



RADD: Empowering Rural Women in Cameroon Through Local Agricultural Processing

By Mercy Dedaa Osei, for ROOTS.

2025/05/21

The rosy hue of sunlight blankets the village square as a group of women, their headscarves a delicate colour of pink, congregate like blossoms in a garden. Their laughter sways in the wind as they settle into rhythm—strong, practiced hands peeling away cassava bark, revealing the creamy flesh beneath. The consistent thud-thud of knives striking wooden boards blends with their chatter, a symphony of purpose. The pale cassava slices, salted and spiced with garlic, ginger, and onions, will be deep fried in oil until they are crispy, and their earthy sweetness curls into the air. Soon enough, the women will wrap the chips into attractive bags, each one a promise of crunch and flavor, ready to find its way into eager hands. The pink scarves flutter like petals in the wind, a vibrant signature of their pride—a harvest transformed, a day's labor turned into something beautiful.



These women are members of Réseau Des Acteurs Du Développement (Network of Sustainable Development Actors, as the French acronym “RADD”), a network of farmers from Cameroon founded in 2009 to strive for socio-economic and ecological justice. Specifically, RADD encourages its members to process their farm produce in order to add value and reduce post-harvest losses, which occur due to difficulties in accessing markets caused by poor transport logistics.

The organisation is well-known for its advocacy on behalf of communities impacted by major agro-industrial projects and small-scale farmers in their quest for seed sovereignty and the protection of indigenous seeds. RADD is not only a research and advocacy organisation. It mobilises women to improve their livelihoods and build autonomy. A case in point is the campaign to help women farmers protect and enhance the value of their farm produce through local processing, which mitigates post-harvest losses and diversifies income sources.



Women drying cassava leaves for preservation at Nyassi. Source: RADD

Marie Cresence Ngobo, the Executive Secretary of RADD, stated, "Rural women produce food in difficult conditions under the sun and in the rain. Regrettably, there are instances where they face considerable post-harvest losses, hindered by inadequate transport or storage infrastructure that prevents them from accessing marketing centres. The sole approach they can devise is to process and preserve their produce, thereby transforming what might otherwise be post-harvest losses into tangible incomes through processing". It enhances their produce and brings greater value to women in rural areas. They have



the potential to expand the range of markets available for their products. The availability of these finished or semi-finished products enables women in urban settings to maintain the preparation of traditional local dishes, thus playing a crucial role in the preservation of culinary heritage. Their products will undergo processing to ensure effective control and management of the production value chain. Equally, this initiative also enables the promotion of local products, which play an important role in the fight against economic injustices caused by the system.

Background of Cameroon

Cameroon is a nation positioned at the crossroads of West and Central Africa. It is the northern end of the Lower Guinea Forest Ecosystem, which includes the majestic Congo rainforest. Cameroon is celebrated for its rich climatic, geographical, and biological diversity, showcasing a variety of landscapes, including vibrant rainforests, dry savannas, lakes, towering mountains, and pristine sandy beaches. The people of Cameroon are extremely diverse, with 280 indigenous languages from the Niger-Congo, Nilo-Saharan, and Afro-Asiatic linguistic families spoken across the country's 475 thousand square kilometres and 30 million people. Cameroon is also one of the only six countries worldwide that uses both English and French as official languages.

The country's economy is structured like that of most of its neighbours. It exports primary products - oil, timber, and cash crops like palm oil, cocoa, coffee, bananas, and rubber. The cash crop export industry is foreign-controlled, with big trading houses that aggregate and sell products into the "global" market controlled by Western capital. This sector is important for state revenue and foreign exchange. Cameroon is a site for exploitative labour relations between foreign-owned and crony-owned corporations backed by the Cameroonian state on the one hand and Cameroonian workers and peasants on the other. It is also important to note that, in most Sub-Saharan African countries, women are predominantly involved in food crop production due to a combination of socio-cultural, economic, and institutional factors.

The dominant production sector in terms of employment and survival for most Cameroonians remains peasant food production. Some of the most commonly consumed foodstuffs are cassava, yams, plantains, rice, maize, beans, pepper, meat, fish, and vegetables (leafy greens like okra and spinach). Cameroonian cuisine is known for its bold flavors and variety, often incorporating ingredients fresh from local markets. Meals can vary significantly by region and cultural background, making the food landscape in Cameroon quite rich and diverse.

Agricultural production in Cameroon is affected by local and international class relations, and an accumulation of state policies under neo-colonial governments. Like in



other sister countries, indigenous food value chains have not received adequate support for financing, logistics development and market facilitation to support small-scale family farmers that are the backbone of the country's food economy.

Rural women, in particular, produce food crops in difficult, undignified, and backbreaking conditions. They toil under the sun and in the rain. They face many problems. For example, post-harvest losses can be as high as 50% due to inadequate storage, processing infrastructure, and knowledge reflecting generations of neglect by the governmental elite. Needless to say, there is active mobilisation on the part of smallholder women farmers to change the policy frameworks that affect food production and distribution. There is considerable opposition to the neoliberal paradigm within which Cameroon's governmental elite operates. Smallholder women farmers clamour for the recognition of their socioeconomic rights and against state neglect. This is where RADD comes into its own.

Agricultural Produce Processing

Agriculture constitutes the foundation of Cameroon's economy, contributing 15-20% to the GDP. It constitutes the predominant source of employment, encompassing around 60-70% of the workforce, particularly in rural areas. The agricultural sector enhances the domestic food supply by cultivating staples such as cassava, maize, plantains, yams, and rice. Including livestock, poultry, and fisheries to satisfy protein requirements. Agriculture plays a vital role in generating significant foreign income through the export of cash crops, including cocoa, coffee, cotton, bananas, palm oil, rubber, and timber, with smallholder farmers primarily engaged in production. It serves food processing industries and sectors that promote job creation and industrialisation. Despite its significance, agriculture is still largely undeveloped because of a shortage of financing, inadequate infrastructure, and - above all - the exploitative system under which it operates. Nevertheless, Agriculture plays a dual role; it sustains the livelihoods of the majority while serving as a key site of capitalist exploitation, surplus-value extraction, and imperialist dependence.

Since it was set up in 2009, RADD has trained more than 5,000 rural women in techniques for adding value to products from their family farms. From the Centre, South, East, Littoral, West, North, Extreme North, and Adamawa regions of Cameroon, the organization has conducted trainings that has enabled women to process cassava, cocoa, soya, tomatoes, plantain, banana, mangoes, pineapple, pawpaw, safou (butter fruit) into a variety of value added products - finished and semi-finished products. They incorporate a combination of traditional and modern processing methods that involve key processes like fermentation, drying, milling, and oil extraction. Using all these techniques to



transform food and give it a new lease of life. Their principle is not to use industrial chemicals (colourings, preservatives, coagulants, etc.).

As the pioneer of this process in RADD and among other spaces in Liberia, Gabon, and Côte d'Ivoire, for over 25 years, Marie Cresence Ngobo notes that the organisation has successfully trained numerous women and young people who have transformed into skilled local processors and trainers inside and outside the country.



Training on the processing and preservation of tomatoes at the RADD office - Yaoundé. Source: RADD



Training on cassava chips processing at Biyem-Assi. Source: RADD

Impacts of Local Agricultural Processing by Rural Women

This initiative benefits both rural women and the trainers who share their knowledge and experiences. First of all, the trainers derive joy and satisfaction from imparting their knowledge to others, and it also functions as their revenue stream. It enhances their self-affirmation.

Equally, training rural women in processing has social, economic, and environmental benefits. The initiative empowers women economically by creating employment opportunities and generating sustainable income through the processing of agricultural produce. By transforming raw goods into value-added products, it unlocks new market opportunities, boosting both local and regional trade.

Furthermore, the social impacts of transforming raw harvests into higher value-added goods that benefit entire communities enables rural women to be empowered through financial independence while preserving indigenous knowledge and improving nutrition.

Moreover, local agricultural processing offers significant environmental benefits by promoting the sustainable use of local resources and reducing waste through value addition, such as turning surplus or imperfect produce into juices, dried goods, or preserves, reducing food waste that would otherwise decompose on farms. This approach not only maximizes the utility of harvested crops but also encourages sustainable farming practices, ensuring that land and water resources are used efficiently while maintaining ecological balance.



Processed cassava chips and banana puff puff or doughnuts. Source: RADD

Challenges Faced by Rural Women in Local Agricultural Processing

Thousands of women across Cameroon are accessing this training, but it is not without challenges. Marie Cresence Ngobo reflects that this training equips women with an additional source of revenue; however, the women face challenges that necessitate a continuous collective approach to finding resolutions.

She notes that the first challenge for these rural women is one of accessing appropriate technology to attain a smooth operation of their work. Like many other rural areas, the gaps created by the saturation of resources and social amenities in urban cities are very visible and show the cracks and neglect of rural areas. In rural areas, the lack of electricity makes it costly to run operations.

Equally, women, and specifically rural women, are burdened with so many gender roles that time becomes a constraint in balancing all the necessary processes of an agricultural value-added product: cultivation, harvest, processing, promotion, marketing, and distribution of their processed products. Women already have numerous chores and family responsibilities, which leaves them with little time to either grow their businesses or rest; additionally, processing, being just one step in a lengthy series of operations, requires significant time and effort. And this reflects how it could also create challenges due to its high labour intensity.

In conclusion, RADD's work with rural women through localised processing will ultimately foster a circular economy that fully utilises raw materials, minimises waste, and significantly reduces environmental impact.



Reference

OECD (2021). Gender and Agriculture in Sub-Saharan Africa.

FAO (2019). The State of Food and Agriculture 2019: Moving Forward on Food Loss and Waste Reduction. Rome: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.

Kamga et al. (2013). "Post-harvest losses of agricultural produce in Cameroon: A case study of maize in the Upper Noun Valley." *Journal of Stored Products Research*, 55, 42–48.

African Development Bank (AfDB) (2021). Cameroon Country Strategy Paper 2021–2025.

Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). (2020). Country Programming Framework for Cameroon.
