

Disrupted for good



Give better, give smarter. At Epic Foundation, a new era of technology is catering to a new generation of donors. Founder and CEO **Alexandre Mars** tells *Africa investor* how the Foundation plans to turn an industry on its head



Alexandre, your entrepreneurial success was derived from the tech world. Take us through your

beginnings

My passion for entrepreneurship started when I launched my first venture at 17. Over the past two decades, I launched and sold several companies in Europe and the US across diverse business sectors, including venture capital, Internet, mobile marketing, social media and advertising. My two latest startups, Phonevalley (the world's largest mobile agency) and Scr00n (a

successful. That's something I learned pretty early on in my life. After the inception of A2X – my second startup – I waited for clients to call me. Of course, no one did. If you want something, go out and grab it because otherwise someone else will do it. So I made a million cold calls and pitched A2X day and night.

The last one is luck. Luck is hard to define. It's not controlled by you, but you can provoke luck. Put these five ingredients together and you can have something successful.

You give the impression that you've always wanted to get yourself into

inequality on children. It's one of the main reasons why I chose to focus on child- and youth-related causes when I founded Epic Foundation – I wanted to build an organisation that would help children grow up healthy and protected from harm, so they can reach their full potential.

In 2010, when we moved back to New York, I already knew my sixth startup would be a nonprofit. While running two startups, I did an extensive market research to better understand the issues in the philanthropic space and the solutions we could bring. I needed to think about how I could leverage my own

“At Epic we use the tools of 2016 for a new generation of donors”

social media management system) were sold to Publicis Groupe and Blackberry, respectively. I currently invest in high-growth technology companies through my family office Blisce, including Spotify, Pinterest and Blablacar.

What would you say to young African entrepreneurs also looking to make it in the tech start-up world? What's the secret to success?

What I have realised is that many people don't believe they can make it and will postpone [trying]. It's always hard to start something, but it's doable. When you're young, the good thing is you don't overthink; you're 21, 22, and you believe you can make it and you do everything you can.

There are five ingredients to being successful. One is having a good team by hiring the best people. Two is having a good product; not necessarily the best product, but having a good product. The third ingredient is something you can't control; the timing. You can have a wonderful team, a beautiful product, but if the timing is not there, you will fail.

The fourth ingredient, which is the secret to success, is hard work. If you work hard, you have more chances to be

a position where you could be a philanthropist...

It started pretty early. As a child, I was greatly influenced by my parents. My mom worked for a French skincare company and then made the decision to leave everything to take care of our education (I have one other sibling).

She enriched my life with her devotion to humanity. Growing up with such a strong role model, I developed many of her passions and interests in helping others. My father was an entrepreneur as well and I learned a great deal from him. I adopted his strong work ethic. The first philanthropic endeavour I ever participated in was also the first time I felt a sense of community. At 14, I was the class leader in my middle and high school, elected by the community. I attended board meetings, advocating for the rights of students.

Years later, my wife's work with the Missionaries of Charity – the late Mother Theresa's organisation in India – had a profound impact on me. When I was working as a venture capitalist in New York at 25, I travelled to Delhi to spend time with her in an orphanage for underprivileged children. I saw firsthand the effects of poverty and

abilities for social good. Then, in 2013, we pulled our children out of school for six months and travelled to over 13 countries meeting with non-profits and philanthropists around the world. The goal was to deepen our understanding of the philanthropic ecosystem. After realising how badly the system was broken, Epic Foundation was born.

With the Epic Foundation, you've pledged to “disrupt the philanthropic industry”. What qualities are defining the industry in 2016?

Through extensive market research, I realised there was a major gap between charities that needed funding and those who wanted to give. On the one hand, we had these incredible organisations and social entrepreneurs who were struggling to access funding, expertise and new networks. On the other hand, you had donors with lots of capacity and big powerful networks who wanted to donate but were often hobbled by a lack of time, lack of knowledge or a lack of trust in the charity.

The qualities that define the philanthropic space in 2016 are transparency and accountability. But, one, the charitable sector has been slow

to adopt technology for the purpose of donor engagement and, two, nonprofits are still communicating with their donors through traditional means.

We believe that deeper, more real time engagement between a donor and their philanthropy will help build a new generation of smarter more engaged philanthropists (individuals or corporations) and thus hopefully help unlock critically needed resources and passions and interests in helping others.

We are innovating philanthropy by using the tools of 2016 for this new generation of donors. Epic Foundation builds and manages a portfolio of rigorously vetted social organisations; tracks and monitors their social impact

entrepreneurship and technology with the best minds in the social sector, we are pushing the envelope of how donors monitor and experience the impact of the organisations they support.

In terms of the operating budget, I'm covering all the overhead costs. Our portfolio organisations are financed through a community of entrepreneurs, private banks, family offices, "voices" (e.g. entertainers and athletes), startups and corporate donors.

We debuted our portfolio of 20 organisations last September-October through a global roadshow to attract large donations. Through the portfolio and global roadshow, we are connecting the next generation of donors with

mobile phone, tablet or your PC. So that's the selection tool.

We also have a tracking tool; a web-based app that we recently launched. The app allows the donors to not only interact and see what's happening with the organisation, but also be able to see the impact of their money. Whenever you want, you have access to the numbers of meals served in a certain homeless shelter, or the number of vaccinations given in Uganda. We connect their systems to our system, we render everything, we have a beautiful user interface and you're able to track everything. It's user friendly, and it's impactful.

Tell us a little bit more about your

"I realised there was a major gap between charities that needed funding and those who wanted to give"

through a data platform; and keeps donors connected and engaged with the portfolio organisations through ongoing reporting of performance and accountability via a web-based application. It improves accountability and transparency. Think of it as a "one-stop shop for philanthropists".

Where and how do you work?

Each year we go out looking for the world's most impactful organisations working to empower children and youth in order to connect them to our global network of philanthropists and corporations looking to give in a more strategic and engaged way.

We work in East Africa, Western Europe, US, Brazil, India and Southeast Asia. To identify the most impactful organisations, our team at Epic Foundation has built a new network across the world of leading foundations, funders and think-tanks. This enabled us to identify and receive applications from over 1,400 organisations across 85 countries in 2015.

From the *favelas* of Brazil, to the banlieues of Paris, to the bustle of New York and San Francisco, to the heart of Uganda, to the slums of Mumbai, and the outskirts of Laos, we have searched to find the twenty most trustworthy, innovative and impactful non-profits and social enterprises. At the same time, by merging my passion for

organisations that are saving lives and empowering children and youth globally.

Our aim is to provide each organisation with crucially needed multi-year funding so they can scale their impact. We launched the 2016 selection process early January for the next batch of organisations to be included in our portfolio. We are currently in stage two. Our goal is not only to connect more and more people with big hearts, skills and funding with amazing organisations, but we also want to change people's mindsets about doing good.

What are the ultimate criteria for these 20 organisations?

There are three main criteria; one is the social impact, two is the quality of the leadership, and three is the organisation itself: financials, the connection with the community, etc. Basically, if you were to invest your money in any for-profit start-up, you would follow almost the same rules. What kind of impact does the organisation have, what kind of management team is in place, and what's the structure of the organisation?

Under the three main criteria, we then have fifteen sub-criteria for every single stage of selection – that's why we have 45 data points. The amount of work for finding the organisations that are the best suited for our product is impressive.

And every year we start over. You can access all of this data online, from your

beneficiaries in Africa. Who are they and what do they do?

We have three organisations in East Africa. Educate! is an organisation based in Uganda that is working to change the educational system in Africa. Their teachers provide leadership and entrepreneurship training and mentorships to children and youth. It's currently operating programmes in more than 250 schools in the country. Overall, when compared to students who did not complete the programme, Educate! graduates earned \$173 more per year, demonstrated a 64% increase in business ownership and a 123% increase in involvement with community projects. The impact on girls was more pronounced with female graduates earning \$265 more per year, reporting a 152% increase in business ownership and a 208% increase in involvement with community projects. That's incredible.

The Nyaka AIDS Orphans Project is working on behalf of HIV/AIDS orphans in rural Uganda. Using a holistic approach to community development, education and healthcare, Nyaka currently provides services to more than 43,000 children. They run two primary schools - which offer free education to 460 children – a secondary/vocational school, two clinics and a water system.

One of my favourite programmes is their Nyaka's "Grandmother

Programme,” which offers voluntary HIV tests and microfinance services to over 7,000 grannies.

The HIV/AIDS epidemic left 1.1 million children without parents, which meant the only family left to care for these orphans were their grandmothers. The Grandmothers Programme was designed to empower these caretakers to provide safe and stable homes for their grandchildren; they receive skills training to make quality artisan crafts and financial service training to help them save and access financial loans.

Finally, Schistosomiasis Control Initiative (SCI) is an initiative that helps governments in African countries treat schistosomiasis, one of the most commonly neglected tropical diseases, caused by parasitic worms. From mapping the disease to training staff to properly monitoring/evaluating the programme, SCI works closely with governments.

What are you looking to achieve over the next decade with the Epic Foundation?

Our mission is clear: we want to continue bridging the gap between great people and companies looking to give and high impact non-profits and social enterprises working with children and youth globally. It's been an amazing journey connecting philanthropists and corporations to Epic's portfolio organisations. Things are changing rapidly and if anything is certain, it is that tomorrow will bring new challenges and opportunities.

The role we can and will play is to ensure that the leaders of tomorrow – today's children and youth – have access to the resources and opportunities they need to reach their potential. At the same time, we will remain committed to innovating new methods and technologies for how philanthropists and corporations select, monitor and engage with their philanthropic investments. This is true everywhere we operate; from Brazil to the US to Uganda.

Finally, our goal is to change mindsets and to change society. We are spending a fair amount of time with the corporate world, pushing them to give a percentage of their profits to social causes; we also believe that we need to work closely with policy makers to really scale the innovations we find. **Ai**

Epic in Africa – A snapshot



The Nyaka AIDS Orphans Project

The Nyaka AIDS Orphans Project is working on behalf of HIV/AIDS orphans in rural Uganda to end systemic deprivation, poverty, and hunger through a holistic approach to community development, education and healthcare.

Headquarters: Uganda

Age range: 5-24+

Year established: 2001

Country of focus: Uganda

Staff: 82

Budget: US \$1,020,000

Educate!

Educate! supports educational systems in Africa in order to empower and train the next generation of leaders and entrepreneurs.

Headquarters: Kampala, Uganda

Age range: 15-20

Year established: 2002

Country of focus: Uganda

Staff: 70

Budget: \$1,800,000

Schistosomiasis Control Initiative (SCI)

SCI works to improve the health and development of the world's poorest populations by helping governments treat schistosomiasis, one of the most commonly neglected tropical diseases.

Headquarters: London, England

Age range: 5-14

Year established: 2002

Country of focus: Uganda, Rwanda

Staff: 27

Budget: \$12,100,000

