

Honduras: Improved Cassava Processing Opens Door to a Better Life

In 2011, Manhattan Beach Community Church awarded TechnoServe \$10,000 to fund the acquisition of cassava processing equipment to benefit five promising cassava producer groups in the Colon, Honduras.

Through TechnoServe's work, we see how one idea, one piece of technology on its own, can address the multiplicity of problems facing the average smallholder farmer struggling to make a living on a small patch of land in a remote corner of her community. Poor Garifuna farmers living in northern coastal communities in Honduras needed a shift from applying outdated farming practices to a focus on establishing the right business environment for their small-scale farming to succeed.

Instead of seeing the Garifuna as victims – poverty-stricken women and men trapped in cycles of subsistence farming – TechnoServe saw them as potential entrepreneurs struggling to run small businesses due to a lack of access to basic business tools and techniques.

Through support from Manhattan Beach Community Church, Garifuna farmers like Digna Bernárdez received the support they needed to take advantage of a ready market for their cassava, thereby generating income to meet their families' daily needs and setting aside some hope for a better future for their children. They received the relevant equipment for cassava processing, including cassava graters, heavy-duty cassava pressers and gasoline-driven generators (given the area's lack of electricity).

The farmers also received training that helped strengthen their entrepreneurial skills and business knowledge. With access to expert advice, Digna and others applied adapted technologies that helped them improve their milling facilities' efficiency, resulting in the



Digna Bernárdez runs a successful cassava processing center in the small rural town of Irióna, Colón. She is a member of the Binadu Uwenedu producer groups and produces about 1,500 units of cassava bread, known as casabe, a week. Her customers are in the cities of La Ceiba and Trujillo. Her casabe is also available at Wal-Mart stores. Digna is not only a charismatic leader, but also an incredibly engaged, energetic and warm woman.

So how can a poor cassava farmer in a remote community build a successful cassava-processing business? TechnoServe's basic answer is to nurture a sound business environment.

production of higher quality casabe, a traditional bread made from cassava, in greater quantities. With sound business plans and new milling facilities, the women have been able to enter the market with a well-priced, reliable, high-quality product that is now in high demand.

Overall, the project has directly impacted 106 small-scale farmers across the five participating producer groups in the communities of Punta Piedra, Cusuna, Ciriboya, Sangrelaya and Tocamacho, all located in the Iruya Province. An additional 500 farmers have benefitted indirectly through the services provided at the processing facilities. Importantly, 90 percent of the groups' members are women.

Cassava processing is labor-intensive and requires the use of specialized equipment to drastically reduce the time and labor spent in order to increase production output, quality and



profitability. Each producer group matched the initial \$1,000 investment made possible through Manhattan Beach Community Church's grant, which went toward the necessary infrastructure improvements and, in turn, safer and more hygienic processing practices. Specifically, this infrastructure investment allowed for the purchase of new mills for four of the groups and the rehabilitation of one group's existing mill. Each producer group of 15 to 25 women has received training to manage the machines. The plants have the capacity to process 500 pounds of cassava tubers per hour.

The producer groups are in early stages of operation but are already achieving positive results. TechnoServe analyzed production costs and determined that by using the new equipment, compared to manual processing, the groups are saving roughly \$140 per 200 pounds of fresh cassava processed into casabe. Each group is currently processing approximately 1,000 pounds of cassava per day, resulting in 230 units of casabe. This level of production represents a 500 percent increase compared to last year, when the groups were processing only 200 pounds of cassava per day and producing 46 units of casabe. Perhaps most importantly, the bread is of higher quality because it does not collect dirt and other impurities; therefore the producer groups can charge a higher price for a better quality product.

Each group's casabe is exported internationally through Wabagari Distribution, an agro-industrial processing and export company. With support from TechnoServe, Wabagari has made contacts with a number of wholesalers and supermarkets expressing interest in regular supplies of casabe chips. Wal-Mart agreed to purchase 200 boxes of dry casabe chips as a trial order and is already distributing to 30 stores nationwide in Honduras.

In addition to casabe sales, the producer groups maintain other sources of income through their business operations. Members pay monthly contributions of 100 lempiras (about \$5.26), compared to the 50 lempiras paid before the new technology was introduced. In addition, each group is generating around \$300 of extra monthly income from non-member cassava farmers from neighboring villages that pay for access to the services and equipment available at the processing facilities, such as cassava grating, dehydrating, storage and transportation.

With their increased capital, the producer groups have been able to extend loans to members, and TechnoServe has helped them each establish a community banking system called a “caja rural.” Through the cajas, farmers can take out agricultural loans for interest rates no higher than 3 percent for members and 5 percent for non-members and can pay that amount back within a few months. Before establishing this credit system, accessing formal credit was almost impossible for the farmers. In the community of Punta Piedra, for instance, the caja rural of the producer group Lucha y Esperanza is providing loans to members and non-members for business initiatives and community-driven development projects.

At a recent training session in Ciriboya, TechnoServe/Honduras Country Director Victor Ganoza spoke with Mirna, a member of the Darara group:

“I take pride of what we’ve managed to do. You know, some of the women who work in the processing plant now have become independent and provide for their children. Together we have formed an association with 25 members,” she said with a big smile on her face.

Victor asked Mirna if she were to close her eyes and imagine herself in five years, where would she like to be. Without any hesitation, she said, “I want to be the biggest and best cassava processor in Honduras.”

Honduras has many more Dignas and Mirnas ready to benefit from productive business opportunities. With help from TechnoServe and its supporters like Manhattan Beach Community Church, we can provide them the hand-up they need to make change possible for themselves, their families and their communities.



Traditional plain casabe bread



Flavored and unflavored crispy, baked casabe chips



At Wal-Mart, first delivery of 200 boxes of dry casabe chips, each box containing 24 packets of flavored and unflavored baked casabe chips



Mirna (second from right) and members of the Darara group