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## Shea Trees and Shea Butter

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To: Patrick Higdon &lt;phigdon@worldconnect-us.org&gt;

Shea trees (Vitellaria trees) grow naturally in the Savannah belt of Western Africa, and Mali is the second largest producer of shea after Burkina Faso. They produce fruit/nuts for nearly 200 years after the 25 year maturation process. The trees grow wildly across Mali and women have been collecting from the wild trees but, in more recent years, the tree has begun to be planted intentionally for the collection of the fruit to make shea butter. Shea trees are key to the economy of Mali because "shea represents 80% of rural women's incomes" (<http://www.ipsnews.net/2010/04/mali-shea-production-vital-to-womens-incomes/>).

Shea butter, made from the nuts of the shea tree, can be used in many ways and there are many opportunities for the women of Mali to profit from it. In western cultures, shea butter is primarily used in cosmetics and lotions as a moisturizer. In Africa, shea butter is able to be used as food and as a source of dietary fat. Many Africans also use shea butter for cooking or medicinal purposes. Medicinal purposes include acting as an ointment, nasal decongestant, and pain reliever when massaged to joints that are experiencing pain.

There is a lengthy process to make the shea tree fruit into shea butter. Once the fruit is picked, the "outer pulp" (the actual fruit part) is removed. This leaves the nut and the shell, which must be left out to dry. Once it is dry, the outer shell is removed, which leaves only the nut. Next, the shea nuts are crushed, traditionally using mortar and pestle. The crushed nuts are then roasted, and after they are cooked, they are ground into a smoother paste and are mixed with water to separate the oils. The butter floats to the top and is removed. Then, the butter is rolled into balls and ready to be sold. For this project in Mali, with the building of five shea butter storage units, the women would then be able to store their excess shea butter, keep track of inventory, and better operate their business.

Storage for these 45 cooperatives at five storage units would also allow the parent organization to broaden the spectrum of potential buyers. Many companies that buy the shea butter wish to buy it in tons rather than kilograms, which can't be accomplished by any of the smaller coops on their own. With all of them collectively working on these five storage units, larger companies will be more likely to buy their shea butter, which will bring them much more money than smaller scale buyers.