

Elevator Pitch Contest 2018

Innovations for Aflatoxin-Free Food Systems

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As competition for research and investment funds increases, young scientists and entrepreneurs need to effectively articulate their ideas in ways that are persuasive and precise. The Elevator Pitch Contest (EPC), a unique platform devised by *Sight and Life*, is an interactive approach whereby entrepreneurs must boil down their innovative concepts into a persuasive pitch to present in front of a distinguished team of experts, investors and the larger nutrition community.

The third *Sight and Life* EPC was held in Mumbai, India, in October 2018 during the 19th World Congress of the International Union of Food Science and Technology (IUFoST). It was hosted by the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN), in collaboration with *Sight and Life*, Mars, Incorporated and Postharvest Loss Alliance for Nutrition (PLAN), as part of the Business Platform for Nutrition Research (BPNR), co-funded by the Government of Canada.

“The Elevator Pitch Contest is a great opportunity for young entrepreneurs to communicate their idea, to talk about it, and to learn from mentors and peers about how to improve it and how to connect with others to take the idea further”

Klaus Kraemer, Sight and Life

Aflatoxin control

This third EPC, titled Innovations for Aflatoxin-Free Food Systems, sought disruptive ideas in aflatoxin control from students, young professionals and entrepreneurs working in the field of innovative products, services, technologies, applications and approaches for reducing or eliminating exposure to aflatoxin-contaminated foods and feed.

Aflatoxins – toxic metabolites of the *Aspergillus flavus* and *Aspergillus parasiticus* fungi – are one of the greatest risks to food security, health and wellbeing in low- and middle-income countries. Over 4 billion people are at risk of chronic exposure to aflatoxins through contaminated foods, which can lead to acute liver damage and liver cancer. Aflatoxins may also be involved in immune suppression, as well as growth impairment in children. Aflatoxins significantly impact trade and economy. The inability to achieve import standards can create barriers to the development of sustainable agriculture, and can lead to huge economic losses for individual farmers and entire countries.

The competition

Open to young entrepreneurs from around the world, the contest drew over 53 entries from 15 countries and 25 universities across diverse categories and stages. Three independent reviewers rated the entries and selected six finalists.

The six finalists were awarded a round-trip to Mumbai, where they presented their ideas for an aflatoxin-free world to a panel of judges, experts and potential investors. The panel of judges included:

- > **Klaus Kraemer**, Managing Director, *Sight and Life*
- > **Amare Ayalew**, Director of Partnership, Aflatoxin Control in Africa (PACA)
- > **Kalpna Beesabathuni**, Global Lead for Technology and Entrepreneurship Lead, *Sight and Life*
- > **Mduduzi Mbuya**, Senior Technical Specialist, GAIN
- > **Wendy Gonzalez**, Technical Specialist, GAIN



Jury members of the Elevator Pitch Contest in Mumbai, India. From left to right: Dr Klaus Kraemer (*Sight and Life*), Dr Amare Ayalew (PACA), Kalpana Beesabathuni (*Sight and Life*), Dr Mduduzi Mbuya (GAIN) and Dr Wendy Gonzalez (GAIN).

Before the competition, each finalist had the opportunity to receive mentoring and feedback regarding their concept and presentation in order to help hone their pitch. The finalists worked with Nirjhor Rahman, the Country Director of YGAP, an incubator supporting impact entrepreneurs, through multiple group and individual sessions to refine their pitch and improve their narrative. They also met with a previous EPC finalist who shared his experiences of the competition. Kalpana Beesabathuni, a *Sight and Life* team member and the Chief Architect of the EPC, worked with the finalists to create a gripping narrative to help them do their best at the event.

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“We designed the contest in such a way that it provides the tools for young scientists and engineers to communicate their unique ideas in a persuasive manner – in the time it takes to ride an elevator”

Kalpana Beesabathuni, Sight and Life

Timeline to conduct the Elevator Pitch Contest



The winners

The winners of the EPC were: Alexandra Warrington from Future Food Now, and Alexandra Sanderson from Kumwe Harvest. Benedikt Suter, Board Member of *Sight and Life* Foundation, and Vish Prakash, Scientific Council Chair for IUFOST, presented the award. Each winner received US\$15,000 seed funding to further develop their concept.

Alexandra Warrington presented a solution for using aflatoxin at-risk groundnut cake, a by-product from oil crushing, as feed for insect farming. The innovation encompasses using insect farming technology to remove aflatoxins from at-risk foods, namely groundnuts and potentially also maize, in Malawi. This approach directly removes aflatoxins from the human food chain, as recent studies have shown that insects fed on aflatoxin-



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Winners of the Elevator Pitch Contest, Alexandra Warrington and Alexandra Sanderson, with Benedikt Suter, Board Member of *Sight and Life*, and Dr Vish Prakash, Chairman of the IUFoST Conference

contaminated feed do not accumulate aflatoxins. These insects can be used as protein-rich food for human consumption or else used as a nutritious ingredient for inclusion in livestock diets. Alexandra Warrington is a graduate in Food Chain Systems from Cranfield University, UK.

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“It was an invigorating process to watch these passionate development professionals and young entrepreneurs present their innovations, which have the potential to improve food systems globally”

Mduduzi Mbuya, GAIN

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Alexandra Sanderson and her team from Kumwe Harvest proposed a rapid and controlled, ‘just-in-time’ postharvest processing model in which maize is aggregated ‘on the cob’ and processed immediately using high-capacity shelling and drying machines. The process reduces farmer postharvest time to 4 days from the current average of 67 days, virtually eliminating

the development of aflatoxins. The process involves buying unshelled maize on the cob from farmers after harvest and transporting it to a central processing facility for immediate shelling and drying, before delivering it to commercial buyers. Alexandra Sanderson is a graduate from the University of Bristol, UK, specializing in quantitative and statistical analysis.

Lessons learned

Lessons learned during the EPC process included:

- 1. Engaging the audience:** brochures with briefs of the finalists’ ideas, venue and event timings were distributed at the conference. This was helpful in reminding the audience to attend the contest. A professional emcee also hosted the event, which was helpful in keeping the energy levels high and keeping the audience engaged throughout the duration of the event.
 - 2. Developing crisp presentations:** the contest stressed mentorship as part of the process, and each participant had the opportunity to receive adequate guidance, training and practice time to refine their pitch. This resulted in confident presentations, which made a significant contribution to the success of the event.
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3. Adding value and appeal: a videographer recorded 30-s introductory videos of all finalists. The respective videos were played before the finalists presented their innovations. This helped the audience and judges connect with the finalists, beyond just the technical concept of their innovation. In addition, a 1-min pitch of all the innovations was recorded and shared with the finalists to help them promote their ideas on various platforms.

Overall, the EPC in Mumbai was a success and the lessons learned will support improvements for future competitions. The six finalists brought this contest to life with their cutting-edge ideas, and we are looking forward to bright futures for all of them:

Alexandra Warrington, Soil Association, Bristol, UK – Future Food Now: Aflatoxin at-risk groundnut cake as a by-product from oil crushing is used as a feed source for insect farming.

Alexandra Sanderson, Kigali, Rwanda – Kumwe Harvest: A rapid and controlled, just-in-time process whereby maize is collected on the cob and processed immediately by utilizing high-capacity machinery.

William Ofori Appaw, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Ghana – Food Logistics:

Encapsulating scientifically proven pre- and post-harvest solutions to empower smallholder farmers to reduce aflatoxin contamination in peanut production.

Anthony Phan, Feed the Future Innovation Lab for Horticulture, University of California, Davis, CA, USA – Dry Card:

Provides farmers and traders an affordable and simple way to determine whether their products are dry enough and will not produce aflatoxin.

Daniel Cavanaugh, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD, USA – Clean Crop Technologies.

Emerson Eggers, CO, USA – Dry Chain America:

Enabling safe and efficient drying and post-harvest storage with desiccant-based drying beads technology and moisture-proof packaging.

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The six Elevator Pitch Contest finalists and judges. From left to right: Alexandra Warrington (finalist), William Ofori Appaw (finalist), Anthony Phan (finalist), Dr Mduzuzi Mbuya (judge), Dr Klaus Kraemer (judge), Dr Amare Ayalew (judge), Dr Wendy Gonzalez (judge), Kalpana Beesabathuni (judge), Emerson Eggers (finalist), Alexandra Sanderson (finalist) and Daniel Cavanaugh (finalist).