

FORESTS NEWS

Shaping a future that ensures women are at the center of the Ghana shea trade

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Women have harvested shea nuts from trees in the savanna region of northern Ghana for centuries, using the rich oils that come from the nut – also known as shea butter – for cooking and to generate income. But they face big changes that threaten their ability to sustain these benefits.

Growing conflict related to land degradation and weak conservation guidelines governing shea-growing areas are making women's forest-based livelihoods vulnerable to competitive encroachment by men.

Observers noticed that women had concerns about the trees and their income, and set out to learn more.

To that end, the Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR) and World Agroforestry (ICRAF) implemented the West African Forest-Farm Interface (WAFFI) project between 2016 and 2019. It incorporated such mechanisms as multi-stakeholder forums and facilitated social learning to explore the potential to improve the influence of underrepresented people – particularly women – in decision-making processes affecting access to natural resources.

The initiative – jointly implemented by Tree Aid and the Organization for Indigenous Initiatives and Sustainability, a local Ghanaian non-governmental organization (NGO) – was launched after increased market demand for shea began to shift patterns of resource access and benefits, pinpointing the need for greater attention from local communities and policymakers, said Peter Cronkleton, an anthropologist and senior scientist with CIFOR-ICRAF. Findings from the project were recently published in the journal *Sustainability*.

Six villages in Ghana faced with resource, soil and land use changes participated in social learning-oriented activities to explore customary systems of land and tree tenure and women's access to resources. The focus was also on understanding the nature of their involvement in shea collection and trade.

Through this process, researchers learned that women are unaccounted for in national policies, which do not recognize or support their activities as resource managers, despite the central role they play in the shea value chain.



Village mapping workshop in Kassena-Nankana West District in the Upper East region, Ghana. CIFOR/Axel Fassio

“Increased market demand for shea was shifting patterns of resource access and benefits, a change that warranted greater attention by villagers and development actors,” Cronkleton said. “Women were reporting that they were losing control over income from some of the most productive shea trees as some men claimed shea nuts or derivative income for themselves.”

Traditionally at the core of the shea nut industry, women not only tend the trees and gather the nuts, but they shell and grind them into butter before selling them at market. While used locally for cooking, recently export demand for use in chocolate and cosmetics has grown. In response, men have become increasingly interested in the economic potential.

In another break with tradition, men were increasingly collecting shea wood for sale as fuel. Villagers suspected that fires were deliberately set in the parklands to damage the trees, so they could be removed without violating local regulations designed to protect live trees.

This posed a challenge for women who rely on shea to feed their families and for income. Regarded as a “women’s crop,” there was stigma attached to the idea of men selling it at market, but buyers began visiting villages to make their purchases, paving the way for greater male involvement.



Shea butter production process near Chiana, Kassena-Nankana West District, Ghana. CIFOR/Axel Fassio

Participants learned that increased demand for shea products and trees was changing social and environmental conditions in a traditionally male-dominated society, putting women under pressure, and revealing the need to reframe attitudes about gender.

The WAFFI approach, which included participatory activities and multi-stakeholder forums organized by researchers and driven by the interests of local communities, led to discussions between men and women around three crucial topics: shea access and management; fuelwood and bushfires. Other themes that emerged in meetings, roundtables and workshops focused on discussions of women’s

access to land and how traditional land distribution systems are changing. Local leaders, traditional chiefs and NGO stakeholders all listened and contributed.

“We learned from participants that shea resources were being depleted in communal parklands and forest reserves,” Cronkleton said. “Customary systems of land and tree tenure can constrain women’s access to resources, while national policies don’t acknowledge or support their roles as resource managers.”

Some proposed ideas forged out of forum sessions were that local cooperatives could provide loans and shea processing equipment to all women producers. Another suggestion was that women should run for both political and community leadership positions, allowing them to engage more directly in governance processes.

“The formation of these ideas, through social learning, could ultimately lead to greater inclusion of women and give them a stronger voice in the formation of policies that affect shea,” said Kristen Evans, a CIFOR associate scientist and a participatory methods expert who was involved in the WAFFI project.

The WAFFI participatory approach took place in three stages over the three years. The first involved training for villagers who became facilitators. The second involved participatory action research approaches with additional training exercises, village exchange meetings and a multi-stakeholder workshop. The third involved exchange meetings and multi stakeholder workshops where participants shared experiences and information.

It became apparent that men were reluctant to admit they were excluding women from the most productive trees, since shea is considered women’s work. Through the process, women began monitoring their shea-gathering practices, ultimately demonstrating that while they were still harvesting, men were frequently claiming the fruit and only giving a share to the women.

“Women are being excluded from the income, not from the resource, itself,” Cronkleton said. “Through grassroots dialogue and participation, a conversation can begin over common concerns and possible solutions with the overall goal of ensuring concerns are addressed in policies by decision makers.”

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