

# The Accesserator Story

---

By Maarten Verboven and Robert Slijk

December 2021

## Chapter 9: Slope of Enlightenment

It was the beginning of 2021 when we finished our exploration of the Unknown. For our well-defined problem we found several potential solutions, but to test these we needed to collaborate with other stakeholders. From this moment onwards, we no longer envisioned ourselves as the main driver to create change. Accesserator tried it for almost 5 years, in which we went from an active to pro-active mindset, and eventually on our way down to the Valley of Death into overdrive. From now on we decided that our vision and solution would only work if all parties involved made a step in the right direction, and not just Accesserator.

Many talks followed, but a hard truth revealed itself. We wanted entrepreneurs and start-ups to develop themselves much more and much faster than all the other stakeholders. Our solution meant a big change that worked enchanting, but was not acted upon. This can be because our solution is not what entrepreneurs, NGO's or markets need, maybe Accesserator is not capable to implement it or the time is not now.

Frustration took over, our enthusiasm disappeared and we simply ran out of ideas. We kept looking up for that brilliant solution that would bring us success, looking for that hand to reach to us and give us that break we needed, looking for relief. Despite all our efforts to pivot our concept, business model and PMC, the slope of enlightenment brought us to stop with Accesserator.

Speaking out loud to each other that stopping Accesserator is an option actually felt good, as it took a while before we were ready to free ourselves from the burden the situation Accesserator was in had become. Next heavy task was to discuss stopping Accesserator with our investors. The people that believed in us and our mission from day 1 and provided us with the necessary cash to implement it. On October 20<sup>th</sup> 2021 the salvation was there when we made the shareholders' decision to dissolve the company, and stop with all activities.

Based on recommendation of some investors, we tried to preserve the impact we'd created over the last 5 years, firstly by trying to sell our total investment portfolio to similar funds and foundations. There was some interest, but all of them found it very difficult to incorporate it in their strategy or organization. We eventually found two options to preserve impact, but with no gains or any return on investment for our investors. Their money was gone.

### A travellers' journey

Back at the campsite in Sesriem we first took a shower, cold one, and a beer from our car-fridge, also a cold one. Evaluating our adventure of today we started to map our route for tomorrow. We would again leave early, not be cruising as animals do live here, pass Dune 45 and go straight to Big Daddy. The last part of the trip has to be done by foot and it's quite a more exhausting and longer trip than going up Dune 45. We now knew we don't need a jacket, but long sleeves though to protect from the sun, sunglasses and sun cream for the lips. We should take enough water, some snacks, but leave other food in the car so we travel light going up.

And we had to go back to Deadvlei, but with all knowledge we had now, I was actually excited to see that place again from a different perspective. And if the route to the top of Big Daddy proves to be too hard, we would just turn back and maybe try again next day. Musing about our trip the sun slowly reached the horizon again.

Early next morning we were back in that line of cars again at the gate. We drove in line, but keeping a safe distance to the car in front of us and limiting our speed. We were overtaken a few times, people just rushing to Dune 45. Approaching the parking of Dune 45, we were the only ones not stopping, but we knew our mission and with the little light already there we continued going 'downstream'. Before sunrise we arrived at the parking for Deadvlei, the place we didn't even notice yesterday, and pulled over.

We walked to the point where we saw an access to the rim yesterday and started our climb. As the sun still didn't show itself, the conditions were chilly but favourable: jacket not needed indeed. Knowing we would not be able to reach the top before sunrise, we didn't rush and just enjoyed the view. Any moment the sun would show its face we knew we would be ready to just sit down and admire that magical moment.

The sunrise was our first break after little more than half hour walking. We were sitting on the rim, facing the sun, having Deadvlei at our back, knowing it is still a long way to go and really enjoying the moment. We continued going up.

Our wish became truth as we reached the top of Big Daddy 2 hours later. A magical moment again. A small bag of sand at home still connects us to that summit.

After quite a few discussions our former Country Director Patrick Namakhoma and our former member of staff, Chisomo Zenasi, made a plan to take over Accesserator activities. Their energy to keep the Accesserator mission alive is admirable. Accesserator will continue as a fully owned and managed Malawian company. Accesserator Malawi will take over most of the portfolio as well. A new Dutch foundation, based in Zomba Malawi and called Drop & Ripple, is ready to take over a few companies in Blantyre. Taking over means getting new life in a partnership and see how such partnership can best become fruitful.

As for ourselves, we are asked by the new owners of Accesserator to stay connected, share our thoughts and stimulate our network in Malawi and The Netherlands. It will be a passive and demand driven role. No longer we are standing in the arena to fight, run and hide to make it a success. But we stay connected to our mission and who knows what the future will bring us.

### Key take aways

- Your previous failures were not only because of you or your competences. It was also because of the mismatch between your business model and the context.
- Invest in the end. We spend many hours after we made the decision to stop Accesserator to make sure that all parties involved are treated with respect.
- Dissolve your company in a transparent and descent way.
- If what you write as a plan has nothing to do with how to execute it, it's only used as an application. If you don't write it down as you execute it, you can't know if it's worth to start it.
- Do things just happen, or can you influence it? That's what a plan is for, to proactively steer the course of things that happen, in a structured way so you can evaluate it.

Personal note Robert:

It all started for me after I came back from South Africa where we helped SME companies as part of the study for Nyenrode. It gave me a lot of satisfaction and joy to share knowledge and capital to create impact. I'm grateful to go on this journey with many great people, with the support of friends and family, and most of it with my co-founder Maarten.

Our dream was to bring value to Malawi and take back as little as possible. Potentially spark the flywheel that could attract more and more capital to the country. My ambitions were high, extremely high. The actual results are realistic.

We brought entrepreneurship, business literacy, and cash. All on a very small scale and the impact is a personal level. Yet this is what was in our reach, and I'm very proud that we just did it.

Now 5 years of Accesserator and a lot of experiences later, the joy to help others and create impact is still present, but I know now that it is most valuable when the other person can accept this help.

Thank you to Maarten for the endless conversations about this topic and all other things. We discussed everything at length and searched for new ways to keep our mission alive. You opened my eyes to many valuable life lessons. Special thanks to Cécile who lend her husband to me for all these hours.

At last, thank you Masha for believing me and give me freedom to chase my dreams. Without your support in the good and bad days, I would never be able to create impact and learn continuously.

Personal note Maarten:

It all started for me living in Malawi for half a year with Cécile, my wife, 12 years ago. Being there, in a village and becoming a little bit part of the community lit the fire for my love for Malawi. It was also the time I learned a lot about 'doing good'.

It was that evening in a bar in Utrecht when Accesserator was actually born. Not aware of this name, not knowing what country it should take place and evening not knowing what it should be about, Robert and I decided to start a company together. I'm still thankful for that day and thankful to you Robert that you wanted to do this journey with me.

I enjoyed the moments of us solving any problem on a white board within an hour. No one can do that faster than us. I have the feeling I've done at least a half MBA as well. Most I enjoyed the business trips to Malawi with countless special moments and meetings. At least my personal mission to walk around in a suit, business cards in the pocket, in Africa one day is accomplished.

I value the friends I made in Malawi. Patrick, Chisomo: the day Robert and I formally ended Accesserator was actually a joyful day as it is the day you take over. For sure we will meet again one day in Malawi.

And a lot of thanks to our investors, that were 'fool' enough to believe in us and our mission. With a special thanks to my 'favourite investor', Cécile, I couldn't have done this without you. TIA, I'm curious to learn what future will bring.

## **Chapter 10: At the Real Top**

*How we wished we could have written this chapter. At this moment it is not given to us to try and implement our latest ideas. But, Accesserator still lives, we handed over ownership and full operations to two of our former staff in Malawi. Accesserator Malawi, locally owned and governed, is determined to continue the Accesserator story. And off course we will follow it, you never know what opportunities future can bring...*