

How Repurpose Schoolbags give a child choice, not charity

 By [Sindy Peters](#)

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Since its launch in 2013, Rethaka has manufactured and distributed 10,000 [Repurpose Schoolbags](#) in six African countries, recycling 400,000 plastic bags in the process. What began as a school assignment has flourished into a successful social enterprise that's gained international recognition.



Each Repurpose Schoolbag is made entirely from repurposed plastic and has a solar-powered lantern attached that charges during the day and enables studying to continue at night. To get some insight into the business and how it operates, we interviewed Rethaka brand manager Phemelo Segoe.

■ ***What inspired the idea and how was enough support generated to make it viable?***

The Repurpose Schoolbags were first a school assignment which later turned into a business idea after some encouraging by mentor Seth Godin. To get the company off the ground, Thato Kgantlhanye (Rethaka founder) raised capital by entering startup competitions. She raised half-a-million rand and this enabled her to secure factory space and assemble a small team of women to start manufacturing the Repurpose Schoolbags.

■ ***How does the upcycling process work?***

We used to recycle plastic bags, collected from schools, corporates and landfills. They were washed, cut accordingly, heat pressed, then finally sewn together. We have moved to upcycling billboards donated to us by Primedia. This has aided our production process and decreased production time as we are no longer creating a strong textile from scratch. After cleaning and cutting, we can move straight to sewing.

■ ***What sort of impact is Rethaka's Repurpose Schoolbags having on the ground in terms of education in South Africa?***



Thato Kgathanye. Phot by Lebo Lukewarm

The Repurpose Schoolbag enables learners living in homes without electricity to study after the sun sets. In rural KZN, in Cebelihle Primary School, we had an international giving partner – Puressentiel – which sponsored all the learners in the school with a Repurpose Schoolbags. The principal told us that her teachers are giving learners homework for the first time because learners can finally do it.

How can the corporate sector get involved - what form of support are you most looking for?

We encourage corporates to consider using the Repurpose Schoolbag for their CSI projects by becoming Giving Partners. Corporates have full disclosure as to which school receives their sponsorship and can be part of a handover ceremony.

In your opinion, do young entrepreneurs receive adequate support from the public and private sectors - where could improvements be made?

There has been quite a notable amount of attention being directed to young entrepreneurs on both public and private channels. The strategies seem to be in place to encourage and support young entrepreneurs, however there are still many challenges that cripple young entrepreneurs and their businesses like access to funding, support programmes that do not offer monetary grants, corporates that do not pay on time strangling a business's cashflow and so on.

If the public and private sectors really want to support young entrepreneurs in making a success of their businesses, there must be real investments, private sector clients must prioritise small business development and government must track the effectiveness of their accelerator programmes.



Rethaka brand manager Phemelo Segoe

What were some of the challenges faced in starting and running Rethaka - how have they been overcome?

Rethaka has been a great company to manage because of the nature of our work and the purpose behind what we do. However, despite our mandate to do only meaningful work, we still encounter challenges with large corporates who may or may not prioritise the development of SMEs thus shying away from working with small to medium businesses.

To overcome this, we've worked hard at building an international reputation and catching the attention of international platforms like BBC, Forbes and CNN for our work. This recognition coupled with working with clients like Standard Bank and Steyn City has helped us build credibility.

In 2017, what do you believe is the significance of Youth Month?

I believe Youth Month should be used reflectively. To reflect on whether or not promises to the youth have been kept, to truly look at what kinds of investments are being made into the youth using our education system as an example.

I believe it is also a month for the youth to look at what they are radically changing today to shape the kind of future they want for the next generation.

Youth Month needs to shift from what was once done to what is being done today, for our tomorrow.

■ **Words you live by?**

‘Know your worth, then add tax’ – Unknown.

Many young people, especially women, are doing amazing work but are so scared of adding rand value to it. Everything you do must be purposeful and if it’s purposeful, it’s valuable. Send an invoice for your value.

ABOUT SINDY PETERS

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