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**The Nuts and Bolts of a Theory on NTFP Trade and Marketing —  
The Case of Shea (*Vitellaria paradoxa*) Products from  
Sub-Saharan Africa**

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**Abstract**

As part of an EU/INCO funded cross-disciplinary research project on “Improved Management of Agroforestry Parkland Systems in Sub-Saharan Africa”, trade and marketing practices of products from the shea butter tree (*Vitellaria paradoxa*) have been analysed over the last three-years. The study has been carried out in Africa (Mali, Burkina Faso, Nigeria and Uganda) and Europe (Germany, France, the Netherlands, United Kingdom).

Shea (French: karité) provides an annual bounty of nutritious fruit to rural communities esp. during the agricultural off-season. Seeds of the fruit contain a high percentage of edible oil: the shea butter. This vegetable fat is an important nutritional and economic resource for households of Western African parklands. In traditional societies throughout the zone, it is the women who are primarily responsible for collection of shea nut, as well as its processing and marketing. Exports of shea nut from West Africa constitute a significant proportion of export earnings for some countries.

The majority of exported shea is exported as raw nut though, and processed industrially for subsequent use in the food industry, mainly as a cocoa butter equivalent (CBE) in European chocolate production. A recent EU regulation allows that up to 5% of the cocoa butter content in chocolate can be replaced by CBEs. Contrary to widespread expectations this has not led to an increased demand for shea butter. Marketing constraints have inhibited the expected boost in shea export from West Africa: unsteady supplies, poor quality of semi-finished products, low prices of alternative vegetable fats originating from South-East Asian plantations to name just the most prominent factors. Yet, growing neglect of shea tree stands causes not only an economic damage, but threatens the conservation of the parklands so typical to West Africa.

The results give insights into social and economic aspects of current shea use and trade. Together with results of the biological research carried out under the same project, they facilitate any attempts to improve marketing strategies of shea products that are not only economically viable but also socially adequate. European niche markets for biological and fair trade products appear to hold the highest potential in this respect.

**Keywords:** Burkina Faso, fair trade, Mali, marketing, Nigeria, non-timber forest products (NTFP), trade, Uganda, *Vitellaria paradoxa*