

# Switched on CEIBS alum plans to brighten Africa's future

■ By Cameron Wilson

**T**hink of sustainability, and concepts such as education, environmental protection, social responsibility, equal opportunity, mass communication and poverty alleviation may come to mind. Then, imagine if one simple innovation could simultaneously support all of these aims where they are most needed – this is exactly what a start-up co-founded by a CEIBS alumni is on the way to achieving.

Winko Solar, launched in 2019 by CEIBS MBA 2020's Mathieu Wing Hang Tse and his Belgian-Congolese business partner Akonkwa Mubagwa, are currently trialling their "Winko Box" product in Togo. They aim to expand their user base to 1,000 by the end of this year,

to help

make real and sustainable improvements to the lives of those in rural Africa.

The Winko Box is a package containing a smartphone with a mobile internet subscription, a solar-powered charger which can provide power for charging phones or other electronic devices, and four bulbs for providing lighting at night. The deceptively simple product allows ordinary people in poor, agricultural areas the chance to perform tasks which are taken for granted in the developed world, such as sending emails or lighting their homes after dark. Thanks to relatively good mobile coverage and a functional online payment system in Togo, the Winko Box is connected to a solar panel during the day to charge a battery inside. Users make a small online payment and are given a code to allow it to be used for a period of time.

"The idea came from my classmate from Congo who explained to me Africa has a lot of issues with unreliable electricity, or just no access electricity at all," Mathieu explains, adding, "We saw a lot of potential, so we looked at our African network and China's world-leading role in solar energy and decided to bring these together."



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With an estimated 90% of users in Togo having no access to any banking facilities, online payment infrastructure is crucial, and by providing users with not only a phone but a data plan, the Winko Box helps support basic economic activity.

“Users can send 500MB a month of data. That’s enough for around 400 photos on WhatsApp, and a lot of our customers are traders who use this software to send pictures of their products to interested buyers,” Mathieu says.

There is also a need for longer-term solutions to providing Africans with electricity as some 600 million people on the continent are not connected to the grid, and by 2030 this figure will only have reduced by a third.

“In Anglophone Africa it’s a bit more advanced and solar power is in place in many areas, but in places like Togo in French-speaking Africa, only 30% of people have access to electricity, and in Burkina Faso and Niger it’s as low as 25% – so our unique point is providing a home system and data plan at a competitive price, less than \$10 USD per month,” Mathieu explains.



Winko Solar Co-founder and CEIBS MBA 2020 alum Mathieu Wing Hang Tse and CEIBS MBA Director and Professor of International Business and Strategy Shameen Prashantham

The system also improves children’s education prospects by providing light for them to read in the evenings, and a data plan which allows e-books and other teaching materials to be downloaded. There are also environmental benefits. For example, kerosene, which is used to power generators in many parts of Africa, causes pollution and is a potential fire hazard.

Mathieu says Winko’s ultimate goal is to provide an integrated hardware solution which works on a sustainable basis to support local communities on several complementary levels.

“Previous generations of managers were more concerned about profit, growth, cost optimisation and so on, but now they’re more entrepreneurial and are concerned about a wider range of things, including the climate issue,” he says.

Furthermore, Mathieu says he believes that companies such as Winko need to challenge perceptions that climate change is not a critical issue and educate other about where improvements can be made which benefit all.

“A sustainability mind-set is necessary from the beginning and we need to present this to institutions and partners to combat climate change, as a fundamental change is needed,” he says.

“Personally, I grew up in a poor part of South America and saw a lot of my classmates growing up in slums and losing out on opportunities because they didn’t have access to the internet or electricity – this is what motivates me. I really feel our mission is to be a social impact start-up and be aligned with the UN SDGs,” he adds.