

# From a spark to a flame: Nigerian youths farming with business in mind

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## Rice–Nigeria PPP

The partnership focuses on increasing the productivity of quality paddy and linking producer groups with local value chain actors to serve the national rice market.

## Summary

**The development of youth cooperative organisations and leadership skills within the 2SCALE rice partnership in Nigeria is the main story line here, with the author focusing on an entrepreneurial young farmer called Shimave. When the youth cooperatives came up against obstacles to get credit for inputs, coaching on building business relationships and credit management provided the right stimulus. The youths then built links with local input dealers and credit providers and developed their clusters. As a result, marketing options are now expanding.**

Shimave Felix was not the kind of young person anyone would ordinarily listen to. He did not have the air of a local youth leader or a politician of influence. That was a couple of years ago. Today, the 25-year-old Shimave is not only respected in his community in Zango but his influence is growing fast. He is part of the young population in Nigeria's North-Central region where the state slogan is "Food basket of the nation". Even so, young people in the region are generally disinterested in agriculture. There are many challenges, such as lack of inputs, available market, pricing and technical skills, that make agribusiness unattractive to

them. Young people make statements like "...tah!, better make I go town go dey wash people motor get money than to farm" meaning "better to work as a car washer than to farm."

### Modeling a new journey

Shimave's new journey began in 2013 with his participation in the 2SCALE project. He joined other in training workshops on good agricultural practices, including rice nursery management, use of improved seed, transplanting of young

seedlings and water management. Shimave took the lessons he'd learned in the trainings seriously and applied them on his one-hectare rice farm. His yield increased in the second season of the year and he then expanded to three hectares of land, generating about 3.1 tonnes per hectare, compared to less than 1 tonne before. He was soon a model for other young people who had left Zongo Village in Benue for the state capital, Markurdi, where they'd hoped to find jobs.

When the youths returned home and saw the drastic changes in their friend's farm, they wondered how he had done it. When they began to ask him to share his secrets with them, Shimave saw the opportunity to organise them into groups. Since then, three youth cooperatives have been formed under the umbrella Zongo Youth Association. The young farmers have pooled their resources to jointly cultivate a total of 100 hectares of rice farm during the current rainy season. Shimave now leads about 60 young people who are tilling the soil to farm rice. But unlike their predecessors they are doing it with business in mind, which they have learned through the several coaching sessions on economic analysis, crop budgeting and production efficiency. These soft skills development sessions started in 2016, given by the 2SCALE business support service called "The Inventive Mind".

### In search of funds to put their skills into practice

Yet, despite all their newly acquired hard and soft skills, the young producers still came up against a few obstacles: they were not organised enough to be able to sell at competitive prices, and it was difficult to get going because they could not access money to buy inputs. And being young farmers, no one was willing to give Shimave and the other youths a loan. At least, not at first...

But a light was after all shining on the youths when Mikap Nigeria Ltd, Nigeria's leading rice marketing company, selling locally produced "Miva" rice, was brought into the partnership. With this development, the farmers' market ac-

cess issue was immediately resolved. The young farmers soon organised a business meeting with Mikap, to discuss other issues like access to credit. In this however, Shimave and the others were to be disappointed. Mikap decided not to organise inputs like fertilisers on credit, and the youths were left with the feeling that Mikap simply wanted to use them.

### The long journey to building business relationships

Yet the spark was ignited and the young entrepreneurs were not ready to give up after their first disappointment. The Inventive Mind continued its support by coaching the groups on how to build good business relationships and to improve their negotiation skills. The coaches also helped the young farmers to establish links with local input dealers like Notore (fertilisers) and the Premier Seed Company. This allowed them to make deals directly with the companies on mutually agreed terms and discounted rates. Other cluster farmers (in Tarka, Guma and Kwande) have brokered a new relationship with LAPO Microfinance and reached an agreement for loans (at a single-digit interest rate) for the coming planting season. And recently, the market options expanded for the youths, with new companies like Afex and OLAM Nigeria Ltd offering them better prices for paddy rice and even providing them with inputs (improved seeds, agrochemicals and fertiliser).

Rice business is gradually starting to boom. Zongo youths are trickling back to the village to enter agribusiness. Like Shimave, most rice growers are now making a profit of over 400,000 Naira (€1,100) per hectare. The Zongo Youth Association has sold about 10 tonnes of paddy to OLAM Nigeria Ltd and some women are starting up processing units as well. And Shimave is carefully leading the association to ensure the young farmers' confidence, through coaching in hard and soft skills development. He is nurturing the youthful spark to become a flame... All the while reflecting on how to get back to Mikap Nigeria Ltd and become part of the Miva Rice brand.

