Fruit chains in Côte d'Ivoire

Accelerating before recovery

At the end of October, OCAB (*Organisation Centrale des Producteurs-Exportateurs d'Ananas et de Bananes*) held an important symposium on the re-launching of fruits chains in Côte d'Ivoire. The three-day event assembled stakeholders and partners in the country's fruit chains with the aim of reviewing the sector and reflecting on the strategies to be implemented to re-launch production and sales. Three chains were the subject of in-depth examination by the participants: bananas, pineapples and mangoes + papayas.

Attended by nearly 500 people, the symposium was for those involved in Côte d'Ivoire fruit chains: planters, exporters, importers and service providers, together with development institutions and administrative authorities. The similarity of the problems encountered in the fruit sectors in neighbouring countries also led the organisers to invite foreign delegations to broaden discussion and reflection. Ghana and Burkina Faso thus accepted this invitation. The event was held under the patronage of the President of Côte d'Ivoire, showing the public authorities' keen interest in the event.

Conjunctural difficulties

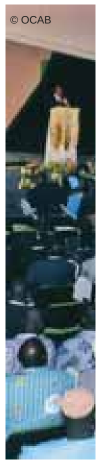
Based to a considerable extent on small plantations (with the exception of bananas), exports from Côte d'Ivoire suffered considerably from domestic political events in the early 2000s and their consequences and then from the effects of the international economic downturn. The situation in international trade changed at the same time and made profitability more difficult for small, little-organised structures. Côte d'Ivoire fruit chains suffered and are continuing to suffer from these features that are not encouraging for the economic development of the sector. At the same time, donors have reconsidered their aid policy and brought new constraints to the sector. These convergent internal and external obstacles to Côte d'Ivoire chains formed the starting-point and the justification of the symposium. Although the problems and situations in the various chains are exposed to the same conjunctural conditions, the latter are nonetheless distinct.

The size of the fruit sector in Côte d'Ivoire makes it a driving force of the economy, as can be seen in the following figures:

- 3 to 4 % of GDP,
- 8 to 10 % of agricultural GDP,
- 35 000 paid jobs,
- 145 to 150 billion CFA francs annual sales until 2002,
- 10 to 12 billion CFA francs in fiscal revenue.

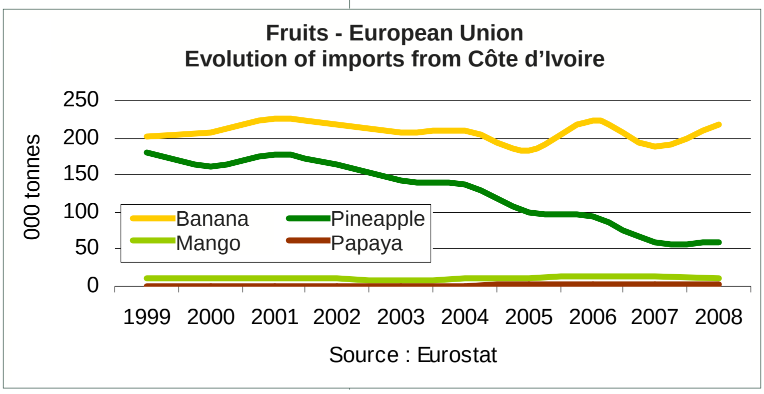
Bananas fighting on the regulations front

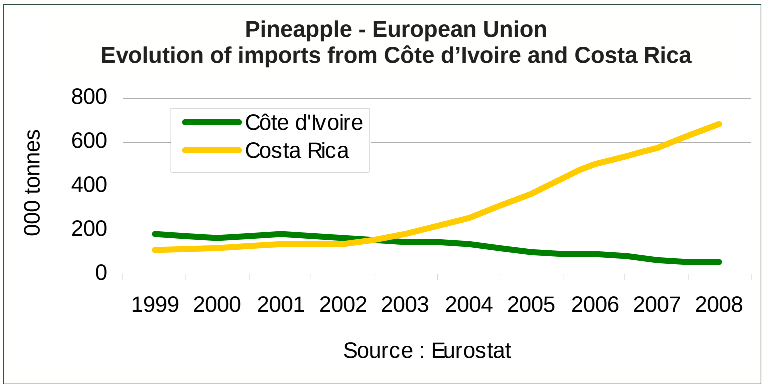
The difficulties in bananas result mainly from the framework of regulations governing international trade. Total production is stable in Côte d'Ivoire but stakeholders have changed gradually to the benefit of large, often transnational companies. The negotiations at the WTO leave little room for manoeuvre for Côte d'Ivoire and, more generally, for the ACP countries. Signatory of an interim EPA (economic partnership agreement), Côte d'Ivoire has the firm intention of remaining on the world banana scene. Aware that the present dismantling of European customs tariffs applied to dollar bananas will continue, professionals and the authorities are seeking the appropriate means to enhance their representation in international negotiations. They claim that the loss of the conditions that they hitherto benefited from deserves particular attention. This could take the form of substantial accompanying measures and in particular more time for the dismantling of customs tariffs to enable the chain to better adapt to the new international situation.



The pineapple sector should become concentrated

Pineapple is probably the chain hardest-hit in Côte d'Ivoire as a result of production involving small plantations scattered throughout





the country, the economic and political situation in recent years and above all the unexpected rise of Central American production sources, especially Costa Rica. The adoption in the latter country of the variety 'MD2' or 'Sweet' and its success on the European markets left Côte d'Ivoire with a very small market share. This growing competition has also benefited from exchange rates favouring the dollar zone as the dollar has lost ground. Producers in the zone using euro-linked CFA franc have suffered from this distortion. Seeing their market share shrinking, pineapple sector professionals are examining the means to be used to consolidate and develop pineapple production. Re-launching production to attain larger volumes will require the concentration of small structures and hence a decrease in their number. This approach seems to be the only one capable of ensuring sustainable activity by achieving an improvement of fruit quality with the parallel development of 'Smooth Cayenne' and 'Sweet' and by aiming at the diversification of outlets, with attention paid in particular to the regional and processing markets.

Scattered mango sector

The mango chain has suffered considerably in recent years from the domestic situation in Côte d'Ivoire and production is concentrated in the northern part of the country. However, in spite of these difficulties, exports have fluctuated but have never stopped. As for the pineapple chain, scattered small plantations and the structure of a sector with numerous stakeholders who often have different interests (growers, collectors, exporters) mean that it is not possible to develop production of high, even quality free of pests (fruitfly). Here again, reflection during the symposium addressed the need to group not only the growers but also the various professions forming the chain. In addition, without the mapping and precise identification of orchards, it seems difficult to achieve better organisation of flows and to schedule effective actions in pest management, a central problem in mango exports to Europe.

Re-launching papaya

Papaya production and sales have decreased considerably in recent years, with the exception of a single large organisation that is practically the only active one. Poor sales and diseases have strongly affected this secondary chain that nonetheless has potential for the country. Future trends will be the re-launching of production, especially of the variety 'Solo', in order to increase regional exports and processing.

In addition to the workshops devoted to the various fruit chains, participants also addressed a fair number of transverse themes with support from prior studies conducted under the authority of OCAB. Substantial information and discussion were thus also devoted to transport, access to loans, reduction of the cost on inputs, port handling and changes in rural landholding structure. Here, the various subsidiary sectors displayed availability and participants showed marked determination to promote the re-launching of fruit chains in Côte d'Ivoire.

As the sectors and the formalisation of constraints have now been reviewed to a considerable extent, the pathways identified should now be followed. This is probably not as easy as all that in the present economic context. Better exploration of the West African markets on which there is demand for fresh and processed fruits would complete appropriately the export side of Côte d'Ivoire fruits. Furthermore, this is in line with European aid via EPAs, with an effort to achieve greater regional economic coherence through the ECOWAS and the WAEMU. Stronger competition on the international market has done much to contribute to the disappearance of small farmers to the benefit of larger organisations, but the latter are doubtless less involved in the local development of southern countries. The only solution to this is the grouping and professionalisation of small growers.

Although the symposium has not solved the problems of the fruit chains in Côte d'Ivoire and neighbouring countries, it has had the merit of remobilising operators who were tending to lose motivation. It has also re-gilded—and this is no mean feat—the role of the inter-branch organisation, not only as regards its own members but in the eyes of the public authorities and development institutions. As on a rugby field, let's hope that the try will be converted! ■

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