

Three African startups win development prize

By Tom Jackson

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Uganda's BarefootLaw, Ghana's Farmerline and Kenya's Kytabu have been named winners of the King Baudouin African Development Prize, taking home €75,000 (US\$84,000) each in prize money and access to a wide network of stakeholders who will support them as they grow.

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This is the first year the King Baudouin Foundation has awarded the prize, which aims to recognise the achievements of young, African tech-entrepreneurs driving social change across the continent.

The three winning startups share the underlying principle of using simple technology to connect people with essential knowledge.

BarefootLaw is the first online legal service in East Africa, offering free-of-charge services that help those who are in need, especially the most vulnerable, to understand and defend their basic rights. Farmerline, meanwhile, connects over 200,000 farmers with market information, peers and larger organisations.

Kytabu has developed an innovative textbook content-leasing app for students, making school-reading accessible to 11 million students in Kenya to break down the high rate of students currently without access to textbooks.

The chair of the King Baudouin Foundation, Thomas Leysen, said by enabling local, creative initiatives focused on social good to grow, the prize aims to promote a culture of self-sufficiency and empowerment, not dependency.

"Traditional foreign aid and donating funds have proven theirs limits if what we want is to create long-term change on the continent. The foundation believes in recognising and supporting local entrepreneurs who are passionate about finding solutions to local development challenges. Our winners have set a new precedent on how technology can change lives across Africa," he said.

BarefootLaw founder Gerald Abila said he was humbled by the award and the recognition of BarefootLaw's work.

"In 2012 we set out with the goal to demystify the law and empower people to understand their rights. The few legal practitioners in Uganda are based in the capital city, making it difficult for people both in urban and rural areas to access legal services," he said. "Our journey is just starting. With the money and mentorship offered through the prize, we will be able to grow and support more people to protect themselves, their families and communities from legal wrongs."

Farmerline co-founder Alloysius Attah said his startup was excited to grow and expand with the support of the African Development Prize.

"Agriculture is central to African economies. We see the impact that technology is having on local communities; our ambition is to connect even more smallholder farmers with direct access to global markets, information and finance. We are building the operating system for small-scale farmers in Africa. Hopefully, this will make them exponentially more successful," he said.

Kytabu founder Tonee Ndungu said quality education is at the heart of human development, but yet many students are held back because they cannot afford books.

"Our app changes that. We are the alternative to textbooks. It is solutions like this that will transform our communities and enable people to build more prosperous lives. We are proud to be a part of a new wave of development across the continent and looking forward to developing the platform further through the prize," he said.

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