

Kenya social entrepreneur wins Commonwealth secretary-general's innovation award

John Oroko, a Kenyan social entrepreneur whose company, Selina Wamucii is connecting smallholder farmers - including pastoralists and fishing communities - across Africa into global supply chains, has won the Commonwealth Secretary-General's Innovation Award for Sustainable Development. The award was presented by the Commonwealth secretary-general, the RT Hon Patricia Scotland and the vice-president of Seychelles Vincent Meriton in the Seychellois Island of Mahe.



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The award ceremony event was held during the opening day of the Commonwealth Africa Innovation Ecosystem Workshop.

The awards seek to showcase impactful innovations and forward-looking solutions that help countries advance the Commonwealth Charter values. This comes after earlier this year Selina Wamucii was recognised by the London Stock Exchange Group which named it as a company to inspire Africa in its annual profile of Africa's most dynamic growth businesses.

Transforming agricultural value chains

Speaking during the award ceremony, Oroko said that the award would go a long way in building the necessary momentum for transforming agricultural value chains across Africa. "As challenging as our innovation journey has been, this award and recognition gives us much-appreciated motivation to continue being at the forefront of agricultural innovation across Africa. I believe we have the best opportunity to transform Africa's agricultural value chains while passing the benefits of an efficient chain to producer communities across the continent."

Facing first-hand, the realities that rural farmers grapple with, in accessing markets and earning decent household incomes, Oroko, who was brought up in a smallholder farming family, made a resolve to transform farmers' earnings and found an ally in technology.

Upon graduating and after a short stint at employment, Oroko quit to start Selina Wamucii, a company named after his mother's first name and his co-founder's mother's middle name as a way of honouring them for their hard work as smallholder farmers which saw them raise their families from their farm's proceeds.

"The story of our mothers as rural smallholder farmers is the story of tens of thousands more across the country and this inspired me to start Selina Wamucii. I believe that every human being who works hard deserves to have access to opportunities that enable them to live a life of dignity.

"Smallholders are among the hardest working people on the planet, yet remain a majority of the world's poorest. It matters to me because I believe we have the best opportunity to transform Africa's agricultural value chains while passing the benefits of an efficient chain to producer communities across the continent."

Okoro whose philosophy is driving initiatives that create lasting impact among communities loves spending time working to address society's most pressing problems.

Since co-founding the company in June 2015 he has managed to enlist over 7,000 farmers across the country who grow high-value food among them fruits, vegetables, fish, seafood, spices and other agro commodities which find their way across markets in Middle East, Asia, Africa and Europe.

How it works

To become part of the network, farmers sign up to join Selina through their mobile phones via USSD. The system captures information relating to the geographical locations of smallholder farmers, what they are producing, the various stages of progress throughout the season, harvest timelines and projections and actual volumes at harvest.

This information makes it easy to estimate expected volumes in a year for different produce, which then enables buyers around the world to plan in advance.

It also streamlines the sourcing process, making it faster and less expensive with a digitised value chain. Buyers, on the other hand, specify what they want and are guaranteed consistent quality, fair price and volumes. The company has improved farmers ability to meet global market standards such as organic and good agricultural practices.

The company is now looking at having the services offered in local languages as well for easier communication with farmers.

The success of the Kenyan operation has inspired a regional scale with Selina Wamucii having conducted soft launches and featured smallholder produce from Ethiopia, Tanzania, Uganda and Mozambique.

Okoro now has his eyes trained on scaling to the rest of Africa with a target of being in every African country across East,

Southern, Central and North Africa.

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