



Startup20 South Africa Awards and Gala Dinner

14 November 2025

Theme: Empowering Startups and MSMEs: Championing
Resilience, Innovation, and Sustainable Growth

Contents

SU20 South Africa Task Forces	3
Executive Summary	4
Attendance Summary	5
1. Introduction	7
2. Strategic Welcome and Mandate Framing	8
2.1 Keynote Address: The Role of Startups and MSMEs in Economic Resilience and Inclusive Growth	8
2.2 Welcome Address: City of Johannesburg	10
2.3 Opening Address: Reflections on the Startup20 Journey and Acknowledgement of Guests	11
3. Strategic Enablement: Partner Contributions to Summit Success	13
3.1 Partner Address: Falak Investment Hub	13
3.2 Partner Address: Absa	14
3.3 Partner Address: Global Entrepreneurship Network (GEN)	16
4. Awards Presentation: Recognising the Architects of Tomorrow	18
4.1 Adjudication Committee Address	18
Category 1: GreenTech Startup of the Year	19
Category 2: AgriTech Startup of the Year	20
Category 3: EdTech Startup of the Year	20
Category 4: HealthTech Startup of the Year	21
Category 5: FinTech Startup of the Year	22
5. Post-Awards Honours and Cultural Culmination	23
Symbolism and meaning of the awards	23
6. Reflection: Diplomacy, Symbolism, and Acknowledgment	24
6.1 Closing Remarks: Vote of Thanks and Reflections	24
6.2 Concluding Reflection: Strategic Significance of the Startup20 Awards	25

SU20 South Africa Partners

The SU20 South Africa extends its sincere gratitude to all our sponsors for their invaluable support and partnership. Your commitment played a critical role in the successful delivery of the Summit, enabling meaningful dialogue, collaboration, and the advancement of entrepreneurship-led solutions aligned with the G20 agenda. We deeply appreciate your confidence in the SU20 platform and your contribution to strengthening South Africa's and the global startup and innovation ecosystem.



Executive Summary

The Startup20 Awards Ceremony, held in Johannesburg on the evening of 14 November 2025, successfully convened a distinguished global assembly of entrepreneurs, policymakers, investors, and ecosystem enablers to recognise and celebrate exceptional innovation within the G20 engagement group. Orchestrated by Startup20 South Africa under the leadership of Chairperson Mr Vuyani Jarana, the event served as the prestigious culmination of the year-long national presidency, translating policy dialogue into tangible recognition for high-impact ventures.

The evening was structured to balance formal protocol with authentic celebration, beginning with ceremonial welcomes from the City of Johannesburg and moving through a series of strategic addresses. Keynotes from Honourable Minister Stella Ndabeni and international voices such as Saudi Arabia's Ms Adwaa Aldakheel and the Global Entrepreneurship Network's Jonathan Ortmans framed entrepreneurship as a critical driver of economic resilience, inclusion, and cross-border collaboration. A meticulous, transparent adjudication process, overseen by an independent panel, ensured the awards' credibility, with winners selected from a highly competitive field of 30 shortlisted nominees across five thematic categories.

Five category awards were presented, each honouring startups that exemplify innovation with purpose: NetZero (Saudi Arabia) in GreenTech; Urdhvam Environmental Technologies (India) in AgriTech; CareerKit (South Africa) in EdTech; Backyard Creators (India) in HealthTech; and Regxta (Nigeria) in FinTech. Each winner received a \$15,000 USD cash prize, a trophy, and a symbolic "passport" to future opportunity, as framed by speakers throughout the night.

Beyond the awards, the ceremony facilitated significant diplomatic and networking moments, including a formal gift presentation to His Royal Highness Prince Fahad Abdulaziz Al Saud in acknowledgement of his foundational support. The programme seamlessly integrated cultural performance and extended networking, reinforcing the African spirit of communal celebration and fostering the relational capital essential for ecosystem growth.

The event was explicitly positioned not as an endpoint, but as "the beginning of implementation." It successfully reinforced the core Startup20 thesis: that entrepreneurs are central to solving global challenges, and that sustained, collaborative support across government, finance, and international partners are indispensable for transforming entrepreneurial potential into inclusive, sustainable economic growth.

Attendance Summary

The Startup20 Awards Ceremony successfully brought together 512 distinguished international guests, representing a strategic convergence of global entrepreneurial leadership, government, corporate, and institutional partners. This robust attendance underscores the event's significant reach and strategic position within the G20 engagement landscape.

International Representation:

The ceremony demonstrated truly global participation, with delegates attending from key entrepreneurial ecosystems across the world:

Africa



South Africa
(host nation)



Nigeria



Kenya



Tanzania



Lesotho



Democratic
Republic of Congo

Middle East



Saudi Arabia



Türkiye

Asia



India



Indonesia



Japan

Europe



United
Kingdom



France



Germany



Switzerland

North America



United States



Canada

South America



Brazil

The presence of delegates from 13 nations across six global regions confirms the international relevance and drawing power of the Startup20 initiative. The distinguished audience comprising award nominees, senior government officials, international investors, and ecosystem leaders created an unparalleled platform for cross-border dialogue and partnership formation. This diverse and high-level participation directly facilitated the ceremony's core objectives of global recognition, network strengthening, and collaborative alliance building, establishing a substantial foundation for continued international engagement beyond the event itself.



1. Introduction

The Startup20 (SU20) Awards and Gala Dinner marked the formal culmination of South Africa's leadership of the Startup20 engagement group within the G20 process. Notably, this event established a significant precedent, it was the first Startup competition ever held under the Startup20 banner, creating a new model for recognising global entrepreneurial excellence.

By launching this initiative, South Africa has introduced a tangible and celebratory activity that strengthens the legacy of the engagement group, providing a replicable framework for future SU20 presidencies. Positioned as both a celebratory and strategic moment within the broader Startup20 Summit, the Awards Ceremony served to honour outstanding innovation across global ecosystems while powerfully reinforcing the central role of entrepreneurship in driving inclusive economic growth, technological innovation, and systemic resilience.

The ceremony was intentionally designed to move beyond symbolic recognition. Instead, it functioned as a platform to affirm entrepreneurship as a policy-relevant, system-shaping force one that intersects with financial reform, digital transformation, sustainable development, and global market access. This positioning was reflected consistently across the programme structure, speaker contributions, and award categories.

Hosted in Johannesburg, South Africa's economic hub and the host city of the G20 processes, the evening brought together senior government leaders, international partners, ecosystem builders, financiers, founders, and innovators from across regions. The Awards Ceremony thus represented not only an endpoint, but a strategic bridge between dialogue, recognition, and future action.

The ceremony's esteemed audience reflected the full spectrum of its institutional and ecosystem support, with key dignitaries including:

- The Minister of Small Business Development, Honourable Minister Stella Ndabeni.
- The MMC for Development Planning in Johannesburg, Councillor Sibongile Eunice Mgcina.
- Members of Parliament, including Honourable Hendrik Christiaan Crafford Krüger of the Portfolio Committee for Small Business.
- International leadership, notably His Royal Highness Prince Fahad Abdulaziz Al Saud and the delegation from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.
- The Startup20 International Secretariat who had honoured South Africa with their presence.
- Ecosystem leaders and knowledge partners.
- Partners: The South African Department of Small Business Development, eVision, NEOM, Absa Bank, SEDFA, W&R Seta, Google, Amazon, Telkom, TIA, Huawei and 22 On Sloane.

2. Strategic Welcome and Mandate Framing

The SU20 Awards Ceremony was strategically sequenced to build a cohesive narrative from governmental mandate to global celebration. This deliberate structure moving from ministerial vision to collaborative reflection, to local welcome created a powerful framework that grounded the subsequent awards presentations in a clear narrative of leadership, partnership, and place.

2.1 Keynote Address: The Role of Startups and MSMEs in Economic Resilience and Inclusive Growth



Speaker: Honourable Minister Stella Ndabeni, Minister, Department of Small Business Development, Republic of South Africa

The keynote address by the Honourable Minister of Small Business Development, Ms Stella Ndabeni, represented a central anchor of the Awards Ceremony. Her address moved the programme decisively into a policy and governance register, reinforcing the strategic relevance of startups and MSMEs within South Africa's economic recovery, transformation, and

long-term development agenda.

The Minister began with a characteristically relatable and poignant metaphor, describing her walk to the stage as *"a long walk to freedom,"* a deliberate echo of the nation's struggle. She invited the audience to appreciate the weight of legacy, stating, *"those that have not struggled cannot fully express the long journey that was walked by those that came before us."*

Her acknowledgements were extensive and purposeful, recognising not only the international guests and parliamentary colleagues like Honourable Toby Chance, but also highlighting the often-overlooked structure of government, noting: *"South Africa has two ministers of business... I emphasise this because at times people want to really forget that we are a business."* This was a pointed affirmation of her department's central economic mandate. She warmly recognised her own departmental team, agency leadership, media, and, in a tender personal moment, her daughter in the audience.

Minister Ndabeni then powerfully reframed the purpose of the gathering. They were there, she declared, to celebrate *"the great work that is being done by those who decided to take action."* She honoured the

entrepreneurs in the room as *“the real economic freedom fighters”* individuals who balance rhetoric with action, who brave storms and knock on closed doors without appointments, and who *“never give up on their dream.”*

She anchored this modern struggle in the historical fight against apartheid, drawing direct parallels. She recounted the stories of struggle stalwarts like Oliver Tambo, who repeatedly failed Standard 6 not due to inability but because of systemic financial exclusion, illustrating *“the resilience and determination to say we are not going to give up.”* She explained that these leaders studied law deliberately to understand and dismantle the oppressive system piece by piece, using knowledge not for personal gain but for collective liberation.

The Minister made a compelling historical link to the present, asserting that the constitutional right to trade (Section 22) enjoyed by today’s entrepreneurs exists *“if it wasn’t for their struggles, if it wasn’t for their dedication.”* The central lesson for contemporary entrepreneurs, she urged, was to similarly *“understand their environment”* and challenge unjust systems within the legal framework.

Her speech then pivoted to a bold declaration on leadership: *“The next revolution can never be led by politicians alone. It requires an ecosystem with active entrepreneurs that do not only ideate but they also take action and influence the policy development.”* This set a clear mandate for collaborative governance.

She seamlessly connected this to the practical outcomes of the Startup20 process, praising the recommendations for advocating reforms in financial services to enable access to affordable finance and technology. To the nominees, she offered spiritual and practical encouragement: *“You still don’t know if you have won or not, but you must thank God that you are here today... The fact that you dreamt about it and you did not sleep on it... means you are a conqueror.”*

The Minister then raised the energy in the room by unveiling the award details: each category winner would receive a \$15,000 USD cash prize, a trophy, a certificate, and a commemorative cheque. She reiterated the core philosophy of the evening: *“Entrepreneurship is not just about profit. It is about purpose.”*

In a spirited defence of her department’s mission, she recounted its origins established in 2014 due to direct advocacy from organised business (NAFCOC) and countered critics who question its value. *“We just turned 11 years,”* she stated with resolve, expressing belief that with ecosystem support, *“entrepreneurs will occupy their rightful place.”*

Concluding with a final congratulation to the finalists, Minister Ndabeni’s address successfully positioned entrepreneurs as the rightful heirs to a legacy of resistance and builders of a new, inclusive economy. It was a powerful fusion of past struggle and future promise, cementing the government’s role as a partner to a

movement it cannot and should not seek to lead alone.

2.2 Welcome Address: City of Johannesburg



Speaker: Councillor Sibongile Eunice Mgcina, Member of the Mayoral Committee (MMC) for Development Planning in the City of Johannesburg

Following the opening segment, the programme transitioned to a welcome address delivered on behalf of the City of Johannesburg. Representing the host city, the MMC for Development Planning formally welcomed delegates to Johannesburg and situated the ceremony within the city's broader economic

and developmental vision.

Opening with a courteous acknowledgement to the programme director and a greeting to all delegates, Councillor Mgcina expressed her pleasure that the on-screen graphics correctly identified her portfolio, a subtle nod to the importance of precise governance and planning. She extended a formal welcome to the distinguished assembly, including the Startup20 Chairperson, founders of key partner organisations, Honourable Minister Stella Ndabeni, and all entrepreneurs present.

The core of her address elevated the purpose of the evening beyond competition. With conviction, she articulated:

"Today is not about winners. It is not about the second places. It is actually about acknowledging the overall role and contribution that you all make. The nomination in itself is an indictment of the success you have had across the year and the hard sweat and tears..."

She framed the gathered entrepreneurs as *"some of the bravest members of our society,"* individuals who forsake personal security to solve societal problems and create employment. This characterisation set a tone of profound respect, aligning entrepreneurial risk-taking with national service.

Transitioning to the role of local government, the MMC outlined a clear mandate for proactive partnership. She asserted that South Africa, and Johannesburg as its economic hub, *"must not fold our hands."* Instead, she

championed “*collaborative efforts*” as the engine to drive the economy forward and create better opportunities. Explicitly linking the city’s hosting of the G20 to local action, she outlined a vision for a “*smart city, a green economy, a cashless society,*” achievable only through innovation originating from business.

Councillor Mgcina provided a concrete example of this commitment: the ongoing clean-up of Johannesburg’s inner city and precincts. She presented this not merely as an urban management project, but as a tangible signal of the city’s dedication to fostering “*legitimate business*” and securing a viable future for both the city and the nation.

She concluded her address by poetically reaffirming Johannesburg’s identity and ambition, welcoming attendees to “*the city of gold, the city of opportunities, the calabash of the continent, the city that never sleeps.*” Her closing remark carried a sense of urgent optimism: “*The future is today and... we must create it today.*”

2.3 Opening Address: Reflections on the Startup20 Journey and Acknowledgement of Guests



Speaker: Mr Vuyani Jarana, Chairperson, Startup20 South Africa

The formal programme proceeded with a pivotal opening address delivered by Mr Vuyani Jarana, Chairperson of Startup20 South Africa. His remarks marked a deliberate transition in the evening’s tone, moving from celebratory welcome to a reflective, accountable, and forward-looking account of the national Startup20 journey. His address served to honour the collaborative architecture that made the event possible and to contextualise the awards

within a larger narrative of institutional building.

Mr Jarana commenced by formally acknowledging the distinguished guests and partners in attendance, situating the ceremony within its vital support network and expressing his profound appreciation for their contributions to the Startup20 initiative. His recognition served to underscore that the event represented not an isolated occasion, but a collective milestone for a broad and collaborative ecosystem.

He articulated the emotional core of his address, stating: *"I stand here filled with joy and gratitude for the seminal work done by the taskforces working with the Startup20 international secretariat, the Department of Small Business Development."* He emphasised that this work was only possible through the direct support and active leadership of Minister Stella Ndabeni, whom he credited not for passive approval, but for dynamic engagement: *"She supported us. She challenged us. She coached us. She wanted the best out of us."* In a moment of candid reflection, he added, *"Minister, even if I say it myself, I think the scorecard should be a bit green,"* acknowledging the positive outcomes of their shared efforts.

A significant portion of his gratitude was directed internationally. He recalled the *"path-finding"* early stages of South Africa's presidency and credited Prince Fahad and the International Secretariat for providing essential leadership and passionate advocacy for entrepreneurship. *"His passion for entrepreneurship, passion for progress got us where we are today,"* Jarana noted, stressing that such support was not taken for granted.

He further highlighted the exceptional, integrated partnership with the Department of Small Business Development, praising Director-General Ms Thulisile Manzini, Deputy Director-General Ms Qinisile Delwa, and the entire department for creating a supportive backbone. This collaboration, he suggested, had set a new benchmark for civic engagement within the G20.

Mr Jarana outlined the expansive, inclusive consultation process that defined South Africa's approach, detailing work with the Township Economy Council, universities, and entrepreneurs from Soweto to Mamelodi. This ensured their policy papers, while acknowledging room for deeper consultation, represented a wide spectrum of voices, shaping *"the future of global entrepreneurship."*

Crucially, he framed the awards not as a culmination but as a launchpad for continuity. Addressing the frequent question, *"What next after South Africa's presidency?"* he announced concrete steps for institutionalisation:

1. The incorporation of an NPC (Non-Profit Company), *"Startup South Africa,"* to ensure well-coordinated national ecosystems and connect entrepreneurs with funders.
2. The launch of an international Startup20 foundation focused not on creating new declarations, but on tracking the adoption and impact of recommendations across presidency cycles in India, Brazil, and beyond.

Concluding, Mr Jarana reframed the ceremony's significance: *"It's just ending today, but it's just the beginning of implementation."* This powerful statement positioned the evening's awards not as a final verdict on success, but as a catalyst within a sustained, collective mission to embed entrepreneurship at the heart of economic policy and growth.

3. Strategic Enablement: Partner Contributions to Summit Success

The successful execution of the SU20 Summit and Awards Ceremony was strategically enabled by a coalition of key partners whose contributions spanned essential financial, diplomatic, and intellectual support. This consortium comprised premier financial sponsors eVision, Absa Bank, and the thought leadership and global advocacy of the Global Entrepreneurship Network (GEN).

3.1 Partner Address: Falak Investment Hub



Speaker: Ms Adwaa Aldakheel, Founder and CEO, Falak Investment Hub

The podium welcomed Ms Adwaa Aldakheel, Founder and CEO of Saudi Arabia's Falak Investment Hub. Her address introduced a vital investment-centric viewpoint to the evening, blending personal narrative with a powerful vision for transnational collaboration. Speaking as part of the Startup20 delegation from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, she immediately connected with the host nation, praising South

Africa as *"the kingdom of rebirth, the kingdom of perseverance."*

Ms Aldakheel began with a striking thesis on the nature of innovation, stating, *"Innovation is not born in a country of comfort. It is born in a country of absolute bravery."* This framing positioned both her nation and the host country as crucibles for transformative change. She outlined the dual mission of Falak, which has grown into a holding group comprising Falak Advisory (creating engines of growth for entrepreneurs worldwide with a focus on Saudi Arabia) and Falak Ventures (managing micro-funds for family offices and ultra-high-net-worth individuals). Her success metrics were compelling: a portfolio market cap of ~\$550 million and an economic contribution of 2 billion Saudi Riyals to the Kingdom.

Ms Aldakheel then delivered a profound reframing of the evening's purpose. Moving beyond ceremonial recognition, she declared:

"In this incredible awards ceremony for founders, awards are not aimed to be awards. Awards are passports."

She elaborated that a passport for an entrepreneur means access to international markets and, more deeply, recognition for the bravery of entrepreneurship the struggle of worrying about salaries and sustenance until

product-market fit is proven. This resonated as a raw and authentic acknowledgment of every founder's journey in the room.

Speaking passionately as a woman leader, she contrasted global statistics where only 11% of Fortune 500 CEOs are female with the reality in Saudi Arabia, where over 45% of businesses are owned by women. Her invitation was direct: *"Every female in this room, Saudi Arabia has its doors open for you."*

She shared a poignant personal evolution, recalling how 15 years ago, mentioning her nationality prompted questions about oil. Today, she stood as a Saudi woman talking about *"human potential, entrepreneurship, and innovation."* This narrative underscored a national transformation she now represents.

Ms Aldakheel proceeded to highlight Saudi Arabia's emergence as the fastest-growing entrepreneurial ecosystem in the world, with startup funding growing 20x since 2016, ranked #1 in digital competitiveness, and powered by one of the world's youngest populations (average age 26). Her message was clear: the Kingdom is not just a source of capital but a ready collaborator, co-investor, and fellow nation *"rewriting narratives."*

She concluded by linking the destinies of both nations: *"Saudi Arabia and South Africa have something powerful. We are both nations rewriting narratives... raising women, youth, and also creating entrepreneurs to become the forefront of a national identity."* Her final belief captured the essence of the night: *"The world's next breakthrough will not come from comfort. They will come from places transforming themselves from within with courage."*

3.2 Partner Address: Absa



Speaker: Ms Joan Mogale, CEO, Absa Business Banking

The partner address from Absa, delivered by Ms Joanne Mogale, introduced a critical financial sector perspective, articulating the bank's role as an ecosystem enabler rather than a mere transactional lender. Ms Mogale began by formally acknowledging the dignitaries, partners, and most importantly the Startup20 award nominees, whose presence she identified as the core of the evening.

She immediately grounded her remarks in the macroeconomic reality of South Africa, citing definitive data to underscore the sector's significance:

- Small and medium enterprises constitute over 90% of all businesses in the country.
- They provide employment for approximately 60% of the labour force.
- They contribute 30% to the nation's GDP.

Against this backdrop, she posed the central question guiding Absa's mission: *"How can we as banks partner with government and all players in the value chain to do even more to spark innovation, drive inclusion, and empower sustainability?"*

Ms Mogale clearly defined Absa's evolved philosophy, moving decisively beyond conventional banking. She stated:

"At Absa, our commitment to this theme goes beyond just offering financial support. It is about enabling an ecosystem that helps our businesses to thrive and grow sustainably."

She acknowledged the sobering challenges reflected in research on the lived experiences of entrepreneurs, which can be *"disheartening."* However, she countered this by sharing her inspiration drawn from direct conversations with founders at the event and observing the collective willingness of all ecosystem participants to shape a better future. This, she said, made her *"feel encouraged and proud that we can all be part of a solution."*

She endorsed the Startup20 South Africa policy recommendations as a *"powerful road map,"* highlighting key areas like fit-for-purpose financing models, platform innovation, digital infrastructure, and affordable data. However, she identified the paramount theme as the *"recognition of the importance of partnership."* True progress, she argued, is only achievable through smart, intentional, and collective work.

Ms Mogale explicitly linked Absa's sponsorship of the awards to this partnership model, noting that the awards celebrate not just challenges overcome but the *"innate growth opportunities these businesses create to boost economic growth and drive job creation."* She highlighted the alignment with Absa's own strategic focus on supporting ventures in environmental areas like GreenTech and AgriTech.

Concluding with a resonant pledge, she defined Absa's ambition: *"Our goal is to truly be the bank of the entrepreneur."* This, she explained, requires constantly asking how the bank can better support the unique needs of SMEs at every stage of their journey. It is rooted in a fundamental *"belief in the potential within this country and economy and understanding that real progress only happens when we collaborate, when we partner and work together."*

Her final congratulations to the nominees and winners framed them as the “*embodiment of what can be achieved through persistent grit, excellence, and innovation.*” Ms Mogale’s address successfully positioned Absa not as a distant financier, but as an integrated, committed partner invested in the holistic success of the entrepreneurial ecosystem and the sustainable growth it propels.

3.3 Partner Address: Global Entrepreneurship Network (GEN)



Speaker: Mr Jonathan Ortman, Founder and President, Global Entrepreneurship Network (GEN)

The programme proceeded with a partner address delivered virtually by Mr Jonathan Ortman, Founder and President of the Global Entrepreneurship Network (GEN). His contribution provided a global perspective, situating the Startup20 Awards within the broader international entrepreneurship movement and reinforcing the systemic

importance of entrepreneurial ecosystems.

Mr. Ortman began by affirming the centrality of entrepreneurship to economic transformation, emphasising that bold ideas alone are insufficient without disciplined execution and measurable outcomes. Drawing on international experience, he highlighted the need for policy makers, ecosystem leaders, and entrepreneurs to operate in closer alignment. As he noted: “*It’s not enough to dream. Policy makers and ecosystem leaders must work side by side with entrepreneurs... rigorously measuring impact.*”

He further cautioned against complacency within entrepreneurship support organisations, arguing that scale of investment must be matched by demonstrable results. In this context, he called for greater accountability, transparency, and evaluation within the ecosystem.

A significant portion of his address focused on the future of entrepreneurship education and ecosystem performance, particularly in a post-artificial intelligence context. He stressed the importance of building pipelines for diverse entrepreneurs capable of tackling complex global challenges, while simultaneously ensuring that public and private investments yield meaningful returns.

Reflecting on international examples, Mr Ortman referenced Saudi Arabia’s Vision 2030 as an illustration of ambitious goal-setting paired with rigorous performance measurement. This comparison reinforced the

message that visionary policy frameworks must be accompanied by disciplined delivery.

Concluding his remarks, Mr Ortman officially declared Global Entrepreneurship Week open, highlighting it as a global mobilisation effort aimed at encouraging millions to move from ideation to action. In closing, he commended South Africa's leadership within Startup20, stating:

"I leave South Africa... inspired once more by Nelson Mandela's words: 'It seems impossible until it's done.'"

His address reinforced the global relevance of the Awards Ceremony, positioning Startup20 South Africa as an active contributor to shaping the future of entrepreneurship worldwide.

4. Awards Presentation: Recognising the Architects of Tomorrow

The awards ceremony constituted the pulsating heart of the Startup20 Awards evening, transforming the earlier discourses on policy, partnership, and potential into a tangible celebration of global entrepreneurial achievement. This segment was not merely a procedural announcement of winners but a carefully orchestrated narrative of validation, shared triumph, and the embodiment of Startup20's core mission. Following the keynote addresses that framed the macro-challenges, the awards zoomed into the micro-solutions the ventures and visionaries building the future, piece by transformative piece.

The atmosphere was meticulously curated by the Master of Ceremonies, who, prior to announcing the first winner, engaged the audience in a collective exercise in celebration. She led the room in practising a drumroll on tables and traditional ululations, stating, "In Africa, we don't just clap hands, right? We ululate, we dance, we sing." This proactive shaping of the audience's role underscored a fundamental theme of the night: recognition is not a passive act but an active, communal participation in the success of others.

4.1 Adjudication Committee Address



Speaker: Mr Gianluca Riccio, Member, Startup20 Awards Adjudication Committee

Prior to the announcement of the winners, Mr Riccio, representing the adjudication panel, took the stage to outline the integrity and rigour of the selection process. His brief but substantive address provided essential transparency, grounding the forthcoming awards in a credible, merit-based framework.

Mr Riccio began by clarifying his role, noting he was speaking not as part of the Startup20 organising body, but from the perspective of the B20, where every major enterprise was once a startup. He explained that the judging panel had been invited to evaluate the award submissions to ensure fairness and an external, enterprise-oriented lens.

He detailed a comprehensive process where a panel of nine independent judges from diverse backgrounds scored a shortlist of 30 nominees from 0 to 100 across criteria including the idea, product, financials, and alignment with G20 goals. He emphasised the intense competition, noting that whilst no one scored a perfect 100, no nominee scored below 50, affirming that *"all the companies were very valuable, very strong."* This transparency laid a

foundation of meritocracy, reinforcing the Minister's earlier assurance of a process free from favouritism.

As he stated during his address:

"The process was not easy. We had exceptional nominees across categories, and the deliberations were robust, considered and grounded in merit."

He framed the awards not as a hierarchy of winners and losers, but as a recognition of excellence within an exceptional field, remarking that the *"second and third classified nominees were not far apart."* In a reflective moment, he quoted Thomas Edison *"I never failed any experiment. I just found 10,000 ways that won't work"* to encourage all nominees, reinforcing that the very act of participation and submission was a sign of progress and resilience.

His overview concluded with a forward-looking note, describing the awards as *"passports"* for all finalists a concept also echoed by other speakers and affirming that every proposal submitted had been *"classified quite highly."*

The summit preceding the awards ceremony featured a pitching session where finalists presented their ventures, providing delegates with direct insight into the innovation and calibre of the competition. This session underscored the practical, entrepreneur-driven spirit of the event, highlighting the distinction between first and second prize winners through live demonstration of their solutions.

The awards were structured across five categories, each representing a priority innovation sector deemed critical for inclusive economic growth, sustainability, and resilience. The presentation of each category followed a compelling format: a detailed verbal profile of the nominees, building suspense, followed by the ceremonial opening of a sealed envelope on stage by a diverse set of award presenters from government, the organising secretariat, and partner institutions.

Category 1: GreenTech Startup of the Year

This inaugural category set a powerful tone for the evening, directly linking entrepreneurial innovation to the planet's most pressing existential challenge: climate change. It recognised ventures that are engineering the tools for decarbonisation, environmental restoration, and a just transition to a green economy.

The Nominees:

- Shippersider Maritime Technologies (Türkiye): An AI-powered SaaS platform driving decarbonisation in global shipping, simplifying operations and enabling real-time EU emissions tracking to help the industry cut costs

and carbon.

- RIA Green (Brazil): A company transforming electronic and photovoltaic waste into sustainable opportunities through recycling innovation and “green art,” strengthening circular economies and social inclusion.
- NetZero (Saudi Arabia): A climate solutions leader advancing nature-based carbon removal through smart afforestation and ecosystem restoration, using proprietary technology to map, monitor, and verify impact.

NetZero (Saudi Arabia) was announced as the winner. Their representatives took the stage to loud applause. In a move that transcended typical acceptance speeches and perfectly embodied the spirit of the category, the winner immediately announced they would donate the entire \$15,000 cash prize to plant “trees of hope” in both developed and underdeveloped areas of South Africa. This philanthropic commitment transformed the award from a recognition of past achievement into a seed for future environmental and social impact within the host nation, creating one of the most resonant moments of the night.

Category 2: AgriTech Startup of the Year

Recognising that the future of food security, rural livelihoods, and sustainable land use hinges on innovation, this category celebrated ventures leveraging technology to revolutionise agriculture. It highlighted the fusion of ancient practice with cutting-edge science to build climate-resilient and productive food systems.

The Nominees:

- Techno (Türkiye): A start-up revolutionising farming by upgrading traditional tractors into precision systems using sensors, GNSS, AI, and cloud tech, already boosting productivity for over 120 farmers.
- Urdhvam Environmental Technologies (India): A Pune-based company tackling India's groundwater crisis using IoT and robotics to create affordable, scalable solutions for restoring and sustaining water for drinking and farming.
- Puba (Brazil): A bioindustry innovator producing sustainable inputs for cosmetics and agribusiness from biodiversity, supporting small producers and combining green chemistry with social impact.

The award for AgriTech Startup of the Year was presented to Urdhvam Environmental Technologies (India). As the winning team was not present in person, the award was collected on their behalf. The presentation was made by a distinguished cohort including Mr. Vuyani Jarana, SU20 Chairperson, and the Chief Director of Funding Support and Coordination from the Department of Small Business Development.

Category 3: EdTech Startup of the Year

In a world facing rapid digital transformation and pervasive youth unemployment, this category honoured ventures building bridges between learning and earning. It championed solutions that democratise access to skills, career guidance, and the tools necessary for individuals to thrive in the economies of tomorrow.

The Nominees:

- MAXY Academy (Indonesia): An AI-driven edtech ecosystem delivering hands-on training and certification in AI, cyber security, and digital marketing to build a future-ready digital workforce across Southeast Asia.
- CareerKit (South Africa): A social enterprise addressing Africa's youth unemployment crisis through AI-powered tools and gamified resources, like the RIAC board game, that have already guided over 15,000 learners from self-discovery to career readiness.
- +1 Code (Brazil): An impact-driven platform empowering youth from underserved communities to enter the tech market through a hyper-contextualised learning approach that links local culture to technical skills.

The announcement of CareerKit (South Africa) as the winner triggered an unmistakable surge of energy in the room a wave of localised pride and validation. This reaction underscored the profound resonance of seeing a homegrown solution, addressing a quintessentially local challenge like youth unemployment, validated on a global G20-affiliated stage.

Category 4: HealthTech Startup of the Year

This award spotlighted entrepreneurship's vital role in augmenting healthcare systems, improving accessibility, affordability, and outcomes. It recognised innovations that translate medical and technological advances into practical, human-centric solutions, particularly for underserved populations.

The Nominees:

- Prevenir Care (France): An AI-driven platform redefining preventive healthcare by making personalised, lifestyle-based primary prevention accessible to all through a network of certified professionals.
- Backyard Creators (India): A medtech innovator developing a breakthrough non-surgical, wearable bionic ear that restores hearing through magnetic stimulation, offering a safe and affordable alternative to invasive implants.
- RioGen (Brazil): A pioneering biotech start-up transforming cancer diagnosis with non-invasive molecular tests, beginning with a urine-based assay for prostate cancer that uses machine learning to predict malignancy risk.

The award for HealthTech Startup of the Year was presented to Backyard Creators (India). With the team not present to accept in person, the award was collected on their behalf by Mr. Pavan Kumar Ponnuru. This win highlighted how deep-tech innovation, guided by empathy, can restore fundamental human faculties, exemplifying how start-up ingenuity can directly enhance quality of life.

Category 5: FinTech Startup of the Year

As the final competitive category, this award targeted the lifeblood of entrepreneurship: access to capital and financial services. It celebrated platforms dismantling systemic barriers to financial inclusion, thereby unlocking economic agency for individuals and fuel for small businesses across the Global South.

The Nominees:

- Regxta (Nigeria): A tech-enabled microfinance platform using alternative data and a hybrid agent model to provide fast, fair credit to underserved individuals and SMEs, boasting over 23,000 active customers.
- T-Assets (India): A fintech advancing sustainability by providing supply chain finance to partners in green sectors like electric vehicles and solar energy, fuelling business growth whilst reducing emissions.
- Pumpkin (South Africa): A digital lender using machine learning to offer fast, fair financing to SMEs in the agri-food value chain, helping them build credit histories through a “funding ladder” model.

Regxta (Nigeria) was announced as the FinTech Startup of the Year. Presented by figures from the Department of Small Business Development, the secretariat, and partner Absa Bank, this award closed the competitive cycle by honouring a venture that provides the essential infrastructure capital upon which all other start-up sectors depend to scale and thrive.



5. Symbolism and meaning of the awards

Throughout the ceremony, the tangible prizes were imbued with deeper symbolic meaning, consistently reinforced by the programme's messaging. As Minister Ndabeni had articulated, winners received not only a \$15,000 US cash prize but also a trophy "symbolising global excellence," a certificate, and a commemorative cheque to mark the moment. This framing elevated the awards beyond mere competition.

The core philosophy was succinctly stated by the Minister: "Entrepreneurship is not just about profit. It is about purpose." This message resonated across the entire awards segment, positioning the ceremony as both a recognition of commercial innovation and a recommitment to values of fairness, inclusion, and long-term societal impact.

Post-Awards Honours and Cultural Culmination

Following the presentation of the five competitive category awards, the programme pivoted to a profound moment of diplomatic recognition. Honourable Minister Stella Ndabeni invited His Royal Highness Prince Fahad Abdulaziz Al Saud to the stage. Framing the gesture not as a mere formality but as a heartfelt tribute to personal partnership, the Minister stated, "*There are people who come into our lives and leave a footprint... Whilst everyone strives to make a difference, we live to recognise some amongst others.*" She presented a gift from the South African government, acknowledging the Prince's "*tireless work,*" "*outstanding support,*" and pivotal leadership within the Startup20 International Secretariat, which had been instrumental in guiding South Africa's presidency journey. This act solidified the human relationships that underpin formal international cooperation.

6. Reflection: Diplomacy, Symbolism, and Acknowledgment

The ceremony naturally progressed into a pivotal segment dedicated to honouring foundational partnerships and reflecting on the broader meaning behind the recognition. This part of the programme served a dual purpose: first, to acknowledge the profound diplomatic and personal collaborations that underpin the international Startup20 initiative through a significant gesture of appreciation; and second, to revisit and reinforce the core values; purpose, impact, and inclusion that elevate the awards beyond mere competition.

It provided necessary space to honour the foundational partnerships and the operational perseverance, particularly of the SU20 Secretariat, hosted and executed by 22 On Sloane, that translated a strategic vision into a celebrated reality. This sequence seamlessly bridged the celebration of entrepreneurial achievement with a deeper contemplation of the ecosystem's collaborative spirit, setting the stage for the final, heartfelt acknowledgements of the collective effort required to bring the historic event to life.

6.1 Closing Remarks: Vote of Thanks and Reflections



Speaker: Mr Kizito Okechukwu, Head of the Startup20 Secretariat

The formal programme concluded with reflective and disarmingly candid closing remarks from Mr Kizito Okechukwu. His address served as a moment of consolidation and authentic gratitude, pulling back the curtain on the immense collaborative effort required. Mr Okechukwu began his address by expressing sincere gratitude, immediately deflecting praise to his core team. He specifically recognised Ms

Carmen Rudd, Project Lead and Ms Boitshoko Shoke, Content Lead crediting them as the primary drivers who “pulled this off,” alongside the support of the wider departmental colleagues. He emphasised that his own role was one of strategic oversight, while the operational execution and tireless effort belonged to his team.

Mr. Okechukwu's speech highlighted the voluntary, mission-driven spirit that fuelled the initiative, recounting how the Chairperson, Mr. Vuyani Jarana, had convened the ecosystem, driven by belief. He extended profound thanks to key enablers: the Department of Small Business Development for foundational support; Absa for crucial commercial backing; and Prince Fahad and the Saudi Arabian government for their unwavering

partnership and grace.

His remarks reinforced the Secretariat's role in ensuring continuity and integrity, acknowledging the international secretariat, taskforces and all G20 governments involved. He concluded by stating that, "It was an honour serving you.

6.2 Concluding Reflection: Strategic Significance of the Startup20 Awards

The Startup20 Awards Ceremony achieved more than the recognition of exemplary ventures; it crystallised the values, ambitions, and partnerships defining Startup20 South Africa's contribution to the G20 process. Through a programme that seamlessly balanced celebratory African culture with substantive global discourse, the ceremony reaffirmed entrepreneurship as a central pillar of economic resilience, innovation, and inclusive growth.

By moving from a welcome grounded in history and policy, through a transparent and celebratory adjudication process, to a culmination that honoured both winners and the partnerships that made it possible, the ceremony demonstrated remarkable coherence and strategic intent. It positioned Startup20 South Africa not merely as a host, but as a credible convenor and bridge-builder between policy, practice, and purpose.

In doing so, the event left participants with a resonant and clear message, echoing the words of Jonathan Ortman and embodied in the night's journey: that the path to equitable growth lies in empowering entrepreneurs, strengthening ecosystems, and, most importantly, sustaining collaboration long after the celebration ends. As multiple speakers affirmed, this was not a conclusion, but "the beginning of implementation."





**FOUNDATION
AND ALLIANCES**

**FINANCE AND
INVESTMENT**

**TRADE AND
MARKET ACCESS**

**INCLUSION AND
SUSTAINABILITY**

**TOWNSHIP AND RURAL
ENTREPRENEURSHIP**