

Funding and scaling individuals and not-for-profits tackling climate change, a profile of Subak

With #QVCS, Maddyness profiles different funds to give founders and entrepreneurs the information they need to choose the right investor. Today we interview Amali de Alwis, CEO of Subak.

I started my career exploring manufacturing – first studying engineering at Birmingham University and then moving into shoe design! I graduated from London College of Fashion, and headed straight into a graduate job with Clarks, spent a year as a men's footwear designer, and realised I was more interested in the thinking and strategy behind products and services so moved to a marketing and brand research consultancy as a quant researcher – and got hooked on tech.

From there, I went on to become CEO at Code First: Girls and had the privilege of growing it into a multi-award-winning organisation that taught tens of thousands of women across the country how to code for free. I then moved on to join Microsoft for Startups as their Managing Director for Startups in the UK, where I was able to share my experiences of building startups and developing growth propositions to help other startups grow, as well as to learn more about SaaS and AI sectors.

Now, in my role as CEO at Subak, it feels like a combination of several roles I've

done in the past. From my early career as a quant researcher to developing programmes to help tech startups grow, each of these roles have helped me to understand not only how to build and scale financially robust tech and mission-led companies, but also how to formulate this to help others do the same.

Which industries are you working in?

Subak is a global accelerator and climate data cooperative that funds and scales tech startups and individuals who are tackling climate change through data. We were set up with the toughest climate challenges in mind, and the recognition that solving those issues at speed would need us to link tech, data, policy and human behaviour and collaborate across the public, not-for-profit, and corporate sectors.

It's ambitious, but Subak is really facilitating this collaboration! We believe that if one person solves part of the puzzle, we should share that knowledge so all sides can solve climate issues quicker, and we support this by offering equity free funding, growth and mentorship programmes, as well as links into leading climate and tech sector experts. That's why Subak's members and fellows are, by definition, not competitors – they're collaborators.

Our community is made up of not-for-profit startups and individuals working on climate data projects, and they cover a multitude of areas across climate change. Climate change is a massive, interconnected challenge, and as well as this need for collaboration, we also need to channel funding and support into early-stage not-for-profits that aren't hindered by a need to generate returns to their shareholders.

What do you look for in a founder?

With climate change being the most critical issue we face as humanity today, it's too urgent to move slowly and not commit to it as a first priority. This belief strongly informs how we seek out applicants for Subak's fellowship and accelerator programmes.

We look for climate-focussed startups and individuals with a desire to be open and collaborative, evidence-led, and innovative. Most importantly, we're searching for individuals with a passion to create an organisation that can make a real difference to the world.

To join the Subak accelerator, we ask startups to have a not-for-profit mandate, a core focus on climate change, particularly on climate mitigation – preventing rather than adapting, whilst we still can. We also look for startups that have a data-centred theory of change, and have the data capabilities to contribute to

our [Data Catalogue](#).

Can you talk about your current portfolio?

Our ever growing [community](#) is made up of our accelerator members (the not-for-profit organisations who receive funding and support through our accelerator programme) supported by our UK and Australia-based Subak teams, and fellows (individuals working on climate-focussed data projects) from anywhere in the world.

We're lucky to have a diverse spread of organisations and individuals who are part of Subak's ecosystem. Our current cohort's organisations include [The Green Web Foundation](#), who are working to accelerate the transition to a fossil fuel free internet by 2030, and [Instrat](#), a progressive think tank in Poland using open energy data to drive policy debate and a just transition to net zero. Meanwhile Subak's fellows work across the globe on problems ranging from recycling to air pollution monitoring.

How has COVID-19 changed the way you operate?

Subak actually launched during Covid, so we had designed our accelerator programmes with a hybrid approach in mind, and our Fellows programme is global and completely remote.

It has been really exciting to meet cohorts in person, though we of course try to balance this with reducing the need for people to travel by air. The remote elements also mean that we can support organisations and individuals from much further afield than we would be able to if only running programmes in person.

What does the future look like? New trends/technologies, changes in the global/local economic landscape?

There's so much that we can do to set ourselves up for a positive future. From a climate perspective, solving our energy issues and transitioning away from fossil fuels is one of the most critical. Particularly with the energy crisis, cost of living increases, and food security issues, thinking about how we power and

connect our societies are the big issues of our time.

Tech can play a big role in helping us to solve big climate issues and help with addressing the impact those issues will have on our societies and communities, but it's not the whole solution. We have to think about how we create social and economic support for people impacted by the climate crisis, understand who can make the changes required, and then drive the changes in behaviour and policy that will help us to deliver those goals.

What makes Subak different?

Subak is the world's first not-for-profit accelerator and data community that scales climate impact through data, policy and behaviour change.

We are incredibly lucky to have the support of a remarkable group of individuals with diverse experience spanning climate, tech, innovation, entrepreneurship, and policy. Our Advisory Board consists of individuals such as Michelle You, who co-founded Songkick, and Baroness Bryony Worthington, who was the lead author of the UK's Climate Change Act.

What really sets Subak apart is our emphasis on collaboration rather than competition. As an organisation, we truly believe in the great gains to be made in supporting young organisations who can think in agile ways and work collaboratively to find new and interesting answers to the climate crisis. Through our focus on collaboration and the sharing of resources, expertise, and data, our members are working together by default and solving these issues more efficiently.

On our accelerator, we also exclusively fund not-for-profits – including those who generate revenue – through a unique curriculum: taking lessons from the tech world on agility, speed and innovation, and applying those to the not-for-profit sector, where a mission focus is front and centre.

What one piece of advice would you give founders?

You are not alone. Building a startup is a challenge at the best of times, but when you're also trying to solve some of the biggest issues of our times, this is an additional burden that these founders need to bear. You have to reach out and find communities and individuals who can help you bounce ideas and make connections, as whilst some traditional startup avenues for funding and support can seem closed and hard to access, there are those of us now who are working hard to democratise access and support for all.

Amali de Alwis is CEO at Subak

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