



BUILDING AN INCLUSIVE APPROACH TO ENERGY ACCESS



EEP Africa 2020
**RISING ENERGY
LEADER**

MAYA KHONJE-STEWART

Co-Founder and COO,
Yellow Solar (Malawi)

Maya's journey in the clean energy sector began in 2008, a few years after university, when she got a job at a biomass energy start-up in Malawi. This offered a clear view of the level of energy poverty in her country, where more than 90% of people live without access to electricity and over 95% still use three-stone fires for cooking.

Over the next few years, Maya was involved in the promotion and dissemination of a range of fuel-efficient technologies for household and productive use. She recognized that the biggest challenge facing sellers of cookstoves and solar products was accessibility. In 2012, she founded Maeve Project, an NGO focused on raising awareness about energy efficiency and designing effective rural dissemination strategies.

Maya also began actively lobbying the government to improve access to energy. Malawi set a goal of 2 million cookstoves by 2020 and Maya directly contributed to more than 50% of the target, with over 1 million improved cookstoves and more than 300,000 pico-PV products disseminated nationwide through her work. Maya strongly believes in the need for the energy sector to work together to create national impact.

"The energy sector in Malawi is still at an early stage, with lots of players coming into the market and trying to find their footing. I want to support even my competitors and share with them different ideas, and marketing and data knowledge, that can help them in their businesses. We need to come together with all our special strengths and push towards one agenda of creating access to sustainable energy with no one left behind."

Maya with some of Yellow's first sales agents in Malawi.



In 2018, Maya and a business partner founded a new retail company called Yellow Solar Power. Using her understanding of the gaps and challenges in the sector, Yellow has already grown into the largest distributor of solar home systems in Malawi with over 300 agents.

As a woman in the energy sector, Maya wants to provide opportunities for other women in rural Malawi but early recruiting for Yellow agents was heavily dominated by men. It soon became clear that the main challenge to women entering the sector was lack of access to digital tools. Yellow's first female agent, Khumbo Chikwalikwali, said she was able to apply for the job because her husband provided her with a smartphone. This inspired Maya and her partner to initiate Project Khumbo, with financing from EEP Africa, and set a goal of empowering 400 women in rural Malawi through access to digital tools and digital literacy.

"We have seen women who are unemployed, transforming household dynamics and becoming breadwinners overnight. We have also seen single mothers with small children earning over 400 dollars in two and a half months. This is money that they have never earned in their entire lives in a short period of time."

Looking forward, Maya plans to expand her work beyond Malawi. She would like to see an Africa that has affordable access to energy and that shifts away from energy poverty towards local empowerment. Maya believes that a lot of issues that hinder access to markets, food security, and quality education can be alleviated by ensuring access to energy. Her goal is to address these challenges with simple energy efficient products and consumer financing platforms for last mile customers. As Yellow's motto goes, everyone deserves to "live better."

"I have worked with Maya for over two years at Yellow, during which time we have grown from a few hundred customers to over 40,000. Maya has been integral to this – and it is clear she is motivated by the goal of improving energy access of those in need more than anything else. Her impact bringing energy access to rural Malawi and beyond cannot be overstated."

Ross Thompson,
CFO at Yellow