

PRESS STATEMENT

TO ALL MEDIA

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Namhla Dotwana shines at 2025 Grassroots Innovation Awards

The Deputy Minister of Science, Technology and Innovation, Dr Nomalungelo Gina, has congratulated Ms Namhla Dotwana, founder of the sustainable beauty brand Namhla Collection, for her outstanding success at the 2025 Grassroots Innovation Awards.

Dotwana claimed the inaugural Professor Keolebogile Shirley Motaung Grassroots Innovator of the Year Award, walking away with a R100 000 cash prize for her pioneering work in creating eco-friendly products rooted in indigenous South African knowledge.

"I am so overwhelmed...this is amazing! It is an incredible honour to be the first recipient of the Kelebogile Shirley Motaung Grassroots Innovation Award amongst other awards I have received. But receiving an award named after a visionary and pioneer in innovation carries a deep and personal meaning for me as a rural woman entrepreneur. With TIA's support, I am committed to carrying forward her legacy by advancing Indigenous Knowledge and creating impactful solutions for our rural communities," said Dotwana after she was announced as the winner.

The Grassroots Innovator of the Year Award honours Prof. Motaung, who passed away earlier this month, leaving behind a legacy of distinguished biomedical science, entrepreneurship, and visionary leadership. Her contributions to science, innovation, and women's empowerment have left an indelible mark on South Africa and beyond.

Dotwana's achievements did not stop there; she also secured first prize in the Outstanding Youth Grassroots Innovator category, third prize in the Outstanding Women Grassroots Innovator category, and third prize in the Social Innovation Award category, making her one of the most celebrated innovators of the evening.

Hosted by the Technology Innovation Agency (TIA) in partnership with the Department of Science, Technology and Innovation (DSTI), the awards ceremony took place at the CSIR Convention Centre in Pretoria during the Science Forum South Africa. The event brought together policy-makers, innovators, entrepreneurs, and industry partners to celebrate creativity, impact, and technological advancement.

Hailing from Tsolo in the Eastern Cape, Dotwana's rural-based enterprise transforms local plants, particularly imphepho into premium skincare, haircare, and home spa products. Her innovation champions sustainability, revitalises traditional knowledge systems, and drives circular rural economies through cultivation, processing, and packaging within her home village of eGotyibeni.

The Grassroots Innovation awards are part of the DSTI Innovation for Inclusive Development (IID) Programme, implemented by TIA. These awards recognise, celebrate, and award excellence and project impact in the design and delivery of key strategic programmes (Grassroots Innovation Programme, Living Labs Programme and mLabs Programme) and TIA's Centres for Innovation and Entrepreneurship.

Deputy Minister Gina highlighted that Prof. Motaung overcame immense challenges to emerge as a distinguished academic, an inspiring leader, and a pioneering tech entrepreneur. She demonstrated that South Africa's rich indigenous knowledge can be transformed into sustainable livelihoods. Though her life ended prematurely, her legacy endures and continues to inspire.

"The grassroots innovation awards are very close to my heart because they debunk the notion that innovation is for the high-heeled elite, and not for rural people in our townships. When the government emphasises the point that no one must be left behind in our empowerment, this is one demonstration to that commitment," said Dr Gina.

The Deputy Minister also celebrated innovators who live in rural areas, as well as the innovators with disabilities, saying they are rewriting the narrative from one of limitation to one of possibility.

Grassroots innovation is a cornerstone of the TIA mandate reflecting the agency's commitment to empowering communities to address their own local needs through practical, community-based solutions. By providing grants, technical support, and access to infrastructure, the initiative ensures that ideas born from local experience can grow into meaningful, scalable innovations.

Within the Grassroots Innovation Programme, TIA currently manages approximately 292 active projects, among these, 50 projects have been commercialised, 52 companies created, and 148 jobs generated. An additional 400 projects are supported through a structured innovation support programme.

This year's awards are particularly significant, as they coincide with TIA's 15 years of supporting innovation in South Africa – from supporting emerging technologies to uplifting innovators.

TIA Board chairperson, Loyiso Tyira, "Tonight, we honour and recognise outstanding grassroots innovators whose solutions address community challenges and contribute to inclusive development. Innovation is not a luxury; it is a national imperative. The work showcased here today demonstrates the powerful role of creativity, science, and entrepreneurship in driving economic progress. We are celebrating a significant milestone this year – it is 15 years since the establishment of TIA.

TIA has been central to advancing South Africa's innovation agenda over the past 15 years. Our work is aligned with government's priorities of inclusive economic growth, skills development, and the creation of industries through science, technology, and innovation. TIA's role in the National System of Innovation is vital to building a knowledge-based economy and securing a better future for all South Africans. Congratulations to all the winners!"

Mr. Tyira highlighted that under TIA 2.0, award-winning innovators should not face funding gaps as they advance their projects. TIA is committed to helping them move smoothly through available support mechanisms by using the Quadruple Helix Model, which unites government, industry, academia, and communities. This coordinated approach aims to create a single, integrated ecosystem so innovators don't need to apply separately to multiple stakeholders, enabling a streamlined path from prototype to market.

The event also recognised excellence across five other categories, recognising outstanding grassroots innovators whose solutions address community challenges and contribute to inclusive development.

Outstanding Women Grassroots Innovator

The award recognises and celebrates outstanding achievements and contributions made by women in the field of innovation.

- Paula Maseko (Buhle Bomqhele) - 1st Prize, North-West
- Lineo Sibisi (Moruo wa Basadi) - 2nd Prize, Gauteng
- Namhla Dotwana (Namhla Collection) – 3rd prize

Outstanding Youth Grassroots Innovator

The award recognizes and celebrates the outstanding achievements of young individuals whose innovative solutions demonstrate a potential for exceptional creativity and impact in the realm of innovation.

- Namhla Dotwana (Namhla Collection) – 1st prize
- Gaoagwe Jeje (Kgosi BioTech Drone) - 2nd Prize, North-West
- Iviwe Notununu (Archaea Eco) - 3rd Prize, Gauteng

Disability Innovation Award

The award recognises and celebrates innovators that are demonstrating exceptional commitment to the well-being and inclusion of people with disabilities through innovative solutions.

- Landile Mabele (Navwok) - 1st Prize, KwaZulu-Natal
- Mfundo Shoji (Efolweni Holdings) - 2nd Prize, KwaZulu-Natal

- Swelihle Magubane (Kubongekile Prosperity Garden) - 3rd Prize, KwaZulu-Natal

Social Innovation Award

Social Innovation Awards is aimed at innovators, entrepreneurs, institutions and social enterprises with prototypes or early-stage businesses that can solve social issues in our country.

- Mzomhle Mapatwana (Mifano Ya Mvua Investments) - 1st Prize, Eastern Cape
- Alisia Rautenbach (Soldevco) - 2nd Prize, Western Cape
- Namhla Dotwana (Namhla Collection) - 3rd Prize, Eastern Cape

Outstanding Lab Supporting Grassroot Innovators

- Innovate Durban - 1st Prize, KwaZulu-Natal
- MLab Limpopo - 1st Prize, Limpopo
- Bhongweni CLC Living Lab – 3rd Prize, KwaZulu-Natal, Greater Kokstad Municipality

Labs/Centres for Innovation and Entrepreneurship Supporting Grassroots Innovators

The DSTI and TIA have established 13 Living Labs, 9 Centres for Innovation and Entrepreneurship and mLabs in 4 provinces.

- Sakhile Youth Empowerment Centre (SAYEC) - 1st Prize, Gert Sibande Municipality, Mpumalanga
- Disruptors in Digital Spaces (DIDS) - 2nd Prize, eThekweni Municipality, KwaZulu-Natal
- Mcebo Centre for Innovation and Entrepreneurship - 3rd Prize, Nkomazi Municipality, Mpumalanga

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About TIA

- Established in 2010, TIA has a national reach with offices in KwaZulu Natal, Western Cape, and Gauteng. TIA funds and supports innovative technologies with commercial potential, provides non-financial support to innovators and SMMEs, and catalyses innovation through various partnerships locally, on the African continent, and globally. For more information, visit www.tia.org.za

About the Grassroots Innovation Programme Overview

- The Grassroots Innovation Programme (GIP) forms part of the broader Innovation for Inclusive Development Programme (IID) of the Department of Science, Technology and Innovation (DSTI).
- The GIP is designed to address the challenges of access to technology development and business development support faced by grassroots innovators who largely operate outside of formal systems of innovation.
- The programme enables innovators who would not have otherwise received funding for their ideas to access support.
- The GIP provides key support elements, including Grant Funding (up to R260 000), technical prototype development, business model conceptualization, skills training, and mentorship.

For more information, please contact Veronica Mohapeloa (for the Department of Science, Technology and Innovation) at 083 400 5750 or Martin Slabbert (for the Technology Innovation Agency) on 079 500 1503.

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