

Social entrepreneur Olivier Vanden Eynde about the Close the Gap project in Mombasa, Kenya:

“I’d be very proud to see this project become self-sustaining, but our ultimate ambition is to make a social and economic impact.”



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Olivier Vanden Eynde

Social entrepreneur in Mombasa



It was in the scorching hot port city of Mombasa, Kenya, that former Deloitte consultant Olivier Vanden Eynde decided to establish a sustainable tech business in 2019. “If you think you can come here and tell people how things ought to be done, you’ll hit a wall before you can say *better in Belgium*.”

SOFIE VANLOMMEL

Dark clouds, propelled by strong winds and drooping with rain, gather high above us. The rainy season has arrived in Mombasa – or as they say here: *four seasons in one day*. It will only take a moment for the bright sun to reappear against stark blue skies. Or who knows, there may be a tropical thunderstorm first ...

A private security guard opens the boom that gives access to the Ratna shopping mall in Nyali, one of Mombasa's first and most vibrant malls which has faced increased pressure from newer malls, built during the infrastructure boom of the last ten years. The lady that sells colourful fabrics from a small shop on the parking lot patiently waits for customers, while the man that runs the local cheese shop (‘mozzarella, parmesan, cheddar’) cleans his counter to make sure it is ready for his next customers.

There’s also a fish shop, and a butcher. “This butcher is commonly known to be the best one in Mombasa,” Vanden Eynde says.

Judging by his rugby-sized torso and indigo-blue shirt, you may be forgiven to mistake him for a young athlete from the green suburbs around Brussels. But that’s only until you notice the national colours of Kenya (black, red and green) – his second motherland – decorating his wrist, and the bits and pieces of Swahili that sneak into his mother tongue from time to time.

Vanden Eynde is founder, co-owner and – after resigning from his job at Deloitte in 2019 – full-time CEO of Close the Gap, an innovative tech- and entrepreneurship platform based in Mombasa. For twelve years he balanced his time between his job as a consultant for Deloitte in Belgium with chasing the dream of becoming a maverick entrepreneur in Africa, and set up a computer refurbishment centre in Antwerpen in the process. At the centre, “nearly new” financially depreciated laptops, desktop computers, tablets and smartphones are refurbished and shipped to the African continent where new devices are out of reach given their high price. It was a challenging time – “a mid-life crisis” he refers to it jokingly. “One moment I would be in upcountry Kenya helping out farmers to digitally engage, the next I was reciting a sales pitch at a bank.”

He founded a commercial entity alongside the non-profit organisation, for which he sourced investments from Dominiek Dumoulin and Griet Meganck, owners of United Pet Food, as well as from the Dutch government, the Koning Boudewijnstichting, and a range of business partners – to the amount of almost 5 million Euros. His wife Debbie joined him at Close the Gap after resigning from her job at tech association Agoria.be.

The Vanden Eynde family eventually made the move to Kenya in 2019. “Most people in the corporate world only start realising their dreams when retired. I didn’t want to wait that long.”

Mombasa is the gateway to East-Africa. Its central port gives access to 6 million people that live in the vast region that stretches from Tanzania to Somalia. The region largely depends on agriculture, tourism and trade. However, on the one hand, agriculture is currently severely affected by draught and a global food crisis in the wake of the war in Ukraine. On the other hand, tourism and trade have not yet recovered from the Covid pandemic travel bans.

In addition, the ubiquitous threat of terrorist fundamentalists of Al Shabaab from neighbouring Somalia always looms heavily on this otherwise peaceful part of the country. This has led to the stringent security measures taken in all public spaces to prevent incidents such as the number of violent terror attacks that occurred in 2013 in a shopping mall in the capital of Nairobi.

When speaking on his motivations for making such an unconventional move to build both a new life and a new business on a new continent, Vanden Eynde said the following: “I have always strongly believed in the principle that companies ultimately become self-sufficient when they generate and re-invest healthy profits, I’ve set out to prove that this same principle equally applies here – in ways that are sustainable, responsible, and constructive.”

The proof, of course, is in the pudding. A look at some of the hub’s projects quickly turns out to confirm just that: a solar-powered mobile freezer for local fishermen, a digital savings-scheme that allows local taxi and Uber drivers to become proud owners of their vehicles, and a podcast, website and live radio that broadcast uplifting regional stories.

Of course, Close the Gap operates in a developing region of the world, which means that there are challenges. “But given all that, what I see is a unique dynamic, and opportunities for pioneering mavericks like myself. The African metropolises of Nairobi, Johannesburg, Lagos, Kigali and Kampala have their own ways of attracting money and talent – one of which is of course higher salaries. As a result, most educated young people leave less opportunistic regions once they’ve graduated – a *brain drain* we explicitly try to counter by helping to create opportunities.

We are seated in the Close the Gap’s offices, housed in a building characterised by typically Moorish ornaments – Mombasa has welcomed its fair share of Arab traders across the centuries.

It is here that the organisation runs an entrepreneurial *incubator*, and a café, a co-working space, a *fab lab* where enthusiasts from all ages learn how to code and print in 3D, and an educational centre. Nearly new, refurbished desktop computers, laptops, tablets, and monitors are sold at affordable prices next to the café.

None of these spaces would look out of place in western companies: contemporary design lighting, plush seating, sanseverias in neat flower pots, and inspirational quotes on the wall (‘Work hard’, ‘Give your best’).

However, there are some differences, too. There are for example office lockers that serve as postboxes for those that don’t have a reliable postal address. The occasional flickering of lights isn’t part of the design, but the result of power interruptions that also affect the reliability of the internet. And the young entrepreneurs that frequent the organisation often come from difficult socio-economic backgrounds where the lack of opportunities leads to unemployment, or worse.

“They’re all true survivors,” says Vanden Eynde. “Their motivation to be an entrepreneur has nothing to do with being hip, or to exude a certain life style – as we often see with young entrepreneurs in Europe. Theirs is, in fact, the purest motivation for entrepreneurship: in the absence of a safety net and state support, they have no choice but to think of creative ways to get bring home the bacon, any bacon. There is a tremendous willpower to get ahead in life, not in the least encouraged by the family members that depend on them.”

Olivier Vanden Eynde was born and raised in Tervuren, *Belgium*, in a family of six children. His parents were both born in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and ran a veterinary practice. Everyone in the family had a penchant for tinkering with the digital hardware that was scattered all around the house, inspired by a family friend that was making a name for himself in the world of ICT.

The family often welcomed veterinary students from African universities, often accompanied by their young families. “Our doors were always wide open. We hardly ever knew how many people would be joining at the dinner table, or how many children would be accommodated in our bedrooms.”

One of these children, Vanden Eynde remembers, was a Rwandan boy, Charles. “When we watched the illuminated globe on my night stand, Charles was shocked to see that some countries were named very differently from what he had learned from his school books, which still referred to *Czechoslovakia* and the *Soviet Union*. This moment has always stayed with me, and has been inspiring me up until today.”

Vanden Eynde’s choice to study economics and business engineering at the Solvay School of Management at the University of Brussels was partly motivated by the fact that *entrepreneurship (setting up a student mini enterprise)* was part of the curriculum. “I have a love-hate relationship with books, and I would definitely not manage to sit behind a study desk for five consecutive years.”

Close the Gap saw the light of day with support from the Bank Nagelmackers by the Free University of Brussels (VUB). “All pieces of the puzzle swiftly fell into place: the link with African students, the love for tinkering with computers, and the passion for entrepreneurship – preferably in ways that have a real impact.”

A wish to become financially independent made him sign up with Deloitte after graduating. However, true to his character, Vanden Eynde managed to do this without betraying his entrepreneurial dream: he signed a part-time contract, a concept that was generally reserved at the company for female management assistants.

Meanwhile Close the Gap kept expanding – from three to ten employees, and from half a million Euros to two million annual turnover. The King of Belgium, as well as captains of Belgian industry, found the time in their busy schedules to meet with him and express support for his projects.

Former USA president Barack Obama – with Kenyan roots – also paid a visit. And the late archbishop Desmond Tutu became a personal friend and advisor, solemnised his marriage to Debbie, and baptised their first son. “Tutu will always be an inspiration. Ubuntu – *I am because of you* – is my motivation and beacon throughout my life and my interactions with other people. Africa reminds me of this all the time: you can only truly and meaningfully realise something *with* others.”



Back in Mombasa, the white Toyota Landcruiser snakes through traffic and a torrential downpour, swerving past loaded hand-pushed carts and around moped-taxis, erratically navigated by ironic riders (known as boda drivers) who won't wear helmets but believe in the protective powers of the fluorescent vest.

Before long, we are joined on the road by frolicking goats, life-sized containers pulled by tractors, and street vendors offering the obligatory towels, bananas and sun glasses. We are headed for the Close the Gap ITAD and refurbishment centre on the industrial outskirts of the city, where nearly new devices arrive by the truck-load from Kenyan and European companies.

Traffic in Mombasa is a little disorganised, to say the least, and the rain is not helping. "This is what we know as a *Kenyan massage*," laughs Vanden Eynde, while he tries to make an urgent payment via the KBC banking app on his phone. It's not working. "The internet tends to go down when it rains." And then we are abruptly pulled to the far left when our driver skilfully avoids a massive pothole ...

Vanden Eynde has learned to accept Mombasa-style traffic for what it is. Once, after being stalled for three hours, he shared his frustration with the man in the car next to his. The passenger, a highranking government official as it turned out, showed him the book he was reading, and said "Look on the bright side, I manage to read four books a week." It proved to be an important lesson.

"Traffic is out of control, the internet is out of control, but I no longer try to control either of them. If you think you can come here with all your expertise and tell people how things ought to be done, you'll hit a wall before you can say *better in Belgium*."

Does this mean he's hit a wall? "Oh yes, for sure. When the builders arrived barefoot at one of our first renovation projects, we gave them safety boots, in line with the strictest safety norms all our operations adhere to. But the next day, they turned up barefoot all over again: they had sold the shoes. It's a typical rookie mistake. A more experienced Kenyan contractor showed me the ropes: you rent shoes out, label them, and store them overnight." There's no denying that the first months in Mombasa were challenging. Vanden Eynde was simply back to square one.

"I arrived with a neat plan and plenty of resources, but from day one I was confronted with lingering construction projects, negotiating landlords, and complex regulations to avoid that our imported containers would be blocked for no apparent reason. On top of all that, we had to deal with complicated requirements for our imports of phones, laptops, television sets and monitors, and monitors, and also with so-called *ambulance lawyers* – money sharks that encourage dismissed employees to initiate legal actions.

It doesn't help in all this that foreign investors are assumed to have deep, if not bottomless, pockets. I was aware of these challenges, and of the companies that came before me and eventually threw in the towel in desperation. Like any entrepreneur in his right mind, I like to be able to anticipate my risks. But I was thrown into a labyrinth from which I couldn't escape. I felt like a fixer, rather than an entrepreneur. It felt like a tsunami, and I hardly slept at night. We burned 80.000 USD per month, without anything to immediately show for it. I quickly realised that millions can evaporate if things get out of control.

I knew I had to take action if I wished to look my investors in the eye. To this day, I am incredibly grateful for the support I received from one of our investors, Dominiek Dumoulin, at that crucial time. *Rome wasn't built in one day*, he said.

It was a mantra I kept repeating to myself at night until I eventually fell asleep.

But how does one conduct business in a country that is listed 128th (of a total of 180 countries) on the global corruption index? "The answer is easy, you simply draw a line in the sand from day one," says Vanden Eynde. "We are lucky to be able to rely on experienced and trustworthy advisors - they are our buffer against individuals in the system with negative intentions. "It is a stance that is sometimes frowned upon here: *we don't allow others to share in our food*, is the local expression. As a result, some officials often subject us to more intensive, slower or rougher procedures than necessary. But showing people what Close the Gap stands for also helps. "Officials often ease their scrutiny once they see what we do for the community. It's very important for us to live in the community – and not, like many expats in Africa – in privately secured estates. We believe in the growth of all people and promoted our cleaner to office manager because she showed promise, and our son Alexander attends an international school where he and a Dutch girl are the only white people. We're no strangers around here."

We eventually arrive at our destination. Our driver jumps out of the car, and opens the doors for us – in the pouring rain. Vanden Eynde hands him a little *extra* while uttering *Asante sana* – Swahili for *thank you*.

“Tipping is just another weapon in the fight against corruption,” he explains. “There’s a fundamental difference between handing out money with the expectation of getting something in return on the one hand, and showing your gratitude for something another has done for you on the other. I always do the latter when someone helps me out. It is a small gesture that, while hardly making a dent in my pocket, creates a tremendous amount of loyalty. *There’s no such thing as a free lunch*. It is a healthy economic principle I’ve learned at Deloitte: whoever I asked for advice over the phone, would send me an invoice – even if the conversation only lasted 15 minutes. Why would we apply different standards to people living in much more challenging circumstances?”

The go-to payment app in Africa is M-Pesa – which processes payments as easily as exchanging phone numbers from your contact list, by the click of a button. No QR codes, no additional security checks. “EU data privacy regulation would make this impossible in Belgium,” says Vanden Eynde. “This shows that, in the absence of data privacy concerns, ICT can develop much faster and wider.”

This is particularly true in the context of Kenya, which counts more mobile phone subscriptions than inhabitants. But while the use of mobile devices is so widespread, access to the internet is remarkably limited: less than two percent of households has access to a broadband connection, and less than five percent has access to the internet. Laptops, tablets and desktop computers are hard to find, and often excessively expensive, while the second-hand market is unreliable. This is exactly the *gap* Vanden Eynde has set out to *close*: by giving digital hardware a second life. Financially depreciated, but still very 'nearly new' desktops, tablets, mobile phones, and monitors are bought directly from companies, and handed over to locally trained staff in Mombasa who test, repair, and prepare the devices for the second-hand market. It is a thorough process, in which not only damages and malfunctions are fixed, but in which also personal data is removed in line with the European Union’s GDPR (and Kenyan data protection Act), or in which unusable parts are converted to recyclable materials. It is a pioneering challenge on a continent that tends to pile its e-waste, often imported from Europe, onto evergrowing landfills.

Most of the hardware is currently shipped from the Belgian branch, but this should soon change. “We have signed our first agreements with multinationals that operate in Kenya, to reverse their current practice of exporting depreciated hardware to Europe and flying data removal experts to Kenya. They all agree that this practice simply doesn’t make sense; it’s ecologically as well as economically absurd, really. But it’s exactly the absurdity of it all that has opened up a new market for us: by demonstrating time and time again that we, too, have the means and skills to adhere to the strictest global technical and regulatory requirements, we are able to provide a cost-effective, sustainable alternative.”

Refurbishments drive the lion’s share of the revenue. The Mombasa branch employs fifty people who process 30,000 devices annually, generating a turnover of 1.3 million Euros and profits to the amount of 300,000 Euros. “We have the resources to expand our capacity to 150,000 devices annually,” says Vanden Eynde. “And that’s no pie in the sky: the demand in this region alone, home to 30 million young people, is limitless in theory. Education and innovation centres like ours are imperative to address the demand, assuming that improving living standards drive an ever-growing demand. And we have a unique advantage: we have direct international access to nearly new overstock electronics that are hard to come by locally.”



One question has been lingering in the background: does he intend to get rich, like most of his tech start-up colleagues around the world? For the first time since the start of this conversation, Vanden Eynde carefully weighs his words. “Getting rich would make me incredibly proud, because this would confirm that our model works. But the reality is that incubator projects like ours are hardly ever profitable: their unique merit lies predominantly in the role they play in *pumping fresh blood* into an economy.

Fact is, 85 percent of start-ups fails, and only very, very few manage to develop into something like M-Pesa. Of course, we will only find out whether we turn out to be one of those lucky few if we start planting the seeds for future success today. But let this be clear: the ambition is not to get rich in itself. If this were our sole ambition, we’d be better off in Johannesburg, Kigali or Nairobi. Or in the USA, in New York, Atlanta and in Silicon Valley.

Our ultimate ambition is to make a difference, a meaningful impact, socially and economically. Whether or not the difference we make is economically sustainable is an open question, and frankly out of our hands. That’s my honest answer.”

We have come to the end of our visit, and one question remains. Apart from how Close the Gap develops, how will Vanden Eynde’s role in it develop? The project has so far coached 100 new entrepreneurs, and has financially participated in close to ten start-ups.

However, the project is still very much driven and financed by white Europeans. “Mainly internationally educated Kenyans point this out to me, and it bothers me. They are right to criticise us from this angle. Most international companies that operate in Kenya, including Google, require that their investments only benefit *black African founders* that have been residing in Kenya for at least three generations. That’s their way of preventing Kenyans residing in Atlanta or Paris, or well-off white Kenyans, to benefit from resources they don’t need. It’s a concept I support wholeheartedly, and one I intend to discuss with our shareholders in the short term: to make one of our local employees – preferably a woman, with proven expertise and a solid understanding of the region – a shareholder. My role should develop more towards being an enabler for other people to grow.”

One thing is certain: the Vanden Eyndes aren't planning their retirement in Mombasa. “We need to keep moving, my wife and I. The African heat can be exhausting, and we’re mostly living in air-conditioned spaces. So, the contours of a bigger plan are already visible: a plan that covers the entire African continent, with hubs in Mombasa, Congo, Kampala and Johannesburg, independently managed by local CEOs and local shareholders. We see it as our responsibility to guide the transition of Close the Gap from a Kenyan project to a full-fledged African project.



Olivier Vanden Eynde (42)

Olivier Vanden Eynde is founder and co-owner of Close the Gap, a social enterprise with branches in Antwerp (Mechelen), *Belgium*, and Mombasa, *Kenya*.

Close the Gap refurbishes and re-markets second-hand digital hardware. Both the Mechelen and Mombasa branches have a healthy bottom line: while the former employs 30 people and manages a turnover of nearly five million Euros per year, the latter employs 50 people and turns over 1.3 million.

In addition to the ITAM (IT Asset Management) business, Vanden Eynde also manages an *innovation hub* and *fab lab* in central Mombasa, and shares his managerial and ICT expertise with start-up entrepreneurs.

The associated Belgian non-profit organisation Digital for Youth has so far donated 20,000 laptops to schools and children with limited access to ICT in Belgium – partly at the request of the various Belgian Ministers of Education during the Covid pandemic.

Vanden Eynde graduated at the Solvay Management School (University of Brussels), obtained an additional Master in Corporate Finance at the Vlerick Business School, and worked at Deloitte for twelve years.

He was awarded the title of Baron by the Belgian Royal Family in 2021. The Vanden Eynde family, including his wife Debbie and their two sons Alexander (6) and Victor (4 months), resides in Mombasa.



"Ubuntu – I am because of you – is my motivation and beacon throughout my life and my interactions with other people. Africa reminds me of this all the time."

MOMBASA

THROUGH THE EYES OF

OLIVIER VANDEN EYNDE

Which local speciality would you recommend?

There's this beverage called dawa. It contains ginger, honey, and lime, and is consumed hot or cold. *Dawa* means medicine, and many Kenyans drink it during the rainy season to ward off disease. But you can of course also order it as a cocktail, with vodka and lemon grass.

What's your favourite restaurant?

I can strongly recommend Monsoons – run by a former Italian paramilitary and his Kenyan wife at the beach, with views onto historic ruins.

You dine with your feet in the sand, and nobody looks at you funny when you decide to go for a swim in the ocean between courses. The fish on the menu is delivered every day by local fishermen.

And because Mombasa has been a key trading port for centuries, you'll often find Indian influences in Kenyan cuisine: spicy, with lots of fresh fruit and coconut.

Where do you go for the weekend?

Safari is in the Kenyans' blood. Most international tourists tend to visit Masai Mara in the west of the country, but Kenya's largest national park, Tsavo, is less than two hours' drive from Mombasa.

Tsavo is famous for its elephants – all 12,000 of them – which you get to see from your own car, or from the lodges that accommodate anyone from budget backpackers to discerned luxury travellers.

How do you keep fit?

Outside of the rainy season, which lasts three months, Mombasa is uncomfortably hot and humid – too hot to do any physical exercise. So we tend to congregate in air-conditioned gyms. The only manageable alternative is swimming in the hotel pool near my apartment.

Which music do you listen to?

Spending time in Kenya has taught me the beauty of Islamic culture, including its music. The calls to prayer that emanate from the mosques near my apartment evoke a sense of calm in me – even though I have no idea what they are on about.

What's worth visiting in Mombasa?

Fort Jesus, a 16th century fort built around 1595 by the Portuguese to guard the Old Port of Mombasa, is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and definitely worth a visit – especially the light show at night, or the fireworks at the time of Diwali, the Indian festival of lights.

This melting pot of cultures, and the mutual tolerance, is what makes Mombasa so exciting: at the pool, you often see ladies in bikinis sunbathing next to ladies in burqinis and to each their own, as they say.

How should one explore Mombasa?

Seeing Kenya from the unique perspective of a dhow – a traditional, flat sailing boat – is a must.

Sunset is a great time to be on the water, with sips and snacks and a mind-blowing view onto the city and all of its vibrance.