

Rohan Roberts: The poster child for agribusiness success in Jamaica

While Rohan Roberts has been featured as the ‘face’ of youth in Agriculture in Jamaica, his story as a successful PROPEL-supported ‘agri-preneur’, has yet to be told. **As one of the first youth to participate in PROPEL programming in Jamaica, Rohan’s story of success through dedication and persistence is inspiring to other youth wishing to go into agriculture.**

Only 25, Rohan Roberts is well on his way to becoming a major player in the agricultural sector in Jamaica. Originally from Devon in Manchester County, Jamaica, Rohan did not always have his heart set on a career in agriculture. Having pursued a degree in finance, Rohan initially had his sights set on working in trading and investment. However, while in school, his father became ill, prompting Rohan to find ways to help the family. Faced with few options, farming opened up new possibilities for Rohan and inspired him to invest in a potential new career.



As a young man from a multi-generational farming family, Rohan’s first foray into agriculture was inspired by the opportunity to make some quick cash to repair his car. He thought he could easily get some quick cash by planting sweet potatoes on a ¼ acre of land. Investing all of his savings, Rohan did the best he could to take care of his field. Unfortunately, lack of research, preparation and foresight resulted in terrible harvest losses owing to a rat infestation. Not having identified a market, Rohan was then forced to sell the remaining produce to higglers at low prices. At the end of the season, Rohan barely managed to make his savings back.

Despite having lost months of hard work and sweat equity, Rohan decided to try again – but this time, he went back to farming with a set plan. First, he took measures to learn all aspects of his crop of choice, Irish Potatoes, by consulting with a local expert and by researching all aspects of crop cultivation. He identified his market, the Christiana Potato Growers Association, securing a marketing agreement prior to planting. He calculated his expected costs versus his possible profit and managed his expenses so as to ensure maximum profitability.

“I was learning everything hands on, I was learning the chemicals that you need, the spacing, proper land preparation – I was learning on the ground, in the field. I went to school for something completely different. I had basically the land and the raw materials to go into production, but I had to spend a lot of time researching, doing my own thing, learning how to cut costs and be efficient”

At the end of his first Irish potato season, Rohan had made all the money necessary to fix his car and enough to scale up his production. Rohan credits PROPEL with much of the confidence he now has as an agri-preneur.



In addition to assisting with technology and technical advice, PROPEL facilitated partnerships for Rohan that have proven invaluable in the rapid expansion of his business. Today, Rohan holds marketing agreements with large scale buyers such as the Christiana Potato Growers Association, Glastonbury and the Potato and Onion Producer Association (POPA). He also sells to local higglers and other buyers using shorter-term contracts, with the price and quantity determining who purchases his crops.

Having found success and a deep love for agriculture, Rohan is committed to expanding his presence in the sector and becoming a mentor to youth considering a career in agriculture.

"I was brought up to be enterprising. I thought it was the best option to scale up and to contribute to the development of my country."

Rohan now leverages his keen grasp of agricultural financial management with solid partnerships within the agricultural market system. He sits on the board of the Rural Agricultural Development Authority (RADA), and cooperates with various market players including credit providers, input providers, buyers, producer groups, storage facilities, and research organizations, such as Bodles Research Station.



In addition to growing crops, Rohan assists POPA with technical advice, such as the optimization and management of the technical equipment being introduced to POPA by PROPEL, for mechanization of the planting and harvesting of Irish potatoes.

He sees training of producers in the business aspects of agriculture and climate-smart techniques, as a key to further growth of the sector. These are areas that will allow Jamaican producers to mitigate risks, while maximizing their profits. Practicing what he preaches, in addition to pioneering technology in Jamaica, Rohan invests in ensuring that best agricultural practices are implemented in his fields.

"I've started to go into drip systems and water harvesting, to make sure I have my pH balance right, my fertilization is effective, doing my soil analysis, vet all the products I use on my crops – ensuring all the implements I use are sterilized, and making sure the people I work with are trained."

Now Rohan wants to further expand his presence in the agri-business field by investing in storage and agro-processing, as well as offering his consultancy services to others wanting to further expand their own agri-enterprises. His keen understanding of the market system as a whole, and the constraints faced by the different players, has inspired Rohan to consider investments in storage and agro-processing. Both of these areas he identified as playing a crucial role in achieving growth and stability within the Jamaican agricultural sector.

"What's happening in Jamaica is that our price structure is volatile – and the reason why we have a volatile structure is poor storage. We plant in seasons, at the same time, the same season. It's a perceived glut, but I if you can't supply all of the food that your country needs for a year, then you don't have a glut. So the answer is, when farmers come in with their crops, proper storage needs to be in place, proper post-harvesting techniques at that."

When asked what kind of advice he would give other youth wishing to enter agriculture, Rohan tells us:

"Make sure you research properly. Consult before you go in. I would be way further ahead now if I did more research and made sure I had all the structures I needed in place before I invested. I basically have gone back to university in real life."

Five years after his first failure in agriculture and many subsequent successes, Rohan expanded his business from the original $\frac{1}{4}$ acre to 22 acres, he employs up to 25 employees in his fields and has expanded crop cultivation to carrots, sweet peppers, tomatoes, potatoes, peanuts, corn, cabbage, pumpkins, and orchard trees.