

FEATURE | THE JOURNEY OF A YOUNG SCIENCE COMMUNICATOR

The journey of a young science communicator

Letago Kgomoewana was not always planning to work in the climate change field but now she is building climate change resilience with the people for the people.

Like all postgraduate students, Letago had a lot on her plate. She had meetings to set up with local farmers in the Mopani district in Limpopo to collect qualitative data for her research project. She had papers to read, a thesis to write, and all the regular demands on the time of a young environmental geographer.

So, when Dr Sheldon Strydom, senior lecturer in Geography and Environmental Studies at the North-West University, encouraged Letago, his student, to enter the FameLab 2021 competition, she was hesitant.

Little did she know that in less than a year she would be representing South Africa as one of the top young science communicators in the world, meeting international researchers, and sharing with the world her passion to see indigenous knowledge systems considered in improving our climate resilience.



Letago Kgomoewana from FameLab. FameLab is well known for the quirky props used by young researchers to explain scientific concepts with clarity and charisma in a way that a general audience could understand and enjoy.

Letago Kgomoewana was not always planning to work in the climate change field. But her interest in climate change resilience was sparked during her honours degree year when she learnt about climate change-related extreme events and disasters.

Combined with her home-grown experience and background in agriculture, this led the way to her current master's degree project that looks into the use of indigenous knowledge systems and their potential to be included in disaster risk management strategies and climate change mitigation policies.

In her time spent with local communities, Letago quickly realised that no one understands an environment like the people who live and work in it. Letago is passionate about encouraging science and scientists to acknowledge the importance of indigenous knowledge and adding the voice of the public, who Letago sees as "libraries of indigenous knowledge" to the climate change conversation. And it was this passion that made Letago stand out during the FameLab SA 2021 competition.

"As someone who was completely unaware of FameLab and science communication prior to entering FameLab, the competition provided me with a series of firsts. It gave me an opportunity to talk about my scientific research outside of my department at North-West University. As a scientist, it opened my mind to a whole world of like-minded and passionate people who want to use their science to change the world," says Letago.

After winning the local FameLab heat held at the North-West University, Letago joined a group of talented young researchers from universities and research institutes across the country to hone their science communication skills and compete in the national competition.

In October 2021, Letago came first in the FameLab SA 2021 final. As part of her award, she would attend an international

FameLab, also nicknamed the 'Pop Idols' of the science world, is a global science communication competition that gives young scientists the chance to present their research in an entertaining and engaging way to a general audience. In South Africa, FameLab is run by the South African Agency for Science and Technology Advancement and Jive Media Africa, a company that specialises in science communication training. One of the benefits of this competition is the opportunity it offers to contestants to improve their science communication, public engagement and presentation skills through the various workshops contestants attend during their FameLab journey.

science communication masterclass and go on to represent South Africa alongside national winners from 23 different countries in the international FameLab competition.

All the training and practice paid off as Letago was voted one of the FameLab 2021 international top 10 finalists. During the online international final, Letago impressed the judges with her storytelling talent and, to the delight of her enthusiastic #teamletago supporters, Letago was awarded the position of first runner-up.

In her three-minute talk, Letago shared some of the knowledge held by local farmers on how to deal with the challenges of a changing climate and what science can learn from them. "This finalist hooked us in right from the start and displayed an absolute passion for her subject. She showed us how something quite unexpected can be one of the global solutions to one of the most pressing problems we face," said panel judge Dr Tara Shine, an environmental scientist and policy advisor.

Virologist Alex Cloherty from the Netherlands claimed the title of FameLab International 2021 Winner. She compared the immune system to a game of chess, while Samantha Nixon from Australia thrilled audiences with her research about using spider venom to treat sheep parasites, securing her the second runner-up spot.

Letago feels that the FameLab experience exceeded all her expectations, building her as a scientist and individual. "I hope that my journey to the world stage inspires a new generation of bold, young researchers who will take up careers in science and technology, research and science communication.

"Indigenous knowledge, although previously viewed as inferior to scientific knowledge, is proving to be just as effective as the latter. Indigenous communities have not always gained from advances in science and technology, especially where risk reduction is involved. As a result, indigenous people have over the years come up with ideas, applied them and maintained knowledge bases to assist them with disaster risk reduction," says Letago.

Since her work with indigenous knowledge began, Letago has found it a reliable source of knowledge because it has so many references. "A method cannot be used for over 50 years without some proof that it is effective. Indigenous people have sustained their livelihoods for generations." Letago believes that conversations around sustainability should include indigenous and cultural knowledge.

Her research uncovered some of the many methods used by Limpopo farmers to adapt to the impact of climate change. Farmers use creeper crops, such as watermelon, pumpkin



FameLab takes participants on a journey of personal development through training and experience in science communication, public engagement and presentation skills.

and sweet potato, to control weeds and maintain soil moisture levels. The *ranjo* system, a traditional method of dividing the village into pasture zones, helps to conserve pastureland and prevent drought-borne disasters. The behaviour of insects and other animals, such as locusts, snakes, butterflies and bees, are carefully observed as indicators of approaching droughts.

As a scientist, science communicator and indigenous knowledge systems advocate, Letago believes that no single form of knowledge, scientific or other, can be a catalyst of change on its own. Her advice to young people who hope to pursue a career in science is to engage in science programmes from an early age to explore the different fields of science and find their niche.

"From Science Olympiads in schools and the Eskom Expo for Young Scientists all the way to FameLab, there are so many opportunities to put yourself out there and begin to establish yourself as a young scientist. African science is fast-growing and our research is having valuable global impact, which is why this generation of up-and-coming scientists is so important."

Article prepared by Jive Media Africa (www.jivemedia.co.za).

If you would like to participate in FameLab or host a heat as part of the national competition, please contact: famelab@jivemedia.co.za