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South African Agency for Science
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Media Release

20 September 2024

For immediate release:

Yolanda Mbalentle Mngcongo Triumphs as FameLab South Africa 2024 Winner with Groundbreaking Research on Indigenous Medicine

Pretoria, 20 September 2024 – Moved by her grandmother’s suffering from a hospital-acquired infection, Yolanda Mbalentle Mngcongo took a deep dive into her heritage to explore how indigenous knowledge of medicinal plants can be combined with nanoscience to combat modern healthcare challenges.

Through her research at Nelson Mandela University, she is developing eco-friendly silver nanoparticle filters to enhance hospital air purification systems with the goal of reducing infections and improving patient care for the most vulnerable. The nanoparticles are rendered environmentally safe, through a special process combining silver and medicinal plants. Her dedication and innovation have earned her the title of FameLab South Africa 2024 winner and the opportunity to represent the country on the international stage.

“I am very grateful for this opportunity because the research that we are doing is for the people and we have to be able to communicate it to them in a way that they understand. It is an honour to represent South Africa in the world and to take all of our indigenous knowledge and put it out there. I cannot wait to represent South Africa on the global stage,” commented Mngcongo.

After a series of electrifying regional heats at prestigious research institutions and around the country, and a dynamic semi-final round, Mngcongo rose above 16 exceptional competitors to claim the top spot.

Managed by Jive Media Africa in collaboration with NRF-SAASTA, FameLab celebrates the possibilities that exist at the intersection of science and communication, spotlighting individuals who bring science to life with creativity and clarity.

Congratulations to Siphosethu Mgwili from Walter Sisulu University, who earned the first runner-up spot and the audience’s favourite vote, and to Eduard Zehrt from Stellenbosch University, the second runner-up, for their exceptional performances. Their contributions

have greatly enriched the competition, and we commend them for their remarkable achievements and dedication to science communication.

Mgwili is pursuing a master's in physiology and anatomy, focusing on creating adjustable, reusable prosthetic pylons for children to improve access to these life-changing devices Zehrt is using advanced imaging technology to detect food fraud by distinguishing between conventional and free-range chicken. His work bridges the gap between science and industry, ensuring food authenticity.

Said Mgwili: "This audience vote is very important to me because it means I achieved my goal of communicating my science to the public. I was able to relate to them and meet them at their level of understanding."

"I feel very privileged, and I am so glad I took part of FameLab and would advise anyone to take part. I am very impressed with everyone and I cannot wait to see what happens next," Zehrt said.

The FameLab South Africa semi-finalists blew away the judges this year, from innovative water safety solutions to novel treatments for mental health conditions. Their work exemplifies the vital role of science in addressing real-world challenges and making positive impacts on society.

Their victory is not only a personal achievement but also underscores the importance of making science accessible and engaging.

FameLab International's ethos of cultural and scientific exchange has proven globally successful, engaging over 40,000 participants and reaching millions over 15 years. It has fostered international partnerships and revolutionised public science communication through events, masterclasses, and networking. Supported by over 200 partners since its inception in 2005, including NASA and CERN, FameLab continues to drive significant impact in science worldwide.

Robert Inglis, Director of Research Engagement at Jive Media Africa underscores the importance of science communication, stating: "Effective science communication is crucial for building trust between scientists and the public. Science not communicated, is science wasted and the stories and storytelling witnessed here tonight certainly allow complex concepts to be made accessible and engaging, ensuring that scientific knowledge reaches and resonates with everyone."

Applications for FameLab 2025 are already open! Institutions interested in hosting regional heats are encouraged to apply and join the growing community of those who are identifying and nurturing science communication talent.

FameLab, an initiative of Cheltenham Festivals, has been running in South Africa since 2013 through a partnership between NRF-SAASTA and Jive Media Africa. FameLab continues to foster science communication talent and enhance public understanding of science.

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Notes:

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About Jive Media Africa:

Jive Media Africa supports top researchers with innovative, cutting edge communications. They are winners of the National Science and Technology Forum Award for Science Communication and have brought the FameLab competition to South Africa in 2013. Jive Media Africa has been getting creative to connect researchers, engineers and scientists with the public. Through communication strategy, media production, training and mentorship their aim is to activate African knowledge and grow capacity for great research and innovation on the African continent. Find out more about Jive Media Africa here: <https://jivemedia.co.za/>

About the South African Agency for Science and Technology Advancement (SAASTA):

SAASTA is a business unit of the National Research Foundation (NRF) with the mandate to advance public awareness, appreciation and engagement of science, engineering and technology in South Africa. SAASTA's contribution to the NRF's vision of "Research for a Better Society" through strengthening the science and society interface. The organisations aims to be the leading science advancement agency in the country by promoting and communicating the value and impact of science, technology and innovation in a dynamic knowledge economy. It also intends to contribute significantly towards building a science, engineering and technology (SET) human resource base. For more information on the operations and programs within the NRF please visit www.saasta.ac.za

About the National Research Foundation (NRF):

The National Research Foundation (NRF) was established on 1 April 1999 as an independent statutory body in accordance with the National Research Foundation Act. The NRF is a key public entity responsible for supporting the development of human resources for research and innovation in all fields of science and technology. The organisation is one of the major players in educating and training a new generation of scientists able to deal with South African and African needs. The organisation encourages public awareness and appreciation of science, engineering and technology, and facilitates dialogue between science and society. Its vision is to contribute to a prosperous South Africa based on a knowledge economy. For more information on the operations and programs within the NRF please visit www.nrf.ac.za