

Welcome ladies and gentlemen, and thank you for taking the time to come to Cotonou for the Regional Farm Development meeting. Many of you have come from very far and under sometimes difficult circumstances to be here, and we really appreciate your enthusiasm and commitment.

It is a great pleasure to be back here in Benin and in Africa looking to keep moving the case of organic cotton forward.

You will forgive me for giving my opening address in English when I speak fluent French, but I realise that most of our work today will be in French, and I want our English speaking colleagues to feel very much part of the discussions. I will revert to French later on.

First, I would like to address my thanks to OBEPAB and its staff for once again being hosts of a meeting on organic cotton, and for as always doing such a great job of making sure everything runs smoothly. Also, thanks are due to Silvere Tovignan, our regional coordinator for Africa who is really the maestro behind today's meeting. We are delighted to have him on board. Also, my thanks to our sponsors, especially GTZ, whose additional support for this meeting enabled us to invite far more people here today; thanks also to ICCO, whose funding supports the OE farm programme and this meeting.

And once again, thanks to you all for being here.

Today I want to encourage you to think about markets. We all know that organic cotton is a sustainable solution to many problems in cotton and agriculture, but without markets, and long-term security and income from markets, it will be difficult to continue let alone expand the sector.

So projects and African companies must think about markets and study markets for organic cotton - for fibre, for yarns, for industrially produced textiles, for hand-woven products:

What is in demand, what is selling, who is selling it; how do your products and the stories of your projects stand out from other producers, here and in other continents.

What is unique and interesting?

When you look at what is being sold already, what do you have the capacity to make?

What could you make if you involved local textiles businesses and designers?

What other fibre and food and wood products are on the farms and can be sold...craft products, oil products, ingredients for processed foods, etc?

What indicators can be developed to demonstrate benefits and impacts to buyers?

These are areas where Organic Exchange will be looking to help, but in many ways it is down to your own efforts, in passing on information, in communicating, informing!

While I have now taken on a more global role with Organic Exchange, Africa has been my main focus for the past 5 years, and remains so. While the global focus provides an opportunity to stimulate learning between regions, our program also seeks to make sure that everyone benefits from growth in demand for organic cotton, and it is here in Africa

that demand took longest to be felt. We must ask why, and we must also make sure we find ways to reverse this trend.

Africa has, because of its situation, some of the best stories to tell with organic cotton when it comes to social and economic impacts for farmers and the benefits from reduced chemical use. It also has some of the greatest difficulties in organic cotton reaching the market, especially when it comes to being able to produce finished goods.

It is also a place where projects have shown enormous innovation and good models especially with Internal Control Systems. In the next few years, potential and innovation must be used to gain African fibre and products their rightful place in the market.

Last Thursday I met with a large UK retailer who expressed a great interest in sourcing fibre from Africa because they feel the stories about the benefits to people as well as the environment are stronger and the benefits more necessary here.

It is clear that there is demand for African fibre, from manufacturers and retailers in Europe and the US. We must identify the blockages to meeting this demand and find ways of eliminating them.

The big questions for us today and in the future is how do we make African farmers, manufacturers and designers more visible to the outside world. What are the strengths of the sector here? Where can we build alliances? How do we encourage business development? How do we encourage manufacturing, what are the strengths and weaknesses of manufacturing companies, exporters, and designers?

There is enormous potential in the region. In my opinion the social aims, gender approaches and farmer participatory approaches of most projects in the region are in advance of those on India or Latin America; areas of weakness would include the development of seed varieties adapted to organic cotton, and water management. Information access is another area. The lack of a strong textiles sector in most countries is also a weakness.

We are going to hear about some current and proposed projects that are very exciting; time does not allow us to hear from all, but I know you all to be unique and dedicated, and we will have a short amount of time today to hear at least a little from every project.

Most of all is a chance for you today to help shape our programme agenda for Africa and how we do it. The proceedings today will be shared with many companies who are potential buyers and investors. It is a chance for Organic Exchange to understand your projects better, and how we can use our programme to help. It is also a chance to think together about how we move forward, collaborate and share ideas.