

“One has to be able to ride the fear of failing”

Founded in 2014, the Zambian company Good Nature Agro has set itself the goal of making the income of local smallholders sustainable. Local community leaders are trained as private extension agents who train farmers in improved farm practices. At the same time, the company provides seed and other inputs and offers the smallholders a guaranteed sales market.

Mr Silungwe, what are the shortcomings of training for smallholders in Zambia?

The biggest share of farmers in the country are dispersed across large expanses, with little or no access to road infrastructure, providing a huge challenge for outreach. The current government extension to farmer ratio is a pitiful one extension officer to as many as 4,000 farmers – additionally, trainings fail to meet the needs of farmers, and are often maize-specific, outdated and do not encourage diversification and climate-smart techniques. Lastly, there is very little advancement in the use of technology to deliver and follow up on training. Innovative and consistent use of technology could ease access to information and guarantee great results in a productive network of farmers.

What is Good Nature Agro’s approach?

Zambia is home to some of the poorest of the poor farmers that largely grow a mono-crop of maize. Small-scale farmers lack access to a diversity of crops and have limited markets to sell their crop production. We work with small-scale farmers to increase incomes by diversifying crop options and acting as the market with our brand, Good Nature Seeds. We provide our growers with localised extension training, an affordable crop loan that allows them to pay back in seed and a sustainable market for the legume crops grown. Growing for us has increased farmer incomes from an average of 150 US dollars on maize to about 500 US dollars on legumes on a half hectare of land. At Good Nature Agro, we are striving to bridge the gap in demand for certified legume seed.

What is different from government extension services?

The government extension service in Zambia is reliably robust in content with well-trained extension personnel. However, the lack of manpower is a major challenge, and on average, as mentioned above, one extension officer supports 4,000 farmers. This limits the basic personal attention that the grower needs. We complement government work by offering one private extension agent or PEA for every group of forty farmers. Our extension agents enter a one-month, intensive field school called PEA College to prepare them to provide the highest-quality support to farmers. During this month, they acquire the core skills they need to best support their fellow farmers. Also, they recruit farmers they will work with in the coming season. For twelve months, PEAs are paid a stipend by Good Nature, but once crops are sold, they shift to commission-based compensation depending



Sunday Silungwe is co-founder of Good Nature Agro. He holds a degree in Development Studies from Zambia Catholic University, and in his company, he is responsible for many hats, from Talent and Expansion to Company strategy and operations. The firm started off with a team of two employees in 2014. Now a staff of 23 handle Good Nature’s operations.

on the sale of crops produced by the farmers they train. This aligns incentives for PEAs, farmers, and Good Nature to produce as much high-quality seed as possible.

What have you achieved so far?

We have sustainably scaled with targeted support from aligned partners. In our first year, we piloted our model with 40 growers. We have recently expanded operations to two new districts, and we now work with a total of 5,200 growers. We have 23 highly qualified full-time employees and 150 local private extension agents. Our Legume catalogue has increased, we now produce five main seed crop varieties: Peanut, soya beans, pigeon peas, black eyed beans and sugar beans. In the last season with 2,200 growers, we produced more than 400 metric tons of seed. We have entered strategic partnerships with some of the best organisations in the region, fostering our capacity and credibility with growers. Some of these partnerships include USAID, Catholic Relief Services, GIZ, Musika, World Renew and the Government, through the Ministry of Agriculture.

Looking back, what did you miss in your own professional training?

Entrepreneurship is a great frontier, and it teaches you a lot of the skill on the job. If there was one thing that I desire to learn professionally, it would be risk mitigation and management. I have found myself in some of the worst situations just because I did not critically calculate or even totally ignored the risk. Usually, with such situations the repercussions are disastrous. To mitigate this, my go to is to usually seek as many informed ideas from my team and co-founders as possible. However, being an entrepreneur in my country requires taking a lot of risks, one has to be able to ride the fear of failing and to grow the courage to try over and over again. In the process of trying, I have often ended up improving approaches. Consistency, in my opinion, brings with it a lot of originality and an overwhelming sense of accomplishment.