

## Allanblackia – scaling up a new non-timber forest product

Unilever

Launched in Ghana, the ‘Novella Africa’ initiative seeks to extract oil from the Allanblackia tree on a commercial scale in a way that benefits the local population. This tree grows in the wet tropical forests of sub-Saharan Africa, producing pineapple-sized fruits with many seeds rich in an oil with unique properties that can be used to produce food products and soap. Local communities already use the oil but, until now, it has never been used on a commercial scale.

Together with The World Conservation Union, Netherlands Development Organisation (SNV) and The World Agroforestry Centre (ICRAF), Unilever is helping local communities and small businesses to cultivate the seeds. By creating this opportunity for rural, often remote, communities, this growing partnership will provide an additional and sustainable source of income, thus contributing to the fight against poverty.

The overall aim of the project is to contribute to the sustainable development and trade of a new forest-based commodity that can help economic development by diversifying income sources, improving livelihoods of poor rural communities and fostering sustainable tropical forest management. Specifically, the project provides mechanisms to ensure sustainable harvesting of Allanblackia and equitable sharing of benefits among stakeholders.

The initiative now operates in three countries and its impact is steadily increasing, helping to create sustainable livelihoods wherever the Allanblackia tree is indigenous. Setting up an efficient and effective rural supply chain is the core activity and challenge of the initiative. This public-private partnership was formed to do this and grow the volume.

Harrie Hendrickx of Unilever R&D, Vlaardingen commented “Normally, we want to be at the end, not the beginning, of the supply chain, but here was very good potential for a new raw material which would be of value to us and other manufacturers. To get it into a supply chain, someone had to step up to the mark to make things happen. Unilever played that catalytic role. It was an opportunity to launch things so that our African partners could develop it into a real opportunity for the continent.”

By working in partnership, the quality and reliability of the supply chain can be secured. Local NGO partners ensure that the partnership operates in a participatory, transparent and equitable manner and that the rural communities receive the majority of the financial benefits and support for community development. Women, in particular, have been encouraged to participate at all levels and children encouraged to go to schools.

The project’s target group include poor rural communities. As primary collectors and sellers of Allanblackia seeds, they are at the centre of the supply-chain model needed for the production and trade of the oil and the target beneficiaries of the project. Local small-scale private sector companies, haulage contractors, nurserymen, input suppliers and millers will also see benefits. The project is unusual in the way it was set up with local communities and small businesses, in cooperation with non-profit development partners and local governments, to provide an additional and sustainable source of income for rural communities.

Unilever’s most important objectives in this project are obtaining a new raw material from sustainable source, ensuring the quality of the oil and making the business profitable to all involved, especially the rural partners. Apart from taking the original initiative for the project, Unilever is providing a market for the finished products, to be used in the manufacture of consumer products, guaranteeing long-term demand and fair prices.

Through the development of this product, the importance of biodiversity conservation for sustainable livelihoods in this area will be demonstrated, promoting environmentally friendly behaviour as a priority for local development. The project will help to achieve greater sustainability in the region by using Allanblackia trees where previously “slash and burn” methods have been practised. Cutting of trees will be discouraged. Communities are encouraged to harvest the wild seeds while planting new trees to create a sustainable supply of seeds and planting of other trees will be stimulated. To that end, local nurseries will be supported to raise trees.

Aware of the effects that large-scale monoculture (palm oil) plantations can have on the local biodiversity, this project has the potential to contribute to the global public good by enhancing the overall well being of the tropical forest belt in Africa.

Unilever is also looking at sustainability by ensuring the project has strong local ownership. “We are actively looking at where the partnership needs Unilever and where it can start to become more independent. You can’t do that in a day and so we are helping grow the partnership to that stage of development.”

At a national level, developing a new export commodity like this will add value to a country’s national resources and have a significant relevance for furthering pan-African economic development through expected south-south markets, poverty reduction and sustainable forest management.

Many technical lessons have been learned as a result of this as a simple research and supply chain development project, but the most important learnings have been over and above this around cross-sector partnership working: the need to spend time building the team at the outset, recognising the balance of skills and competencies that different partners bring to the table, the ability to help each other grow as equal partners and the importance of a set of guiding principles to avoid difficulties. As Harrie Hendrickx recollects: “Partnerships are complex and it is a fine line between using as few partners as possible, but as many as is necessary to work well. None of this is rocket science, but you just have to be sure you do it.”

Apart from the core-team, more than forty organisations: NGOs, small African businesses, government organisations and rural African leaders, support the initiative as partners in different countries, as a result of the work conducted in Ghana.

This partnership project will fight the loss of tropical forests, create jobs and develop local communities by initiating a sustainable and profitable supply chain for a novel non-timber forest product.