

Improvements in the production of 'women's gold'

The experience of ICCO and Fair Match Support: the business case for shea nut production by women in Burkina Faso

The OLVEA company

Majestic wild shea trees of about fifteen metres tall grow everywhere in the wooded areas of West Africa, especially in Burkina Faso. From the shea nuts women extract the kernels that provide the nourishing shea butter, the 'women's gold' as it is called by Burkinabe villagers. As the shea nut is rich in fats and vitamins, it is used as a cooking fat, natural medicine, and for birth and death ceremonies. Shea butter from Burkina Faso is processed in a variety of products that find their way to international markets, such as shampoos, lotions, lipsticks and day creams, but also chocolate.

OLVEA Burkina Faso is a French company that was established in 2008 in Bobo-Dioulasso in Western Burkina Faso, in the heart of the production area of shea nuts. The company produces shea butter which is highly appreciated by the cosmetics industry. At the start the company bought the bulk of its products from middlemen.

As the quality and continuity of the production were far from optimal, OLVEA Burkina Faso looked into the possibilities to guarantee a sustainable supply chain by going straight to the producers and producer organisations.

The supply side

98% of the shea producers in Burkina Faso are women. The income gained with the shea nut production makes many of them financially independent.

The full potential of the shea nut production is however not realized, due to inefficiencies in the shea value chain. The OLVEA case shows that building sustainable relationships between producers and buyers has benefits for both. OLVEA now supports more than 20,000 female shea producers in Burkina Faso.



Gender-based constraints

Tedious work

Collecting and processing shea is an exhausting job, which is typically considered to be women's work. Once the women have collected a good number of fruits, they remove the pulp. The nuts inside are boiled before removing the shell, and the remaining kernels are sold to OLVEA.

Time constraints

The nut-gathering season coincides with the rainy season in Burkina Faso, the time when farmers start planting their crops. Women have to start collecting shea nuts very early in the morning, so they can spend the rest of the day working in the family fields where they grow millet, maize, peanut, sesame and other cereals. Late afternoon they go back home to prepare the evening meal for their families.

Lack of information on market requirements

Female shea producers are not well informed on the requirements of the market. Few of them have long-term, reliable commercial relations with buyers.

Lack of organisation

Because of their lack of organisation, women are difficult to reach for companies interested in buying shea nuts. This gap is filled by middlemen.

Lack of knowledge

The women's lack of knowledge on standards and on post-harvesting practices results in lower quality of the production.



Result:

Products fit the sustainable organic market

Photo: Karim Zoné/ ICCO



Strategies

Value chain facilitation

Supported by the Dutch NGOs ICCO, and Fair Match Support (FMS), a strategy was developed to link OLVEA to organisations of female producers and to establish a fair and sustainable commercial relationship.

Capacity building

OLVEA Burkina Faso helps to build the capacity of the producer organisations. They learn how to improve the quality of their kernels to meet market requirements, and receive literacy training.

Financial and non-financial support provided by ICCO

ICCO financed equipment such as scales, mobile phones and laptops for the organisations of female producers and provided training on financial management and awareness of the quality standards of OLVEA Burkina Faso.

Development of a collaborative protocol

A business protocol was developed. The protocol defines that a fair, transparent and guaranteed price is paid to the producers. It also defines payment modalities, quantities and qualities, as well as the roles and responsibilities of the company and the producer organisations.



Results

Benefits for OLVEA

Access to premium market

The women produce in a sustainable way, without chemicals. Thus the products that OLVEA Burkina Faso sources directly from the female producers and their organisations fit the sustainable organic market, a premium niche market.

Traceability through the chain

OLVEA Burkina Faso's vision is that cosmetics shouldn't contain contamination, therefore the ingredients are traceable through the chain.

Better profits and expanded customer base

The value of this sustainable and high-quality supply chain is communicated and picked up by the market. In 2009 OLVEA Burkina Faso was losing money in the regular market, but now it is making a profit in the niche market and it is still enlarging its customer base.



Benefits for women

Guaranteed market and price

Before the programme, women depended on middlemen for the sales of their kernels. Now there is a direct link between them and the buyer. OLVEA guarantees them a fair price and secure market.

Higher income

Women receive a better price (above the market price) and thus a higher income. The money is paid directly to the women, allowing them to improve their living conditions.

Money for community projects

OLVEA Burkina Faso offers a premium to their producers when the nuts comply with certain quality standards. A committee in the producer association determines what is done with the premium (e.g. contribution to schooling, health services).

Increased awareness of market requirements

Women are aware of the importance of product quality and of training how to better meet market requirements, e.g. training on post-harvest treatment.

Improved organisational capacity

Through the trainings they have received, leaders and management of producer associations have become more skilled in financial management and governance, and in managing the traceability of their products.



Credits

Sustainable Shea butter supply chain: OLVEA Burkina Faso, Film on the website of OLVEA.

ICCO/STARS Newsletter: 'Women in the shea butter business, a story of endurance', Dominique Owekisa and Diane Igrimabazi, October 2017.

