

Student launches solar backpack for Kenyan school children

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Former Aga Khan Academy, Mombasa, student Salima Visram has become a social entrepreneur even as she studies as an undergraduate in Canada, with the launch of a crowd-funded Kenyan business producing school students' backpacks that create solar lighting for pupils to do their homework.

The business, last month, delivered its first 500 back packs in Kikambala Primary School, in Mombasa County.

"Studying at the Aga Khan Academy Mombasa greatly improved my leadership skills and helped me grow my community development skills. I received an educational experience beyond the classroom that helped me learn about the real-world implications of what i was studying," said Salima.



The business, last month, delivered its first 500 back packs in Kikambala Primary School, in Mombasa County. (Image Source: <http://kenvibez.com>)

Some 92 per cent of rural households in Kenya use kerosene to fuel lighting. When night falls, this sees millions of Kenyan school children forced to rely on the toxic and expensive light source to do their homework. For those who cannot keep up with the expense of buying the fuel, learning stops when the sun goes down, according to a report compiled by lighting company Sunny Money in Kenya.

Salima grew up in Kikambala witnessing the effects that poverty and the lack of electricity had on school going children and came up with the solar back pack, which she calls the Soular Backpack. The backpack allows children in rural areas to leverage the power of the sun during their long walks to and from school to provide light for reading at night.

The back packs consist of a solar panel, a battery pack and an LED lamp. The solar panel stores solar power during the day and allows the LED lamp to be connected to it during the night as a light source. For four hours of charging, the back pack is able to give out seven to eight hours of light a night.

In January, Visram raised \$38,000 (Sh3,990,000) through crowd-funding platform Indiegogo, which she used to place the first order of 2,000 backpacks to distribute to the Kikambala village as a pilot project.

"If successful, I want to expand the project to a hundred schools in the county within the next year and a half. This is in direct alignment with Kenya's Vision 2030 "Masomo Bora", which is the nation's effort to ensure that all children are educated, and realize their full potential," said Visram.

Salima Visram is now in her final year of studying International Development Studies at McGill University, in Montreal, having been at Aga Khan Academy, Mombasa, for her secondary school education. She believes social business is the greatest catalyst in creating sustainable change, and hopes to form partnerships with UNICEF, the UNHCR and the Government of Kenya to expand the project to other parts of Kenya and Africa. Her goal is that through education, people will be given the tools to empower and alleviate themselves from poverty.

“Salima’s vision and implementation demonstrate the power and importance of empowering our students to create solutions to the problems that are hampering Kenya’s development, and we see her emerging rapidly as a role model for all that the Academy stands for, and its mission in positioning talented young students as future leaders driving change and poverty alleviation for all,” said Mr Bill O’Hearn, Head of Aga Khan Academy, Mombasa.

Staff Writer

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