

## **Repositioning for the future: African hand-washing innovation Shesha Geza streamlines its strategic direction**

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### **Case summary**

**Learning outcomes:** After completion of this case study, students should be able to reflect on the concept of creating shared value and then determine whether Shesha Geza can be referred to as a shared value company and, if so, what level of shared value it demonstrates. They will be able to subjectively and objectively understand the possible meaning of when a social enterprise embarks on a strategy to scale the organisation; clarity of construct will enable managers to better plan and successfully implement scalability goals. They will also be able to recognise, once scalability goals are better understood and planned, that there are a multitude of intra-organisational levers and drivers that may contribute to the organisation's ability to scale its operations, which are related to specific internal organisational capabilities of social enterprise companies. In addition, there are situational factors that may affect the business either positively or negatively in relation to the scalability success of which a social entrepreneur should be aware.

**Case overview/synopsis:** In April 2021, Dean Boniface and his brother, Roger, had just signed off a new informational video for their Shesha Geza innovation, a low-cost hand-washing station designed for use at commuter hubs and high-traffic areas across the African continent. The unit used diluted chlorine instead of alcohol-based sanitisers to ensure a more expedient and sustainable solution, one better suited to Africa's logistical challenges. Boniface, the co-founder of Vue Architects, had conceptualised the idea of the hand-washing hub during South African Government's enforced COVID-19 lockdown from 27 March 2020 to 1 May 2020. Shesha Geza's speed to market was a key contributor to its successful response in solving a critical social need. Throughout 2020, Boniface and his team built successful partnerships and secured an impressive order pipeline within a short span. Export opportunities across Africa, installations and maintenance of a sizable number of units across South Africa and the development of a behavioural change programme aimed at hygiene in schools kept the momentum going in the business. However, a year into the business and the future sustainability of a crisis-response enterprise and the ability of a shared value enterprise to scale were playing on Boniface's mind. He was worried about the future of the small resource-constrained business. Holding onto the mental map of everything the team had learned over the past year, Boniface was confident about one thing: "All the programmes we build around Shesha Geza are value-adds to our current business. Hand hygiene will not diminish after COVID-19; it will continue to be an important social issue across the African continent."

**Complexity academic level:** This case is intended for discussion in post-graduate-level courses such as an MBA and in postgraduate courses focused on business model innovation or on creating shared value. This case is suitable for use in the environment of business courses in relation to environmental situational factors that may affect the ability to scale social enterprises or strategic implementation courses, considering the still pervasive challenge of scaling increasingly important social impact enterprises.

**Supplementary materials:** Teaching notes are available for educators only.

**Subject code:** CSS 11: Strategy.

**Keywords:** Strategic management; Innovation; Strategic intent

## **Introduction**

The industrial look, exposed brick, clean lines and open-plan design of the Vue Architects office in Johannesburg, South Africa, were comforting and familiar. It felt good to be back in the office. But the faces obscured by an eclectic range of masks, from the standard blue medical variety to Africa-style Shweshwe [1] fabric masks and even a Mickey Mouse in the corner, reinforced the fact that 2021 was not an ordinary year.

On 16 April 2021, Dean Boniface and his brother, Roger, had just signed off a new informational video for their Shesha Geza [2] innovation, a low-cost hand-washing station designed for use at commuter hubs and high-traffic areas across the African continent. The unit used diluted chlorine instead of alcohol-based sanitisers to ensure a more expedient and sustainable solution better suited to Africa's logistical challenges.

Boniface, the co-founder of Vue Architects, had conceptualised the idea of the hand-washing hub during South African Government's enforced COVID-19 hard lockdown from 27 March 2020 to 1 May 2020 [3]. The intention was to act swiftly to solve a critical social need, and throughout 2020, Boniface and Roger capitalised on the momentum by forming a company – SheGeza (Pty) Ltd. – around the innovation and an accompanying hand hygiene behavioural change programme.

However, after a year into the business, with Boniface's architecture business back on track and Roger's entrepreneurial and business school lecturing schedule in full force again, they were spread thinly in terms of resources and time. Boniface was the first to admit that the SheGeza team was small and did not have the means to adequately market both the Shesha Geza product and the extended offering. "Maybe I should have dedicated a person just to marketing and to help us find the right people," he wondered as he fine-tuned an elaborate doodle – to scale, of course. "It's been a bit slow. Typical designer, I haven't followed the money. I've been following the creative part."

Because of the aforementioned reason his brother, Roger, who had been named one of the most promising young entrepreneurs in Africa in Forbes Africa's 30 under 30 list for 2018 (Forbes Africa, 2018), had come on board as CEO. Boniface knew Roger was "much sterner and business-minded" and had the acumen to drive the company forward. But having just started a new boxing gym and both brothers balancing life with their young children, the time they needed to devote to the fledgling SheGeza was in short supply.

Boniface knew that as the COVID-19 crisis faded into a distant memory, global vaccination efforts expanded and life returned to a sense of normality, SheGeza would need to find a sustainable niche for itself. Fortunately, options were aplenty. There were a number of strategic paths that the company could follow, but Boniface was mindful of losing the heart and the socially minded intention of the project.

He recalled a comment Roger had made the other day when they were discussing the future strategy of the business. “We’ve got to be careful how we balance our time chasing the rainbow, while being realistic along the way – or we’ll dig ourselves into a hole and eventually collapse. The project has spiralled into a number of different avenues, so I think that the challenge now is to see what’s the most viable resource.”

### **Responding to a social need**

The South African Government’s early response to containing the coronavirus was swift. Travel bans were instituted and land ports closed within ten days of the first confirmed case (De Villiers et al., 2020). However, high inequality, social and infrastructure deficits, poor access to health care in impoverished communities and crowded living conditions remained notable obstacles in halting the spread of the virus. Many of these issues were entrenched social problems, often a legacy of the abhorrent apartheid system of racial segregation [4]; however, it was possible to address one problem: hand hygiene. Hand washing, alongside mask-wearing, was a simple and effective means of protecting individuals.

On paper, though, South Africa was winning the fight to deliver services to its people. The country’s statistics office, Statistics South Africa, noted substantial improvements in service delivery between 2001 and 2018, highlighting in particular that 89% of households had access to drinking water (Statistics South Africa, 2018). However, just two years previously, and using Statistics South Africa’s own data, research and dialogue body Trade and Industry Policy Strategies (TIPS) determined that of the approximately 16.9 million households in South Africa, i.e. only 44% (or 7.5 million) had piped water facility inside their homes. About 5.1 million (30%) of households had piped water facility inside their yards. TIPS also noted that the quality of access, from source to service interruptions, was still a concern (Mudombi, 2020).

In April 2020, the South African Water Caucus (SAWC), a network of organisations advocating for equitable water access and provision, wrote to Lindiwe Sisulu, country’s minister of human settlements, water and sanitation, requesting the roll-out of water tanks, reliable water supply and sanitation packs to communities without access to water. In a follow-up letter dated 1 June 2020, the SAWC wrote: “Despite a number of commitments made by yourself, as well as President [Cyril] Ramaphosa, to protecting the interests of those who are most vulnerable, particularly in relation to access to water and sanitation during the Covid-19 pandemic, communities remain without water and proper sanitation.” (South African Water Caucus, 2020).

The logical step was to turn towards alcohol-based sanitisers as an alternative, however, this but this too was a challenge because some individuals turned to these products for a “quick fix,” particularly in light of severe alcohol bans by the government. This led to severe health consequences and the theft of alcohol-based sanitisers (Pijoo, 2020).

So, confined to his Johannesburg home, Boniface and his team – Gareth Vaughan, Kaylee Serra, Henk Erasmus and his brother, Roger – set about creating a workable, alcohol-free hand-washing solution.

### **Quick off the mark**

“It was the day of lock down and we were carrying our computers out of the door to go and work at home. From that moment we started to think about what we could do and how it might

look,” recalled Boniface [5]. He also remembered with a smile that the only place they could get supplies during lock down was plumbing stores, which led to the prototype taking on the appearance of a pipe organ.

Ultimately, the assortment of colourful synthetic pipes stuck as a design homage to Shesha Geza’s unusual beginnings. But it was the inner workings of the unit that proved the real game-changer. Recognising the need to create an environment-appropriate, low-maintenance handwash basin that side-stepped the need for alcohol-based solutions, Shesha Geza was designed to hold a large volume of chlorine-based sanitisation solution. The unit stored, chlorinated, filtered and recycled water for hand-washing, eliminating the need for soap or alcohol-based solutions (James et al., 2020). It conformed to World Health Organisation guidance that chlorine was an effective means of combatting viruses and touch-borne germs (World Health Organization, 2014). It required significantly less water and was mobile. Each unit allowed for up to 20,000 handwashes over a period of four to six weeks.

Within weeks, Boniface and his team had a working prototype. Now, they needed a means of distribution. By tapping into his business network, Boniface came in contact with The Aurum Institute, a reputable African health impact non-profit organisation (The Aurum Institute, 2021). Aurum was a trusted advisor to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [6] (CDC) concerning South Africa’s coordinated health-care sector response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and they were in the market for Africa-appropriate products and services that could be produced quickly and in high volumes.

Leveraging Aurum’s established network and connections, SheGeza found its way into the boardrooms of the CDC, the US President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) and the South African Health Ministry. The CDC’s approval of the product was a critical milestone for the business, which built on the gravitas of these key stakeholders to secure an order pipeline valued at several million ZAR [7] by July 2020, just four months after the prototype was launched.

### **A socially minded endeavour**

Neither Boniface nor Roger developed the Shesha Geza project with the idea of creating what Michael Porter and Mark Kramer, Harvard Business School professors, termed a shared value business (Porter & Kramer, 2011). They simply set out to find an African solution to an African problem.

Shesha Geza was designed, initially, around the Covid pandemic, so we were always worried about whether this would be a sustainable business in the future, Boniface acknowledged.

Some ideas, such as looking for companies to sponsor or brand the units, had been proven hard to get off the ground. “But the truth is we haven’t focused enough on knocking on doors,” Boniface admitted. “The truth is we should be pushing it. There needs to be a bigger drive. We need someone with a whip behind us, pushing us.”

The partnership with Aurum, as well as the collaboration with the South African Government, PEPFAR and CDC, was forged because the small and agile team had been able to innovate at speed. “Our advantage is that we’ve got a small team that can work quite nimbly and do it without worrying about all the red tape of big corporates,” reflected Boniface. He was proud

of this flexible approach to problem-solving in Africa and was enthused at the idea of solving other social issues across the continent using creativity and design.

“We designed the Shesha Geza basin in weeks, and we were first to market, which was one of the main reasons why we were so successful. So we have to keep that speed,” he said. But with multiple balls in the air, how could they position their social enterprise [8] to grow into a full-fledged business?

### **Identifying a future market: head versus heart**

By the start of 2021, in the wake of a whirlwind year of innovation, execution and partnerships that were driven by the desire to fulfil a social need, it became clear that SheGeza had evolved across four distinct legs, namely, the production and installation of Shesha Geza stations, export potential into greater Africa, education and behavioural change and ongoing maintenance. Each leg was centred within the broader water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) sector.

#### ***Installation of innovative hygiene stations***

The physical unit of Shesha Geza was at the core of the offering. By July 2020, the company and its non-governmental organisation partner, The Aurum Institute, had fulfilled an order for 56 units from the PEPFAR (US Embassy & Consulates in South Africa, 2020) to install stations at public health facilities in Gauteng Province (Exhibit 1).

By the end of 2020, the team had installed around 200 units for CDC South Africa, also in partnership with Aurum and on behalf of the South African Government, the team installed units at clinics across the country. In addition, nine pilot units were installed at South African schools.

#### ***An export opportunity***

Fairly early in its story, Shesha Geza came to the attention of Endeavour Mining (2020), a multi-asset gold producer focused on mining in West Africa. The company saw potential in sponsoring the installation of the stations at major locations in Côte d’Ivoire as part of the group’s corporate social investment initiatives. Having trialled the unit at one of Côte d’Ivoire’s airports, a few valuable insights had emerged, notably that the unit’s bulk was not well-suited to transport by container. This drawback affected the viability of exporting the product. So, the team was set about creating a concrete version that could be cast on-site, thereby creating a more cost-effective offering and a more robust product.

Although there were other challenges, including sign-off on installation and ongoing maintenance, the brothers saw export into Africa as a significant opportunity, considering that sub-Saharan Africa alone faced even more severe water inequality than South Africa [9]. This situation was compounded in rural areas and hard-to-access mining locations.

#### ***Shifting behaviours***

Closely tied to the installation and distribution of Shesha Geza units was the development of a behavioural change programme. The team partnered with US firm Splash, which provided hand-washing stations for children to use in emerging market countries such as Ethiopia and

India and also focused on educating children about developing good hygiene practices (Splash, 2021). Splash developed a behaviour change model based on the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine's behaviour-centred design framework (London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, 2021).

“This partnership was key to creating the Shesha Geza programme,” mused Boniface. Once they had a programme outline in place, the team was working to fully understand the local context and the background of the South African children they hoped to educate about good hand hygiene. A survey in northwest province was the starting point for this new leg of the business, and the team was keen to use the results to shape the behavioural change programme of the business.

Boniface was convinced that the behavioural change programme was key to the overall SheGeza offering, and he felt that it made the most financial sense if they could attract corporate support. The team had already successfully designed a children's toy basin to help engage children around the story and importance of hand washing. The team had already trialled the toy with some primary school students, and Boniface laughed when he remembered how disgusted they were at the dirty water.

“Play is a big factor in behavioural change,” he reflected as he thought of his young toddler at home. “This is a great developmental tool that kids can play with and learn.”

### ***Maintaining existing units***

As part of its business model, SheGeza also provided a paid-for monthly maintenance service for each unit, including testing of chlorine levels weekly to ensure the efficacy of the product, repair of units and water replacement services.

Initially, to fulfil this critical role the team enrolled the help of out-of-work Uber drivers. Using an Uber-like model, SheGeza paid its maintenance contractors between ZAR 100 and ZAR 500 per basin, depending on the complexity of the maintenance involved. In addition, they paid them the prevalent Uber rate for every kilometre travelled between basins. The more basins serviced, the more money a driver made.

By April 2021, there were seven teams operating as independent contractors, all of whom SheGeza had equipped with the necessary tools, system and a Google Sheets [10] app capable of supporting the Shesha Geza systems. Each contractor had the freedom to run their own business and enlist help – creating a sort of mini-franchise model.

### **The way forward**

“There just aren't enough hours in the day,” Boniface said out loud, perhaps with a little too much gusto because heads bobbed up from their computers all around the office. “Back to work everyone, nothing to see here,” he joked.

Holding onto the mental map of everything the team had learned over the past year, Boniface was confident: “All the programmes we build around Shesha Geza are value adds to our current business. Hand hygiene will not diminish after Covid-19, it will continue to be an important social issue across the African continent.”

While the multi-faceted strategy of the business was clearly taking shape, Boniface was still concerned about the focus and capacity required to maintain the momentum that had been spurred on by the COVID-19 pandemic. What more could they do to grow their social enterprise in a professional manner, to keep building a sustainable business while giving back to society?

## Notes

1. *Shweshwe* is a printed cotton fabric produced in Southern Africa, which is often used in the manufacture of traditional clothing. In 2013, it was described as the “denim of South Africa” by journalist Lucille Davie, owing to its popularity and widespread use. Retrieved on 7 May 2021 from <https://web.archive.org/web/20140120212524/http://www.medioclubsouthafrica.com/land-and-people/3556-shweshwe-the-denim-of-south-africa>
2. *Shesha Geza* means “hurry up and wash” in isiZulu, one of South Africa’s 11 official languages.
3. Note about SA having a tough, hard lockdown.
4. Apartheid, an institutionalised system of racial segregation, was introduced in South Africa in 1948 and was ended between 1990 and 1993. Retrieved on 11 May 2021, from A history of Apartheid in South Africa | South African History Online ([sahistory.org.za](http://sahistory.org.za)).
5. Interview with Boniface and Roger, recorded on 16 April 2021.
6. Established in the USA by Dr Joseph Mountin in 1946, the CDC advocated that a disease threat anywhere in the world is a disease threat to everyone, and so focused its global efforts towards strengthening the world’s ability to prevent, detect and respond to infectious diseases. In 1994, the CDC started its alliance with the democratic South African Government and the National Department of Health.
7. ZAR is the abbreviation for the rand, the official currency of South Africa.
8. The BC Centre for Social Enterprise defines social enterprises as “revenue-generating businesses with a twist.” They can be not-for-profit organisations or for-profit companies, but they share the goal of solving social, economic or environmental problems, which earning a profit. Retrieved on 13 May 2021 from <https://www.centreforsocialenterprise.com/what-is-social-enterprise/>
9. The World Health Organisation estimated in 2004 that only 16% of people in sub-Saharan Africa had access to water via a household connection (either indoors or in their yard). Retrieved on 11 May 2021 from [http://www.who.int/water\\_sanitation\\_health/monitoring/jmpfinal.pdf](http://www.who.int/water_sanitation_health/monitoring/jmpfinal.pdf)
10. Google Sheets is a spreadsheet computer program offered by Google as part of its web-based Google Docs Editors suite.

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## Exhibit 1. US PEPFAR funds local hand-washing innovation Shesha Geza



Source: The Aurum Institute (2021)

**Figure E1.** CDC South Africa Acting Country Director Dr Romel Lacson visits a Shesha Geza hand hygiene station outside of a public health facility in Ekurhuleni, Gauteng, South Africa

### Press Release | July 17, 2020

The US President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) and its partner, The Aurum Institute (Aurum), have launched innovative mobile hand hygiene stations, aptly named Shesha Geza, which means “hurry up and wash” in isiZulu. The stations have been placed at several public health facilities in Ekurhuleni, Gauteng, as part of efforts to help curb the spread of COVID-19.

Funded through the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) South Africa, Aurum has rolled out 15 hand hygiene stations valued at ZAR 375,000 in total at clinics throughout Ekurhuleni in May and June. An additional 36 units will be deployed across Ekurhuleni and the North West Province in June and July, in staggered fashion as part of phase 2.

The Shesha Geza handwashing stations feature a diluted, chlorine-based sanitizer liquid, which can be utilized to sanitize hands when washing with soap or using an alcohol-based hand rub is not feasible or available. In this case, a chlorine solution is both more feasible and cost effective than other alternatives for the locations where Shesha Geza units are deployed. The stations are operated by a foot pump to reduce the need to touch water faucets. Balancing mobility and water storage capacity, the 600-liter tank equates to 4,000 hand washes per one cycle. The water in the tank can be used safely for a minimum of 5 cycles, facilitating over 20,000 hand washes before needing to be refilled. The design also allows for hand washing with soap as an alternative to the diluted chlorine-based solution where feasible.

Hand hygiene is an important part of the South African response to the international emergence of COVID-19. Practicing hand hygiene, which includes hand washing with soap for a minimum of 20 seconds, using alcohol-based hand rub, and, where necessary, use of a diluted chlorine-based solution, is a simple yet effective way to limit the spread of COVID-19 and other infections. CDC recommendations reflect this important role.

“We know that hand hygiene helps to remove pathogens and prevent the spread of disease, so practicing frequent hand hygiene is recommended,” said Dr Romel Lacson, CDC South Africa acting country director.

“Smart and safe, Shesha Geza draws on local inspiration and creativity and the U.S. government is proud to be able to fund such innovative solutions to the challenges faced by local communities. COVID-19 is not a disease that the government, doctors, Community Health Workers, or any other special group of people can fight on their own. It is one that will require all of us to work together to overcome. Each person doing their best to keep themselves safe by practicing hand hygiene, keeping their distance from others, and wearing masks to reduce the spread of germs to those around them— this is what’s required to bring this global outbreak to an end and save hundreds of thousands of lives,” said Lana Marks, US Ambassador in South Africa.

US PEPFAR had partnered with the Government of South Africa to support HIV care, treatment and prevention since 2004, investing more than \$7.25bn (over ZAR 100bn) in programs here. Shesha Geza was one example of recent collaborations between US PEPFAR and the Government of South Africa to mobilize US PEPFAR resources to counter the COVID-19 epidemic while still advancing the core goal of supporting people living with HIV. US PEPFAR remains committed to ensuring that all South Africans have the opportunity to live longer, happier and more productive lives as well as to prevent new HIV infections.

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Disclaimer. This case is written solely for educational purposes and is not intended to represent successful or unsuccessful managerial decision-making. The authors may have disguised names; financial and other recognisable information to protect confidentiality.

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