

Enterprising Guyanese youth seizes on opportunities to develop a profitable seedling business

Akeem Coppin hails from a farming family in Dingwall Corentyne, East Berbice in Region 6, Guyana. He lives with his mother, a single parent who works on a small piece of land owned by his extended family, growing and selling bananas, plantains, oranges and mangoes at a roadside stand. His grandparents had farmed mixed crops on most of the cleared land. Akeem who has always had an interest in farming attended the University of Guyana, Berbice Campus where he pursued a degree in agriculture. Like many rural youth, he had to work his way through university. While working part-time in an office in 2015, he noticed a business card for Partners of the Americas and saw that the NGO was interested in rural development and helping those in need. Akeem seized the opportunity and gave them a call. *“I told them about my interest in building a shadehouse. They asked if I wanted to do hydroponics, but I said no – in this area there is a demand for seedlings. They said if I set up the frame, they would supply me with trays, potting mix, a shade net and black shade plastic sheets.”* So Akeem set up his first, small 10’ x 15’ shadehouse to produce seedlings.



Akeem Coppin, youth agri-preneur

In October 2016, PROPEL began scaling up its trials of onion production in Guyana. Following up success with developing the onion market system in Jamaica and St. Lucia, PROPEL was seeking to introduce onion production into Guyana to reduce the large volume of onion imports, which in 2015 was about 4 million kgs. PROPEL was working with farmers in various regions of Guyana including Region 6, where Akeem was farming. They heard about Akeem’s fledgling seedling business and invited him to attend onion production training courses being carried out in the area with National Agricultural Research and Extension Institute (NAREI). **Akeem jumped on board, there were things to learn about onions:** for example, growing onion seedlings takes more time compared to seedlings for other plants such as tomatoes and peppers (about six weeks for onions as opposed to three or four weeks for vegetables).

Right after the PROPEL training, and because “demand was already rising” for his seedlings, Akeem decided to apply to Guyana’s Institute of Private Enterprise Development (IPED) for a loan so he could expand his business. *“It was actually the first seedling business IPED ever got involved with. They said no one before had asked for a loan for a seedling business.”* IPED followed his progress with interest. The loan was extended with a 5% interest rate and it allowed him to build his second 20’ x 38’ shadehouse. **With his larger shade house now in operation, Akeem began to grow onion seedlings.**

“PROPEL gave me three different varieties of seeds – Texas Early Grano, Mercedes and Caballero – and lots of technical advice about water management and mold, and how to prevent or treat disease and pests.”

Akeem paid attention to the training:

“I wanted to learn the whole thing in case I go into growing onions. Also, it is great to be introduced to something new.”



Akeem produced more than 20,000 onion seedlings, between November 2016 and February 2017, for farmers who were participating in PROPEL's onions trials. PROPEL supplied the seeds and potting mix, and then paid him \$4 (G) for each onion seedling, on behalf of the farmers in the trial. Akeem cultivated the onion seedlings in trays, with each tray producing about 128 seedlings. His first shadehouse holds approximately 80 trays and it is now his germinating shadehouse. After five to six days in that shadehouse, he transfers the seedling trays to his larger shadehouse, which holds about 200 trays and gets more sunlight. Altogether, he has almost 300 seedling trays. Following the onion trials, farmers were trained to produce their own onion seedlings and Akeem then re-focused on the expansion of his viable vegetable seedling business.



Onion Seedlings

By the end of 2017, Akeem estimated that he had made a profit of more than \$100,000 (G) for every 200 trays of vegetable seedlings that he sold.

His enterprise was so successful that he was able to pay off his loan from IPED within six months. He now has 4 to 5 growing seasons each year. He tracks all his costs including his own labour – in an Excel chart *“so you know what you spend and what you earn.”* He has 15 regular customers, and in total about 60 farmers who buy from him. When farmers place their orders, they usually deposit 50% of the total cost as a mobilization fee. He explains that many farmers are sceptical of formal contracts, but he would like to eventually have a set of regular customers who contract to buy a certain amount of seedlings from him every year. His biggest challenge is finding seeds to buy, which leaves him often scouring through stores in Georgetown.

He attributes the overall success of his business to the quality of his seeds, and the fact that district farmers are pleased to have a local supplier because they used to have to travel far to buy seedlings. Also, *“I am organized, I call farmers and say come and get your seeds in about a week. That way I can organize the next set of seedlings and manage everything.”* Akeem would like to grow his business to the large scale like some seedling producers in other regions who have room to grow seedlings in 1,000 trays.



Akeem walks the family farm planning his next big initiative

His involvement with PROPEL has definitely helped his business. Farmers who obtained onion seedlings from Akeem also became aware of the other seedlings that he grows and many of them became new customers. Akeem is also now trialing 1/8th of an acre of onions with support from PROPEL.

Asked if he had ever encountered any stigma about being farmer, he was surprised at the question. *“I guess some people don't see farming as something essential, but farming is nice and to be able to plant and see the actual germination, the product of your work, in your hands...it is terrific.”*

By the time Akeem graduated in late 2017, this enterprising 25 year old had established a small seedling business, profitable enough to pay his university fees, transportation and even allow him to help out at home. Akeem hopes to eventually move into large scale commercial farming. **“Seedlings is just the beginning,” he promises.**