

Coordination and collaboration: Far from being a waste of time

By Dieu-Donné Konnon,
trainer-mentor, Benin



Key themes: Cluster and platform development, Sustainability of coaching services, Functional capacities

Pineapple–Benin PPP

The partnership is led by Promofruit, a company that looks for increasing its sourcing of fresh pineapples from smallholders organised into POs to process into juice for marketing in several West African countries.

Summary

This is a lively dialogue between a pineapple farmers’ organisation leader, Athanase, and his cousin, Marcel, visiting from the north. With great patience and conviction, Athanase finds argument after argument to convince his sceptical cousin about the many benefits farmers have achieved by being part of an ABC and pineapple platform of the processing company Promofruit. Coaching support comes out as a strong drive behind the positive changes. The author re-enacts this dialogue based on the account of it from one of the agribusiness coaches, Nina.

“You people of the South, you definitely prefer to make speeches than to work! The last time I was here, you were talking about capacity strengthening to have access to production inputs – or was it on strengthening your business relationships – I don’t remember exactly!”

Nina, the agribusiness coach, is a bit taken aback. She had come to inform Athanase about the next coaching session for the pineapple cluster which includes his farmers’ group together with input and credit suppliers, extension officers of the zone, as well as representatives of Promofruit, the enterprise processing pineapple into juice. She found Atha-

nase together with his cousin Marcel, who was visiting from Alibori, a city in northern Benin. It was Marcel who made the exclamation above.

But Athanase remains unfazed: “First of all, we are not making speeches, that is for politicians. With the help of our coach Nina, we discuss, exchange and reflect together with all actors involved in the pineapple cluster to explore ways to improve our business. As you know, we produce pineapples for the juice processor, Promofruit, but that does not mean that we are no longer interested in what happens with our pineapples after they are transported away.”

Marcel is not really convinced: “Well, in any case, the processor makes much more profit than you do, it is always like that. Look at Promofruit’s directive on inducing pineapple flowering, where you had to take account of your neighbours’ production calendar, but in the end it is the processor obtaining a regular supply of pineapples!”

Concrete benefits

Still, Athanase has plenty of counter-arguments: “Ah, but you do not understand that those speeches as you put it, generate money in a very concrete way! They lead to better coordination between all the actors involved, helping them to become more competitive. And this goes on at all levels – from the field to processing and even beyond. Do you know that because I am a member of the ABC, with the support of our platform, the CLCAM (local branch of the mutual agricultural credit institution) granted me a loan at only 11% interest?” Marcel then exclaims: “What? But the normal rate is 24%!!” Athanase continues: “Indeed, we are now involved in the pineapple partnership, which is considered as a kind of guarantee! By the way, the processor also benefits from this positive image. They received a bonus of 1% on their investment credit – and as we are talking about millions, even 1% counts!”

Marcel still needs more convincing: “Okay, but your work as a farmer is in the field in the first place and not in a meeting or a banker’s office!” Ever patient, Athanase keeps explaining to his cousin: “But being a member of the pineapple partnership also serves my purpose! Do you recall seeing the plastic sheet covering my pineapple field?” Marcel responds: “Oh yes, it avoids you breaking your back from weeding.” Athanase: “Precisely. It is saving me a fortune on labour costs for weeding. In fact, the idea of that plastic sheeting came up during our meetings, and it was because we bought a large amount of it as a group that we were able to pay an affordable price. It was the same for that bag of fertiliser over there... Perhaps your cotton would not appreciate it, but believe me, we are very happy that we could finally buy fertilisers with nutrients specifically assembled to meet the needs of pineapples. This did not come about by knocking one-by-one at the door of the supplier. It happened because we were represented by a platform that groups nine pineapple ABCs as well as other local actors in the value chain. We are talking about more than 3,600 farmers (of which 1,600 are women) which is an impressive number of people! When you add up all the new develop-

ments, our yields increased from 35 to 60 tonnes/ha. And even better is that we no longer have low graded pineapple due to small-size pineapple, non-uniform coloration, etc. and the price we get is negotiated with the company.” With all these arguments, Marcel starts to falter: “Okay, Okay, you have some good results, but then I do not see why you still spend your time in meetings – and by the way, what are you going to discuss this time?”

Coaching: now and beyond 2SCALE

Nina who didn’t miss a single word of the exchange and was very happy to hear Athanase’s arguments, now speaks: “You know, in business, if you do not keep moving forward, you will fall behind – and this goes for farmers too. In the next session we need to think about our future. Maybe Athanase did not tell you all the details, but 2SCALE has been supporting the farmers technically for several years, also with capacity strengthening programmes adapted to our needs that helped us to improve our coordination and collaboration. Along with a team of coaches for the different ABCs, we facilitate coaching sessions on group dynamics, how to professionalise the platform, good governance, enterprise management, and so on. But as you may know 2SCALE is withdrawing its support by the end of this year.”

With this information, Marcel has found new arguments to feed his scepticism: “Meaning that Athanase will not have any more meetings when I visit him the next time? We know how it goes when projects withdraw their support! Sorry that you will not be here anymore... It is a pity, you look to be a charming young lady!”

But his cousin quickly responds: “You are wrong, actually. We are grateful to our coaches who share information and help us manage our enterprises and business relationships better. This is why we started to develop a system to finance internal coaches: we will set aside a small number of CFA francs from each kilogram of pineapple supplied to the processor. In this way, the coaching cost will be spread over all the actors, including the processor, Promofruit. You will understand by now that we are all in the same boat!”

Marcel finally gives in to defeat: “Okay, I give up, I am really impressed... but in any case, I will wait to see if your plan will work!”

Nina adds a final point: “We shouldn’t underestimate the challenges ahead of us, however. Because, to be able to pay all the coaches with this contribution, the processing unit will have to operate at full capacity – that is, it will need to process 135 tonnes of pineapples a day instead of the present 60 tonnes.” Still she ends the conversation with a laugh: “Anyway, without challenges to be met we would be bored! See you next year Marcel, I will certainly still be here!”



8 The pineapple platform is formed by representatives of all the local-level ABCs and some other regional actors involved in the pineapple value chain.

9 *Caisse locale de crédit agricole mutuel.*