

**Statement by Mr. Michael Ocansey, co-founder of AgroCenta, from Ghana  
Delivered at the 52nd Joint Advisory Group (JAG)  
Meeting of the International Trade Centre held at the  
World Trade Organization, Room S1  
Geneva, 10th July 2018**

I want to begin by saying a big thank you to the entire ITC team especially Arancha for the opportunity to be here this morning. Really an honour to be here.

My name is Michael Ocansey and I am a co-founder at AgroCenta, a technology based company working within the agriculture value chain in Ghana. We started off as just two co-founders in 2017 and have since grown to a staff strength of 37.

Towards the end of 2015, Francis (my other co-founder) and myself returned to Ghana after living in Dubai for a year going through an accelerator and working on our first startup, Swappaholics. It failed. In January 2016 we got back to the drawing board and decided to venture into the agriculture space since there was a lot of talk about it at the time. We made a trip to the northern part of Ghana where we have majority of the farming population in the country. We stayed among the farmers for 2 weeks trying to understand exactly what their pain points were.

It is quite general knowledge that farmers in northern Ghana are poor but we were shocked to discover the extent of this poverty while we lived among them. These were folks who fed pretty much the entire country and probably some neighbouring countries but could hardly send their kids to school consistently. The farmers told us they just needed a better way to trade so they could make more profit from their sweat. This information coupled with the heartbreak we experienced seeing their living conditions, moved us to come up with a for-profit solution backed by passion. We spent most parts of 2016 building this solution. We currently work in 3 out of the 10 regions of Ghana and have a network of 12,000 smallholder farmers. 4000 of that number have experienced a 40% increase in revenue by trading through our platform. Our goal is to expand into 6 regions and to 50,000 farmers by end of this year.

My entrepreneurial journey has been a lot of fun coupled with much learning. AgroCenta is my 4th startup. The first two got abandoned when hunger drove me back to the corporate world. With AgroCenta I decided to persevere no matter how tough it gets. We have had to travel 14 hour journeys from Accra to the northern parts of Ghana. Several hours of dirt road when going to very remote villages for community entry. I have learned very interesting customs practiced by the folks in the northern parts of Ghana. I have met village chiefs and opinion leaders to deliberate on issues regarding their communities. I have learnt a lot about best agricultural practices just by working with extension officers. In all this, what really helped push me forward has been my willingness to learn from others. The culture dynamics between southern Ghana (where I come

from) and northern Ghana (where we work) are diverse. If I don't learn their ways, I can't work with them. Working with semi-literate and illiterates has also opened my mind to a new way of delivering technology based solutions to this category of people.

Even though we are a for-profit company, our core is about improving the financial livelihoods of smallholder farmers. We want farmers to have more money in their pockets so they can take care of their families. We want more women to have access to land for farming and not rely on sharing lands with their husbands. We want farmers to move from one acre lands to five acre lands. It is when we see these happening at scale that we can say we've been successful as social entrepreneurs.

It has not been easy to get AgroCenta to where it is now. Most of the lessons I have learnt have been through trial and error. Had I not failed in my previous start-up endeavors, AgroCentre would not be as successful. I learnt how listening to the client is key to making a business competitive in the market. My partner and I identified an untapped area in the market. We spent time with communities and farmers to understand what they wanted – we listened, and delivered. Now, to remain competitive we keep listening to end users to improve our platform.

We also got some key support that made us improve a lot our solution and provided us with a lot of visibility. Last year at the WEDF Young Entrepreneurs Pitching competition organised by the ITC in Budapest we won. We have gone on to win a total of 7 awards. The biggest and latest of these happened this year in April, right here in Switzerland where we won the Seedstars Global Summit competition that had a prize of \$500k equity investment.

Young entrepreneurs need to be given both the support and space to fail. Starting a business takes courage – to leave a secure income and embark on a journey that you only hope will succeed. It takes resilience in the face of failures, to pick yourself up, brush yourself off and keep going. But most of all it takes confidence, in yourself and in your idea.