

Editorial: small-scale food processing

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The focus of this issue is small-scale food processing, which is reflected in a diverse range of articles, all of which concern developments in Africa. With billions of dollars of investment currently pouring into the continent, this seems like a good time to be an African food processor. China, Africa's largest trade partner, is refocusing investment away from energy and transport towards renewables, including agriculture and food processing. India has announced a \$5 billion loans package to Africa as well as \$700 million for new institutions and training programmes, and a Brazilian investment bank plans a \$1 billion investment fund for Africa, focusing on areas that include agriculture. In the US, a consortium of three multinational food companies has offered 50,000 hours of employee volunteers' time to share technical and business knowledge with 250 food processors in Eastern and Southern Africa and share best practices in food processing with African organizations who will support further development of the sector. A \$300 million private equity African Agriculture Fund has been set up to provide technical assistance for agribusiness, including rural entrepreneurship programmes and technology and business advice for food-processing enterprises. For SMEs, which make up most of the food sector, this involves capacity development to access finance, entrepreneurship training, financial literacy, and business planning.

The importance of financial planning is emphasized in an article in this issue by Claire Coote, who describes an assessment of the financial viability of small-scale sweet potato processing in Uganda. She notes that although financial feasibility is crucial, other factors should also be considered, including technical parameters and ease of finding markets. She identifies constraints as the relatively limited period during the year that chip drying can take place, access to, and the cost of, chipping machines, and the limited market for the produce in Kampala. The paper summarizes the experiences of producers, provides a break-even cost of chip processing, and sets out issues that need to be addressed by implementing organizations, particularly the true costs of processing.

Support for training is a key area of the current investment boom and training is central to the work of many support organizations. It features in two articles in this issue. Martin Hilmi reports on a training programme in Tanzania for owner/managers of small and medium agri-food enterprises. He describes how adapting training methods and materials requires an in-depth understanding of trainees' needs and how these can be appraised and diagnosed. Workshops were specifically designed so that they did not overtly appear to address training needs and this approach was found to give considerable in-depth insights into the real needs of participants. This allowed training methods and materials to be adapted to suit the social and cultural contexts in which the participants operate. The focus was on

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enabling and empowering owners and managers to become co-trainers, building on their knowledge, attitudes, skills and behaviours when doing business. The resulting training was practical, interactive, highly verbal, and used pictorial images that were socially and culturally sensitive. The results of this approach were improved competencies in business management and processing techniques, which resulted in increased distribution networks, sales and revenue.

In the second article, I and my colleagues, Mike Dillon, Michael Lubowa and Barrie Axtell, report on a sustainable approach to food processing training in Uganda. The paper identifies the internal and external constraints on small-scale processors and describes the training components that were used to address these. In a similar way to the experiences reported by Martin Hilmi, we found that developing the skills of small business owners so that they could design and hold their own training programmes was a successful strategy. This in turn led to the adoption of the training approach by other local organizations to assist development of the food processing sector in the country.

There are many intermediary organizations and private sector companies that source raw materials such as tree products and supply them as foods, or ingredients in cosmetics, to markets in industrialized countries. In this issue, two papers examine small-scale tree butter production in West Africa: first Paulin Azokpota and colleagues describe variations in the traditional processing of butter tree seeds in northern Benin to produce a product that is similar to shea butter. A survey of 192 butter processors found three different pre-treatments and 10 processing methods, including six newly recorded methods. Secondly, Nigel Poole and Rebecca Kent examine the role that shea butter processing in northern Ghana has in contributing to poverty reduction, food security and sustainable development. They note that in the shea sector, environmental conservation, income generation, and gender equity potentially meet in a 'triple-win' situation. The article examines interventions at two stages of the value chain: shea harvesting and processing. Both involved local innovations in chain organization: the first to improve nut prices and quality through organic certification; and the second by organizing women processors into cooperative groups to improve their access to markets and processing machinery. The study found that collective organization helped overcome issues of small scale of operation and quality control at the primary processing stage and that linking producer groups to buyers at the secondary processing stage helped increase incomes. Finally, Mary Obodai and colleagues document the steps involved in processing kenkey, a traditional Ghanaian dumpling. The preparation and sale of this popular local food is almost exclusively the preserve of women, and it provides considerable employment in Ghana's informal sector.

These papers highlight some of the opportunities and difficulties of operating a small-scale food processing enterprise in Africa. Of course, the current surge in goodwill and billions of investment dollars does not come from altruistic investors or those without self-interest, and it remains to be seen whether this heightened level of support is able to trickle down and materially assist the types of small-scale food processors described in these studies.

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