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# Three times the effort for ten times the yield: Growing tomatoes in Nigeria

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**Notes to broadcaster**

Nigeria produces about 1.5 million tonnes of tomatoes every year, with a value of 3 billion Nigeria naira. This might seem like a lot, but it pales in comparison with some other countries. And, because tomatoes are a popular food crop in Nigeria, it doesn’t even come close to meeting demand. Aside from huge producers like India and China, even smaller countries like Italy produce nearly five times as much as Nigeria, and with far less land. This means that Nigeria has to import most of its tomatoes, usually in the form of tomato paste, to make up the shortfall.

Tomato farming is becoming more and more popular in the country. The demand for the crop by retail consumers and processors and relatively short time from seed to harvest is very attractive to farmer with naira signs in their eyes.

But farmers need to be aware that growing tomatoes is not as straightforward as growing other crops. It is a very delicate and capital-intensive crop to grow. In this script, we talk to an agronomist at a large-scale tomato farm about the realities of tomato farming, and then we talk to two farmers about their experiences farming the crop. We will find out more about popular tomato varieties, about ways to reduce costs, and ways to get capital from banks or agricultural funds.

Farmers who plan to grow tomatoes and other high-value, high-input crops will find this script useful. This script will show the budding tomato farmer what they can expect, what the challenges and the benefits are, and make them aware that, although tomatoes are not a straightforward crop to grow, the benefits are considerable.

You could use this script as inspiration to research and write a script on growing tomatoes or other high-value crops in your area. Or, you might choose to produce this script on your station, using voice actors to represent the speakers. If so, please make sure to tell your audience at the beginning of the program that the voices are those of actors, not the original people involved in the interviews.

If you choose to use this script as inspiration for creating your own program, you could talk to farmers who grow tomatoes or other, high-value crops in your area, and the experts who advise them. You might ask them:

What is the market for growing tomatoes in this area?

What does it take to get into the market—in terms of capital, knowledge, etc.?

How long should the farmer expect to work at growing tomatoes before they make a good profit?

Estimated running time for the script: 20 minutes, with intro and outro music

## HOST: Today we will be talking about tomato production in Nigeria.

## Tomatoes are a very important food crop for Nigerians, eaten in meals across the country. Almost every ethnic group in the country has a delicacy that requires tomatoes, and what some people consider the national dish—*jollof rice*—is almost impossible to make without tomatoes.

## However, tomato production in Nigeria is severely lacking, especially when you compare it to other countries, and the country’s ability to meet demand. While Nigeria produces 1.5 million tonnes of tomato every year, imports are rising to make up the shortfall.

## We asked Ms. Mira Mehta and Mr. Art Cardoso about the challenges tomato farmers face in Nigeria, and why production levels seem to be so low.

## Ms. Mehta is the founder of Tomato Jos, a for-profit social enterprise that works with local, small-scale farmers to improve production and better serve local markets. Mr. Cardoso was the lead agronomist and is now Vice-President of Production. Tomato Jos is based in Panda, in Nasarawa State in the north of the country.

## Hello Mira and Art.

## MIRA & ART: Hello!

## HOST: What would you say is the biggest challenge for tomato production in Nigeria?

## MIRA MEHTA: I would say the biggest challenge is getting the raw material—the tomatoes. We’ve seen time and time and time again that people place a lot of importance on, and spend a lot of money on, putting up factories.

## Certainly the factories are necessary to produce tomato paste, but I think one of the issues is actually getting the crop from the farmers to where it can be processed.

## HOST: What about from the farmer’s point of view?

## MIRA MEHTA: I would say education is a big issue. Even though there are a lot of development programs and resources, it doesn’t seem like farmers have the understanding or know-how to access them. For instance, there are loans out there that small-scale farmers could benefit from.

## In addition, this lack of education also leads to gaps in knowledge—for example, how to deal with diseases, especially those affecting tomato plants. There was so much misinformation around last year’s tomato disease problem that made the situation worse.

## HOST: How do you mean?

## ART CARDOSO: For instance, people, even in the media, were calling it “tomato Ebola” as if it was a virus, when it was actually caused by a moth. As a result, farmers were unable to properly treat the disease.

## MIRA MEHTA: There’s another problem that happens a lot. Farmers don’t always have access to the right chemicals. So they’ll go to the market or a local shop and be sold a small, unlabelled, bottle of green liquid and be told to put this in your knapsack sprayer and spray. They have no idea what they are spraying—if it’s harmful, if it’s effective, or if it’s water with green food colouring in it.

## HOST: What other issues affect tomato farmers in Nigeria?

## MIRA MEHTA: Capital is an issue. Tomato is a wildly unpredictable crop, with huge variations in prices. Farmers could put a lot of capital in, and harvest when there was a glut, and the price they’d receive would be extremely low. It can be quite discouraging. It can make some farmers ask, “What’s the point?”

## ART CARDOSO: Another thing is farmers’ expectations. To be really successful at growing tomatoes, you need a lot of investment, both in finance and in time. If farmers come into it thinking it’s an easy commodity to grow—like maize or rice—they can sometimes be shocked that it’s not like maize where they can plant a seed and get a decent enough yield to cover the cost of the seed and get a little extra back. It’s not quite that easy.

## HOST: So are farmers too optimistic?

## ART CARDOSO: Not really; it’s more like some of them aren’t expecting or prepared for the level of work needed to be successful in tomato farming.

## MIRA MEHTA: Art mentioned farmers’ expectations as far as yield and return on investment. But there are also expectations on farmers from processors or buyers or middlemen. Farmers aren’t always aware of these expectations. They don’t always understand what’s expected of them.

## HOST: Could you explain further?

## MIRA MEHTA: There have been a lot of outgrower programs in Nigeria and across the continent where what’s expected of farmers hasn’t been made very clear. And so sometimes the farmers are not necessarily aligned with the processors in terms of what they are expecting to get out of the program.

## HOST: So the programs were disappointing to the farmers?

## MIRA MEHTA: It actually went both ways. Some farmers promised something to a group, or a processor, maybe a certain amount of produce, and were not able to deliver the promised amount on time—or even at all, for one reason or another.

## This causes a breakdown in trust and makes the group less likely to work with the farmer next time. It also makes processors and buyers want to work with large-volume producers because they think they can rely on them more.

## HOST: Which means the small-scale farmers are out of luck?

## MIRA MEHTA: The small-scale farmers are more likely to band together to form co-operatives. But these co-operatives aren’t always run by farmers; sometimes they are essentially run by middlemen. So the communication between the farmers and the buyers or processors is not direct, and sometimes a few things are lost in translation.

## HOST: Thank you, Mira and Art. Now we will be talking to some farmers about their experience farming tomatoes. We’ll start with Mallam Sagir Bala, who comes from Kaduna State in northern Nigeria. Welcome, Mallam.

## MALLAM BALA: Thank you.

## HOST: Can you tell us a little about yourself?

## MALLAM BALA: I live in Hunkuyi, in the Kudan Local Government Area of Kaduna State. Farming has always been a big part of my life. I lived with my grandfather and I grew up watching him on his farm, and it really built up a love for farming in me. He grew a lot of things and everything I learnt about farming, I learnt from him.

## HOST: You primarily grow tomatoes now?

## MALLAM BALA: Yes. I grew maize for a bit last year during the tomato disease problems, but I mostly grow tomatoes.

## HOST: What led you to grow tomatoes?

## MALLAM BALA: I always had an interest in it from the time I was young. Maybe it was their bright colours. For me, it is easy to grow and I don’t have to spend a lot of money.

## HOST: Really? I have heard that it is one of the harder crops to grow.

## MALLAM BALA: It’s not as straightforward as other crops, true. Even what I said about not spending a lot of money, it’s only because I have been growing them since I was young. So it’s almost like second nature to me.

## HOST: You’re an expert.

## MALLAM BALA: I wouldn’t go that far. All I know is that I have always been interested in growing tomatoes and when you are really passionate and interested about something, you put a lot of effort into making sure it is successful. Even when I was in secondary school, studying agricultural science, I was interested. When we had to pick a crop to grow, I focused on tomatoes. It’s hard at first, but once you understand what you are doing, it is easy to do.

## HOST: So what are some challenges you have faced growing tomatoes?

## MALLAM BALA: Insects. I thought my tomatoes were infested with nematodes but I later discovered that it was the larvae of a moth. It really affected me last year.

## Normally, I make around 300,000 naira ($940) a year, but last year I only made 50,000 ($155). I actually switched to maize because of it. I couldn’t believe it. In the good years, I was even able to buy a motorcycle and I still had some money left over, but last year my family and I really struggled.

## HOST: How did you overcome this?

## MALLAM BALA: We had to get someone to spray the crops. I’m not sure what they used, but they warned us not to go into the farm barefooted for a few days after they sprayed it.

## HOST: Hopefully, that’s the end of it.

## MALLAM BALA: Well, the advice is that we should spray regularly to keep the pests away. It costs money, but it’s better than losing everything.

## HOST: What other challenges do you have?

## MALLAM BALA: Money is a challenge. I would like to grow and expand, but to follow the market, it costs money.

## HOST: How do you mean?

## MALLAM BALA: When I first started, I was using the local variety. We call it Darita. People don’t like it as much as the Beefsteak variety, so that’s what I am now growing. I have been growing the Beefsteak for almost three years. It costs more to grow than the local variety.

## HOST: Why? Are the seeds more expensive?

## MALLAM BALA: Yes. You can get the local seeds anywhere, but I can only get the seedlings of Beefsteak from Lagos or Ibadan. Then you need to spend money on hiring experienced labourers because it’s not like the ordinary variety—you need people with experience to help.

## HOST: What about dealing with sellers and getting your crops to the market? How has that been?

## MALLAM BALA: I had to be very creative when dealing with sellers. I used to give out samples of the produce as a market strategy, to let them see what I am growing.

## HOST: Thank you, Mallam Bala. Next, we will have a brief chat with Tijani Mohammed, a farmer in Kaduna who tells us why he grows tomatoes over other plants. Good day, Mr. Mohammed.

## TIJANI MOHAMMED: Thank you.

**HOST:** So why tomatoes?

**TIJANI MOHAMMED:** Well, there is a lot of demand for them in the market. Locally, some supermarkets even have deals with farmers, so that they can guarantee a regular supply. Even when there is a shortage in the market, these shops sometimes still have a good supply. So I knew that it would be good economically for me to grow them. I used to grow maize but I’m happy I made the change. Also, they are easier to control than other crops after you plant.

**HOST:** How do you mean?

**TIJANI MOHAMMED:** There are methods we farmers use to delay the growth of tomatoes until a certain period of time.

**HOST:** Why would you want to do that?

**TIJANI MOHAMMED:** Ok, say for example you plant seedlings and they start to grow and you find out the demand is not high. Then you can slow the growth down a bit until the demand is higher.

**HOST:** How do you do that?

**TIJANI MOHAMMED:** I took a special training to learn the method. It’s not something I can easily explain, but it involves pruning the plants.

**HOST:** Thank you, Tijani.Next, we will be talking to John Jonathan, another farmer and trader based in Kaduna. Thank you for talking to us today, Mr. Jonathan.

**JOHN JONATHAN:** No problem.

## HOST: How did you get into tomato farming?

## JOHN JONATHAN: I started a long time ago; I’ve been doing tomatoes for almost ten years. But I’ve always been into farming. When I was a child, we used to go the farm after school, and when we got to a certain age, we were given a portion of land to grow whatever we wanted. I eventually started growing tomatoes.

## HOST: HOST: What kind of tomatoes did you grow?

## JOHN JONATHAN: When I first started growing tomatoes, I grew the local variety, Darita. From my childhood, this is the variety we were growing and so that’s what I started with.

## But over the course of my farming, I got talking to other farmers, learning from them and sharing my own knowledge. That’s how I got interested in the other varieties. Right now I’m growing the EVA variety. It has a smooth body and looks very fresh. I’ve been growing them for five years now and I have no complaints.

## HOST: What are your challenges?

## JOHN JONATHAN: Money. You need to spend money to make money. The way farming is now, you need to spend more money than you did in the past. Now that farming is more mechanized, you need money to buy or hire farming implements as well as pay for maintaining them. If you want to expand your farm or grow your farming business, you need more capital—and this has always been difficult to get.

## HOST: How have you managed to overcome this?

## JOHN JONATHAN: We formed co-operative societies. It makes us look bigger and “more serious” when we are dealing with banks or selling our tomatoes.

## HOST: What do you mean by “‘more serious”?

## JOHN JONATHAN: Maybe I’m not using the right words. I mean when we go to the bank, for example, I feel they respect us more when we are a co-operative than as a single farmer. We have more to offer as a co-operative. Our co-operative, for instance, got a loan from the Bank of Agriculture.

## HOST: Has the loan helped?

## JOHN JONATHAN: The money we got wasn’t enough to buy the farming implements we needed, so we resolved to hire them instead from the owners. It’s still expensive, but not as expensive as buying them outright.

## HOST: Do you have any other challenges?

## JOHN JONATHAN: Storage. You know tomato is very perishable by nature. It doesn’t last long at all. When my tomatoes are ready, I have to act fast—take them to sell in the market immediately or find a way to preserve it. Thankfully, we also used the Bank of Agriculture loan to rent a place to store the produce.

## HOST: Do you have any advice for people who are trying to enhance their farming business?

## JOHN JONATHAN: What worked for me was to form a co-operative society with like-minded people. Then we went to the bank for loans. And most importantly, when we got the loan, we spent the money wisely on farming.

## HOST: Thank you, John. As you can see, listeners, capital and access to loans seems to be a big issue for Nigeria’s tomato farmers. As John Jonathan said, you need to spend money to make money. Let’s get back to Art Cardoso now to conclude for us.

## ART CARDOSO: Mira and I have a saying that, with tomatoes, you need to put in three times the work and three times the money than you would with other crops to get a tenfold yield. I think farmers, both new and old, and processors need to understand this.

## HOST: Thanks again, Art. We hope this has been informative for you, listeners. See you next time.

## Acknowledgements

Contributed by: Ted Phido, The Write Note Limited, Lagos, Nigeria

Reviewed by: Osaki O. Alalibo, owner, Abiding Wealth vegetable farm, and doctoral candidate in agriculture at Rivers State University of Science and Technology, Nigeria

**Sources of information**

Interviews:

## Mira Mehta (Founder/CEO) and Art Cardoso (VP Production/Lead Agronomist), Tomato Jos, Panda, Nassarawa State, Nigeria, March 7, 2017

## Sagir Bala, farmer, Kaduna, March 21, 2017

## Umma Abdullahi, farmer, Kaduna, March 21, 2017

## John Jonathan, farmer, Kaduna, March 21, 2017

Tijani Mohammed, farmer, Kaduna, June 7, 2017