. It was very hard to identify people who really understand the vision. At the early stage, we were very fortunate to find a developer who understood the vision and the goal for social impact much quicker than we expected. Right now, we are a team of five, but we cannot yet pay salary to the team. In the next month, we plan to engage two or more developers to be able to cover more areas. The three-to-six-month plan is to increase the team to about 15 and seek skills that we are currently missing, such as drone mapping. We have built the team by advertising the positions. Finding suitable persons has been a challenge as many people who
initially show interest, later realise they don’t have the resilience and passion that this takes. When selecting the team, we have learnt it’s very important to be open and clear about the vision, where we want to go, what is expected and what is the bigger picture. As we are not yet able to pay salaries, the benefits will come later, and it is crucial for the team to see the bigger picture.

**WHAT TYPE OF ENVIRONMENT IS YOUR STARTUP OPERATING IN?**

We are operating in the northern part of the country next to several townships/slums with moderate support, mostly from the private sector and little support from the government. Challenges include monthly rent for high office space and unreliable electricity supply.

**WHAT KIND OF SUPPORT IS AVAILABLE FOR STARTUPS LIKE YOURS IN YOUR COUNTRY?**

We have participated in the MLab incubation programme, BOOST UP, and the Chivas Venture Challenge. Such programmes are very important because there is little support available for startups in South Africa. The youth unemployment rate is high, but the school system doesn’t encourage students to become entrepreneurs. Entrepreneurship is seen as the most brutal and difficult path for young people. There is a stigma to failing as an entrepreneur here – in contrast to many other countries. Therefore, it is necessary to empower young people and help them with resources such as knowledge and funding. Currently, even if you want to become an entrepreneur, you don’t necessarily know how. Luckily, my family has been very supportive, which has helped a lot.

**WHAT SKILLS HAVE YOU GAINED DURING TRAINING, MENTORING, AND OTHER SUPPORT ACTIVITIES ALONG YOUR JOURNEY?**

During BOOST UP, I have learnt about the importance of lean service creation and the importance of including your customers from the very early stage. Your idea might sound good to you, but not necessarily to others, so you will need to listen to your potential clients. I gained a lot of insight on how business works and how to behave as an entrepreneur; how to pitch my idea to different investors; and how to find opportunities and network. I also learnt about the importance of culture in the company and having the right team.

**WHAT FEEDBACK HAVE YOU HAD SO FAR FROM YOUR CLIENTS, END USERS, OR PARTNERS?**

They really love the product as it offers seamless travel between cities, townships, slums, and rural areas. They really love the product as it offers seamless travel between cities, townships, slums, and rural areas.

**WHAT CHALLENGES HAVE YOU HAD IN BRINGING YOUR PRODUCT TO MARKET?**

We have had a lot of challenges. Initially, we didn’t know how to market or how to take the product to the market. Even in social media, you can only reach a limited number of people at a time. We started to tell people about the product and how it will help them when we go to communities. We currently have about 3,800 users. The area covered is not yet that big, about 20 km². When we cover more areas, we can get more users as there is no need for the product for people whose area is not yet
The next phase we are planning will cover 50 km². Other challenges we have faced include a lack of funding and finding the team who understand our culture and goals.

**WHAT DO YOU BELIEVE IS THE BEST PLATFORM TO NETWORK IN YOUR LOCAL STARTUP ECOSYSTEM?**

For us, events have offered a lot of networking opportunities with potential partners. I have learnt not to be shy when talking about my idea. Even if some people look scary, you can nicely ask to have a few minutes of their time. Talk about your product, let people know where you want to go and what you do, and share your passion.

**WHAT ARE THE FUTURE PLANS FOR YOUR STARTUP?**

Our short-term goals are to cover 300 km² in the next six months, and 700 km² within the next 12 months. We feel that reaching 700 km² will give us more credibility when speaking to investors and partners. In the longer term, we want to provide digital maps to all townships/slums in Southern Africa by the year 2023, and scale further to sub-Saharan Africa by 2028.

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"Talk about your product, let people know where you want to go and what you do, and share your passion."

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**IF YOU ARE LOOKING FOR AN INVESTMENT OR HAVE SECURED SOME, WHO IS/ARE YOUR IDEAL INVESTOR(S)?**

So far, we haven’t received an investment, but we are working hard to get an investment to enable us to cover more areas, scale, and to grow our team. Our ideal investor is someone who wants to invest in a company making a societal impact, can share advice and knowledge, and help us partner with relevant people. We would like to collaborate with the investor and show how the money is used. I wish Jack Ma or Bill Gates were in the audience one day when I pitch!

**WHAT CAN YOU PASS ON TO ENTREPRENEURS AND FOUNDERS LIKE YOURSELF WHO NEED SUPPORT?**

When you start this journey, you need to make sure you love what you do and are passionate about what you do. Your main passion should be the impact you can make in people’s lives rather than financial incentives. What should drive you is the societal impact and how your product can make people’s lives better. Make sure you attend relevant events and seek opportunities such as incubation programmes. I wish I had had the knowledge I gained from the BOOST UP programme when I first started, especially understanding Lean Service Creation and the importance of engaging users from the very beginning to fully understand the problem. That would have definitely helped me scale faster. Looking back, it would have also been helpful to have the knowledge I now have about building the right company culture and how to pitch to our ideal investor.
AGROBOT is a service that uses normal SMS technology powered by Artificial Intelligence (AI) to help farmers to get accurate and reliable information on agricultural problems and farm inputs such as seeds, fertilisers, pesticides, etc. With AGROBOT, farmers can have an interactive chat with an AI programme, which will educate and advise them on modern farming techniques.

Bress Mgongolwa

WHICH PROBLEM DOES YOUR STARTUP LOOK TO ADDRESS AND WHY?

The problem we are solving is the lack of professional information available to farmers in Africa. Agricultural knowledge and skills are crucial for a farmer to produce crops of high quality and quantity, but farmers currently lack access to information due to there being so few specialists (extension officers) available in rural areas. Farmers currently depend on old ways of farming, which are neither sustainable nor profitable. I come from a family with a farming background, and have been doing farming activities since I was a small kid. I have seen how people are using the old farming ways, while the modern ways would lead to better yields. I was involved in educating farmers, but realised this process is too slow because of limited resources, so I wanted to create a system that depends on Artificial Intelligence (AI) and SMS technology instead of human interaction.

HOW DID YOU BUILD YOUR TEAM, AND HOW HAS YOUR TEAM GROWN DURING YOUR STARTUP JOURNEY?

We are a team of 13 young professionals who are passionate about and specialised in agriculture. In the team, we have five agricultural specialists or extension officers, and eight persons are working in other roles such as product development, finance, PR, and communications. We are a team of seven males and six females, and we have complementing skills in the agricultural sector. Our team is strong in agricultural knowledge because we want to ensure all our information is correct.

WHEN DID YOU REALISE THAT YOU ARE INDEED ONTO SOMETHING BIG?

I noticed we are into something big when doing field testing in Iringa. In a few days of starting testing, we got a lot of positive feedback and many people started using the service. So far, our main success has been being able to roll out the service to more than six regions in Tanzania.
We have now collected a lot of data and are training the AI to use the data, so we plan to recruit a data scientist. We will also increase the number of agricultural specialists. They each have their area of specialisation such as seeds or pesticides, and we need to have a team that can cover all areas.

When recruiting team members, we have noticed that it’s crucial to ensure that the team members share the founder’s vision. We test this by giving the extension officers small tasks to complete before recruiting. This has helped us identify persons who are committed. When recruiting non-agricultural specialists, we have asked them to first volunteer, which lets us know their skills and ensure we share the same vision. As a startup founder, I think one needs to be a good leader – someone who shows the way and accepts suggestions from the team. Don’t think of your team as employees but rather as people with a special role and talent.

WHAT TYPE OF ENVIRONMENT IS YOUR STARTUP OPERATING IN?

The operating environment in Tanzania is good, but the main challenge is the lack of startup policy. We need to pay huge taxes even though we are a small company. Another challenge is funding. The funding is mainly available from private companies and there are a lot of middlemen, making it very slow to get the funding to use.

In Tanzania, the image young people have about entrepreneurship is that it’s very hard, mainly because of the legal requirements and policy. It is quite complex to gather all the legal documents to register a company, and startups need to pay tax even though they have not yet generated an income. A lot of young people give up because of this.

WHAT KIND OF SUPPORT IS AVAILABLE FOR STARTUPS LIKE YOURS IN YOUR COUNTRY?

The support we have received has been funding, technical and agricultural knowledge, and business skills. We have managed to find people who specialise in agricultural analysis, data, and technology support.

The support for startups in Tanzania in general is not enough compared to other countries like South Africa or Rwanda, where tech startups are seen as important businesses, and where some taxes have been reduced. In Tanzania, we also have very few funding opportunities for startups. We should have better funding mechanisms.

WHAT SKILLS HAVE YOU GAINED DURING TRAINING, MENTORING, AND OTHER SUPPORT ACTIVITIES ALONG YOUR JOURNEY?

For us, on the scale from one to 10, the BOOST UP journey was a 10. We got a lot of useful skills and information, for example on how to prepare a good pitch. The pitch session hosted by Walid O. El Cheikh was very helpful.

WHAT FEEDBACK HAVE YOU HAD SO FAR FROM YOUR CLIENTS, END USERS, OR PARTNERS?

We continuously seek feedback because it helps us to improve and develop. We have a hotline number where people can ask questions and provide feedback. We have, for example, received feedback on the fees, which made us realise we need subscription plans for three and six months. Some commercial farmers have given us feedback that SMS is no longer a relevant technology for them, which is why we have decided to launch an app for smartphone users. We will continue to have the SMS service available, though, for those farmers who don’t have access to smartphone.

WHAT CHALLENGES HAVE YOU HAD IN BRINGING YOUR PRODUCT TO MARKET?

The main challenge has been gaining clients’ trust in terms of payments. Some clients were afraid to subscribe because they feared the service would deduct money from their account even if they don’t use it. We have explained the payment models and how payments are deducted, and encouraged them to use the free trial period. Marketing has also been a challenge because in rural areas, a lot of time is needed for travelling. Organising meetings, for example during the testing phase, is also difficult as one needs to apply for permission to organise a meeting of more than 10 people, and the process is very hard.

“I wanted to create a system that depends on Artificial Intelligence (AI) and SMS technology instead of human interaction.”
WHAT DO YOU BELIEVE IS THE BEST PLATFORM TO NETWORK IN YOUR LOCAL STARTUP ECOSYSTEM?

For us, the best platform has been to join innovation hubs. They have lots of events and you can see what other people are doing, what challenges others are facing, and how they have solved them. We have gained a lot of experience through the innovation hubs and tech groups. Some startups are afraid to share knowledge. Don’t be. It’s really useful to share information with your peers.

WHAT ARE THE FUTURE PLANS FOR YOUR STARTUP?

Our main goal is to reach 2.5 million farmers by 2021 and expand to different regions of Tanzania. We are also looking into launching our service outside of Tanzania, starting in the Democratic Republic of Congo this year. We have a partner in the DRC and are going through the legislation.

IF YOU ARE LOOKING FOR AN INVESTMENT OR HAVE SECURED SOME, WHO IS/ARE YOUR IDEAL INVESTOR(S)?

We received an investment last year and are now in the final talks with a potential investor. We are currently looking for USD 35,000–100,000. What we hope from an investor is to have a revenue sharing model.

WHAT CAN YOU PASS ON TO ENTREPRENEURS AND FOUNDERS LIKE YOURSELF WHO NEED SUPPORT?

I would say to my fellow entrepreneurs, “don’t give up on your dreams, keep working”. If you have an idea, start working on it. When you have a minimum viable product, you will have early-stage customers and you can look for investment. But if you are only talking about the idea and don’t have anything that can be tested, it’s very difficult to receive funding. Very few investors would invest in an idea. I would also advise to gain business knowledge. When I first started, I thought all that matters is to have a product and I didn’t have financial skills or know how to prepare tax reports. Investors want to see those things. Since it’s been a long journey, I have been able to get training on that.
Johnson Mosikare

Agua Contada aims to prevent both the overbilling of residents for water, and the wastage of water through leaks in pipes

WHICH PROBLEM DOES YOUR STARTUP LOOK TO ADDRESS AND WHY?

We aim to solve the problem of overbilling of residents for water and the wastage of water through leaks. I am part of my local community forum and I saw people complaining about high electricity and water prices. The municipality cuts off electricity for people who owe the municipality, and most often, this is because of unpaid water bills. I noticed that people were complaining that the water bills are high, even when they leave the city for the whole month. I researched the topic and found out the municipality was increasing the water prices because they were constantly losing water in leaks. The leakage results in air passing through the pipes, which makes the water meters overread.

WHEN DID YOU REALISE THAT YOU ARE INDEED ONTO SOMETHING BIG?

I realised the problem is worth solving when more and more houses had their electricity cut off. At one point, more than 15,000 houses were cut off in my city. When I researched the topic more, I found out the problem exists all around the country and it’s not unique to South Africa.

So far, one of my biggest successes has been to get the chance to participate in BOOST UP Bootcamp and learn so much in such a short time. The Bootcamp and meeting with the other entrepreneurs made me realise there might be a more effective way of solving the problem I’m looking at. The original solution was to invent a totally different water meter to what already exists. This requires government approval, which could take years to get. After the Bootcamp, I started to look at the problem from a different angle. Instead of building a new meter, I am now building a prototype for a server-controlled device that blocks air coming through the pipes. This is quicker to make and there are no government regulations, so I’m confident this will be a faster way.
I have also created a web-based platform where a person can do their own water meter reading to avoid the municipality overcharging. I haven’t shared this with the community yet, but there are 22 households waiting to get started.

**HOW DID YOU BUILD YOUR TEAM, AND HOW HAS YOUR TEAM GROWN DURING YOUR STARTUP JOURNEY?**

We are currently a team of two, myself and a local engineer. In the near future, I foresee we will need a few more persons to do installing, meter reading, and marketing.

My biggest lesson related to building the team has been to start by planning before onboarding team members. In the very beginning, we started to do rather than plan what we are going to do. The Bootcamp opened my eyes that we have been doing nonsense compared to what we could have been doing. I saw that having a clear plan is key: think about what you want to achieve by when and think backwards to work out what needs to be done, by whom, and by when to achieve the goal. Only after having the plan is it time to start doing.

**WHAT TYPE OF ENVIRONMENT IS YOUR STARTUP OPERATING IN?**

In my area, there is a lot of interest and hype about technology, but no real understanding about it. Especially people who have the authority to change things don’t necessarily have real understanding of the potential of technology and innovation. It would be beneficial to have more communication and regular meetings between innovators. There are some hackathons, but they have so far not led to further collaboration outside the events.

In the Northern Cape, entrepreneurship is often associated mainly with doing tenders for the government, and tech entrepreneurship is very limited. Many businesses here would benefit from tech solutions, but they don’t always know there would be an easier way of doing things. I notice here that, as an entrepreneur, you know what people might need, but often you must make people understand that they need it.

**WHAT KIND OF SUPPORT IS AVAILABLE FOR STARTUPS LIKE YOURS IN YOUR COUNTRY?**

The main support I have received has been through the BOOST UP programme. Also, MLab has offered us the use of their space. I think there is a need for further support for startups, especially training and knowledge sharing like the BOOST UP training. It’s important that the support does not make startups dependent on it as startups should be the ones putting in the effort, not expecting others to do it for them. Some businesses would benefit from longer-term support and regular follow-up on progress and targets.

**WHAT SKILLS HAVE YOU GAINED DURING TRAINING, MENTORING, AND OTHER SUPPORT ACTIVITIES ALONG YOUR JOURNEY?**

During BOOST UP, I feel like I got a better understanding of the bigger picture of entrepreneurship. Like one of the workshop hosts put it, it’s not about the product, not about yourself; it’s about the end result and solving the problem. One of the important takeaways was also to learn to see and admit that I was not on the right track. I then took a step back and looked at the problem from a different angle.

**WHAT FEEDBACK HAVE YOU HAD SO FAR FROM YOUR CLIENTS, END USERS, OR PARTNERS?**

I have recently made a survey in a community WhatsApp group for households, in which I collected information on their interest in meter reading. The feedback was useful and encouraging as I noticed clear interest from the participating households.
What challenges have you had in bringing your product to market?

My main challenge has been time management. I finished the website with a calculating code two months ago. The next step is to onboard people to do the meter readings. That will also give me data to see what needs to be adapted. Another challenge is the finances. It’s difficult to find people to work on the meter reading as I’m only able to pay them once the households have paid.

What do you believe is the best platform to network in your local startup ecosystem?

In my area in the Northern Cape, there are limited opportunities for networking as it’s quiet when it comes to events. Nationally, MLab and the Technology Innovation Agency have been good contacts for me. Also, the community forum has been a useful platform for me as it provides access to the households. My tip regarding networking is to go big fast. Don’t only network locally, but rather with national and international stakeholders. This will also bring you credibility locally.

What are the future plans for your startup?

We aim to start the meter reading by June and introduce the device by September 2020. My hope is that we can create an income to create employment for youngsters and eventually to contribute to the economy.

If you are looking for an investment or have secured some, who is/are your ideal investor(s)?

This might become timely in a few months. We will, however, try to first get as far as possible without an investor.

What can you pass on to entrepreneurs and founders like yourself who need support?

Don’t be afraid to fail and remember that being stubborn is not a good thing. Focus on the problem you want to solve and make sure you understand the real problem. Start simple and make sure you don’t lose focus from the original problem.

Focus on the problem you want to solve and make sure you understand the real problem.
When did you realise that you are indeed onto something big?

The project was started in 2017, when the founder, Kabelo Julius Morokotso, started to work on the first robot. At the time, I was working as a teacher in a nearby village. A friend of mine told me that I should see the robot as I was doing research about STEAM (science, technology, engineering, art, and mathematics) as a solution for out-of-school youth. When I saw the robot, I was so impressed that I said we should do something with it, something inspirational and meaningful to children. Some months later, we took the robot out to the public at the Botswana Global Expo. It was great to see how the children were inspired by it. Another important success for us.

WHICH PROBLEM DOES YOUR STARTUP LOOK TO ADDRESS AND WHY?

We are looking at the problems of lack of indigenous toys, diversifying the tourism industry, and promoting technical and vocational education and skills. We want to bring back knowledge that one can do big things with the vocational skills people don’t tend to take seriously.

WHEN DID YOU REALISE THAT YOU ARE INDEED ONTO SOMETHING BIG?

Boniswa Bayani (who was interviewed for this publication) and Kabelo Morokotso.

Cyber Kajumo Rigs aims to offer solutions for the problems of metal waste management and unemployment and to motivate and upskill youth in the rural areas. The business involves recycling materials to create giant metal art monuments that serve as mobile tourism icons and educational teaching aids, and whose replicas can be diversified into toys and animations. The characters of the icons, such as the nine-metre-tall robot statue Kajumo, are diversified into merchandise that educate children on environmental and heritage issues and teach basic concepts of coding and robotics. In essence, Cyber Kajumo Rigs takes metal waste, art, and technology and uses them to solve environmental issues and educate while creating employment.
was being selected to participate in the BOOST UP Scale Up incubation programme.

HOW DID YOU BUILD YOUR TEAM, AND HOW HAS YOUR TEAM GROWN DURING YOUR STARTUP JOURNEY?

We are currently a team of six: the lead artist, myself, a graphic designer, a marketing strategist, and two workshop assistants. All team members are from our existing networks, either old friends or from the same village. We are all working as volunteers as we cannot afford to pay salaries yet. This has been a challenge when engaging people as many people are looking into money first. When looking for team members, we are primarily looking for talent, skills, and the right character, rather than formal qualifications. Being part of BOOST UP has given us credibility when approaching some possible partners.

WHAT TYPE OF ENVIRONMENT IS YOUR STARTUP OPERATING IN?

There are some challenges in starting a business. It’s a challenge to raise external finances and mobilise capital, especially for a solution that is unique and different like ours. Many entrepreneurs give up along the way. Usually one needs to have their own funding to build the prototype and raising funds for that might take a long time. We have some opportunities in Botswana to apply for funding, such as the Youth Fund and through the Botswana Innovation Hub.

WHAT KIND OF SUPPORT IS AVAILABLE FOR STARTUPS LIKE YOURS IN YOUR COUNTRY?

We are clients of the Botswana Innovation Hub, and their one-on-one support, training, and coaching have been very helpful. They have also given us tasks to work on, such as preparing a milestone plan for the business, which was completely new to us and taught us the importance of having clear milestones for the project and working towards them. They have also been helpful with connections, such as introducing us to an institution which has a 3D printer.

The support that is available is good but not really sufficient. It would be very helpful to have some funding available for prototyping. It would not need to be large amounts of money, but many startups cannot get started because they lack funding for building a prototype.

WHAT SKILLS HAVE YOU GAINED DURING TRAINING, MENTORING, AND OTHER SUPPORT ACTIVITIES ALONG YOUR JOURNEY?

During the BOOST UP, I learnt to think about product development from a different perspective: one needs to first think about the client, rather than the product. I also learnt how to develop a clear and concise pitch and about building the team. Once we grow, we can adopt the learnings along the way.
WHAT FEEDBACK HAVE YOU HAD SO FAR FROM YOUR CLIENTS, END USERS, OR PARTNERS?

We have received a lot of positive feedback. When people see the robot, they also understand the potential. That’s why we would like to bring the robot statues more to the public, but the transportation is expensive so we need to find sponsors for this.

WHAT CHALLENGES HAVE YOU HAD IN BRINGING YOUR PRODUCT TO MARKET?

One of the challenges is to move the robot to bring it to the public for people to see it. We have so far moved it twice, once to the Global Expo, and it was showcased by the Ministry of Science and Technology. Moving the statue requires a large truck, which is expensive. Another challenge is having access to the 3D software and expertise for 3D modelling for 3D printing. This requires very specific expertise, which is difficult to find. Access to funding is also a challenge for us.

WHAT ARE THE FUTURE PLANS FOR YOUR STARTUP?

Our short-term plan is to finalise the prototype and begin the third robot statue. We are also working on making the robot statues move. We are thinking about making the arms move with solar energy. Moving the legs would be too dangerous, but moving the head and arms would be a huge advancement for us. This could also inspire other innovators in Southern Africa to build robots similar to the ones in the European robotics arena. We also want to turn the robot statues into an animation project to keep it relevant amongst children as they are able to learn through cartoons. In the long term, we would like to build an educational park with robots and educate on environmental issues. We have a piece of land, but we need to develop a model for how it could work as a business.

WHAT CAN YOU PASS ON TO ENTREPRENEURS AND FOUNDERS LIKE YOURSELF WHO NEED SUPPORT?

If you believe in something and want to solve a problem, don’t give up. It’s important to accept criticism. You need to be very mature to survive in the entrepreneurial space, and have an open mind to people and ideas. I would also advise to focus on the societal rather than the monetary aspect. Consider how your business can help the next generation. I think it’s time we start thinking more about the future generations.

I wish I had known that being an entrepreneur is not always easy going. Somehow, we have this false thinking that if I have an idea tomorrow, by the end of the day it can be done. Being an entrepreneur is a challenge. It’s like walking up a mountain. The more you keep going, the more resilience you build before you get to the peak. It’s important to know your destination and your peak. After that, you can go up an even bigger mountain.

You need to be very mature to survive in the entrepreneurial space, and have an open mind to people and ideas.
**Which problem does your startup look to address and why?**

We are solving the water scarcity problem in Zambia by increasing access to clean water in areas where water supply and treatment infrastructure don’t exist or are insufficient. We provide locally made water pumps at an affordable price to people or organisations who are able to spend a little bit more than they would on an open well, which often runs dry in the dry season, and for whom a machine borehole is too expensive or unreachable. The boreholes and pumps are used for getting clean drinking water and income generation in areas where water supply and treatment infrastructure don’t exist or are insufficient.

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**Eastern Manual Drilling**

Eastern Manual Drilling improves access to clean water by providing locally made water pumps at an affordable price, solving water scarcity and poverty problems in areas where water supply and treatment infrastructure don’t exist or are insufficient. Eastern Manual Drilling’s services include geological surveys; manual borehole drilling up to 40 metres; construction of groundwater recharge and rainwater harvesting systems; and the installation of rope pumps, EMAS pumps, submersible pumps, and solar pumps.

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**Pious Musokoshi**

We are solving the water scarcity problem in Zambia by increasing access to clean water in areas where water supply and treatment infrastructure don’t exist or are insufficient. We provide locally made water pumps at an affordable price to people or organisations who are able to spend a little bit more than they would on an open well, which often runs dry in the dry season, and for whom a machine borehole is too expensive or unreachable. The boreholes and pumps are used for getting clean drinking water and income generation in areas where water supply and treatment infrastructure don’t exist or are insufficient.
agriculture and livestock farming, increasing food security and decreasing poverty. As our pumps are locally made, maintaining and repairing them is easy. I used to live in a community where we had a problem with water scarcity, and I started to think about how we can solve it. I joined an organisation called Jacana and got training, which helped to design a pump and get started.

**WHEN DID YOU REALISE THAT YOU ARE INDEED ONTO SOMETHING BIG?**

Our biggest success is that we have managed to continuously grow our sales. By 2017, we had sold 50 to 60 boreholes and so far, we have sold 189. Another important success is the social impact and the improvement in the lives of our customers. We have seen that those who use the pump for gardening and farming have been able to increase their income and send their kids to school.

**HOW DID YOU BUILD YOUR TEAM AND HOW HAS YOUR TEAM GROWN DURING YOUR STARTUP JOURNEY?**

Altogether, our team has now 22 persons, which includes five administrative staff and the drilling team. In the administrative team, we have myself as the director, two engineers, one manager, and one business development manager. When we started, it was myself and one colleague working together. We realised that having the right team is important to succeed and grow, but we had little resources. The main challenge was to find persons with expertise, but who are not demanding a high salary, which we could not afford. When looking for the engineers, we advertised the positions and looked for retired engineers with long experience, who now wanted to give back to the community. When contracting the business manager, we first contracted her part time for a consultation role. Then when we won a contract of 20 boreholes, we were able to contract her full time. During the journey, I have learnt that you cannot do it alone. You need to have a team that shares the same vision and passion as you have. When building the team, try to also find a way to engage people with much more experience than you have as that gives you an opportunity to learn from them. It is also good to have a diverse team, including both males and females.

**WHAT TYPE OF ENVIRONMENT IS YOUR STARTUP OPERATING IN?**

Our government is quite welcoming and the environment is quite friendly for startups. Starting a startup is not difficult. I wouldn’t say the water sector is the easiest sector, though, because of the quality requirements, but in general, the government is quite flexible with startups. I think there is a positive feeling about SMEs and entrepreneurship because about 80% of Zambia’s population is self-employed.

**WHAT KIND OF SUPPORT IS AVAILABLE FOR STARTUPS LIKE YOURS IN YOUR COUNTRY?**

In Zambia, the National Technology Business Centre’s (NTBC) support for startups is very useful. The challenge is to find financial support, for example to get funding to prepare a prototype. I also think it would be useful to have more platforms for the startups and public sector to meet and talk about collaboration. In Zambia, there is a lot of potential for youth entrepreneurship to grow.

**WHAT SKILLS HAVE YOU GAINED DURING TRAINING, MENTORING, AND OTHER SUPPORT ACTIVITIES ALONG YOUR JOURNEY?**

I first learnt the technology side from Jacana, where I got training and made the first prototype. During the BOOST UP training, I learnt about the business and operational side: how to move from an idea to an investable state. I also found very inspirational the component about social impact because a good business doesn’t only take things from a society, but also gives back.
What feedback have you had so far from your clients, end users or partners?

The feedback has been both positive and negative. In some cases, we have ended up with dry boreholes, because we didn’t exactly know the ground structure. This happened especially in 2019 because of a drought. We then came up with technology called VES, which helps us to know where to drill. If it wasn’t for the negative feedback, we wouldn’t have developed the technology which improved our operations. We also receive a lot of positive feedback from happy clients, who now have an affordable pump with locally accessible spare parts. Having access to water brings them many benefits. For us, monitoring our work and asking for feedback is important. We have an app that helps us to monitor all the pumps we have installed and we regularly send questionnaires to customers for feedback.

What challenges have you had in bringing your product to market?

In the beginning, our main challenge was to gain customers’ trust. People didn’t want to make an investment without being certain that the pump would work. We made three boreholes as charity work to public places – to a hospital, school, and market. This allowed people to see how the pump works and test them themselves. That was a useful strategy as it increased the trust and got us business. Another challenge was to convince people that we have the technology to drill deep enough to access water. We solved this by demonstrating the depth of the borehole with a meter, which helped to convince the customers about the technology.

What do you believe is the best platform to network in your local startup ecosystem?

For us, networking has been very important. A useful platform has been the Conservation Farming Unit in Zambia, which organises farmer events on a yearly basis. Such events are beneficial for meeting with potential customers. I think it’s important to realise that networking should not be viewed as competition, and one of the benefits of networking can be to receive criticism. Criticism helps to view the product from a different angle and improve it.

What are the future plans for your startup?

We are currently only operating in one part of Zambia. We see a lot of potential and now have the capacity to start expanding to other parts of Zambia.

If you are looking for an investment or have secured some, who is/are your ideal investor(s)?

We are currently talking with a potential investor from Germany, who I met in the plane on my way from Finland to Zambia. He is planning to visit us in Zambia. At Slush, we also identified a potential investor from the UK. He wanted to invest in us, but we didn’t agree with his strategy and terms as we didn’t see them to fit the business we are in. Therefore, we decided to not close the deal. We are currently also in discussions with NGO connections we made in Finland.

What can you pass on to entrepreneurs and founders like yourself who need support?

Remember that nothing big started big. Persistence is the key to success, and it will be needed as you will go through hard times. Be willing to learn. Just because you have a brilliant idea doesn’t mean you know everything. I wish I had known more about finance when I first started, and then I realised I need help from someone with those skills. Look for the right team, who shares the same passion and vision as you have.
Jane Nakasamu

Greenbelt Energy is in the business of producing biogas from biomass as an alternative to charcoal and firewood, which are still used to produce 70% of Zambia’s energy. The company has designed a smart gas cooker that uses state-of-the-art sensors and a mobile application, which connects Greenbelt Energy’s information systems to their products. These products include biogas, smart gas cookers, gas cylinders, and regulator pipes. They use their mobile application to provide sales services to their customers as well as to spread awareness on the danger of using charcoal and firewood.

WHICH PROBLEM DOES YOUR STARTUP LOOK TO ADDRESS AND WHY?

I address the problems of energy insecurity, deforestation, and unsafe cooking methods, which result from the fact that 70% of Zambia’s population are dependent on charcoal and firewood for cooking. Every year, about 200,000 hectares of forest are cut down for firewood. This leads to deforestation and contributes to climate change and natural disasters. Aside from this, unsafe cooking methods cause health problems, especially for people with respiratory illnesses such as tuberculosis. This affects especially women as many women are involved in small cooking businesses using unsafe cooking methods. Using charcoal for cooking is also economically wasteful. These problems are not unique to Zambia, but exist all over Africa.

WHEN DID YOU REALISE THAT YOU ARE INDEED ONTO SOMETHING BIG?

Our biggest successes so far have been building the prototype and being able to show it to potential investors and people who are
interested in the company. Also, being selected for the BOOST UP and other programmes, such as SANbio’s FemBioBiz competition, have been important successes, especially because of the exposure they have brought.

It has been really interesting to see that people are excited about the solution and many have been eager to buy it, so we have had to explain that so far, it’s a prototype and not yet in the market. The main feedback has been that people are interested in the product – especially if it’s more affordable than existing alternatives.

**WHAT TYPE OF ENVIRONMENT IS YOUR STARTUP OPERATING IN?**

The startup ecosystem in Zambia is very interesting in the sense that there are quite a large number of startups, but they are not very strong. In a recent publication, Zambia was rated as the number two country in Africa with youth entrepreneurship second from Nigeria, but people know little about startups in Zambia. There is lack of visibility and networks amongst startups. It’s sometimes difficult to know whether there are other startups working in the same value chain that one could partner or collaborate with. There is also skepticism when it comes to startups. People don’t want to invest in startups, for example.

I think having more visibility for startups would make the ecosystem stronger. When I talk to other startups, they are often concerned about marketing, because they are afraid someone will steal their ideas. It would be beneficial to have more networks bringing startups together to talk about common challenges. That would help in building a strong ecosystem and doing amazing things together.

**WHAT KIND OF SUPPORT IS AVAILABLE FOR STARTUPS LIKE YOURS IN YOUR COUNTRY?**

There are a lot of mentorship programmes that we have been part of and really appreciated. For example, WECREATE (now WEAC) really helped us with the business model and connected us with interesting networks. I’m currently receiving mentorship in the Bopinc Inclusive Innovation Programme. I actually had a meeting recently with my mentor and that was really interesting. He has really good networks, so I hope I can take advantage of his networks as well.

I have also received support for our prototype improvement from NTBC, and they have connected us with opportunities such as calls for proposals.

I would say that I’m one of the very fortunate Zambian startup founders as I have been able to get a lot of support. For many others, there is a lack of opportunities.
lack of funding, and a lack of connections and mentorship. There would be a demand for many more opportunities, and those opportunities would not necessarily need to be huge ones. People really appreciate a chance of getting some mentorship and advice.

**WHAT SKILLS HAVE YOU GAINED DURING TRAINING, MENTORING, AND OTHER SUPPORT ACTIVITIES ALONG YOUR JOURNEY?**

The BOOST UP experience was really great. I got knowledge I couldn’t have learnt anywhere else. It was amazing to meet all the entrepreneurs and the coaches, and the networks I built have made a huge impact on my startup and myself. At the moment, I’m taking part in an Inclusive Innovation training course organised by the SAIS 2 Programme and the Bopinc. I’ve gained very practical knowledge and I’m able to apply the learnings immediately to my startup.

**WHAT FEEDBACK HAVE YOU HAD SO FAR FROM YOUR CLIENTS, END USERS, OR PARTNERS?**

We have gained a lot of positive feedback from people who are interested in becoming clients. It has also been really useful to get feedback from people who are more sceptical about something, for example intellectual property or design. That has helped us develop certain things. When developing the prototype, we didn’t initially care how attractive it looked, as long as it worked. Based on the feedback, we have improved the casing and packaging to ensure the design meets at least the minimum expectations. We have also received feedback to do more marketing so that people know about us. The feedback has also helped us learn more about our company and understand that there is actually not much stopping us from entering the market.

For us, very useful channels for getting feedback have been the different exhibitions where we showcased our product, such as the Zambia Entrepreneurship Summit. In addition, we interact with potential customers to gather their views.

**WHAT CHALLENGES HAVE YOU HAD IN BRINGING YOUR PRODUCT TO MARKET?**

We are still developing the prototype and improving certain things based on the feedback we have received. We are, however, ready to enter the market with the version we currently have, whilst we still keep improving. The next steps will be manufacturing, marketing on a larger scale, and getting the distribution model ready. To do this, we are trying to raise enough capital. Our product will be assembled in Zambia, but we will import some of the materials and have identified the suppliers. The distribution channels are important. We will need to make sure that we can bring the product to our customers when they need it, as convenience is one of our value propositions. This requires a strong team and investing in motorcycles and potentially a truck for waste collection. Our plan was to start the sales in five months (from July 2020), but we may need to adjust the timeline because of the hiccups caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

**WHAT DO YOU BELIEVE IS THE BEST PLATFORM TO NETWORK IN YOUR LOCAL STARTUP ECOSYSTEM?**

I would say the best way to network is to attend conferences and seminars of your own field. Also, attending different training programmes is useful. Some networks will be beneficial, others not. And then there are those connections that really surprise you, when you weren’t expecting them to get back to you but they do, and they turn out to become a very good connection.

My tip for getting the most out of networking situations is to experience and enjoy; you are more comfortable to shine your light when you relax. When I attend conferences, I make sure I really enjoy myself. When you are happy, you make people happy, and they are more interested in getting to know you and what you are doing.
WHAT ARE THE FUTURE PLANS FOR YOUR STARTUP?

Our most important future plan is to grow across the continent. We don’t want to just focus on the markets in Zambia, but to enter international markets in Sub-Saharan Africa. Our team is strategically based in various locations as it will help us to internationalise. Our team members are actively doing market research and building networks, so once we are ready to enter new markets, it will be easier for us.

IF YOU ARE LOOKING FOR AN INVESTMENT OR HAVE SECURED SOME, WHO IS/ARE YOUR IDEAL INVESTOR(S)?

We are currently looking for an investment. We are entering the market and will need increased capital and operational expenditure. We will need to do a lot of marketing as this is a product that people are not used to. We have had discussions with potential investors but are still waiting for a more concrete contract. In the meantime, we are also looking for other opportunities. My ideal investor would be an impact investor working towards climate action, who understands our sector, and could bring a lot of expertise and knowledge.

WHAT CAN YOU PASS ON TO ENTREPRENEURS AND FOUNDERS LIKE YOURSELF WHO NEED SUPPORT?

I would encourage early-stage entrepreneurs to be ready to be resilient, especially if working in Zambia or elsewhere in Africa, as there will be lots of unpredictable issues along the journey. You need to believe in your vision as you will then do what needs to be done to achieve it. That may mean changing some things about the business, but the vision should remain.

When I started, I wish I had known more about management. I mostly started with visionary leadership, but was not very focused on operational management. It’s just now that I’m learning about management and how to make sure results and targets are met. I am very grateful nonetheless for the support from my family and the opportunities God has given me to shine my light and share my energy.
WHICH PROBLEM DOES YOUR STARTUP LOOK TO ADDRESS AND WHY?

Initially, the problem we were looking to solve was the issue of high rates of kidnapping and human trafficking in South Africa. But we soon came to realise that this solution can be used to decrease gender-based violence. That is now the problem we are trying to solve. I got the idea for Guardian Gabriel when studying at the University of Cape Town. At the time, there were a lot of cases of students being kidnapped and mugged in the campus. I got scared and thought of ways in which I could keep myself safe. I didn’t find ways that were efficient enough and that was when I decided to create such a solution myself.

WHEN DID YOU REALISE THAT YOU ARE INDEED ONTO SOMETHING BIG?

I think that point came when I was in Johannesburg applying for a startup programme, which only selects 14 out of thousands of applications. That was when I realised that I’m solving a very serious problem. After that, I started receiving a lot of encouraging messages. In 2019, there was an outburst of protests because women were angry with the amount of gender-based violence in the country. That reaffirmed me that I’m working on something important.

I would say my three biggest successes so far have been being accepted to the Red Bull Amaphiko (now called Further) Programme for Startups; receiving grant funding from the Technology Innovation Agency in 2018; and getting a chance to participate in the BOOST UP Bootcamp and Slush in 2019. Participating in the Bootcamp and

Guardian Gabriel is a personal safety company whose primary product offering is a standalone panic button that allows users to send their location to family and friends without requiring connectivity to a cell phone. Guardian Gabriel aims to alleviate the high rates of femicides in South Africa, where statistics on gender-based violence and missing children are alarming.
That was when I realised that I’m solving a very serious problem. After that, I started receiving a lot of encouraging messages.

Slush was a huge success to me and I connected with many people, especially the fellow startups from Southern Africa, with whom I’m in contact and who support me going forward.

HOW DID YOU BUILD YOUR TEAM, AND HOW HAS YOUR TEAM GROWN DURING YOUR STARTUP JOURNEY?

I left Cape Town at the end of 2019 and I’m currently in Johannesburg. The team is just me at this point, but I’m looking to grow the team this year. I’m specifically interested in including a software developer and a sales person in the team. At one point, I had three other team members. We were all students at the time. After two years, the team members’ values were not aligned with the project anymore. The lesson I have learnt is to build as much as possible on my own, and once I’ve found committed and skillful people, to onboard them as my team members.

WHAT KIND OF SUPPORT IS AVAILABLE FOR STARTUPS LIKE YOURS IN YOUR COUNTRY?

I have participated in three startup support programmes: French South African Tech Labs, Red Bull Amaphiko programme and the BOOST UP programme.

These opportunities didn’t come to me; I had to go and find them. I’m a person who likes to look for opportunities. However, I have lived in two places where startup support is widely available: Cape Town and Johannesburg. Looking at the country as a whole, that is not the case. I come from a small town and when I finished my studies, going back was not an option as there would be zero opportunities and support. So the differences in support available are very large within the country.

WHAT SKILLS HAVE YOU GAINED DURING TRAINING, MENTORING, AND OTHER SUPPORT ACTIVITIES ALONG YOUR JOURNEY?

The French South African Tech Labs assisted me especially with the business side and building the tech side of the product. The Red Bull Amaphiko programme helped me to become more of a holistic entrepreneur and to look more on the social impact aspects. During the BOOST UP programme, I learnt about how to grow the business and scale up. My biggest takeaway from BOOST UP and participating in the Slush startup conference was that I was even more encouraged to go out there and seek opportunities. Often, entrepreneurs have the attitude of “perhaps opportunity will come to me”. One has to step away from such a mindset. One needs to understand that, in order for things to happen, one needs to go out there and make them happen. Participating in these programmes has helped tremendously in the journey and have given me sufficient skills to get started and make progress.

WHAT FEEDBACK HAVE YOU HAD SO FAR FROM YOUR CLIENTS, END USERS, OR PARTNERS?

The feedback has been that the problem that I’m trying to solve is an important one and my solution is a much needed one. However, some people have commented that the execution is going to be quite difficult. Firstly, hardware is difficult to pursue in entrepreneurship. And secondly, to get the product in customers’ hands is a challenge.
That’s because those who need the solution the most are not necessarily able to afford it.

This year, I sort of started from scratch with the prototype. For the previous prototype, I received feedback that the device is too big. I didn’t have much say in the look and feel with the previous one, so I’m now doing my own design which will give me control on how it should look like.

**WHAT CHALLENGES HAVE YOU HAD IN BRINGING YOUR PRODUCT TO MARKET?**

At this point, I’m very much focused on building the prototype, so I’m still at a very early stage. One of the challenges is that in South Africa, the gender-based violence is higher in the population with no or little income. For them to afford the solution and to serve those who need it the most, one needs to think of a creative business model. The biggest challenge, however, is the lack of funding.

**WHAT DO YOU BELIEVE IS THE BEST PLATFORM TO NETWORK IN YOUR LOCAL STARTUP ECOSYSTEM?**

Networking is really not my favourite thing to do. I find it intimidating. For me, the best way of networking has been in different startup competitions. It never gets easier, but you become stronger.

**WHAT ARE THE FUTURE PLANS FOR YOUR STARTUP?**

My medium-term goal is to see the completion of my own hardware device. The timeline was to have it finished by June 2020, but now with the COVID-19 pandemic, there might be disturbances. From there, the plans include numerous testings for the device and securing specific clients.

**IF YOU ARE LOOKING FOR AN INVESTMENT OR HAVE SECURED SOME, WHO IS/ARE YOUR IDEAL INVESTOR(S)?**

I’m looking at securing investment, but for me at this point, it has been difficult because most investors would like to see your traction, and that includes how many users you have. So, I will first need to try to get a certain number of users before securing an investment. For me, an ideal investor would be an investor with an impact focus.

**WHAT CAN YOU PASS ON TO ENTREPRENEURS AND FOUNDERS LIKE YOURSELF WHO NEED SUPPORT?**

I would say that if you believe in something, believe it all the way. That’s my daily mantra. Before I started, I wish I would have known how long things will take. It will take twice as long as you think it will, so be persistent.

To be a female-led business funded by a VC firm, you need to be a needle in a haystack.
IOT Radar builds Internet of Things (IoT) cloud platforms for the African market. Their product, AMI Radar, specialises in friendly, reliable technology for utilities management. It provides a platform for water, electricity, and gas meters connected to the cloud. IOT Radar addresses unreliable and inefficient water, electricity, and gas data in the market. Their cloud-based platform uses the utility data to provide consumption history, recovery reports, alerts, notifications, dashboarding, and billing services. Their advanced analysis and forecasting tools help utility and property managers to manage and recover costs. This puts utility and property managers in control of their assets and keeps businesses and buildings profitable. IOT Radar currently does commercial work for four of the biggest property managers in Namibia and have more than 600 devices online.

WHICH PROBLEM DOES YOUR STARTUP LOOK TO ADDRESS AND WHY?

A shortage of efficient, simple, quick IoT utility data in Africa. IoT deployment is picking up, but there are very few African software solutions to make sense of the data in a simple and user-friendly way. The first IoT focus area that we built out was in the utilities space. The platform currently offers utility data from various different sources in one place for easy management and monitoring for property and utility managers.

"The platform currently offers utility data from various different sources in one place for easy management and monitoring for property and utility managers."
WHEN DID YOU REALISE THAT YOU WERE INDEED ONTO SOMETHING BIG?

We built the first version of our product for a property development in Namibia that was in desperate need of an automated utility data collation and billing solution. They had the hardware, but no software solution. We delivered and implemented the solution and started to engage with the property manager on the pros and cons. We started realising how much admin and work hours they were saving through the solution and realised it could be rolled out wider and with more features. We started with a focus on utilities as it is such a massive priority for property managers, but it is deemed to be too complex. We bring simplicity to this area for them.

HOW DID YOU BUILD YOUR TEAM, AND HOW HAS YOUR TEAM GROWN DURING YOUR STARTUP JOURNEY?

We have a very small team at this stage, but it was put together by getting people involved who are specialists in their areas. Alex started the business and covers many fronts, but specialises in IoT deployment and integration; Barry looks after programming and development; and I look after client onboarding and business development.

WHAT KIND OF SUPPORT IS AVAILABLE IN YOUR COUNTRY FOR STARTUPS LIKE YOURS?

There isn’t much governmental support available in Namibia. There is, however, support via private and non-governmental institutions if you can find the right fit for your focus area and stage of business. And then there are some state-owned enterprises that deliver very good value in certain segments, like the NCRST. Generally, you need to push your business yourself and do whatever you can to make it work with the resources at your disposal.

WHAT SKILLS DID YOU GAIN DURING TRAINING, MENTORING, AND OTHER SUPPORT ACTIVITIES ALONG YOUR JOURNEY?

Understanding better the minds of investors and what they are looking out for, distribution strategies for Africa, and growing your brand.

WHAT FEEDBACK HAVE YOU RECEIVED SO FAR FROM YOUR CLIENTS AND END USERS OR PARTNERS?

We continuously receive valuable feedback about what works well and what could be expanded. Our client base has also evolved. It used to be property managers only, whereas now it is utility managers as well, with evolving needs and requirements. We still try to focus on the core offering and what sets us apart from our competitors.

WHAT CHALLENGES HAVE YOU FACED IN BRINGING YOUR PRODUCT TO MARKET?

There have been many challenges along the journey. The most important challenge that we had to deal with has probably been to stick to our development and sales priorities while growing the business and managing the existing business. What is even more challenging is doing this while we have to look after our primary source of revenue, which is another business, while we get this business properly off the ground. Time, focus, and discipline is key.

WHAT DO YOU BELIEVE IS THE BEST PLATFORM TO NETWORK IN YOUR LOCAL STARTUP ECOSYSTEM?

There are plenty of opportunities to network, be it on social media or at interesting corporate and entrepreneurial events. The key is to make time for the events while maintaining focus on your business and choosing the right events that may have the most impact on you and your brand.

"Generally, you need to push your business yourself and do whatever you can to make it work with the resources at your disposal."
What are your plans for your startup?

We have plenty of plans, which is good as they say you can go through tough times but be careful not to run out of plans. We have been fortunate to establish ourselves as a solid competitor with all the big property managers in Namibia. Our next focus is on customers outside of Namibia and also a white labelled option for utility managers inside and outside of Namibia. We have made some strides in this regard and look to up our game further this year.

If you are looking for investments or have secured some, who is/was your ideal investor(s)?

We were fortunate to attend Slush in Helsinki and pitched at a side event for African innovators. We managed to gather interest from a possible investor who operates in the software space for commercial properties in Europe and the US. This is probably the right type of fit for us as well as investors who have networks or experience in building B2B software solutions in our focus environment.

What can you pass on to entrepreneurs and founders like yourself who need support?

The support may not be easily accessible or available, but it is there. You just need to keep digging and follow your interests and connections to get to the right avenues. It’s tough to make time for this, but if you find the right connections and network, it is absolutely worthwhile. We are also not entirely where we need to be in this regard, but we’re getting closer.

“[Our next focus is on customers outside of Namibia and also a white labelled option for utility managers inside and outside of Namibia.”]
JointPesa is a digital bank for savings groups in Africa. Their solution empowers smallholder farmers by providing a digital platform, the JointPesa App, which will serve as their saving and lending platform on a group basis and act as an intermediary platform for group members to access other financial services such as microinsurance. JointPesa’s business model is a B2B2C model; with the JointPesa service acting as an intermediary platform that connects end users with other service providers. They have built a strong customer relationship base, with a network of over 1,000 smallholder farmers.

**WHICH PROBLEM DOES YOUR STARTUP LOOK TO ADDRESS AND WHY?**

We are addressing the problems of cash-based savings and the lack of financial services access for people in the informal sector. Keeping cash at home is not safe, but many people face challenges in accessing traditional bank services. Financial inclusion has a large positive impact on people’s lives, including increased financial literacy and security.

Access to financial services is key in enhancing African farmers’ ability to overcome productivity gaps and increase food security and income, but currently, 90% of Tanzanian smallholder farmers are unbanked. With the JointPesa mobile wallet, smallholder farmers can save via their savings groups and use their savings to access other financial services such as insurance and pension funds. They can also set farming input purchasing goals, do group cash collections, make group-based bulk payments to suppliers, make premium payments for microinsurance products, and put the cash saved by their groups in safe custody.

I became interested in finding a scalable solution to financial inclusion after volunteering in an NGO that coordinates group-based savings. I worked there for six months and got an understanding of the group-based savings concept.

**WHEN DID YOU REALISE THAT YOU ARE INDEED ONTO SOMETHING BIG?**

Our biggest success includes a partnership with the World Food Programme to conduct a pilot to 15 smallholder farmers groups in Morogoro Tanzania, where...
JointPesa is used as a tool to access credit scores and microinsurance. In this partnership, WFP has funded us with a $15,000 seed fund for the pilot. The output of the pilot phase with WFP is improved financial literacy and access to financial services for small farmers. Another success was being selected to the BOOST UP startup support programme, which brought us international exposure.

We are currently in the process of regulatory compliance and getting advice from the Central Bank on how to comply with regulations. We started the process in December 2019 and submitted the application in January 2020. This is a major milestone for us.

HOW DID YOU BUILD YOUR TEAM, AND HOW HAS YOUR TEAM GROWN DURING YOUR STARTUP JOURNEY?

We are two co-founders working on the business, myself and a friend from university. Along the journey, we have been working with multiple people. Of these people, we have built a strong in-house technical team to help with building the product. In the third quarter of this year (2020), we plan to grow the team with operational staff experienced in financial services who have a good understanding of the informal sector. We will also look into engaging a data scientist. In the future, we will look into building an internal tech team who would oversee the technical processes, but currently the challenge is that having a tech team is expensive. We had three different teams along the way, and have learnt some important lessons. My advice would be to start with a small team: if you know how to do it, start doing. Having a big team in the beginning can be stressful and it is better to understand the scope of your business first and only then grow your team.

WHAT KIND OF SUPPORT IS AVAILABLE FOR STARTUPS LIKE YOURS IN YOUR COUNTRY?

In Tanzania, we have many innovation hubs. The number of hubs and the support has been growing in the last five years. Most incubation and other support programmes are quite product-focused, and talk little about the operational and business side.

We found participating in the BOOST UP very valuable because it focused on the business and operational side, while most other support has focused more on the product. I learnt the correct language to use when talking about the business and how to talk about it; I learnt to pitch. I also learnt about validation and now we know better what to do and have a road map for the business.

WHAT FEEDBACK HAVE YOU HAD SO FAR FROM YOUR CLIENTS, END USERS, OR PARTNERS?

From potential partners, we got feedback about our readiness – before they could partner with us, we should complete the formal compliance. This was one of the reasons driving us to prioritise compliance. Our end users and potential end users have reported important feedback, such as a lack of internet connectivity. This has led us to seek new types of partnerships to solve the issue, such as telecom companies for discounted mobile data.

Our next focus is on customers outside of Namibia and also a white labelled option for utility managers inside and outside of Namibia.
WHAT CHALLENGES HAVE YOU HAD IN BRINGING YOUR PRODUCT TO MARKET?

Our major challenge has been compliance, which is an expensive process. When looking for funding, it is easier to find funding for technical development rather than compliance. We don’t have many local investors with interest in investing in startups in Tanzania, so access to funding is a challenge in general.

WHAT DO YOU BELIEVE IS THE BEST PLATFORM TO NETWORK IN YOUR LOCAL STARTUP ECOSYSTEM?

For us, events have been the best platform. Through participating in events organised by innovation hubs, we have also heard about the support programmes such as BOOST UP. My advice for startups starting their journey would be to be around other startups, participate in events, and network. That way, you can hear about different opportunities and get information. Whatever you are going through, someone else has already been through. Mingle and talk about your challenges with other startups, and you will find support.

WHAT ARE THE FUTURE PLANS FOR YOUR STARTUP?

We plan to expand in Tanzania and to other countries in Africa, starting from Rwanda, Zambia, and Malawi.

If you are looking for an investment or have secured some, who is/are your ideal investor(s)?

We are looking for investors, ideally someone with an impact focus on women and youth, as these are our potential target beneficiaries.

WHAT CAN YOU PASS ON TO ENTREPRENEURS AND FOUNDERS LIKE YOURSELF WHO NEED SUPPORT?

I would advise that while the product is very important and the core of the business, it’s also important to look at the business and operational side from the very beginning. Think about the business as a whole. Network as much as possible and remember that networking is not only about pitching. It’s also about listening and learning from others. Listening will help you find the right partners.

It’s also important to look at the business and operational side from the very beginning.
Mavis Nduchwa

Kalahari Honey works to solve the problem of human–wildlife conflict by using beehives as living fences to keep elephants away from farms. These living fences prevent damage by elephants, which means that farmers no longer have to shoot any that come near their farms. Kalahari Honey trains and supplies farmers with beehives, and then buy back the honey from them. This business creates employment and income for farmers, contributes to better yields for farmers as crops are not destroyed by elephants, and contributes to gender equality and women’s empowerment. Kalahari Honey processes, packages, and sells the resulting desert raw honey and mead (honey wine). They currently have a network of more than 250 female farmers.

WEBSITE

kalaharihoney.com

WHICH PROBLEM DOES YOUR STARTUP LOOK TO ADDRESS AND WHY?

We address a number of problems including human–wildlife conflict, gender inequality, and food insecurity. Botswana has the largest population of elephants in the world, and 80% of Botswana’s population depends on agriculture for their livelihood. Farmers often face problems of elephants destroying their crops, which has led both to elephants being shot by farmers and destroyed crops.

We solve this by using beehives as living fences to keep elephants safely away from farms. We also work to empower women by training and increasing their opportunities for income generation, which has led to decreased gender-based violence in the rural communities. In addition to the business side, we also contribute to the sustainability of rural communities by organising rural development trainings. I grew up in a rural area, where the biggest challenge was food insecurity. People didn’t have...
jobs and they were dependent on agriculture, but the land did not produce much because of elephants destroying crops. This led to human–wildlife conflict, and there was not enough information available on how to keep elephants off the farms or what crops to grow for better food security.

WHEN DID YOU REALISE THAT YOU ARE INDEED ONTO SOMETHING BIG?

We measure success in several ways, but for us, societal impact is the most important factor in success. For instance, one of our key performance indicators is reducing gender-based violence by empowering women with training and earning opportunities. An important success for us has been that farmers are now contacting us and asking us to set up beehives on their farms. When we started, we had to try to convince farmers to use our solution, but now the word has spread amongst farmers. They have seen our solution works and are more open-minded to try it. We have also been mapping the routes of elephants and saw that they are starting to take new routes. Our other successes include the growth in sales, and in fact we have been facing challenges in meeting the demand due to its growth. We have also been able to partner with the Botswana Ministry for Agriculture, which is an important step for us.

HOW DID YOU BUILD YOUR TEAM, AND HOW HAS YOUR TEAM GROWN DURING YOUR STARTUP JOURNEY?

A team is the most important part of your startup, so I have made sure to select people who share the same passion. In the leadership team, we are currently five persons, including an expert in accounting, logistics, marketing, and IT as well as myself as the engine behind the startup and vision. I have myself scoured the persons from my networks as I wanted to ensure that I have a team with a passion for conservation. When Kalahari Honey was just an idea, I pitched to my team members and they agreed to join. Luckily, I am a person who believes in networks, so the first thing when looking for the team members was to look through my networks. The rest of our team is based in Botswana, but the IT expert is in Nigeria. I had known him for some time as we participated in a hackathon together. I knew how he is able to work and solve problems under pressure. What I have understood during the journey is that you build your team, and the team will help you to build the startup. Investing time in scouting the team is very important, as well as ensuring they understand the vision.

In the future, we would like to grow our team by asking the African Union to arrange a volunteer specialist to join our team for a certain time. Our needs for growing the team relate to expanding to the US, and conducting more research on bees and plants in order to have a bigger impact in food security. We are currently in dialogue with a university to discuss research collaboration.

WHAT TYPE OF ENVIRONMENT IS YOUR STARTUP OPERATING IN?

Botswana’s business environment is relatively good. We are fortunate not to suffer from corruption and have good governance, but we need to intensify startup support to provide the right environment for startups. I think it would be important to improve 1) access to information and connectivity; 2) the incubation, acceleration, and mentorship opportunities; and 3) access to finance. People always assume that money is the biggest challenge, but if you don’t have the right incubation, acceleration, or mentorship support, you will not see your first anniversary as an entrepreneur. Startup support services should also be more segmented, so the support could be more differentiated for those who are in the incubation and acceleration stages. I believe we should invest heavily in encouraging our young people to grow in tech and to become entrepreneurs. For this, we need more role models as encouraging examples.
WHAT KIND OF SUPPORT IS AVAILABLE FOR STARTUPS LIKE YOURS IN YOUR COUNTRY?

In addition to the BOOST UP programme, I had a chance to participate in a number of other startup programmes, such as the Land Accelerator in Kenya, which accelerates the startups that are into land reservation and is organised by the World Resource Institute. They select seven teams from around Africa for one week’s acceleration in Kenya. I have also participated in the Tony Elumelu Foundation’s entrepreneurship programme. This was in the early phase of my entrepreneurship journey and an eye opener for me as I learnt the basic skills in business management.

WHAT FEEDBACK HAVE YOU HAD SO FAR FROM YOUR CLIENTS, END USERS, OR PARTNERS?

At the moment we have difficulties with meeting the demand for the honey and honey wine, which means people love it. Feedback from the farmers has been great. In the beginning, we had to convince them about our solution, but now farmers are coming to us asking to implement our solution on their farms.

WHAT ARE THE FUTURE PLANS FOR YOUR STARTUP?

In the future, we plan to focus more on rural community trainings in Botswana, but we are also looking into scaling to the neighbouring countries Zimbabwe, Zambia, and Namibia. We also plan to grow the exports. We currently export our products to three countries, but are looking into scaling to the Middle East and Europe.

WHAT CHALLENGES HAVE YOU HAD IN BRINGING YOUR PRODUCT TO MARKET?

When we started working with the communities, we were naive and thought that people will love our solution right away. But if people don’t understand it and the benefits it offers them, it is not going to work. People are generally afraid of bees. We had to organise a lot of engaging dialogues and pre-training with the communities to explain how the solution works and what are the advantages to them. At the moment, our biggest challenge is developing the distribution network, and we are currently looking for partners for this.

WHAT DO YOU BELIEVE IS THE BEST PLATFORM TO NETWORK IN YOUR LOCAL STARTUP ECOSYSTEM?

I wish there was one big networking platform linking Botswana and the continent. Networking is a very important part of being a startup founder. You will need people to help you grow, and as potential customers.

WHAT SKILLS HAVE YOU GAINED DURING TRAINING, MENTORING, AND OTHER SUPPORT ACTIVITIES ALONG YOUR JOURNEY?

BOOST UP is a much-needed boost for Southern African startups. It is a robust training and, most importantly, it doesn’t only offer theoretical training, but you get a chance to get exposed internationally, make useful contacts, and visit different startup ecosystem actors. During my startup journey, I have developed a lot as a person. When I first started, I thought I would be working more with bees and elephants. Instead, I have learnt to lead teams, to work better with communities, and to pitch. As an introvert, this has not always been easy, but the entrepreneurship journey has made me very confident. That is important, because if you are not confident, no one else will believe in your idea.

WHAT CAN YOU PASS ON TO ENTREPRENEURS AND FOUNDERS LIKE YOURSELF WHO NEED SUPPORT?

The most important thing is to identify your problem properly. Also, invest in tech if you can, and partner with tech companies as it will make your life easier.

WHAT FEEDBACK HAVE YOU HAD SO FAR FROM YOUR CLIENTS, END USERS, OR PARTNERS?

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IF YOU ARE LOOKING FOR AN INVESTMENT OR HAVE SECURED SOME, WHO IS/ARE YOUR IDEAL INVESTOR(S)?

We are ready to scale up and are looking for an investment. When we started, we got a grant of USD 5,000 to kick start our activities. Now we are looking for investment to train more farmers and develop the distribution. In addition, we have the community development side, for which we are looking for grants from different foundations.
MOHIRI

 WHICH PROBLEM DOES YOUR STARTUP LOOK TO ADDRESS AND WHY?

We are contributing to solving the problem of high unemployment. In Botswana, the official unemployment rate is 18%, but in reality, the estimate is closer to 40%. Many unemployed people are doing entrepreneurial activities which is why they are not counted in the official figure, but it’s not like they have chosen the entrepreneurial journey. They just do it as part-time work while looking for a job. There are two main problems: the lack of jobs to meet the demand for employment and the difficulty for people to find existing job opportunities. Our mission is to create a service that makes it easy to find job opportunities by increasing their visibility. Companies often publish the job opportunities in newspapers. There are about seven main newspapers in Botswana, and each costs about a dollar. You don’t know which one is going to have an interesting job opportunity, so you will spend a lot of money buying different newspapers. After doing that for a few weeks, it becomes obvious that it’s a costly and inefficient way to keep up with job opportunities.

We wanted to improve this by creating a service collecting all the jobs published in the country in one online platform. So, if you are looking for a job in a specific field, you know that if there is a job, you can find it in the platform. The question was, how to do this. The obvious answer could have been to create a website or an app, but in Botswana, data is fairly expensive. If people cannot afford to buy newspapers, then spending a lot of money on data to access the platform would not solve the initial problem. Therefore, we wanted to take a different approach at least for the beginning. In Botswana, Facebook is the most popular part of the internet, and since many telecom companies subsidise using Facebook, it is the most

Mohiri is a personalised job assistant that sends users real-time job alerts whenever there is a vacancy that matches their profile. Registrations are handled by an automated AI assistant which runs the alerts service and user registration function. By sending out free job alerts to their users’ phones, Mohiri eliminates the cost of missed opportunities and maximises their users’ ability to respond to vacancy opportunities. They offer a free job alerts service to users and businesses gain a platform to advertise vacancies as well as access to high-quality candidates.

SDG

COUNTRY

Botswana

Thato Kasongo

MOHIRI

mohiri is a personalised job assistant that sends users real-time job alerts whenever there is a vacancy that matches their profile. Registrations are handled by an automated AI assistant which runs the alerts service and user registration function. By sending out free job alerts to their users’ phones, Mohiri eliminates the cost of missed opportunities and maximises their users’ ability to respond to vacancy opportunities. They offer a free job alerts service to users and businesses gain a platform to advertise vacancies as well as access to high-quality candidates.
affordable way of using the internet. We investigated and determined that about 75% of our target customer segment uses Facebook, so it became clear that this is the accessible channel we should use. We then created a chatbot, which is a computer programme that can hold conversations via text. We created a website but also made the service available to access via Facebook. People can register through Facebook and when there is a job in their industry, they receive a Facebook message about it. The chatbot enables us to reach a lot of people on scale. The service quickly became popular and in the first year, almost 45,000 job seekers signed up via Facebook – with zero pula spent on marketing. Currently, we have 300,000 weekly users.

Our biggest achievement has been that we have helped so many people find jobs. It’s difficult to track the numbers though, because in most cases, we don’t manage the recruitment process. We have also won many competitions. We were able to participate in the BOOST UP programme, and won the Seedstars pitching competition. These have brought us an opportunity to travel, get training, and enjoy some international exposure.

HOW DID YOU BUILD YOUR TEAM, AND HOW HAS YOUR TEAM GROWN DURING YOUR STARTUP JOURNEY?

In the past year, our team has grown from three to nine people. We have a team of technical people (developers that manage and develop the website), social media people, a graphics team, and a business development team. In the beginning, the team members were acquaintances; some I schooled with, and others were from my networks. One of the biggest challenges when building the team has been to find technical talent: developers and programmers. It was in fact so difficult that I even thought about finding a co-founder abroad or moving my startup to another country. Eventually, we found the talent, but as a growing startup we are constantly looking to expand.

I have learnt that the most important thing is to find people with the same passion and vision. You need people who are passionate, talented, focused, and disciplined. We have made some mistakes – some people joined, but when things got hard, they left quickly. You also need to look at personalities, whether they fit the team and the culture you want to have. For me, those are the priorities, way more important than a degree. I have also learnt that it’s good to have diversity in the team. When we started, we were three males in the team, but now we have a balance of 5 males and 4 females. This is important because diversity brings different thoughts and opinions, otherwise the thinking becomes a bit same sided.

WHAT TYPE OF ENVIRONMENT IS YOUR STARTUP OPERATING IN?

The entrepreneur scene in Botswana is growing. Our government is trying to diversify the economy and is making a lot of investments into fostering innovation and entrepreneurship.
I think startups in Botswana, especially the tech startups, have an advantage in the Southern African region. Our government is doing a lot to get entrepreneurs to start and grow. For example, certain government jobs are reserved for 100% youth-owned small businesses. That’s a significant step. So, while I don’t think the support is sufficient, I think we are headed in the right direction.

Obviously, there are difficulties as well. Our private sector is not used to partnering and trading with startups, so unless you are building a consumer business that doesn’t require interaction with larger companies, it’s challenging to access the market. This is improving, and many big corporations are becoming more open to working with startups.

**WHAT KIND OF SUPPORT IS AVAILABLE FOR STARTUPS LIKE YOURS IN YOUR COUNTRY?**

We have been incubated by the Botswana Innovation Hub, which has been extremely helpful in our journey. They facilitated a lot of training programmes related to managing a startup, to grow our skills in business, developing products, and managing finances. They have also helped us to grow by for example offering a subsidised office space when we needed a bigger space for our team.

Even though there is a lot of emphasis from the government, I don’t think the support is sufficient yet. One of the challenges is the lack of funding as we don’t have an active venture capital ecosystem.

**WHAT SKILLS HAVE YOU GAINED DURING TRAINING, MENTORING, AND OTHER SUPPORT ACTIVITIES ALONG YOUR JOURNEY?**

The support programmes I have participated in have been very educational. I learnt a lot, especially on how to structure your startup, doing research to create solutions that fit the market, building networks, and understanding the financial side. Not a lot of people in my country have gone through such programmes.

Some of my main learnings are around product development. I found a workshop with Sili Solutions during the BOOST UP Bootcamp in Finland very inspirational. They talked about the importance of research. I learned that the worst thing one can do is to spend a lot of time and money on building something people don’t want – and then having to redesign the whole system. That was very valuable for me and I have introduced it to my business.

During the Bootcamp, I also learnt a lot about access to venture capital finance. We are not at the stage of seeking venture capital, but when we get there, I feel very well equipped to talk to an investor and present the things they want to see when investing in a business.

**WHAT FEEDBACK HAVE YOU HAD SO FAR FROM YOUR CLIENTS, END USERS, OR PARTNERS?**

We just launched the first version of our website. One of the things we are learning is that we want to build a lot more features into it. We are realising there is an opportunity in the education space. Some unemployed people are also looking for opportunities for self or professional development. It’s an opportunity for us to partner with training institutions who could offer their services through Mohiri. We are currently researching the market interest.

**WHAT CHALLENGES HAVE YOU HAD IN BRINGING YOUR PRODUCT TO MARKET?**

The biggest challenge has been to find the technical expertise. This created some delays in accessing the market. Connectivity issues pose another challenge as data costs in Botswana are fairly high. This is also a challenge for some of our target customers, so we are trying to partner with telecom companies to create data bundles to make it cheaper for people to access our site.

**WHAT DO YOU BELIEVE IS THE BEST PLATFORM TO NETWORK IN YOUR LOCAL STARTUP ECOSYSTEM?**

Networking is important – both attending networking events and networking online, for example in LinkedIn. It’s also useful to join innovation hubs and startup communities. If you are looking for something specific, such as funding, do research online and find the VC firms investing in your industry and
region. Try to engage with people working there, for example by sending LinkedIn messages.

While networking is valuable, it takes a lot of time from working for your startup, so it shouldn’t be a full-time job. Networking has also become a bit of a buzzword. The way I approach networking is that I’m always trying to make friends and establish a mutual interest. Treat networking less as a sales exercise but rather just an opportunity to meet new people. That way, it becomes easier for you to have conversations. That being said, it’s also important to be prepared, so know your 10-second elevator pitch like the back of your hand. Sometimes you’ll meet people who want to hear you out but don’t have the time, so you have to make them excited within the few seconds in order to get to the next stage.

WHAT ARE THE FUTURE PLANS FOR YOUR STARTUP?

We are planning a lot of very exciting stuff! People will gradually see what we have been up to. One of the things we are creating is a recruitment tool, so that we don’t only market the jobs through our platform but one can also use the platform for hiring.

IF YOU ARE LOOKING FOR AN INVESTMENT OR HAVE SECURED SOME, WHO IS/ARE YOUR IDEAL INVESTOR(S)?

We are not currently at the stage of looking for VC finance because we want to first see if we can finance our business through the revenue we create. However, we want to grow, so when looking for an investor, we will try to have a partner that has a continental footprint. We would appreciate someone who can offer hands-on mentoring and advice, and it would be even better if they are experienced in the industry.

WHAT CAN YOU PASS ON TO ENTREPRENEURS AND FOUNDERS LIKE YOURSELF WHO NEED SUPPORT?

It’s important to do research before starting. Honestly, I didn’t do very structured research or validation, although I had observed the problem and gathered views from peers. We were lucky because we found out we were doing what the market wanted, but many times, this is not the case. If you don’t do a lot of research, you tend to solve the problem in a wrong way.

I think one of the most important things is also to build the right processes. For example, the team needs to know what the different steps are in a sales process or when developing a new feature in the website. I feel like that will help to cross the border from being a startup to being a business. That’s also important so that the startup can outgrow the founder as other people can come and take responsibility.
Jacqueline Rogers

The My Pregnancy Journey business concept is an educational pregnancy app and mobile solution for South African women and women from the rest of the African continent. The other available pregnancy apps are internationally-based apps focusing on first-world issues and not African or third-world issues. The My Pregnancy Journey app’s creators have identified a gap to supply valuable information that is focused on Africa and its unique challenges African women and girls face.

WHICH PROBLEM DOES YOUR STARTUP LOOK TO ADDRESS AND WHY?

We looked at all the pregnancy problems Africa faces and discovered that one out of four pregnant women in Africa has a fatal pregnancy outcome, and that Africa is one of the continents with issues such as adolescent pregnancies, HIV infections, and birth deaths. Many of these issues could be decreased with education and knowledge, as we found out from the World Health Organisation (WHO) and other sources. We then did further research on the existing platforms and found out there isn’t a proper pregnancy app in Africa. The only solutions were SMS or WhatsApp solutions that target only specific groups or countries. So we created an educational pregnancy app that African women can relate to, and that targets all those issues in an educational way through technology.

I’ve been an entrepreneur in the pregnancy industry in South Africa for the last 12 years. I started my entrepreneurial journey when I fell pregnant and saw another gap in the pregnancy market. I had my previous business for nine years and sold it about three years ago. Being active in the pregnancy industry, I was always looking out for other gaps in the market. That’s how I came across this massive need for educational pregnancy information.

WHEN DID YOU REALISE THAT YOU ARE INDEED ONTO SOMETHING BIG?

From the very beginning, I was very excited and had a gut feeling that we could be onto something
big. Before starting My Pregnancy Journey (MPJ), I did a year of research, and then it took two years to put the project together. It’s been long in the making, but now the app is live and we are getting traction, not just in South Africa but in other countries as well. With my first business, I learnt so much about being an entrepreneur. So now with my second business, it took me a lot less time to build this business. Even before we went live, I got picked by the WHO as one of Africa’s top 30 innovators. We also won the MTN App of the Year Award for the Women in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics category, and I was picked to participate in the BOOST UP programme.

**HOW DID YOU BUILD YOUR TEAM, AND HOW HAS YOUR TEAM GROWN DURING YOUR STARTUP JOURNEY?**

I have worked with a large number of people along the journey, but currently we are two shareholders in the business: myself and a medical doctor with pregnancy expertise. Outside of MPJ, I actually work for her – I run her practice as a part-time job because MPJ is not making a profit yet. When I started MPJ, she bought into the business and became a shareholder. All the content in the app is written by pregnancy specialists and everything is proofread by Dr M. A. R. Inacio, the other shareholder. We outsource the software development because it’s a safer option at the moment. It has worked well, but once we start to make profit, we want to have our own technical and design team. In the future, we also plan to enable the listing of service providers in other countries in addition to South Africa, for which we will need team members on the ground who could provide us with this information.

I haven’t faced many challenges related to the team, but many businesses fail because they don’t have the right team members. I would advise any entrepreneur to do their homework about the people they are planning to involve in their business, and make sure you have solid agreements in place to be clear on everyone’s responsibilities.

**WHAT TYPE OF ENVIRONMENT IS YOUR STARTUP OPERATING IN?**

Entrepreneurship is generally seen as a positive thing in South Africa, but a lot of entrepreneurs fail. It’s hard. I think the main challenges are the lack of support such as training and one-on-one mentoring as well as access to finance. I apply for all the opportunities I see and have been lucky to receive support, but we struggle to fund ourselves.

**WHAT KIND OF SUPPORT IS AVAILABLE FOR STARTUPS LIKE YOURS IN YOUR COUNTRY?**

MPJ was incubated at the Innovation Hub and I received mentoring on business, tech, and finances. I also got the opportunity to participate in the BOOST UP programme. I have subscribed to different online platforms and, whenever I find something interesting online, I subscribe to their newsletters. That’s how I get to know about many other opportunities.

**WHAT SKILLS HAVE YOU GAINED DURING TRAINING, MENTORING, AND OTHER SUPPORT ACTIVITIES ALONG YOUR JOURNEY?**

During the BOOST UP Bootcamp, all the workshops were really good and informative. At the pitching training, we all improved a lot. We started not so good, and when we walked out there at the BOOST UP Final pitch competition, we were all pretty good.

During the incubation at the Innovation Hub, especially having financial mentoring was very helpful for making proper financial forecasts and business plans. Having the figures in place is important when looking for investment.

As an entrepreneur, one constantly needs to learn new skills. My first business was in pregnancy fashion. I never had any fashion experience, but I bought a 200-rand sewing machine and started sewing lessons when my daughter was three months old. Then I found a clothing manufacturer and started my own maternity brand. I grew the brand and had it for nine years. A few years ago, I decided to start MPJ, but as I had no tech skills, I
I had to start from the bottom. In the end, you can do clothing or an app – it’s still about being an entrepreneur and there are the same business principles. So it gets better with experience.

**WHAT FEEDBACK HAVE YOU HAD SO FAR FROM YOUR CLIENTS, END USERS, OR PARTNERS?**

We have received mostly good feedback so far, but we will need more feedback to understand how to improve. I will create a Whatsapp group with some users to gather detailed insights on what they think about the app. We use Firebase to track downloads so we can see what pages have been used the most. There are also some things I know I want to improve, but we need finances for this. We have started running a social media campaign and I have noticed an increase in app downloads as a result.

**WHAT CHALLENGES HAVE YOU HAD IN BRINGING YOUR PRODUCT TO MARKET?**

I learnt a lot from my first business – especially not to give up. I think I’m a good project manager, so that part was really easy. The challenging parts are the financial constraints. Putting the project together was expensive and was self-funded by me and my shareholder. Online marketing is also expensive, so the main challenges relate to finances.

**WHAT DO YOU BELIEVE IS THE BEST PLATFORM TO NETWORK IN YOUR LOCAL STARTUP ECOSYSTEM?**

I have subscribed to all different types of online platforms to find different opportunities for startups. There are not many events in South Africa. As I’m an entrepreneur, I’m constantly working, so I tend to only attend events that seem very beneficial and relevant to me. I have found it useful to connect with other entrepreneurs through different programmes like BOOST UP, Innovation Hubs, and the WHO.

**WHAT ARE THE FUTURE PLANS FOR YOUR STARTUP?**

More extensive marketing is the next step for our business. The app is now live, so we need to let people know about it. I’m very passionate about the project and I have lots of ideas for the future. I want to translate the app to have it available in different languages in addition to English. I will start with French and Portuguese as those are widely spoken in Africa. There are also many features I would like to add, such as a community group and a chat group. I would also like to include more videos for the disabled users.

**IF YOU ARE LOOKING FOR AN INVESTMENT OR HAVE SECURED SOME, WHO IS/ARE YOUR IDEAL INVESTOR(S)?**

We are currently looking for an investment. My ideal investor would be able to offer mentoring and advice along with the investment, especially on how to market an app and to identify partnerships. I can learn and I have the capability of doing so, but I feel like at some point, we may need to partner with someone. An investor could ideally also help with identifying such a partner.

**WHAT CAN YOU PASS ON TO ENTREPRENEURS AND FOUNDERS LIKE YOURSELF WHO NEED SUPPORT?**

Every business has its ups and downs. I would advise entrepreneurs to do a lot of research. The opportunities are not going to come to you, but you need to find them. There will be many closed doors, but you just need to carry on and be resilient and find that one open door, where the right people see your vision and your passion, so just don’t give up. You also need to be organised, focused, and have a strong work ethic to succeed as an entrepreneur.

“I found a workshop with Sili Solutions during the BOOST UP Bootcamp in Finland very inspirational. They talked about the importance of research.”
SAKAB HOLDINGS

SDG

Botswana

Bernard Sebakile

Sakab Holdings is an electrical engineering company that specialises in solar solutions. They provide clean, reliable, and affordable electrical energy through off-grid power systems, including solar generators, solar mini plants, and other related electrical solutions. They build reliable solar power generation and storage systems specifically designed to work where there is no access to electrical power grids, which also function as power backup. These systems enable customers to generate, store, and manage their own 24-hour power supply, allowing them to become independent of unreliable power grids and carbon-emitting backup generators.

**WHICH PROBLEM DOES YOUR STARTUP LOOK TO ADDRESS AND WHY?**

We are a solar solutions company focusing on solar energy. I was born in a village without access to light and heating, and have seen how large an improvement it is to have access to electricity. For example, in the rainy season, it’s difficult to make fire, so having electricity has a huge impact on the people’s lives. A large portion of Botswana’s population have no access to electricity. The costs of electricity are very high, and there are a lot of power cuts. I decided to see this as an opportunity rather than a challenge. I started the business in 2017 when I was in college. I had also learnt a lot about the topic from my father, who is an electrical engineer.

“We have realised it’s important that the whole team has a common goal and hunger to succeed and learn.”
WHEN DID YOU REALISE THAT YOU ARE INDEED ONTO SOMETHING BIG?

We have seen how our products can improve the lives of people who previously didn’t have access to electricity. Most of our clients are farmers for whom we install solar generators that can be used, amongst others, as solar power backup and irrigation systems, so they have a big impact on people’s lives.

In 2018, Sakab Holdings was selected for Nu-Generation Africa Documentary, a TV programme about innovative African youth.

HOW DID YOU BUILD YOUR TEAM, AND HOW HAS YOUR TEAM GROWN DURING YOUR STARTUP JOURNEY?

Our team consists of me, my father as a senior engineer, and two young technicians as assistants. The main challenges we have encountered related to building the team have been the limited funds, as we are still in the beginning of our operations. We have solved this by having a mix of experienced staff (my father) and younger staff who are eager to learn while working. We have realised it’s important that the whole team has a common goal and hunger to succeed and learn. If we had more resources, we would offer more official training to our assistants. In the future, we plan to grow steadily.

WHAT TYPE OF ENVIRONMENT IS YOUR STARTUP OPERATING IN?

We operate in Botswana, which is not a complicated environment. The main challenges of the operating environment for us are finding finance to scale up, access to land to build a warehouse, and the slowness of collaboration with authorities. Having a warehouse would help in assembling the products. Currently, we buy the parts from China and assemble them ourselves.

My family has been very supportive throughout my entrepreneurship journey, but most of my peers think entrepreneurship is not for them, or not for Africans. I’m not sure what the reason is for this. Maybe it’s the culture or the way we have been raised. There is a need to educate the youth about entrepreneurship.

WHAT KIND OF SUPPORT IS AVAILABLE FOR STARTUPS LIKE YOURS IN YOUR COUNTRY?

We have participated in the BOOST UP programme and received support from the Botswana Innovation Hub. The training and different workshops have been very helpful and important for us. It should be freely available for everyone who wants to become an entrepreneur. Many young people are interested in entrepreneurship, but don’t know where to start. Practical training, mentorships, and funding would help young entrepreneurs to get started.

WHAT SKILLS HAVE YOU GAINED DURING TRAINING, MENTORING, AND OTHER SUPPORT ACTIVITIES ALONG YOUR JOURNEY?

I have learnt especially about entrepreneurship and business management, such as finance, cash flows, and budgeting. I started as a more technical person, so I have learnt about the business side along the way. My biggest learnings during the BOOST UP journey were pitching, networking, and how to look for an investment. Before BOOST UP, it was very hard for me to pitch, but I improved a lot.

WHAT FEEDBACK HAVE YOU HAD SO FAR FROM YOUR CLIENTS, END USERS, OR PARTNERS?

The feedback has really helped us improve the quality of our products. For example, we have had to change the brand of some parts to ensure customer satisfaction, such as batteries so they would last longer. We do site visits to our customers after one year from instalment, and we survey and interview our customers. Some contact us directly if they have feedback.
**What challenges have you had in bringing your product to market?**

When the product is new, one has to work hard to get traction. In the beginning, we made demonstration projects, for which we provided the labour for free. We found this to be a successful way of building trust.

**What do you believe is the best platform to network in your local startup ecosystem?**

We have done most networking in different events and conferences. They have been useful for meeting experts from different industries and making partnerships. Networking is sometimes tricky because we meet new people and don’t always know what their intentions are. When you meet people, don’t promise anything. Rather do due diligence and investigate their work ethics. Partnering with people is sometimes risky, but one doesn’t grow without taking a risk. I think that either I grow, or I learn from my mistakes.

**What are the future plans for your startup?**

We are gaining traction little by little and want to scale up. Once we are more financially stable, we plan to open a branch in Zimbabwe or Zambia. We also want to get into solar power plants and outdoor advertising screens to increase our market size.

**If you are looking for an investment or have secured some, who is/are your ideal investor(s)?**

We haven’t secured an investment yet. We made some promising contacts in Finland, but they didn’t lead to investment. We would use the investment for upscaling the business; we would start buying in bulk, start bigger production and distribution, and we would build a warehouse. Our ideal investor would be passionate about the energy sector so that we could have a common goal.

**What can you pass on to entrepreneurs and founders like yourself who need support?**

Work extra hard to achieve your goals. Be passionate about what you do and believe in yourself. Acquire the skills that are needed. When I started, I had the technical skills, but I wish I had had the business management skills from the beginning.

> Work extra hard to achieve your goals. Be passionate about what you do and believe in yourself.
Berhane Wheeler (who was interviewed for this publication), Helvi Itenge-Wheeler

An educational application, The Lab helps students understand what happens in different science experiments. The application enables students to perform school science experiments simulated on a mobile device. The Lab provides an alternate solution to expensive school laboratories and will be used in underprivileged schools that do not have lab facilities, first in Namibia and then elsewhere in Africa.

WHICH PROBLEM DOES YOUR STARTUP LOOK TO ADDRESS AND WHY?

In Namibia as the rest of Africa, the schools seldom have school labs, which negatively affects the understanding of science experiments. This makes it hard for students from underprivileged schools to gain higher education in science, or even excel in their dreams of becoming a scientist. In 2015, 86% of South African public schools did not have a school lab. There has not been a similar study for Namibia, but we can assume the numbers may be about the same or that even fewer Namibian schools have labs, considering that South Africa is more developed. Our solution is an application called The Lab. It is a cheaper and more efficient alternative to the expensive school labs, by helping to explain the science experiments which take place in the application.

I realised this problem exists when I was in grade 8. I noticed that some of the learners didn’t understand properly what happened in the physical science experiments, and since there is only one teacher and many learners, this inspired me to create an application that explains the experiment process. Also, I noticed that some of the physical experiments take too long to see the results during the class. When doing the experiment in the application, you can see the results faster and complete more experiments. From the school’s perspective, it’s cheaper to do the science experiments in an application compared to having an expensive school lab.
When did you realise that you are indeed onto something big?

At the end of 2018, I got an opportunity to pitch at the Tech Innovation Bazaar, and many of the judges gave me positive feedback. That’s when I felt that I could turn this into something big. Since then, I managed to win many pitch competitions, which is very encouraging. These include being selected as the Best Exhibitor at The Next Einstein Forum (Windhoek, Namibia, 2018); The Lab reaped the most awards in the Dragon’s Den that was organised as part of the Tech Innovation Bazaar (Windhoek, Namibia, 2019); won the top spot in the second EdTech Sprint Week (Windhoek, Namibia, 2019); and many more. Another important step for us was when we were selected to participate in BOOST UP Scale Up and Slush, and the positive feedback we received there. At the BOOST UP final pitch competition, the audience selected us as their favourite startup, and we won mentoring from the United Nations Technology Innovation Lab (UNTIL) in Finland. Also, the interest from Namibian schools has been encouraging. Currently, three schools in Namibia are ready to utilise The Lab.

What type of environment is your startup operating in?

In Windhoek, the operating environment is a bit challenging and slow. It’s quite difficult to be profitable in Namibia, because the population is a limitation. Especially for businesses that are not related to basic needs, it might take a while to grow. That is why we need to think outside the box about how to make our product available also outside of Namibia. When there are entrepreneurship events, there are lots of participants, so the interest is there.

What kind of support is available for startups like yours in your country?

There are many organisations which support startups in Namibia such as the National Commission on Research, Science, and Technology (NCRST); the Southern Africa Innovation Support Programme (SAIS); Dololo; the Tech Innovation Hub; and the Namibia Business Innovation Institute (NBII). They provide many free training courses such as pitching coaching and entrepreneurship events, and some give free office space.

We have participated in the BOOST UP startup support programme, during which we got training and mentoring from experts around the world. We learnt a lot about how to pitch and develop our business model. We have also won financial support, NAD 10,000, at the Tech Innovation Bazaar. The training we have received has been very helpful. It would be beneficial to also have hands-on advice on marketing and sales, such as how to use social media for marketing. It would also be beneficial to have a community to talk with other tech entrepreneurs.

In Namibia, many young people are graduating unemployed and with little skills to start a business. When finishing school, it would be good to already have a business mentality to not depend on employment. The government could play a bigger role, like in Botswana, where there are more support and startup grants available. Many young people have a great business idea, but don’t know how to get started. It would also be important to have better platforms for sharing information as people who are not well connected do not know about the support opportunities.

What skills have you gained during training, mentoring and other support activities along your journey?

During BOOST UP, I learnt a lot, for example how to further develop our business model, pitch our business, and the importance of the team. I learnt that it’s not about you or the product – it’s about the customer. The Bootcamp in Finland was a great opportunity also for networking and visibility. I had an opportunity to be interviewed by the BBC News Africa, and their tweet reached about 25,000 people.
WHAT FEEDBACK HAVE YOU HAD SO FAR FROM YOUR CLIENTS, END USERS, OR PARTNERS?

We have tested The Lab in two schools back in 2018. The learners felt it was fun and grasped the concept quickly. We also found out that students doing experiments in the app got better learning outcomes than those doing the physical experiments as they were giving more scientific answers. During the user testing, an important piece of feedback we received was that the application is not compatible with some phones. When I was testing the application myself, I always used my tablet, which has a much larger screen than the phones the testers were using. We then changed the vertical alignment to a horizontal alignment so that it’s easier for the users. We also simplified the experiment process so the user does not need to take as many steps as previously.

During the BOOST UP Bootcamp in Finland, we received feedback especially on our business model. That helped us to develop a new business model and pitch the solution better.

WHAT CHALLENGES HAVE YOU HAD IN BRINGING YOUR PRODUCT TO MARKET?

One of the challenges is that the application currently only works in Android devices, because one needs to have a Mac computer to develop apps that can be sold in the App store. We are trying to gather funding to purchase a Mac computer. Many private schools use Mac products, so the application not being in the App store hinders us partnering with them. When trying to partner with public schools, the main challenge is bureaucracy. It can take months to meet with government officials and longer for them to make a decision. Also, the public schools have very few resources, so partnering is difficult.

WHAT DO YOU BELIEVE IS THE BEST PLATFORM TO NETWORK IN YOUR LOCAL STARTUP ECOSYSTEM?

I think the best platform for networking are different entrepreneurial events where one can share ideas and refine our message to potential partners, clients, and investors. Also, social media networks like Facebook are useful channels for finding different opportunities and keeping up with recent topics in entrepreneurship. I would like to advise early-stage entrepreneurs to go to a lot of events and try to enter as many pitch competitions as possible. An important lesson I learnt at Slush is that it’s very important to plan in advance when participating in big events. Spend time getting to know who will be there and agree to meetings beforehand. Try to contact as many investors beforehand as possible. If the event has a networking platform, make your profile as attractive as possible. When you are there, you realise how useful all this is.

WHAT ARE THE FUTURE PLANS FOR YOUR STARTUP?

We plan to get The Lab used in many schools in Namibia and elsewhere in Africa. To achieve our goal, we seek to partner and collaborate with local and international organisations and to identify a partner for sales. We also aim to get funding, for example by entering various startup competitions. We also plan to continue innovating educational apps. Hopefully one day, we can participate in Slush again and share our success story!

IF YOU ARE LOOKING FOR AN INVESTMENT OR HAVE SECURED SOME, WHO IS/ARE YOUR IDEAL INVESTOR(S)?

Our ideal investor is someone who knows the education sector, is able to provide advice, and shares the same values. Someone who is committed to innovation and excellence, and motivated to develop emerging technologies to enhance reading and learning experience to afford equal learning opportunities for Namibian children and beyond.

WHAT CAN YOU PASS ON TO ENTREPRENEURS AND FOUNDERS LIKE YOURSELF WHO NEED SUPPORT?

I would advise them to do market research early on: know your customers and your target audience and what they want. It’s important to start with this, so you don’t create a product to target an audience that wants something different.

As long as you are passionate about your vision and have a hard-working mentality, anything is possible. Age or where you come from doesn’t matter. You will definitely have to work hard, though. Things don’t come easy. That’s why you should do something you are passionate about, so you don’t give up easily.
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