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. There, she mingled with fellow scientists, entrepreneurs, and potential investors and received coaching and mentorship, while vying for important networking relationships and seed capital.

Uwineza said that participating in GIST gave her an amazing opportunity. “It was my first time in the United States, my first time pitching my project in front of people, my first time meeting hundreds of entrepreneurs and mentors, my first time doing what most people call networking, my first time in a competition like this—and I say, wow, thank you, God,” Uwineza said.

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.

“At 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 finalists this year were selected from more than 1,000 applicants from 104 emerging economies.

“They're all in different stages,” said Kellye Eversole, a GIST mentor and president of a technology consulting firm. “Some of them have not really formed their business plans yet, but the education they got [during the 22–24 June competition in Silicon Valley] is going to help them do that. Others are ready to launch, and what they need is some short-term capital investment to try to do the final stages of development before they go to market.”

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.
Workshops focus on female entrepreneurs
Andrea Korte

Science 353 (6298), 457.
DOI: 10.1126/science.353.6298.457-b