

African Entrepreneurs – Successful and Responsible

Episode 08

Title: The Organic King – Jean Pierre Imelé from Cameroon

Author: Henri Fotso

Editor: Katrin Ogunsade, Adrian Kriesch

Translator: Salamata Saenger

Proofreading: Natalie Glanville-Wallis

Characters / Narrators

	Women	Men	Age	Language
Intro/Outro	x		Unimportant	
Narrator		x	Unimportant	
Jean Pierre Imelé (clip)		x	54	French

INTRODUCTION:

Hello and welcome to this new episode of our “Learning by Ear” series about “African entrepreneurs”, who are particularly successful in their businesses and at the same time committed to the societies they live in. Today we are going to meet Jean-Pierre Imelé, the king of organic agriculture in Cameroon.

- 1. SFX: Ceaseless crackling of computer keyboard – Street noise from outside**

2. Narrator:

The man who seems to be very busy in his office in the economic capital of Douala doesn't welcome or even look at us. He is sitting highly concentrated at his desk. He's not even distracted from his work by the busy street noise coming in through the window and door slits. Although he is staring at his screen and is hectically typing, we have to interrupt him:

3. Narrator: Good morning sir!

4. Jean Pierre Imelé: Good morning!

5. Narrator: What is your name?

6. Jean Pierre Imelé: My name is Jean Pierre Imelé.

7. Narrator: May I ask your age?

8. Jean Pierre Imelé: I will turn 54 years old this year. On August, the 21st.

9. Narrator: What do you do in your life?

10. Jean Pierre Imelé: I am a farmer. An organic farmer in Cameroon.

11. Narrator:

A surprising answer from a man working in an office. Most farmers in African countries are busy working in the fields at this time of day. If we look at how he masters the computer and all the books in the shelves behind him, the loads of files in his office, we understand immediately that this African farmer is unusual.

To respond to a globalizing world, Jean Pierre Imelé created an enterprise called Biotropical. Since 1988 the enterprise produces and sells its products on the Cameroonian market and exports certified organic tropical fruit.

12. Jean Pierre Imelé

“Our enterprise is a pioneer on the market. We employ more than 200 people and work on about 200 hectares of land. We develop productions with little planters on around 400 hectares of land and increase it every year. We produce fruit, a lot of fruit. Like mangoes, the little green mangoes from Cameroon, very sweet and very good. We also produce pineapples, bananas and papayas. We also offer garden products for the local market”.

13. Narrator:

But according to Jean Pierre Imelé Biotropical could still improve. Even if the company makes enough to pay all overheads and make some profits:

14. O-Ton: Jean Pierre Imelé (fr.)

“But we still have some challenges. We want to improve our production system in order to define the technical problems related to our production. We produce organic products in an environment, where there are many parasites. For example flies on the mangoes...”.

15. Narrator:

But Biotropical doesn't use pesticides to combat vermin, like many other farmers do. Organic agriculture means producing food without using any chemical substances. In Europe most of the mass production is done by using fertilizers and pesticides. But a lot of people want to eat more natural and healthy products, which are often even tastier. That's why they are willing to spend more money on organic food. And that's why Biotropical exports fruit to the European market, where the demand is higher than in Africa. In that way Jean Pierre generates most of his money from abroad but creates jobs in Africa. During his studies abroad Jean Pierre was already ambitious and motivated to contribute to the development of his own country. But it was a long way to go.

16. Jean Pierre Imelé

“I was 18 when I went to France. I landed in Lyon. Like everybody else, I applied to study business administration, which includes economy, management and law. I left the University of Lyon after two years to study agriculture. I went to a graduate school for agriculture and specialized myself in processing, meteorology and trade. I learned all these things in order to be able to perfectly lead a project like I do today”.

17. Narrator:

After 23 years of work Jean Pierre Imelé still has two big challenges. On the one hand he wants to strengthen his enterprise to the satisfaction of his partners and improve the production system.

18. Jean Pierre Imelé

“On the other hand there is the idea of Pan-Africanism. We have many natural resources. Africa is a continent with a huge growth potential, for example in the agricultural domain but it is not developed yet. One of my challenges is to make young people understand that agriculture is very important, that they can make their lives better through agriculture. Look at me: I built a house, my children go to school, I have a driver although I am a farmer.”

19. Narrator:

But nothing can be created out of nothing. Jean Pierre works hard voluntarily.

20. Jean Pierre Imelé

“Nothing comes easily. Since I created this enterprise I work about 15 hours every day. But I have fun in my work. I do some research for the development and I control the sowing and production.”

21. Narrator:

For Jean Pierre, owning a big car or other luxurious things is not everything. His wealth is the pride he has when he looks at his large organic mango plantations. That is why he also expects a lot from his employees.

22. Jean Pierre Imelé

“I am demanding. I don’t know if it is a weakness or a strength but I always think my colleagues should be at the same level as me. They must involve themselves in the work as much as I do. Nevertheless, I am a human being, so I understand that not everybody can be like me. Besides, I have other weaknesses like everybody does (laugh)”.

23. SFX: crackling of computer keyboard

24. Narrator:

Multitasking is definitely not one of his weaknesses, as he busies himself with the keyboard while advertising engagement in the agriculture business.

25. Jean Pierre Imelé

I advise young people to take agriculture as a chance and get together to develop projects. But never do it alone. It is better to build a team. A team, because there is a lack of machines, so it is really better to work together in order to increase the productivity and be effective against other countries. I mean Vietnam and Brazil, which are well known in agriculture today”.

26. Narrator:

For Jean Pierre motivation is very important to set up a project. Money is not the first element. Biotropical started with only 1500 Euros. Now the yearly turnover is 800 000 Euros and the enterprise employs a relatively young team. According to the founder, agriculture is a sector which can provide reliable jobs to young people in Africa.

27. Jean Pierre Imelé

We have the opportunity because we have a lot of space, interesting conditions for ecological production, a young population and rivers everywhere. I wish African governments would make some reforms related to agriculture and land. This would allow poor people to own land and develop their own plantations. This would be the best way to struggle against hunger.

28. SFX: Sound effects of cars and passer-by on the street

29. Narrator:

It is half past three in Douala and some people have already left their offices to avoid the traffic jam. But Jean Pierre seems to work longer. Could he arrange his time and have diner with us? He moans a bit and gently refuses our offer:

30. Jean Pierre Imelé

« In fact, I just came back from Italy last night. I took part in a meeting, which was about an agricultural research program in Africa. So I was ten days out of office because I had a trade fair in Japan before this meeting in Italy. I think I will stay until ten p.m. today. I need to make up for it now all the staff has left. Otherwise, I usually work normally and go home. When I take my holidays, I go somewhere where there is sea or mountains. I like mountains, that is why I live in Buea at the foot of Mount Cameroon. Sometimes, I go with friends to climb it.»

31. Narrator:

So we decide to meet up with him two days later in Buea. His entire family is waiting for us in a beautiful villa only a few minutes by car from the Atlantic Ocean. We sit down in the living room where we pursue our conversation about organic-agriculture.

32. SFX: kitchen sounds and children in the background

While his wife is tinkering with pots and pans in the kitchen and the children are playing in the backyard, Jean Pierre talks about his plans for the following days. He's going on a business trip to Germany. He promises he will invite us for a visit to his organic tropical plantations on his return. For now, we will get a taste of it, as we end the day with a delicious dinner prepared from freshly harvested fruit and vegetables, which are, of course, 100 percent organic.

Outro:

That is all for today's Learning by Ear program, which focused on Jean Pierre Imelé, the leader of organic agriculture in Cameroon. Henri Fotso was our reporter. Thank you for listening. If you want to learn more about this subject or listen to other programs of our Learning By Ear series, please visit our website at www.dw.de/lbe. And don't miss our next episode. Bye bye.