

# PIDG Pathfinder

Summer 2020

## Sharing knowledge

### Embracing change, empowering Africa



**Elizabeth Hipwell,**  
Chief Operating Officer,  
InfraCo Africa

I joined InfraCo Africa in 2014 as the company's Business Development, Communications and Impact Manager. Previously, I had worked for Accenture Strategy for eight years, mainly in the finance sector on huge multinational change programmes which were both exciting and challenging, when I decided to take a sabbatical and study for a Masters in International Development at Sciences Po in Paris. My intention was to explore a subject that interested me, away from my career, and to try living somewhere new before returning to my job.

While in Paris, I was introduced to PIDG and through PIDG, to InfraCo Africa. The idea of using public sector funding to mobilise private sector investment really appealed to me. It seemed to mix the best of both worlds, the pace of change and discipline that I'd seen within the private sector with the developmental ambition and focus on tangible impact that the public sector strives for. So, whilst climbing Mt Kilimanjaro one fateful summer and admiring the beautiful African landscape, I decided to change my career plan. A decision I have yet to regret!

During my interview with InfraCo Africa, I was asked if I could give them a single figure that would convey to the Board how developmental a project was and provide for some comparison against a financial return. Nearly six years on, we're still working on this deceptively simple request, applying a model that delivers 'a double bottom line' and that has continued and will continue to evolve. It also neatly sums up my experience with InfraCo Africa to date.

The company and I are on a journey. I joined 12 colleagues, all based in London, to oversee a small portfolio of early-stage projects managed by external developers. InfraCo Africa's 'simple' ambition at the time was to build an internal capability to develop projects directly and so grow our pipeline. My first performance objective was to develop a new website to help achieve this. Our web developers at the time queried whether InfraCo Africa would ever need space

for more than five projects or if we'd really publish more than one news release a year. I confidently said "yes" even though I wasn't entirely sure we would.

Fast forward to today and I can proudly report that we've achieved our ambition to grow our pipeline and promote many more projects. Today we have 40 employees, offices in East and West Africa, a diverse portfolio of projects, and can not only finance early-stage project development but also invest in the construction and operation of innovative infrastructure businesses.

In the first five-year business plan I worked on in 2015, I never envisioned that we'd be considering funding electric bikes or mobile desalination in 2020! Climate change has also become increasingly central to our work, with all of our projects now needing to demonstrate Paris-alignment (footnote). We have pioneered off-grid renewables and irrigation infrastructure projects which actively seek to address and mitigate the effects of a changing climate for some of Africa's most remote communities and we continue to refine our understanding and grow our ambition here. But what really excites me, is that our drive has not slowed and so I'm confident that five years from now we'll be doing things that we couldn't imagine doing today. One of my performance objectives for this year is to redesign our 'News' page online, because we now have so much to talk about we are running out of space!



Chanyanya irrigation project in Zambia

It's not just InfraCo Africa that has changed. Back in 2014, we had relatively little interaction across PIDG beyond reporting and planning. We're now co-located and finding new ways to collaborate and respond to challenges as they arise – something driven home for me by our joined-up response to the current COVID-19 crisis. Collaborating across PIDG has also pushed InfraCo Africa to be even more ambitious, not just in what we are doing but in how we do it, particularly the new ways of working that we are embedding into our projects.

Working for a company that is evolving and that genuinely operates on the frontier can sometimes be exhausting! It means rethinking strategies, challenging yourself and problem solving. However, it also offers incredible opportunities. As InfraCo Africa has grown so have I. I am now the COO and have found myself taking responsibility for a range of new challenges, like running a developer procurement process,

setting up a subsidiary business or establishing the developmental impact of an agri-processing plant.

Perhaps the biggest unexpected change though is the pride that comes from knowing that your work genuinely improves people's lives. I was fortunate enough to visit one of our projects, Kalangala Infrastructure Services (KIS) on Bugala Island in Uganda. Whilst there I was invited into people's homes and workplaces to hear about how their lives had changed as the result of the infrastructure InfraCo Africa has funded. The impact of the project went far beyond the numbers, reports and status charts that I'd been involved in and, from listening to the communities who benefited from the project, it really struck me what an important enabler infrastructure can be. We are now working to share similar stories from across our projects, amplifying the voices and experiences of those we work with where we can.



Kalangala Infrastructure project, new ferry service

While InfraCo Africa has experienced growth, many of the original team remain and there is still a shared sense of purpose and commitment to what we're trying to achieve, only we now have a greater diversity of experiences, views and ideas so that we can be even more ambitious and innovative as a consequence!

Looking forward, I feel like the horizon is moving even further out for us. Every new business plan I have been involved with has been that bit more ambitious and I don't think this will change. Ultimately though, people remain at the heart of what we do: those that

we work with and the opportunities we can give them; and those that use the infrastructure we develop and the benefits it brings them.

As for me? I'm in the process of moving to Nairobi to work with our Kenyan team and hopefully spend more time understanding the impact of our projects and engaging with our local stakeholders. If you happen to be travelling through Kenya in the future – after lock-down of course – then please do drop into our office to talk about what InfraCo Africa might be doing next and how we can work together to achieve even more.