

She sells Shea

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The shea tree grows wild in a belt across Africa south of the Sahara. Mali, Nigeria, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Benin and Togo have the highest population of shea trees. These are also some of the poorest and least developed countries in the world. Women have collected the fallen shea nuts for centuries and extracted the oils and other components using traditional techniques, for use in cooking, soap and cosmetics. They sell the surplus to improve their standard of living. Shea butter has been called “women’s gold” not only for its colour, but also because of the income it provides across the continent.

Women all over the world are recognising the benefits of natural cosmetics and increasing numbers are choosing traditional plant derived products in preference to those made from mineral oils. Shea butter is very attractive, not only as an effective skin moisturiser, but also because it contains antioxidants, which are reputed to have anti-aging properties. It has become increasingly popular with both niche and international brands who are using it in skin care products. These brands need to be sure that the shea is sourced sustainably. They are responding to customers who want their purchase to help people in the developing world whilst protecting forests and natural habitats.

Sustainability certification with ISCC PLUS, a strong and trusted sustainability scheme, provides this reassurance. ISCC certification guarantees fully traceable and deforestation free supply chains, which protect biodiversity and people’s rights. ISCC developed a certification approach especially for shea supply chains. This allows the millions of women collecting shea nuts to be included into the certification.

Women in Burkina Faso are being helped by AAK to access new customers. AAK (AarhusKarlshamn) of Sweden is one of the world’s leading producers of speciality vegetable fats with 20 production

facilities in Europe and the Americas and over 3,000 employees. The 2016 net sales volumes of AAK were approx. €2.2 bn. The main business areas of the company are food ingredients, chocolate & confectionery, dairy, personal care and more. AAK, which has a mission to help rural communities, smallholders and small businesses in the agricultural sector, has chosen ISCC for certification of shea kernels. Over more



than 60 years, AAK has gained extensive knowledge and experience of this raw material and the local communities in which AAK operates. Henrik Vingaard, AAK’s Sourcing & Trading Director says ‘shea kernels are a very important and unique raw material for AAK. We work with the women who collect

the shea kernels, building capacity in local communities. AAK's work in these areas includes interest-free micro credits and the formation and teaching of women's groups in villages, and by doing direct business with us, the women have been able to markedly improve their income. ISCC certification shows that our processes have been scrutinized by an outside auditor and gives our customers further assurance'.

The shea kernels gathered by the women are stored in warehouses and then sent by sea to the AAK plant in Aarhus Denmark where the kernels are crushed and shea butter is extracted. The shea butter is split into liquid and solid oils for different applications. Shea oils supplied by AAK are also used within the chocolate and confectionary business and in many dairy and bakery products.

Assuring that shea kernel collection, with its supply chain, meets ISCC's high standards needs the skills of an experienced auditor. The certification of the AAK supply chains has been carried out by SGS, the world's largest inspection, verification, testing and certification company. SGS auditors went



out into the field to hold informal interviews with the women collectors and the small local companies who transport and store the shea kernels. They check on the pre-finance that AAK gives them for the shea kernels. The opportunity to receive pre-financing, fair prices, the logistical support and direct trade with AAK further strengthen the empowerment of the women and village communities. The women receive training on how to avoid hazards like snake bites, they may encounter when they go out into the bush.

Measures to improve the first processing step of the shea conducted by the women in the villages, and to reduce the risk of boiling burns, have been taken. More efficient stoves have been built that use less wood and water, and methods are applied to improve the quality of the shea kernels. The auditor says 'the women explained the practice of collecting shea nuts. This has been part of women's lives in West Africa for centuries as shea trees grow all over the region. Some of the nuts are used locally and the surplus is sold to provide an income for the women.'

The demand for natural, plant-based cosmetics is still increasing. AAK has helped the women of West Africa to provide shea butter to big international cosmetic brands and get a good reward - because they're worth it!