

Women's economic participation in B' Ayoba



Introduction

B' Ayoba (pvt) Ltd is an Africa Enterprise Challenge Fund (AECF) grantee in Zimbabwe dedicated to producing, processing and marketing fruit from the baobab tree. The business model involves the collection and primary processing of baobab fruits in remote rural areas in Zimbabwe.

Villagers collect the whole baobab fruit from the trees for transport to B' Ayoba collection centres where they are checked for quality before being transported to a central processing plant for export to North America and Europe. This case study examines the level of women's participation and finds that they have been the primary beneficiaries of the project, receiving 63% of the total paid out to baobab collectors. The data used is drawn from B' Ayoba collectors in the Mount Darwin region, in the arid north of Zimbabwe.

Providing context: Zimbabwe, Mount Darwin, and the baobab industry

More than 70% of the Zimbabwe's 14 million people live on less than US\$1.25 a day¹. Agriculture is the foundation on which the rest of Zimbabwe's economy is built, yet the lack of access for smallholder farmers and rural agricultural workers to export markets, high-quality inputs and finance hinders growth and development in the sector. The lack of political stability has also affected the economic environment, with business confidence and levels of investment low.

The Mount Darwin region is particularly poor. 99.8% of the population live in rural areas² compared to a national average of 67%³. Only 8.5% have access to electricity⁴ compared to 44% nationally⁵, while over two thirds have to walk over 500m to access their primary water supply⁶.

Baobab collection does not yield high returns for the collector. As such, the collection of baobab fruit is typically conducted by those at the 'bottom of the pyramid', simply because people will only collect wild fruit for a living when they truly have no alternatives. At the same time, the barriers to entry for collection of wild baobab are minimal and anyone with the ability to carry a bucket or sack are able to harvest. As such, the beneficiaries of the project are amongst the most vulnerable in the region.

The role of women in Zimbabwe

Despite the legal commitment enshrined in the new constitution to gender equality, women and girls in Zimbabwe continue to face a myriad of challenges in the political, social and economic spheres as a consequence of gender inequalities and imbalances. The exercise of women's rights is constrained by harmful cultural and religious practices, subordination in the public and private spheres, patriarchal attitudes and educational imbalances. Reflecting these barriers, the UN's Human Development Report (2015) placed Zimbabwe 155th out of 188 countries analysed on their Gender Inequality Index⁷.

This disparity was clear in this project. Interviews with stakeholders revealed that the registration process favoured men. The B'Ayoba management and field staff were obliged to use the male-dominated traditional leadership structures to approve the introduction of the project in the area, promote it, call for active registration, and to retain a continued 'licence to operate' in this traditional and communal land area. Perhaps unsurprisingly, as a result interviewees felt that men were first in line to register for a new resource coming into the area, thus establishing a barrier to entry for women.



1 <https://www.wfp.org/countries/zimbabwe>.

2 ZimStat, 'Census 2012: Provincial Report for Mashonaland Central', pg. 25.

3 ZimStat, 'Census 2012: National Report', pg. 11.

4 ZimStat, 'Census 2012: Provincial Report for Mashonaland Central', pg. 130.

5 ZimStat, 'Census 2012: National Report', pg. 12.

6 ZimStat, 'Census 2012: Provincial Report for Mashonaland Central', pg. 135.

7 UNDP, 'Human Development Report 2015', pg. 227

Evidence on women's participation in B'Ayoba and impact

B'Ayoba registered 625 baobab fruit collectors in the Mount Darwin region, of which 54% were men and 46% were women. However, of those 625, only 311 actually collected and sold baobab fruit to the company. Within this group of active participants, women were far more prominent, making up 60% of the total. Overall, 65% of the women who registered actually collected fruit, compared to only 37% of men. Furthermore, the women tended to deliver greater quantities of fruit than men, and therefore earned more revenue per capita than men. Per active participant, women's earnings from sales to B'Ayoba were on average 22% higher than men's earnings.



62% of women said that collecting baobab for B'Ayoba was their main source of income.

These results suggest that women were the main beneficiaries of the B'Ayoba project, both contributing a larger share of the workforce and on average receiving more money.

This could be because of the quality of work offered - collecting baobab fruit is not lucrative, and requires little in the way of skills or technical education. Interviews suggested that men with access to other economic opportunities pursued those opportunities instead as they were more lucrative. In contrast, for women B'Ayoba offered an economic opportunity which provided them with more income than the activities they were previously engaged in, such as subsistence agriculture. As a more disadvantaged and vulnerable group, women were more likely to engage in bottom of the pyramid work.

Impact

Although the financial flows were small, surveys with female participants revealed the significance of the baobab income; 62% said it was their main source of income, indicating the lack of other economic opportunities available to them. Their main avenue for expenditure was groceries. This also reflects the extent to which female participants were amongst the most economically vulnerable, as the majority of revenues were spent directly on daily consumption rather than larger, more transformative investments (e.g. school fees, household items). The coordination of collection areas is also run by local shopkeepers, resulting in payments for fruit being spent in their shops and thereby helping to support the wider local economy.



Conclusion

Women are the primary beneficiaries of this project. They were more likely to participate than men and as active participants spent more time collecting baobab despite societal restrictions limiting their access to work.

This result could be because of the relatively low paid and low skilled nature of collecting baobab fruits; men may have had better economic opportunities not available to women through educational imbalances or societal barriers.

Creating opportunities for low paid work can lead to economic empowerment for groups at the bottom of the pyramid.

Some of the advantages of focusing on creating opportunities for low paid work were revealed by this project. Fundamentally, creating opportunities for low paid work can lead to economic empowerment for groups at the bottom of the pyramid. Since the barriers for these jobs are low, and the competition for work is weak, it allows disadvantaged groups, such as women, a means to raise incomes and advance economically.

The pitfalls of co-opting pre-existing power structures to facilitate project implementation were also highlighted. Although it can help local communities accept and legitimise local projects, it can also reinforce hierarchical or patriarchal societal rules. In this case, women were initially excluded despite eventually becoming the primary beneficiaries.

This case study is based on an evaluation of women's participation in B'Ayoba carried out by James Carnegie in 2015.