



ssnup

Smallholder Sustainability
Upscaling Programme

project results

SUPPORTING SMALLHOLDER FARMERS FOR CLIMATE-SMART PRACTICES, PRODUCTIVITY AND QUALITY IMPROVEMENTS IN MALI



Market access



Capacity building



Management system



Beneficiary organisation

Karit'Or is a Mali-based company created in 2020 that specialises in the production and marketing of cosmetic products made mainly from shea butter. The company has one workshop and a unit plant located in Bamako and works with distributors in Mali, Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire and France. The company established sustainable partnerships with 400 women gathered in cooperatives, mainly located in the region of Kayes and Bamako in Mali. Thanks to the building of a unit plant, Karit'Or switched from a handcrafted to an industrial production, and is among the top three manufacturers of natural cosmetic products in Mali.

The challenge

Despite strong market demand and growing partnership opportunities in African and European markets, **the company faces significant challenges in expanding due to regulatory constraints and the lack of key certifications, particularly COSMOS certification** (issued by ECOCERT), essential for reaching international export. Weaknesses in the shea value chain, inconsistent production quality and supply, and limited compliance with organic standards among partner cooperatives reduce competitiveness and restrict the ability of smallholder women farmers engaged in shea production to benefit from market opportunities. In addition, gaps in ESG (environmental, social, and governance) practices further limit readiness to meet international requirements and partnership expectations.

The proposed solutions

Karit'Or and its partner cooperatives were accompanied towards **COSMOS certification and stronger ESG practices, two mutually reinforcing conditions for accessing international markets**. On the certification side, this covers organic production practices from nut collection to cosmetic-grade transformation, the identification of certified wild collection sites, and the strengthening of cooperative capacities. On the ESG side, it builds on a diagnostic of existing practices, the development of an action plan, and targeted capacity building in environmental management, social equity, and governance. Beyond market access, both streams contribute to **increasing the revenue of women producers, reducing the environmental footprint of shea production, and building a more resilient value chain from supply to manufacturing and sales**.

The expected outcomes of the project were:

- 1 The establishment of sustainable **commercial partnerships with 600 women shea butter producers**.
- 2 **The training of 600 women producers and aggregators** on ECOCERT COSMOS-compliant production practices.
- 3 The development and initial implementation of an **ESG strategy across Karit'Or and its partner cooperatives**.
- 4 **The improvement of shea butter quality and production volumes** for a facilitated access to international markets.

PRIORITY TOPICS

Environment
and climate change



Gender equality



IMPACT INVESTOR



ZIRA CAPITAL

PARTENAIRE D'IMPACT

BENEFICIARY ORGANISATION

Karit'Or

Mali

NUMBER OF FARMERS REACHED

87

AGRICULTURAL VALUE CHAIN

Shea

START DATE

June 2024

END DATE

March 2025

TOTAL EXPENDITURE

€ 34,836

Including € 27,834 (80%)
financed by SSNUP



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key results



- ✓ **ESG diagnostic** conducted
- ✓ **Action plan** developed, covering ESG standards



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cooperatives trained through ESG training sessions leading to improved working conditions, governance, and transparency reported across partner cooperatives



smallholder farmers



shea production

87

shea women producers trained to train on organic standards



Training cascaded to villages through documentation sharing

aggregators



nut collection and processing

5

partner cooperatives trained on organic standards



Karit'Or's organic shea supplier network expanded

processor



cosmetic manufacturing

Karit'Or brought to certification readiness, with audit quote for certification



Certification pending production relocation to Senegal



Because of additional costs requested by the cooperatives, only 15% of targeted women were trained. A train-the-trainer approach was adopted instead, with each trained woman expected to pass on knowledge to 20 others.



Certification was initially planned in Bamako, Mali, but ECOCERT no longer operates there. Certification will be relocated to Senegal, with a production unit to be set up in Dakar ahead of the auditors' visit.

SDGs supported by the project



1. No poverty

1.5 Building the resilience of vulnerable people

2. Zero hunger

2.3 Improving agricultural productivity and increasing smallholder farmers' income

2.4 Adoption of productive, sustainable and resilient agricultural practices

5. Gender equality

5.5 Women's participation in economic life



lessons learnt

✓ **Certification readiness is a process, not a one-time intervention**

Preparing businesses and their supplier cooperatives for international certification standards requires sustained accompaniment beyond a single mission. While some organisations may already have partially aligned practices, the certification process involves operational, logistical, and financial decisions that extend well beyond initial support. Building in transition time, follow-up mechanisms, and budget flexibility is critical to ensuring certification processes are seen through to completion.

✓ **Trainer-of-trainers approaches can extend reach but require structured follow-up**

When logistical and financial constraints limit direct training reach, cascading knowledge through trained participants offers a pragmatic and cost-effective alternative. However, peer-to-peer knowledge transfer is difficult to monitor and should not be treated as equivalent to direct training. Structured follow-up, clear cascading protocols, and verification mechanisms are needed to ensure the quality and consistency of knowledge transmission across the value chain.

✓ **Local practices and expectations must be factored in from the start**

In some agricultural value chains, the economic benefits of certification accrue primarily to processors rather than to farmers or cooperatives upstream. When the incentive to comply with new standards is not direct or immediate for training participants, engagement cannot be taken for granted. In such cases, smallholder farmers are more likely to expect compensation as a condition of participation. Anticipating this dynamic from the outset, both in budget planning and in the design of participation incentives, is critical to ensuring adequate reach and sustained engagement throughout the intervention.

Outlook

COSMOS certification remains pending, as Karit'Or has yet to fully meet all ECOCERT requirements. A key bottleneck is the relocation of its ISO-certified production machine from Bamako to Dakar, made difficult by security constraints along the route, which renders transport costly and risky. **Promising discussions are underway with a new investor**, who has expressed willingness to support Karit'Or's path to certification and international market access.

