Improving sheabutter processing and marketing to benefit rural women in the Bongo District of Ghana

by Dominic Avea and Joe Nchor

The local innovation

Ms Nsobila Atingabono is a 41-year-old housewife with a family of eight persons who lives in Tamolga, a small farming community in the Bongo District of northern Ghana. She grows millet, maize, guinea corn, groundnuts, Bambara groundnuts, cowpea and vegetables for household consumption and sells the surplus for income. However, because declining soil fertility has led to low crop yields, she – like most other women in the area – often could not produce enough food to last her family for the whole year, while the income earned from other sources of livelihood was not enough to meet the family’s economic needs. Therefore, Ms Atingabono joined the local Asongtaba No. 1 Women’s Group about 20 years ago to process and sell shea butter so that she could better cater for her family’s food and economic needs. However, because the group was producing shea butter with a slightly grey to dark colour, it could not compete with that of other shea butter-processing groups to attract good prices and sales.

In 2012, Ms Atingabono experimented on her own using a saltpetre solution to wash the sheanuts before processing, as she suspected that the poor quality of the butter was due to the use of black nuts that were not clean enough for processing into good-quality shea butter. She also added tamarind fruit extract to the liquid oil at the final stage of processing. This filtered the oil by settling the impurities before the butter solidified. She then saw that the butter produced from the sheanuts treated with saltpetre and tamarind fruit extract during the processing had a much better colour and taste than did the shea butter made from the untreated nuts. After repeating the process and getting the same positive results, she adopted the procedure as a way to improve the quality of her shea butter, and then introduced this innovation to the other members of her group.
**PID to increase women’s benefits from the innovation**

In 2016, in the framework of the Promoting local innovation in Food and Nutrition Security (Proli-FaNS) project supported by Misereor/KZE (Catholic Central Agency for Development Aid), this innovation was identified and selected by a team from NABOCADO (Navrongo-Bolgatanga Catholic Diocesan Development Organization, the local NGO partner coordinating the project in Bongo District) and the District Department of Agriculture together with local innovation groups (involving both women and men), based on jointly agreed criteria, for further development in a participatory innovation development (PID) process. If successfully developed, it will be widely promoted to help address problems of food and nutritional insecurity experienced by women in the Bongo area. Sheabutter processing is a major income-earning activity of many women in the area; this was an important criterion for selecting this case for PID.

Despite the women’s ability to process very clean and high-quality butter thanks to Ms Atingabono’s innovation, they still faced problems in producing enough to make a good income on the market. The group was processing sheabutter manually with simple equipment (a pot in a tripod over an open fire), which made the work very time-consuming, produced low volumes and therefore increased production costs, especially if the labour time was taken into account. In 2017, the group agreed to work together with a team made up of two female extension officers from the Bongo District Department of Agriculture (DoA) and a male extension officer from NABOCADO in a PID process to:

- reduce drudgery in sheabutter processing and increase the processing capacity by trying out improved roasting equipment;
- increase sales of and revenue from the sheabutter by facilitating better market access and linkages; and
- improve the income status, livelihood security, and nutritional and health conditions of the women and their families.

The team designed and planned the PID jointly with the women’s group. It also trained the group in an improved technique of roasting the shea kernels and identified large external buyers to which they linked the group. To reduce the drudgery in roasting and to increase the volume processed, the women’s group tried out a fabricated roasting machine provided through the Local Innovation Support Facility (LISF) under the Proli-FaNS project. They compared the use of the tripod and the fabricated roaster with respect to experience of heat during the roasting and the effort exerted to turn the crushed nuts in the pot and in the roaster. At the end, the introduced sheabutter processing methods proved more efficient and productive, and they could thus produce and sell more sheabutter and increase their income.

**Resulting changes in Ms Atingabono’s life**

The joint process of the Asongtaba Women’s Group and the PID team in improving sheabutter processing and marketing has significantly improved the food security and economic situation of Ms Atingabono and her group members, as well as of other sheabutter processors in the community. Within two years of the introduction of the roasting equipment, about 150 other women are now using this new processing method to produce high-quality sheabutter for sale. Previously, Ms Atingabono and her group members could not give their families three meals a day throughout the year, but now they can provide them regularly with nutritious meals by using the increased income from their sheabutter enterprises.

Ms Atingabono calculated that she used to produce five bowls of sheabutter in a week but, after the PID process which made two roasters available to the entire group to use in turns, she now produces 20 bowls a week. She receives frequent orders from various individuals and supermarkets in Accra to supply sheabutter produced by her and the other group members. Although marketing still leaves...
room for improvement, she has noted an increase in her weekly earnings. She now spends Ghanaian Cedi (GHS) 180 to buy raw sheanuts, GHS 15 on fuelwood and GHS 10 on milling, giving a total cost of GHS 205, and she sells the 20 kg of butter produced at GHS 300, yielding a net profit of GHS 95 (almost €16) per production cycle. She said: “Now I save GHS 20 every week in the group Savings and Internal Learning Concept (SILC) box, spend GHS 50 per week to feed my children and have invested some of my income from the sheabutter into petty trading of cooking ingredients.” She has rented a store in the Soe market, two kilometres from Tamolga community, for her retailing business.

She summarised her joy about how the PID experience influenced her life as follows: “I cook delicious meals for my family three times a day all the time. My children are in school and don’t lack anything. I have a mobile phone to make calls and receive orders. I don’t rely on my husband for money, so he respects me more than before. I participate in funerals and festivals very well, as I can buy the clothes required for such occasions. I am very happy and grateful to NABOCADO and the PID team for opening my eyes and improving my life.”

Unexpected outcomes of the process

Ms Atingabono’s innovation and the PID experience increased cohesion among the members of the Asongtaba Women’s Group, making it better structured, stronger and more united, and thereby enabled them to determine prices and conduct sales together. The strength of the group led the Regional Agriculture Extension Officer and the Bongo District Director of DoA to link the group to an opportunity for training in entrepreneurship capacity and to obtain a sheanut crusher from the Korean International Cooperation Agency (KOICA) project operating in northern Ghana. In addition, the group constructed a small local aggregation and processing centre for sheabutter in the community in order to enhance their processing activities. The group is also registered with the Department of Cooperatives to operate as a legally recognised cooperative society and is now able to access credit facilities to support their businesses.

Main lesson learnt

The case of Ms Atingabono and the Asongtaba Women’s Group reveals that, when local innovations are recognised and further developed in a participatory way and disseminated, they can trigger rural development and improve the economic status of the innovators and other farmers who learn from them.