Partnerships key to sustainability

BOBO-DIOULASSO—Close cooperation between companies is essential for the development of sustainable agriculture and the building of better communities in West Africa, as demonstrated by the example of Fruiteq and Nature’s Pride.

by Tom Joyce

European demand for fresh mangoes has doubled in the past ten years, rising from 100,000 tonnes to over 200,000 tonnes in 2010. West Africa—well known for the quality of its mangoes—has a market share of approximately 15 per cent, divided between Côte d’Ivoire, which accounts for nearly half of exports, Mali and Burkina Faso.

European regulations and European Union market requirements, in areas including protection of the environment, food safety, and ethical trade and production, have multiplied to keep up with the increasing demands of European consumers. Meanwhile, increasing numbers of exporters of exotic and off-season fruit from the Southern Hemisphere are engaging in a ‘sustainable’ approach to meet this demand. A solid partnership based on trust between importer and exporter is therefore a key ingredient towards overcoming the constantly changing demands of purchasers, as evinced by the representatives of Fruiteq, which exports mangoes from West Africa, and its Netherlands-based import partner, Nature’s Pride. Conscious of the need to introduce sustainable production and trade practices, companies like Fruiteq and Nature’s Pride have fully committed to developing a genuine approach that combines product quality and social responsibility.

Mangoes are one of Nature’s Pride’s flagship products, along with avocados, asparagus, green beans and mange-tout. The trade in mangoes has given the Dutch company a chance to forge strong partnerships with its suppliers in developing countries, in particular with Fruiteq, which specialises in producing and exporting fresh mangoes. Founded originally to facilitate market access for small-scale growers, it now works with six mango producer organisations spread between three West African countries: Burkina Faso, Côte d’Ivoire and Mali.

‘Fruiteq and Nature’s Pride have been working together for almost three years,’ explains Els Lindeboom, social responsibility manager at Nature’s Pride. ‘Under the new partnership Fruiteq has managed to overcome the difficulties it was experiencing, selling 45 containers during the first year and up to 75 in 2012. Nature’s Pride has taken the gamble over the past 11 years of developing a sustainable and fair strategy, based on social responsibility. This policy favours long-term relationships with our suppliers based on trust, combined with social development projects such as well-digging and building schools or orpanages. Our relationship with the growers is very special. We think alongside them and help them to place their business firmly on the path to prosperity and sustainability.”

Adama Zongo, director of Fruiteq, believes that this partnership has strongly benefited his export company. “We have expanded hugely in the past few years,” he says. “Two years ago, we only had a single packing station in Burkina Faso, which catered for all the production harvested in Mali and Côte d’Ivoire. Several problems occurred with product transport, which
is therefore absolutely essential to be able to count on reliable partners at all stages in the value chain.
Maintaining relationships of trust with growers, suppliers and customers means that we can build up a long-term project."

In an effort to adapt to the evolving demands of European markets, the two partners have also decided to work with the Fair for Life certification programme for social responsibility and fair trade in agriculture. Fair for Life ensures that human rights are respected at all stages of production, that the workers enjoy decent working conditions and that small farmers receive a fair wage.

"With an emphasis on responding to the concerns of their consumers regarding sustainability, our customers, including supermarkets and the catering sector, wish to understand our corporate culture and make sure that it is based on ethical principles," resumes Lindeboom. "We introduced a social charter in 2006 with ten principles that must be respected by our suppliers. We regularly visit our producers to work together on continuing to improve production and the quality of our products. At the same time, we make sure that the European Union food safety regulations are complied with, and we support our suppliers in this approach. However, as our core business is imports and marketing, and not supplier support, we call on organisations like COLEACP to provide the expertise we need."

Through its IFP programme, COLEACP helps producers and exporters from African and Caribbean countries to comply with European market requirements, in particular via direct support for businesses through diagnosis, training and the introduction of sustainable food safety management systems, which are all validated, if necessary, by support for certification.

"Exporting from West Africa, especially land-locked countries like Mali and Burkina Faso, is highly complicated"

Through Fruiteq, about 2000 producers, who are organised into cooperatives, unions or groups, market their produce, which is Organic Agriculture, GlobalGAP and Fairtrade-certified. The certifications entitle the growers to a bonus at the end of the season, which, in addition to supplying them with inputs for their market gardening crops, also means that they can invest in the community.

Drilling to bring water to villages, building pharmacies and schools or making an ambulance available are all social projects resulting from fair trade. "A recent assessment put the estimated number of people in the region that benefit indirectly from Fruiteq activities at 500,000," states Zongo. "If Fruiteq has decided to move towards the sustainable trade market, it is because, in the first instance, it guarantees us an income. Secondly, because there is a real need in desert countries like Mali and Burkina Faso to protect the environment and use the natural resources at our disposal as efficiently as possible. Lastly, this type of trade gives something back to the community in the form of development projects. It is a true incentive, when you know that you are bringing something extra to your community."