

The PE startup addicted to innovation

 By [Lauren Hartzenberg](#)

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It's often said that a defining quality of successful tech startups is that they're not afraid of failure. Because the more you try, the more opportunity you have to succeed. A pair of entrepreneurs from Port Elizabeth appear to have just this winning mindset.



Sabelo Sibanda and Thulile Volwana

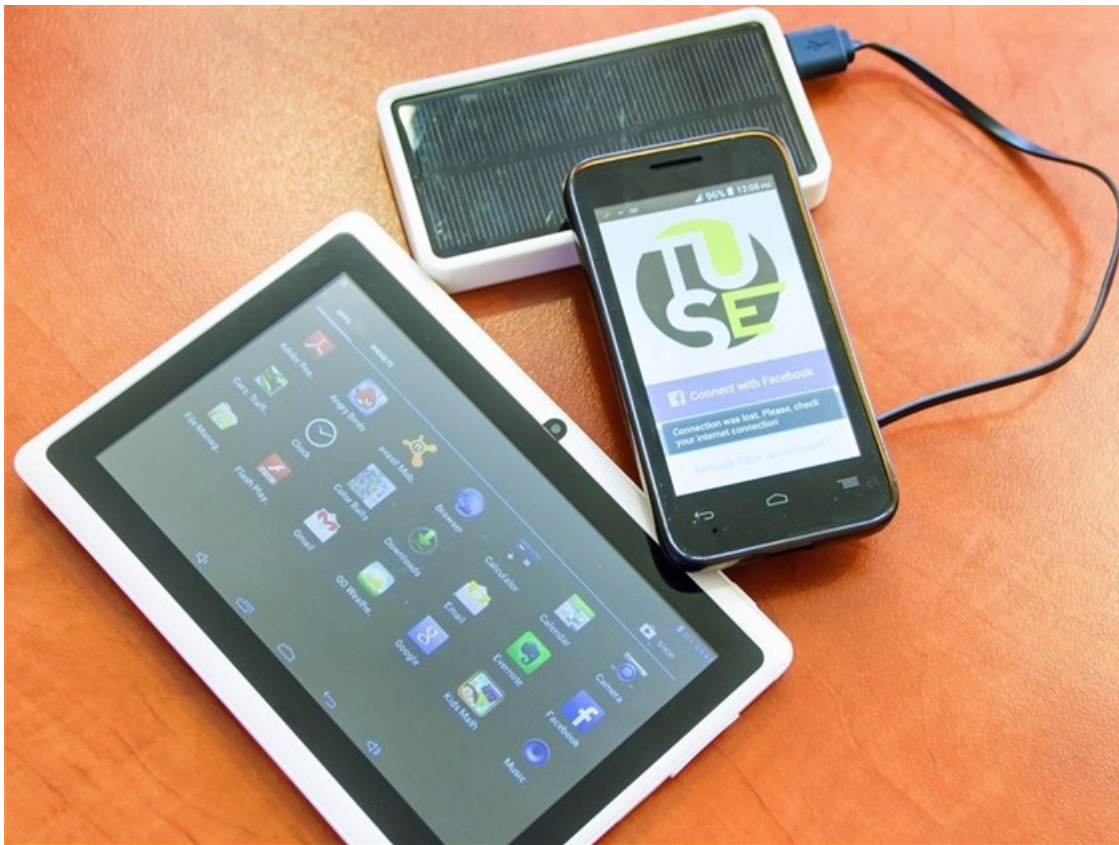
Sabelo Sibanda and Thulile Volwana are the founders of not one but two companies, the first being Millbug, a startup incubated at Shanduka Black Umbrellas. It began its life in the e-commerce space selling millennial women's clothing. In its first year of business the company was nominated for a South African e-commerce award.

On to the next one

But the pair didn't rest on their laurels. They soon realised that their target market accessed the internet primarily via mobile and were more inclined to purchase digital products as opposed to tactile products on the small screen. This led to the idea of selling a tablet PC; but while developing it they discovered "more important solutions" the product could address.

And thus, in 2013 the low-cost solar-powered Vuya Tablet PC was born. Aimed at rural markets in Africa, the device can be charged by the sun in places where a reliable supply of electricity is difficult to come by. Millbug received R35,000 from the Small Enterprise Development Agency (Seda) to assist them with the project and business support from the Shanduka Black Umbrellas incubation programme. The invention drew acclaim from local and international media for its ability to improve connectivity and narrow the digital divide.

But the young innovators didn't stop there either. Last year Sibanda and Volwana launched Tuse, a company incubated at Propella - a Telkom Future Makers Hub. The Tuse app allows a user's mobile device to become a node in a wireless mesh network on which users may send messages, make calls and transfer files to peers for free. It doesn't require traditional wireless infrastructure, making it an ideal solution in areas with little or no network coverage. The idea led to the company being selected as part of the [Aspiring Innovators programme](#) at this year's Gartner Symposium in Cape Town.



Sibanda and Volwana were [invited to Silicon Valley](#) at the start of this year to join renowned tech accelerator Founders Space. Sibanda, co-founder and managing director, tells us about the pilgrimage and Millbug's future plans.

■ ***Tell us about the Millbug Vuya Tablet PC and Tuse app, and the inspiration behind each of them.***

The Millbug Vuya Tablet PC is Africa's first solar-powered tablet PC. Tuse is a solution that allows people to communicate in places with no signal. Both were developed to address the massive shortcomings we have in the developing world with regards to communication and communications infrastructure.

■ ***What has the response been like from the market?***

The response has been phenomenal. It's incredibly gratifying to see ideas, not only be well received, but genuinely help people.

■ ***Is there a gap in the SA market for sustainable tech products, like the solar-powered Vuya tablet?***

I believe there is an incredibly large gap for sustainable tech products like the Vuya tablet. This gap not only exists in the higher LSMs but also in the lower. One of my favourite books, *The Fortune at the Bottom of the Pyramid* by C.K. Prahalad expands on this idea.

■ ***Tell us about your visit to Silicon Valley earlier this year.***

We were the first African startup to be invited to join the Founders Space accelerator (the number one tech accelerator for foreign-based startups in Silicon Valley, according to Forbes Magazine). We participated in their programme for a month in preparation for demo day.

At demo day we managed to get pre-seed investment from Draper Dark Flow - Tim Draper's fund for high potential African startups and were the first South African startup to get it. A month later, we were back in San Francisco for the Global Technology Symposium where we were identified as one of the 10 most disruptive startups in the world.

■ ***What are your team's future plans?***

We are busy setting up an electronics manufacturing facility in Port Elizabeth and are making full use of the momentum we've received from being part of the Aspiring Innovators initiative at the Gartner Symposium as well as being finalists in the SAB Social Innovation Awards. We have our sights set on rapid African expansion and are working with a number of corporates that share this vision - of course, more are welcome!

The Millbug Vuya Tablet PC was previously designed in South Africa and built overseas. It is now in the process of being produced locally and will be available shortly at the company's facility in Port Elizabeth. The Tuse app is available for download in the [Google Play store](#).

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