

Africa Trade Policy Notes



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Unshackling Women Traders: Cross-border Trade of Eru from Cameroon to Nigeria

Introduction

Eru, a vegetable found in the forest, plays an important role in trade between countries in West and Central Africa, especially between Cameroon and Nigeria. This note analyses the environment for trade in Eru as an example of a high value non-wood forest product (NWFP) that has a great potential both in terms of exports but also for income generating activities. Women are heavily involved in Eru trade as both harvesters and small-scale traders. It is a key means for many women to diversify the income stream of their household and reduce their financial dependence on men. Hence, it is of particular importance to analyze the Eru value chain from a gender perspective. The note discusses how women face substantial constraints relative to men in developing their Eru business, which limits their value-added and the contribution of their work to their household's income.

The note also discusses a key challenge facing countries in the region notably, how to support trade in Eru with its potential for poverty reduction, while also ensuring its sustainable cultivation. Current destructive harvesting techniques, extraction rates in excess of what can naturally be replenished, the rapid decline of the natural habitat of the plant and the lack of effective management of forests, and of Eru itself, compromise the long-term sustainability of this important natural resource. Gender imbalances in access to training and finance, and ownership of land undermine effective responses to this problem.

Background

Central Africa harbors the Congo basin forest, the second largest forest reserve in the world after the Amazon forest. This forest has a huge diversity of biological resources including non-wood forest products (NWFPs), comprising two *Gnetum* species that are widely traded in the region, *Gnetum africanum* and *bucholzianum*, locally known as 'Eru' by the Anglophones and 'Okok' by the Francophones in Cameroon.¹

HIGHLIGHTS

Eru trade is a main source of income for individuals involved in the value chain. Available estimates suggest that Eru contributes on average 62% of a harvester's annual income.

A key challenge facing the production and trade of Eru is over-exploitation and the lack of governance to implement sustainable management of these natural resources.

Given the potential of the Eru value chain to promote household welfare, removing the constraints faced by female producers and traders of Eru can have a great impact on economic growth and poverty reduction.



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¹In Nigeria, they are locally known as 'okasi' by the Ibos and 'afang' by the AkwaIboms. Dealers in Cameroon and Nigeria locally refer to them as 'salad'. The eru leaves are eaten raw, or shredded and added to soups, stews, porridges, and fish and meat dishes. Both species of eru are highly nutritious and an important source of protein, essential amino acids, and minerals.

Current estimates suggest 40% of Cameroon's population live below the poverty line of 1 USD per day. Over half of the population is in rural areas (INS 2007 ECAM 3). Sourced principally from Cameroon, Eru is an important product for the country given the volume of Eru trade and its high economic value in an area of high poverty. Even though exports of Eru from Cameroon to Nigeria are not well recorded by customs officials at the border, evidence suggests there are substantial and increasing export flows. In 1992 exports of Eru from Cameroon to Nigeria were estimated to be 428 tons (FAO 2009). By 2009, this trade measured more than 4,000 tons, and represented about 78% of the overall volume of international trade in Eru. At the price of 1,000 FCFA/Kg, this means that Cameroon exported about 4 billion FCFA worth of Eru to Nigeria or 7.6 million USD.² Overall, Cameroon's exports of Eru to the world are about 5.1 billion FCFA, equivalent to 9.8 million USD, and represent 0.3% of total Cameroonian exports.

Eru trade is a main source of income for individuals involved in the value chain. Available estimates suggest that Eru contributes on average 62% of a harvester's annual income. Dependence upon Eru-based incomes increases for those further from the forest, providing on average 75% of retailer's (1,268 USD) and 58% of exporter's annual incomes (7,000 USD) (CIFOR 2009 and Ingram et al 2012). FAO (2009) reports that women trading Eru, as harvesters and traders, make daily profit margins during the main season that vary between 16 USD and 160 USD depending upon the prevailing market conditions and whether the seller is a harvester or a trader.² Likewise, profits along the value chain increase the further away from the forests, with exporters enjoying the highest profit margins and harvesters making the least profits.

Eru is also one of few products in which women are actively involved either as harvester or small-scale trader. Women dominate the lowest segments of the value chain. Amongst a total of 759 harvesters interviewed in the Southwest and Littoral regions of Cameroon almost 80% were

female (CIFOR 2009). Ndoye (1997) reported that about 94% of intermediaries operating in the humid forest zone of Cameroon were women. In addition, all of the retailers identified in the Southwest Region were women (CIFOR, 2009). Finally, of the estimated 265 exporters 58% were female (CIFOR, 2009).

Profit margins for those working in this sector depend, among other things, on gender, family status and age of the entrepreneurs. For example, women are more restricted in their access to forest resources than men (Ingram et al. 2012). Eru of good quality—meaning large, thick and dark green leaves—and quantity are generally found in closed canopy forests and mostly on trees and tree canopies. Local customs however discriminate against women with respect to access to trees (timber, commercial fruit trees and commercial fuel wood) and other productive resources like bamboo, raffia, cola etc. Under communal tenure regimes, women traditionally obtain legal rights to family land, but they do not possess inheritance rights. Consequently, for crops like Eru, women can exercise their right to cultivate in the forest. However, unlike male harvesting agents, women are restricted from climbing trees to collect Eru. As a result, males have access to the best harvesting areas, collect the best crop in terms of quantity and quality, make larger profits from Eru activity, and support more people from Eru revenues (Ingram et al. 2012).

A key challenge facing the production and trade of Eru is over-exploitation and the lack of governance to implement sustainable management of these natural resources. Central African countries have made commitments to sustainably managing their forest resources by ratifying a number of international legal instruments. The implementation of these legal tools, however, is often ineffective due to weak enforcement and inadequate consideration of sub-regional interests and realities (FAO 2009).

Removing the constraints to Eru trade and addressing the gender specific barriers that are discussed in this note will be an important step towards a more organized and transparent market

²at the exchange rate XAF/USD=524

for Eru. Likewise, it will provide a stronger base for implementing a regulatory environment that will ensure sustainable management of this important resource for the people of Southwest Cameroon. An approach that simply restricts the collection of Eru from the forests will have especially deleterious effects on the incomes of women.

Women and Trade in Eru: Constraints along the Value Chain

This note investigates the role of men and women along the Eru value chain. The analysis is based on interviews, mainly conducted in focus group discussions and complemented by some face-to-face interviews. Interviews were conducted with 60 women and 20 men involved in the Eru value chain as harvesters, direct exporters, or intermediaries along the Bamenda/Mamfe/Ekok trade corridor leading directly to the Ikom market in Nigeria (See figure 1).³This corridor is characterized by a high volume of Eru trade. Around 40% of Eru exporters who export to Nigeria through the Southwest region of Cameroon use this route.

Below is a summary of the key outcomes from the focus group discussions.

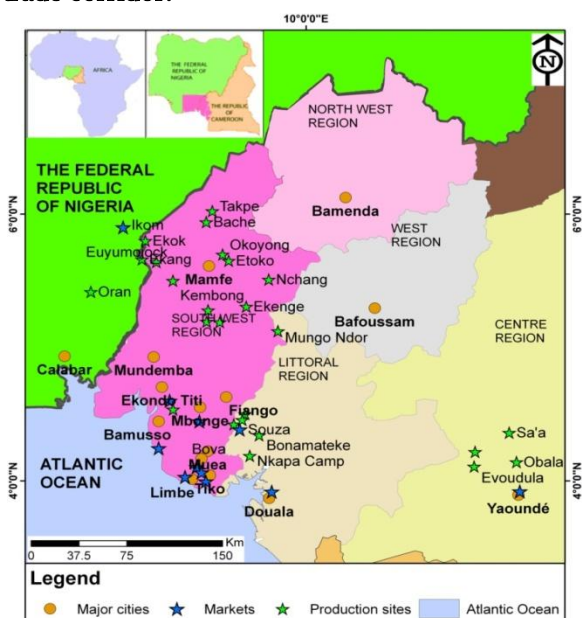
The benefits from women’s participation in Eru trade

The income from Eru trade allows women to contribute financially to their household, especially to their children’s education. For example, one participant in the discussion group said, “[M]oney from Eru has helped me a lot. It helps us to afford food for the household and to pay for children’s education.” Taking part in Eru trade is also seen as a source of empowerment for women. One response that reflects the overall impression from the focus groups was “*I am happy to have [my] own business and [do] not receive orders from any boss[;] neither [do I] need to depend on any man for [my]*

³An interview guide (qualitative questionnaire) was used to conduct interviews for each stakeholder group moderated by a female facilitator.

livelihood.” Finally, 70 % of the participants confirmed that they take part in Eru harvesting and trade because it contributes to diversifying the income stream of the household and hence reduces their vulnerability.

Figure 1: Key border crossings in the Southwest Region of Cameroon and the Mamfe/Ekok/Ikom trade corridor.



A key feature that makes Eru trading an attractive activity is that profits can be quickly realized relative to other seasonal products such as cocoa and egusi seeds.⁴Trade in Eru is an all-season activity. Furthermore, the product is found free in the forest. This entails that very little start-up capital is required relative to other activities. If capital is required, small amounts can be obtained from savings in community associations ('Njangi'). Finally, cultivating Eru is an activity in which those with a low level of formal education can effectively participate.

⁴Egusi seeds are the fat- and protein-rich seeds of a cucurbitaceous plant used in preparing egusi soup - a kind of soup thickened with the ground egusi seeds cooked with water, oil and typically containing vegetables, seasonings and meat which is popular in many West and Central African countries.

Gender specific constraints

While women are heavily involved in the Eru value chain, they also face constraints that are gender specific. The key issues raised in the focus group discussions include:

Domestic violence as a result of the time devoted by women to exporting and intermediary business activities. Some female exporters and intermediaries are victims of verbal and physical abuse from their husbands. Women do not take action to report such abuse because they say, *“The pride of the African woman is to be under the roof of a man and having children.”* According to interviews women say, the only solution appears to be to stop exporting or give their merchandise to colleagues, who sell Eru on their behalf.

Time related constraints arise due to the social bias towards women performing household chores and the reality of reproductive decisions. About 40% of participants lamented their inability to spend more time on trading activities and that they usually miss some of their planned trips to collect Eru because of household responsibilities. More than 90% of exporters and intermediaries agreed that taking care of their business and household during pregnancy is very difficult. Furthermore, discussions revealed that women have very little or no knowledge about birth control. Discussants made it clear that they do not have the power to refuse their husbands, as one participant pointed out that: *“it is considered a pride of fruitfulness by the society for us women to have more children.”* However, contrary to societal expectations, participants said they do not consider having many children a priority.

Limited influence on decision-making related to participation in Eru activities and the allocation of the income generated from its trade. While small-scale Eru trade is dominated by women, decisions are only made by women after consultation with their husbands. Consequently, women tend to be dominated by the opinion of their husband. Focus group discussions revealed that:

- Husbands consider Eru trading and harvesting to be a profession with low-status which they find suitable for women, including their wives;
- Women have to consult with their husbands before investing or spending their profits. One discussant shared that, *“Our husbands are the heads of household. Because of the respect we have for them and in order to justify the time we spend doing business and the benefits of the business, we often make them to be aware of profits and losses and on how we may want to use the money. It is a lack of respect to the husband for a woman not to do this which may often result to problems with husband.”*

Lack of ownership of land limits female access to credit. The profit from Eru is mainly used to support children’s education, health and other household needs. If funds are available for savings, they are put into “njangis”; community-based financial associations based on mutual trust. Yet, according to participants in the study’s focus groups, funds from these associations are typically used by their husbands for cocoa production. Cocoa production is a male-dominated activity since it requires a longer term investment on land that cannot generally be owned by women. A participant explained that culturally women do not own land because it is believed that, *“The girl child in a family has not come to stay, but will one day become another man’s ‘property’. And usually when the man dies and leaves the wife, one of the man’s relatives will ‘inherit’ the woman and she becomes his wife.”* Men generally have exclusive rights to manage and administer property. As a result, women cannot obtain access to credit due to the absence of collateral. This severely constrains their capacity to grow their business.

Limited education and access to training. According to the interviews, women involved in the Eru value chain, as exporters and harvesters, want training on how to access credit and expand their business. In addition, some would like further education. They complain that available training activities are concentrated on male-dominated activities. Also, they say their role in the household limits the amount of time available for such activities. As one participant pointed out,

“Our access to further education and training is inhibited by the obligation to take care of our children and to cook food for the household.”

Of particular importance, given the challenge of sustainable harvesting and trade of Eru, is that the women harvesters do not have access to knowledge on how to domesticate Eru, despite expressing a strong interest to learn. This is complicated by the lack of female access to land upon which domesticated Eru could be grown. Eru is becoming scarce. Distances travelled to get Eru from the forest are increasing. In addition, the way in which Eru is harvested affects its sustainability. It is reported that some males harvest Eru unsustainably from the trees, along which the Eru plant thrives. This undermines the Eru plant. According to women interviewed during focus group discussions, this practice is causing progressive exposure of the forest and deforestation. This is a good example of how traditional female knowledge of the resource and forest could be very useful in enhancing its protection and sustainability.

In this context Van Vliet (2010) shows that development agencies working around the Takamanda area have failed to fully take into account gender differences in resource use and land tenure when designing projects to support sustainable agricultural activities. The ongoing shift in livelihood, especially that of men, from the sustainable harvest of non-timber forest products to the production of cash crops, primarily cocoa, is leading to the conversion of closed canopy forests into cocoa-forestry systems. With the transformation of the forests into cocoa producing, rather than Eru producing land, urgent action is needed to preserve this way of life and financial means for women.

Harassment from officials. Exporters and intermediaries also report harassment from government officials, and at times buyers, which causes delays and losses given the perishable nature of their products. Officials sometimes accept promises from traders to pay “settlements” or bribes after sales; however if the market is not favorable, this can lead to debt accumulation. Moreover, when debts are not paid, officials can confiscate products. This situation usually puts

some women in a vulnerable position whereby some may succumb to sexual blackmail, as focus group participants suggested, although no participant directly admitted to having been involved in this type of situation.

Box 1. The Administrative Process to Exporting Eru: Documentation and Taxes

To export Eru, an individual should possess the following documents: an export authorization, a certificate of origin, a specification sheet, a phytosanitary certificate, and proof of payment of the graduated surtax. Exporters are indeed obliged to pay two types of taxes:

- 1) Ordinary (or general) taxes applicable to all businessmen, payable at the taxation centre with competent jurisdiction (full discharge tax, fees for market stalls and others);
- 2) Eru taxes, which are based on the export volume of Eru and comprise:
 - a) Regeneration tax payable before exploitation 25% as of January 31st, during exploitation 50% as of May 31st, at the end of exploitation 25% as of October 31st;
 - b) Graduated surtax payable upon exportation of unprocessed Eru, in the case where the quotas are exceeded (CFAF 10/KG);
 - c) Surtax upon exportation of fresh Eru (CFAF 50/KG) and dried Gnetum (CFAF 75/KG);
 - d) Phytosanitary tax (CFAF 6,500).

The Eru exporter should expect a payment of CFAF 650/KG if transported by air, and several other taxes and charges depending on the country of destination and the means of transport (FAO 2009).

Limited access to market contacts and trading networks. Responsibilities in the home limit the access of women to contacts in the market, role models and social interaction. As a result, their contact with the “business culture,” which serves as the main training ground for trade, is therefore constrained. Meanwhile, men who are relieved of many household tasks, benefit from greater mobility, have better access to markets, credit and business connections. Such access provides them with a forum to meet, learn from, and gain the support of others who trade in different products. These constraints to the interaction of women with other market players hinder the growth of Eru activities and limits diversification into other trade activities. For example, bush mango trade requires larger capital and access to “connectors”

(i.e. experienced traders), who match traders up with buyers in Nigeria.

Trade and Business related constraints

In addition to the explicit gender constraints discussed above, women, as well as men, involved in the Eru trade face a range of trade and business related constraints. However, in practice women often face greater difficulties in overcoming these constraints than men. The main constraints include:

Inability to acquire administrative trade and transport documents. Given that Eru is a special forest product, sale and/or marketing is regulated. Box 1 outlines the documentation and taxes an exporter must provide the government. Despite the detailed list of documentation and taxes officially required by the government, there is no sense of any system in place to monitor that exporters have all of this documentation and pay these taxes, which underlines the fact that these administrative barriers to Eru trade should be streamlined.

For a given operator, administrative procedures for the marketing of Eru are very cumbersome and begin at the central service of the ministry in charge of forestry, notably by obtaining three main documents:

1. Approval document which gives access to the forestry profession and includes a file processing fee of 150,000CFAP;
2. Special permit to cultivate Eru, which gives access to the resource; and
3. Record of waybill receipts, which authorizes the operator to transport the product.

In addition, Box 2 explains the two-step process to obtain administrative approval from the Ministry of Forestry and Wildlife.

Since men have better access to credit and business connectors than women they are in a better position to gain the support of others and to acquire cultivation and marketing permits from the government. For example, in 2009 only one out of six permit holders that exported through

Idenau port in the Southwest Region was a woman.

The complicated nature of the administrative process to obtain permits automatically disqualifies poor and uneducated women who both do not meet the criteria and are the main actors involved in the value chain.

To facilitate their export activity, some intermediaries and exporters purchase waybills from corporations rather than acquire the permits directly from the government, because of the cumbersome and opaque administrative procedures. These corporations act as brokers and sell quotas at prices above the original regeneration tax. The waybill gives exporters the right to transport Eru and it must be presented at every check point along the way. The average cost of a waybill for small-scale traders is 12 FCFA/Kg of Eru, representing 1.2% of the average price received per Kg by exporters. It is important to note that it is illegal for large corporations to sell waybills to exporters; however, this practice is necessitated by the complicated and arduous process for exporters to obtain such trading permits.

According to traders, more powerful and influential permit holders have sought to exercise control over the trade in Eru by “blocking” the access of other smaller traders to permits through a process dogged by corruption. Again, this is likely to impinge particularly heavily on women, whose lack of contact with effective networks of traders is likely to limit their ability to confront corruption in the allocation of permits. In order to facilitate Eru trade, it would be useful to reform and streamline the administrative process in place, which limits female involvement in the market and creates unnecessary barriers to Eru trade. Traders should be able to obtain permits directly from the Ministry of Forestry and Wildlife with a simple, affordable, and transparent procedure.

Box 2. Process to Obtain Administrative Approval

The initial *granting of approval* is the first stage of the administrative procedure and it is subject to the *recommendation of the technical committee*, on the basis of a file submitted to the Ministry of Forestry and Wildlife against a receipt.

The file comprises the following documents:

For individuals: a stamped application bearing the applicant's full name, nationality, profession and place of residence; curriculum vitae indicating professional experience and qualifications; a non-conviction certificate, not more than three months old; and the statistical and trade registration numbers.

For corporate bodies: a stamped application indicating the company name and address; a copy of the company's articles of association; the statistical and trade registration numbers; the manager's non-conviction certificate, not more than three months old; curriculum vitae of the manager or official in charge of forestry operations indicating notably his technical knowledge and professional experience; current and previous activities of the company; and an attestation of regular payment of contributions due to the national social insurance fund.

For individual and corporate bodies: the area of activity for which approval is sought; documentary evidence of the technical knowledge of the applicant, in the case of private individuals, or of the official in charge of operations, in the case of corporate bodies; a tax certificate; a statement of tax situation; and proof of file processing fee payment.

In addition to the administrative hurdles set for Eru exporters to jump through, it also seems that the government has set up informal export quotas for unprocessed Eru. Even though there is no official information of such informal quotas, these kinds of unsanctioned barriers to trade are another business related constraint faced by traders.

High transport costs, roadblocks, and corruption hinder road transport. The poor state of the Mamfe - Ekok road and high transportation costs, compounded by hikes in the price of fuel discourage road transport. Hence river transport via Satom and John Holt beaches, which are located on the Cross River, are the preferred means of transportation. Participants revealed

that the construction of the Mamfe - Ekok road should facilitate trade. However, informal payments to forestry guards, councils, customs, police, quarantine and commerce officials along the route make road transport unpopular and undesirable to exporters. Ultimately, these payments will undermine the value of the investment in the new road. Furthermore, even after presenting way bills, exporters must make informal payments to officials. For example, on average at the Satom and John Holt beaches, exporters still have to pay officials 1,000 FCFA/200 Kg bag of Eru leaves transported. However, this is less than the average amount they would have to pay white using road transport—about 1,500 FCFA/200Kg bag—where there are multiple road blocks and consequently higher charges.

Transport costs alone account for the highest proportion of exporters' costs, about 23 percent. This, together with the five formal and informal types of taxes (forestry, council, quarantine, custom and police), comprises 59% of total costs and constitutes about 19% of the share of profit for exporters.⁵ The euphemistically named "police tax", used to cover bribes and corruption to police and gendarmes, usually en route, alone amounts to 14% of costs (CIFOR, 2009). For example, intermediaries travelling from Yaounde to Bamenda pay on average 5,000 FCFA, but sometimes pay up to 15,000 FCFA for "settlements" during peak season (November/December) when roadblocks are prevalent.

Market power of buyers in the Nigerian market pushes down returns to Cameroonian exporters.

At the Ikom market in Nigeria, Cameroonian exporters have very low bargaining power. According to the focus group discussions, this is due to several reasons. First, the Association of Afang Dealers in Nigeria (the Nigeria wholesalers) forbids Cameroonian exporters to sell directly to retailers. Second, Nigerian wholesalers have formed a cartel thanks to their vibrant association. The association constitutes two major warehouses—the AkwaIbom

⁵Profit margins were calculated using average prices and costs of exporters. Average figures are based on calculations from reported actual quantities, cost and prices.

warehouse and the Ibo warehouse. Within these two major groups, there are minor “shades” or groups of at least 5 members. Each “shade” has its established customers in Nigeria and suppliers in Cameroon. Each member ensures the smooth running of the shade in the absence of the other members. At least one member of the “shade” always remains in the market to attend to suppliers and serve customers. “Shade” members then arrange the returns and expenditures among themselves based on financial records (CIFOR 2009). For example, if a “shade” member owes money to a supplier or if a customer owes money to a “shade” member, the money is paid to or by the member on duty for that day (whether he was involved in the previous transaction or not). In this situation, Cameroonian traders who do not have an association to represent them⁶, have low bargaining power and the prices they receive are dictated by the Nigerian associations.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Trade in Eru is an example of a natural product that provides significant contributions to the livelihoods of actors along the value chain in Southwest Cameroon, who are predominantly poor women. Women are involved in this trade out of necessity, as it is the only major livelihood opportunity available to them and its revenues meet the basic needs of their households. Trade in Eru also has a catalytic function for other economic activities, as profits from this activity are typically invested in other food and education.

However, women face a range of societal, business and trade related constraints. Women face pervasive harassment, lack of access to credit and training, and restrictions on their mobility and capacity to exploit market opportunities. These factors explain their limited ability to take full advantage of trade and to increase control over their own lives and families. An increase in the involvement of women in economic activities outside of the household would also mean an increase in autonomy within households, thus leading to greater domestic power and control.

These factors also explain why women continue to concentrate their activities outside of the household on Eru. It is an activity that requires little capital and low skills. Given the potential of the Eru value chain to promote household welfare, removing the constraints faced by female producers and traders of Eru can have a great impact on economic growth and poverty reduction. In addition, access to more profitable export activities, such as bush mango and cocoa, which remain male dominated, would have a positive impact on women’s economic and political status.

There are six key steps that can be taken to address the obstacles faced by women in achieving their potential as small entrepreneurial traders in the west of Cameroon. They are:

1. **Formulate and implement policies that promote gender equality at the national level.** The government should define laws and policies that guarantee equal rights for men and women in the exercise of control over assets such as land and in accessing services such as education, and credit. This also requires giving women control over economic decisions which affect their lives and, on a political level, a greater sharing of reproductive responsibilities among women and men in society. The government should also ensure that institutions and officials that have a stake in the forestry and agricultural sectors are adequately trained to be able to effectively implement gender equality under the law. The government should also work in collaboration with civil society to ensure that both women and men are educated on the rights of women.
2. **Put in place a market information system and implement a policy framework to organize women traders to improve their bargaining power and economies of scale.** Many informal exporters in Cameroon appear not to realise the full size, potential and prices in the Nigerian market. A catalogue or database of all actors in the chain could facilitate research and regulation of the sector while monitoring the resource. Whilst cultural

attitudes to organisation may challenge the level of association and collective action possible, this sector would benefit from the organization of main actors into associations and the strengthening of the capacities of these associations.

3. **Remove road blocks and other barriers to trade along key corridors.** The large potential Nigerian consumer market with its proximity to the fertile production areas of Cameroon, offers a major opportunity for small Cameroonian exporters. However poor infrastructure and costs create delays, poor roads, taxes and corruption along the route and act as significant barriers to efficient trade.
4. **Reform and streamline the administrative permit system for exporters.** The government of Cameroon employs unnecessarily complicated documentation and administrative procedures for Eru exporters. Simplifying documentary requirements for exporters and the inordinately long

administrative procedure would contribute to a more sustainable trading system for Eru.

5. **Training and capacity building for women.** Education and skill building will broaden the range of choices women can make and give them more influence within their households and in society. Building the human capital of women and girls will make them become better producers, confident traders and stronger citizens.

Benchmark progress in removing gender bias along the Eru value chain. Baseline surveys and continuous monitoring and evaluation of sex-disaggregated data will greatly help the understanding of gender differences in trade. Such studies will also exhibit the positive implications of gender equality to support the formulation of appropriate and gender aware policies and programmes in the forestry and agricultural sectors. Making women's voices heard at all levels of decision-making in these sectors is critical.

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