

“I want to be part of the energy story in Kenya,” says Gina Din-Kariuki, a Kenyan entrepreneur and public relations (PR) guru. Sixteen years ago she quit her job as head of corporate affairs at Barclays Bank Kenya and, having built a name for herself, plunged into business to create Gina Din Corporate Communications (GDCC).

The firm is one of Kenya’s most successful PR firms and has handled large corporate clients in various sectors, including telecommunications, banking, hospitality and air travel.

GDCC handled the Safaricom account when the telecom operator launched in Kenya and went on to represent the firm for many years. Din-Kariuki watched first hand as the industry evolved and became one of Kenya’s success stories. With the discovery of oil and gas in the East African country, Din-Kariuki wants to do more than just watch.

“It was interesting... but I didn’t get into the whole telecommunications space as a businesswoman. I watched it grow. So this time energy came in and I thought: ‘This is exciting but I don’t want to sit and watch. I want to be in the game.’”

Din-Kariuki is now the local shareholder of CAMAC Energy, a US-based New York Stock Exchange-listed company involved in the exploration, development and production of [oil and gas](#).

“We are going to be exploring for oil in this region. So one of these days you will see me with a hard hat.” Her entry into the [energy](#) sector makes Din-Kariuki one of very few women in Africa to actively invest in the energy sector. “Maybe I will bring a little bit of glamour to the oil industry,” she says with a chuckle.

But beyond bringing glamour, Din-Kariuki hopes to influence policies that will see Kenyans benefit from the country’s resources. This is also a serious long-term investment for her.

“I always say to God, ‘you must have sent this to me to make sure that I learn how to be patient’ because I am not patient. PR is lots of deadline and also you get instant results. What I have learnt in this energy industry for a year and a half [is that] it’s teaching me patience. It really is. It’s so slow. It’s a very long-term investment.”

Oil exploration is also an uncertain investment. “Life is a gamble. I am very excited by the prospects of energy in this country. I am very encouraged by the

way the government is handling the whole process. And you know what? I don't want to sit on the sidelines. You are either watching the game or playing the game. I want to play it."

Din-Kariuki describes herself as resilient and strong. She is not scared of taking risks; neither does she jump ship when the going gets tough. In fact, she believes difficult times come just before the "next leap of success".

"Every time I have wanted to quit and there have been a few [times] it's at that point that [I was at] the very verge of greatness... that moment after is when it's your next leap of success. It's really interesting," she says. "What I would say to people starting their businesses now is hang in there. The journey of an entrepreneur is never straight. There are... potholes on the way but we have to stay in there for the long haul."

Although doing business in Africa is challenging with the continent facing "infrastructural challenges" and "pockets of instability", Din-Kariuki admires the resilience of African entrepreneurs. These entrepreneurs, she says, will bring the "Africa Rising" narrative to fruition.

"I think there is something about entrepreneurs in Africa. We are the ones who are going to make Africa rise. If you look at entrepreneurs in Africa and you look at entrepreneurs elsewhere in the world, the ones in Africa have gone through so much to get them where they are.

"Many started out in very humble circumstances, some haven't been to school... so when you compare that to a Bill Gates or a Steve Jobs, I kind of tend to think, 'wow to the African entrepreneur', because they have gone through so much more. It's this spirit to succeed; it's the spirit to break the cycle. It's a spirit to make sure that the generations below us don't have to go through what we went through. Because the beginnings have been so difficult that we have no choice; if we don't do it then who? If not now, when?"

Din-Kariuki would like to see more people, especially the African youth, go into entrepreneurship. "There are not going to be many jobs for everybody. We need to create these jobs. I think we have no choice but to encourage youth entrepreneurship and a lot of the work that I am doing with the youth right now is a long those lines."

She warns, entrepreneurship is not suited to everyone. "I think it's not for the faint hearted; you have to be internally very strong because you take a lot of hits along the way, a lot of failure and... some people just can't handle failure. Some people are too sensitive to be entrepreneurs. You have to be very thick skinned to be an entrepreneur. Every single day I wake up... there is a new challenge. There will never be a point when there is not going to be a challenge and I am [always] ready for that," she says.

Even as she casts her sights on Kenya's oil and gas industry, Din-Kariuki is still

involved in her PR business. GDCC is currently rebranding and is expected to launch across Africa to meet what she describes as a “need for an African PR brand”. “We need to be ready to serve our clients for the next 16 [years] and on, but with new tools. What we are coming up with... is a product that is going to serve Africa, not just Kenya,” she says of the rebranding process.

Over the last 16 years, Kenya’s PR market has evolved, with more local and international firms entering the market. However, this is not a cause for worry for the GDCC boss. “It’s exciting. The pressure is on to be the very best in what we do. Yes, there is a lot more competition but I think that is quite exciting. The market is much bigger. There is a whole SME market now that is looking at PR. That was never there before. So we are not really all fighting over the same clients because the base is much wider.”

Din-Kariuki describes PR as one of her passions. “I call myself a ‘creative disruptor’. I am never happy with the status quo. I always want to take the brands that I handle from mediocrity to magnificence. I get so much pleasure and joy out of that.”