

GCIP-SA entrepreneurs star in African innovation competition

Two alumni of the Global Cleantech Innovation Programme for SMEs in South Africa (GCIP-SA) were the only two South African finalists in the British Royal Academy of Engineering's Africa Prize for Engineering Innovation.

According to GCIP-SA national programme manager Gerswynn McKuur, the success of graduates of the programme in other competitions is testimony to the quality of the programme. Alumni of the GCIP-SA regularly excel on national and international platforms after completing the programme.

The two Africa Prize finalists, André Nel with his GreenTower, a solar-energy micro-grid boiler, and James van der Walt with the Solar Turtle, a containerised mobile off-grid power station, were GCIP-SA finalists in 2015.

The British Royal Academy of Engineering established the Africa Prize for Engineering Innovation to stimulate and reward innovation in sub-Saharan Africa and to encourage engineers to develop scalable solutions to local challenges.

All Africa Prize finalists were invited to pitch their innovations during the Pitch@Palace Africa event at St James's Palace in London last month. Prince Andrew, the Duke of York, launched this event in 2015.

Nel says the opportunity to participate at the Pitch@Palace Africa event was incredible. "Each of 16 finalists did a three-minute pitch to a select audience that form part of the vast network surrounding the Duke of York. I was inspired by the standard of pitching that conveyed the singular message that engineering innovation is thriving in Africa.

"I met with a private utility and we are now in discussions to collaborate on a project to implement a GreenTower to provide renewable hot water and electricity to a community of 100 RDP homes in Gauteng."

He says he is very grateful to the GCIP-SA programme for how it has helped him to refine his technology, as well as his business model. "During the GCIP-SA training programme we were exposed to the deBarys 20-element business model, which has been an invaluable tool in positioning and growing our business to become investor-ready," he says.

Nel's company, Eco-V, has commercialised the GreenTower, a hybrid off-grid hot-water that has been proven save around 90% in energy compared to electric boilers. It is affordably powered by solar energy. Sunlight heats up solar thermal collectors, adding to heat energy extracted from the air by solar heat pumps powered by solar PV.

Key commercial pilot projects executed during 2015 and 2016 have validated GreenTower technology and, along with winning a number of international and national awards, have created significant traction for GreenTower.

Van der Walt says that although his Solar Turtle innovation did not win, a number of interested investors approached him after the event. "The response was amazing. I'm feeling very positive at the moment," he says.

The SolarTurtle is a solar kiosk designed for security and portability. These container-based solar kiosks are assembled off-site and then deployed by simply offloading the container and unfolding the panels towards the sun.

Entries for the 2017 GCIP-SA competition and business accelerator are now open for start-ups and small- and medium-sized enterprises with innovative clean-technology solutions in energy efficiency, renewable energy, water efficiency, waste beneficiation, green building and green transportation.

The programme combines a competition and a business accelerator programme where participating entrepreneurs are continuously trained and mentored in the development of a more marketable and investor-attractive product and business. Participants also have the opportunity to connect with potential partners, clients and investors, participate in showcasing events and a chance to win a cash prize and a trip to San Francisco to compete with the best clean-technology innovators from eight other GCIP countries.

"We would like to invite entrepreneurs with new and ground-breaking technology innovations, or who are using existing technologies in unique applications, to submit their entries on our website – www.southafrica.cleantechopen.org," says McKuur. He explains that innovations should be at proof-of-concept stage up to pre-commercialisation, demonstrate a feasible concept and product and have the potential to be commercialised.

Applications for the 2017 GCIP-SA competition and accelerator close on 26 April 2017.

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