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Swaziland team wins the first *Scientific American* Science in Action Award, powered by the Google Science Fair

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On Wednesday June 6, two teenagers from Swaziland, the small country located in southern Africa, were named the winners of the inaugural *Scientific American* **Science in Action Award**, powered by the Google Science Fair. The winners are Sakhiwe Shongwe and Bonkhe Mahlalela, both 14, and their winning project explores an affordable way to provide hydroponics to poor subsistence farmers, enabling them to grow their crops and vegetables in very large quantities and within limited space without using soil. In addition to the $50,000 prize, Shongwe and Mahlalela will have access to a year's mentorship and will travel to Google's California headquarters in July to compete in the 13-to-14-year-old age category in the overall Google Science Fair.

"We believe that Swaziland neither needs the tons of food aid coming from western and eastern countries, nor complicated expensive strategies beyond the budget of the country to solve low food productivity," Shongwe and Mahlalela state in their Google Science Fair entry. Shongwe and Mahlalela developed an Unique Simplified Hydroponics Method (USHM) to grow vegetables using local waste organic matter as a growing medium and waste cartons as garden containers. Hydroponics is the process of growing plants in sand, gravel or liquid with added nutrients but without soil. Mentors Thomas H. Culhane, Daniel M. Kammen and Michael Webber will work with Shongwe and Mahlalela to help realize the goal of their project.

Scientific American's independent **judging panel** elected Shongwe and Mahlalela as the winners from a pool of 13 *Scientific American* Science in Action Award finalists. "All of the finalists produced inspiring work, so they are all winners to me," says Mariette DiChristina, editor in chief of *Scientific American*. "It's thrilling that the judges chose to give the first Science in Action prize to Sakhiwe Shongwe and Bonkhe Mahlalela, whose entry stated that they believe the lives of subsistence farmers 'can change for the better through science.' We at *Scientific American* share that belief in science as a system for improving the human condition."

In addition to Shongwe and Mahlalela, three other Science in Action Award finalists are also Google Science Fair finalists. Catherine Wong, 16, from the U.S., has a project that focuses on using cell-phone networks to bring telemedicine to people who do not have easy access to doctors. Sumit Singh, 14, from India, has an entry centered on increasing crop yields through vertical multilevel farming. Sabera Talukder, 15, from the U.S., has a project that seeks to create a water-purification system that cheaply and portably purifies water for developing countries.

In July these finalists will come to Google's headquarters in Mountain View, Calif., to present their projects to an international panel of **finalist judges**, including science luminaries, technology innovators and Nobel laureates. They will compete for **prizes** that include $100,000 in scholarship funds, real-life experiences at CERN near Geneva, Google or the LEGO Group, a trip to the Galápagos Islands courtesy of National Geographic Expeditions, and Chromebooks for their class. The winners will be announced at a gala on July 23, which will be streamed live on the fair's **YouTube channel**.

Scientific American has been a partner with the Google Science Fair, an annual international online competition, since it launched last year. The *Scientific American* **Science in Action Award** was created to recognize a project that addresses a social, environmental, ethical, or health issue to make a practical difference to the lives of a group or community.

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For more information about the Google Science Fair and *Scientific American's* Science in Action Award, please visit:

Scientific American Science in Action Award landing page: **www.ScientificAmerican.com/science-in-action**
Google Science Fair 2012: **www.google.com/events/sciencefair**
Educator resources: **www.google.com/events/sciencefair/educators.html**
Bridge to Science: **http://blogs.scientificamerican.com/budding-scientist/2012/06/06/teens-engineer-a-way-to-help-farmers-in-swaziland/**
Google Science Fair's YouTube channel: **www.youtube.com/user/GoogleScienceFair**

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