

COMMENTARY

Women's NutriBusiness Cooperatives in Kenya – A Prologue

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My last visit to Kenya in the role of Principal Investigator for the USAID-funded University Development Linkage Project was in December, 1999 when the University of Nairobi, Tuskegee University and The Pennsylvania State University formally transferred the assets of the nutribusiness project to the women's cooperatives in Gatanga and Ndanai. The turning-over ceremonies were attended by cooperative shareholders and officers, members of the Kenyan parliament and other local dignitaries as well as by USAID staff and representatives from the participating universities. Expectations of success as the project ended were high on the part of the women who had come to understand that the uji mixes they had created using crops they grew on their shambas were not only tasty but also healthful foods for babies and young children.

In the decade since the official turning-over took place, it has become increasingly clear that, however well conceived, planned and implemented, externally-funded community economic development projects are not likely to be sustained beyond the initial period of funding unless the participants initiate and "own" the enterprise, invest their personal finances in the project and realize timely economic and social benefits through their participation.

To label the Kenya NutriBusiness Project as having either "succeeded" or "failed" would be to over-simplify the complexity of implementing an institutionally-initiated project that engaged rural Kenyan women in a food processing and marketing initiative to simultaneously add both economic and nutritional value to locally-produced agricultural commodities.

At a technical level, the project engaged nearly 2500 rural Kenyan women, either directly or indirectly, in a series of participatory workshops that led to the formulation and production of culturally-acceptable, nutritious, convenient, shelf-stable porridge mixes, suitable for infants, young children and others with special nutritional needs, in rural areas where no electric service was available.

At a social-organizational level, however, the nutribusiness project encountered difficulty in building trust among rural women who had not previously worked together. It also proved much more challenging than anticipated to build capacity by developing the skills in leadership, group decision-making, organizational and inter-personal communication, business planning and marketing that are essential for a successful cooperative business enterprise.

Despite holding multiple training workshops for the Boards of Directors and members of the cooperatives and attempting to prepare the women for the economic and organizational realities they would encounter when donor funding ended, neither of the women's nutribusiness cooperatives maintained its initial shareholder base or elevated members, other than those initially selected as officers, to leadership positions.

Most of the small-scale and subsistence farming that supports the livelihoods of households in much of rural Africa is done by women. Consequently, there is an economic incentive for governments to create opportunities for rural women to add value to the crops they are able to produce on the land they cultivate. The process of value-addition through food processing, however, is generally limited to adding economic value to a single commodity, e.g. extracting sunflower oil from seeds, frying potatoes into crisps or making marmalade from oranges; products that may be less costly than a similar foreign import, but may not be of a higher sensory or nutritional quality. Generic food products that are processed and sold locally by women's groups are becoming increasingly common in Africa, but if the demand for such products increases markedly, it is quite likely that competitors will soon be selling a similar product at a lower price.

The nutribusiness approach attempts to avoid a "rush to the bottom" by enabling rural women, with the assistance of nutrition and food technology specialists, to design and produce unique, shelf-stable, multi-ingredient food mixes for specific market niches. What future nutribusinesses urgently need, however, is an expanded support team that can regularly monitor the activities of these groups and provide on-going organizational, business planning and product marketing support on a timely basis.

In the early 1990s the concept of value chains in the agro-food system was not being widely addressed by development organizations and government agencies. Today, communication technology and a rapidly globalizing food economy has produced an increased awareness among African consumers of the importance of a healthful diet for infants, young children, pregnant women, the elderly and, in particular, for individuals with compromised immune systems. These changes have created opportunities for rural women's nutribusiness cooperatives to produce and market healthful, convenient food products that are identifiable by brand name and provide informational labeling.

At the present time, a food marketer distributes Azuri Nutri-Mix (formerly Bascot) through an agreement with the small group of women who have continued to function as officials of the Murang'a Women's NutriBusiness Cooperative. The product bears the Kenya Bureau of Standards label and a nutrition label and is very attractively packaged. Sales of the product are reportedly brisk. At a technical level, the challenge is to raise production capacity to 2,000 Kilos per month to meet current demand by the two leading supermarkets in the Nairobi area. At the social-organizational level, a greater challenge is to reorganize and reinvigorate the cooperative and address the issue of the sustainability of the business enterprise.

With current efforts underway to add value to agricultural products at the community level as a way of addressing rural poverty, the opportunity exists to implement the nutribusiness concept in many local communities. In doing so, other groups of women will be able to apply the valuable lessons learned through the experiences of the women in Murang'a and Bomet. I am deeply indebted to these women for having provided the opportunity for us to share glimpses of each other's lives for nearly two decades.