

Turning Waste to Treasure: How ETG and URCPA-AD are Driving Rainforest Certification and Sustainable Cashew Nuts Transformation in West Africa

In recent decades, cashew has emerged as one of West Africa's most dynamic agricultural exports, with countries such as Côte d'Ivoire, Benin, Ghana and Nigeria playing a leading role in global supply.

The sector has grown rapidly, not only as a source of foreign exchange but also as a livelihood for smallholder farmers across the region. Yet, much of the potential of the cashew fruit remains untapped: While the nut is the most widely traded product, other by-products are often discarded. This represents a missed opportunity.



To make use of the economic and environmental benefits of the by-products, the Union Régionale des Coopératives de Producteurs d'Anacarde de l'Atacora Donga (URCPA-AD) and the Export Trading Group (ETG) began to lead towards a change through the Cashew Matching Grant Fund under the GIZ Business Support Facility for Resilient Agricultural Value Chains.

URCPA- AD launched the Support Rainforest Alliance certification and the promotion of cashew nut shells project in August 2024 with the aim of acquiring Rainforest Alliance (RA) certification for farmers and converting cashew nut shells into valuable eco-friendly products.

Furthermore, ETG also launched the Growing Green: Sustainable Cashew Production across West Africa project with the core objective to scale up RA certification across both Côte d'Ivoire and Benin. With a deep ambition in focus, ETG aims to protect the environment, empower women, improve working conditions, and restore pride and purpose among farmers and factory workers alike.

Since the beginning of the projects in northern and central Benin, farmers are beginning to embrace sustainable cashew practices. Through training and innovation, cashew waste is being re-imagined as a source of energy, bio-fertilizer and income.

Empowering Women, Transforming Communities

In rural areas, firewood remained the primary source of energy, leading to deforestation and long hours spent searching for wood. For many in the communities of Atacora-Donga, especially women entrepreneurs, this represented economic limitations and the daily struggle of securing fuel for household and business needs.

Little did they know that an alternative solution was right in front of them. Cashew nut shells are just as good a source of energy as firewood.

Before the project began, cashew nut shells were widely discarded as waste. They were piled up, burned, or simply left unused. As one woman put it, "We had no choice but to cut trees. We didn't think the shells we threw away could be useful."

17 women in Northern Benin now turn cashew shells into biochar and charcoal.

But that perception changed quickly.

Cashew shells have now become not only a source of energy but also a source of income. Through training supported by URCPA-AD and its partners, seventeen (17) women from the north of Benin are now able to produce biochar and charcoal from cashew shells, creating a clean and sustainable alternative to firewood.

Not only does this innovation reduce pressure on local forests, but it also empowers women to become producers of their own energy. The trained participants are now local champions, passing on their knowledge to around 120 other women, creating a ripple effect of empowerment and environmental responsibility across their communities.



For young entrepreneurs like Faziliatou Salifou, the stakes were high. Running a small business producing cashew apple juice, she spent a significant portion of her earnings buying charcoal for processing.

“

This training changed everything for me. I can now make my own briquettes from the cashew shells. It will drastically reduce my production costs

”

Others voiced their desire for environmentally friendly energy solutions.

From Wasteful Practices to New Possibilities

However, cashew nut shells are not only a source of energy; the biochar that can be produced from them has the potential to significantly improve soil fertility, representing a breakthrough for cashew farmers.

Even partner organizations were surprised by the project's innovations. Bossou Emmanuel, from consortium partner NASARA Benin, acknowledged:

“ **We had only thought of making briquettes. We didn't know shells could be transformed into biochar. Now we are exploring this new frontier** ”

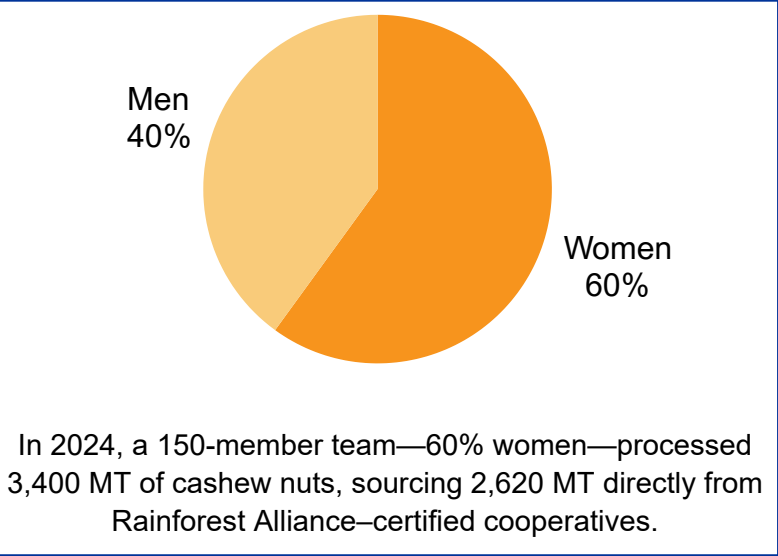
Yet, knowledge alone wasn't enough. As one participant expressed, “This knowledge is powerful, but we need machines to produce briquettes and make it practical for all.”

Recognizing this need, URCPA-AD confirmed that small-scale, women-friendly machines will be provided to help increase production.



From Employment to Empowerment: ETG's Women-Centered Approach

This story of transformation extends beyond the farms into cashew processing factories. At ETG's processing facility, women are at the heart of the business.



But for ETG, empowerment goes beyond job-creation. An impactful change was made by the provision of an on-site daycare facility.



Before, many women worried about their children while at work, now, they can work with peace of mind, knowing their children are safe and cared for

said Director Rajat Budhiraja

This has not only boosted productivity but also helped women balance work and family, redefining what meaningful support looks like in the cashew sector.

Sustainability at the Core: Rainforest Alliance Certification

Parallel to the cashew by-products trainings, both URCPA-AD and ETG have rolled out comprehensive training programs on Rainforest Alliance (RA) certification, introducing sustainable agricultural practices to farmers. At URCPA-AD, 21 extension agents were trained to equip over 2,000 farmers with knowledge on effective farming practices.

The focus was on practical steps in order to:

- Eliminate child labor by encouraging paid adult labor,
- Promote cover cropping and reduce use of chemicals to protect soil biodiversity and water bodies,
- Avoid burning chemical containers and preserving small trees on farms.

For farmers like Boukary Arouna Inoussa, who is only cultivating one hectare of cashew, this shift has been transformational.

“I’m proud to apply everything I’ve learned. Beyond the certificate, I now intercrop, avoid use of inorganic insecticides and preserve trees. These practices bring rain on time and improve my yields”

For Ourou B. Esther, a farmer and mother, these changes mean a better future not just for her farm, but for her children. She shared with pride:

“Because of the child labor prohibition in RA certification, more children are now in school. In our community, 4 out of 6 children passed their BAC (Senior High School final Exam). This change has given our children a chance at a better future.”



During one exchange, Goudi Anne, a local beneficiary, expressed a collective wish: “We want to learn how to transform cashew apples into juice so we can reduce waste and generate income. The fruit can do more, we just need the tools and training.”

This feedback has been shared with ETG, signaling a next step in their strategy: closing the loop sustainably from farm to factory, ensuring that every part of the cashew nut, shell, and apple drives income, empowerment, and environmental protection.

Looking Forward: A Future Rooted in Knowledge and Nature

What began as a project, has grown into a movement of transformation.

Through URCPA-AD, hundreds of farmers are now on the path to Rainforest Alliance certification, gaining not only better market access but also innovative solutions like biochar production from cashew shells to enrich their farms and reduce deforestation.

Meanwhile, ETG's efforts have gone beyond building a supply chain. By combining strategic training, inclusive employment, and impactful partnerships, ETG is helping West African cashew production become more fair, green, and rewarding. The movement is also tackling waste reduction at every stage. While cashew nut processing is central, communities are now looking to maximize value from every part of the harvest.



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