

Rewoven wins inaugural Äänit Prize

Rewoven, a textile recycling startup, cofounded by Esethu Cenga, Lonwabo Mgoduso and Tshepo Bhengu, was named the first-ever recipient of the Äänit Prize, The Mandela Rhodes Foundation's new award for social Impact.



Tshepo Bhengu, Lonwabo Mgoduso and Esethu Cenga

Every second, the equivalent of a rubbish truckload of clothes is burnt or buried in a landfill. The fast-fashion industry is one of the most polluting in the world. It generates 90 million tons of waste annually, of which only 1% is recycled.

Rewoven diverts textile waste from landfills by collecting it from the source and recycling it into new fabric. Rewoven's manufacturing process uses 99% less water and generates 50% less CO² emissions than normal production processes. The fabric has the same look and quality as fabric made from virgin fibres. The labour-intensive textile recycling process provides much-needed jobs, particularly for women, who make up the majority of clothing industry workers.

Rewoven's vision is to create a socially and ecologically sustainable way to create clothing and to contribute to more socially and ecologically sustainable ways of living.

"Rewoven is a compelling and innovative textile recycling start-up that brilliantly addresses critical needs for economic development, broad-scale employment, women's empowerment, and planetary responsibility. This enterprise has the potential to be transformative economically, socially and environmentally. It is sustainable by profit and globally scalable." This was the citation delivered on behalf of an independent panel of judges made up of African experts from various sectors, chaired by Elliot Gerson, executive vice president of the Aspen Institute.

Professor Njabulo Ndebele, chairman of the Board, said that the awarding of the new prize was a historic moment in the life of the Foundation, which is Nelson Mandela's official legacy organisation for leadership development. "By entrepreneurship, we mean a belief in the critical role played by individual human effort, hard work, innovation and creativity in leading to the betterment of society and Africa's place in the world. Each of the seven finalists beautifully embodies this spirit. I am struck by the combination of pragmatism and hopefulness that characterises these projects – a way of seeing possibilities hidden within the challenges that we face," he said. Professor Ndebele also emphasised his gratitude to the donor, David Cohen.

The awards were co-hosted by actor Masasa Mbangeni and MRF CEO Judy Sikuza, who are both Mandela Rhodes Scholars themselves, and streamed to a global audience. Sikuza said that she was delighted with the result. "Esethu Cenga's leadership of Rewoven is exactly what we hope for when we select and develop Mandela Rhodes Scholars. Esethu demonstrates courageous, visionary leadership that is grounded in hard work and humility. We are very proud of her and Rewoven, which offers such a creative solution to several complex problems." She added that the competition was extremely tight and that all of the finalists' ventures are exceptional and worthy of support and investment.



Finalists for inaugural Äänit Prize announced

19 Oct 2021



The Äänit Prize is a complementary offering to the Foundation's flagship programme, the Mandela Rhodes Scholarship, and is available to alumni of both the Mandela Rhodes Scholarship and the Rhodes Scholarship. The prize supports both for-profit and non-profit initiatives, increasing the impact of leaders in both alumni communities by supporting their efforts to reduce inequality and deliver positive social impact in Africa. The Prize is funded by Ezra Charitable Trust which was started by long-time MRF supporter and Rhodes Scholar David Cohen.