



(L-R) Tonny Omwonsa, the CEO Kenya National Innovation Agency (KENIA), Optimerce founder John Waweru, Heifer International Kenya Country Director Esta Kamau, Grace Kyarimpa, Managing Director of Agrodive Ltd, Kenya and a representative of Rafiki Pay during the award ceremony held in Nairobi.

Photo Credit: Francis Mwangi/Heifer International.

Agri-tech firms win Heifer cash grants for innovation

By Murimi Gitari

THREE winners of a Heifer International-backed award for agri-tech innovation will receive cash grants of up to \$20,000 and training on a three-month mentorship programme.

The Agriculture, Youth and Technology (AYuTe) Kenya Challenge recognises the most promising young agri-tech innovators across the country.

Optimerce Consulting, a business that digitises the process of produce collection at farm-gate through mobile apps, was named the winner of the competition, who got a cash grant of Ksh 1 million.

RafikiPay a company that deals with the processing of sunflower, groundnuts, soya and canola oil from the hybrid seeds, emerged as the first runner-up, winning a cash grant of Ksh500,000.

The second runner-up Agrodive Ltd Kenya walked away with Ksh250,000.

Agrodive converts insects, earthworms into sources of protein in animal feed and high-quality organic fertilisers.

Heifer International introduced the award to promote affordable solutions in line with its goal of helping more than six million smallholder farmers in Africa to earn a sustainable living income.

The Kenyan award winners were chosen from a field of young agri-tech innovators from across the country and were announced during Heifer's gala awards ceremony held in Nairobi early September.

A company must have developed a tech solution to address smallholder farmer challenges with strong potential to scale to be considered for the award.

Other finalists were Azma Foods Ltd, Digital Farmer, Ento (insects) Solutions Ltd, Farm Mall, Farmerline Technologies, Limachain, Nalima Digital, Shambaline Ltd, Soluvax, Stofresh Africa, Toothpick Company Ltd and Vermi-Farms Initiative Ltd.

Heifer International Kenya launched the AYuTe Africa Challenge Kenya in June to promote and reward agriculture technology innovation across different agricultural value chains in the country.

The top 15 finalists were competitively selected through a rigorous judging process and got a chance to do their final pitching where three winners were selected.

Speaking at the gala ceremony, Heifer International Kenya Country Director Esta Kamau affirmed the organisation's support to the winners.



The 15 young agritech innovators and finalists of the AYUte Africa Challenge Kenya with certificates they received from Heifer International Kenya during the award ceremony in Nairobi.

Photo Credit: Francis Mwangi/Heifer International.

"Having worked with farmers for very many years we see the AYUte Challenge as an opportunity to identify exciting young innovators who have wonderful ideas to be able to walk with them through the journey of fine-tuning those ideas as well as providing linkage to the opportunities to scale up those ideas," said Ms Kamau.

She noted that the competition has affirmed the organisation's belief that many young tech companies require a combination of significant investment and expert guidance. "I am confident that we have filled that need, not just for the top three winners but also for those who made it to the top 80," she said.

The much bigger AYUte Africa Challenge award, launched in 2021, gives grants annually of up to US\$1.5 million to the most promising young agri-tech innovators on the continent.

In the same year, two companies, Hello Tractor and Coldhubs Kenyan and Nigeria-based companies respectively won US\$1.5 million for being at the forefront of driving youth engagement in agriculture.

Heifer International says it conceived the idea for AYUte Africa Challenge based on four decades working with

African farmers and seeing first-hand the stark difference between local farms that have access to technologies and those that do not.

Speaking after receiving the award, Optimerce founder John Waweru thanked Heifer International Kenya for recognising and supporting youth who have ventured into innovations meant to help smallholder farmers.

"This award means much more to me than just the Ksh1 million as my business model was birthed out of a tragedy that had happened in our family," he said, adding a word of encouragement to the other contestants.

"It is not only me who is getting to the top but each and every one of us. And now we have been tasked to go out and ensure the technologies we have developed will give our farmers more profit and help them prepare their children, who will be the next generation [of farmers], to embrace, and not dislike, agriculture."

David Cheboryot, the director of the business accelerator E4Impact Entrepreneurship Centers, said the innovators on the programme had been prepared well to create impact in their communities.

"As E4Impact we were glad to have been involved by Heifer International Kenya to provide capacity building, training and mentoring of the young agri-tech innovators in the various stages of the competition on the art of storytelling to better connect the problem and the unique value they were providing, how to dissect and validate their markets, defend their revenue streams, document, quantify and share on their socio-environmental impact and justify their financial request which the finalist and the winners managed to do," he said.



John Waweru, the Founder and CEO of Optimerce Consulting Ltd, the winner of AYUte Africa Challenge Kenya receiving a dummy cheque from Tonny Omwonsa, the Kenya National Innovation Agency CEO. Photo Credit: Francis Mwangi/Heifer International.