

People approach in the TDC coaching sessions

Marketing coaches talking about their experiences in Côte d'Ivoire



Intro

NECAAYO, ECAMOM, COAFAN, etc. Cryptic acronyms are typical for Côte d'Ivoire producer groups, but one thing is sure, the C stands for 'cooperative'. These cocoa cooperatives aim to sell as much of their members' cocoa as possible at the best conditions possible. But doing so is far from evident.

Enthusiasm is never lacking, but business skills are. That is why the Trade for Development Centre (TDC), a programme of Enabel, offers marketing coaching since several years. Eight Côte d'Ivoire cocoa cooperatives currently receive support of TDC coaches. We were given a glimpse of what they do.

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Locked market

Méagui is the cocoa capital of Côte d'Ivoire. Even though this city in the south-west of Côte d'Ivoire has only 100,000 inhabitants, no less than 40 cocoa cooperatives operate there. Three of these applied for marketing coaching and were selected. Coach Christine Englebert went to Côte d'Ivoire. "The Côte d'Ivoire cocoa value chains differ greatly from what I am used to," is her first impression. "Primarily because the market is very much regulated and closed. Locally, they call it a locked market, a *marché cadenassé*."

The Côte d'Ivoire authorities are the main player. For each harvest they decide a minimum price for the farmer, but also who is allowed to export cocoa. Worldwide, Côte d'Ivoire is by far the number one cocoa producer. It produces 40% of all cocoa worldwide which means multinational cocoa processing corporations have become very active in Côte d'Ivoire as they want to source sufficient cocoa. As a consequence, there is a bottleneck there currently. "Cooperatives have a very hard time finding new clients; their single most important challenge though is keeping existing clients," is how Christine summarises the situation. "They could look for smaller chocolatiers, but smaller chocolatiers do not source significant volumes. When we thought about marketing it was less about prospecting new clients than about consolidating existing relations and what is needed to do so."

Dominique Derom, who coaches two cooperatives, tells a similar story. These two cooperatives are SCKA in Afféry, some 150 kilometres north of Abidjan, and YEYASSO, in the country's remote west. "The cooperatives can hardly switch between clients and their negotiation space is very limited. Often they are very dependent on their current client(s), also for financing their operations. For instance, SCKA used to work with a major trader, but it was bought out by another trader. The change in management and contacts has strained relations. The eventual destination of the cocoa is Nestlé, which works with several cooperatives in the region. They ask the trader to purchase a certain amount of cocoa from these cooperatives. In other words, good relations with both Nestlé and the trader are of key importance for SCKA."



Member loyalty

Jean Cornet coaches COAFAN, a cooperative that is located near the Ghana border. “If you ask about long-term ambitions, they obviously think of direct relations with foreign clients. But that is not realistic at present; they still have many steps to take. First of all, because the cooperative still faces other challenges, such as convincing enough members to sell their cocoa via the cooperative. After all, the border with Ghana is near; they just have to cross the river. For 2018, Côte d’Ivoire and Ghana agreed on setting the same minimum price for farmers; but in 2017 there was no such deal. In Ghana, farmers got paid 20% more. Because the global market price collapsed, it was a significant difference.”

Member loyalty is also a challenge in Méagui. Farmers know there are 40 cooperatives in the region and they are not afraid to hop from one cooperative to another. Christine confirms, “That the cooperative’s search for a position of its own and the right marketing story was consequently not only targeting external clients but also its own membership.” “In this light, the community projects –water pumps, schools, road repair works, etc.– which the cooperatives develop in the villages where their members live are important. NECAAYO, for instance, tours with an evening music and entertainment programme, and provides information at the same time.”

Focus on positioning

The cooperatives are coached in marketing on site. In a first module the team is coached in developing the strategy and a plan. The cooperative and the coach agree on a list of things that have to be done before the second module starts. The coach is available by telephone or by email. This second module specifically works on implementing the plan. The cooperative can submit a communication proposal to the TDC, for which it can receive up to 15,000 euros to develop presentation materials such as brochures or a website.

Christine concludes, “The focus was not on prospecting, but on positioning.” “How do we want to position our cooperative on the market; also vis-à-vis other cooperatives in the area? What are our values? One specific result was a stand at SARA, the annual major agricultural fair in the capital Abidjan where cooperatives from across the country present themselves. We developed very nice materials for the event, such as posters and folders.”

Jean adds, “In the first module I used a ‘brand positioning’ method to enable the people of COAFAN to explain the advantages for farmers to supply the cooperative. It took them a while to get the idea, but afterwards the discussion went deeper. How can we deliver our message in as simple a way as possible? Via which channels can we make ourselves known? Via the local radio or with village visits? What is the use of Fairtrade or Utz certification? This led to the idea of moving the COAFAN head office 15 kilometres down the road, away from the border. A new target group could be reached that way, farmers who did not have the means to transport their cocoa to Ghana. That way, the cooperative would not be dependent on the price differences between both countries.



SARA, a major agricultural fair in Abidjan where cooperatives from across the country present themselves @ TDC

Module 2 primarily addressed the psychology of the client-purchaser. How can we present our cooperative as a dependable partner and what is needed to do so? This is about basics, but very important ones, such as quality or delivery deadlines.”

Dominique adds, “The people of SKCA are driven. Between modules there were also intense and fulfilling contacts.” “In fact, for us, there is one central issue: how can a small cooperative such as ours deal with a major cocoa trader? How does such a multinational think? How do we have to communicate with them? Which arguments can we use? How should we start negotiations and how can we prepare? With exercises and role playing I tried to have them find answers to all these questions, to make them stronger next time. Sometimes this concerns very specific matters. For instance, the president of the cooperative is usually the spokesperson. But that is not always the person who knows the specifics best. So, I tried to change these habits. When three people go to a meeting they should use their strengths and stick to their area of expertise.”

Meanwhile, some cooperatives have completed the third module. The idea is that matters become more and more specific. For instance, when the coach is on site, the cooperatives can plan meetings with certain key partners or potential clients, but also with graphic designers, web designers or local consultants. The three coaches conclude, “such meetings can be prepared and carried out jointly, but it is important that the cooperatives manage the contacts and decide which way to go.”

Impact

Does such an initiative have an impact? “It is too early still to discuss specific results,” replies Christine. “The modules are still ongoing. Yet, I have noticed a change of mind and I have picked up positive reactions, also from foreign visitors, about the way the cooperatives have presented themselves at SARA.”

For Jean not only COAFAN’s move or the promotion activities to attract new members are positive indications, but also how this was done: “The cooperative’s managers do not speak about ‘our story’ when addressing farmers – ‘ours’ being COAFAN’s – but about ‘your story’ – as in ‘you, the farmers of COAFAN’. It shows how they have learned to think from the viewpoint of their target group.

Dominique also cites the example of a second cooperative that she coached. “YEYASSO is located in a rather remote area in the west of Côte d’Ivoire, which had been unstable until recently because of the civil war. It used to be a coffee region primarily, but – also because of climate change – it has become increasingly attractive to cocoa farming. YEYASSO is a relatively large cooperative and has two major clients, but it also has surplus cocoa for which it needs extra clients. During the sessions we often worked on their sales story. We also practised the story and tested it, up to a meeting with a trader. Afterwards, one of their clients told me they had noticed the difference. The way in which the cooperative’s managers had prepared the meeting, how they listened and interacted, had become much more professional.”



Brainstorm session at YEYASSO © Dominique Derom

People approach

“My best memories are those of the overall atmosphere during such a module,” concludes Christine. “The people approach is key after all. During the day-time meetings we work hard at brainstorming and developing ideas and in the evening we laugh and go for a drink together. I ran a race against the ECAMOM president to show women can. I don’t know whether he let me win, but afterwards he allowed me to drive his car. And the ECAM president is a woman, which is exceptional in the region. We talked very much about how she could turn this into an asset. After all, she is a strong woman with many ideas.”

“I have worked in the chocolate sector for many years, but this was my most enriching human experience,” concludes Dominique as she reminisces. “And it was also disconcerting. You suddenly face people who have done back break-

ing work for most of their lives for their cocoa beans, and they have never actually seen chocolate, let alone tasted it themselves. The first time I brought along a few bars of Fairtrade chocolate; the second time I decided to put little chocolates and sweets in my bag, so I could share some with more people. Some begged me for extra chocolate to give to their children. And then there you stand.”

“I really look forward to stepping on the plane to start a new module. Because I know I will meet with friends,” concludes Jean. “And at the same there is the understanding that everything is so wrong. Because farmers there go through tough times, while we fill our supermarket shelves with bottom-price chocolate. I saw with my own eyes what a difference it would make if we were to pay more for our chocolate.”



Who are TDC's marketing coaches?



Dominique Derom

worked many years as a marketing consultant, also for chocolate industry businesses. She visited Africa only as a tourist. When someone pointed out the TDC's coaching programme to her, she saw her dream to work in the continent being fulfilled.

Photo: Dominique and YEYASSO are visiting a client



Jean Cornet

was marketer for Unilever and Alpro, in various countries. Starting as a marketing coach to him seemed an ideal opportunity to follow his personal interest in sustainable trade and development.

Photo: COAFAN at work with coach Jean Cornet



Christine Englebert

worked as a marketer in the business world and later focused increasingly on fair trade. A few months spent in Africa convinced her to start as a consultant. Since then, she has spent a lot of time on dirt roads, heading for smallholder producers in remote villages.

Photo: Christine Englebert visits the Belgian embassy with ECAMOM