

Startup MoBFIT uses SMS to connect farmers with buyers

 By Tom Jackson

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Ugandan startup MOBFIT has developed what it describes as robust GSM-supported agricultural supply chain software, able to directly connect smallholder rural farmers to buyers at a low cost via SMS and automated voice call technology.



Image by 123RF

Launched last year and already used by over 300 farmers and over 1,000 buyers, [MOBFIT](#) allows a farmer to simply send an SMS with information about their produce to a short code. The system then generates a unique identification number for them.

MOBFIT then receives offers from buyers, identifies the highest prices for particular produce, and connects these buyers directly to the farmers. The system allows farmers to negotiate prices before harvest and get paid upon delivery, while buyers have time to plan and get their produce on harvest day.

Founder Charles Batte grew up in Kamwokya, an impoverished slum in the Ugandan capital of Kampala, and started his own farm eight years ago. Here he witnessed firsthand the challenges faced by farmers, especially in reaching the market. MOBFIT is his solution.

“Interacting with community members excites me most,” he tells Disrupt Africa. “I am always in the field seated, for instance, with a 17-year-old single mother discussing how our programme can support her agricultural endeavours to

financially sustain her family and feed her child. Creating such grassroots impact and seeing the human-centred design approach changing lives in my own community is what inspires me to keep going.”

Bootstrapped thus far, Batte has encouraged significant uptake of MOBFIT via direct marketing to farmers, households, hotels and restaurants, but he is currently talking to venture capitalists and impact investors to help finance the scale-up process. The startup is hoping to raise US\$500,000.

It is MOBFIT’s use of “dumb” technology that sets it aside from many of its competitors in the agricultural space.

“The majority of tech solutions currently available that connect farmers to the market are applications supported on smartphones, which most farmers do not have, or use the more expensive USSD technology,” Batte says.

“We have identified that gap in this marketplace and decided to develop a solution that is supported on the most basic GSM mobile phone, which the majority of our rural farmers possess.”

This broadens MOBFIT’s addressable market, and ensures it reaches out to those farmers that are most affected by the problem.

“Our solution applies basic API technology that allows a farmer to interact directly with a platform providing an interface for buyers by simply sending an SMS to a designated short code number,” Batte says.

“The system is configured to create an auto-display on the interface with support from a system administrator when a farmer requests it. We track farmer locations by GPS, which enables us to cluster produce based on communities, districts and regions. This means even a farmer that produces little benefits as our system encourages them to pool produce.”

MOBFIT is generating revenue from commissions on sales made through the platform, advertising, and subscription fees, while Batte has also won cash at a number of startup competitions to help with running costs. He is seeking funding, however, to scale to other countries.

“We are currently operating in Uganda and looking forward to extending to Kenya and Rwanda,” he says.

ABOUT TOM JACKSON

Co-founder @DisruptAfrica. Tech and business journalist in Africa. Passionate about the vibrant tech startups scene in Africa, Tom can usually be found sniffing out the continent’s most exciting new companies and entrepreneurs, funding rounds and any other developments within the growing ecosystem.

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