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We've empowered 10,000 young entrepreneurs with organic farming

- **Berry, Contec Global boss**

11th September 2017

By Amechi Ogbonna

Mr. Roheen Berry is the Managing Director of Contec Global Group, a billion dollar enterprise, leveraging technology to meet the rising demands of Nigeria's population growth and globalisation. In this interview with Daily Sun in Lagos, Berry spoke extensively on what his company is doing to improve Nigeria's agricultural sector in line with the Federal Government's efforts to diversify the economy away from oil. He also gave insight into AfriOne, Mobil phone, the first to be manufactured in Nigeria. **Excerpt:**

My name is Roheen Berry. I am Managing Director, Contec Global and we are a 40-year-old company of five generations in Africa started by my father 39 years ago in Nigeria. We specialise today in high security IT, making passport, drivers licenses, feeder documents for many countries across Africa and outside of Africa too, but we specialise in Africa. We have now moved into government databases, biometric systems for facial, fingerprints and voice recognition. That has led to FinTech in which we have a FinTech app called NowNow. We also have a mobile manufacturing unit called AfriOne that is now doing very well. It is the first mobile manufacturing unit made here in Nigeria, one of the few if not only one made in Africa as well.

We have an agrobusiness, which is Contec Agro, which specialises in bio-fertiliser, bio-seeds, bio-pesticides as well as cassava, banana plantations, tomato and potato farms also here in Nigeria. We also have a gas business called Cogo, which is a small scaled electrification and a transport business for the industrial sector. So there are numerous things Contec Global has been involved with in over 39 years. For example, the CERPAC project, which is the expatriate resident permit in Nigeria is running for almost 17 years. It is an extremely successful boot project in the sense that we built it, own it, operate it and we will transfer it. So it is our investment.

The government is receiving dollar investment from something we started here and it is also receiving database on what expatriates here are doing such as what the tax here is, companies they work for, have they been on the criminal record outside Nigeria? So it is a very useful database for the government of Nigeria and like I said, it has been running for 17 years without interruption or cases of fraud and it has proved to be one of the highest foreign currency revenue generating projects in Nigeria outside of oil companies. We have followed that model to where we make the passports, drivers licenses, we make all kinds of feeder documents for the countries and we manage their databases encrypted whether immigration or other government services, which ever it may be, we are actually the ones in charge of it. We train them on how to manage it and if there is any problem, we come in to fix it. We also built the entire structure, which will be for the government of Nigeria's 36 offices in every state in Nigeria.

Coming out of obscurity

There is a new management and I have been the Managing Director for a long time. Traditionally, we did government projects and there was no need for us to advertise to be known anywhere because we just put our heads down and did our projects. What we were very good at doing was that we were able to create very large IT infrastructure without having any skill set IT on ground originally 17 years ago. Today, our footprints are gradually developing and there are a lot of young Nigerians who are very good at IT programming or oracle database or anything required. So we were able to manage IT projects where there was no IT infrastructure and that was one of the biggest things we did. For that, we did not need to advertise.

Today, as we are growing bigger and moving into, for example, the mobile phone market, it is the first time we are going into the public sector and for that, people need to know who Contec Global is and who is behind it. For example, we have touched almost every sector in Nigeria and nobody knew we were the ones doing it. The plastic currency that used to exist here, that was done by us more than 10 years ago. Today, England is bringing out its £5,000 note, don't forget we implemented this project more than 10 years ago in Nigeria, which included the N20 note and other denominations of plastic bills. So every Nigerian has touched Contec Global without knowing it.

Value added services Nigerians should expect

All our businesses are positively affecting businesses. For example, if we talk about agro, the business being done in that sector is completely bio. It is designed to help the soil and not destroy it by pumping it with fertilisers. It is all natural organic and we now have more than 10,000 cassava farmers using it across the country and we have proved that we are growing better than pesticides. It is the same thing with the seeds, all our organic products that are coming up. We have seen that our bananas are doing very well. We have also seen food shortages in Nigeria in the sense that junk foods and packet noodles, are only meals now encouraged. It is very important that we go back to the old cooking traditions and we think that food is going to become the very major thing in future. So that is one way we are adding value, not only to businesses but we are teaching farmers in rural places, providing nutritious foods, correct seeds, helping the soil and water table not to be completely polluted with all kinds of chemicals, which could affect everybody.

In the mobile sector, we are not just selling hardware because anybody can sell hardware. For us, it is important to manufacture locally; train all kinds of young people on our production lines in something they have not been able to do before, which is manufacturing a mobile phone. Today, a mobile phone is not just a phone, you do your whole life on the phone so what we are doing is to empower people by providing them a platform that now they can do many things with it. For example, time will come when they might have ideas of apps they want to be on our phones for anything, whether it is for education, health, FinTech or entertainment; whatever it is, they will be doing them. We hope that we will be able to encourage them to use our products.

In terms of competition, we are not here to compete with any brand but to sell our phones. Right now, we are competing with very good products that are half the prices of anybody else's product if not even less in some cases. We are making laptops, ipads and phones and all are coming in half the price and they are made in Nigeria and we are seeing already that in terms of sales we cannot keep pace with demand. This shows we must be doing something right.

Level of local content in manufacturing

Some things are imported. For example, most parts are not manufactured here, not just anywhere except in one place; even Apple is not manufactured anywhere else except in California. We have to understand that the world is now a global market place and because of this, we should not be seen as coming away from that, rather, we are encouraging the good things about globalisation and at the same time, we are encouraging many indigenous businesses as possible. As we grow, there are many parts we will keep trying to produce from here.

Collaborations with state governments/agriculture associations

Yes, we have collaborated with numerous state governments. Unfortunately, I am not familiar with all their names but we have 10,000 cassava farmers. I know we have a few universities with us, I know they have given us few testing grounds in more than 15 states, which have already been done and tested. We know that in Niger and Edo states, we have partnerships already and there are few states as well. Actually, the agro-business is growing very quickly. Contec agro also helps promote opportunity to enter the agro sector and given the impetus to diversify. I think it is uniquely important to help train young people to be modern day farmers.

Enthusiasm of young farmers

They were highly enthusiastic and I saw meticulous attention to details in these young women and men and I was told that there was a strong population of farmers in Nigeria. These young men and women were highly trained and skilled, had university courses running in direct collaboration with Contec Agro team so you are seeing an inherent corporate social responsibility in every tenet of web Contec Group undertakes, be it financial empowerment from NowNow, technological empowerment through the made-in-Nigeria project or through the diversification in agrobusiness through Contec Agro. The main focal business of Contec Global was always the IT security and that is a business we have been running for a long time. We have seen all over Africa a need for it and with that for identification, social security numbers, databases that are maintained correctly for the government in terms of security and at the same time, for anything be it shopping, marriage records, among others. It remains very important and it is the backbone of any country and this is where we are very strong.

In the CERPAC project, you will see how an IT project can make or generate huge income for the government without them actually putting in any of their own investment or money and at the same time come out not only with physical funds but also train an entire generation of officers in immigration, and equally have access to 36 state-of-the-art offices, which have commanding control centre. And this project at the same time has expatriates. We will be launching a service soon, which will be beneficial for expatriates living here because they are going to receive benefits for enrolling in this programme.

Solving Nigeria's data challenge

We have been helping for years by providing a dollar pegged service. For example, in the CERPAC project, our revenues are in naira but they are pegged to prevailing dollar rates. We are not in any way taking from the government. This particular circumstance has never really happened in Nigeria before so nobody could have prepared for it and I think we are out of it and the worst is behind of us and

hopefully I don't think we will be going back to that place. I think things will now be much better for everybody.

Impact of infrastructural inadequacy in service delivery

It definitely has impacted us but again our specialty has always been being able to come into very difficult situations where there is no infrastructure of any kind, and we are able to manage and create infrastructure successfully. This is what has been Contec Global's greatest strength. We are able to adapt to almost every situation and find a solution that works and provide infrastructure for any type of industry. For example, in our gas business, we have been taking flared gas and providing electricity for years now by using gas turbines to do so for industrial purposes. We have given an offer for providing public transport for gas, which is cleaner and also an easier way for the local government to make money and also to do the correct thing by not polluting the environment.

In the IT industry, there was no IT infrastructure 17 years ago, no high speed broadband links, mobile connections, and all that, but we were able to create a full nationwide network for the immigration services to use real time. So these are the things we have been able to do here and we don't really look at the inadequacies of all the infrastructure as a negative thing, we just get on with whatever we have to do and make sure it gets done in the quickest and most efficient way.

Key challenges

Most of our projects are positively affecting. For example, when we launched the plastic currency here, not only did it last longer, there was no way of reproducing the notes but they were things I said that time, which people did not take seriously. It also prevented the spread of disease because what happens in cash economies where most people use cash, is that people generally count money by licking their fingers and putting them on the notes. You put through a machine even if you go through an airport, the money goes through a machine, they can test you. On the other side, when you take the money back and you pay somebody, the first thing they do is they lick their fingers and count the notes. It is a fast way of spreading disease. Even as simple as it is, that was what we did more than 10 years ago and it was such a successful project; it saved Nigeria billions of dollars in reprinting in fake notes and lasting 10 times longer. Even the image of the country, in terms of the bank notes, is almost like a flag, the image was always crisp. England is now adopting that kind of stuff so most of the things done at Contec, people want to see the needful, governments are needful, so they encourage us.

Current staff strength and future job creation

Contec is growing on a daily basis so I cannot give you the exact number of people we have in the group. For example, in the NowNow FinTech, we have agents that work for us. They are definitely half Contec, half-not Contec so do you include them or not? If we include them, that can go up to 15,000, if we don't include them, then the number could amount to a couple of hundreds. Another example is the mobile phone factory. They are almost 300, then if you look internationally, you would start looking at the agents. You will also look at the agro segment, do we include the farmers or not? So it is definitely in the thousands; some are direct while some are indirect so it is in thousands.

Each company has a different business model and different way it is going to grow. In farming, we hope to get tens of thousands if not hundreds of thousands of people inside because in a country of

180 million people, there is need for a lot of farmers to feed the population or to export. So we intend to have many people there in the gas business, in the IT sector and in the FinTech sector because all of them are growing on a daily basis.

Assessment of economic challenges and corruption

Well, Nigeria is a very strong country having amazing people and because of that, it is coming out of the worst recession it has ever had, with its head held up high. Even though it was extremely bad, I think Nigeria has seen the last of it and it is getting better. We also believe with the emergence of mobile phone, internet, the average Nigerian today is very much aware of correct practices and that is where Nigeria and Nigerians are doing the right things almost constantly and I am seeing the speed at which things are improving here and I can tell you I have never seen that kind of speed anywhere else. So I think personally that Nigeria is one of the best countries to invest in and I hope that more people come in because more competition will welcome more investment but at the same time, I want the best for Nigeria and I think it is going to happen for sure.

Liberalisation of the naira

There are two schools of thought and only time will tell which will be better. We know that at the moment there is no option but to continue as things are, so whatever advice I will give to any company is to come here and study the market carefully, see what the problems can be, have a template in front of you of where things can go very rapidly and whatever business you decide to set up here, it should be in your mind that there is a possibility. I don't think it is going to happen again but it is a possibility and you should be able to sustain yourself for a given period of time until things clear up or get better. In terms of the policy, I am not going to comment on that but I believe that things are getting better and we are definitely looking up not looking down so it is a great time to start coming here and think about doing something.

Other countries of operation

Within Africa, we have offices in Burundi, Rwanda, Niger, Benin Republic, Burkina Faso, Tanzania, Kenya, Malawi and we have had presences in other countries too like Uganda, South Sudan, Gambia and Senegal, but we are not there today; we will be going back. At the moment, we have Equatorial Guinea and Cameroon as well. Abroad, we have regional offices in London, Dubai, India, Germany and USA. We just took over a car manufacturing company in Germany. The brand's name is known as Wiesmann, it is a fantastic product and came with incredible infrastructure, which was one of the reasons we took it over. It came with a fantastic factory, good brand name and it is the fourth most recognisable brand in Germany in 2015. So it is quite known within Germany but not well known outside of Germany because they were always sold out but we are looking definitely towards the automobile world and we believe that today infrastructure complaints all over Africa is because it is still developing and there is such a huge scope. For example, most of the big cities across Africa are by the coast. The interior regions are not forgotten but definitely, there is huge potential there but the main reason why it is not being exploited, used correctly or growing at the speed it should is because there is no infrastructure. We believe there are roads and highways all across Africa so the automobile world will definitely be growing in the future and it is something we will like to look at and who is better than Germany to do that? So we will like to prove ourselves first with our cars and I think one is already out now but by next year, the proper models will come.

When are we seeing the AFRIONE in the market?

It is already in the market, it has been sold out. It is popular and it has been around for two months now. There was an official launch and the governor himself came to inaugurate the project. It was well received and was in all the newspapers and there is no factory like that in Africa; it is a state-of-the-art factory located in Ilupeju.

Message for customers in Nigeria

We have been very silent as Contec Global over the last 40 years and now, hopefully, they will get to know who we are. They have known us without knowing us for a very long time and now we will like the people to know who we are, what we have done to affect lives positively in this country over so many years.

Are you targeting your made-in-Nigeria products for export?

At the moment we are not, but definitely we would like to get to the point of exporting. In the agriculture sector, we are looking at exporting because we see that the proximity to Europe, Middle East and US is excellent. Fresh juices are now being made in concentrates and exported from Latin American countries into America; we would like to do the same thing for plantain here and same thing for seeds. We are looking at some interesting projects, which include growing rare trees and what we want to do is growing this set of trees to help places that have suffered deforestation by growing rare ebony thick valuable trees, which have been decimated right now by certain countries that are not looking at the long term damage deforestation is causing the entire planet. We just recently saw the deforestation effect in Sierra-Leone where an entire village got washed out; one of the main causes was deforestation.

As per the NowNow, it is a mobile money stuff, which opened one month ago and we have already covered, I think, almost a 100,000 people, who have linked to it with no advertising. We have a very strong graph showing that people are liking it and it is spreading at a very rapid rate.