

FIGHTING INJUSTICE BY REDUCING CLIMATE CHANGE



EEP Africa 2020
**RISING ENERGY
LEADER**

ESTHER ALTORFER

Managing Director East Africa,
Sistema.bio (Kenya)

Even as a child growing up in France, Esther knew one thing: she wanted to fight against injustice. As she grew and gained work experience, Esther began to break that idea down into two more specific goals: fighting for women empowerment and fighting against climate change. She believes these fights are the key to a fair, equitable and sustainable world, and has transformed them into a personal quest and a passion for clean energy.

"I consider climate change as being the umbrella problem. By focusing on climate change, we can actually solve many other problems, including empowering women. For me the two challenges are directly intertwined. Women are disproportionately affected by climate change. By reducing climate change, we directly work towards empowering women by lowering the burden that they face on a day-to-day basis."

Esther began her career in impact investment. After a stint at Deutsche Bank, she joined a German microfinance bank in Bolivia that was launching clean energy financing products for micro- and small enterprises. She next moved to a French bank in Mexico, where she discovered Sistema.bio, a biodigester start-up that combines clean energy, smallholder farmers and microfinance to address the challenges of poverty, food security and climate change. Esther knew this was what she was meant to do.

When Esther joined Sistema.bio in 2014, she began by restructuring the in-house finance program to make their biogas clean cooking solution more affordable to farmers. This increased the company's client base by 55% over the next two years. She also digitized the company's data collection and customer interaction processes, through a mobile app and CRM, and closed the first impact investment round.

Esther with Mama Alpha,
Sistema.bio's first client
in Kenya.



Based on this success in Mexico, Esther helped Sistema.bio launch its first international subsidiary in Nicaragua in 2016. She then focused her energy, with support from the Shell Foundation, towards replicating and scaling up the company's unique approach in India and East Africa.

Esther launched the Kenyan subsidiary in 2017 and it has already become the biogas clean cooking market leader. By mid-2019 the East Africa operations had grown to more than 2000 clients, 70 employees and over 100 independent contractors based in rural communities, thus sharing Sistema.bio's growth with the communities it aims to support.

During her time in Kenya, Esther has led her team through severe challenges, from droughts to COVID-19. These experiences have only reaffirmed Esther's commitment to biogas cooking, as she can see the life-changing impact it has on women, children, and men in rural Kenya. She believes the company culture - in which managers lead by example, roll up their sleeves and connect with the team - is one of the keys to Sistema.bio's success.

"I think humility is one of the core characteristics of a leader. It leads to constant learning and being open to understanding what we know and what we don't know, and that we are open to accept help from mentors, consultants or peers."

With EEP Africa financing, Sistema.bio is continuing to scale up operations and expand to new regions in Kenya. Although COVID has forced the company to cut costs and assess its business model, Esther aims to triple sales revenue, improve unit economics, implement a carbon credit program, and recruit 150 more sales agents during 2021.

"I will dedicate all my energy to advancing access to clean energy in East Africa by creating value from waste and empowering smallholder farmers. With my team, I will nurture and grow local leadership to achieve this."

Through empathy, hard work and collaboration, Esther is building Sistema.bio into a profitable, highly impactful and resilient social enterprise that has the potential to improve the lives of hundreds of thousands of smallholder farmers in Kenya and East Africa.

"Esther has been a central actor in the growth and success of Sistema.bio. She joined the company when we were less than ten people, and has been critical in our growth, holding a wide range of roles and responsibilities, now managing our largest team. Her passion for our impact, attention to detail, problem-solving and flexibility has made her an effective leader and an absolute pleasure to work with."

Alex Eaton,
CEO of Sistema.bio

