

# Agricultural advisor: New challenges for an old profession

*By Bernard  
Dédjélénou,  
trainer-mentor  
and coordinator of  
URP-AL, Benin*



**Key themes:** Cluster relationships, Functional capacities

## **Soya–Benin PPP**

Soya bean processing into various marketable soya products is at the heart of the partnerships. The CTAE is an SME connected to producers to ensure reliable quality soya beans.

## **Summary**

**This story is about the author’s challenges advising the soya partnership in Benin as a trainer-mentor. CTAE, the soya processing company recognises the importance of addressing quality challenges in order to get sustainable markets. For that purpose, CTAE developed a direct relationship with their supplying farmers’ organisations and other local actors, thanks to cluster development. Building strong relationships allowed for better coordination and made capacity strengthening on issues such as quality improvement and contracting easier.**

Being a paid staff member of a producers’ organisation often presents new and formidable challenges to agribusiness coaches. They are working very intimately with the producers, and the best way they can support them in thinking strategically is to keep coming up with new ideas for action. The coaches need to keep their eyes open to innovative opportunities that can shake them out of their old habits and ways of thinking – which can also mean having to extend their roles and terms of reference. This was the case for me over the last four years as I have needed to extend my job into new directions. From being a purely technical advisor I

learned my way into my new position of facilitator and then of trainer-mentor for 2SCALE. How did this evolution come about, all the while staying committed to the farmers? And, how is it that soya came to be a treasure for the producers of the region? These questions are what my story is about...

Today, even the smallest child knows that the big challenge is not to produce but to sell, and to sell well! But, sell what? Cotton, the “white gold” that provides a living to many producers in other rural areas of West Africa, generating state revenue as well as jobs - can somehow not be produced in

the Atlantic Region of Benin. Pineapple, vegetables, cassava, maize or soya offer other possibilities, but they do not have the same potential. Yet, through the support of the 2SCALE project, we chose to focus on soya beans. As the coordinator of the Regional Union of Producers in the Atlantique and Littoral areas (URP-AL), I saw in 2SCALE an opportunity to make a difference to the URP's members as it focuses on strengthening the relations between producers, their clients and their suppliers. Value is added through all the links in the chain and all the actors involved benefit from the gains.

Through 2SCALE, the URP initiated a partnership with CTAE, a local cooperative enterprise that processes soya beans. You may ask: Why was CTAE interested in linking with the farmers? After all, establishing relationships takes time and energy and the results are often rather unpredictable.

### Solving the issue of poor quality

In fact, CTAE was facing the problem of low quality raw material. The bags of soya delivered by the traders in the market of Glazoué often contained chaff, sand and not fully dry grains that turned black. The poor quality of the raw material not only affected the quality of the processed products CTAE was putting on the market, but it also reduced the cooperative's turnover while also damaging its equipment. With such a poor supply base, buyers have little control over the product they end up with.

So, how did we go about solving this problem within the context of 2SCALE? CTAE is the champion of the soya bean Agribusiness cluster (ABC), which includes the producers' organisations (POs) and other actors. The processor's business model is to have a round of quality control of the soya before purchasing it from the farmers. This is possible because of the business relationships built up between CTAE and the soya POs of the Atlantique region, with the support of coaching.

Through ICRA, I and later on Joé Toho coached actors of the ABC, focusing on different learning cycles on topics such as the development of business relationships, negotiation and

contracting procedures, collective selling and stock management. Together, the soya producers and CTAE listed a set of quality specifications for soya requested by CTAE. When the quality requirements are respected, the contract will grant the producer a bonus of 25 CFA francs (about €0.04) per kg beyond the market price. The Atlantique POs are now able to provide enough soya of good quality at a price they find acceptable. CTAE is happy with this agreement, as the quality of the soya-based products it puts on the market has increased highly, thereby further increasing the demand.

### Better quality, better business relationships

Between 2013 and 2015, the number of producers linked to CTAE increased from 192 to 236, and local production from 82 to 228 tonnes, thanks to the stronger business links. The producers' commitment motivated CTAE to deliver documents to them serving as a guarantee for obtaining a loan from ALIDÉ (a micro-finance institution, also a member of the ABC). With this money, they could buy the inputs, such as improved seed and inoculants, required to maintain the quality of their products. Joé and I are thinking of drawing up a tripartite contract between ALIDÉ, CTAE and the producers to ensure direct repayment of the loans upon delivery and in this way deepen the confidence between the producers and the micro-finance institution.

After only a few years of work, we have clearly noticed that the quality of soya and of its derived products (like goussi, oil, soya bean cake...) depends on a solid contractual business relationship between the soya producers' organisation and the processing unit on the one hand and the accessibility of the producers to inputs such as improved seed and inoculants on the other. The answers to the technical challenges are not always where we expect them to be: they can sometimes be found simply in building relationships and better organisation.

- 2 Union régionale des producteurs de l'Atlantique et du Littoral.
- 3 Coopérative de transformation, d'approvisionnement et d'écoulement de soya.
- 4 Association de lutte pour la promotion des initiatives de développement.

