

Ifeoluwa's passion for problem solving:

adapting to COVID-19 nutrition challenges in Nigeria



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The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have been far-reaching and devastating for all sectors of society, worldwide. Soupah, a Nigerian woman-led small business and member of the Scaling Up Nutrition Business Network (SBN) Nigeria, exemplifies the ways the pandemic has impacted enterprises, but is also an inspiring example of how innovation can be harnessed to overcome challenges and emerge more resilient.

[Soupah Limited](#), a food processing company located in the heart of Oyo State, Nigeria, was founded by Ifeoluwa Olatayo as a student in 2016. What started as a simple delivery system, transporting fresh produce to university students on a bicycle, has progressed into a thriving technology-driven social enterprise. Soupah Limited improves farmers' access to market which, in turn, allows produce to be priced affordably for customers.

The venture works with local farmers, processing their fresh fruits and vegetables into soup spices which provide for the nutritional needs of families in Ifeoluwa's community. The spices are supplied to various supermarkets and Soupah's own five retail stores, where the company sells packaged soup ingredients and other nutritional foods. "These products help cater for the nutritional needs of every socio-economic class," enthuses Ifeoluwa, who heralds her passion and willingness to problem-

"Entrepreneurs need to innovate. Your ability to change and be flexible is a key characteristic needed to drive your SME and overcome the challenges."

Ifeoluwa Olatayo,
Founder, Soupah Limited

solve as the most critical contributors to her success.

Soupah Limited currently employs 12 full-time and four part-time workers serving more than 2,000 customers and producing six major product lines. The company has received several awards for its social and environmental impact across the value chain, from farm to fork. In addition to being a finalist in the [2018 Global Scaling Up Nutrition \(SUN\) Pitch Competition](#), awards include the EcoBank New Venture Fellowship, Indi-Africa Fellowship, 2018 Food Connection Challenge by Netherlands Government in Nigeria, Overall Winner of the 2019 MSME Award by the Office of the Vice President of Nigeria, and the prestigious 2019 Bourlag-Adesina Fellowship for African Entrepreneurs.

Ifeoluwa's journey demonstrates she is no stranger to challenges. "Being a teenager when I started, I had to learn as I went along. I had no funding – I wrote business proposals to some banks, but no one was going to bet on a teenager still in university," she laughs. "Most people suggested I focus on my educational pursuits. However, as the business matured in terms of sales, brand awareness, and innovation, things began to ease out – and we have grown to a stage where the business is more stable and blooming."

Powering through the pandemic

However, Ifeoluwa's determination was put to the test during the COVID-19 pandemic. "Since people were low on cash, and unsure how long the lockdown would last, many Nigerians opted for staples such as rice, beans, and garri (a popular African dish made from cassava), while other nutritious foods like spices, vegetables, and fruits, went largely unsold." Unfortunately,



Soupah's processed products were not amongst the products most consumers wanted to stock up on, so sales plummeted. Similarly, the lockdown led to a low supply of perishables which culminated in higher prices.

In March and April 2020, the business experienced a 34% loss, which increased to 53% in the subsequent two months. As a result, Ifeoluwa furloughed some staff and ran a skeletal operation; just enough to ensure non-furloughed staff were paid.

However, while the pandemic's impact on the business was severe, Ifeoluwa saw the potential to pivot into other markets and develop the use of digital solutions as a means to survive. Refusing to wait for sales to fall further, the team started delivering fresh products like tomatoes and peppers at affordable prices to customers in need. "We were able to do this as a result of bulk purchase directly from local farmers, and processing and storing the produce in ways that increases its shelf life and

reduces the pressure to sell immediately, or hike prices to make up for a shortfall incurred on spoiled product," Ifeoluwa reveals.

Building resilience through innovation

Ifeoluwa also identified the need to better connect to customers, so she procured USSD codes (Unstructured Supplementary Service Data codes, widely used in some countries to initiate transactions via mobile phones) to drive sales. The use of USSD codes allows Soupah to deliver fresh and/or processed fruit and vegetable produce to their customers anywhere within Ibadan, Oyo State. The codes are sent to Soupah using mobile phones, but do not require internet access to work. "So far, we have seen positive changes. We are receiving an average of 25 orders each day via USSD," Ifeoluwa states. "We have increased our product lines by 20% and sales have increased by 41.8% as a result of the increase in sales of fresh produce, and we hope it gets better from there."

While the lockdown may be over, many agribusinesses are still overcoming pandemic-related challenges. “For us, sales have improved remarkably from the pandemic onset, but the challenges of running an agribusiness in an emerging economy like ours persist,” she explains. “For example, storage and logistic challenges mean transporting the produce from the farm to the city is difficult, and the movement and social gathering restrictions mean in-person events, like trade shows, are no longer physically possible. Due to this, marketing and branding are more virtual, hence awareness around our new product lines and new technology requires increased budgets and modified approaches.”

Game plans for a bold future

Soupah exemplifies resilience, but Ifeoluwa does not take this for granted. “Entrepreneurship is not a walk in the park, it can get challenging! However, when you do

it for the right reasons, it makes the journey worth it,” she enthuses. “The pandemic helped us recognise our shortfalls as a company, especially in the area of technology – and we responded adequately, highlighting our resilience and flexibility. Seeing the impacts of our business on the farmers and people able to purchase our affordable products, and seeing the smiles on the faces of customers able to purchase 1 kg of tomato products from us for as low as USD 0.10, instead of USD 1 in other markets, makes it all worth it.”

For Ifeoluwa, the coming years hold ambitious expansion plans. “Beyond the pandemic, we want to create another corporate solution that enables our model to scale globally,” she reveals. “I aspire for my company to be technology-driven and to harness its potential across the fruit and vegetable value chains. We hope for technical support and funding that enables us to try a variety of innovations across the storage and logistics areas of our business.”



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