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Booming demand for shea, African ‘women’s gold’, helps reduce poverty

By AGENCE FRANCE PRESSE | March 31, 2014



‘Women’s gold’ ... shea nuts on a shea butter production line/AFP

ABIDJAN, Mar 31 – The fruit of the shea tree has long been considered sacred by many in Western Africa because of its myriad health benefits.

But now growing demand among Western consumers for the fruit, known as “women’s gold” by those who harvest it, is helping improve lives in some of the world’s poorest communities.

Sweet-lovers around the globe already consume the nut as shea butter, which is used to make chocolate, as well as in products like margarine and as a cooking oil.

Western companies such as L’Oreal, The Body Shop and L’Occitane are also using more and more of the product as a natural moisturiser and anti-ageing ingredient in their cosmetics.

Around 600,000 tonnes of shea are produced each year in Africa. Of that around two thirds are exported to Europe, more than double the amount shipped 10 years ago, while the rest is consumed locally.



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Cosmetics companies, which purchase around a tenth of Africa’s shea exports, have been buying more to please increasingly socially-conscious consumers.

And now that change is starting to help women at the other end of the supply chain.

Around 16 million people in Africa — particularly women living in rural areas — are supported by the shea industry.

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In many of the countries where it grows, from Ethiopia to Senegal and down to the Democratic Republic of Congo, it is a lifeline for some of the world's poorest people.

Shea provides a "substantial source of income" and an important tool for fighting poverty, said Mamadou Coulibaly Sangafowa, Ivory Coast's agriculture minister.

In northern Ghana, it "helps improve the financial independence of women a lot", observed Stephanie Green, marketing manager for the Ghanaian company SeKaf, which produces shea butter for cosmetics.

With the money generated, local women can "create small businesses" in the villages, which help to "eradicate" poverty their communities, she said.

Shea is central to both economic and social development in rural communities because it can "pull up the rural economy", said Christophe Godard, who works in Burkina Faso on behalf of the French oilseed group Olvea.

- A 'priority' crop -

The shea tree grows wild and untamed across almost 4 million square kilometres (1.5 million square miles) of the African savanna, and cannot be planted. Considered sacred by many Africans, it can survive fires and droughts and live hundreds of years.

But it only bears fruit after 25 years, and even then only once every three seasons, according to AGK.

Extracting the shea butter from inside the fruit, which looks like a large green plum, is also a long and arduous process. It can take several hours of processing, using over 22 steps, to produce a single kilogram of the butter.

Demand for shea is growing "both domestically and internationally", said Sangafowa Coulibaly, who wants to make the industry a "priority" because of its good prospects.

Ivory Coast is already the fifth-largest producer of shea in the world, harvesting around 40,000 tonnes a year, but the government wants to more than triple that to 150,000 tonnes.

Two factors, however, are holding the industry back.

One is the quality of the crop, "which is key for market access", said Aminata Coulibaly Barry, who runs a group of women shea butter producers in Mali.

Konte Diarratouma, who oversees the national shea project in Mali, agreed. She urged the creation of a central body representing producing countries to impose quality standards and improve logistics for transporting crops.

Addressing the "low level of organisation of the stakeholders" would help Mali create a "shea (industry) that could compete in the international market", she said.

Another is poor levels of organisation in the industry.

Stephanie Green, who works for SeKaf, argued that the "domestication of the shea tree and improving the conversion rate should be priorities", particularly as the existing stock of trees becomes older.

Christophe Godard of Olvea disagreed. He estimated that barely half of shea nuts growing wild are collected today.

There is "more than enough for all the stakeholders in this sector" if the industry can become more organised.

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