

Agriculture and ICT From the traditional to a modern harvest: An upgrading of the skills of rural women

by: Ramata Soré

Strengthening the economic power of women members of the Songtaaba-yalgré association has been achieved through upgrading their skills using information and communications technology (ICT). The result: New skills acquired and a big increase in the value added of local products.

Songtaaba-yalgré, an association that specializes in production of karite butter, has trained its members in the use of new technologies. Its goal is to raise production standards and output of a quality butter product.

“Using a global positioning system (GPS), we have set boundaries for fields and established the number of feet of karite trees, and the area of the fields,” says Marguerite Simporé, the animator who is responsible for GPS training.

She was trained by an expert from Europe and now she is passing along her knowledge to other rural women. “I did not go to a modern school; but now that I can use GPS, I am training the women in other villages.”

GPS uses a small electronic module to establish positions using satellites. It provides the geographic coordinates of the karite fields worked by the women. Those who gather the karite nuts in the fields fill out a data sheet that identifies the point of origin of the karite nuts.

“If the women do not correctly complete the collection of information or comply with the harvesting instructions, we refuse to accept the nuts because we can’t be sure that they come from the organic fields that have been identified using GPS,” insists Awa Sawadogo, a Songtaaba-yalgré leader.

Certified products

Six villages located within a hundred kilometres of Ouagadougou, the political capital of Burkina Faso, have been designated as organic areas. Those six are Boussé, Boulsin, Saponé, Siglé, Gampéla, and Kombissiri. In those regions, no artificial substances are used in food production. Millet, sorghum, beans, peas and peanuts are the chief products of this area. The karite trees in the fields where the food crops are grown are nourished by natural sources: donkey and horse manure and kitchen wood ashes. The women gather the karite nuts that have fallen from those trees.

When crushed and processed, after cooking, the karite nuts produce a vegetable butter or fat. Conversion into organic butter conforms to high standards of cleanliness, preparation and processing. Stainless implements and precision instruments such as a thermometer are required.

“In our region, our association is the only one with this expertise,” Noélie Ndembé states proudly. She is the project leader for information and promotion of karite (Miproka).

She says, “We are ready to market that expertise.”

Almost 400,000 women in Burkina Faso are involved in the production of karite butter. They are members of women’s groups, associations or small family businesses. Karite is Burkina Faso’s third largest export after cotton and livestock. In 2003, exports of karite almonds amounted to almost \$12 million. According to the Ministry of Agriculture, Burkina Faso produces more than 80,000 tonnes per year. For the women of Burkina Faso, this rich crop is a source of income that helps to improve living conditions in rural areas. The karite tree (*Butyrospermum Parkii*) grows wild in the tree savannas of western and central Africa. It is found in Nigeria, Burkina Faso, Chad and Senegal. A karite tree can grow for up to 300 years and produces fruit after 15 years of growth. Average annual production is between 15 and 20 kilos of fresh fruit per tree each season.

The fruit is green in colour. Inside the nut is a very oily whitish almond. This is what provides karite butter after processing. Karite butter moistens, softens, protects, heals and beautifies the skin with its rich content of vitamins A, D, E, and K. Mothers use the butter on babies to prevent or cure skin irritations and to protect them against the dry harmattan winds.

Exports of karite butter to western countries have increased greatly since 2002, when the association obtained a quality label, Bio-Ecocert and Bio-NOP. These certified labels guarantee a 100% natural product that has been produced under conditions that respect the environment and human health. These two labels make it possible for Songtaaba to export its products to Europe, to Canada and the United States. Demand is strong in both the cosmetic and Agri-food markets. A significant share of Songtaaba’s organic production goes to a Canadian company that makes beauty and skin care products.

Exports of karite butter are also used in the manufacture of food products. Since 2003, karite butter has been used in the European Union in making candy and chocolate at the rate of between 40,000 and 60,000 tonnes per year. This opens another, new market for the women who produce karite butter.

Organic karite butter is different from ordinary karite butter. “There are no restrictions on harvesting or processing of ordinary butter,” emphasizes Awa Sawadogo. Over time, the odour of ordinary butter can change, and eating such butter can be bad for one’s health. Organic butter is free from any traces of pesticide. It has a higher nutritional value and a longer period of use. In terms of price, there is also a clear difference. A kilo of organic butter sells for 2,500 CFA Francs, while a kilo of ordinary butter sells for 1,000 CFA Francs. Songtaaba produces 30 to 50 tonnes of organic butter each month, as well as about 60 tonnes of ordinary butter.

Organic karite is winning over the world

The association sells the bulk of its karite production by means of its Web site, <http://www.songtaaba.net>.

“Previously, we produced karite butter without an export market. Production was variable because clients were not consistent. Now, we have regular buyers and 90% of our orders come via the Internet, using an order form on our Web site. Our sales are increasing year after year. In 2004, we exported 30 tonnes and in 2005, 10 tonnes. That drop was due to internal problems,” explains Noélie Ndembé, project leader for information and promotion of karite (Miproka).

The objective of the Web site, “is to give visibility to the activities of rural women and to promote our products,” says Noélie Ndembé. The association Web site has been on line since 2002. For Songtaaba- yalgré, being on the Web means “Having a presence everywhere in the world.” The association exchanges information about its products with any organization or person who asks for it. The association looks for international trade fairs and takes part whenever possible.

Thanks to ICT, Songtaaba-yalgré is again diversifying its activities. Seeking once more to conquer national and international markets, Songtaaba-yalgré has introduced organic karite almond jam, which is available in two types: sugar free and with honey. The jam ingredients include honey, lemon juice and organic karite almonds. The jam is sold in 375g jars. At present, the jam sells for 1,300 CFA Francs per jar.

“The price will go down if we succeed in securing a strong national market,” insists Chantal Ouédraogo-Bernatchez, who is studying to obtain a Masters degree in industrial engineering in Canada and working on assignment at Songtaaba.

“It is a very rich and nourishing product for children and adults, and it’s a home-grown product. They are already familiar with it. Our challenge is to make it part of their daily diet.”

Miproka, promoting and informing about karite

In a move to give its activities wider visibility, Songtaaba-yalgré, with the support of the International Institute for Communication and Development (IICD) has implemented a five-year public education project, known as “Miproka.” Bousse and Saponé, villages located about 50 km from Ouagadougou are the centres of this pilot project. Both centres have been provided with two computers, connected to the Internet, a scanner, photocopier and a telephone.

“These computers are connecting tools. They are a means of communication between the villages and our group at Ouagadougou,” says Noélie Ndembé.

Thanks to these Internet connections in rural homes, Songtaaba-yalgré has access to a wider range of sources and is able to quickly move information between its central office and field units. ICT makes it easier to spread

knowledge in terms of karite butter production, and improves the quality of production of by-products, such as soap and pomade.

A better life for women

ICT plays a role in making karite production more profitable for the women of the Songtaaba-yalgré association. Buyers pay 500 CFA Francs for 2.5 kilos of organic karite nuts. The organic advantage is clearly seen since same quantity of ordinary karite nuts sells for 200 CFA Francs. The women who harvest organic are paid more than twice the price of ordinary nuts. This impressive difference encourages more women to choose the organic route to better returns.

“I now have a bicycle. I can get around more easily, and now I can help to pay family expenses, which used to be difficult,” says a smiling Marguerite Simporé.

Thanks to this organic karite nut project, some rural women in Burkina Faso have been able to take control of their economic situation.

The motto *Une femme, un revenu*, (an income for every woman) has been the driving force behind the activities of Songtaaba-yalgré since 1998. The women use karite nuts to develop different products, such as certified organic soaps, creams and pomades. For these women, karite has become a financially rewarding green gold.

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