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**Improving competences of female entrepreneurs
in savannah forest commodity development and marketing**

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Abstract: Savannah ecosystems occupy 2/3 of Ghana land area, and provide services for livelihoods of millions of rural people. However, savannah forestry development has been neglected. In 1999, there was an attempt to establish a Savannah Forest Division within the Forestry Research Institute of Ghana (FORRIG), but the office was closed again in 2004 because of lack of resources to support its work, and the resignation of the research officer to work in the high forest sector. Yet, the savannah forests rich in plant biodiversity, including economically important trees that form the natural capital for tree-based commodity enterprises. These enterprises have proven the only means of sustaining subsistence of rural livelihoods, as well as contributing to rural economic development.

The savannah forests commodity market is dominated by female entrepreneurs, who often operate in the informal trading sector. One important commodity is Shea-butter, a product from the Shea tree (*Vitellaria paradoxa*). The tree has a wide geographical coverage in Sub Saharan Africa, and grows from Senegal in the West to Ethiopia in East. Today the Shea tree produces the second most important oil crop in Africa after oil palm, but as it grows in areas unsuitable for palm growth (dry savannah zones), it takes on primary importance in Sub Saharan Africa. In recognition of the Shea tree's contribution to economic empowerment to female entrepreneurs, a new partnership (three organisations) has been established to develop competences of female tree commodity entrepreneurs. The Ghana Open Polytechnic University (GOPU) is a new teaching and research institution that promotes formal and informal distance-learning programmes. It has established the *Institute of Savannah Forestry Research and Training (INSAFORET)* to develop capacity of savannah forest stakeholders/users. INSAFORET provides formal qualifications in Savannah Forestry, including vocational training in savannah forestry commodity product development (value chains/quality assurance); short courses in savannah forests entrepreneurship; skills training in business development and marketing (including exports). GOPU trains the extension staff of Community Welfare Foundation (COMWELF) in forest commodity development and marketing, and works with the NGO to deliver innovative support through its Programme on *Ecosystems Services and Rural Economic Development*. Researchers/technicians from the Department of Applied Biochemistry/Chemistry, University for Development Studies are providing technical expertise for developing high quality Shea products for exports. The partnership model will be presented, and call made for international participation and support for the savannah forest commodity sector, that is critical for poverty alleviation in Sub Saharan Africa.

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