

Private–public partnerships can achieve sustainable and equitable development

October 2008



Harrie Hendrickx (Unilever, The Netherlands) visiting a family involved in collecting *Allanblackia* seeds in Western Province in Ghana. Photo © Cyril Kattah (NDGL, Ghana)

Mature *Allanblackia* fruit. Photo © Tony Simons (ICRAF, Nairobi)



What does an international consumer product company based in the Netherlands have in common with subsistence farmers living in West Africa?

The answer is a little brown seed.

In 2000, Unilever noticed that local people in Ghana used an edible oil made from *Allanblackia* tree seeds. The company soon discovered that this could substitute for palm oil as an excellent base in many of its consumer products, for example margarine and soap.

Two years later, Unilever joined forces with leading conservation and development organizations, as well as local communities, small-scale businesses and local governments to form "*The Novella Partnership*". The partnership aims to extract, on a commercial scale, oil from the seeds of the *Allanblackia* tree. It exemplifies the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development's insistence that private–public partnerships are essential to achieving global goals of sustainable and equitable development.

The initiative depends on local subsistence farmers who either harvest the seeds from the trees directly or who act as focal points for business partners to collect the seeds harvested by other farmers. Ghana alone has 200 such focal



points with up to 4,000 collectors. It is foreseen that by 2011 the partnership will involve 30,000 farmers in five countries generating a total income of US\$2,000,000. This translates into the average small-scale farmer earning an extra US\$175 a year by 2015.

Ghana is the first country to implement the entire production process from seed gathering and crushing through to the production of consumer products, but Nigeria and Tanzania have started to mirror this success. Cameroon and Liberia may follow soon.

For IUCN, the initiative offers a unique opportunity to ensure that environmental sustainability and social equity are embedded in the supply chain of an internationally traded commodity from the outset. In Ghana and Tanzania, the planting of Allanblackia trees is increasing from several thousand to about 100,000 trees a year and is being incorporated into forest landscape restoration projects.

Besides initiating the partnership, Unilever is providing a market for the finished product. The company guarantees purchase of sustainably produced Allanblackia seeds at a pre-agreed price and transports the crude oil to Rotterdam in the Netherlands where it is processed into consumer products. "Since more than 70 per cent of Unilever's raw materials come from agriculture, any new supply chain would have to

Storm-damaged Allanblackia tree reshooting.
Photo © Fidelis Rutatina (NDTL, Tanzania)

Mr Isaac Quarm of Unilever Ghana Ltd showing an exceptionally large Allanblackia fruit.
Photo © Harrie Hendrickx (Unilever, The Netherlands)

Allanblackia fruit cut in half showing the seeds.
Photo © Tony Simons (ICRAF, Nairobi)

be sustainable from the start", says Harrie Hendrickx, project leader for Unilever.

This guarantee enables the whole Allanblackia supply chain to work with confidence towards growing the business and reaping the social and environmental benefits.

The first Allanblackia oil-based Unilever products are expected to be launched in 2008. "It has been very rewarding for me to build this project," says Hendrickx. "It developed slowly, but we are committed to staying in Africa and to making this project a success. It takes time but in the end it will affect many lives in a more sustainable manner. People involved in the project recognise this and so are enthusiastic in helping to shape a brighter future."

For more information, please contact: forests@iucn.org

FOREST CONSERVATION PROGRAMME

