

FameLab South Africa 2025 winner Luther Chipembere targets Zero Hunger with AI innovation



Image: Dr Anton Binneman Manager of Science Communication and Engaged Research at SAASTA congratulates FameLab SA 2025 winner Luther Chipembere

Pretoria, 18 September 2025 – By the time you finish reading this paragraph, more than 50 people around the world will have died from hunger-related causes. Yet the world already produces enough food to feed everyone. This paradox drives Stellenbosch University researcher Luther Chipembere, who has developed an AI-powered “digital super brain”, to predict hunger before it strikes.

His groundbreaking work earned him the FameLab South Africa 2025 title after a three-minute presentation that captivated judges and audience alike. Chipembere will now take his research to the international FameLab competition at CERN in Switzerland, where he will showcase his innovative approach on a global stage in November this year.

Using machine learning, Chipembere trains his system with historical data on drought, rainfall patterns, food prices, conflict and war. With each dataset, the model becomes smarter at detecting the early warning signs of hunger, giving policymakers the chance to act before crises escalate into headlines.

Chipembere believes that this kind of predictive power is essential if the world is to achieve the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goal of Zero Hunger, ensuring that no one is left behind in the fight against food insecurity.

“It’s not about waiting for hunger to strike,” he said. “It’s about predicting it before it happens, giving leaders the information they need to save lives. I am confident that if we can accurately predict hunger, we can prevent it and protect the most vulnerable.”

Inspired by Nike’s iconic tagline, “Just Do It”, Chipembere took a leap of faith in entering the competition, a decision he says has changed his life.

“Just do it. I know it’s Nike’s line, but it really applies here. When I first saw the FameLab call advertised at the institutional level, I thought: let me just sign up and see what happens. Taking that leap of faith brought me here. If I hadn’t, I’d never be in this position today. So, my advice is simple: just do it – you never know where it will take you,” he said.

On the broader role of science communication, Chipembere reflected:

“Through the training I received from Jive Media and FameLab, I’ve learned that science communication is about meeting people where they are, and then helping them move to where they need to be. That’s a very powerful thing.”

The judges also commended first runner-up Lutho Lange (Nelson Mandela University) and second runner-up Jackey Mukhawana (Rhodes University) for their exceptional performances. The audience favourite was Nasiphi Phaliso from Walter Sisulu University. Together, they reflect the strength of South Africa’s emerging generation of scientists, ready to bridge the gap between the lab and society.

The competition, managed by Jive Media Africa in collaboration with NRF-SAASTA, is recognised as the country’s leading science communication platform. This year’s national final brought together 22 outstanding semi-finalists from across South Africa, showcasing research ranging from cancer to conservation.

Read all about them here: <https://jivemedia.co.za/famelab/>.

Dr Mamoeletso Mosia, Managing Director of NRF-SAASTA, explains why science communication is central to the organisation’s mission:

“As a country, we need to push our science to the people. One very important aim is to provide science communication skills to researchers. When researchers are studying, they are trained to speak to their peers and ensure their science is not diluted – but they are not always taught how to communicate it to the public, which often includes children.”

Robert Inglis, Director of Research Engagement at Jive Media Africa, spoke about the transformative journey participants experience in FameLab:

“This is a baptism by fire, and they walk away transformed. We are hugely grateful to the NRF, NRF-SAASTA and the universities and institutions that have supported FameLab for 13 years. Their backing has made a lasting impact on countless lives.”

FameLab has been running in South Africa since 2013 and forms part of the global FameLab network, which has reached more than 40 000 young scientists worldwide. Applications for FameLab South Africa 2026 are already open, offering another chance for rising science communicators to step into the spotlight.

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About Jive Media Africa:

Jive Media Africa supports top researchers with innovative communications. Winners of the National Science and Technology Forum Award for Science Communication, they introduced FameLab to South Africa in 2013. Their creative approaches connect researchers with the public through strategy, media production, training

and mentorship, aiming to amplify African knowledge and improve the positive impacts of research. For more information: <https://jivemedia.co.za/> and <https://training.jivemedia.co.za>.

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

SAASTA, a unit of the National Research Foundation (NRF), advances public engagement with science, engineering and technology in South Africa. It aims to grow the pool of quality learners who will become the scientists and innovators of tomorrow and to contribute to building a robust science, engineering and technology human resource base. For more information: <http://www.saasta.ac.za>.

Find out more about FameLab in South Africa: <https://www.saasta.ac.za/competitions/famelab/>.



Image: Meet South Africa's rising science stars! The ten finalists of FameLab SA 2025 showcased brilliant research and captivating communication skills