



Photo: J. Boethling

## Women's gold

Surging demand from the global cosmetics industry for shea butter could create a new source of income for the women of Burkina Faso.

Producing shea ("karité") butter in the villages of Burkina Faso is a labour-intensive process taking several days. It has always been considered women's work. During the summer the women trek long distances with their calabashes and plastic bowls to gather the fallen fruit of the karité tree. First of all they remove the nuts from their white flesh. The nuts are then parboiled and

left in the sun to dry, before being crushed to release the oil-rich kernels. These are then pounded by hand into a powder which is mixed with water to make a brown paste, and brought to the boil again. Once cooled, the paste is kneaded until it is white and creamy, an arduous procedure which removes the pigments and bitter odour. Finally the substance is reheated over a wood fire; the resultant warm oil is filtered through a cloth and left to cool.

The finished, slightly granular product known as shea butter is used by African women in cooking, as a skin cream and to make soap. However,

demand from the global cosmetic industry is now increasing – creating an opportunity for the women of Burkina Faso to sell their products in the wider marketplace.

### ■ A badly-needed source of extra income

Mariam Idogo and her husband grow maize, millet and a few vegetables, most of which they and their four children consume themselves. But during summer, before the new season's crops are harvested, their stores become depleted and Mariam Idogo

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is forced to buy extra food. To earn the money she needs she processes about 100 kilograms of shea butter, which she can sell for the equivalent of barely 80 euros at the local market. All of this is spent on additional food for her family. However, shea butter prices are highly volatile, and sometimes she only earns enough to buy one meal a day. If she could obtain better prices on global markets she could keep starvation permanently at bay. And there might even be a little left over for the children's school fees.

## ■ Keep the added value in the country

Buyers in Canada, the USA and Europe, however, prefer to purchase the whole nuts of the karité tree, so that they can control prices and maintain quality standards. For this reason aid agencies in Burkina Faso are helping the women to refine their processing methods and marketing, to ensure that as great a proportion as possible of the added value is retained within the country.

One such project is the "Projet d'appui à la promotion de production du beurre de Karité" in the south of the country, not far from the Ghanaian border. Workshops are held to teach the women how to improve the quality of their shea butter. The project also provides access to bank credit, to enable them to purchase extra nuts when demand is high. And last but not least, literacy courses boost their abilities as businesswomen. The project is

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## Prospects for the farmers of Burkina Faso

About 80 percent of Burkina Faso's population live in the rural areas and depend on subsistence farming for their livelihood. They grow millet, maize and some vegetables, and keep a few chickens or goats. Almost everything they produce is needed for their own consumption, but in dry years their harvest is often insufficient.

Growing cash crops for export should provide farmers with the income they need to buy extra food, pay school fees for the children or update their agricultural methods. For this reason Burkina Faso has actively encouraged the cultivation of cotton for export in recent years. Two thirds of the country's export earnings are now generated by cotton. But the industry is faced with overwhelming competition from the subsidised cotton grown in the USA, Central Asia and China.

Organic cotton produced for Swiss fair trade organisation Max Havelaar, Germany's OTTO Group, and others, is expected to open new markets for the farmers of Burkina Faso. A new cash crop is dried mangoes for the African subsidiary of Swiss fair trade company Gebana, which sells them to Europe.

The production of cashew nuts and sesame seeds has created new market opportunities for the farmers. Deutsche Gesellschaft für technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ – German Technical Cooperation) is one of those helping to support this initiative.

The process of implementing the projects is fraught with difficulties. The infrastructure in rural areas is totally inadequate. Burkina Faso is a land-locked country. Export goods must therefore be transported to the sea-ports of Ghana or Cote d'Ivoire by the only railway line or by truck along poor, unsafe roads.

supported by the Aid Agency of the Protestant Churches of Switzerland (HEKS).

About 1450 women are involved in the project. Together they are capable of producing 200 metric tonnes of shea butter each year. They are currently in negotiations with various cosmetic

manufacturers. An initial purchase of some 40–60 tonnes is under discussion. One US cosmetic company has already ordered 10 tonnes. Mibelle, the Swiss manufacturer of active ingredients for the cosmetic industry, has also expressed an interest. An English dealer in Ghana has ordered about 50 tonnes of ready-made butter,



*Once cooled, the paste made of karité kernels is kneaded until it is white and creamy.*

which he plans to sell to cosmetic companies in Europe and North America. "A growing number of cosmetic companies, such as Lush and Body Shop, source their shea butter directly from the African producers", says Jamil Mokhtar of HEKS, who is responsible for marketing the shea butter. There are also smaller potential buyers from the growing organic and fair trade sectors.

## Zusammenfassung

Der Karitébaum wächst in weiten Teilen Westafrikas wild. Er ist genügsam, kommt mit wenig Wasser aus und schützt das Land vor Erosion. Seit jeher nutzen die Frauen die ölhaltigen Kerne zur Herstellung von Öl und Butter für Küche und Kosmetik. Auch verkaufen sie Produkte aus der Kariténuss auf lokalen Märkten. Seit neuestem verarbeiten auch internationale Kosmetikerhersteller die so genannte Sheabutter wegen ihrer günstigen Eigenschaften. Das könnte eine Chance für die Frauen in Westafrika sein, für ihre Karitéprodukte einen besseren Preis zu erzielen. Doch dafür müssen sie die Qualität der Butter und ihre Vermarktung verbessern.

## Resumen

El árbol de karité (*Vitellaria paradoxa*) crece en forma silvestre en muchas regiones de África occidental. Es poco exigente y puede sobrevivir con muy poca agua, a la vez que protege la tierra de la erosión. Desde tiempos ancestrales, las mujeres utilizan sus semillas oleaginosas para fabricar aceite y manteca para cocinar y con fines cosméticos. También venden los productos de la nuez de karité en los mercados locales. Desde hace poco, los fabricantes internacionales de productos cosméticos también procesan la llamada manteca de karité debido a sus propiedades favorables. Ésta podría ser una oportunidad para las mujeres de África occidental en el sentido de lograr mejores precios para sus productos de karité. Sin embargo, para ello deben mejorar la calidad de la manteca y su comercialización.

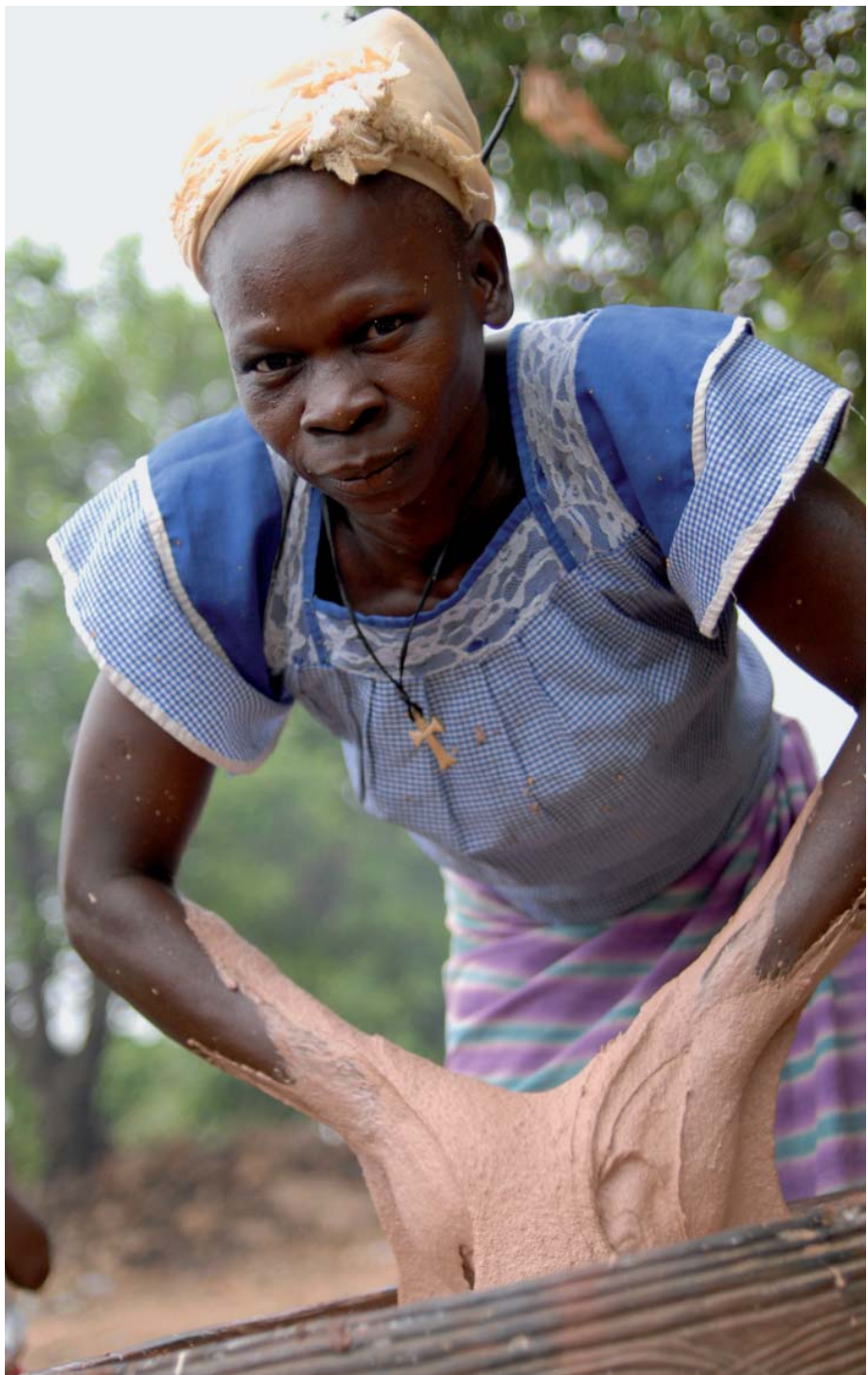


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## ■ Hopes of a new sales outlet

The project also supports a cooperative set up by Nabila Avi in her village of Sesuala. As in most villages in Burkina Faso, the processing conditions in Sesuala are back-breaking. "We don't have a grinder, nor a waterhole." Behind Nabila Avi a warm wind swirls dust and dry leaves over the cracked ground, and bends the yellowing blades of

grass. The only touches of green in the landscape are the leaves of the gnarled karité trees. These trees protect the dry land from desertification, but they need protection themselves – not only from the herds of goats, but also because firewood is scarce in the region. "Once the people realise how valuable the karité trees are they take better care of them," says Nabila Avi, nodding to herself.