

She's making it her business to help build an Africa awareness

KANINA FOSS

FIFTEEN formidable female entrepreneurs from all over the world will fly to France in October, business plans in hand, to compete as finalists in the Cartier Women's Initiative Awards.

Three will be from Africa – one from South Africa.

When she gave birth to her son, Anne Githuku-Shongwe's business idea was born too. "As a mother of three, it bothered me that after my son was born I couldn't find interesting media for him," she says.

She noticed the pervasiveness of Western media (when her daughter had to choose a role model for a school project, she couldn't decide between Hannah Montana and Beyonce), and the negative perceptions of Africa, and a desire grew for her children to be told stories that conveyed a sense of hope for the continent.

She also noticed the amount of time her son spent playing video

games, and realised the potential to reach children in a way they considered fun and cool.

"Their dreams for the continent will follow the media they consume – that's what is in their heads every day," she said.

Her business, Afroes, develops interactive digital media products – like video and cellphone games – that are rooted in African heritage to encourage awareness of social issues and the development of new skills.

The first game Afroes developed is based on a township soccer game, and was a way to celebrate the Africa that was showcased during the World Cup.

The second, Champ Chase, was developed in partnership with the Nelson Mandela Children's Fund, and can be downloaded online.

The criteria for the awards are creativity, financial sustainability and social impact. A winner is chosen from each of five regions worldwide. They receive business coaching for a year and \$20 000 (R145 000).

Tanzanian Ann Kihengu has a company which distributes solar lights and cellphone chargers to rural areas in a country where only 11 percent of the population has access to electricity.

Most Tanzanians rely on kerosene lamps, which are hazardous and costly in fuel.

Kihengu employs entrepreneurs who go to villages to lecture people on the benefits of solar power versus kerosene. "Most people can't afford big solar systems. I knew which people needed these products and how much they could afford to pay," she said.

Ugandan Sara Katebalirwe is reviving the use of bark cloth, an ancient Ugandan material produced from the bark of the indigenous Mutuba tree. The bark is stripped, pounded flat, and left to dry in a process that predates weaving.

Jury president for Africa, Wendy Luhabe, said: "Not only is (Katebalirwe) creating an enterprise, but sustaining a very ancient way of creating fabric."

