

An opportunity to use commercial enterprises to ensure global food security

 By [Cari Coetzee](#)

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President and CEO of AGT Foods, Murad Al-Katib was recently named EY World Entrepreneur of the Year 2017 for his success in building a business empire focused on providing vegetable protein to the developing world, but also for helping to feed refugees. We chat to Al-Katib about his win, entrepreneurship and feeding the world.



Congratulations on winning EY World Entrepreneur of the Year 2017 - what does this win mean to you and for AGT Foods?

It has been quite a year for AGT Foods, our staff and me personally as well with a number of prestigious awards that really validate the work we are doing. The EY World Entrepreneur of the Year 2017 is very exciting because it recognises the entrepreneurial spirit that all of our staff have. We are a very entrepreneurial company where everyone at every level views the company and the work they do as their own. This philosophy and commitment have been a key component to how we have grown from a startup in 2001 to a global food company with sales of about \$2bn with 47 facilities on five continents, markets to 120 countries and about 2,000 staff – all in 15 years or so.

The competition was certainly strong for the EY World Entrepreneur of the Year 2017, with over 50 entrepreneurs from 49 countries representing hundreds of thousands of staff and tens of billions in revenue. To be selected as the EY World Entrepreneur of the Year 2017 winner has been a humbling experience and gives added profile to our business and a voice to the social causes surrounding food security and availability of nutritious food to populations around the world.

Murad Al-Katib, President and CEO of AGT Foods



AGT Foods CEO scoops EY World Entrepreneur of the Year 2017 title

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■ What advice would you give other food entrepreneurs and companies operating in a time of waning resources, food insecurity and massive global population growth?

I truly believe that entrepreneurs are born and they hone their skills over failures and success – it is this process that provides the foundation to realise their vision and capture their opportunities.

Food security, availability of nutritious food consistent with the environment is a major concern for governments and citizens of the world. Added to this is incredibly challenging times with regard to societies, unrest and a staggering spike in refugees and displaced people.

I was fortunate to see an opportunity 20 years ago in Canada with the emergence of pulse production where farmers were

beginning to embrace these crops in part for the sustainable agricultural production aspect - as you may know, pulses fix nitrogen in the soil when included as part of a rotational cropping plan, with technologies for seeding they have a low impact on soil with regard to erosion and they use a fraction of the water to produce a pound of protein over other, largely animal protein sources. I recognised an opportunity and built a successful global business around the concept of buying pulses from farmers, processing them in facilities at the origin and exporting them to markets around the world - providing quality protein. I saw an opportunity and took it and it so happens that the business I started provides real tangible benefit to many people in the world.

Compassionate entrepreneurialism is something I feel strongly about – the place of entrepreneurs to use commercial enterprises to help solve the world's problems. These solutions will not come from government or NGO's alone – entrepreneurs innovate and are part of the equation.

As I look back I want to be known, as an entrepreneur, who worked hard to bring our environmentally sustainable pulse crops to the world, as lentils, peas and chickpeas play a big role in feeding the world. Pulses are a key part of sustainable agriculture with low water usage, low greenhouse gas emissions, low impact on soil erosion and natural nitrogen-fixing properties that reduce the need for fertiliser application. However, they are also critical to sustainable development goals surrounding food availability, food security and the world's ability to feed a growing population.

From my experience to other entrepreneurs, particularly in food and industries that are related to or impacted by issues we face in the world today, I would say be prepared, know the outcomes and advance without fear. Believe in yourself and your idea. By thinking about the available outcomes, evaluating all possible variables and understanding what the results might be, you will be prepared for anything that happens. You may not know which of the possible outcomes may come to fruition, but you can proceed without fear because nothing will be unexpected.

Tell us about your quest to bring food to the world?

In my case, my entrepreneurial journey started at the age of five, importing Turkish bubble gum bought on family vacations to Turkey and then resold on the playground at school. My family immigrated to Canada in the mid-60's and they taught me that there is a bigger world out there.

The area of Canada I grew up in had traditionally been known as the 'breadbasket of the world', producing wheat and cereals and with a new emerging crop of pulses – lentils, peas, chickpeas, and beans. I developed a fascination with the dynamics of emerging markets and never lost sight of the dream of feeding the world. Population growth and rising incomes in emerging markets, and the opportunity to participate in building Canada's position as a major supplier of global protein, were career and learning pursuits that evolved into passions for me.

In the 1990's agriculture has been undergoing a renaissance where farmers are increasingly diversifying the products they grow and an entire industry has emerged to originate, process and export this output to the world. My goal was to create the 'protein basket of the world' to feed the world and alleviate hunger by making quality vegetable protein and staple foods available to markets around the globe and by helping to build a sector to drive change in the agribusiness in Canada.

■ ***In your post-win interview you stated that the consumer demands environmental sustainability and social responsibility, particularly the millennial consumer. What is AGT Foods doing to engage with the millennial consumer to drive and contribute to this consciousness and making sure that future generations maintain this outlook?***

“ One of the results of millennial influence on the market place is that there is no such thing as social entrepreneurs - only successful entrepreneurs that recognise that social cause should be central to corporate culture and strategy. ”

Millennials are our next generation of leaders and entrepreneurs. They care about the environment and healthy lifestyles but they are also driven by success. Of course, we use mediums that speak to millennials to share our messages of feeding the world and how secure and safe food systems play a role in society as well as the positive environmental aspects of sustainable agriculture and food production and business environment in general.

Today, there is a necessity of social purpose which is an essential element of business success as consumers, stakeholders and millennials, as consumers and employees, demand it. One of the results of millennial influence on the market place is that there is no such thing as social entrepreneurs - only successful entrepreneurs that recognise that social cause should be central to corporate culture and strategy.

Millennials are particularly keen to these messages and I hope through my activities and the success of my company I can create and share a model that inspires young people to think about what they may do to participate in this global movement as well as to other entrepreneurs to mobilise their commercial enterprises for the better of humanity in some way.

■ ***How does AGT Foods plan to help create two billion vegetarians and why is this so important?***

According to the United Nations, as a society, we need to produce as much food in the next 50 years as has been produced in the past 10,000 years of civilization and pulses, as a main vegetable protein source for large numbers of the world's populations is a key part of this. Food, water and shelter are three of the primary needs for people all over the world and something that everyone deserves to have and are part of the building blocks of civil society.

The world is seeing massive population growth, primarily in South Asia, China, and the Middle East – areas of the world that are key consumption markets for pulses and that do already consume much of their protein from vegetable sources. As population growth happens, with it increases the size of the middle class in these regions – it is expected that protein requirements will go up and with that so will the desire for more quality protein.

By making quality and affordable vegetable protein available to markets around the world from pulses, we see pulses being part of the solution to feeding the world. They are nutritious, sustainable and have characteristics that are positive for the environment - and they taste good too.

■ ***What are your views on the agriculture industry and how they are approaching the problems to which you are trying to find solutions?***

Agriculture as an industry is critical to the world economy and to social stability as food production, availability and security is a major issue for governments and societies all over the globe. It is one of the principal building blocks of civil society. The transition to agrarian communities is one of the reasons why humans were able to advance to the point we have today.

As populations grow it is putting more and more demand on agricultural and food systems around the globe to ensure that people have safe, nutritious and really enough food to eat. Agriculture is a driver of economic growth and wellbeing as well

as feeding the world, irrespective of what crops are being produced – whether it be cereal grains, oilseeds, vegetable products or pulses - agriculture has been undergoing a renaissance where farmers are increasingly diversifying the products they grow and an entire industry has emerged to originate, process and export this output to the world.

Sustainable agriculture to feed the growing world population may be one of the most important advancements there is to reduce water usage, carbon and greenhouse gas emissions, soil erosion all while increasing yield and output.

This is exemplified by rapid growth of pulse production in Saskatchewan, to approximately 5.8m acres of lentil production and over 8.5 million metric tonnes of lentils, peas, beans, and chickpeas in Canada in 2016

“ Farmers are some of the best entrepreneurs out there – they solve problems and create economic benefit every day. They are among the most innovative groups working within any economy. ”

It needs to be a partnership between government – with trade, agricultural and environmental policy, and industry to provide an outlet for the purchase, processing, and export of products as well as universities and research organisations to develop better agronomy and varieties to produce more products and of course farmers to grow the crops. For example in Saskatchewan, we have this partnership between all branches working together to grow the agribusiness sector in the province and to the benefit of the participants in the agri value chain.

ABOUT CARI COETZEE

Cari Coetzee is a contributor to Bizcommunity Tourism, Agriculture and Lifestyle.

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