

# A Participatory Evaluation of Child Labor in the Shea Value Chain in Northern Ghana

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**Abstract:** The shea tree has been a strategic resource for women livelihoods in Ghana serving as an important source of income for rural households. An estimated 20 million women are directly involved in the shea sector in West and East Africa. In West Africa, Burkina Faso, Ghana and Mali play a very important role in the shea market with Shea butter, a product of shea used for food products (90%), cosmetics (9%) and pharmaceuticals (1%). Given the nature of the actors and their interactions, human rights violations may exist in this shea market: forced labor, child labor, indecent wages, etc. In spite of the fact that most countries in the shea belt have policies in place to protect children's rights, many countries still face child labor; hence, this study.

The study adopted a participatory and learning approach to assess the shea value chain in northern Ghana, involving interviews with companies, 11 shea cooperatives, 11 children's groups, 11 Department of Social Welfare officers, 11 teachers, and 20 parents/caregivers. The qualitative design allowed respondents to provide detailed information on the shea value chain and the cause of child labor. The study revealed that the shea value chain is a viable economic activity for communities, especially women and their households. Key stakeholders in the industry include chiefs, religious leaders, women cooperatives, assembly, transporters, shea nut aggregators, processors, and policy and advocacy institutions. There are still high potential areas for shea nut extraction that the government, multilateral, and private sector could tap into.

Child labor exists in the sourcing communities of all participating companies, with children being active participants in the picking and transportation of shea nuts. Poverty is the major cause of child labor or engagement in the shea value chain. The study recommends enforcement of the Children Act, 1998 under the shea value chain sector and child policy dialogue among communities and government to balance law and moral issues in child labor engagement.

**Keywords:** Child, Labour, Value Chain, Participatory, Approach.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The shea tree has been a strategic resource for women livelihoods in rural Africa, Ghana and communities especially in northern Ghana (Jepsen et al., 2024a). Shea is found in the shea strip stretching from the Senegalese coast to the Horn of Africa. Shea butter, also called "women's gold", is an important source of income for households living in rural areas. An estimated 20 million women are directly involved in the shea sector in West and East Africa. In West Africa Burkina Faso, Ghana and Mali play a very important role in the shea market.

Shea butter, a product of shea is used for food products (90%), cosmetics (9%) and pharmaceuticals (1%) (Lovett, 2015b). It remains the second source of vegetable fat in Africa

after palm oil. There has also been a growing international market for shea butter. The shea sector has found itself in a market economy dominated by several buyers of almonds and shea butter. Global demand for shea is greater than supply. Several supply circuits are set up by private companies to obtain almonds and shea butter at better market conditions, faced with this renewed interest in shea products, human rights barriers may emerge (Nishinaga & Natour, 2019). For example, it may happen that women who collect and process shea kernels are not paid fair prices. Given the nature of the actors and their interactions, other human rights violations may exist in this shea market: forced labor, child labor, indecent wages (Lifanovskaya et al., 2023).

In spite of the fact that most countries in the shea belt have policies in place to protect children's rights, many countries still face child labor. However, its enforcement is often problematic, for three main reasons: the policy has not been worked out in operational terms, the application is not adapted to variable socio-cultural conditions, and there is a lack of human and financial resources to implement these policies. By and large, the same goes for the codes of conduct concerning child labor that many international companies have adopted: they are not always put into practice. Two other reasons for not enforcing child labor policies are related to the 'poverty argument' (also used by politicians) and the influence of 'vested interests' in some industries to have access to 'cheap children' (Thévenon & Edmonds, 2019).

Several multinational companies operate on the shea market. The United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, as well as the ILO Tripartite Declaration of Principles on Multinational Enterprises and Social Policy, recommend responsible business conduct for companies. According to the OECD, Responsible Business Conduct (RBC) sets an expectation that all businesses regardless of their legal status, size, ownership or industry should avoid and address the negative impacts of their operations, while contributing to sustainable development in the countries and communities they operate. This study therefore assesses selected shea companies' operational models and processes in relation to human rights and child labor within the shea value chain in Ghana.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### A. Shea Value Chain at the Global Level

Shea trees grow exclusively in the shea belt' across 20 Sub-Sahara African countries and have a lifespan of hundreds of years and can bear abundant crops (Jepsen et al., 2024b). Shea butter, an edible vegetable fat, is traditionally harvested by women in West Africa's agroforestry parklands and has been consumed by local populations for thousands of years. Evidence suggests that ancient Egyptians used both the oil and wood of shea trees, likely sourced in Chad, South Sudan, and Uganda up the Nile River.

Shea butter has gained international recognition in the food, cosmetics, and confectionary industries, attracted by various actors beyond the producing regions (Reynolds & West Africa Trade Hub, 2010). The majority (85%) of processed shea butter goes to the food industry, while the rest is used in personal care products (Kilenga, 2022). Shea butter is mainly used in skincare and haircare products due to its properties. The demand for shea butter in the European cosmetics market is growing due to rising consumer awareness of shea butter and the demand for natural cosmetics. The global shea butter market is estimated to reach USD 2.9 billion by 2025 (Mondal, 2023), with Europe accounting for more than a quarter share of the global market (LINK Ghana, 2022). Shea nuts are processed in Europe by leading vegetable oils processors, which have subsidiaries in Ghana. Some processing is also done in Ghana, and shea butter, as well as shea derivatives like shea olein and stearin, are exported to Europe.

### B. Ghana Context

Ghana's Northern Savannah Zone (NSZ) is home to nearly 400 million shea trees, which provide a significant source of economic livelihood for women in the region. Women traditionally retain control over shea-related revenues, usually spending it on education, health insurance, and other social services (Chen et al., 2017). A study in Northern Ghana found that 90% of women view shea as their major source of livelihoods. The increased incomes make households more resilient to negative shocks and coincide with the "lean" season of the year before agricultural crops are harvested, providing critical economic support for the population (Alhassan, 2010).

The shea value chain is dependent on natural shea parklands, with women playing key roles in the upstream shea value chains as pickers, processors, and sellers of nuts and butter (Mensah, 2023). The butter has been traditionally used as cooking oil, for healing cuts and bruises, and as skin cream. Significant investments by government, NGOs, and cooperative organizations have significantly improved operations, especially for women in Northern Ghana. Mechanized equipment has been introduced to increase efficiency and quality of extraction.

The main participants in the shea industry in Ghana fall into four main categories: shea pickers or collectors, first line traders, shea butter processors, and exporters or marketers (Mensah, 2023). Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and other developmental organizations play a significant role in developing the industry, with an extended value chain including village pickers, post-harvest processors of dry kernel, local buying agents, rural or urban traditional butter processors, and large-scale exporters of shea kernel Lovett (2004). Other players in the value chain include large-scale processors of shea butter based in-country and small-scale entrepreneurs formulating cosmetics based on shea butter (Kletter, 2002).

Ghana's shea value chain is dominated by key players and stakeholders, including GSA members like 3F Africa, Afri global Ghana, Akoma Cooperative Multipurpose Society, Asheba Enterprise, Balaji Industries (GH), Bunge Lodgers Crocklaan, Charles K. Boateng Enterprise, Churchwin A Trading, Creative Marketing Ltd, Davmel Company Ltd, Earth tone Inc, Essaar Agro West Africa Ltd, Ewyi-Ghana/Larti-BA Ent/Nogree, Freget Eagles, Ghana Nuts Ltd, Wilmar, among others. GSA is the largest exporter of unrefined shea butter, with around 94 million shea trees in the country, producing around 60,000 tons of shea nuts annually (Etefe, 2023). However, the pricing of shea kernel and butter remains a major challenge in Ghana, despite its contribution to the national and global economy. The lack of a shea board to regulate floor price for shea nut and its butter purchases has made it difficult for pickers to continue value chain activities. Policy guidelines are also lacking, and local producers have limited power in determining prices. The average price of raw butter in 2017 and 2018 was GHC 2.4 and GHC 4.5 per kilo of shea butter produced, with 37.93% of buyers being international and 16.67% being local. Ghana is also rapidly losing shea tree populations due to land conversion, climate

change, bushfires, and charcoal burning (LINK Ghana 2022). Government and stakeholders are working to address this issue. The government of Ghana and GSA Shea Landscape

Emission Reductions Project in Northern Ghana is classical example. The global shea value chain map is presented in figure 1 below.

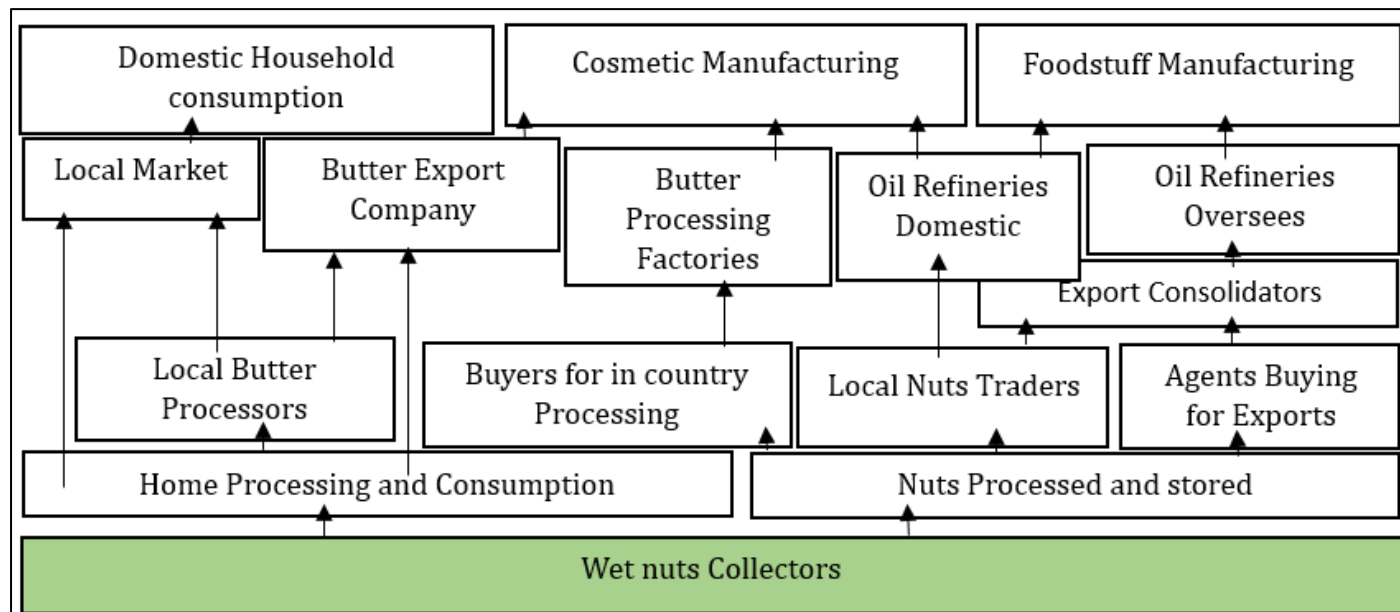


Fig 1: Global Shea Value Chain Map  
Source: Kent and Bakaweri (2010)

Generally, the shea value chain at the national level starts from the picking of the wet nuts which is generally done by smallholder women pickers. The picked nuts are processed and sold either as shea butter or shea kernel to local and international companies.

### C. Conceptualization of Child Labor

Child labor is defined by the National Plan of Action (NPA) 2 of Ghana, which outlines various activities children engage in that are not considered child labor. Child labor is defined as work that is inappropriate for a child's age, affecting their education, or harms their health, safety, or morals. However, not all work carried out by children is considered child labor (Andriiv, 2022), as some activities may help them acquire livelihood skills and contribute to their survival and food security.

The Ghana Children's Act defines exploitative labor as work that deprives a child of their health, education, or development (Jariego, 2021). The Ghana children's Act sets minimum age requirements for employment at 13 years for light work, 15 years for general employment, and 18 years for hazardous work. Hazardous work includes seagoing, mining, quarrying, portering of heavy loads, chemical production, and work in places where there is a risk of exposure to immoral behaviors (MD, 2019). ILO Conventions 138 and 182 target categories of labor for abolition, including labor performed by children under the minimum age for that kind of work, labor that jeopardizes the physical, mental, or moral well-being of a child, known as hazardous work, and worst forms of child labor, such as slavery, trafficking, debt bondage, forced recruitment of children for use in armed conflict, prostitution and pornography, and illicit activities.

Agricultural work often poses hazards and interferes with children's wellbeing, such as working on fields treated with pesticides, staying up all night on fishing boats, or carrying heavy loads. The International Labor Organization (ILO) also defines child labor as work that deprives children of their childhood, potential, and dignity, and is harmful to physical and mental development. Worst forms of child labor include slavery, debt bondage, prostitution, pornography, forced recruitment of children for use in armed conflict, drug trafficking, and other illicit activities (Nwazuo & Igwe, 2016).

In Ghana, nearly 2 million children aged 5-17 years are involved in child labor, accounting for 22% of the population. The World Bank Report on child labor in Ghana revealed that out of the 1.9 million children involved, 1.2 million are engaged in worst forms of child labor (WFCL). The fact that 91% of these children have two living parents suggests that neglect of parental responsibility may be a major cause of child labor. Other factors such as poverty, economic hardship, and labor markets may also contribute to child labor. Ghanaian child workers are mostly boys, with boys dominating sectors like fishing, commercial agriculture, forestry, quarrying, mining, truck pushing, and drug peddling. Girls are predominantly engaged in child domestic work, portering, prostitution, selling, and local eatery work. The Northern Region is the primary form of child labor, with children vulnerable to snake and scorpion bites and accidents. WFCL in Ghana includes child domestic work, fishing, head portering, commercial sexual exploitation, customary servitude, small-scale mining and quarrying, and commercial agriculture. Many child workers suffer from physical, psychological, and emotional disturbances, including depression and lack of hope for improvement.

#### *D. Ghana Child Protection Related Policies*

Ghana's Constitution guarantees the right of children to be protected from work that threatens their development. The country has various child protection policies, including the Children's Act, 1998 (Act 560), the Human Trafficking Act, 2005 (Act 694), the Domestic Violence Act, 2007 (732), and the Criminal Code (Amendment) Act, 1998 (Act 554). The Labor Act, 2003 (Act 651) amends and consolidates laws relating to labor, employers, trade unions, and industrial relations, establishing a National Labor Commission to facilitate and settle industrial disputes and promote effective labor cooperation between labor and management. The Act covers labor issues such as public and private employment centers, employment conditions, employment of persons with disabilities, young persons, women, fair termination of employment, remuneration, temporary and casual employees, unions, employers' organizations, collective agreements, strikes, the establishment of a National Tripartite Committee (NTC), forced labor, occupational health and safety, labor inspection, and the establishment of the National Labor Commission (NLC).

The Human Trafficking Act, 2005 criminalizes the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, trading, or receipt of persons, within and across borders, by the use of threat, fraud, and exploitation of vulnerability or by paying to gain consent. The Act allows for the filing of complaints with the police and provides for the rescue, rehabilitation, and reintegration of trafficked persons. The Juvenile Justice Act, 2003 (Act 653) establishes the juvenile justice system in Ghana, protecting the rights of juveniles and providing for young and juvenile offenders. It defines a juvenile as a person under 18 who conflicts with the law and requires different treatment from adults, except under certain exceptional circumstances. Ghana is endowed with policies that seek to protect children and vulnerable families, including the Child and family welfare policy (2015), the social protection policy (2016), and the Justice for children policy (2015).

### **III. METHODOLOGY**

#### *A. Research Approach*

The research utilized primary and secondary data to examine the shea value chain in Ghana. Primary data was collected from shea cooperatives, D.S.W, teachers, children, and parents. The study used Participatory Technology Approaches (PTA) to ensure quality and reliability in data collection. Secondary data was gathered through literature review, desk review, and literature on potential sheanut regions and districts. The study focused on private and government shea actors, human rights, child labor policies,

and conventions at national and global levels. Participating companies' safety and operational policies were audited. Primary data was collected from two shea companies in Techiman and Tamale through semi-structured interview guides. Companies provided information on their operations, stakeholders, policies, procedures, contracts, and training materials. Data was also gathered from District and Municipal Social Welfare Departments, community-level Junior High School teachers, and shea cooperatives. Focused Group Discussions (FGDs) were held to understand the shea income model and gender roles in the shea value chain activities.

The study purposively selected the shea processing companies as the sourcing companies for the study, considering all five regions in Northern Ghana. The qualitative design used field surveys and desk reviews to gather participants' life experiences in the shea value chain. The study included 11 Shea Cooperatives (SCs) from 11 communities, with a total membership of 141 (100% women). Children from each community were selected to share their life experiences in shea activities. Additionally, 11 social welfare department officers were selected to discuss the shea industry's contribution to child labor in their communities. The role of teachers in providing parental and teaching guidance was also considered critical in exploring the shea industry's influence on children. 11 community school teachers were selected for their knowledge on the shea-child labor phenomenon. A total of 20 care givers/parents, with an average size of 2 parents per community, and 99 (37% boys / 63% girls) with an average of 9 children per community were also purposively sampled. The study focused on mixed research data analysis, primarily qualitative, with content analysis based on respondents' comments and relevant documents. A participatory analysis process was adopted, allowing participating companies, stakeholders, and shea cooperatives to fully participate in the analysis. Quantitative data was used to complement qualitative data, resulting in an integrated approach that addresses all research questions by providing quantities and percentages to complement the qualitative data. The research was conducted from July 8th-20th, 2022, during a strike in public schools, causing school closures for interviews. However, teachers from sourcing communities were identified and interviewed. The data collection period also coincided with critical farming activities, causing difficulties for the research team to meet stakeholders and SCs. Despite these challenges, the research quality remained high. The study focused on child labor issues at the shea kernel level, limiting its scope to the shea kernel level, as the companies only source shea kernel and not butter from the communities.



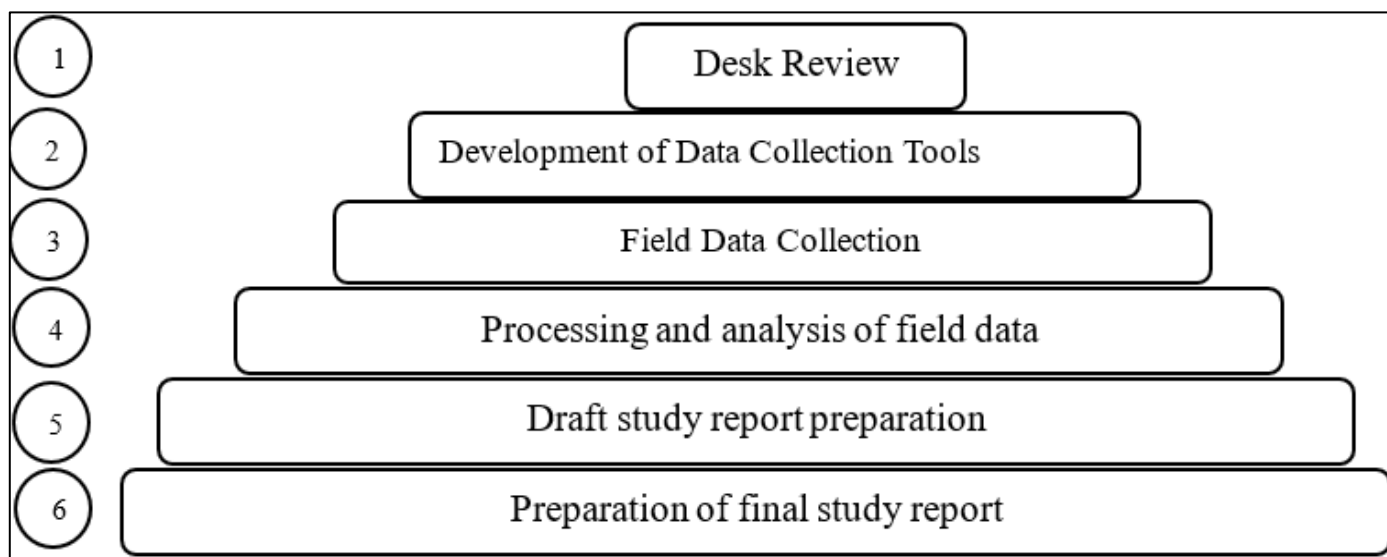


Fig 2: Research Design  
Source: Field Survey, 2022

#### IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

##### A. Operational Policies, Guidelines and Procedures of Selected Shea Companies

The shea companies have well-documented operational policies and guidelines that protect and guide the operations of long-serving employees, in line with the Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights of the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (2011). The companies have workers policy that addresses the health and safety needs of staff, providing detailed safety net support in areas such as family support, communication, health safety, medical check and insurance, code of conduct, transportation, and provident fund support.

The policy has built confidence among staff by providing them with safety nets to protect them when in need. It also ensures sanity and order by prescribing the "Dos and Don'ts" of staff in their daily operations. Sourcing companies accessed under the study have documented child protection policies in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Ghana Children's Act 560,1998, which discourage the use of children in their company activities. Agency agreements are signed with company agents operating at the community or district level, providing a code of conduct and expected benefits such as annual bonuses. Agents under the company are provided with health support services on condition that they are on official duty and were involved in accidents.

All employees are given detailed orientation on the policies and operational standards, creating staff awareness on safety and operational principles. They are provided with working gears, personal protection equipment against COVID-19, and private health insurance policies. If the company engages non-staff in any activity, it bears all risks associated with that activity and bears the cost. This conforms

to Ghana Labor Act, 2003 (Act No 651) regulation on work place safety. The two selected renowned shea companies are not seen to have engaged children at the company level neither do they encourage the use of children in company activities at the community level.

##### B. Shea Value Chain Activities within Sourcing Areas of Shea Companies

Shea trees bear fruits at maturity from November to August, with picking or gathering lasting from April to August. The greenish fruit, with a sweet fleshy edible pulp, contains 0.7-1.3g of protein and 41.2g of carbohydrate. The fruit pulp is rich in ascorbic acid, iron, and calcium, and B vitamins. The sugar content varies from 3-6%, distributed between glucose, fructose, and sucrose. The fruit is an important source of food for animals like bats and provides nutrition for many households, especially children. In northern Ghana, the fruits contribute to food security as their ripening coincides with the lean season of food production ("Shea Butter and Its Processing Impacts on the Environment in the Tamale Metropolis of Ghana," 2013). The shea industry has been an occupation for rural women and children, with 100% of FGDs holding with cooperatives stating that men do not participate in shea nut gathering, making the shea business a preserve of women.

The study found out that the shea value chain activities in the sourcing areas generally have two income models; income from the sale of shea kernel to shea processing companies and other markets as well as incomes from the sale of shea butter processed from the shea kernel. Majority (90%) of cooperatives sell their shea kernel as the source of income due to the ready market as well as less complexity compared to processing into shea butter as depicted in **Figure 3** below. Also, 7% of the cooperatives are engaged in shea butter processing while only 3% are engaged in both kernel and shea butter extraction.

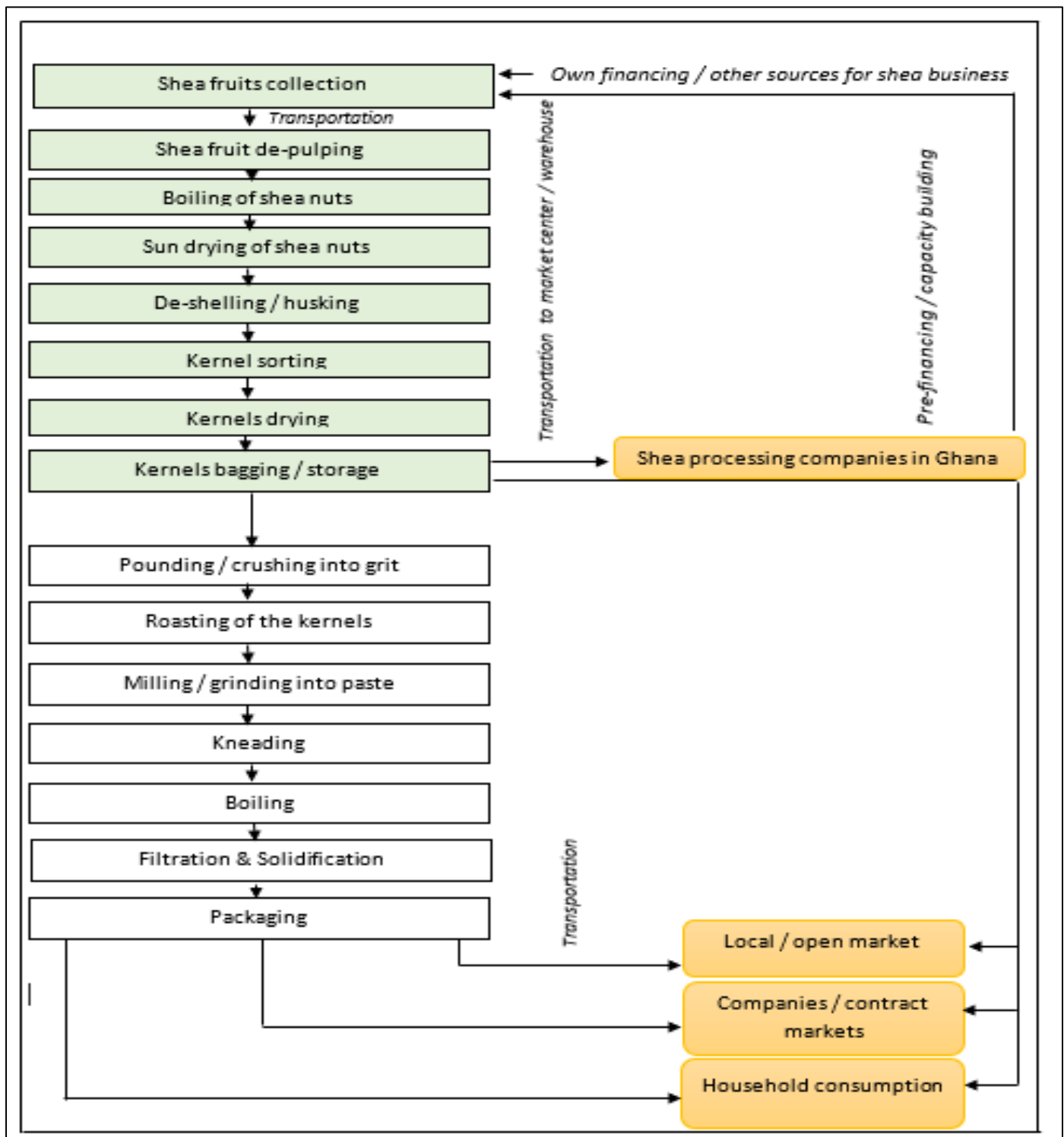


Fig 3: Value Chain Activities  
Source: Field Study, 2022

The study reveals that women in sourcing areas pick shea fruits from uncultivated plots or wild, carrying loads of 20-25kg. Shea nuts are then de-pulped, which involves the removal of the fleshy mesocarp, and sun-dried for 5-10 days to prepare them for shelling or de-husking. The kernel is of interest to all sourcing companies and other shea nut processors. The drying process facilitates de-husking, which removes the hard shell or coat covering endoderm containing oil. This can be done through various methods, such as

thrashing or pounding with a mortar and pestle. Machines are not preferred as it cracks the shea kernel. The shea kernel is then dried to remove moisture and is bagged in jut sacks for market sale. The kernel can be sold to sourcing companies or other markets for income or processed into shea butter before being sold. The average price for shea kernel sold to these companies is between GH160 to GH200 per 85kg bag, depending on the season. Prices vary per production season and are not fixed. The study shows that only 15% of total

cooperatives and suppliers are engaged in processing the kernel to shea butter. The shea butter processing procedure is tedious and time-consuming, taking one person 20-30 hours and 8.5-10.0kg of wood fuel to produce. There is no evidence of an overall balance between the cost of input energy and the economic profit from the sale of shea butter, and processors cannot provide cost estimates to this effect.

### C. Sourcing Regions and Areas Relevant for Future Detailed Investigations

The study found that sourcing companies can expand to other sourcing areas in and outside their current sourcing areas. Generally, regions that have potential for shea but have not yet been mapped out are the Eastern Region, Bono and Bono East Regions as presented in Table 1. These were also regions that existed organized shea processing companies had identified as new potential regions they could explore in the future. On the other hand, though the Savannah and Upper West were also identified as major reasons for future exploration by organized companies though there were already companies in such regions.

Table 1: Potential Sourcing Areas in Ghana

Company	Region	Districts
Organized Companies	Eastern Region	Afram Plains District
	Bono Region	Jaman North District
	Bono East	Kintampo Municipality
	Savannah	Pru District
	Upper West regions	All Districts

Source: Field Study, 2022

The study identifies regions and districts with a shea population that can meet the demand for shea, and these regions also have favorable climatic factors for the tree's growth. However, the current sourcing areas have untapped capacity, as wild shea fruits and shea park lands are under-picked, and picking is still manual, with pickers walking over 5-15 kilometers to pick nuts and carry them home. This is supported by studies by Laube (2015) and Abdulai and Polytechnic (2014). The shea tree also has a great capacity for producing sap, which can be a significant raw material for the gum and rubber industry.

To further explore the shea potential, it is recommended to explore new sourcing areas and well-utilize existing ones. A 47-year-old woman in one sourcing community stated that she could only pick from her husband's field, as it was difficult to go into the wild to pick shea. This is due to poor picking arrangements and transportation systems, which hinder pickers from reaching farther communities and transporting them home.

### D. Evidence and Major Root Causes of Child Labor in Shea Sourcing Areas

Child labor is defined as any activity performed by a child that is too dangerous or hazardous, and has the potential to negatively affect their health, education, moral, and normal development. In Ghana, a child is considered any who has not reached the age of maturity, which is 18 years. The target group for this study includes children aged 5-17 years engaged in the shea value chain and the Ghana Children's Act 560, 1998. The study found that child labor exists in various forms, particularly in the agricultural sector, with children below 18 years engaged in various household and agricultural activities. Poverty was identified as the main cause of child labor, as it significantly increases the income and survival probability of families. This is supported by studies by Naeem et al. (2011). Parents and shea cooperatives view children's

involvement as part of their moral upbringing and support system, rather than as child labor. Children in sourcing areas traditionally learn by helping their parents and communities perform social and economic activities as part of their upbringing. Communities and key stakeholders view the engagement of children in economic and social activities as a process of initiating them into a form of occupation and self-recognition role play, preparing them to become responsible adults who can perpetuate the culture of the people. Boys below 18 years are seen on farms supporting in farming, hunting, fire wood fetching, and other social and economic activities. Girls also participate in household chores, fetching firewood, picking shea nuts, and actively planting and weeding crops. These roles build a culture of hard work and recognition into adulthood.

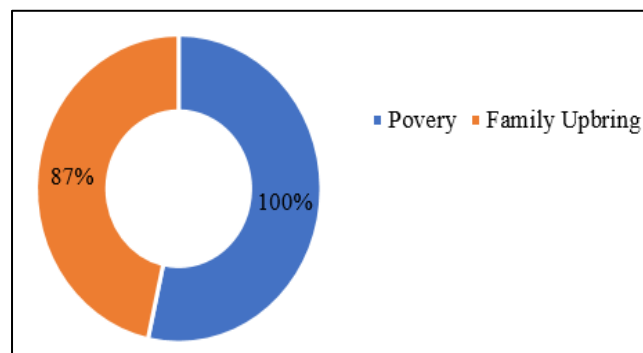


Fig 4: Major Causes of Child Labor in Ghana  
Source: Field Survey, 2022

In the rural communities studied, 82% of community teachers interviewed reported that children often ask for permission to support their parents on family farms. This highlights the significant role children play in family menus and livelihoods. It is considered normal for a child to play any role that their mental and physical abilities can support,

especially if they cannot perform basic household chores. However, this situation becomes challenging when parents expect their children to take over from them (GSS, 2003).

Some activities in sourcing communities can be hazardous to children, as they face stress, snake bites, psychological and physical stress, which can affect their studies and growth (Frankvanlierde, 2023). A focused group discussion with children revealed that they see the picking and marketing of shea as a hobby and an economic activity that supports them. However, they face risks such as snake bites, physical pain, and sometimes inability to locate their homes. The study reveals that the collection and picking of wet shea nuts from bush and farms is a major activity often performed by women and sometimes supported by their young daughters. The process involves carrying the nuts on their heads, trekking long distances, or using tricycles to transport them in bulk. Women and children do not wear protective gear, which exposes them to hazards like scorpion and snake bites.

Transportation of the shea nuts is done by women, carrying them on their heads and trekking up to 15 kilometers. In some cases, tricycles are rented for this purpose. The wet shea nuts are parboiled by individual women shea collectors using big iron pots, which requires heavy use of water and firewood, and exposure to fire and heat. Girls aged 5-17 years and boys may provide support in fuel wood fetching and water for the parboiling process.

After parboiling, the shea nuts are dried on the bare floor until they are completely dried to enable cracking and separation of the kernel from the husk. Gender roles analysis revealed a significant role of women and girls in this activity, with boys and men also supporting the process when it is about to rain and the woman is not at home.

Dried shea nuts are manually cracked and winnowed by women to obtain the kernel. Old ladies are hired to perform this function, and girls are seen providing support at this stage. The next stage of the shea activity is drying and sorting the kernel to obtain a suitable moisture content for storage. Boys are seen providing support after school hours, helping their mothers dry the shea kernel and pick the bad kernel. A FGD with children in one of the sourcing communities indicated

*“When we return from school, we help our mothers dry the shea kernel in the sun. Sometimes we even help them to pick the bad kernel”*

When asked about the role of boys in the shea activities, this was the response;

*No, shea activities are only for women and girls. The boys only go to the farm with our fathers to work on maize or yam farms”*

These statements confirmed the role of women and girls in the shea value chain which is confirmed by the study and other similar studies in Ghana.

The shea kernel is bagged and stored by women and their children, often aided by boys and girls. In some communities, warehouses provided by Wilmar are used until sales. Boys and men provide support during this stage. Shea kernels are sold by women or cooperatives at the community through community sale agents and participating company agents. Shea kernels are sold in piecemeal or bulk sales when companies like Wilmar move into the communities to purchase the kernel. Tricycles aggregate shea nuts in communities to buying centers, where they are weighed and bought by the company. Men carry out the loading and offloading of bags into trucks for transportation to Tamale. Income realized from shea kernel sales are fully controlled by the women and are used to address their needs without any external influence from their husbands. From the foregoing, it is observed that all activities including shea picking, transportation, parboiling, drying, cracking and winnowing, bagging and storage are done by women and sometimes aided by their girl children. This was collaborated by key stakeholders such as companies, teachers and social welfare staff interviewed by the study team. This is in tune with several literature which have documented the dominance role of women in the upstream shea value chain (Kaplinksky and Morris, 2001; Schmitz, 2005; Ahmed, 2007; Stonehouse and Snowdon, 2007).

Girls aged 6-14 years in Ghana assist their mothers in activities such as picking, transportation, cracking, winnowing, bagging, and storage of shea kernels. Teachers interviewed found that these activities do not prevent girls from attending school, and they mostly participate during weekends and after school. Girls' participation is motivated by their mothers' ability to buy dresses during festive events like Eid al alha, Eid ul Fitr, and Christmas from the income realized from shea.

Stakeholders interviewed, such as teachers and social welfare staff, believe that there could be high child labor in the shea value chain due to its income potential for women. The most critical area is carrying wet shea nuts from the bush to the house, especially where there are no feeder roads to facilitate transport by tricycles.

Currently, the assistance girls give their mothers in these activities does not constitute child labor but rather the learning process for the girl child. The Ministry of Employment and Labor Relations National Plan of Action (NPA2) of Ghana defines child labor as work that is inappropriate for a child's age, affects their education, or is likely to harm their health, safety, or morals. Child labor does not encompass all economic activities undertaken by children, but rather those that do not conform to national legislation or international instruments and standards on child labor.

The study reveals that 90% of respondents Social Welfare Departments in all districts believe there have been no reported cases of child labor in the shea value chain. Girls' involvement in shea activities is considered light work and part of their moral upbringing. Some activities, such as learning trades, take children out of school. Teachers



interviewed support the assertion that children's absenteeism from school, late reporting, or school dropout cannot be attributed directly to shea-related activities. The seasonal nature of shea picking does not have a significant negative impact on children's schooling.

Boys are sparingly involved in shea-related activities, with their few isolated involvements stemming from their mothers soliciting their help to transport shea or help pack the kernel in homes and storage houses. Adult men's involvement is mainly for storage and loading at a fee. The study highlights that children are engaged in shea activities based on their moral, cultural, and social roles. However, the existing child labor and child protection policies contradict communities' perceptions. Ghana has signed several conventions and treaties to protect children, but the Ghana Children's Act 569, 1998, which defines child engagement, has been contravened by communities' perception and children's engagement.

#### *E. Link between Shea Companies' Activities and Child Labor in Shea Value Activities*

The study revealed that children participate in shea value chain activities such as nut picking, parboiling, drying, and sorting, but there is no significant evidence linking these activities to companies operating in shea butter communities. Shea cooperatives in sourcing communities and districts operated by shea companies have relationships with bigger buyers either nationally or internationally which they work with. Shea activities were already being carried out as social and economic enterprises by women and girls, with support from men and boys before the operations of external companies or market actors.

At the company level, there is no evidence of child labor or children engagement. Both companies have policies discouraging children in shea activities and have a welfare system in place to prevent child labor. However, there is no mechanism or system to detect child labor or child involvement.

The study found that the existence of companies could increase and intensify shea commercialization, potentially triggering child labor activities within the value chain. The seasonality of the shea tree does not allow children to be strongly engaged in most activities within the chain. A shea cooperative in one of the study communities reported that children with 95% girls support shea value chain activities, particularly in picking, transporting, parboiling, cracking, drying, and sorting.

#### *F. Opportunities for Sourcing Companies within the Shea Value Chain in Ghana*

The study highlights challenges in the shea value chain activities at both the company and cooperative level. However, there are also opportunities for large-scale shea companies within the shea value chain to collaborate with key stakeholders to enhance their activities and increased incomes. To address potential child labor issues, companies should work with the Department of Social Welfare to operationalize their child protection policies and empower community child protection committees. The Department of

Social Welfare should educate and enforce the Children Act to ensure a common understanding of child labor and moral/cultural issues.

There are several actors within the shea value chain, providing a collective force to engage the government and COCOBOD for strong policy support for the shea sector. Women shea pickers in all sourcing areas of the two companies could develop into viable cooperative enterprises, with assistance from the Department of Cooperatives, LINK Ghana, GSA, and NGOs.

Building capacity for women shea kernel sellers in the value chain approach, including exchange visits to depots and processing centers, can enhance their understanding of the shea value chain. Participating companies can adopt measures aimed at long-term relationships with shea pickers, such as financing or in-kind support during off-seasons for other economic activities.

Community agents, young and entrepreneurial, can be used in company-level activities to explore and engage communities for more shea. Communities appreciate the shea tree, which can be utilized for Farmer Managed Natural Regeneration (FMNR) and planting.

The Children's Act provides a strong foundation for assembly and community-based child protection tribunals to protect children in communities.

## **V. CONCLUSION**

The shea value chain is a vital economic activity for communities, particularly women and their households. The sector is complex, with multiple actors involved in various stages such as picking, transporting, processing, and marketing. It has both local and international characteristics, making it competitive and providing numerous business opportunities for both men and women. However, the law (Children's Act, 560, 1998) on child labor provides a clear dichotomy between the legal framework and community/societal view.

The Ghana Children Act 560, 1998, part-V Employment of children, Part I-Child Labor, stipulates that no person shall engage a child in exploitative labor, which deprives their health, education, or development. The study found that children engaged in early hours of picking shea nuts were considered child labor under the Act. The Act also provides minimum age requirements for light work and hazardous employment. Data from sourcing companies shows that children aged 9-15 are engaged in the picking, transporting, and processing of shea kernel and butter, which falls under the law. The Act defines light work as work that is not harmful to the child's health or development and does not affect their attendance at school or their capacity to benefit from school work. Hazardous work, such as carrying heavy loads, poses a danger to the health, safety, or morals of a person.

The study found that children are actively involved in the picking, transporting, and processing of shea nuts, which is considered hazardous to their physical health and well-being. Children aged 10-15 years are particularly vulnerable due to the risk of snake bites and lack of sufficient sleep for healthy growth and development.

The Ghana Children's Act 560, 1998, acknowledges the moral and cultural perspectives of communities and stakeholders in engaging children in household and community development. However, child labor still exists within the shea value chain activities of companies' sourcing communities, including shea nut picking, transportation, parboiling, and crushing. Poverty is identified as a major cause of child labor, and until parents can financially support themselves, children will continue to be used to contribute to household incomes. The study did not establish any link between participating companies and the engagement of children in their sourcing areas. It is important to note that, before the advent of organized formal companies, children engaged in the picking, transporting, and processing of shea was a communal and household support strategy. The scale and intensity of children's involvement in the shea industry could increase with the increasing commercialization/monetization rate in Ghana. Enforcement of the Children Act 560, 1998 at the community, district/municipal, and national levels is highly recommended, along with shea policy enforcement by government and stakeholders. Livelihood support and public sensitization are identified as major strategies to minimize child labor in the sourcing communities.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The study examines child labor laws and conventions in Ghana, revealing that the government has numerous laws protecting children and prohibiting them. However, the study found that these laws are not being enforced in all areas of northern Ghana. The study suggests that the government should apply child labor laws in the sector, and all stakeholders, including private and government actors, should apply the minimum legal working age for jobs in the shea value chain industry. Recommendations are proposed for improvement.

### A. Private Sector or Sourcing Companies Level

- Participating companies should have practical programs and policies that will ensure children do not participate in the shea value chain. Though the study observed companies have child labor policies, its implementation at the community level will require much efforts by communities. Awareness creation through community radios, community level trainings, social media such as WhatsApp's and use of religious platforms.
- There should be full certification of "no child participation" in shea products before it is purchased so as to ensure communities do not engage children in the sector.

- Sourcing companies should provide alternative picking mechanism such as the use of rollers for picking and discourages children from picking since there is high risk in the picking and transporting processes. This should be part of the education and training programs of sourcing companies as well as NGOs, and CSOs role.
- Sourcing companies, government and private partners needs to ensure that livelihood interventions such as bee rearing and livestock production targets women in the shea sector. This will contribute to poverty reduction while also enhancing the shea value chain activities.
- Private sector and sourcing companies should collaborate NGOs / CSOs in educating communities on child labor issues as well as on existing policies and laws.
- Sourcing companies will require to understand the existing Ghana child labor law 560 and provide financial support to Department of Social Welfare to set up and strengthen child parliament committees at the district and community levels.

### B. Government and Policy Level

- The Ghana Tree Crop Development Authority (TCDA) should adopt practical policy and program on the shea industry. The production, conservation and utilization as well as the role of children in the sector should be a national and international priority. There should be a very clear policy framework in conserving and increasing the shea population and its utilization.
- It is strongly recommended that the Tree Crop Development Authority (TCDA) should provide an independent regulatory processes and systems for the shea sector.
- There should be an enforcement of the children's ACT, 560, 1998 under the shea value chain sector. There should be child policy dialogue among communities and government to synchronize the dichotomy between the law and moral issues in the engagement of children. This will require collaboration with NGOs, CSOs and sourcing companies.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

On behalf of all authors, there is no conflict of interest.

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