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Enabling Agriculture

A Crowdfunded AgriTech Case Study

Featuring

The ThriveAgric Rebirth

In Conversation with

Adia Sowho | Kola Aina | OO Nwoye

case studies

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Authors

Tunji Adegbite, Founder, Naspire
Mfonobong Ekpo, Research & Analytics

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Precious Nwachukwu
Adebukola Bassey

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CONTACT US
tunji@naspire.com

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Executive Summary

Nigeria cannot feed itself. The country's food insecurity crisis is a direct consequence of the continued decline in the agricultural sector, with farming technology remaining, for the most part, the same as in the 1960s when the country's agricultural production peaked. The once-leading oil palm exporter with towering groundnut towers now relies on a staggering level of imports to meet local demand.

Dominated by smallholder farmers – who battle with poor-quality inputs, an inadequate supply chain plagued by logistical challenges, and, more significantly, limited capital availability – the total production lags demand. Combined with rising food inflation, over 19 million Nigerians are now in danger of acute food insecurity.

While the government has implemented policies meant to stimulate growth, these policies have not yielded the desired results. Most smallholder farmers continue to struggle to access essential inputs and must contend with volatile markets and diminishing profit margins. As a result, growth in this critical sector of the economy has been stagnant.

A brewing humanitarian crisis – several agritech startups, most popularly, crowdfunded agritech, have tried to address these challenges by extending services to smallholder farmers. These businesses aim to address challenges like lack of access to inputs and credit needed for high yields; they also provide solutions to improved market opportunities so that farmers can receive premium prices for produce.

Crowdfunding, a form of alternative finance popularised through sites like GoFundMe and Kickstarter, was adopted as a viable option for finance in the agricultural industry. Instead of a charitable donation or one-off reward-backed funding without an expected return on investment and capital, the donors, more appropriately, retail investors on crowdfunded agriculture platforms, would receive a profit and capital invested. For smallholder farmers, most on the fringe of financial inclusion, crowdfunded agritech gained traction as it filled a vacuum created by traditional finance institutions with their strict loan requirement.

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, many of these companies have failed, leading to losses in billions of investment Naira. In the public unravelling of this business model, many perfidious agritech companies simply disappeared, leaving distraught investors holding the bag.

One company, ThriveAgric, bucked this trend, rallied help from its venture backers, and sought out experienced venture builder, Adia Sowho, to navigate the disruption to its business model differently.

Undeterred by its few missteps at the outset, ThriveAgric changed its narrative by creating a transparent repayment schedule and has since honoured all its obligations to its crowdfunding investors. Despite the challenges, the company has reinvented itself and is charting a course to profitability.

While solving the complex problems of agriculture in Nigeria may require unconventional models, crowdfunded investments promising guaranteed returns – without any insulation from the vicissitudes of a sector in constant flux – is not one.

This report examines the crowdfunding agriculture business model and presents a breakdown of one company's path to reinvention and redemption.

ThriveAgric’s turnaround is a learning in crisis management amongst other business and leadership lessons, and we at Naspire are happy to produce this case study for your reading. We appreciate the support of contributors and stakeholders involved in publishing this case study.

Enjoying time away from the rapid pace of leading a high-growth startup, Adia Sowho did not expect that her tennis session would end with a persistent founder at her door, insistent that the future of his company – ThriveAgric – lay at her feet. Nor that she will spend the next few months appeasing apoplectic customers.

At 10 am the day before, Adia Sowho, a veteran business and tech leader, had a chat with Kayode Oyewole of Ventures Platform, the first Venture Capital (VC) investor in Thrive Agric, offering a half-day weekly to be available to startups on an hourly basis. By 5 pm, her phone was buzzing with a conference call, 'When your phone rings and you see this plus this plus this caller, I was like ah, kilode! It was Kola Aina, OO Nwoye, and I think one or two others asking to take that half-day and then some.'

Before that crisis, Uka Eje – the co-founder and CEO of ThriveAgric – had reached out to Adia to become an advisor to the growing company, an offer she turned down, citing her limited availability as she was busy with Migo, where she worked at that time. This time, Uka was determined not to take no for an answer. After presenting the problem, he planned to camp outside her home until she agreed to step in and steer the company through its darkest hour.

ThriveAgric, an agritech company whose business model at the time involved crowdfunding from retail investors, was, by September 2020, dealing with the relentless wrath of social media users – particularly on Twitter and Nairaland – as investors and sympathisers demanded to be paid, trending #ThriveAgricPayYourInvestors.

The company's impolitic decision to not communicate its challenges early and clearly to investors but to continue to update its website with promising farm updates gave room for some to brand the company a pyramid scheme. Perhaps understandably, its first official statement on the 29th of September 2020 upset investors rather than ease their fears. Disaster loomed, and amid threats of legal recourse, Uka and the rest of the ThriveAgric team were facing a situation they were ill-prepared for, not that a global pandemic disrupting business operations is something for which anyone prepared.

So, when Ventures Platforms stepped in to provide direction and reached out to Adia Sowho to step in as interim CEO, it was a lifeline for ThriveAgric, and Uka Eje and Arikawe Ayodeji were ready to ensure that she accepted. One thing was sure – no matter how wrong they had handled things before, they were seriously asking for help.

Though moved by his uncommon humility in an industry rife with hubris, Adia first had to answer if she cared enough about ThriveAgric and its vision and if she was willing to accept the challenge.

In October 2020, Adia Sowho agreed to brave the storm as interim CEO, and investors waited with bated breath.

Introduction

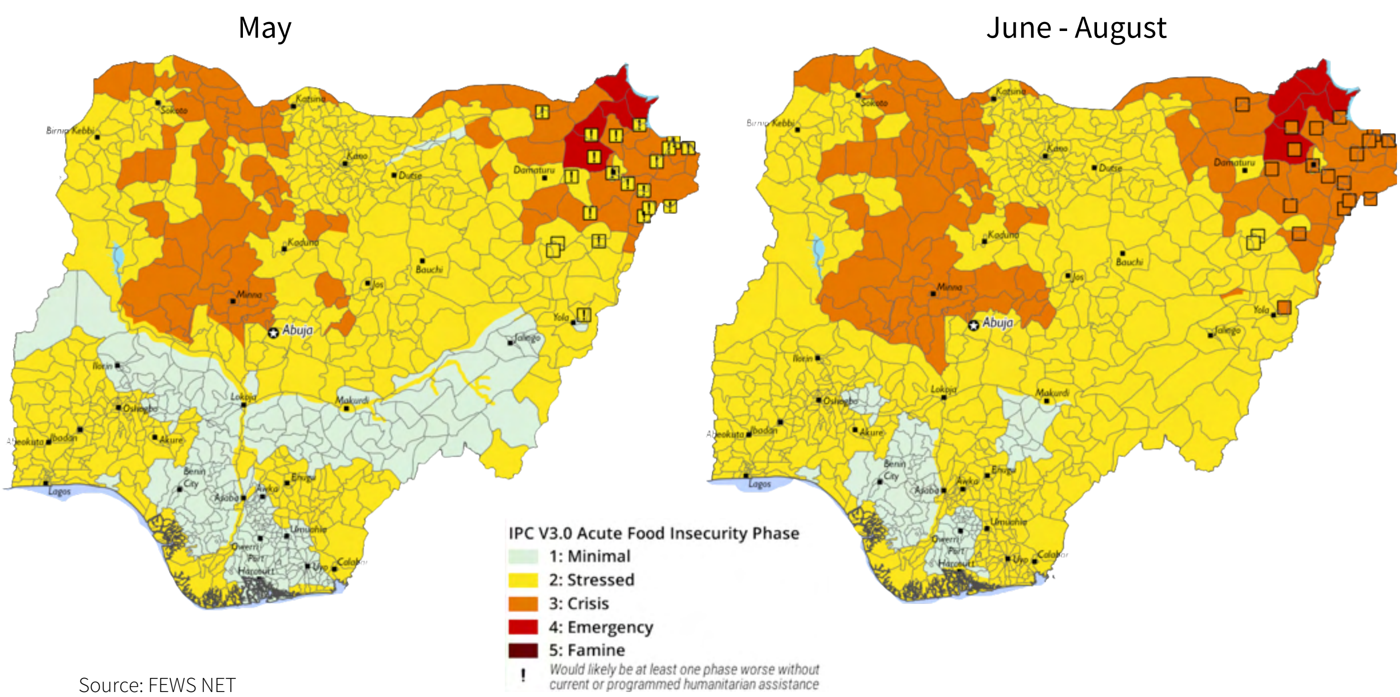
With the rise of tech-based solutions and growing consumer financial education, crowdfunded agritech companies launched to bridge the credit gap, connecting funding from individual investors to smallholder farmers for guaranteed returns for investors and higher profit for the farmer.

Nigeria's food production level is insufficient for its population's needs. It is an undesirable yet expected outcome of the country's long battle with the triple threat of declining agriculture output, protracted conflicts that displace farming communities and interrupt farm work, and the challenges in the global economy and supply chain disruptions affecting imports.

Since the production peak of the 1970s, the agricultural sector has struggled to meet local demand. From being one of the top palm oil exporters worldwide and an exporter of half the world's groundnut production[1], the country's crop production has declined, exacerbated by higher population growth and inadequate development in the sector. The result is staggering levels of dependence on food imports.

Figure 1

Nigeria Projected Food Security Outcomes, 2022



Source: FEWS NET

1. FMARD (2014) National Agricultural Resilience Framework. Ministry of Agriculture, Nigeria.

Paradoxically, agriculture in Nigeria also suffers from massive post-harvest losses due to logistical bottlenecks and inadequate storage facilities[2]. Post-harvest losses also occur as a compounded factor of poor-quality yields, limiting the effective use of harvested produce. For example, in Benue state, Nigerians complain about mango wastage every harvest season. However, experts have explained that the mango variants' low quality limits their usefulness for export or processing[3].

Smallholder farmers, who comprise 80% of Nigeria's farmers and produce 90% of domestic outputs[4], are chronically underfunded. On average, small-scale farmers have less than 2 hectares under cropping and struggle with securing adequate fertiliser supply and other inputs required for high and quality yields[5]. These farmers rely on rudimentary hand tools, and with limited access to markets, climate change, inadequate research and extension services, production cannot meet local demand[6].

This low production and other confounding factors have sent food prices soaring, with prices of staples like yam, bread and beans increasing by more than 100% between 2020 and 2022. For Nigeria's 40% population living below the poverty line[7], skipped, missed, and nutritionally sparse meals are a familiar feature in their feeding plan. Cadre Harmonisé projects that about 19.4 million Nigerians are at risk of acute food insecurity between June and August 2022[8].

The vicious cycle of low- and poor-quality production results in malnutrition, reducing adult productivity levels and children's cognitive development, ultimately negatively impacting the country's economic productivity.

According to UNICEF, with a prevalence rate of 32%, Nigeria has the second-highest burden of stunted children under five globally[9]. The World Bank estimates that a 1% loss in adult height due to childhood stunting is associated with a 1.4% loss in economic productivity[10]. Similarly, UNICEF estimates that ripple effects from malnutrition in Nigeria account for economic losses of up to 11% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP)[11].

It is an imminent crisis. Nigeria must improve agricultural yields and limit post-harvest losses. The challenges faced by small-scale farmers, such as limited mechanisation, abysmal road networks, limited access to market information, credit, and quality inputs such as fertiliser, seed, and post-harvest storage, have kept many smallholder farmers in a recurring cycle of poverty.

With the rise of tech-based solutions and growing consumer financial education, crowdfunded agritech companies launched to bridge the credit gap, connecting funding from individual [retail] investors to smallholder farmers for guaranteed returns for investors and higher profit for the farmer.

Despite their lofty dreams, many of these companies failed between 2020 and 2022, leading to a loss of agriculture jobs and billions in investments by Nigerians – guaranteed ROI gone with the wind. Factors precipitating the meltdown included a paucity of risk management and communication structures.

This report examines the crowdfunded agriculture business model and presents a breakdown of one company's path to reinvention and redemption.

2. Eromosele Abiodun. (2021) Nigeria records 50% post-harvest losses annually. An Interview with Dr Patrica Pessu, Executive Director, NSPRI. ; Balana, B; Aghadi, CN; and Ogunniyi, A. (2022) Improving livelihoods through postharvest loss management: Evidence from Nigeria.
3. Dami Bolaji. (2017) Mapping Mangos: First Stop, Benue.
4. Mgbenka, R.N. and Mbah, E.N. (2016) A review of smallholder farming in Nigeria: Need for transformation. International Journal of Agricultural Extension and Rural Development Studies. Vol.3, No. 2, pp. 43-54.
5. ibid.
6. Adebayo, P. F., & Ojo, E. O. (2012) Food security in Nigeria: An overview. European Journal of Sustainable Development, 1(2), 199-221 ; World Bank (2019) Nigeria On The Move: A Journey To Inclusive Growth. Nigeria Systematic Country Diagnostic
7. NBS, 2019 Poverty and Inequality in Nigeria. ; World Bank (2022) Nigeria Poverty Assessment 2022: A Better Future for All Nigerians
8. Cadre Harmonisé, Food and Nutrition Situation in The Sahel, West Africa And Cameroon. Projected situation June-August 2022
9. UNICEF. https://www.unicef.org/nigeria/nutrition
10. Repositioning nutrition as central to development: a strategy for large-scale action - overview (English). Directions in development Washington, D.C.: World Bank Group.
11. ibid. UNICEF

Agriculture in Nigeria

Agriculture remains a vital component of Nigeria's economy, employing almost half of Nigeria's total working population[12] and contributing 23% to the GDP[13].

With 69.3 million hectares, >75% of the country's land mass, considered agricultural land, the sector's potential is indubitably great[14]. Therefore, it is a bewildering anomaly that despite significant natural resources, Nigeria's staple food production cannot meet local demand

Nigeria's food production was sufficient, being one of the top global exporters of key cash crops before the oil boom in the 1960s[15]. The country, which accounted for 42% of international trade in groundnut oil, 60% of palm oil exports, and 18% of cocoa exports by 1961[16], has less than 5% of the global share of exports for these crops by 2020[+].

Figure 2

Statistics on Agriculture in Nigeria, 2021

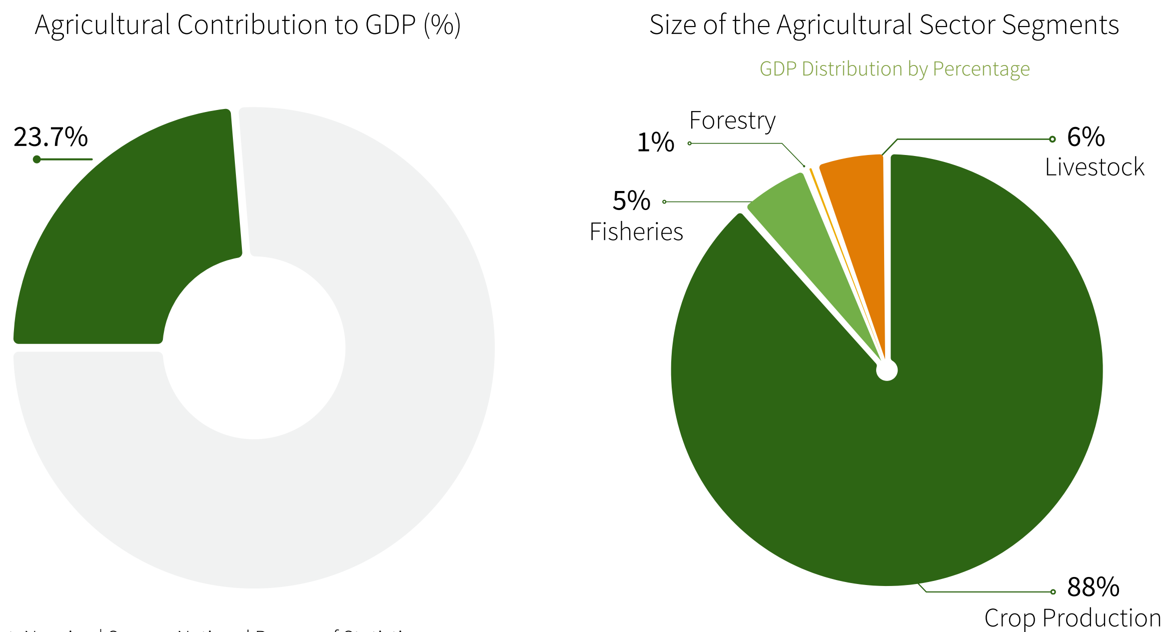


Chart: Naspire | Source: National Bureau of Statistics

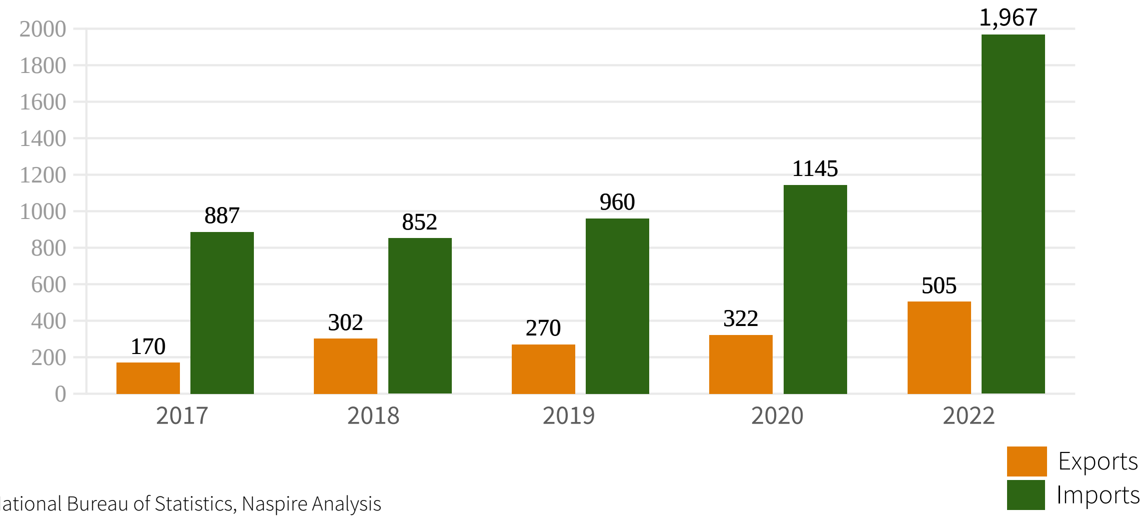
12. NIPC https://www.nipc.gov.ng/opportunities/agriculture/
13. NBS. (2021) Gross Domestic Product Report
14. FAO. Nigeria Country Profile.
15. ibid. FMARD. 2014
16. ibid.

\+ Author's analysis based on trade data from World Integrated Trade Solution, WITS and The Observatory of Economic Complexity, OEC.

Figure 3

Nigeria's Agriculture Trade Deficit

(N' billions)



Source: National Bureau of Statistics, Naspire Analysis

Population growth has outpaced any increase in food production, and food imports have risen as the country's food sufficiency has declined steadily year on year[17]. Nigeria's agriculture sector has grown by less than 1 per cent annual value-added per capita since the 2000s[18], leading to a loss of USD 10 billion in possible annual revenue from the export of groundnut, palm oil, cocoa and cotton alone; as a result of the decline in agro-commodities production[19].

Of Nigeria's cultivable area, only 40% is in use, and the cultivation is mainly inefficient[20]. Farming technology in Nigeria has, for the most part, remained at the same level, with the sector dominated by smallholder farmers using rudimentary techniques.

These small-scale farmers, with average farmland of about 1-3 hectares, account for over 80% of Nigeria's farmers and produce over 90% of the domestic output[21]. However, half of the working population engaged in small-scale farming are trapped in multidimensional poverty and belong to the poorest 40% of the population[22].

A common issue globally, smallholder farmers have difficulty obtaining credit from traditional banks[23]. In Nigeria, with less than 10% of the population accessing credit annually, according to the Central Bank and EFInA[24], the access barrier for smallholder farmers is further exacerbated. It is nearly impossible for primarily rural smallholder farmers, not formally captured by the banking[financial] sector, to access traditional finance.

17. World Food Programme. (2019) Nigeria country strategic plan (2019–2022).
18. ibid. World Bank (2019).
19. Nike Popoola. (2019) Nigeria lost N3.6tn to non-oil exports — NEXIM. Punch Nigeria.
20. Matemilola, S. and Elegbede, I. (2017) The Challenges of Food Security in Nigeria. Open Access Library Journal, 4, 1-22.
21. ibid. Mgbenka, R.N. and Mbah, E.N. (2016).
22. International Bank for Reconstruction and Development and World Bank. (2015) More and more productive, jobs for Nigeria: a profile of workers.
23. FAO. (2015) The economic lives of smallholder farmers: An analysis based on household data from nine countries.
24. EFInA. (2021) EFInA Access to Financial Services in Nigeria 2020 Survey. ; CBN. (2020) Economic Report: Half Year 2020.

The financing gap is nuanced- while banks are the sector's largest financier, agriculture loans are consistently the smallest in its portfolio despite the sector's higher GDP contribution relative to other industries[25]. Banks' available credit facilities are extended to larger farmers and other players further up the value chain who can better meet the stringent collateral requirements. It is nearly impossible for primarily rural smallholder farmers, most not formally captured by the banking sector, to access credit.

In a 2017 national survey of smallholder households, less than a third of smallholder farmers reported being financially included, meaning they had a formal financial account opened in their name at a bank, non-bank financial institution (NBFI), or mobile money provider[26]. Despite 80% having at least one means of identification that could facilitate opening a bank account, many do not. Low literacy levels mean they are either unaware of existing loan facilities or lack formal documents to show proof of land ownership to collateralise a bank loan.

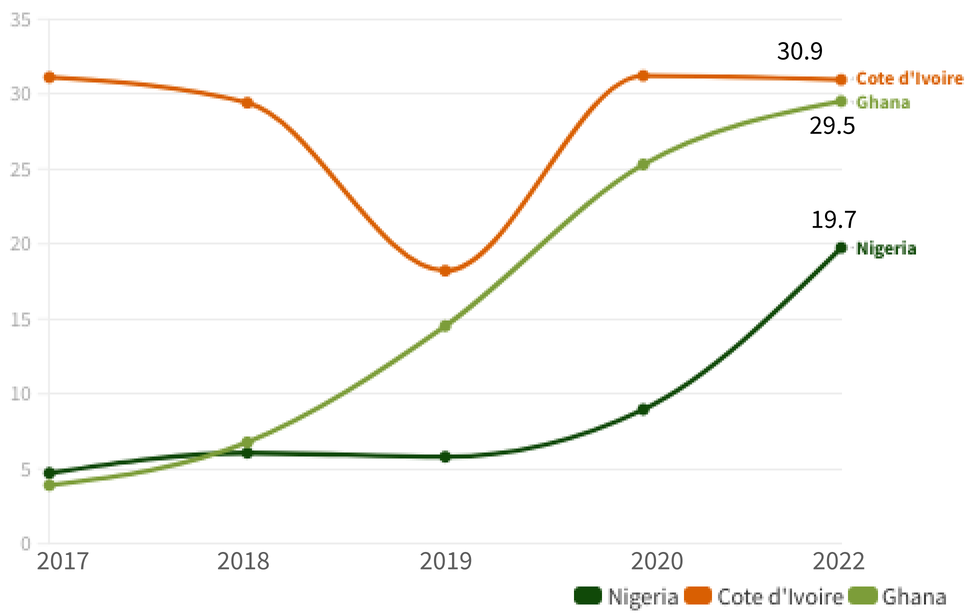
Smallholder farmers also experience difficulty accessing expensive and scarce fertiliser and other essential farming inputs. According to studies, on average, smallholder farmers in Nigeria do not have access to sufficient fertiliser per hectare[27]. In 2018, Nigeria's fertiliser consumption (kilograms per hectare of arable land) was 19.74, lower than 30.9 in Côte d'Ivoire and 29 in Ghana[28].

In addition to limited access to quality agrochemicals, continued dominant use of rudimentary farming tools, and insufficient agriculture extension services, there has been little research and development to improve crop species. As a result, Nigeria's average yield per hectare, except for rice (which has had marginally higher yields following government subsidies), has stunted[29].

Figure 4

Fertilizer Consumption in Nigeria, Ghana, and Côte d'Ivoire

kilograms per hectare of arable land



Source: World Bank, Naspire Analysis

25. Osaibohien R, Adeleye N, DeAlwis T. (2020) Agro-financing and Food Production in Nigeria.
26. Anderson Jamie, Barbara Marita, Collins Musiime, David Thiam, Mamadou. National survey and segmentation of smallholder households in Nigeria: understanding their demand for financial, agricultural, and digital solutions (English). World Bank Group.
27. P.A. Fuentes, B. Bumb and M. Johnson. 2012. Improving Fertilizer Markets in West Africa: The Fertilizer Supply Chain in Nigeria
28. World Bank. (2018) World Development Indicators. Fertilizer Consumption (Kg/ha of arable land).
29. FAOSTAT

The farming industry in Nigeria is one of the least mechanised in the world. Nigeria has a tractor density of 0.27 per hectare, less than the 1.5 per hectare recommended by the Food and Agriculture Organisation[30]. While medium and large-scale farmers (with the use of mechanised farming) practice intensive agriculture, they are in the minority (3%). Most farmers in Nigeria still use rudimentary hand tools (90%), and 7% use animal-drawn tools for planting, harvesting and post-harvest processing[31].

Combined with insufficient agriculture extension services and inadequate access to information about weather, soil and market conditions, farmers' ability to respond in real-time to changing conditions, the growth and productivity of smallholder farmers are significantly limited. Challenges like these have left Nigeria, a former agricultural powerhouse, with an average lower yield per hectare than neighbouring West African countries[32].

Indicative of the systemic challenges facing the sector, an estimated 40-60% of agricultural produce is lost annually[33]. Products arrive at markets deteriorating due to deficient transport and logistics infrastructure, long delays at security checkpoints and improper storage, resulting in significant wastage and economic loss for fresh agricultural products along the value chain. Consequently, Nigeria can neither produce enough nor maximise the value of the quantities produced.

Table 1

Percentage of Nigerian farmers using mechanisation during the rainy seasons

Region	Tractors	Animal Traction		No tractor or Animal traction
		Owned Animal	Rented Animal	
North West	2	28	25	47
North East excluding Taraba	5	42	22	33
North Central including Taraba	11	3	2	85
South East	0	0	0	99
South South	0	0	0	99
South West	5	0	0	95
Total	4	14	10	73

Chart: Naspire
Source: Takeshima and Kennedy (2019) Mechanization in Nigeria: What needs to be done to stimulate demand and support market growth?

30. World Bank. (2014) Agribusiness Indicators: Nigeria
31. Onwualu, A. P. and N. P. Pawa. (2004) As cited in S. Asoegwu and A. Asoegwu. (2007) An Overview of Agricultural Mechanization and Its Environmental Management in Nigeria. Agricultural Engineering International: the CIGR Ejournal.
32. FAOSTAT
33. Dijkxhoorn Y, Talabi J, Eunice L. 2021. Scoping study on fruits and vegetables; results from Nigeria. An assessment of investment opportunities for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Wageningen Economic Research, Wageningen

Profile of Smallholder Households in Nigeria

74% of smallholder farmers are not included in the formal financial sector, and 25% live in extreme poverty.

66 million
Smallholder Farmers

Farming for Sustenance
Most Vulnerable

Size: 23%
Bio: The most vulnerable group, they rely on the farm for their daily life. The majority of them are located in the northern geopolitical zones. This group is least likely to abandon agriculture and has the lowest household income. Additionally, the group is the least financially integrated and the least likely to own a mobile phone.

Battling the Elements
Vulnerable

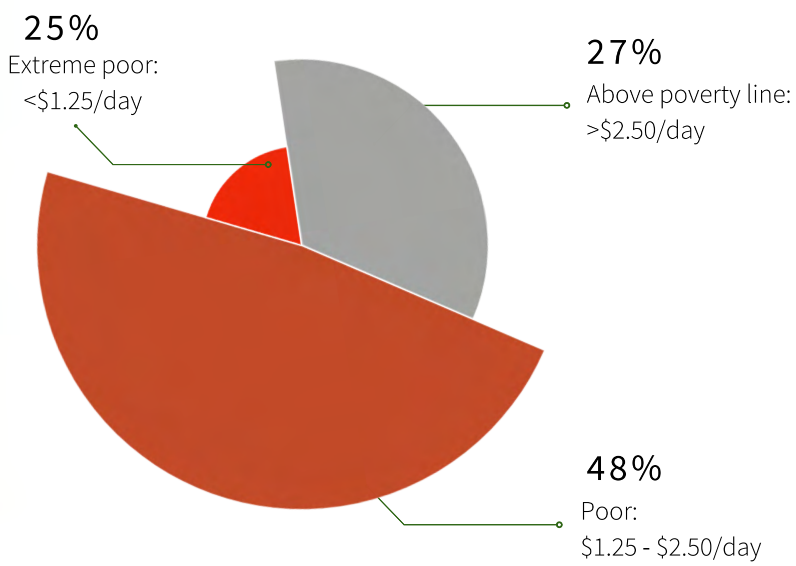
Size: 44%
Bio: This segment forms the broadest and is present in every geopolitical region; Most of them are poor, want to stay in agriculture, and are financially excluded. Farmers in this segment are least likely to believe that a savings account is necessary for their agricultural activity.

Options for Growth
Somewhat Resilient

Size: 19%
Bio: The most educated segment and relatively new to farming. Farmers in this segment are the least satisfied with their agricultural achievements and have relatively more access to financial tools.

Strategic Agricultural Entrepreneurship
Most Resilient

Size: 14%
Bio: This segment has relatively younger household heads and is the most financially included. Educated, they are relatively less poor and most likely to want their children to continue in agriculture. Most seriously affected by weather, pest, price and other shocks.



Source: Anderson Jamie, Barbara Marita, Collins Musiime, David Thiam, Mamadou. National survey and segmentation of smallholder households in Nigeria: understanding their demand for financial, agricultural, and digital solutions (English). Washington, D.C.: World Bank Group.
ii. Mastercard Foundation Rural and Agricultural Financing Learning Lab and ISF Advisors (2019), Pathways to Prosperity: 2019 Rural and Agricultural Finance S State of the Sector Report.

A Digital Revolution

Agritech startups providing data, route to market, machinery rentals, and financial solutions aiming to improve smallholder farmers' access to equipment, farm inputs, and expert advisory services have sprung up to address these challenges.

Many agritech companies have sprung up offering technology-enabled solutions to address these challenges. Companies providing data, route to market solutions, and machinery rentals through crowdfunding aim to improve smallholder farmers' access to finance, equipment (e.g., tractors), and expert advisory services. Bringing much-needed growth into the sector, African agritech startups boomed with 110% growth between 2016 and 2018[34].

From cloud to machinery, data and market intelligence, the African startups are using tech to solve the continent's complex agriculture problems. Companies like AgroMall and Crop2Cash digitise the value chain. The former uses data to provide agronomic advisory, extension services and management for farmers. In contrast, the latter provides access to formal financial services and digital payments to farmers through its partnership with First City Monument Bank. Others like Hello Tractor and Beat Drone focus on providing mechanical support. Hello Tractor offers a shared tractor service connecting owners with smallholder farmers, while Beat Drone uses drones to spray pesticides on farms, supervise crops, and map farmlands.

However, crowdfunded agritech startups were the most prolific and commonly known by the general public. Crowdfunding, a form of alternative finance, which started as a way to raise money for creative projects or to support a public cause popularised through sites like GoFundMe, was adapted as a viable option for finance in the agricultural industry. Instead of a charitable donation without an expected ROI, the donors, more appropriately, retail investors, would receive a profit on the amount invested.

Crowdfunded agritech gained traction as it filled the vacuum created by traditional finance. The latter rarely extends its credit services to smallholder farmers, most on the fringe of financial inclusion with limited financial identity. These companies connected the general public to farming investment opportunities. Farmcrowdy (its crowdfunding service is now under Crowdyvest) was Nigeria's first agriculture crowdfunding platform. Others like ThriveAgric, Agropartnerships, Farmnow, Farmpower and over sixty others joined the growing industry; and promised investors guaranteed investment returns.

34. Disrupt Africa. (2018) Agrinnovating for Africa: Exploring the African Agri-Tech Startup Ecosystem Report.

A misnomer? – Are Crowdfunded Platforms AgriTech or Financial Services?

At its simplest, the core service provided by crowdfunded agriculture platforms to retail investors made them more of a financial investment service than an agricultural technology company. However, many went beyond raising funds, providing advisory, produce off-taking, and route-to-market services, to control the entire value chain and guarantee returns.

Hearts in the right place, these companies addressed one of the critical challenges in the industry – access to finance. However, as the COVID-19 pandemic would reveal, agricultural investments are high-risk and continually guaranteed returns are an anomaly in farming as different factors can disrupt production.

'Act of God' events, as the pandemic would be classed in insurance terms, are not uncommon in the sector. While the scale might be significantly less, local rather than global, events like the 2020 locust infestation in Kenya[35] and the widescale destruction of tomato plants in Nigeria[36] in 2016 are unpredictable even with superior species, albeit reduced.

These crowdfunded agritech companies promised investors 15% - 40% returns per harvest period and had a relatively smooth run until the pandemic brought economic activities to a halt globally. The economic destabilisation from the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in delayed repayments from many of these companies. Crowdfunded platforms like ThriveAgric, Menorah Farms, Grow Crops Online, Eatrich Farms, Winich Farms, HO Corn, Agro-Park, PayFarmer, and, more recently, Crowdyvest and Agropatnerships have all defaulted in the repayment of investors at some point in their history.

During the pandemic, attributing payment defaults to the disruption of services globally was understandable; however, 21 months since the government lifted pandemic restrictions, some of these companies continue to owe investors, and a few have recently defaulted, highlighting a perhaps intrinsic flaw in the business model. Some investors have taken to social media to accuse some agritech companies of failing to deliver on returns, while others have threatened legal action[37].

According to reports from owed investors, after informing investors in March 2020 about a possible delay in payments, the now-defunct Menorah Farms allegedly said it would only repay the capital invested without any returns on investment. At the time of this report, we could not confirm if any investor had received their money.

Growcropsonline started showing troubling signs long before the pandemic. According to a TechCabal report, the company first delayed payment in 2019[38]. It ultimately declared a force majeure in May 2020 under the guise of the pandemic[39].

Unsurprisingly, many dubious characters capitalised on the popular investment trend to dupe investors. An analysis of some now-defunct crowdfunded agriculture investment platforms reveals that they likely relied on using new capital injections to repay old investors. While others may have been reputable businesses, it matters little to hurting investors who are out of their capital and promised ROIs.

35. The Guardian. (2020) Kenya suffers worst locust infestation in 70 years as millions of insects swarm farmland.
36. Ganguly M. (2016) Nigeria's tomato crop is suffering its worst pest attack. Down to Earth.
37. Iwayemi Z. (2021) Agropartnerships investors blow hot, threaten to sue platform for breach of contract. Nairametrics.
38. Olowogboyega O. (2020) Nigerian agritech companies promise big returns, here's what you should know before investing. TechCabal.
39. Uti E. (2021) How Two Ladies' N1.9m Investment in Grow Crops Online became Stunted. Foundation for Investigative Journalism.

case studies

Observing traffic slow to a crawl on the distant 3rd mainland bridge on a typical Lagos evening, Ibiyemi*, an Agropartnerships investor, discussed his now ill-fated investment – his pain and anger palpable.

Ibiyemi, battling a chronic cardiac condition, quit his manufacturing job just as the pandemic started to protect his health. Already pinching pennies to extend his savings, he rushed to take advantage of an investment in an Agropartnerships farm when Money Africa, a financial advisory service, included it in its April 20, 2021 email.

The caveat cautioning medium risk was not a deterrent for him, 'Afterall medium is not high, and the email said Leadway insured them.'

He hurriedly invested ₦380,000, almost 10% of his 4 million naira nest egg, hoping for a 32% ROI in 9 months. Instead, he received an email in February inviting him to a webinar about payment timelines.

Confused, he joined in to hear that Agropartnerships had delayed his payout until July 2022. He will only receive 10% of the promised ROI in July, with the repayment staggered into three tranches of 10%, 10% and 12% + principal.

Although deeply angered by the situation, Ibiyemi has left it to fate as fighting for the money may affect his health adversely and cost him more. Despite worsening health, he has since turned his focus to a new business because "there's no honour in waiting for others to provide for me at my age."

The experience of investors like Ibiyemi is commonplace; experts advise investors to be cautious and avoid rushed and unrealistic guaranteed ROI investments. Investors should never proceed without thoroughly understanding the risks and investigating regulatory compliance and what insurance covers; else, it becomes gambling.

ThriveAgric is the only startup to date that has completely paid investors. It discontinued its crowdfunding service, pivoting to providing tech-enabled solutions for smallholder farmers and raising debts from institutional funders instead.

Like the other defaulting crowdfunded agriculture platforms, ThriveAgric also exhibited poor communication at the early stage of the default, a shaky start on its path to redemption. Still, the co-founders, showing uncommon humility, turned the company to expert manager Adia Sowho as the public outcry grew. The startup has successfully revitalised its business, providing a practical example of crisis management for other companies.

Box 1

AgriTech companies alleged to have defaulted on repayment (past or present)

- Agropartnerships
- Crowdyvest
- Payfarmer
- Eatrich
- Farm Funds Africa
- Goatmeathq
- Emerald Farms
- Agrecourse
- Farmkart
- Iscom Farms
- HOCorn
- Agropark
- Winich Farms
- Efarms
- Menorah farms
- Diaryfarms
- Tusher Farms
- Farm Invest
- Growcropsonline
- Grandeur solicitors
- Abiyamo Farm
- Madaki Agro
- ReQuid

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Startups are encouraged to build companies with risk embedded and not to address those risks until later. In the early stages, startups are told to move fast and break things. The question is, do you have the structures, processes, and team to see these risks and close them before they manifest in the business?

In Conversation with

Adia Sowho

While navigating crises is associated with a CEO's position, not many leaders would accept the role in the middle of one. Why did you choose to accept the offer?

On a call with Kayode [Oyewole] and another venture capitalist, I offered to take a half-day weekly to be available to startups on an hourly basis earlier in the day. By 5 pm, I received a conference call from Kola [Aina], OO[Nwoye], and I think one or two others asking to take that half-day and then some.
Uka showed up at my house the next day, presented the problem, and said he was not leaving until I agreed. I will always appreciate and talk about the humility it took because many of us view asking for help as a sign of weakness.

The problem presented to me spoke to my conscience as food security is vital for any country's progress. ThriveAgric is one of the few companies in that space making valiant efforts to create a solution that puts Nigeria in a position where we export more food than we are importing.
Looking at this country's population and the amount of arable land, there's so much upside. ThriveAgric had only begun scratching the surface, so this was an important cause for me. I thought to myself, if I can help, I don't have any reason not to.

Would you say the pandemic triggered a risk, or were there underlying issues that a pandemic just became a channel for it?

Startups are generally encouraged to build companies with risk embedded and not to address those risks until later. In the early stages, startups are told to 'move fast and break things.' The question is, do you have the structures, processes, and team to see these risks and close them before they manifest in the business?

So, the pandemic triggered a risk; however, every business has an inherent risk, and it is crucial to understand that no one globally was ready for the pandemic. No matter what issue you have prepared yourself for, the pandemic multiplies the possibilities of that issue by 1000%.
Let's look at the countries where it is documented – the entire travel industry, accommodation, transportation, airlines – everyone is looking at two years of revenue gone. It is impossible to adequately plan for two years of revenue disappearing without notice. There were risks in the business that the pandemic just grossly inflated.

How did you and the team approach rectifying the issues?

One of the reasons you approach someone like me to run a business is because you are looking for things like structure, governance, and documentation. Those are not words you can wrap sexy startup mantras around, but experience has taught me that those things are important. “Move fast and break things” does not leave room for structural governance and documentation. So, startup culture in and of itself poses a problem.

At the start, I defined paying the customers back as a project. I formed the project team based on who was doing something that directly contributed to meeting that goal and put them all in a room, and we talked daily. Just those conversations in the room provided structure. What's the structure? We talked at a consistent time with a consistent set of people keeping constant sight of the goal.

Each day we came and said, ‘okay, what was our goal? What are we doing? What progress did we make? Is this the progress we expected to make, and if not, what happened?’ We asked ourselves how to do it better the next day to get the desired result.

Consistency and structure go hand in hand. It was about finding the key questions or activities to achieve a specific goal. And then rinse and repeat. Also, the issue affected people and emotions are involved when people are involved. So, we had to detail our process for payment, ensuring transparency for affected investors.

How was it interfacing with emotional customers and trying to allay their fears in dealing with this situation?

It was probably one of the hardest things I've ever had to do. Honestly, it was challenging for me emotionally to be on the receiving end of wrath, but of course, I couldn't show that.
I mean, on a personal basis, I don't owe anybody money partly because I don't want to be put in that position. But as you know, as the interim CEO of that company, there's a certain level of personal accountability that I had to take. So, that debt, in a way, spiritually became mine, so explaining it was very difficult.

And then, not everybody is logical in those conversations. It was a full spectrum of expressions; I got insulted a lot. I couldn't go on Twitter for a while, even for October 20th. I couldn't because as the shots were fired in Lekki, ThriveAgric customers were asking me for their money. At some point, the digital assault on Twitter was overwhelming, and I handed over my password to the PR team for a while.

I asked for help because it was too much for me. I could not focus on the company and deal with being accused of all sorts of things – killing family members, denying people their futures, and just general insults as is commonplace on Twitter.

There was one funny story. A particular customer interjected me while making profuse apologies to say I didn't look sorry enough. So, I paused dramatically, stating again that I was in the middle of apologising and did not know how else to express my displeasure at the situation.

I explained to them that the role of the CEO is to run a company such that he gets his money back as initially promised, and that was what I was going to do between apologies. Then the comment section stepped in, asking, what do you mean not sorry enough, is it because she is a female leader and what does sorry enough look like? Because this was not the first call, I think it was like the second or third. I let them fight my battle for me with much gratitude in my heart because they could say the things I could not say on that call.

But as soon as the company started to look like it was returning to good health, emotions were calm, and the team regained customers' trust. Some even came back asking when they could reinvest.
At one point, I missed a call because I had COVID-19. Some people had come to the call to see our progress even though they had been paid. When they did not see me, they were worried [laughs]. They came to the following call to make sure I was okay. So yes, eventually, people started supporting us and buying back into the dream.

It is uncommon for founders to hand over control willingly. How was your experience joining and working with the ThriveAgric team?

It takes humility to ask for help; I will always appreciate and talk about the humility required. I am not perfect either; I am still learning to ask for help.

The ThriveAgric situation was very different as I was invited into the business. With that invitation came a very important agreement: to listen to what I had to say because my time couldn't be wasted.
I have a good relationship with the team and chatted briefly yesterday with Uka. I'm staying on as an advisor and aware of how the company's doing. Their continued success is important to me because would I have solved the problem if the company scattered because I left? The hope is that the company stays on the right trajectory.

ThriveAgric: The Reinvention of an AgriTech Company

The Dream: An Africa that can feed itself.

It has never been a question of if but rather of when and, even more importantly, how. These questions are what ThriveAgric was out to answer when the startup commenced operations in 2016. Years later, they have remained relentless in pursuing a sustainable solution for one of Africa's biggest problems – food security.

Creating sustainable solutions is an iterative, non-linear process, so complications often set in; however, ThriveAgric's strategy was to make its process as straightforward as possible so everyone could participate. Their basic model connects smallholder farmers to capital and inputs to increase their output, benefiting themselves, families, communities, and investors.

ThriveAgric bridged the gap between farmers and investors using digital technology. They achieved this by providing access to crowdfunded farm equity, allowing investors to directly support the farmers and get a return on their investment.

Although the business controlled most parts of the value chain, retail investors only interacted with one part of the business – purchasing investment slots in farms and receiving their ROIs after post-harvest sales. On the farmers' side, ThriveAgric provided capital in the form of inputs, management advisory and route to market post-harvest, partnering with companies who buy the harvest at the best possible price.

Farming is a high-risk venture for farmers and their investors, making securing capital an uphill task. ThriveAgric developed a platform to provide small farmers with much-needed capital, advisory and materials, increasing the farmers' profitability. However, the company struggled to honour their commitment to pay its retail investors when many of them needed it most because of the challenges faced by farmer-partners during the pandemic.

Before the Crisis

Uka Eje and Ayodeji Arikawe founded ThriveAgric with a mission to help Africa achieve food security by supporting smallholder farmers. The duo, who met at Covenant University, Nigeria, had previously worked together as undergraduates and a conversation with a mutual friend sparked the idea for ThriveAgric.

While Eje, an indigene of Benue state, one of the country's farming hubs, already had an advantage in getting access to farmers, the solution wasn't so straightforward. Despite helping farmers aggregate capital, there were still issues concerning their output, quantity, and quality. Their product needed to manage more steps in the value chain. So, the co-founders tweaked the product to include management advisory and route to premium markets services.

Still a nascent industry in Nigeria, many agritech companies shared similarities, deviating very little from the 'proven' business model'. However, ThriveAgric gained consumers' attention fast with a promise of being farmers-first and having a stellar roster of investors, positioning it for success. In 2019, ThriveAgric received $150,000 in funding after getting accepted into Y Combinator, in addition to earlier funding by VP in 2016, which they used to scale up their operations.

ThriveAgric enjoyed patronage as one of the highly-rated agritech companies, with remarkable brand salience. From Adeoti, a marketing executive, to Mrs Bisi, a retired civil servant, ThriveAgric's proposition resonated with many across the different socio-economic groups and spurred growth. It did not matter how much capital you had; ThriveAgric had something for you.

For as low as ₦5,000, anyone could invest in crops and poultry on ThriveAgric's farms and get up to 20% returns in 9 months. In addition, they partnered with Piggyvest, a partnership which proved to be a strategic and highly profitable one, as every investment opportunity listed by ThriveAgric on the popular savings platform sold out shortly after.

The Crisis

The COVID-19 pandemic, which slowed the world to a crawl, had unprecedented effects on life and businesses. ThriveAgric, unfortunately, was not exempted from the pandemic's effects.

By March 2020, as the entire country began to shut down, the first cracks caused by the pandemic began to show. Investors did not receive their returns as promised, which would go on for months. The pandemic created a domino effect that hampered the company's productivity- from border restrictions that prevented in-person farm visits and delayed farmers from receiving much-needed farm inputs to off-takers failing to pay for goods received when due, ThriveAgric was entirely in crisis mode.

ThriveAgric's profit depended on successfully moving produce post-harvest to off-takers within a short period, limiting the need for extensive storage facilities. The nationwide halt in movement significantly altered this. According to Eje, in an interview with TechCabal, they lost over 100 million naira worth of produce in transit despite their attempts to rent more cold rooms to store products like processed chickens[40].

'The pandemic meant that off-takers couldn't pay for the goods we've already supplied, Eje said. "Farmers were also suffering losses on the farm, and we lost over 100 million naira worth of produce in transit because they were held up on the road. No movement during the pandemic."

Another strain point was off-takers who did not honour their payment commitments. The FMCGs and restaurant chains expecting a quick return to business often shifted payment dates, making ThriveAgric, which based its promise to investors on those timelines, appear perfidious.

The lack of communication from ThriveAgric, left investors frustrated, birthing the #ThriveAgricPayYourInvestors movement on Twitter, leaving room for harmful speculations that ThriveAgric was a Ponzi scheme, which the company vehemently denied. Customers furiously alleged that others who invested through Piggyvest paid first, further straining relations. Also, investors discovered that the company's insurance coverage was only limited to farm assets and not the actual investments.

The company faced public wrath and threats of legal action against them. Investors congregated online to mount further pressure on the company, with one investor outrightly referring to the company as a 'fraud.' Things quickly became a nightmare for a company that began with a dream.

40. Adeyemi D. (2022) The untold story of how ThriveAgric survived a turbulent 2020. TechCabal.

All hands on deck

As tempers flared and allegations piled up, Ventures Platform, one of ThriveAgric's investors, stepped in to provide support through the difficult time, providing what the firm's General Partner, Kola Aina, referred to as one of the most consequential forms of portfolio support in VC.

According to Kola Aina, 'When we got wind of the situation, we stepped in quickly and did the best that we could by first working with the founders to understand the scale of the challenge and the impacted stakeholders. We put together a crisis team comprising various advisors of VP like OO Nwoye, Olumide Soyombo and many others.'

Moving to provide structure, Ventures Platform wanted to bring on board a leader with experience dealing with a complex business crisis while also caring about ThriveAgric's vision. Adia Sowho, a seasoned operator with multi-sectoral experience across Nigerian corporate organisations and startups, fit the bill perfectly. 'Getting her on board was perhaps our most significant addition,' said Kola Aina.

For Sowho, her offer to provide advisory support to startups on an hourly basis for half a day weekly had morphed into a call for more. Following a call with Kola Aina, OO Nwoye, and other VP team members the day before, Eje, ThriveAgric's co-founder, showed up at Sowho's home, determined to camp outside until she agreed to come on board. She could not envisage it would probably become one of the hardest things she ever had to do. Still, Eje's persistence eventually wore her down.

In October 2020, ThriveAgric appointed Sowho as interim CEO, and Eje stepped into the COO role. In addition to other crucial hires – a new Chief Financial Officer, Olurotimi Arigbede, and Head of Risk Management, Michael Kadiri – who joined the team to help chart a new course for the company. The company also released a press statement detailing a comprehensive timeline for investor payout and a new payout dashboard – payout.thriveagric.com – allowing each retail investor to track repayment dates.

Immediately diving into what she believed to be the root of the problem, structuring the financial repayment plan for retail investors, Sowho focused primarily on the teams and people required to solve the problem. 'It was not about using fancy frameworks but putting structure and governance in place, doing simple things like getting the right people in the room to talk daily. That started to tease out problems daily, and we would solve it and move to the next one,' she said. She commented that solving the challenge required a systemic approach, and it was then and only then that the company could finally lift its head from under the water that had threatened to drown it.

Using 'bridge capital' provided by existing investors and recovered payments from defaulting off-takers, ThriveAgric completed the payout to retail investors ahead of its 12-24 months timeline by April 2021. Tweets with #ThriveAgricpaidinfull by relieved investors told the turnaround story – an altogether feel-good moment.

Adia Sowho has been lauded for her steady leadership; some have even referred to her as a miracle worker, and they aren't wrong. She exercised the wealth of knowledge that she had gathered from all her experiences to cause a pivotal turnaround for ThriveAgric. When asked how she steered the company out of the crisis, she admitted it was a tough job trying to protect the company while ensuring customer satisfaction. For her, ThriveAgric's problem was essentially about timing due to the disruption caused by the pandemic. She admitted the unintentional lack of communication by the company, explaining that 'bad news is always tough to deliver.' According to Sowho, startups should always leave the door open for experiences; this, to her, is a key to sustainable success.

Current State

While the guidance from Kola Aina and Sowho's leadership was undoubtedly pivotal in ThriveAgric's redemption arc, the tenacity of the co-founders and entire team members remains the primary catalyst. Eje and Arikawe began ThriveAgric with a desire to make a positive difference in the world; their dream was almost tainted as fraudulent, but they stepped up to show that their goal is genuine.

The decision to step down and make way for the experienced hands saved their sinking ship. As Sowho puts it, it takes an incredible amount of humility to ask for help. Taking responsibility for their actions and inactions positioned them to prove the genuineness of their commitment to creating a sustainable business.

The pandemic was a litmus test for many companies globally, altering business operations, including ThriveAgric's. The immense sacrifice from the entire ThriveAgric team made the pandemic and its ensuing crisis an overall net positive. It has changed their approach to the same core agricultural problem, making them stronger and more resilient.

ThriveAgric paused retail investments during the saga and has divested from crowdfunding, pivoting to institutional funding to grow its 200,000+ farmer base. The company has secured investment and partnerships with the CBN, local commercial banks, World Food Program, and USAID.

ThriveAgric recently announced a $56.4M debt financing, including a $1.75 million co-investment grant from USAID-backed West Africa Trade & Investment Hub (Trade Hub). The funds will enable the company to grow its 200,000+ farmer base and expand into new African markets, including Ghana, Zambia and Kenya.

ThriveAgric is an excellent example of how companies can come back from difficult times with the help of their community. Today, ThriveAgric is rebuilding after successfully pivoting its business model from crowdfunding. It has expanded operations to Ghana and Kenya on its journey to building an Africa that feeds itself and the world.

Supporting companies through difficult times is one of the most consequential forms of portfolio support in Venture Capital.

In Conversation with

Kola Aina

ThriveAgric vs its subscribers: From your perspective, kindly tell us what happened.

The COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown restrictions significantly hampered the company's business operations which generated the returns on its crowdfunded farm subscriptions. Border restrictions reduced the availability of farming inputs (feed, fertilisers, and crop protection products). The price of farming inputs increased dramatically and fluctuated frequently, reducing the number of farmers they could support within our original budget.

Lockdowns and movement restrictions limited their ability to physically reach farmers and supply much-needed farm inputs at the appropriate time, which led to crop failure. Major food processors, who are off-takers, slowed production to apply safety measures to protect their staff and products. This decreased their demand size. The outcomes and ripple effects led to what eventually played out between the company and its subscribers.

Leadership isn't easy in this kind of challenging situation. What was your approach to resolving the issues? Why Adia?

Supporting companies through difficult times is one of the most consequential forms of portfolio support in VC. When we got wind of the situation, we stepped in quickly and did the best we could by first working with the founders to understand the scale of the challenge and the impacted stakeholders. We put together a crisis team comprising friends of VP [Ventures Platform] like OO Nwoye, Olumide Soyombo and many others who also played a key role.

We guided the team on the right approach and provided practical support in what was a very time-sensitive situation. We also provided and helped structure the bridge capital that the company needed and brought on board the human capital that we needed to tackle this unique mix of events. This led to getting Adia on board. The company needed someone with experience dealing with a complex business crisis, managing multiple stakeholders and value chain structures. It was also important that this person cared about ThriveAgric's work and saw something worth fighting for.

Adia Sowho brought a new and experienced strategic problem-solving ability balanced with an operational mindedness to the very urgent task at hand, which was why she was the excellent choice to come on board as interim CEO. Getting her on board was perhaps our most significant addition.

How challenging was your experience?

The entire situation was quite challenging, as we had always engaged with ThriveAgric's founders as real partners. This problem was also our problem. It was a phase in the business that required a different strategic approach. Many people reached out to us (offline and online), so we also had to manage our communication on the issue.

As with such situations, questions, opinions, and sentiments are thrown up that require expertise and careful navigation to tackle. For me, it was about fully understanding the problem to gain clarity, act accordingly and get past it. This helped me immensely.

How would you say the team and company are faring now?

They are up, running and learning. One great thing about a crisis is that it gives you an opportunity to learn. ThriveAgric recently announced a $56.4M debt financing raise to enable the company to grow its 200,000+ farmer base and expand into new African markets, including Ghana, Zambia and Kenya. So I would say they are faring quite well.

The team is also growing, and they've strengthened and expanded their management by bringing in a Head of Risk, a CFO and other experienced team members. Having resolved the temporary payment disruptions and attendant issues within a year while maintaining company profitability, they established their resilience, which is something to be proud of.

What steps have been taken to avoid a similar event in the future?

ThriveAgric immediately paused its crowdfunding services and has made progress in securing more institutional funding, partnerships and investors. The company has also set up more robust business continuity measures and streamlined its farmer support services while working on building a standard as well as sustainable model and bouquet of services that fund themselves.

Is agritech (especially agricultural financing) a riskier investment? How do the inherent risks in the industry affect companies innovating in the space?

Risk is attached to every investment, which is the same with agritech, particularly agricultural financing. As with other industries, I believe more investment opportunities will open up as more visibility and structure are achieved in the ecosystem and value chain.
I also think the domino effect that innovation typically activates will also play out here. Few companies like ThriveAgric willing to drive innovation in the industry will succeed, attracting more investment for further innovation.

As local socio-economic challenges and global health issues converge, today's founders/startup leaders must solve a new equation. What are the most critical requirements for founders/startup leaders today?
I'll highlight three things: First, a global perspective that considers the convergence of various new phenomena and a deep local context—secondly, grit and resilience to stick to the mission despite all the headwinds. Lastly, the ability to sell to, inspire and motivate talent to join and stay with the company in an increasingly competitive talent landscape.

What do you think this turnaround means for the larger tech ecosystem?

We always viewed the challenge with ThriveAgric as systemic. It really meant a lot to us that the company's challenges were resolved transparently as a signal to the ecosystem that integrity matters and that companies can keep their word and come out of a crisis stronger than before. This is key to building a resilient ecosystem and maintaining the confidence of private risk capital in the ecosystem.
Despite the other challenges that still remain in the space, the ThriveAgric story is a shining example of what can happen when governance is in place, when stakeholders play their role and the place for experience, even in a young budding startup ecosystem.

… the turnaround shows the maturity level we've come into. In those days, we struggled to get products built, then we started building, and the struggle became hiring people to support those products. Now we have big companies that are growing rapidly and need a substantial turnaround.

In Conversation with

OO Nwoye

What was the approach to resolving the issue with ThriveAgric?

The founders, Uka and Ayo, have great fundamentals, and the farming aspect of the business was well run. No one could have anticipated COVID-19 and the disruptions to commerce that followed to happen. Off-takers could not sell their products because all ports were blocked, and there was no movement worldwide.

The approach was collective rather than individual. The founders, team and Kola worked with the board and multiple stakeholders to resolve the situation, and the primary priority was the customers.

Uka and Ayo were open to getting expert help, and we approached selection like a Venn diagram. We needed someone with big company experience but who understood how small companies work and, in this particular instance, someone who could hit the ground running. To do this, the person had to have local context and relationships that they could call upon.

Adia was ideal. I think she already knew the team she would have brought in to help salvage the situation at that moment in time. It also helped that, thankfully, she was somewhat available. And the result shows it was a good decision. ThriveAgric is now solely run by the founders and is on the right track.

Several agritech companies have defaulted payments. How have inherent risks in the sector affected startups in this sector?

Every investment opportunity where other external factors affect your outcome has inherent risk. Our ecosystem has infrastructural deficiencies, from lack of data to poor transportation to inadequate financing and inadequate – or will I say substandard – insurance. So, it doesn't have to do with agritech. Everything that has an opportunity already has its risks.

So, while agriculture has its challenges, I wouldn't say agriculture is inherently risky. It has a lot of moving parts, from things that have to do with environmental challenges to the limitations of a standardised agricultural economy. We have a country where we are, mostly, subsistent agriculture farmers. Then, the dance of the Nigerian policy around investment, agriculture and other aspects.

What does this turnaround mean for the larger Nigerian tech ecosystem?

The turnaround shows the maturity level we've come into. In those days, we struggled to get products built, then we started building, and the struggle became hiring people to support those products. Now we have big companies that are growing rapidly and need a substantial turnaround.

You don't turn around a small or inconsequential company. We have gotten to the point where there is an impact that their failure would have on society, prompting the need for skilled hands that can help turn it around. It shows that there is growth but also that companies don't need to die with the founders. This story has to be not just told but properly told. You see, most times, founders would rather burn with their startups than give away control of their company, even for a little while.

Most founders start a company and find their capacity to start and grow a company is not the same. It is not a failure- the skill set required to start a company is not the same skill set required to run a company. For example, Google's founders needed an administrator to come in for a while and help the startup expand and become a larger company.

It proves that, sometimes, when you let go, it is the better thing for the company, and most times, you could get it back, and that is not failure. When you have investors, employees, and customers, I believe founders should check egos at the door and prioritise the best outcome for everyone.

ThriveAgric's team deserve commendation for the foresight to say, 'Okay, let's get expert help.' It's a big deal because many companies have failed just because the founders refused to let go. Many unnecessary startup deaths can be prevented by highlighting true examples of founders letting go to help the company survive.

What new skills do you think leaders in today's economic climate need to have?

I don't think anything has changed. Being able to solve problems requires the same thing; the only difference is that more people now understand the necessity of problem solvers. It's not about having money; we need a convergence of founders, innovators, and scientists.

For founders and startup leaders, it's imperative for them to see that their work actually saves lives. But I don't think founders need to do anything differently.

We need more people supporting the system –the government, financiers and other stakeholders, even parents that say, 'what are you doing? Go and get a real job.' But it's not just about getting a job, your job has to impact society, and if we don't have enough people solving the complex problems, one day we will all die!

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Contact Us

tunji@naspire.com

+234 703 359 4256