

Levelling the playing field

for local entrepreneurs

What does it take to become a successful entrepreneur in Africa? When it comes to innovation for development, success stems from empowering local communities, companies and organisations to work together on solutions. But it's a bumpy road for local entrepreneurs. It's often difficult to get the right permits in place, create good relationships with relevant stakeholders (especially government agencies) and to convince the local community of your new solution.

Even more so, getting funding to turn bright ideas into reality is far from easy, [especially when having to compete against larger – often non-local – organizations for funding support](#). The playing field is skewed towards these organizations that have lots of experience and specific proposal-writing departments to make their innovations stand out. They know that funds like to see things such as a theory of change or business model, that they like to know how a team is composed, and who will be in charge of operations on the ground.

The average proposal that VIA Water receives from local entrepreneurs in Africa does not have this polished look and feel. It might not tick all the boxes we have in mind.

But they do often contain great ideas.

If we are serious about local ownership, we need to make sure these great ideas actually stand a fighting chance against the larger organisations that have excellent written proposals.

At VIA Water, we try to cultivate the right conditions for local innovators in Africa to thrive. In other words, we aim



to level the playing field for local entrepreneurs to make a difference

Understanding the market

A local innovator not only understands the problem for which he or she is trying to find a solution. In many cases, they are also capable of placing the problem and possible solution in the correct context.

For instance: Nadine from the Hydroponics project in Rwanda works on vertical farming solutions for small urban spaces. To best integrate her innovation to meet the challenges and needs of her local community, she researched vegetables that would do well in her hydroponics system and that would also make a good yield in

the local market. But she also understood that some of these products were not well-known in Rwanda, so she attracted a chef to design new recipes that would make these vegetable products more attractive to local communities.

Working with a local innovator is not always a recipe for success however. They themselves can be so passionate about their technological invention, making it harder for them to see the local context might not be the perfect fit.

And there are other hurdles to take. Here's how we work with local innovators.

Working with local innovators

1. Provide tailored support

We provide support even before a proposal is officially submitted. We scan the initial concept notes for viable ideas, and work with the innovator to make sure the entire process of innovation has been thought-through, leading to a solid proposal. In innovation however, things don't always go as planned, and sometimes we take a chance on a proposal that seemed promising and solid at first but never works out.

After a project has been accepted, we train the entrepreneur in skills such as business development, marketing, communication and leadership. We organise this through providing tailored training at the beginning of their VIA Water journey (Sharing Skills Seminars) and towards the end of it (VIA GO); through online Masterclasses and through one-on-one support from our own team or experts from our network.

2. Partnerships to make innovations stand out

We provide support in finding possible partnerships that would make the project better. Sometimes we are already able to help an innovator find the right partners before they submit their final proposal, making for much stronger coalitions to back the project up. At other times, the need for a specific partner only comes up after the project has started. We will look around in our network, ask the experts we know and connect them together.



This is often a process of trial and error since partnerships are not easy to forge.

During training seminars we also organise field visits to organisations that are of interest to the projects, often resulting in great connections and sometimes partnerships.

The connections we are most proud of however, are the ones that are starting to form between our projects. The project started by Orvion in Mozambique for instance – focusing on DNA technologies for microbiological water analysis – was able to work with two other VIA Water innovators in Mozambique, and had made connections with a project in Mali as well.

3. Identify challenges

Together with the innovator, we identify possible weaknesses and try to find solutions to incorporate them into the project plans and budget. Sometimes, these weaknesses can be addressed with the right partnerships or training. Otherwise, we think through them with the innovator and try to come up with solutions beforehand.

We are also on-hand to help them

when things do go wrong, and to support them in addressing the issue. Unfortunately, this is not always feasible due to the distance between the VIA Water team and our project owners: sometimes more close guidance might be required. But in our view, a project without challenges can never be a proper innovation. Which is why we also encourage the innovators to share about the challenges they have faced, so that the wider community of VIA Water projects can learn from each other's innovation journeys.

A levelled but still bumpy playing field

The road ahead for any entrepreneur is bumpy, with many curves and sometimes dead-ends. For an African innovator, this can be even more so. They are not always backed up by government institutions, and there might not be a safety net if they fail.

We feel that these local risk-takers are the ones that are needed for the job though.

At VIA Water we try to encourage and support them to make it work, and we try to level the playing field so the road ahead might become a bit easier to travel.

About VIA Water:

VIA Water supports projects with innovative solutions for water problems facing cities in seven African countries. Through the programme, these solutions can be brought to life: with financial support, but also with the help of the (online) learning community. At the moment, VIA Water has a full portfolio: over 60 projects are being implemented in Mali, Benin, Ghana, Rwanda, Kenya, Ethiopia, Senegal and Mozambique.

VIA Water is executed by Aqua for All and funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.