Bananas – Slow to come from Senegal
Exports of – organic and fair trade – bananas from Senegal to Belgium have been announced a few times already, but considerable obstacles still remain between Tambacounda and the Colruyt stores. ‘We are enthusiastic, but we tend to forget that it is not easy to deliver quality and quantity for a difficult product such as bananas, especially not for farmers’ organisations without experience,’ says Leo Ghysels of Rikolto, the NGO formerly called Vredeseilanden. Dreams have made way for realism and efforts are further pursued.
Bananas in Tambacounda

In the 1970s and 1980s, Senegal suffered repeated droughts. At the time, many farmers migrated to the Gambia River region, south of the city of Tambacounda. With the help of OFADEC, a Senegalese NGO, these farmers organised in producer groups or Economic Interest Groups and created an umbrella farmers’ organisation called APROVAG (Association des Producteurs de la Vallée fleuve de la Gambie). Several ethnic communities – Wolof, Fula, Sérères and Diola – live together in the villages. To not jeopardise the social and cultural balances, a collective approach is advocated: the land is owned by the EIGs, which distribute the plots of land among the farmers.

Bananas have become the crop of choice. The conditions are good for this crop because the Gambia River provides water and humidity in the region is low, which means fungi and diseases are rare. Today, APROVAG has approximately 1000 members, one-third of which are women. The farmers also cultivate cotton, ground-nuts and food crops, but to generate revenue they are dependent most on the sale of bananas on the Dakar, Kaolack and Touba markets. ‘Soudure’, the period without banana harvests and income, remains an uncertain time for many families.

Enormous assets

But there is more behind the APROVAG story than the fact that the region is suitable for banana cultivation. Senegal has proven to be a politically stable country, even with its diverse cultures and different religions. Senegal’s tolerance stands strong, even while the neighbouring countries of Mauritania and Mali fall victim to Muslim extremism. APROVAG’s membership includes farmers with – Catholic – names such as Jeanne, Michael or Frédéric as well as – Islamic – names such as Issa and Mohammed. The infrastructure is good: the road from Tambacounda to Dakar is an asset, especially considering African standards. Finally, Senegal’s authorities want to invest in products with export prospects, and this includes bananas.

The market potential is even more important. Senegal’s production amounts to approximately 36,000 tonnes per year. The country consumes some 45 to 50,000 tonnes of bananas. In other words, the difference has to be imported. Imports come primarily from Côte d’Ivoire. If Senegalese farmers succeed in matching the quality of bananas of Côte d’Ivoire, they will find themselves in a strong position.

In 2007, Rikolto became a partner in the venture. The Belgian NGO had been active in the country and region for a long time and saw opportunities. APROVAG’s story matched perfectly with the value chain approach, which Rikolto and its partners apply across the globe. In this approach, smallholder family agriculture is key and the position of the producer in the whole chain is the focus.
Consumer demand and the markets are driving forces within value chains. Rikolto wants to build bridges between the various stakeholders. It has a single goal: make sure that farmers – the weakest link in the value chain – are not left behind. That is why Rikolto and APROVAG not only focus on capacity development or quality improvement, but also on networking with other players in the banana supply chain.

Agrofair, an importer of tropical fruit, mainly in the organic and fair trade segment, is a first important partner. Currently, their EkoOké bananas primarily come from Peru. However, they are willing to invest in Senegal because shipping from Dakar is much shorter than from South America which is an obvious advantage.

In 2011, the Trade for Development Centre also became a partner. TDC’s investment of € 320,000 over several years was used first for the construction of a number of packaging stations, where bananas are washed and packed into boxes. This is required for exports, but also for supermarkets in Dakar.

A second part of the financing helped APROVAG to obtain organic and fair trade certification. By training producers in quality control and the principles of organic agriculture, by formalising procedures, by preparing audits, by starting up test plots, etc. the organisation was prepared to meet all the necessary criteria.

Double certification must give them access to the European market of organic and fair trade bananas, a commercial niche that offers a significant added value.

Double certification was also a condition for Colruyt to partner with APROVAG, which effectively started in 2013. Rikolto and Colruyt have known each other for a long time and, for instance, collaborated intensely on rice from Benin. Philippe Toussaint of Colruyt Group’s Corporate Social Responsibility team describes the retailer’s vision as follows: ‘A few years ago we started with ‘supply chain projects’ to make the producer -to-consumer chain sustainable. When the organisation is ready, we invest and commit to purchase a considerable volume in the long term.’

‘With an importer (Agrofair), a retailer (Colruyt), a facilitator (Rikolto) and the Belgian development agency (through TDC) on board the future of Senegal’s bananas was secured. “However, we got carried away by our enthusiasm. There were and still are many obstacles that need to be overcome. In fact, if things were that easy, Chiquita and other major industry players would be operating in Senegal too,” summarises Leo Ghysels, Rikolto’s sustainable chain development Programme Adviser.'
‘To export bananas, the whole supply chain must be organised as an industry,’ underlines Leo Ghysels. ‘From seedlings to delivery in Dakar, every operation has to become a routine that is repeated, weekly, with regular quality and quantity. Each individual farmer must also be very disciplined. You have to remember that one plantation often encompasses more than 150 individual farmers, each with their own plot of land. Streamlining all the operations into one smooth chain takes many years.’

For instance, quality assurance systems are not operational yet in every farmers’ group. Every producer should be careful to prune and thin, discard smaller bananas so others can grow better. Not everyone is using the coloured pieces of cloth that indicate when a bunch is ready for harvesting. Also, suppliers to a supermarket in Dakar or a European importer must meet strict standards of traceability. This requires registration systems, which are not operational everywhere yet.

Irrigation is an essential issue too: a banana tree needs 50 to 60 litres of water a day. The plantations are near the Gambia River banks, which means water is plentiful. But many farmers, until recently, irrigated their plots manually, with garden hoses. This means five hours of work per day. Some plantations have adopted sprinklers to make irrigation more economical, targeted and regular.

Recently, Colruyt donated a water pump and an electrical installation and shipped it to Tambacounda. These are key steps, because bananas that suffer water shortage when growing ripen on the tree. You cannot tell from the outside, but it affects the bananas that still have ten days to go on a container ship. This is most likely what went wrong with a test container that arrived in Rotterdam in 2015.

Another issue is the use of fertiliser. In view of organic certification, the production of organic fertiliser is very important. That is why in 2014 a small composting business was created in Sankagne, which also created jobs for youths in the area.

However, a real breakthrough is only expected when funds will be available to purchase a tractor, a trailer and a composting entity, without which it would have been impossible to boost fertiliser production. Irrigation and the use of fertiliser are definitely worthwhile. The village of Nguène, where farmers have been intensively coached over the past few years, more than doubled its yields.

Finally, there is also management. A farmers’ union does not follow business logic. This is why, beside APROVAG, a business entity was created, APROCOB. However, making such an entity operational again requires training and time.
Domestic or international?

Dreaming of exports to Belgium brought about change. The certification story is an example in point. In the summer of 2016, the Nguène II farmers’ group obtained organic certification and GlobalGAP and APROVAG obtained their fair trade certificates. ‘It shows that the story still lives with all partners,’ concludes Leo Ghysels as he takes stock. ‘Everyone is also aware now that many steps still have to be taken to ensure permanent quality and quantity. It will not be months, but more likely years.’

However, many short-term opportunities await the domestic market. APROVAG used to supply middlemen ‘in bulk’, who then shipped the bananas to Senegal’s major cities. Direct contacts have now been established with supermarkets in Dakar such as Casino and CityDia. That is where expats as well as Senegal’s growing middle class go shopping and are willing to pay prices that are not much lower than prices in Europe: 900 FCFA or approximately 1.5 euro per kilo. But to supply these markets the bananas must be delivered in boxes.

‘That is our next challenge,’ adds Leo Ghysels. ‘First, more test-run deliveries to major importers and Dakar retailers. And more importantly, find out how we can make this process profitable. The various transport options to Dakar are an important factor in this respect. Tambacounda is on the busy road to Mali and many trucks return empty from the neighbouring country. The option of using their own truck with a refrigerated container must also be considered. This would require a regular and significant supply of bananas and finding cargo so as not to return empty from Dakar. The message is that you must test, calculate and especially learn. After all, only through experience will the export option come any closer.’

On a study tour thanks to the TDC

The project financed by the TDC also paid for two study tours to Peru.

‘Our colleagues in Peru succeeded in strongly simplifying many processes to lower costs,’ remembers Valentin, a member of APROVAG. ‘Irrigation, the transport of bananas to the warehouse, the washing of the bananas, etc. Often, there are simple solutions that make things easier and we can copy them in the short term.’ Among other things, the packing stations are based on a Latin-American model.
Conclusion

Output is one thing. Sustainable production, including an organic and/or fair trade label is a second. However, that doesn’t mean you are ready for exports, as the Senegalese banana story illustrates. The Tambacounda farmers will still need to rely on the domestic market for a while.

“Hope of exports to Colruyt stores gave the Senegalese a boost. Indeed, progress has been made. But, we aren’t there yet,” says Leo Ghysels. It is important for farmers to feel that steady progress is being made throughout such a long process. And this is the case, fortunately, with irrigation, composting, and prices for bananas going up.” Finally, for all the partners in this project, this again shows the complexity of our approach.

“Sometimes, we are too eager and too quick to claim a chain is working, whereas a slowed-down journey is usually the only viable and sustainable approach.” concludes Leo Ghysels.

Sources

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