



INNOVATION COUNCIL

## **Spotlight:** **10 Questions for** **Wetility & Renewables in Africa**

Innovation Council sat down with Vincent Maposa, the Founder and CEO of Wetility and Tony Tiyou, the Founder and CEO of Renewables in Africa, to talk about the beginnings of their companies and what made them successful.

Wetility is a rooftop solar PV technology company based in South Africa. It creates optimal capacity for stand-alone and sectional title homes and small commercial buildings. The company harnesses the power of the sun, with the aim of introducing the world to a hybrid solution that works seamlessly and in harmony with current power supply options.

Renewables in Africa is a clean energy engineering consultancy providing services in renewable energy and energy management to project developers and investors. RiA is primarily focused on projects in Africa, but it does advise clients about energy projects in other emerging markets as well. RiA is also a media platform with the vision to transform Africa and African lives by leveraging the power of renewable energy.

Wetility and Renewables in Africa work closely together.

## 1

### How did your companies get started?

**Vincent:** Tony and I met through a mutual contact who suggested that we could work together. We were figuring out what our Wetility business model would be. We knew we wanted to engage in the green tech sector, and the conversations with Tony were helpful in identifying what our niche could be. So we set him up as our advisor and we became the guys on the ground with the technology, establishing ourselves in the market.

**Tony:** RiA adventure started 5 years ago while I was working as a consultant in the Renewable Energy space. I realized that there was a lack of awareness about what renewable energy is and so I decided to set up a company that will do both advocacy work and work on concrete engineering projects on the ground.

## 2

### What was the moment when you knew that your businesses were on track for a successful future?

**Vincent:** I think we knew the moment we started the webinars and the reception / interest that people showed was impressive. It was even before we had a product. We felt that with that enthusiasm, we should forge ahead.

**Tony:** We started the RiA platform initially as a blog as we identified a gap in the awareness space. We quickly saw the interest people showed us and also the level of access we were able to gain with players in the sectors. We knew we were on something good.

## 3

### Name some factors behind your companies' success to date.

**Vincent:** One factor for sure is the team we have built. Collaboration has also been helpful in getting our products developed. Another factor has been, incidentally, COVID. We had a chance to test our business model because of the pandemic, online working, etc. In addition, deterioration of the power grid and services provides by utilities in SA. It allows us to service customers in a meaningful way by providing service that improves their lives.

**Tony:** Our values are clearly the reason for our success to date. We have 6. Let me mention the first 3:

1. *Say what you do, do what you say. Respect your words. Follow through.*  
This is a key one for us and I make sure everybody in the company is aware of it.
2. *Meet deadlines all the time. When it's not possible, inform the team and justify.*  
Timekeeping is essential. More than simply meeting deadlines, it is about respect for ourselves and other people
3. *Think outside the box and solve problems.*  
This is a classic. You can't be a successful company if you do not take the time and effort to solve problem.

## 4

### What is the role of innovation at your businesses?

**Vincent:** Innovation contributes to probably around 70% of our success. We haven't reinvented solar panels, but rather we provide a different way for customers to interact with our service and what they get from interacting with our business. Good customer experience and interface is paramount for us. They should go from a preliminary quote to actual installation in a seamless and efficient manner—this experience requires innovation. The inverter or panel they could buy elsewhere. But the customer service and explanation of what they are getting is a function of innovation. This is what we deliver.

**Tony:** Innovation is everything for us. We started our company by innovating a business model: bringing together a media platform and engineering expertise. For us to stand out from the crowd, to grow, we have to innovate. We can be more creative in developing new solutions with others—this is why we are always very happy to connect and engage with innovative companies like Wetility.

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### How much does collaboration matter for your work?

**Vincent:** For us, collaboration occurs with a range of people. Installers are contractors. We do the engineering and procurement work, then construction management. They do installation. We work also with brand consultants, with tech developers, and with Tony through his platform Renewables in Africa. We seek partners aligned with what we want to do. We work with a range of people who have ended up driving us in certain directions or in identifying and refining our vision.

**Tony:** Our mission is the Bring (Back) Power to Africa, and part of our vision is to fully electrify Africa by 2040. We won't be able to achieve this without collaboration. Like the good old African proverb says: If you want to go fast, go alone, if you want to go further, go together. Collaboration is essential to our work.

## 6

### What can governments do to foster innovation and entrepreneurship?

**Vincent:** : One of the things –and this is probably a reflection of governments in Africa—is there is a broad opportunity for SMEs to drive economic growth, youth employment, etc. That is a universal thing across governments—including at provincial and local levels. Governments should really be supporting SMEs. So far unfortunately this is lacking. It goes beyond funding. Do governments make it easy to do business for small and medium sized companies. How quickly do they pay you for instance if you do work for a government client. In practice they are often the last to pay—compared to private sector. Actions don't match their words in terms of commitment to SMEs.

**Tony:** I would strongly subscribe to what Vincent has said. I'll simply add that to foster innovation and entrepreneurship, you have to start by having a clear vision, together with clear objectives. From there, you derive the right strategy and implementation to make it happen. Initiatives without a proper vision won't lead to significant outcomes.

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## How have your companies interacted with the intellectual property rights system?

**Vincent:** Vincent: How we built our team was going out and finding specialists, each with particular set of skills. This led us to develop our own IP across products – hardware, software, and financial products. Lots of small businesses just use existing platforms to drive their business, something available in the market. This is fine, but it's not our approach. If market shifts, those guys have to pivot or they are left out in the cold because they don't have their own solution. In our situation, IP in some cases is related to our hardware and in other cases we use trademarks. In terms of our patent filings, these are mostly in South Africa, with the help of technical IP experts and legal experts.

**Tony:** As a media platform and as project developers, we haven't had much opportunity to interact with IP. However, in our advisory service, we support companies like Wetility which do engage with IP systems. Whenever possible, we are clearly advocating to follow the Wetility example.

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## What are the most important lessons that your teams have learned so far?

**Vincent:** In terms of positive lessons: there is no shortage of demand for what we are trying to do! The differentiator is whether you can supply that demand and meet that demand. It is not just about closing sales. You need also to implement the solution, and have a solid value chain to ensure you deliver on what you sell and promise. Sales need to become actual installations. This is a key lesson.

Another one is we have now practical evidence in terms of what skills shortages exist in our space. As you get deeper into implementation the circle is really small. Not much is being done within school system and also within our own system for employing people to effectively extend the circle—time and resource constraints. And this can have a significant impact on how far your organization can go. We think this is worsening over time. We are not sure how to build skills in the areas we need over time—educational institutions did this in the past, but there are fewer of them over time. Also, the experienced people are the ones you go immediately to in order to do an installation for you; but what about giving apprenticeship and opportunities to junior staff. The circle becomes smaller if that is not happening, due to the way you are hiring people to work with you, and what the contractors are doing with their own staff. Nobody is looking at this from the macro level to be sure the skills exist at an adequate level. In South Africa, installers following all regulations and highly skilled, there are probably not more than 100 (companies and maybe 200 individuals). This limits the installations you can do per day, whereas the market currently demands more.

Also, it is hard to raise money and do business online for instance due to the pandemic. You need to see people, meet them, and discuss in person with them. Show them cohesion of your team, good social skills to apply for sales. When you interact only online it's really hard to get yes/no, or to engage in a meaningful way with potential investors to show them your vision.

Also, there is the question of where does capital sit and where is it deployed. Most of our investors are not based in SA. So our access to them was made even harder in recent times – we could not travel and vice versa. This was a major challenge. How can we solve this? We are still not sure at this time.

**Tony:** As a new company, you go through many iterations before eventually settling on a business model that suits you. We clearly experienced that. What you have in mind when you start may not be what you end up with. You should be flexible enough to adapt, leveraging market feedback.

There is a stark difference between theory and reality. When we started, we wanted to focus on one country and to perfect our game before expanding into other countries. Doing business in Africa, depending what territory you are into, you quickly learn that to keep your business afloat you may have to approach many territories at once.

Another key lesson is to keep the optimism and keep believing. Especially when the going gets tough.

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## **How do you see your role in advancing environmental sustainability?**

**Vincent:** First, we want to be part of green economy. This is probably obvious given our sector. Also, we aspire to be a catalyst for bigger and more significant changes that may or may not happen because of us. Attitudes about renewables are changing and this can create new opportunities for others in the clean energy sector. As restrictions on greenhouse gas reductions are put in place, as healthcare become more of a priority so that we control emissions (government regulations), and as people realize the socio-economic impact of having electricity more often and more regularly – the space for us to engage and make a difference grows. Us achieving our business goals is a small contribution as part of a bigger wave of positive change in this space.

**Tony:** This is part of our raison d'être! From the name of our company already, you can see that we are set up to promote and provide clean energy solutions. Not only we are seeing ourselves as advocates for the industry and solutions providers, but we also want to be part of a bigger movement.

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## **New technologies and approaches sometimes face a lag in customer and government regulators' acceptance. What can be done to accelerate uptake of novel products and services?**

**Vincent:** As long as things are presented to clients in a way that is meaningful, this is the first step. From a government perspective, our sector is highly regulated. Electricity, water, telecom are highly regulated in all countries. This is an advantage and disadvantage. Lack of fluidity at times regarding things that are clearly good and necessary can make it hard for businesses like ours to achieve our goals. SA has had arbitrary targets and regulations in place for years, which makes it hard for innovative businesses. There needs to be an improved environment of regulations that reflects technological advances and that has been developed in consultation with industry players could accelerate industry development (our sector) and improve the energy system more quickly. Instead we are seeing deterioration of the electricity services in SA and, despite opportunities to make electricity more accessible, the environment makes this hard. Licensing restrictions are a key example. The technology is there, the financing is there, but regulations particularly around licensing are obstacles.

**Tony:** Again, I would agree with Vincent wholeheartedly here. I think that, also, the industry and society should back political leaders and candidates with a green agenda and make them accountable once they are in power. This way elected leaders would know they have to act to keep their promises. This could help to fast-track the emergence of more favorable regulations.



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