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ThriveAgric case A: An Agritech entrepreneurial opportunity in Africa

Uka Eje

Uka Eje was born and raised in Benue state, which was known as the food-basket of Nigeria. However, as with much else on the African continent, even those areas blessed with fertile land and rich in produce, in Benue farmers were poor, their prospects were uncertain, and agriculture for most provided little more than subsistence living. Uka was born into a farming community and so agriculture was in his blood, but he wanted something different from his life.

As a boy, Uka took a 12-hour road trip to get to school in Lagos. Although just a child, when looking out of the window, for miles and miles all he could see was barren land. Why? he thought. Why was so little land developed and turned to productive use? From what he was beginning to understand of other parts of the world, so much land would not lie unused elsewhere. Even as a child Uka could see something that looked like a problem that needed addressing, but of course he had no idea what to do about it.

Uka studied biochemistry at Covenant University, one of the most prestigious institutions of learning in Ogun state, Nigeria, graduating in 2012. Initially he wanted to be an entrepreneur, and with his university friend Ayodeji Arikawe (Ayo), an IT major, Uka tried several startup ideas; principally in food ecommerce and delivery, but nothing came of them, so on graduating he went home, back to the farming environment, still trying numerous unsuccessful startups with Ayo and seeing once again the problems in the agricultural community into which he had been born. Uka could see that local farmers couldn't get a decent price for their product, but that the product they sold so cheaply to middlemen was subsequently resold at much higher prices in Lagos. The problem was particularly acute in part because of an outbreak of Tuta Absoluta, commonly known as 'Tomato Ebola', which had decimated tomato-crop yields in some parts of Nigeria and led to soaring prices elsewhere – price rises that the farmers themselves saw no benefit from as they had no means of storage. Others were profiting, however.

It was only when Uka started doing a stop-gap job at Royal Impact Corporation, a social enterprise that built systems in the food, agricultural and technological sectors, that he began to understand the complex nature of the problem with agriculture in Nigeria, where 70% of the entire population worked in agriculture; contributing some 30% of national GDP.

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