The SDG Challenge Prize

Objective

The SDG Challenge Prize was an innovation initiative that aimed to promote citizens’ engagement and to bring peoples’ voice in the policies, services and decisions that affect them. The key initial areas for piloting included SDGs, HIV and Aids and behaviours of young people as well as education and unemployment. It was expected to create solutions and engagement in the topics at stake coming directly from those closest to the problems to accelerate change. The initiative helped to access new and alternative sources of data and solutions; new ideas to address specific issues relating to development challenges and new ways of identifying issues at stake.

Project Cost

US$ 20,000

SDG Challenge Prize Package

US$ 2,000 + Training package on entrepreneurship / project management skills

Advocacy and Awareness raising channels

Social Media, Key Implementing Partners, Posters and Brochures

Key Partners

National University of Lesotho, UN Agencies, NGOs, Civil Society Organisations, Youth Organizations, Private/Public Sector, Media

Project Timeframe

October 2016 – June 2017

The SDG Challenge Prize, an initiative by the UN Lesotho in cooperation with the National University of Lesotho, issued a competition to get the youth of Lesotho engaged in key developmental challenges in Lesotho by simultaneously generating innovative solutions and ideas on how to solve the problems identified.

The pre-defined focus areas to the competition were: 1) SDGs; 2) HIV/AIDS knowledge and behaviour of young people; as well as 3) the disconnect of education and employment. By presenting only broad areas of intervention to the competition the SDG Challenge Prize resembles a two-sided bottom up approach which lets firstly, the youth of Lesotho shape and identify the challenges as well as tasks which were used for the competition, and secondly, asks youth for to address these through innovative solutions.

Identifying the challenges and tasks

Pictures: https://www.facebook.com/pg/UNLesotho/photos/?tab=album&amp;album_id=1393565587338688

On 17 October 2016, the UN Lesotho and National University of Lesotho convened a joint workshop among students and alumni of NUL to define key areas and questions to pilot through the SDG Challenge Prize innovation initiative by asking: *what are the most pressing problems in the areas at stake and how would you solve them?* Around 150 youth participated in shaping the tasks for the competition by addressing various areas of intervention within the stated themes through group-work and a final vote on the most important challenges. Themes and tasks identified through the workshop and ultimately used for the SDG Challenge Prize were:
Theme 1: Sustainable Development Goals
- Find a way to ensure that every home in Lesotho has access to water, especially as Lesotho is rich in water resources!
- How to achieve that everyone in Lesotho is aware of the Sustainable Development Goals?
- Ensure that natural resources for future generations are not depleted by our actions today – especially in the face of climate change!

Theme 2: HIV and AIDS and behaviours of young people
- Find a way to improve the nutritional status of HIV positive people!
- What can be done about the social acceptance and disclosure of HIV positive people?
- How to increase the effectiveness of HIV/AIDS treatment in terms of access, availability and people’s behaviour?

Theme 3: The disconnect between education and employment
- Create a system or platform that empowers start-ups in terms of capacity building and business exposure!
- Come up with a way that aligns institutions of higher learning with needs and demands of the job market!
- Find a solution that makes the job market more transparent, accountable and easier accessible!
- Develop a job opening platform that exposes local human resources to the international job market!

Launching the SDG Challenge Prize
Pictures: https://www.facebook.com/UNLesotho/posts/1432978450064068

The SDG Challenge Prize was ultimately launched on 24 November 2016 complemented by a tree planting ceremony in front of the NUL administration block, in which 17 indigenous trees were designated to each of the 17 SDGs. The NUL Vice Chancellor Prof. Nqosa Mahao and NUL Pro Vice Chancellor H. Manthoto Lephoto, preceded by welcoming their guests: - the UN Resident Coordinator in Lesotho Ms. Karla Hershey; the Principal Secretary of the Ministry of Development Planning Mr. Tlohelang Aumane; UN staff; NUL senior management and colleagues; media; as well as the key invitees – the NUL students who are the candidates of the SDGs Challenge Prize. The Launch of the SDG Challenge Prize further revealed the Prize itself issued during the competition. Winners of the SDG Challenge Prize received a monetary award of US$ 2000 and a follow up training in entrepreneurial skills and project management as a non-financial incentive. The SDG Challenge Prize asked for innovative solutions to one of the themes and one of its issued tasks. Entries to the competition were allowed from all levels of society with the only limitation of a need for a NUL affiliation (student number) and ranged from regular project ideas, usage and or development of new technologies, (social-) media based formats of solutions, to new ways of data visualisation.

The Final Round of the SDG Challenge Prize
Pictures: https://www.facebook.com/UNLesotho/posts/1572171936144718

During the competition 34 entries were received from which 15 were selected in a pre-selection of an independent committee for the final round of the SDG Challenge Prize. The final round, held on 17 March 2017, allowed the finalists to pitch their innovative solution in front of a thematic jury consisting of UN, academia, private sector and civil society/youth organizations. Each participants pitch was limited to a maximum of 10 minutes in which the jury evaluated the proposed innovation and ranked participants and their innovations accordingly. The 10 best innovations were selected as winners of the SDG Challenge Prize.
Awarding the SDG Challenge Prize and steps ahead
Pictures: https://www.facebook.com/UNLesotho/posts/1614523578576220

Following the final round the 10 selected winners will be awarded the SDG Challenge Prize during a final award ceremony held on 27 April 2017. During the award ceremony, remarks were made by Dr. Cornelia Atsyor, UN Resident Coordinator a.i.; Ms. Makhoabane Lelimo, Deputy Principal Secretary of the Ministry of Development Planning and Dr. Motšelisi Christine Mokhethi, Dean, NUL Faculty of Social Sciences, to congratulate the winners for their innovative solutions and efforts made during the competition. Dr. Cornelia Atsyor highlighted, that the “SDG Challenge Prize has shown once more that youth engagement is pivotal to sustainable development in Lesotho and the overall success of the SDGs because young people are the future critical thinkers, change-makers, communicators and leaders”.

Winners of the SDG Challenge Prize are in the following requested to participate in the training on entrepreneurial skills and project management organised in cooperation with the private sector. This training has been made mandatory to ensure that the winners of the SDG Challenge Prize are equipped with the right tools and expertise to successfully implement their solutions. Further, the winners are asked to develop an action- and implementation plan in close consultation with the project partners to ensure targeted interventions and precise budget allocations. During the implementation phase of the innovative solutions, identified winners are asked to select and report to a Mentor from NUL which will further assist with guidance and mentorship.

Lessons learned
As became aware during the process of the competition, areas for improvements can be identified within: 1) the advertisement, 2) the expectations of entries, 3) the selection process.

1) The advertisement of the SDG Challenge Prize was done in collaboration with NUL but failed to ultimately address a wide enough audience to reach the full potential of the competition. Channels used for the advertisement were social media, brochures and posters, as well as the launch of the competition in Roma itself. Although information of the competition was distributed widely, the time given for advertising the competition prior to the first deadline was too little and efforts made by NUL to spread the competition among students seem to have not reached its full potential. A possible improvement could be to properly plan an advertisement campaign with enough time prior to the launch so that students and youth are aware of the SDG Challenge Prize. Additionally, using more traditional means of communication like radio and newspapers could have heavily impacted the outreach and advertisement of the SDG Challenge Prize.

2) The kind of entries that are expected and the formalities of the SDG Challenge Prize must be made more clear to the participants and the stakeholders involved in the selection process. During the competition, unclarities remained on both sides within the formalities of participation, the scope of innovation regarding solutions, and the application process. Some of the youth participating misunderstood the formality of “chose one theme and one task” resulting in applications addressing one theme but all the tasks mentioned under that respective theme. Due to fairness, such entries failing to comply with the formalities for entries had to be disqualified. Further, the scope of innovation was unclear to both, youth
and stakeholders involved in the process, as participants did not always presented innovative solutions which was criticised by the stakeholders in the selection process. Innovation however, does not necessarily refer to technological innovation or totally new solutions to specific problems, but rather refers to “out of the box thinking” and making more efficient use of existing resources. Thinking out of the box was not always applied by participants to the SDG Challenge Prize. Improvements within this area can be achieved by developing and providing a more detailed handbook on how to apply and what is expected during the competition. Further, stakeholders and youth should be briefed about the expected output of the competition, especially given the fact that a too heavy focus was laid on business practicability and sustainability during the selection processes. The SDG Challenge Prize however was an idea competition putting the process of developing solutions in its focus, seeing business implementation as a side effect to the generated solutions.

3) The selection process, although based on a 5 point likert-scale in a two-stage selection process, must be made more clear to the stakeholders and should be improved due to its qualitative character. Different jury members defined and assessed specific selection criteria differently leading to diverging ratings. While diverging opinions and ratings are part of a qualitative assessment, the divergence within the applied selection process resulted due to an unfamiliarity with the system. A joint development of criteria, a training on how to rate in accordance to the system and a core team of jury members for both processes could improve the selection process. During the SDG Challenge Prize two different juries have been part of the overall rating, one jury for the pre-selection and one jury for the final round, further contributing to the above-mentioned divergence of ratings.

Besides the mentioned lessons learned and areas of improvement, the established partnership with the private sector and the bottom-up approach of the SDG Challenge Prize can be mentioned positively.

The SDG Challenge Prize identified the areas and tasks of the competition in close consultation with youth of Lesotho reflecting a two-sided bottom up approach. By letting youth define the developmental challenges to be addressed and by simultaneously using collective intelligence and youth engagement for providing innovative solutions, ownership and a localised approach to challenges in the country has been achieved.

Further, successful partnerships have been built with academia, CSOs and the private sector during the competition. Especially the private sector in form of The Entrepreneurship Network (TEN) proved to be a valuable asset to the wider success of the competition. TEN provided practical guidance and insights during the selection process and will in addition lead the project management and entrepreneurship training during which participants are requested to further work on their proposals. Further mentorship during the implementation phase will be provided in collaboration between NUL and TEN, ensuring a balance between research/science as well as business based implementation.

Following the above, the SDG Challenge Prize can be seen as a successful and innovative pilot to foster awareness and generate more inclusive, participatory ways of tackling problems, simultaneously creating solutions coming directly from the people of Lesotho. Engaging people directly in the process of problem solving encouraged more advocacy in addressing solutions and advanced collaborative and innovative partnerships. The SDG Challenge Prize identified ideas and practices of innovators through building capacities in the areas at stake. New products and services have been developed during the competition and will most likely make their
entry into wider implementation. Aside these advantages the competition helped to access new and alternative sources of data and solutions; generate ideas to address specific issues relating to development challenges in Lesotho; explore new ways of identifying issues at stake that might not have been considered before; strengthen accountability and ownership.

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