

Leah Diana Mitaba

Entrepreneur

ZAMBIA



“I am proud to be counted among women who took the step to start a business, have inspired others along the way and are currently running and growing a registered business that brings in an income for myself and the community”



Leah did the unthinkable for many employees. At the age of 35, she resigned from her formal salaried job to become an entrepreneur. She is now one of Zambia's female Emerging Commercial Farmers. She is co-founder of and running Chibote Farmers' Co-operative Society and of Butterfly Initiatives Limited, two Zambian Agri-business ventures that seek to meet the country's vegetable and fruit needs. It has been two years since Chibote managed to set up a cooperative farm and produces quality fresh vegetables that have found a place on the shelves of Zambia's leading supermarkets such as Pick n Pay and Food Lovers Market. Zambia's fast rising middle class has a taste for a more diversified range of foodstuffs such as beetroot, lettuce, rocket, apricots, dried fruits and so forth. Leah's unique business approach has been enriched by her past work experience that involved working with women and under privileged groups. Leah has successfully introduced new vegetable lines to increase incomes for the local community in which the cooperative is situated, integrating corporate social responsibility into its operations and the community. In her portfolio, as Executive Secretary for the cooperative, Leah, led her team to scoop Best Cooperative and Best Agricultural Cooperative Awards for 2017. Leah believes in regenerative farming, and she is also passionate about gender equality and deliberately works with female and youthful smallholder farmers in the local area. She acknowledges that various efforts targeted at helping small scale farmers and the agricultural industry at large are growing but a lot still needs to be done to reach vulnerable groups. Therefore, she participates in various networks such as the Zambia National Farmers' Union, and the Fruit and Vegetable Committee of the union representing the voice of small holder farmers. She is also an Administrator of a social media (Facebook) platform called Small-scale Farmers (Farming as a Business) SSF, a farmers' forum bringing together more than 400,000 farmers, mostly smallholder farmers to share lessons and experiences on farming. Through this platform Leah continues to inspire, influence and shape current and future farming trends in Zambia and beyond.

Notwithstanding the successful growth of her business, owning

a small firm comes with challenges. Leah points out that the courage to start and find the motivation to quit her job was the greatest hurdle. Deciding to go into farming full-time and letting go the steady income made many in her family think of her as flighty. "Whenever I shared ideas I had for my business, almost everybody I knew would say, but that's so risky! Finding inspiration has not been easy", says Leah. Another challenge has been balancing work life demands. Her belief that self-employment would make this easier was quickly dashed when she was faced with the conflicting demands of being a mother, a wife and a business owner. "But don't get me wrong- she quickly adds - the three hats are also my motivating factor and a constant reminder of why I am in business".

The EMPRETEC training and aftercare programme under the Graca Machel Trusts Women Creating Wealth programme was a turning point for Leah and gave her a different perspective on entrepreneurship. She gained the courage to approach potential investors and to explore potential export markets. She learnt to be self-confident and take leadership. She has a strength in establishing partnerships and working as a team, but Leah is also a leader, a creative and visionary person in her own right something she has shielded from in the past, preferring to work through partnerships. The training made her recognize her leadership abilities and to harness this strength. Leah's vision includes developing a 5,000-hectare plantation estate of macadamia nuts, bananas, livestock (fish and animals) and honey in one of Zambia's rural communities to tap opportunities in the export market while contributing to reforestation, soil regeneration, wildlife regeneration and socio-economic development. She looks forward to exploring available funding mechanisms for the plantation project and of course to mentor other women that she works with.

LEAH DIANA MITABA

Lusaka, Zambia

www.butterflyinitiatives.wordpress.com

