

Innovation is most significant when it provides effective solutions to the problems facing humanity. We talk to four social innovators who are working tirelessly to boost habitats, health and humanity



IMPACTFUL INNOVATIONS

TSHEPO MOLOI, FOUNDER & CEO: STOKFELLA

Visit: www.stokfella.com

Some R14 billion flows through stokvels annually and Moloi believes that his app-based company, StokFella, can transform these informal savings syndicates into a modernised fintech industry.

As a long-time member of stokvels and having done extensive research, Moloi found that the administration of managing their activities frustrated members and hindered their growth potential and value. So he launched StokFella in February 2016 to allow stokvel members to manage their savings via a smartphone.

“Our aim is to put the power of informed financial management and decision-making into the hands of all stokvels. By providing a tool to help people organise, manage, communicate, visualise and be more efficient in growing their wealth, we can truly start tackling the existing gap in equality,” he says.

The current iteration of StokFella gives users access to a directory of local stokvels and conditions of joining them.

The system allows users to track funds owed to them and submit a claim to withdraw funds from the group. New users have the option to start and manage their own stokvels.

Moloi says the response has been phenomenal. There are close to 400 groups on the platform and the user base is growing at a rapid rate. He is not deterred by the fact that some of his target market may not be tech-savvy.

“It’s a myth that stokvels are mostly for the older generation because studies show that the average age is 25-49. We aren’t ignorant when it comes to barriers such as technology, building trust or financial illiteracy, which is why we do demonstrations in communities to reach these individuals directly,” he says.

There’s a growing demand from stokvels in Limpopo and the North West, so Moloi plans to expand the team beyond Gauteng in the near future. StokFella is also in the process of introducing additional financial products.

“As an innovator it’s important to let your customers guide your growth. You have to listen carefully and be humble enough to be taught about your own product,” he says.



NIC KLOPPER, CEO: HEARSCREEN

Visit: www.hearxgroup.com

In 2015, more than one billion people suffered from hearing loss globally and in South Africa more than 3,2 million people are affected by hearing difficulties. hearScreen is an innovative start-up that aims to assist these people by providing smart solutions for healthy hearing.

In March 2016, the company launched hearZA, the world’s first clinically valid hearing screening solution on a smartphone.

The app is downloadable free of charge and requires a smartphone and earphones to complete a two-minute hearing test. Following this, you’re notified whether you need to consult an audiologist.

The hearZA app has been downloaded by more than 25 000 South Africans and used to test in excess of 50 000 people in more than 25 countries. The company is currently working with the World Health Organisation and the American aid agency USAid.

“I believe that we developed the right product at the right time,” says Klopper. “With the exponential growth in worldwide smartphone penetration we could leverage this for a cost-effective, clinically valid hearing screening solution. Our vision is to offer healthy hearing for everyone, everywhere and until that’s achieved, our goals haven’t been reached yet.”

The concept was born when Klopper served on the Department of Health committee, implementing a policy aimed at screening 3,5 million children for hearing loss. He was tasked to lead the commercialisation of hearScreen after it was developed by De Wet Swanepoel and Herman Myburgh at the University of Pretoria.

Klopper is currently working on several new projects under the hearXgroup brand. hearScope is a smartphone-based video-otoscope that uses machine learning and artificial intelligence to diagnose ear diseases from images taken of the eardrum.

“We are also focusing our attention on forming new partnerships with similar high-impact start-ups in the mHealth space. Digital health solutions can no longer afford to operate in silos and need to be long-term, investing the necessary resources into being more interoperable. hearScreen is gearing up to become the frontrunner in this space,” he says.

What advice does Klopper have for aspiring social innovators? “Being an entrepreneur is not a job – it’s a lifestyle. Keep chasing the vision, not the money. The money will end up following you.”



ASHLEY UYS, FOUNDER: OCULUSID

Visit: www.real-world.co.za

Uys is a scientist and entrepreneur at the helm of three companies that develop low-cost diagnostic test kits. Striving to help make medical testing affordable and accessible to people in low-income brackets, his first innovation was a self-testing kit that can diagnose and determine which strain of malaria test-takers have.

“Early detection of diseases is critical for effective treatment, which reduces mortality rates,” says Uys. “We aim to develop non-invasive and sensitive diagnostic products, which produce results within minutes at the point of care, anywhere.”

After completing a BSc Honours in biotechnology, Uys worked at the University of Cape Town’s Institute for Infectious Disease and Molecular Medicine as a researcher on HIV. He established his first company, Real World Diagnostics, at the age of 24. With no business experience, he struggled to secure funding and establish a name for himself within the sector. His distribution model reduced risk and generated revenue, which later allowed him to invest in a manufacturing facility.

He founded his second company, Medical Diagnostech, a manufacturer of medical diagnostic test kits for drug abuse, HIV, malaria, pregnancy, and ovulation, in 2010. In 2013 he established his third company, OculusID, which specialises in the development of biometric solutions with impairment and disease detection by analysing the pupil of the eye’s response to light.

“To be taken seriously in the science industry, you have to develop something innovative,” says Uys. “An entrepreneur’s character, however, is key to success. If you have a viable business idea, it’s crucial to do proper market research. It’s also important to be unique and make good ‘guesstimates’ to minimise risk and maximise reward.”

Armed with persistent determination and a curious mind, Uys is on a mission to spearhead more innovations. He’s currently working on developing diagnostic products for motor fuel contamination and tropical diseases.

“I’m a proud African and I believe we should build our continent by innovating ourselves. The more we export to First World countries, the better our economy will be. My short-term goal is to commercialise some of our first-to-world prototypes. In time, my goal is to expand by setting up operations abroad to increase our market reach,” he says.



TARIQ YUSUF: CO-FOUNDER: ePOWER HOLDINGS

Visit: www.epowerza.com

The founders of ePower Holdings are striving to give the 600 million Africans living without electricity access to TV, wifi and power. It was founded by Yusuf, Brent Peterson, Rudi van der Westhuizen and Tlhopie Motsepe in 2015. The company offers an off-grid renewable energy solution that’s manageable and self-sufficient in the form of 6-12m containers.

The containers use solar power to allow customers to do battery swaps. Each 12V battery comes with an LED light capable of lighting a small room and charging small appliances in each household. Each 12m container can provide 1 000 household battery swaps per day. These containers also provide communities with a 24-hour TV-viewing facility, an Internet café, and access to educational platforms.

The business partners have rolled out three ePower containers in Mooiplaas in Centurion, Soshanguve in the

north of Pretoria, and in Zambia. “This has had a huge impact on each of the communities because access to electricity has changed their day-to-day lives,” Yusuf says. “While there are a lot of solar products available, what’s important to us is creating something that has the potential to change the lives of those who are living off the grid.”

ePower Holdings is striving to take its solution across the continent and has entered into talks with key stakeholders in Namibia, Mozambique and Nigeria.

“We would like to roll out more ePower solar hubs in South Africa and Zambia and our long-term goals are to enter more African countries in the next few years. We’d also like to partner with like-minded investors in the energy sector to see how the ePower concept could be environmentally friendly and economically viable in different environments,” says Yusuf.

His advice for other social entrepreneurs is never to give up. “There are many needs in the world. Striving to address these problems will help push you to invent something unique.” **DM**

PHOTOGRAPHERS: LEAH HANMER & ANDILE MTHEMBU. MAKE-UP: ZENZI MASIKU