PROFILES OF WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS
I am proudly presenting you the inspiring women entrepreneurs participating in the Global Forum’s Women Entrepreneurs’ Roundtable.

Women entrepreneurs in developing countries are currently hailed as the new rising stars of their economies. And as they scale their businesses, their success not only leads to economic growth through direct jobs and investments in their own companies, but also promotes inclusive development and growth.

Studies also show that as women-led businesses grow, the wider community benefits. Women earners reinvest money in their family’s health, nutrition, and education. This points to an enormous opportunity to deliver development results by supporting women entrepreneurs who run growth-oriented companies in emerging and frontier markets.

For all their potential though, women entrepreneurs still face a number of challenges when scaling their businesses, including a lack of access to finance due to cultural attitudes and legal conditions, and other factors such as lack of autonomy, business skills, and mentorship and professional networks. As a result, many promising businesses do not mature.

infoDev seeks to promote the role of women as entrepreneurs who establish companies, spur innovation, create jobs, and drive the charge toward inclusive growth in the developing world. Our Women’s Entrepreneurship activities support women-led SMEs and start-ups to scale up their businesses by understanding and addressing the specific challenges they face. These activities cut across and are directly relevant to all of infoDev’s work.

In 2013, we’ve already made notable progress on the women entrepreneurship agenda. In partnership with the Government of Canada, our Caribbean entrepreneurship program launched a Women Innovators Network in the Caribbean (WINC). And with the support of the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, we have launched the Mobile Entrepreneurship for Inclusive Development (MEID) program, supporting mobile technology entrepreneurs to develop sustainable enterprises that meet local market needs.

The Women Entrepreneurs’ Roundtable at the Global Forum is the first outcome of the MEID Program. The Roundtable is an opportunity for successful and promising women entrepreneurs from Africa and across world regions to share experiences and resources on how to succeed in business, connect with mentors and next generation of promising entrepreneurs, and increase the visibility of women entrepreneurs’ achievements. On the following pages, you’ll be introduced to many of the participants. Their stories, and their potential to impact the world, are at the heart of what we do.
LEVELING AN UNEVEN PLAYING FIELD

While roughly one-third of the small and medium-sized enterprises in the developing world are run by women, their average growth rate as businesses is significantly lower than growth rates of SMEs led by men. Entrepreneurship is a major economic driver for development since successful businesses create jobs, promote in-country investments and generate tax revenues. Women entrepreneurs running growth-oriented companies therefore represent a segment of society with great potential to spur economic growth.

Lessons learned from developed countries demonstrate the benefits to the wider community as women scale up their businesses. For example, in the USA women-led companies having been growing faster than male-led firms for almost 30 years, contributing nearly $3 trillion to the U.S. economy and creating 23 million direct jobs.

Scaling up women-led businesses not only leads to economic growth through direct jobs and investments in their own companies, but also promotes gender equality. Studies have shown that countries which create better opportunities and conditions for women and girls can raise productivity, improve outcomes for children, make institutions more representative, and advance development prospects for all.

Women entrepreneurs, however, face a number of challenges in scaling their businesses, including a lack of access to finance due to cultural attitudes and legal conditions. The World Bank’s 2011 report on Women, Business and the Law noted that 103 out of 141 economies it analyzed still impose legal differences on the basis of gender. Other ‘soft’ factors such as lack of business skills, knowledge and professional work experience are impediments as well.

Financing was identified as the greatest need among the women entrepreneurs profiled in this booklet.
INFODEV’S APPROACH

The objective of the infoDev’s strategy toward women entrepreneurs is to support women-led SMEs to scale-up their businesses by addressing the challenges they face. The strategy is founded on four pillars:

1. Support women entrepreneurs through infoDev’s global incubator network and mobile social networks by integrating gender sensitive practices into incubator services, including industry-specific ones, and adapting existing training and support to better suit the needs of women.

2. Implement regional programs to support women entrepreneurs which provide assistance to women business owners, most notably in the Caribbean, the Mekong region and Ethiopia.

3. Improve access to finance to women-led growth-oriented ventures by working with commercial banks both to inform them of the benefits of engaging in loan programs with women entrepreneurs, and to provide guidance on how to tailor their products to the specific needs of this client base.

4. Showcase successful women entrepreneurs by telling the inspiring stories of women who have overcome barriers and developed their businesses, encouraging other growth-oriented businesswomen to push ahead, demonstrating investability to potential financiers, and creating a ready-made mentor network.

Several approaches are well underway, and other, newer programs are budding and being formed. Regardless of their development phase, all programs have strong local contexts and are based on locally relevant public-private partnerships.

Female entrepreneurs in developing countries are currently hailed as the new rising stars of the economies and different stakeholders have commended them as an important source of economic growth and development.

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Alison Jacobson is Co-founder and CEO of Firestring, a technology company leveraging social architecture to revolutionize knowledge management. The company delivers enterprise search and collaboration technologies so that knowledge workers can find each other’s content and share information easily, like users do on the consumer Web using Google and Facebook.

Before founding Firestring, Alison worked for many years in the e-learning sector, managing teams that developed large-scale e-learning content projects, learning management systems and content authoring tools. Through this Alison began to develop her thinking about how companies create and manage their IP as well as develop competencies within their teams. Collaborative publishing and the rise of Web 2.0 led to Firestring’s entry into the market four years ago.

Firestring has since grown rapidly and secured a strategic partnership with Britehouse Holdings, a Dimension Data company. The company is also marketing their products across a very wide and long-standing customer and partner footprint, in South Africa, Africa and globally. Alison attributes her success to the power of networking, and of the Internet itself.

“Effective networking and use of the Internet have been critical, as strange as that may sound today,” she explains. “When you’re a small business owner, especially one that provides products and services for large corporates, you have to be comfortable punching above your weight. This means making contact with other tech companies and prospective customers who are much more established than you are through the use of tools like your own company website, Twitter, Facebook, Linked In and email. And you have to do so in a way that fluently expresses your competence and in a sense, your right to be there.”

“The Internet is a great flattener,” she adds. “It puts start-ups next to giants and often sees the former becoming the latter very quickly.”

Alison’s future goal for Firestring is to create enterprise search applications so that knowledge workers find each and their documents as easily as consumers do on the Web, like with Google and Bing. In a sector crowded with competitors, Alison is confident in Firestring’s approach.

“Know your markets,” she says. “Being an entrepreneur means having vision and passion, but take off your rose-tinted glasses long enough to run regular competitor scans and to truly understand your customer.”

“The Internet is a great flattener. It puts startups next to giants and often sees the former becoming the latter very quickly.”
Anne Githuki-Shongwe is the Founder and CEO of Afroes, a company creating uniquely African mobile applications and tools for social development agencies and corporate enterprises keen to spread educational and branded messages across the continent. Its products are positioned to unlock the leadership, citizenship and entrepreneurial potential of millions of young Africans through mobile game-based learning.

Afroes has already reached over 500,000 youth through 4 bespoke mobile game-based learning applications with a series of partners keen to reach youth with critical life skills. To date, Afroes has developed and distributed a series of award-winning gamified mobile learning solutions designed to inform, engage and unlock the potential of African youth and their communities.

Anne credits Afroes compelling vision to shape and inspire learning amongst young Africans coupled with the opportunity presented by mobile penetration across the African continent as a key factor in its success to date. Finding invaluable people to both work in her business and to support her business very early in the process has also been important.

“Opportunities for new business have come from my “circle of influence,” she explains, “people whom I have met or been connected with somehow. Interestingly, most of these have been women.”

Anne’s future goals for Afroes are to build Africa’s own mobile game-based ‘academy’ that will offer 21st Century Skills in a fun and engaging way made available to millions of youth communities across the African continent. With offices in South Africa and in Kenya as the regional hubs, the company also has plans to extend its reach to youth communities in countries across West Africa as well.

Prior to establishing Afroes, Anne was an international development professional with over 20 years of development experience working with the United Nations and management consulting firms across Africa and the United States. She is a prolific public speaker on themes related to social innovation for the public good, and is a recipient of both the Schwab Foundation/World Economic Forum Social Entrepreneurs of the Year 2013 and of the Kenya President’s Honour 2012, Order of the Grand Warrior. Her focus on solutions is what keeps her going.

“Entrepreneurship has to be driven by passion to solve an existing problem – almost obsessive – that will keep you strong and focused during the tough times – and that there will be. It is part of the entrepreneurial journey.”
Binta Coudy Dé is Vice President of the Jjiguene Tech Hub, the first women tech network in Senegal. A computer science engineer by training, and a technology lover at heart, she’s determined to use the Jjiguene Tech Hub as a platform to increase the number of women in technology.

Coudy’s interest on the usage of technology for small businesses – and the gender gap in the sector – developed while she was still in school. In between studies, her and her teammates participated in Microsoft’s Imagine Cup Worldwide Finals, organized the first Code Camp in West and Central Africa, and sought out other opportunities to advance themselves.

“Since we were at school, we always wanted to build something, create something by ourselves,” she says. “We were very active in tech communities such as Google groups, Microsoft student partners, and open source groups where we learned things that school couldn’t teach us.”

Her team is member of the Global Youth for Innovation (GYIN), and has participated in many competitions and conferences, including Startup Weekend, Demo Africa, and the UNESCO-sponsored International Congress on Technical & Vocational Education & Training (TVET). The Jjiguene Tech Hub was borne out of these experiences.

“With all those events, we noticed that there aren’t enough women in ICT,” explains Coudy. “So when we left school in July 2012, we decided to focus on our projects. The biggest one is to motivate women and girls to take up technology and science fields via a tech hub.”

The Jjiguene Tech Hub aims to increase the number of girls studying in science and technology fields, increase the number of women technology entrepreneurs, and teach women how to incorporate ICTs into their businesses. Though still early in her career, and facing all the challenges typical of start-up entrepreneurs, Coudy is sanguine about her prospects.

“It’s in the most difficult times that we discover our capabilities. When you are passionate, you do not give up. Women are the strength of family, the strength of a country, a continent. So women, never give up - our countries need us.”

“It’s in the most difficult times that we discover our capabilities. When you are passionate, you do not give up. Women are the strength of family, the strength of a country, a continent. So women, never give up - our countries need us.”
Chinwe Ohajuruka is an architect, project manager and sustainability consultant with more than 25 years’ experience in a variety of international settings. She is currently the CEO of Comprehensive Design Services (CDS), a firm that is committed to practical sustainable design solutions for Nigeria and Africa.

CDS is currently working on the Passive House Prototype (PHP), an affordable and innovative design product that will make renewable energy widely available to Nigerians through the vehicle of much-needed affordable housing. The prototype was borne out of winning the African Diaspora Marketplace II Competition in 2012. The visibility and credibility provided by the win allowed CDS to introduce the prototype to Nigerian governmental organizations and large corporations in a bid to educate the public, and in preparation for scaling up the project once the prototypes are completed later this year.

Architecture, construction, sustainability and renewable energy are typically fields that are predominantly associated with men globally, and even more so in the African continent. With two Masters Degrees in Architecture, and several professional accreditations to her name, Chinwe has not let this gender bias discourage her, and believes that these are areas of opportunity for women to pursue.

“As a female working in these areas, I have found it challenging, rewarding and refreshing and would encourage like-minded women to get involved,” she says.

“I have learned that our perspective on quality of life and community is unique to us and needs to feature much more prominently in the world of building, sustainability and technology. The world is waiting for females with our passion, drive, creativity and sensitivity to human suffering and the need to make a difference.”

Chinwe would like to see the Passive House Prototype replicated in housing estates across the 774 Local Government Areas in Nigeria. “I have an unshakable desire to use my experience, education and the technological developments and innovations in architecture to improve the quality of life of low-middle income people in Nigeria,” she says.

She cites “a fundamental belief that architecture has to transcend the built form and be a powerful and innovative agent of social transformation in society” as a key success factor that has allowed her to start and grow her business. Her long-term goals for CDS include scaling the PHP across other African countries that have similar issues of inadequate infrastructure and housing, and across the world as an energy efficient, environmentally responsive housing type.

“The world is waiting for females with our passion, drive, creativity and sensitivity to human suffering and the need to make a difference.”

Profiles of Women Entrepreneurs
Fern Elise Foster is the Co-founder of STUSH Marketing Ltd, a content marketing agency located in Kingston, Jamaica. Through STUSH, Fern creates fresh, innovative concept-to-execution campaigns for many of Jamaica’s most renowned brands, including Pepsi, LIME, CB Foods, and National Bakery.

Returning to Jamaica after completing a public health degree at Johns Hopkins University with the goal of pursuing a career in medicine, Fern would soon trade a stethoscope for a camera. In 2010, along with childhood friend Tamia Carey, Fern launched LiveStush.com.

“I literally started this business with only a laptop and a camera in 2010,” explains Fern. “With no formal training in photography or videography and no budget for any staff or any extras, STUSH at its essence has embodied the Jamaican phrase, ‘tun yu hand mek fashion. In other words, work with what you’ve got! In less than three years, through creative and engaging content centered around Jamaican culture, we were able to take a brand that no one had heard of, to an audience of over 100,000 “likes” and over a million unique monthly viewers on Facebook.”

A tongue-in-cheek reference to the Jamaican word for “posh” or “uppity”, LiveStush is a vibrant lifestyle and entertainment brand. Fern’s passion for showcasing Jamaican culture on a global level is evident in LiveStush.com’s engaging photojournalistic approach to the diversity of Jamaican culture, which has made the popular site a staple of the Jamaican social media landscape.

“I have such a strong vision for the future of Stush!” she says. “We have an amazing opportunity to spread our Stush wings beyond Jamaica to reach deep into the diaspora. Brand Jamaica continues to grow from strength to strength, and there are many opportunities for us to take advantage of our enormous library of original content for both licensing to external entities, as well as to promote brands that want access to the millions of Jamaicans and West Indians who live outside of the region.”

As the scope of Stush expands, Fern intends to continue to provide opportunities for creative-minded young women interested in developing a career in this space, while also continuing to learn from others.

“You can’t do it all yourself,” she admits. “Creating relationships with like-minded people both in your field and in complementary disciplines makes you and your business acumen stronger, opening your eyes to pathways for improvement that you might not have considered.”

“You can’t do it all yourself. Creating relationships with like-minded people both in your field and in complementary disciplines makes you and your business acumen stronger, opening your eyes to pathways for improvement that you might not have considered.”
Fiona is currently the East African Project Manager for Angaza Design, a solar technology startup. The company has developed an innovative technology that allows customers to purchase energy for phones, lights, and devices on a Pay-As-You-Go basis. Embedded into the solar units sold by the company, the technology puts high-quality, life-changing solar products within financial reach of all kerosene-dependent households by allowing them to pay for light in small increments over time – and at a lower cost than kerosene.

Angaza isn’t Fiona’s first experience working with early stage business startups in creating and managing local networks to distribute products that serve base of the pyramid (BoP) communities. Prior to joining the company, Fiona co-founded an agri-tech startup that introduced the first mosquito repellent candle to East Africa, and also founded an information portal that provides information to young entrepreneurs. These experiences have reinforced the importance of both cost and convenience when marketing to consumers without a lot of disposable income.

“Our technology is tied directly into regional mobile money systems such as MPESA so customers can purchase ‘energy credit’ directly from their phones,” she explains. “The technology is easily scalable, and requires very little behavioral change for the customer. Also, it adds only ~$2 to the cost of goods of that product to make it Pay-As-You-Go-enabled.”

As an early stage for-profit international social venture, the company experiences the financing challenges typical of new and innovative socially-minded businesses in emerging markets. “We are caught between traditional venture capital and the impact investing sectors,” she says.

But in spite of the challenges, she remains undaunted. “Tenacity and audacity make for great things to happen!”

“Tenacity and audacity make for great things to happen!”
Heather Anne Cochran is an entrepreneur with a focus on the African startup ecosystem. She is the Co-founder of the startup Slicebiz, an innovative platform that brings crowdfunding for startups to Africa. The company’s mission is to unlock a whole new funding market for startups to access finance by creating the framework that will make it easy and appealing for middle class wage earners to invest small amounts of their disposable income into high-growth startups with proven potential to give high return on investment.

The solution Slicebiz is offering is to leverage web/mobile platforms to create a connection between startups looking for funding and business-savvy young professionals/middle class looking to invest. The company is also supporting the creation of offline resources for entrepreneurs. Slicebiz has partnered with the Open University of West Africa to open Hub Accra, Ghana’s foremost co-working space designed to incubate high-potential entrepreneurs and help them take their ideas to market.

Piloting the model in Ghana and Kenya, the company’s overall vision is to help build startup/entrepreneurial ecosystems globally.

“Longer term, our goal is to use these two pilot frameworks to establish a proof of concept,” she explains, “and then create an easily-replicable strategy that can be implemented to boost similar economies throughout African and other emerging markets.”

Heather’s work has led her to be a winner of the 2013 Apps4Africa business challenge, a US State Department initiative launched by Hillary Clinton supporting innovations for Africa, which she credits as accelerating the growth of her company. “This opened the doors to a whole new world of opportunities,” she explains.

Slicebiz has also won several other innovation and entrepreneurship awards that have given it global exposure. Perhaps more important to its success, however, has been the critical role that mentors have played for Heather during her journey.

“After the whirlwind of the past half year, I have learned the undeniable and irreplaceable value of committed and expert mentors,” she says. “The support of mentors and role models, specifically female role models, has been invaluable. If I had one piece of advice for other young female entrepreneurs, it would be to surround yourselves with similar women, and men, at different stages of the process to provide support and solidarity.”

“The support of mentors and role models, specifically female role models, has been invaluable.”
Dr. Iris Mwanza is Co-founder of Mobile Payment Solutions Limited (MPS), a software company focused on harnessing existing mobile technology and infrastructure to promote m-commerce and e-commerce. The company’s mission is to use the mobile phone to transform Southern Africa into a cashless economy. MPS’ software and integrated systems enable companies and NGOs to make and receive electronic payments and significantly reduce their cost of doing business.

Its UtiliPay Payment Gateway allows bills to be presented and paid via mobile phone, Internet or ATM, while its Mobile Banking Platform expands the reach of financial services to mobile phones and allows financial institutions to increase efficiency and expand their geographical reach without high operational costs.

Iris’s company is currently working on a Mobile Marketing Platform, which will allow insurance companies to present simple micro-insurance products to their clients through a mobile handset, was recently awarded an African Diaspora Marketplace grant to develop the service.

“Our goal is to develop innovative products which have general and regional application so that we can grow the company beyond Zambia,” she explains.

Iris has a wealth of diverse experiences that have prepared her for her current role. She holds a Ph.D. in International Relations from Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, and completed law degrees from Cornell University and the University of Zambia. Her work experiences include stints as a corporate lawyer in Zambia and in a Washington D.C. law firm, at the World Bank in Washington DC in the South Asia, and as Chief Operations Officer for the Centre for Infectious Disease Research in Zambia (CIDRZ), the largest HIV/AIDS non-profit organization in Africa.

“A multidisciplinary education and my work experience in both the private and public sectors have given me an array of skills and a toolbox – legal, financial, operational, and managerial - that have been helpful in starting and running a business,” she says. She credits this knowledge with making her a more effective leader of her company, and encourages other entrepreneurs to develop the same.

“Stay in control of your company,” she suggests. “It is fine to use professional services and have partners, but always ensure that you understand all aspects of your business, particularly the finances, and that you make the major decisions.”

“Always ensure that you understand all aspects of your business, particularly the finances, and that you make the major decisions.”
Jolene Sim is the Co-founder of Centsless, an online rewards system that powers the education and consumer products industry. The software allows education providers to gamify their classrooms and make learning exciting for their students. Students earn reward points for every action that is conducted in a learning environment, including things such as watching educational videos, and playing educational games.

Jolene started her entrepreneurship journey early, when she co-founded a social media marketing agency at age 20. Still in university, her and the initial founding team managed to raise more than $8,000 start-up capital in a week to build an initial prototype of their business idea. Since then, their business has evolved and they currently run social media marketing campaigns for a growing list of clients.

Two years later, Jolene and her team achieved another significant milestone when they raised $60,000 in seed funding to start Centsless. Soon after, the business was selected as one of the top 10 business venture start-ups in the Global Innovation through Science and Technology Awards (GIST). The company has since struck up a number of partnerships, including with CashVille Kidz, a financial education portal that reaches 8,200 schools in Malaysia and Singapore, and with Maybank, Southeast Asia’s third largest banking group.

“Our partnership allows the loyalty points of all Maybank credit and debit card to be convertible to Centsless points,” she explains. “This provides us the avenue to absorb the money backing the loyalty points which have been earned by the 13 million Maybank cardholders.”

Centsless aims to engage the parents of their student database to purchase and adopt Centsless points as a commodity, in order to motivate their kids to learn in and outside classrooms. Jolene is bullish about the market potential.

“We believe that there will be three key drivers in our business,” she explains. “First, the education systems in most countries do not provide the motivation for kids to reach further voluntarily. Second, parents in this region are prepared to pay to see their kids excel academically. And third, ultimately kids have an influence on their parents’ spending pattern.”

With two successful start-ups under her belt, and plans to expand Centsless into Indonesia and Thailand by 2015, Jolene is succinct with her approach to entrepreneurial success.

“Stop focusing on the tougher sides,” she says, “and take opportunities as they come.”
Kenia Mattis is the Co-founder and Director of ListenMi, a company building a new online distribution model that connects Caribbean artists to consumers and businesses. ListenMi’s social music network will enable artists to affordably create digital content - such as audio books, creative programming, and original music - while giving individual consumers the tools to purchase products, and corporate customers a method to repackage creative content for revenue generation.

An avid music and nature lover from the small tourist town of Ocho Rios, Jamaica, Kenia brings a unique combination of interests and experiences to her role. Her work as a marketing and branding consultant is often differentiated by her experience in music and media productions. She has been able to combine her studies in strategy with her passion for creativity in the brand development and marketing solutions she has delivered for companies in the consumer goods, food manufacturers and utility industries. While putting her bilingual Marketing MBA to good use, Kenia also pursues her love for poetry and music as a songwriter for artistes and musicians including Romain Virgo, Etana and American cellist, pianist and composer Dave Eggar.

“I relish opportunities where both sides of the brain can be used to develop smart, creative solutions,” she says.

Kenia’s experience in middle manager roles for local and multinational companies gave her a quick feel for what she liked doing most - creating projects from scratch.

“Business is more rewarding when you’re passionate about what you do. Being passionate about something means you can take a fresh look at it every day and not get burnt out. The glow you get from fuelling your passions and striving to fulfill your dreams doubles as a crucial beauty secret in stressful times.”

In just a matter of months, the start-up has already begun a beta test of their creative content production and distribution services with a very reputable Jamaican client. This has allowed ListenMi to further refine its business model and readied them to move toward a phased expansion of their operations. Their plan is to build local and go global, enabling supply to reach the demand. Kenia credits her team for the company’s rapid progress.

“Our team has undeniable synergies. Every day I marvel at the brains, talent, heart and guts we managed to pack into one room, which we always fill with great ideas that inspire us to deliver results,” she explains. “I’d also say that starting a company is best done with people who you trust, know and like. That way you can build together for the long haul.”

“I relish opportunities where both sides of the brain can be used to develop smart, creative solutions.”
Nguyen Thi Thanh Binh is the CEO and President of Vinastone Joint Venture Company, a family business that extracts and produces natural stone products in Vietnam. Working in the stone industry is something that comes naturally for her.

“I was born and grew up in Thanh Hoa province, the cradle of the natural stone exploiting and processing industry,” she explains, “so naturally the image of stone was graved in my mind since I was a child.”

Nguyen initially got into the industry as a French interpreter for a Belgian company that imported bluestone products from Thanh Hoa. After two years on the job, she had learned enough to branch out on her own, and with the support of her family, established the Ha Thanh Binh Marble Company. The business quickly grew its customer network in Belgium and the Netherlands, and in 2003, created the Vinastone Joint Venture Company with two Belgian customers. She’s been CEO ever since.

“You absolutely have the opportunity to start your own business if you have a passion for business, work hard, be creative and catch opportunities,” she says.

As CEO of Vinastone, Binh develops and implements the company’s strategic vision. She plans to develop the company into Vietnam’s largest and most professional private group in the production, import and export, construction and maintenance of natural stone.

It’s a goal that she’s well on her way to achieving. In 2008, Vinastone was recognized as one of 100 brands that affect Vietnam’s market in the survey on national brands held by the Vietnam Chamber of Commerce and Industry (VCCI). The company significantly expanded its production facilities two years later, and in 2011 opened its first showroom in Ho Chi Minh City. Future expansion plans include a move towards care and maintenance, in order to maintain and enhance the quality of the stones acquired by clients.

Nguyen credits her success to some key lessons she’s learned in her 10 years at the helm of Vinastone, including “do not put all your eggs in one basket” and “build a good relationship with a credit organization and partner.” She also believes a good leader should be willing to empower others who work for them.

“Young a woman, I know women always want to do and manage everything,” she says. “But when I empower others, and empower them well, I have more time to concentrate on the main goals of my whole business.”

“Your absolutely have the opportunity to start your own business if you have a passion for business, work hard, be creative and catch opportunities.”
Orn Sidana is Co-founder and Managing Director of Nokorthom Agriculture Development, a distributor of agricultural inputs in Cambodia.

After several years working as a volunteer, grant manager, and finance manager at different NGOs, Sidana started Nokorthom with her partner. She plays an important role in developing strategy and co-leading the company, which distributes agricultural inputs including insecticides, herbicides, fungicides, and corn seeds through securing exclusive contracts with international suppliers.

Nokorthom Agriculture Development has quickly grown to be one of the top pesticide distributors in Cambodia, and now works with more than 200 dealers nationwide. Its revenues have increased more than tenfold since the company was launched in 2009. Sidana credits her success to clear direction and planning by management, and good relationships with customers.

“Relationships are the base of everything,” she says. “We try to get close to our dealers and satisfy them by providing the best services and products.”

She also credits her company’s product marketing strategy.

“We work with farmers and provide them with all the knowledge necessary to properly use the products by conducting more than 1000 training annually,” she says. “Moreover, to build confidence with them, we have conducted many product field demonstrations in their communities.”

Sidana’s plan for expansion is to expand her offerings to her customers, including the addition of a new line of hybrid corn seed products, which is a preferred crop for farmers in Cambodia. She also hopes to become a manufacturer, and open a chain of one-stop shops for agricultural products.

“The future goal of my company is to become the #1 pesticide distributor in the country and the first company to re-package the products locally,” she says.

“Relationships are the base of everything.”
Perihan Abou-Zeid is the Co-founder and CEO of Qabila Media Productions, a media content creator that capitalizes on crowdsourcing and digital media to produce content that bridges the gap between entertainment and the intellectual needs of the target audience. From promotional videos to mass media content, Qabila ensures that the message of its client reaches the target audience effectively, by studying the audience behavior and adopting a crowdsourcing model that actively interacts and engages the audience to better understand them.

The timing for Perihan’s launch of Qabila couldn’t have been better - right after the revolution in Egypt, when people were hungry for value-based content. The company was amongst the pioneers of premium online content creation, which helped propel its growth.

“We have so far worked with clients in 7 countries, and have produced more than a 150 productions,” she says, adding “we aspire to expand our production capacity into feature film productions, as well as expand into new markets.”

Prior to joining Qabila, Perihan worked with Google as a Business Strategist, where she consulted large-sized corporations on their online advertising strategies across the Middle East. A few months after her graduation, she founded the first online supermarket in Egypt. She’s also a published freelance editor, trainer and former professional basketball player who loves nothing more than a good travel adventure.

Perihan’s drive has won her several awards in academic excellence, leadership, and entrepreneurship, including most recently the Best Female Entrepreneur Award from the MIT Enterprise Forum – Pan Arab Region, where Qabila won the First Runner Up Award. On finding success as a female entrepreneur, she prefers to focus on the latter.

“Just forget you are a woman, and work as a business person,” she says. “Being business savvy is what makes you successful regardless of age, gender or background.”
Phan Thi Tuyet Mai is the Founder and General Manager of TMTM, a Vietnamese company that plants, processes and preserves Moringa into consumer products including tea, biscuits, and beauty products. A vitamin and protein-rich plant native to parts of Africa and Asia, Moringa is cultivated widely for its nutritional and medicinal benefits.

Mai has a degree in chemistry, and over 22 years of experience in the seafood industry. But it was her enthusiasm for Moringa that led her to start the company in 2011.

“I started my business just because of my passion for Moringa,” she explains. “The Moringa tree can help fight against malnutrition as well as many diseases, which will improve the lives of the Vietnamese very much.”

TMTM is the sole manufacturer and supplier of Moringa products in Vietnam. As part of its marketing strategy, the company has implemented many projects that deliver Moringa to the poor.

“We had carried out many charity programs to popularize Moringa in poor areas which help farmers improve their life effectively,” says Plan. “For our effort, Moringa now is known by more and more people. To me, this is the biggest achievement.”

In the future, she hopes to increase the popularity of the tree in Vietnam, and wants to increase TMTM’s product offerings to include candies, beverages, and medicine. Increasing international distribution is also a priority. In her efforts to reach these goals, she’s not afraid of setbacks.

“I have failed many times in both life and business,” she says, “but failure is the basis of success.”
Racquel Goddard is the Founder and Managing Director of iDaedle Consulting Limited, a company providing sales, marketing and strategy consulting solutions to corporate clients. Her career began as a paralegal in Atlanta, Georgia where she managed large municipal bond issuances. She then went on to hold several executive-level positions at large multinational organizations. But after years in the male-dominated IT corporate world, Racquel lost her job and made the decision to forge her own path. She credits the support of her family, friends, and networks as key enablers of her starting and growing her business.

“I’ve had excellent mentors, people that inspire me in the way that they do business, their adherence to quality, how knowledgeable they are about their industries and how selflessly they deliver advice to those in need.”

Racquel’s business has managed to build an enviable list of clients that continues to grow. Included among them is Jamaica Education Television, a public private partnership aimed at improving the quality of education. iDaedle Consulting developed their strategy to execute their mission of using technology and innovation by filming the best teachers across the country and providing access to them to all of the schools.

“It is the project that we’re most proud of,” she says.

Racquel currently serves on the Board of Jamaica Education Television. She also serves as advisor on numerous other projects and hosts a monthly women’s networking forum aimed at empowering female business owners.

“We meet once a month over lunch to support each other, share ideas and collaborate on projects where possible,” explains Rachel. “It has been a tremendously rewarding experience.”

Racquel’s goal for iDaedle Consulting is to showcase the technological prowess of the region, and all of the talent and ideas that continue to develop in the Caribbean. In doing so, she hopes to create the first Fortune 500 company born out of the region. She faces many challenges in reaching that goal, but fear is not one of them.

“My fear many times held me back from facing the unknown,” she explains. “Even those times when I did fail I learned valuable lessons that I wouldn’t have learned otherwise. When you fail you figure out what not to do so the next time around you can try something different. When you do stumble just keep getting up, listen to that voice inside you that knows you can do it, the voice that says it won’t necessarily be easy, but it will all be worth it.”
SENG TAKAKNEARY
Managing Director, Sentosa Silk

Seng Takakneary is the Founder and Managing Director of Sentosa Silk, a company that designs and produces uniforms in Cambodia. She started her business in a one-room shop with two sewing machines in 2004, transforming herself from an NGO worker into an entrepreneur. Her interest in Cambodian silk and her desire to become a role model for Cambodian women led her to start the business.

“To grow myself and to grow my company, is to grow my country,” she says.

Today, Sentosa Silk employs poor and disabled craftsmen and women from rural Cambodia, and produces a range of fine Cambodian silk garments and home furnishings. The company is now expanding into uniform tailoring and fashion accessories. Since opening nine years ago, Sentosa has found a natural market locally, and is gaining strong ground internationally.

As the female owner-director of a fast-growing silk business, Seng has plenty of advice for other female entrepreneurs. “Most importantly,” she says, “plan ahead and expect that the beginning of a business is going to be very hard work.”

When she is not designing or cutting her next deal, Seng is focused on her presidency of Cambodia’s first Women Entrepreneurs Association (CWEA). CWEA’s mission is to encourage and support the growth of women-owned businesses in Cambodia through collective efforts, providing business services, networking and building a single voice to relevant stakeholders on issues of common interest.

“To grow myself and to grow my company, is to grow my country.”
Sharleen Chin is the CEO of Meiling Inc. Ltd., a premier luxury women’s apparel designer brand in the Caribbean. The brand is renowned for its innovative style, deceptively minimalistic look with attention to detail, and use of high quality fabrics and workmanship.

The MEILING Inc. Ltd story started in the late 60s when designer Meiling returned to Trinidad after training in London, and opened a first-of-its-kind boutique in a friend’s renovated garage. Forty plus years later, the company now has a chic flagship boutique in Trinidad, exports regionally to other stores in the Caribbean, manufactures lines of corporate wear and has a small line of lifestyle products.

As CEO, Sharleen is primarily responsible for publicity, marketing, sales, new business development and looking for innovative ways to get the MEILING brand to local, regional and global markets.

“I am part of the management team of three women, including the owner/designer, Meiling Esau and the CFO/COO,” she explains. “Together we are the corporate directors, and as in any small company, we wear many hats.”

Sharleen received the Top Fashion Executive 2012 award from the Fashion Industry of Trinidad and Tobago (FITT). And earlier this year, she spearheaded the Trinidad and Tobago Installation at the British Fashion Council’s International Fashion Showcase 2013, during London Fashion Week. Sharleen also conducts preparatory workshops at the Caribbean Academy of Fashion and Design, with fashion students about to enter the job market.

“There is a passion for your work. It always amazes me how every successful business person can tell you a story of falling flat on their face. Yet it is that passion for what they do which motivates them to continue. Believe me, when I say, at MEILING Inc. Ltd we have had our share of tumbles, but each one is a learning lesson to move on and up.”
Somto Fab-Ukozor is the Founder of Mobile Skills To Cash (MS2C), a texting service that matches NGOs, private companies, and public sector opportunities to skill-sets of citizens seeking employment using the short messaging service (SMS) infrastructure. The initiative stands to bridge the startling statistics of a spiraling unemployment level prevalent in Nigeria. Nigerian youths make up 70% of its population with an alarming unemployment rate of over 33%.

With a degree in Electrical/Electronic Engineering from the Federal University of Technology Owerri, Nigeria, Somto has a keen interest in using ICT as an innovative tool for youth development and empowerment. She is equally interested in mobiles for education, and was a participant at the 2nd Mobiles for Education Alliance: Partnering for Scale and Impact that took place in Washington D.C.

So far MS2C has been able to set up tech hubs in two universities in Nigeria, where undergraduates hone technical and ICT skills. The future goal of MS2C is to create a rippling effect through its network of students, in order to have more youths – especially females - interested in building their skills.

Somto believes that it’s important for women entrepreneurs to “always believe in oneself and be focused.” She credits determination and support from mentors as the two key factors that allowed her to start her business.

“Determination has helped me to keep a clear head and think of innovative ways to tackle real societal challenges,” she says.

“Also the support from mentors and family has been tremendous, they have been supportive of my causes and the fact that they believe in me pushes me to do more.”
Stella Kariuki is the Co-founder and Director of Operations and Finance for Zege Technologies, a software development firm that focuses on building financial solutions for daily living. The company’s MPayer application enables businesses to manage their payment transactions using both mobile money (Mpesa, Airtel Money) and cash.

Stella’s entrepreneurial journey started early, at the tender age of 12. Her passion for nurturing young men and women into entrepreneurship and encouraging people to be the best that they can be is a skill she frequently uses in her current role.

“If you bring out the best from your team members by encouraging and empowering them, they will bring out the best in your organization. An organization is really as good as its people,” she says.

Launched at DEMO Africa in 2012, hundreds of businesses serving thousands of customers have already signed up to use MPayer. Stella attributes the company’s success to “persistence and continuous innovation and iteration of our products while always listening to customers and advisors to ensure we constantly provide our customers with value for money while making impact to the organizations we serve.”

“Having like-minded, exemplary, talented individuals as part of the founding team enabled us start off in a great way, setting up a good foundation for the organization,” she adds.

The company has already won several awards, was named one of Top 100 ICT companies in Kenya, and has been featured on media such as Forbes, CNN, and BBC. With the successful launch of MPayer at Demo Africa, the company hopes to reach out to and 10,000 small and medium businesses in Kenya by the year 2015 and venture into 2 other African countries by 2016.

“If you bring out the best from your team members by encouraging and empowering them, they will bring out the best in your organization.”
Thuy Thanh Truong is the Co-founder and CEO of Greengar, a company that develops simple, fun, and useful mobile apps for education. The company’s most popular apps include Whiteboard, Collaborative Drawing, Brain Tuner, Flashlight, and Color ID. With over 14 million downloads, Greengar apps are among the most popular on the App Store.

Thuy was born and raised in Vietnam until the age of 17, when she came to America with broken English. The language barrier was a struggle.

"Language enables people to communicate, but it can also be a barrier to understanding and accomplishment," explains Thuy, adding "every challenge is an opportunity to be excellent."

She started working fulltime in retail banking and insurance sales while still attending the University of Southern California. After graduating with a Computer Science degree, Thuy went back to Vietnam to start her first business: Parallel Frozen Yogurt. The company was a success, and expanded to a chain of five different stores.

In 2010, she helped to cofound an app development team for Greengar, and in 2012 made the decision to move from the food and beverage industry to the mobile technology industry, joining Greengar to build a collaborative platform for schools and educational institutions. The “Smartboard Platform” is a toolkit that seamlessly connects mobile devices to enable real-time collaboration, making it easy for professors to share their notes and presentations with all the students in the class.

“My goal is to reduce the distraction of taking notes while listening to a speaker,” says Thuy. “Our real-time collaboration technology will increase the effectiveness of teaching, especially as people build more schools and expand language teaching projects. I want to provide a low-cost solution that helps students to learn more efficiently.”

Her vision is to bring mobile collaboration to every classroom in the world, and she knows what it will take to achieve it.

“Building a company takes more than just great products,” she says. “It takes time, effort, commitment, vision, direction, execution, and passion!”

“Building a company takes more than just great products; it takes time, effort, commitment, vision, direction, execution, and passion!”
Tiffany Simpson is the Founder and President of Belizean Artwork Publishing, a software and website developer. The company publishes books and CDs for local Belizean artists, and creates educational computer games that specifically cater to the needs of students in the Caribbean.

Born and raised in Belize City, Tiffany caught the entrepreneurial bug early.

“Growing up, I always had a passion for owning my own business and being my own boss,” she explains. “After I graduated from college I never took a job. I started to explore and develop my entrepreneurial skills.”

In 2009, she started a Belizean Artwork Publishing with her brother, and created an online platform that made it very easy for Belizean artists and musicians to publish their books and CDs. But two years later, her son was diagnosed with autism.

“This journey that has allowed me the opportunity to see that people learn differently and not just people with special needs,” she says. “For that reason, we should have many different ways of imparting knowledge in order to accommodate for this.”

As an extension of the Interactive Learner Program, Tiffany is currently developing an online learning institution, which teaches e-learning courses to individuals, the kinds of skills that are necessary for creating jobs and business opportunities. It will be another product addition to her company’s growing portfolio.

“In the past four years, my company has successfully launched several products, services and campaigns,” she says. “The results I have experienced does not come from hard work, but comes from working smart.”

Tiffany credits due diligence with making her work smarter. “Don’t get too excited about an idea and ‘shoot from the hip,’” she says. “Seek council in all the decisions you make. It will make all the difference in how quickly and effortlessly you are able to grow your business.”

“Seek council in all the decisions you make. It will make all the difference in how quickly and effortlessly you are able to grow your business.”
Toni is the Co-founder and CEO of Eneza (formerly MPrep), a company that helps kids learn, review, compete and collaborate through accessible and fun mobile applications. Using content that is entirely teacher-created, the solution provides quality study tools to anyone with a mobile connection.

A teacher and a technology enthusiast, Toni started her career as a Teach For America corps member and program manager in New York City. In 2008, she took her talents overseas, co-founding an educational program in rural Kenya called WISERBridge. The program was a success, quadrupling the passing rate of students over a period of four years. It also provided Toni with some invaluable insights on the market for educational services.

“Having lived in a rural area for a year without water or electricity made me acutely aware of the hardships our customers face and how we can best sell to them,” she says. “First hand experience is always a great advantage in starting a business.”

In 2011, she was searching for ways to replicate this success across the country, when she ran into the idea of leveraging mobile phones to do so. Seeing a huge opportunity to reach remote areas like her “dala” (home in Luo tribal language), Toni decided to drop out of business school and pursue the idea.

Right now, Eneza has 12,000 users, and expects to have over 100,000 students on their platform by the end of this year. Eventually, the company wants to spread to other countries within Africa and the world.

“We hope to be the go-to mobile educational resource, especially for students in hardship areas,” explains Toni. “We also want to increase student achievement scores at least 20% by 2016.”

For Toni, these are ambitious but achievable goals. The key, she says, is to rely on your experience, and also the experience of others.

“Be confident in what you know will work in the market from the experiences that you have, but listen intently to everyone’s experiences. Deeply understand,” she explains. “As women we are often silenced ourselves, and we need to ensure other groups that are still voiceless are being heard.”

“Be confident in what you know will work in the market from the experiences that you have, but listen intently to everyone’s experiences.”

Profiles of Women Entrepreneurs
Vanessa Clark is Co-founder and CEO of Mobiflock, a mobile app that gives parents the ability to keep their children safe when they are using their smartphones and tablets. It lets parents monitor and control the child’s device use, whether blocking certain activities, enabling safe web browsing, or limiting the time when certain activities can take place.

A journalist by training, Vanessa Clark was “tempted over to the dark side” by a PR role at a London-based start-up in the early 2000s, and so her love affair with young businesses began. Back in South Africa, she headed mobile messaging provider Clickatell’s marketing department when the company transitioned to Silicon Valley, where it is now based.

The flexibility of Vanessa’s freelance business allowed her to support herself and still spend time building Mobiflock. Her location also played a role.

“You can design your own world – just because something has always happened in a certain way, it doesn’t mean it always has to be so,” she explains. “People often only do things because they see other people like them doing them, so be aware of your role in inspiring other female entrepreneurs, just by doing your thing. Most important – have fun!”

Mobiflock has received recognition in several start-up competitions and pitching events, including DEMO Africa, Seedstars, and the Tech4Africa Samsung IGNITE competition. The company has also been featured in TechCrunch, Time Magazine, Wall Street Journal, BBC, and the New York Times. Mobiflock is now used in more than 160 countries around the world, and regularly receives feedback from parents describing how Mobiflock is preventing their children from being harmed.

“Feedback from our customers made everything very real and proved that we were achieving our goal of making the Internet safer for children,” she says. “This was hugely encouraging.”

Vanessa credits the company’s focus on getting the brand right from the outset as a key contributor to Mobiflock’s success. Staying true to her vision has also been an enabler, and is something she encourages all female entrepreneurs to do.

“You can design your own world – just because something has always happened in a certain way, it doesn’t mean it always has to be so,” she explains. “The networking, pitching opportunities, awareness, and exposure to like-minded people and companies has been vital.”