

Entrepreneurial sisters venture into US market

It was a drive to explore international trade that saw entrepreneurial sisters, Michelle and Mo Mokone, grabbing an opportunity to venture into the United States of America market.



Michelle and Mbrongwe Mokone, owners of Mo's Crib. Source: Supplied

The pair are the co-owners of Mo's Crib, a company that produces a range of handmade home décor products.

Their product range includes handwoven baskets, planters, trays, wall art and home outdoor items. It was in 2021 that the pair decided to take advantage of the African Growth and Opportunity Act (Agoa), a United States Trade Act, which was enacted in May 2000.

Agoa allows 35 qualifying Sub-Saharan countries to export 1,835 tariff lines - duty-free - to a significant consumer market in the US.

Michelle Mokone, who is the operations and supply chain director of Mo's Crib, says their products are manufactured from unique materials such as ultra-durable polyvinyl chloride plastic, reclaimed from landfill and construction sites throughout South Africa, and various types of grass.

All this is underpinned by a particular interest in the protection of the environment.



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“Our mission is to leverage the craftsmanship of South African artisans to help accelerate awareness about

the most pressing environmental and social issues faced today.

“With every sale, we are creating economic and educational opportunities for South African men and women, while diverting plastic waste from the natural resources of our hometown of Pretoria,” Michelle said.

In addition to safeguarding the natural environment, the Mokone sisters are deeply committed to the development of the people in their community.

“We are striving to create opportunities and make a meaningful impact. We would like to grow our footprint beyond the USA and enter new markets, such as Europe and the United Arab Emirates. We have our own internal plan to create 20 new jobs within the next two to three years,” Michelle said.

She said a forwarding agent assisted them with the compliance and administration process to booking various containers.

“Since 2021, we have shipped a total of eight containers to the USA. We are on track to ship two more containers before the end of 2023. We also regularly ship a container to fulfil our orders for our online store which is fulfilled through our warehouse in New Jersey.

“Although shipping is relatively expensive, especially for a small business that is 100% self-funded, we have benefited from the Agoa Act through significant market access. Currently, the USA orders constitute 60% of our overall revenue,” she said.

South Africa is working to secure a renewal and extension of Agoa, including through direct engagement between government and business representatives, as well as with members of the US Senate and Congress across party-political lines.

During a recent parliamentary briefing, Trade, Industry and Competition Minister, Ebrahim Patel, told Members of Parliament that South Africa's participation in Agoa benefits neighbouring countries through shared value chains.

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