

Transcript

Rudolph [00:00:03] Welcome to Future of Business, a podcast run by a team of MBA student which takes you behind the walls of the business school to explore the diverse range of sectors and stories embedded in the Oxford MBA cohort and beyond, and how they will shape the future of business. My name is Rudolph Okai and today I'll be speaking to Ashraf Mizo. Ashraf and I are both MBA students and at the University of Oxford said business school. And today we'll be talking about his entrepreneurship journey. Welcome, Ashraf.

Ashraf [00:00:30] Thank you Rudolph.

Rudolph [00:00:32] So, Ashraf, I know that we've had several engagements and conversations and all the wonderful things you've been doing, but today I want to specifically talk to you about your entrepreneurship journey and how you call yourself into that sector. So maybe you can start by introducing yourself and let us know what you do.

Ashraf [00:00:51] So my name is Ashraf Mizo. So, I'm from Khartoum, which is the capital of Sudan. I have a background in electrical electronics, engineering and social entrepreneurship. I started off my entrepreneurship journey working on something called human machine interface systems, so very deep engineering work. We looked at different alternatives for interacting with devices, and I worked on something called gesture control. So imagine opening or closing your hand to pause or play music, or making a right or left hand gesture to change your PowerPoint slide. And that got me into the field of electronic prosthetics. These are prosthetic limbs that read electrical signals from muscle activity, and then you can control a robotic hand. And that led me to start Nayla Prosthetics, which is a company specialized in developing and distributing affordable high utility prosthetics for amputees in Sudan and hopefully in the region. We also connect users to occupational opportunities such as access to jobs, vocational training and microfinance.

Rudolph [00:02:01] All right. That's interesting. But let me ask you, how would you describe the entrepreneurship market in Sudan? Is it something that is blooming, coming up, expanding and that's why you got yourself into entrepreneurship?

Ashraf [00:03:01] I think the entrepreneurship market and ecosystem is still very much fragmented in the country. Access to capital, access to different learning, access to actually, contextual learning. I feel like there are a lot of resources available on the web around entrepreneurship and how to start a business. But I think the missing link is how do you do it in an ecosystem like Sudan, for example? But I think it's definitely being much more contextualized. I think there's a big movement, especially with the younger generation starting companies that sort of are fed to the Sudanese market and Sudanese ecosystem. My entrepreneurship journey, I feel very fortunate. I feel like a lot of doors opened up for me that I was able to sort of leverage and utilize. But I wouldn't say it was conventional.

Rudolph [00:03:56] So would you say there was a particular instance that made you want to say, aha, now I want to go into entrepreneurship?

Ashraf [00:04:03] I don't think I ever described myself as an entrepreneur. We when we started developing prosthetic limbs, I was still a university student. I then went to a conference at Northwestern University in North Chicago, and there was a Forbes reporter at the conference, and she asked me if I wanted to be featured in the project. And I was

like, absolutely. And I remember the day the article came out in the Sudan, a few companies reached out and said that they wanted to fund the project. I took it with a grain of salt because things never really materialize in Sudan. But actually, one of the companies came through. They wrote me a big check, especially as a fourth-year student. I didn't know what to do with the money at the time, but we used it to really develop sort of the product, the prototype. At the time. We wanted to develop something that would suit the socio-economic environment of Sudan. We're still working on myoelectric prosthetics. I thought technology was the way to go. I think developing technologies was the way to deliver good service. I could not have been more wrong, but and then sort of both a partnership with the research lab in Tokyo and things started to open up. And I guess it just it was a journey every time a door opened, and I would, like, enter and like it would lead to another door. I wouldn't say there was like an aha moment where I thought I was going to get into entrepreneurship or prosthetics or know how it would end.

Rudolph [00:05:43] Oh, okay. So, let me ask, is there any reason for that specialization in prosthetics? And what kind of spectrum of service do you provide in that space?

Ashraf [00:05:53] Okay. The reason for specialization. Yes, it's a great question.

Ashraf [00:06:01] For amputees. So, people who lost limbs or part of their lives, it is heavily skewed towards people with lower limb amputation. So, people who lost part of sort of the leg or feet with the minority being people with upper limb amputations. And the reason why we got into upper limb prosthetics is that there was a big gap in the market in terms of the services and the products provided for upper limb amputees, because the numbers were heavily skewed towards lower limb amputees, because there was the notion that having physical mobility and being able to move from point A to point B was more important than having a hand function. You see that the funds, the products, the services, they were all going, they were heavily oriented or heavily skewed towards lower limb prosthetics with a negligence towards people with upper limb amputations. So, we saw even though the market was smaller, but we saw a big opportunity in serving people that have long been neglected and underserved.

Rudolph [00:07:07] Okay, that's a really good. So, given that the market wasn't readily available for that, what has been your strategy serving the market so far?

Ashraf [00:07:16] Um, again, excellent question. We had two strategies. One, when it came to like developing or distributing the actual products in terms of logistics. And the second was how do we how do we latch on and integrate with the already existing infrastructure? So, in Sudan, for example, and it's a, it's a very similar case in other developing countries in East Africa, the industry of prosthetics is either controlled or provided by the state or by international organizations working in the field. In Sudan, it was the Ministry of Social Development that had a subsidiary called the National Authority of Prosthetics and Orthotics. That was sort of the national body for providing all of the prosthetic and orthotic services in the country. That body worked very closely with the International Committee of the Red Cross that has for decades provided technical assistance and training for states. They provided the raw materials for creating something called the sockets, which is an integral part of the actual prosthetics and then also the terminal devices. So, the feet or the joints or the actual peripheral part of the prosthetic limb. And because of that partnership, because it was it was state operated but also funded by international organizations, it created some sort of dependency in the field. So, states became dependent on these international organizations to provide these services,

the training, etc., etc., but also caused stagnation and development of the actual products. Right. Again, if something is heavily subsidized, if something is, as you've seen, heavily contributed through international organizations or the humanitarian sector, there isn't a lot of innovation that happens when it comes to the actual products and the product delivery and service delivery. So that was sort of the environment that we entered in, but we still saw a lot of opportunity in working, in integrating with that infrastructure. So, the National Authority of Prosthetics and Orthotics, that state body had a lot of, sorts of distribution channels. It had centers across the country. And we thought that if we could integrate and create something that would work with their products or with their sort of technical capacities, we could expand our delivery.

Rudolph [00:09:51] Okay. So is it a case that currently you are in collaboration with the government, either the government agency or a private institution? How are you seeing it through right now?

Ashraf [00:10:01] I always thought that private public partnerships is the way to go in Sudan. Um, we in the business school, they teach us a lot about sort of your non-market strategies and non-market environments. And I think for a lot of businesses, especially small businesses, your internal capabilities are a function of your sort of non-market environment or non-market strategies. So, we felt that if we were on the good side of the state, if we were integrated within the infrastructure and the channels of the state, it would give us longevity in terms of operations, it would give us breadth, but it also gave us reach. We were very lucky in that we were unlucky at first. We were very lucky. We, Sudan, for those who didn't know, was under a 30-year-old dictatorship, starting from 1989 until 2018. We had a big revolution in 2018, went through a lot of ups and downs, but emerged victorious. We overthrew the 30-year-old dictatorship. We then had a transitional technocratic government for a year and a half after that, that then unfortunately, we had another coup back in October of 2021, so we were operating under three different political environments. Obviously, that is the non-market environment that we were in, and our business was heavily affected, um, depending on what sort of political environment who are under. So, under the 30-year-old dictatorship, all the partnerships that we tried to create were. It was very tricky. The international the National Authority of Prosthetics and Orthotics and their partnership with the International Committee of the Red Cross was very strong and strong in the way that they sort of shut off and closed to any other external collaboration. I remember the meetings where the head of the authority and the head of the Red Cross Committee at the time and I walked out very unhappy. And there's the International Committee of the Red Cross because of that partnership, because of sort of the corrupt environment, they fought against any effort of domesticating the industry. I was it went against their sort of best interest to have a company like us, or an external company come in and like change things up. When we had the revolution, when a new minister for Social Development was instated, we saw a lot of shifts. We had a very good relationship with the minister and obviously that trickled down to the National Authority of Prosthetics and Orthotics. We had an influence in choosing the person that was going to lead the authority and then things started to open up. Then collaboration became so much easier. Then the International Committee of the Red Cross had had to confine to what we wanted and still have a dynamic that we have to sort game that we have to play. But it definitely changed a lot. And now we're under a very sort of murky waters in terms of the new political regime that people don't really understand. So, it's been six or seven months now. We don't really know who actually is controlling the country. And obviously, the partnerships that we have and stated before having been somewhat jeopardized. But. Um. Yeah, we're hoping for the best and see how we can how we can move forward.

Rudolph [00:13:43] Yeah, I guess it's fair to say that your PESTEL analysis keeps changing with time because you need to know who you're dealing with. And yeah, people are seeing you as a threat even though you are a new entrant coming in and trying to just see how you can grow the market.

Ashraf [00:13:56] Yeah, absolutely. We love some framework talk.

Rudolph [00:14:01] So yeah. About. So, given all this, how would you say the advancement of health technology has helped the disability inclusion and how has it changed in that sector?

Ashraf [00:14:13] Oh, well, um, it's a very, very, very big question. Um, when I started this journey, I thought that a, I, um. And. Additive manufacturing, for example, or sort of the fourth Industrial Revolution technologies were the way to go. Again, I could not have been more wrong. I think they have a big role to play when it comes to. This type of work. But I think the real innovation needs to happen in sort of the operational side of the businesses. So, in terms of delivering the services needs to happen in sort of the accompanying services that come with assistive technologies, right. So, what we realized is so our mission from the get-go was the socioeconomic inclusion of amputees in Sudan and hopefully the region. We thought that could happen through creating these prosthetics and technologies. Yes, they have they play a big role. But we realized that we needed to accompany our products with, again, like I said, occupational opportunity services. So, to ease the process of this economic and social inclusion. One of the latest programs that we ran was microfinance program on which we give amputees or potential users access to small business training. So, we teach them how to separate personal accounting at a separate sort of business accounting on a very local and contextual language. We give them a micro loan. And obviously the prosthetic and the prosthetic component helped with raising self-esteem, sense of independence, mobility, so raising their performance capacity and then the access to loan, the training, and then we help them start a small business. So, a small kiosk, small agricultural project, small brick production facility, had a list of projects and then they would repay in installments. Right? So, it's like the prosthetic raised performance capacity and then you give them access to some income generating activity. And then that was sort of our formula for social and economic inclusion. I think there's a lot to work on there. I think when where the technology comes to play is how do you how do you how do you develop these products and services, whether it's fintech services or insureds insurance, tech services or the actual prosthetics in terms of manufacturing them at an affordable price point. Then technology comes to play. But when it comes to like creating the products themselves or innovation within the product. I think we're still a long way from that and we need to sort of develop and innovate around it.

Rudolph [00:17:14] Oh, that's quite interesting because I think I get a sense that Nayla has created this integrated model where you're trying to give autonomy by helping them with the limbs and also giving them access to capital to do something with their lives, trying to make up for lost ground, which is quite interesting. And that means I guess funding will be key for your project because you need to fund the design of this prosthetics, you need to fund the way their businesses are being started. It's a startup. I'm guessing there will be a lot of SMEs where not every kind of business does well for them to pay back but you also need to sustain the business. Thus, that's quite interesting.

Ashraf [00:17:53] Yeah. Funding is definitely the key word.

Rudolph [00:17:57] Yeah, that's. That's right. So, would you say that's the major challenge being faced by Nayla?

Ashraf [00:18:06] I think it's definitely one of the bigger challenges, I think. Um, again, I've been I've been fortunate enough to be connected to a lot of local players that were able and are still able to fund, but also access to a more global Western network. I think the problem with. With the funding is that you need to show one traction, but you need to have a clear strategy and plan moving to the future. And I think that's those are the two components that would make the funding process accessible. I think when it comes to funding, the issue that we always face is what do we have to show in terms of future plan? Working in such an uncertain environment. Right. We went under a 30-year-old dictatorship. Overcame that under a transitional government. Things started to open up. The country was thriving. Sense of morale was very high. And then we had another military coup that really changed everything. So very low morale. Everywhere you go, no clear. Sort of like administrative governmental structure. And we don't really know what the what the future is going to look like. Right. So, I guess in the equation of funding, having traction, something that you have done before plus clear future plans, the clear future plan component is somewhat missing or somewhat foggy. Right.

Rudolph [00:19:49] I also think so.

Ashraf [00:19:49] To. Yeah. So, it's like if we. We need to get that clear. We need to have clarity on what we're going to do next. And for us. When I came to Oxford, we were still operating under a more stable regime. Right. The plan was to become the national supplier in the next two or three years by expanding our partnerships with governmental bodies. So, we had working with the Ministry of Social Development. We were planning to work with sort of the national defense military, and we thought that was the way to go. And then we wanted to expand into more of a financing institution for people with disabilities. Right. So, one, expanding the assistive technology portfolio, so we provide upper limb prosthetics. We want to provide lower limb prosthetics, other types of orthotic devices and assistive technologies, and that would expand the portfolio of people with disabilities that we're able to serve. Right. And then we wanted to expand on the economic opportunity models and programs. So, access to microfinance, access to micro-insurance, etc., etc. and we wanted to scale into the region. Obviously, that really changed with the change in sort of the political tide. So, I guess that is what is missing from the funding equation. But I think with the Oxford Network being here, being able to tap into so many smart, innovative people, we're trying to work what we're trying to work out what the future is going to look like. And I think when it comes to funding, it will be so much easier.

Rudolph [00:21:53] Yeah. I mean, I guess I can see the point where you are back in the UK, in Oxford studying then all these things happen. When you are aware it changes your business plan, changes your models and it just throws you off. And I think that's one of the challenges of being an entrepreneur, cannot predict what happens in the future. But like you said, when innovation comes in and I hope this situation in Sudan gets much, much better, thank you. Not just for the business, but for the citizens and everybody else because everything that must be done in the country. I think it depends on the morale of the people and the high morale, gingers people and empowers them to try and do something. So, I hope things open up. And I can see that it Oxford MBA is actually equipping you. Because now you are going through the challenges. So now you see how you can use the tools that are being introduced to in Oxford to see how you can mitigate these issues and solve them. And like you said, with the broad network of the cohort and even the bigger Oxford community. I mean, I do know that there are accesses of other

things, services that you can tap into to see how that can help you in the journey, in Sudan when it comes to Nayla. And you are actually doing quite well because it's not just about the prosthetics you are giving but also doing the funding side, which I will be happy to see it come into fruition, and hopefully use that probably open a branch in Ghana and the bigger subregion because that is something that you are doing. You are giving other the opportunity and stability. Disability inclusion is not something back home in Africa that we normally, it sort of comes like an afterthought to how we fit these guys back in. We should put them at the front and center, because they are the ones being disadvantaged and we need to carry them along. So yeah, but I also have to ask this question before we go back. You've been in Oxford for a couple of months. Uh, I know you're very great basketball player, and you surprised everybody at the MBA tournament back in France. Well, it was quite a surprise. And you guys won. And congratulations for winning that tournament. So, what would you say is your favorite activity, let's say probably outside basketball when it comes to the University of Oxford?

Ashraf [00:24:03] Um, I love playing squash, actually coming to Oxford. Obviously, there aren't many opportunities to play outdoor basketball. I'm not sure if you guys have heard the UK does not have the best kind of weather. The university itself is not very big on basketball, so access to indoor basketball courts was a challenge, but access to squash courts, then you can play squash any time of the day or night in so many places in Oxford. So, I picked that up. I think it's a great way to like to socialize with a small group of people. We always say we are. We're big cohort 355 people. And every time we get a chance to like really to socialize and like engage in a more intimate, like, close circle, it's really good. And I think I was able to do that to squash.

Rudolph [00:24:58] Alright. I suggest that maybe you teach me how to play squash one day.

Ashraf [00:25:01] Absolutely.

Rudolph [00:25:02] Ah Ashraf, it's been wonderful having you and it was great talking to you.

Ashraf [00:25:06] Thank you. Good talking to you.