

South African Universities Acting Local and Thinking Global for the UN's SDGs

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On Friday, 27 October 2023, students from national universities battled it out to be crowned the winners of the second National SDG Challenge in South Africa. This platform by Soapbox South Africa, connects businesses and university students to work on solutions for some of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals.



Brandon van Rooyen, Arnelia Francis, Robyn Mellett, Lizaan Pelsler, Daniel Naude.

During the [SDG Challenge SA](#), multi and interdisciplinary student teams from different South African universities- Stellenbosch University (SU), University of Cape Town (UCT), University of the Western Cape (UWC), University of the Free State (UFS) and the University of KwaZulu Natal (UKZN) worked to solve sustainability issues of four leading organisations in South Africa. The issues and solutions generated are linked to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. This year's pioneering organisations included [Burgan Cape Terminals](#) (BCT), [STANLIB](#), [NCS](#) and [Ivanhoe Mines](#).

It all began with a rigorous recruitment and selection of students followed by pairing them with the participating organisations. From there the organisations described their current sustainability focus areas in detail with student site visits. Thereafter the student consultancy teams, for four to six weeks, researched, ideated and pitched their solutions in a “Shark Tank” style in front of a jury panel of sustainability experts at the Grand Finale. The jury panel consisted of representatives of organisations like WWF, Green Cape & Story Room who decided who crowned UFS and Ivanhoe Mines as the SDG Challenge SA winner of 2023. Besides being upskilled and inspired to pursue a purposeful career the students walked away with a R15,000 cash prize.

Commenting on the experience, Brandon Van Royen of UFS said, “Participating in the SDG Challenge really taught us that everyone can make a difference. No matter how big or small, we can stand up as a community to address today's world's needs.” Together with his fellow students Brandon looked at innovative ways of managing waste while uplifting communities for Ivanhoe Mines in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

In 2015 The United Nations launched the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to the world. The seventeen goals are there to enable businesses and governments to address major development issues relating to people and the planet. Tackling challenges like poverty, gender inequality and better management of the vital water and land resources we all depend upon.

“We couldn't be more proud of the amount of the sheer talent, hard work and thinking that was put behind all the solutions presented by the consultant teams. This coupled with the commitments from the companies in this year's edition is a true reflection of the ideals of the Global Goals. I think there is so much more that is possible with this kind of spirit and positivity,” said Amelia Francis, head of programme SDG Challenge SA.”

The planning for the SDG Challenge SA 2024 is already underway with the search of new organisations and universities to pair up and solve more global challenges, as we race to reach the UN's goals by 2030. Companies and organisations are encouraged to heed the call by participating in this ambitious initiative, so that we may future-proof students, communities and companies for sustainable development.

Sanlam Investment's Lindiwe Mtshali, showcased, in a keynote, how the solution developed by last year's Stellenbosch students, focusing on SDG 8 (Decent Work & Economic Growth), has been fully integrated into their strategy and daily operations. “I wanted to encourage students today that their fresh minds on solutions matter and can be implemented.”

The SDG Challenge mobilises students and organisations since 2018 in The Netherlands, Portugal, Miami and South Africa to work together on the implementation of the SDGs in the corporate sphere. It is a win-win situation, where students are introduced to working as a student sustainability consultant and companies work towards a future-proof business model. Organisations can partner in the National Challenge or participate in an exclusive Company Challenge. Challenge Today, Improve Tomorrow.

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