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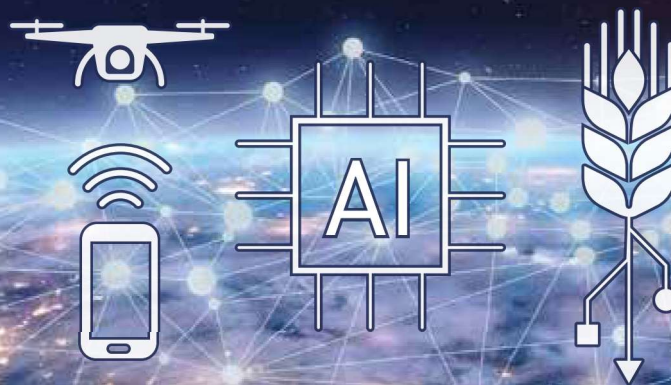
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BEAN CHAMPIONS

Nigeria's rural women revolutionise local locust beans

A food manufacturing start-up is upscaling the potential of a cheap, nutritious local crop and providing rural women with access to a reliable market.

Emmanuel Maduka

In Nigeria, African locust beans are being transformed into affordable and nutritional dried bean seeds. Agri-processing company, LifePro Food Mills, which is based in Akure, south-western Nigeria, is working with women farmers to produce 750 kg of processed bean seeds each month. Under the brand name 'Hiru', the company currently sells to over 50 outlets – mostly supermarkets – within the country, as well as to UK and US markets.

Locust beans are an indigenous plant grown for their pods with the seeds crushed and fermented, mostly by rural women farmers, for processing into seasoning for soups and stews. Despite the nutritional properties of the beans, which are high in calcium, the crop has

previously not been commercialised due to issues associated with the smell of the produce and poor shelf life. These issues arise from basic local processing methods, such as sun-drying the beans in the open.

To overcome these challenges, Adebowale Oparinu and Emmanuel Maduka co-founded LifePro Food Mills in 2018. "At the moment we are working with 20 women in rural areas whom we call our 'Hiru Champions'. We train them on hygienic ways to pre-process the bean seeds, which we buy from them at attractive prices to finalise processing in our factory. The women earn about €13.50-€22.50 each day depending on their production capacity. We aim to have empowered 200 women by 2020," says Oparinu.

To meet the supply demands of the company – and knowing that they have a ready market for their produce – the women 'champions' have scaled their production from 80 to 240 kg per week. They are trained by the start-up to pre-process the seeds by softening the pods (by boiling them) and manually depodding the seeds. LifePro Food Mills then reduces the beans' moisture content using a heat pump dehydrator, processing them into either a dried form or powdered product. The beans, which are packaged in 200 g pouches and have a shelf life of 1 year, cost ₦850 (€2.08) and are

delivered to customers in Abuja, Akure, Ibadan and Lagos for free.

The LifePro team was able to secure ₦7.5 million (€19,000) in funding from an I-Startup Southwest Demo Day organised in 2018 by the Premier Hub Innovation Center in Akure. They used the investment to set-up their factory, purchase equipment to maximise production capacity, and reach out to more rural women. Funmilayo Faponda from the Ibule Soro local government area of Ondo State is one of the Hiru Champions. Prior to linking up with LifePro Food Mills, she was producing locust beans whilst also working as a cleaner to boost her income. "I feel so happy working with them [LifePro]. It has helped me take care of my father and two children; the constant income helps me eat well and buy needed supplies. I sell what I produce at better prices and can even produce much more with the assurance of selling it," she says.

750 kg

of processed bean seeds are produced each month by LifePro Food Mills

€13.50-22.50

is earned by women farmers each day

The company is continuing to innovate new bean-based products and has been working on a patented bouillon cube to be launched within the next 2 years. In 2020, Oparinu also hopes to expand into the Ghana market. ■

LifePro Food Mills processes African locust beans into nutritional dried bean seeds to sell under the brand name 'Hiru'



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