

# Sharpened Sense

Yesterday's newspaper is today's pencil for Wada Kealotswe, the young innovative female entrepreneur in Botswana turning reading matter into writing tools. And she has already sold over 70,000 pencils.

BY ALASTAIR HAGGER

**I**N SETSWANA, THE NATIVE language of Botswana, there is a typically evocative proverb that goes: Dilo makwati re kwatabolola mo go ba bangwe – Sharing knowledge is like the stripping of bark from a tree to pass to others.

Though digital news-sharing has now become the norm throughout Africa, the traditional newspaper is still widely consumed as an important news source. But the damage its production entails is literal, not figurative: for every ton of newspaper, 12 trees are destroyed.

We strip the bark, we share the knowledge – but we damage a world that should be made immeasurably richer and safer through our accumulation of that knowledge.

Many modern economies routinely recycle paper so that industries which utilize this material can be less reliant on wood pulp, but widespread and effective waste recycling remains atypical in the developing world.

The UN Environment Programme laments that Africa is currently recycling only 4% of its waste, describing this failure as “a far cry from the African Union vision that African cities will be recycling at least 50 per cent of the waste they generate by 2023”. Given that an estimated 70-80% of Africa's MSW (municipal solid waste) is recyclable, this shortfall is as alarming as it seems avoidable.

In Botswana's capital city, Gaborone, there are a number of private companies offering recycling services, but still no integrated recycling initiative to prevent the bulk of the MSW ending up in landfill. In September 2021, the Botswana government



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announced its Integrated Waste Management Policy, which it said would encourage “increased shared responsibility among stakeholders for the protection of public health and the environment”. It remains to be seen what practical (and enforceable) solutions the policy will implement, but in the meantime, an innovative young female entrepreneur has taken a proactive step in demonstrating the economic potential in the savvy reconfiguration of physical knowledge.

Wada Kealotswe is the founder of Eco Zera, a company which recycles waste newspapers into pencils that wear their origins proudly: the text and photographs of the newspaper pages can be seen clearly embedded in the pencils’ bodies, like some strange reincarnation of dead information tasked with recording the knowledge that will take their place.

A development economist, Kealotswe reached the semi-finals of a competition at the 2019 World Bank Youth Conference in Washington DC for a more generic newspaper recycling idea; the project evolved into Eco Zera Pencils when she discovered there were machines available in China that could turn reading matter into writing tools.

“I knew that in Botswana, no-one was recycling newspapers, and I was always wondering, ‘where do they go?’ So I got in touch with The Voice and The Sunday Standard (two of Botswana’s most widely-read newspapers) and asked them. They told me they have a warehouse outside Gaborone where they just pile those newspapers. So I thought, ‘okay, I can source them – and maybe at a competitive price.’

The used newspapers are combined with resin and graphite imported from China, rolled in the Chinese machines, dried in the sun, and then finished in an oven, where they bake to the wood-stiffness of a traditional pencil.

“When you look at them, or sharpen them, you would never know they’re made of paper,” Kealotswe says. And for those who like to take their writing or studying frustrations out on their tools, they have a pleasing snap as crisp as that of their wooden counterparts: “They’re very hard. If you break them, they break like wood.”

The production is labor-intensive: only 20% of the manufacturing process is driven by the machines Kealotswe has set up in a garage on the outskirts of Gaborone. She has three permanent employees, and



has recruited and trained a further 15 young people, who assist in the fulfilment of large orders when needed. In the two years since the company’s inception, Eco Zera has sold over 70,000 pencils, with a new range of colored pencils due to be introduced this spring; the brand was also featured at this year’s re-scheduled Expo 2020 Dubai. “And we even sell them in pharmacies,” says Kealotswe. “You know, when people are getting their nails, they get interested, and buy our pencils!”

Last year, Eco Zera won a SEED Climate Adaptation Award, which has helped her scale the business; ‘Zera’, appropriately, means ‘seed’ in Hebrew. “We are seeding the planet,” she says. “We are making sure that trees are safe. And these newspapers would otherwise be going to landfill, and landfill produces methane. So we believe that the little we are doing will also contribute to reducing rising temperatures.”

Kealotswe says she expects the brand to finally be profitable this year, despite the myriad barriers to entry facing an African entrepreneur in a landlocked country.

“Some of the challenges are the high cost of labor, and the fact that we have to source our other raw materials from abroad. We don’t have a port, so we rely on South Africa and Namibia,” she says. “And it’s not so easy to get finance for young people who need collateral. I self-funded my project, to overcome the challenge of having to go to banks or investment enterprises, so I didn’t have that stress. So how should I describe it? Yeah – that’s hustle!” 📌