Innovation competition empowers young entrepreneurs
Science, technology, and local concerns fuel ideas from the developing world

By Juan David Romero

Clarisse Uwineza was only 8 years old when both of her parents were killed in the 1994 Rwandan genocide. She was the second-oldest child, and it fell on her to look after four younger siblings. Despite her heavy burden and all that she had suffered, she managed to attend school. In a country where, at least at the time, girls often left school before earning a diploma, Uwineza continued to study.

Today, at age 28, Uwineza has her Bachelor of Science degree in environmental chemistry and is the founder/CEO of her own company, Environmental Protection and Organics. One of her projects, which is aimed at converting bio-waste into clean organic fertilizer, took her as far as Stanford University in late June, where she was one of 29 entrepreneurs from the developing world who showcased start-up companies at the sixth Global Innovation through Science and Technology (GIST) Tech-I Competition.

The GIST initiative was launched in 2011 by the U.S. Department of State to provide mentorship and networks to aspiring entrepreneurs from developing nations, to equip them with the tools to impact their communities. This year's GIST Tech-I Competition was the third AAAS has administered, coordinating the selection and organization of participants and providing experienced mentors to work with the young entrepreneurs.

“AAAS, we believe the power of curiosity and creativity can benefit communities and improve lives everywhere,” said Rush Holt, AAAS CEO and executive publisher of the Science family of journals, at the competition's award ceremony, “and the Tech-I program is a representation of that.”

Lisa Brodey, the State Department’s executive director for GIST, explained the importance of the program in furthering innovation and delivering economic benefits.

“When young innovators have the skills and mentoring that they need, they are more likely to take the risks that can turn ideas into startups and ultimately into successful businesses,” she said.

From year to year, the program has seen increased participation among women. Among this year’s 29 finalists, 12 were female.

The contestants were selected based on scores from an expert review panel convened by AAAS, who reviewed applicant materials including promotional pitch videos. Top scorers went on to a public vote. After being selected, the finalists received support to attend the 2016 Global Entrepreneurship Summit (GES) at Stanford, along with the two-day entrepreneurship workshop with successful entrepreneurs, scientists, and investors, which preceded a pitch competition offering $70,000 in prize money.

Charles Dunlap is the program director for the AAAS Research Competitiveness Program (RCP), which leads the GIST Tech-I project for AAAS. He said that the spirit and goals of entrepreneurship should be promoted because they tie into the State Department’s diplomatic goals, “and for AAAS, they tie into our goals to see science have full impact in society and economic development.”

For Uwineza, her commitment to helping improve people’s lives is stronger than ever.

“I will do everything until I have great positive impact in society, not only in my country, Rwanda, but also in Africa and even the entire world,” she said.

Photo: GIST Tech-I

Workshops focus on female entrepreneurs

Focusing on female innovators’ access to entrepreneurship, a series of Women’s Village Workshops held this year in Côte d’Ivoire, Mozambique, and Nigeria taught strategies for expanding business networks and propelling science and technology innovations toward the market.

Each workshop, organized and managed by AAAS’s Research Competitiveness Program (RCP), brought together 25 local entrepreneurs from an array of fields, including information technology, health, telecommunications, and agriculture. A majority of the participants were women.

The program is just one element of the U.S. Department of State’s Global Innovation through Science and Technology (GIST) initiative, which helps young innovators from around the world with startup companies that tackle economic and development challenges.

To accelerate the workshop participants’ entrepreneurship, each was challenged to reach “60 in 6”: to expand her network by 60 people over the course of the next 6 months using the strategies learned at the workshop.

“After the workshop, I put into practice what I have learned, and my network continues to grow,” said Jessyca Esther Houenou, a software and web developer who has cofounded an organization to promote Côte d’Ivoire’s natural wealth. Houenou also said that she has shared digital marketing techniques from the workshop with other women who were interested in reaching new customers.

Cultivating leadership among participants is a key benefit of the workshops, said Charles Dunlap, director of RCP.

“We see all of those things as capacity-building—we want to see our participants pass on knowledge,” he said.

Participant Safoura Fadiga, also of Côte d’Ivoire, said that the workshop she attended was structured to promote collaboration.

“I liked the communication techniques used,” she said, explaining that participants moved around the room to interact with one another, rather than remaining seated. An engineer, teacher, and entrepreneur, Fadiga leads IST-DUBASS, a private, French-English bilingual college that aims to train more young people—particularly girls—in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. —Andrea Korte
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