

## INNOVATION AND IMPACT

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## INTERVIEW

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projects in agriculture*

## AGRI-FINANCE

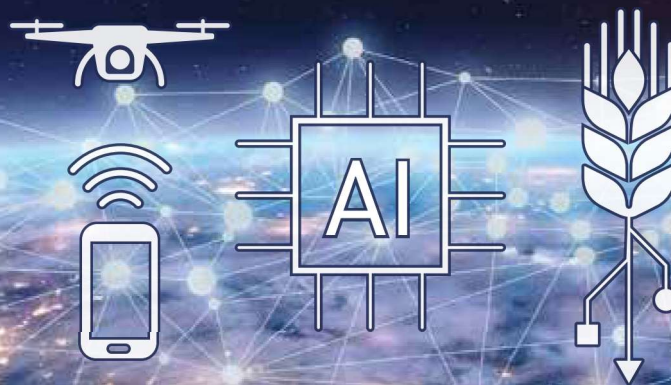
*Looking to the future for credit  
and finance solutions*

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# SPORE

[spore.cta.int](http://spore.cta.int)



Smart farming

# TRANSFORMING AGRICULTURE WITH ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE



A global perspective on agribusiness and sustainable agriculture



# Uganda's local grass reduces plastic use

Rural women farmers are earning additional incomes by harvesting a wild grass variety and selling to a local start-up for processing into biodegradable straws and stirrers.

Grace Musimami and Vincent Defait

**A** Ugandan agri-processing start-up is addressing the country's excessive use of plastic by exploiting a local wild grass, Luseke, to make biodegradable straws, whilst providing women farmers with a new source of income. Since its launch in March 2019, the company, Our Roots Africa, has sold some 10,000 Luseke straws to local and international restaurants, hotels and private customers.

Two hundred women farmers – 20 at the Our Roots Africa production centre, and 180 supplying the grass – are supplementing their earnings by working with the start-up. “Our aim is to have an impact on the daily income of women,” explains Nakawuki Stella Lukwago, one of the company's six employees, which is based 40 km west of the capital Kampala. According to Lukwago, the collection and transformation of Luseke grass enables the women farmers to earn an additional €18–45 a month, which is a significant amount in a country where the majority of rural women live on less than US\$1 (€0.9) a day. This is the case for Atim Harriet, who earns US\$ 5,000 (€1.25) per collection day. “Before joining this project, life was difficult. I struggled with household responsibilities,” says the farmer, who can now provide for her family's needs. “We ensure that the women also have enough time to farm for their family,” points out Lukwago.

Our Roots Africa trains the women to select and collect the grass, which grows with a hollow centre, without damaging them. At the production centre, the grass is then sorted by size and quality (for mixers or straws), washed, smoothed out to remove any prickles, and sterilised by boiling; the straws are then bagged up for distribution.



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200 women farmers are supplementing their incomes by selling wild grass to Our Roots Africa

At present, the cost of transporting the grass remains a major obstacle for the small company, as do certain traditional practices: many farmers prefer to burn the bushes to preserve their fields, unaware that Luseke grass can be a source of additional income. The quality of the grass also varies depending on its origin. For instance, straws originating from the district of Masaka can be reused, whereas those made from grass from the districts of Lwengo, Rukungiri and Kabale can only be used once. “We are currently testing these two types in our model garden to learn what determines the quality,” says Lukwago.

Our Roots Africa has started receiving its first orders from abroad, with a packet of 25 straws costing US\$6 (€5.45)

on the company's website. “We have orders from restaurants in Brazil, the UK and Germany,” states Lukwago. Our Roots Africa aims to achieve Fairtrade Certification in order to penetrate the European market, which has banned the use of non-reusable plastic straws by 2021.

The company also hopes to continue empowering local women farmers, “Our goal is to employ nearly 300 women producers and, in 5 years, we would like to work with 1,000 of them. Our dream is to make Luseke grass a new commercial crop on the international market,” explains Lukwago. ■