



# Impact Story

## Collaboration and Growth: Senegalese Women's Role in Advancing the Cashew Value Chain

**Country:** Senegal

**Program:** Volunteer Cooperation Program 2020-2028

**Partners:** Chambre de Commerce, d'Industrie, et d'Agriculture de Ziguinchor (CCIAZ) and Interprofession Cajou du Sénégal (ICAS)

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# Context

Since the early 2000s, global demand for cashew nuts —the edible seeds in the cashew tree apple native to tropical America— has grown significantly. This rising demand has prompted producers in Africa to transition from traditional artisanal methods to more cost-effective techniques that rely on specialized equipment. It has also encouraged technical and financial partners to invest in the cashew industry, improving competitiveness and attracting both local and foreign investors. Recognizing the crop's potential for economic growth, many producers across the continent have adopted cashew farming and cultivation, fueling a thriving market, which now accounts for 50% of global production. West Africa is the leading exporting region, with Senegal contributing about 5% of total global exports, and boasts a well-structured cashew value chain with a potential economic impact of nearly \$50 million.<sup>1</sup>

In the five Senegalese cashew-growing regions where Catalyste+'s Gender-Sensitive Value Chain (GSVC) approach operates —Fatick/Kaolack, Sédhiou, Kolda, Ziguinchor and Thiès— over 2 million people are directly or indirectly involved in the industry. This crop plays a crucial role in lifting many individuals, particularly women, out of poverty by providing jobs, generating income, and enabling rural economic development. In fact, 65% of the micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) involved in cashew nut production and sales in Senegal are led by women, highlighting both the significant contributions of women to the value chain and the potential for their economic and social empowerment as the industry grows.<sup>2</sup>

A **Value chain** describes the sequence of activities, inputs, and processes required to develop a product or service, including land, raw materials, capital, labor, information, and the value added at each stage. A **Gender-Sensitive Value Chain** integrates a gendered perspective into the analysis and development of value chains, ensuring equitable access to resources, opportunities, and decision-making for women and other marginalized groups while fostering an inclusive environment where all stakeholders can thrive.

The role of women in cashew cultivation and production has evolved over time. In the past, women's access to land was limited, and they often worked for minimal compensation by primarily collecting cashew nuts in the fields. Barriers such as lack of financing and technical training restricted their economic growth. Today, more women engage in agricultural entrepreneurship, with some owning their farms. This change is largely attributed to the establishment of cooperatives and Economic Interest Groups (GIEs), which have played a key role in market access, training, and financial inclusion. These groups have enabled women to present collective offers to potential buyers and funders at trade fairs, for example, increasing their negotiating power, boosting their visibility, attracting more clients and partners, and granting them access to group training sessions. By forming these collectives, women have also built self-confidence, secured specialized financing, and assumed leadership roles in cashew production, positioning themselves as key agricultural actors.

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<sup>1</sup> Diouf, E. (2024, August 29). *Interview with Catalyste+'s Country Representative in Senegal*. In [https://www.africancashewalliance.com/sites/default/files/documents/perspectives\\_2023-enfr\\_web.pdf](https://www.africancashewalliance.com/sites/default/files/documents/perspectives_2023-enfr_web.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Diouf, E. (2024, August 29). *Interview with Catalyste+'s Country Representative in Senegal*. In Report \_ CASHEW VALUE CHAIN - SÉNÉGAL ANALYSIS AND STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK FOR SUBSECTOR GROWTH INITIATIVES, USAID, 78 p, 2017

Within this context, Catalyste+'s GSVC approach in Senegal aims to increase the incomes and improve the living standards of women and smallholder cashew farmers by providing them with technical support focused on skill development, training, and access to financing. Through diverse partnerships, we work to strengthen market access for women's groups, helping them develop marketing strategies and teaching them the digital marketing skills required to tackle the challenges they face.

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## Chambre de commerce, d'industrie et de l'Agriculture de Ziguinchor

A key partner in our work within the cashew value chain in Senegal is the Chambre de Commerce, d'Industrie, et d'Agriculture de Ziguinchor (CCIAZ), which plays a vital role in driving local economic development and empowering women in the sector. With a network of over 2,500 members (including SMEs and GIEs) across industries like agriculture, fishing, and tourism, the CCIAZ safeguards its members' commercial interests by providing strategic guidance, engaging with communities and governments, and enhancing their visibility at both national and international levels. Given its significant role in the local economy, the CCIAZ is committed to promoting gender equality and expanding economic opportunities for women. By providing training and support to women-owned and women-led businesses, it addresses challenges such as limited access to education opportunities. Through these efforts, the CCIAZ has positioned itself as a driving force in advancing women's economic empowerment, particularly within the Senegalese agrifood transformation sector. Agriculture and agribusiness are the cornerstone sectors within CCIAZ's network, encompassing over 1,000 member businesses, 70% of which are women-led.

Through our GSVC approach, Catalyste+ has supported GIE DEMIIR, a member business of the CCIAZ based in Ziguinchor. GIE DEMIIR is a small business focused on processing and packaging products derived from the cashew tree, including cashew nuts and cashew apples, along with other agricultural goods. The business is built on the principles of unity and collaboration, leveraging its team members' unique expertise and skills. The group is led by Ms. Noëlle Niouky, a determined and proactive entrepreneur who has dedicated her life to cultivating the abundant fruits of the region. Ms. Niouky sees the cashew apple as the region's gold and chose to focus on its production due to the fruit's versatility as a food product. She believes that cashew farming is a transformative opportunity for women and vulnerable groups in the region, enabling them to earn a sustainable income and transition out of the informal economy. Together with her team of 20 women and five men, she has built GIE DEMIIR into a hub of economic empowerment, creating sustainable business opportunities and supporting more secure livelihoods for women and the community.

### **Collaboration with Catalyste+**

#### ***Diagnostic Evaluation and Business Planning***

Catalyste+'s work with GIE DEMIIR began in 2020 through a comprehensive diagnostic evaluation of the group's operations led by Catalyste+ Advisor (CA), Mozart Nguizani. This evaluation identified key

areas for improvement, such as the need for a structured business plan, stronger marketing strategies, and enhanced production processes. As a result, GIE DEMIIR's team developed a business plan aligned with their growth objectives and a marketing strategy that allowed them to expand their customer base, particularly by reaching new online markets in other regions of Senegal.

The group leveraged digital platforms and targeted marketing efforts to enhance visibility and attract new clients. A key tool in this approach was the adoption of WhatsApp Business, which enabled GIE DEMIIR members to process online orders and communicate efficiently with customers. Within a few months, this strategy delivered tangible results, increasing overall sales by 25% and ensuring sustainability for the group's activities. Furthermore, GIE DEMIIR created a digital database that has enabled real-time tracking of production, transformation, and sales, ensuring more consistent and efficient operations.

In addition to online marketing, GIE DEMIIR implemented a direct, face-to-face outreach strategy. A dedicated female team member engaged in porte-à-porte visits to hotels, restaurants, and other local businesses to showcase the company's products and highlight their unique advantages. This personalized approach was crucial in establishing new business relationships and expanding GIE DEMIIR's customer base in Ziguinchor and beyond.

To facilitate the implementation of hygiene and food storage recommendations from the diagnostic evaluation, Catalyste+ support included a CAD \$600 subsidy. This funding allowed GIE DEMIIR to purchase essential equipment, such as lab coats, gloves, hairnets, basins, towels, rags, buckets, carpeting, insect repellent, and an industrial cleaning machine. With this equipment, the group improved their operations by properly sorting different types of fruits using basins, sterilizing surfaces for product preparation, and keeping insects away from the produce. Staff members gained confidence and expertise in using the new equipment, which streamlined workflows and improved the efficiency of larger cleaning tasks such as floor and surface cleaning. These upgrades helped GIE DEMIIR meet industry standards, reduce waste, and improve product quality.



*From left to right: Madame Niouky, CA Mozart Nguizani, Elhadji Diouf, Elisabeth Gill*

### **Capacity Building in Food Safety, Hygiene, and Processing**

Following the diagnostic evaluation, Catalyste+ provided targeted capacity-building workshops to improve GIE DEMIIR's food safety, hygiene practices, and food processing techniques, in line with international standards such as the Codex General Principles of Food Hygiene and the Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP) system. Led by CA Mamadou Sow, the training sessions with 13 employees (11 women and 2 men) focused on key practices, including proper handwashing; the use of lab coats, hairnets, and gloves; decontamination and sterilization techniques for surfaces;



the sorting of fruit components (flesh, skin, seeds, etc.) into separate containers; and the isolation of fresh fruit from spoiled produce to prevent contamination.

These practices directly addressed one of the most significant challenges in the Ziguinchor agricultural sector: inadequate storage infrastructure for perishable goods. Without proper storage, local businesses are often forced to discard spoiled fruit, leading to increased waste and limiting sales to local markets. By implementing HACCP protocols and improving food production and storage techniques, GIE DEMIIR significantly reduced spoilage and extended the shelf life of its products. For example, cashew juice can now be stored without refrigeration for up to five years without fermenting, while other juices have a shelf life of up to six months. The upgraded equipment significantly improved production efficiency, allowing GIE DEMIIR to optimize the use of raw materials and meet customer demand. Thanks to their collaboration with CA Mamadou, the group upgraded their cashew juice packaging by transitioning to glass containers, ensuring higher quality and better hygiene standards.

These advancements enabled GIE DEMIIR to earn certifications for Codex and HACCP standards—a critical step toward market expansion. Enhanced storage practices slowed down inventory spoilage, allowing more time for the transformation process, reducing overall waste, and improving profitability.

### ***Product transformation and diversification***

Building on the hygiene and storage knowledge gained, GIE DEMIIR made significant progress in food processing and preservation techniques. CA Mamadou Sow guided workshops on product transformation, testing, and packaging, which enabled the group to diversify their product range. They developed new items, including juices from cashew apples, mangoes, and ginger, as well as value-added products made from cashew apples such as preserved cashew apples, cashew dates, dried snacks, jams, flours, cakes, and couscous.

GIE DEMIIR also introduced innovative practices to sustainably use by-products, turning mango peels into vinegar—a practical solution for reducing waste and maximizing the value of raw materials. Building on this success, the group has already launched mango vinegar as a new product and plans to expand production to include mango oil and cashew vinegar in the coming years. These initiatives not only align with GIE DEMIIR's goals of innovation and food self-sufficiency but also demonstrate their commitment to resource optimization and strategic growth.



*GIE DEMIIR staff using the purchased equipment to separate mangoes from their peels in concordance with hygiene practices*

With these operational improvements in place, GIE DEMIIR opened up a storefront attached to their production facility, enabling direct sales to local retailers, restaurants, and households.

## Impact on the Cashew GSVC

The collaboration between Catalyste+ and GIE DEMIIR has transformed the lives of the women in the group. By building their capacity in business development, marketing, food safety, hygiene, and product transformation, the partnership has empowered women to transition from informal economic roles to more structured and sustainable livelihoods.

The economic benefits for women have been both significant and diverse. Women at GIE DEMIIR now play a central role in transforming cashews and other products, earning steady incomes that enhance their households' stability and financial security. As GIE DEMIIR has grown, Ms. Niouky has been able to raise women's wages, enabling them to take on family responsibilities traditionally handled by men, such as school fees, food expenses, and healthcare costs. This shift significantly thereby strengthened their autonomy and financial independence.

Likewise, the expansion of the business has had a positive impact on women in the community, enabling GIE DEMIIR to create new job opportunities for seven community members—six of whom are women—in production, administration, accounting, and transformation. This expansion of their team strengthened their internal capacity and positioned the group for further growth.

GIE DEMIIR's commitment to knowledge sharing has led them to empower local actors by training eight women and five men within the group. These individuals, in turn, have passed on their new product transformation and diversification skills to 40 additional community members (25 women and 15 men). The group has also welcomed students from the University Assane Seck in Ziguinchor, reinforcing their role as leaders in sustainable, community-driven agribusiness.



*Cashew apple from GIE DEMIIR's production*

In addition to these tangible outcomes, Ms. Niouky has stated that Catalyste+ assignments have significantly boosted the confidence, motivation, and discipline of GIE DEMIIR's staff, especially women. This shift has fostered an environment where team members feel valued and inspired to contribute to the group's success. By strengthening their skills, providing support, and cultivating recognition, GIE DEMIIR has reinforced the team's sense of ownership, which continues to drive the group's growth.

The business has also become a model of gender-sensitive economic growth in the agribusiness sector, empowering women to take on leadership within the cashew value chain and setting a strong example for other initiatives. It has been recognized by the CCIAS as one of the most salient examples of success in terms of financial growth, community impact, and women's empowerment, demonstrating how targeted support, local

leadership, and inclusive practices can drive sustainable change.

At 70 years old, Ms. Niouky is preparing the next generation of leaders at GIE DEMIIR by gradually passing on her knowledge to trusted staff members, many of whom have participated in Catalyste+ assignments. This transition aims to ensure the group's sustainability in the long term and continue empowering women in the region and beyond.

## Interprofession Cajou du Sénégal

Through Catalyste+'s GSVC approach, we have also supported the Interprofession Cajou du Sénégal (ICAS), an organization that strengthens the cashew nut industry by improving food and nutrition security, increasing producers' incomes, fostering job creation, and protecting the environment. Established in August 2021 in Ziguinchor, ICAS serves as a national body uniting all actors in the cashew sector. Its operations span major production regions, including Dakar, Thiès, Fatick, Kolda, Sédhiou, and Ziguinchor.

With over 11,000 members across the value chain, including producers, processors, and exporters, ICAS brings together a diverse range of groups, companies, and primarily cooperatives, 100 of which are women's groups. The organization strategically prioritizes the cashew processing node, supporting women in accessing international cooperation opportunities, particularly through training sessions, financing, and networking with other partners. ICAS's initiatives not only improve the competitiveness of women-led groups but ensure their active participation in driving the cashew industry forward in Senegal. They further enhance women's skills to access funding and markets, foster strategic partnerships, and contribute to policy development and decision-making within the sector.

### **Collaboration with Catalyste+**

Since August 2023, Catalyste+ has collaborated with ICAS on several occasions to address multiple needs, including assessing the support requirements of the Mbao Classified Forest. This ICAS member groups 120 members (100 women and 20 men) engaged in cashew nut processing. The cashew nuts, cultivated across more than 300 hectares, play a vital role in sustaining the 723-hectare classified forest.

To this end, Catalyste+ Advisor, André Dupuis, conducted several field visits to evaluate the cashew nut production chain and identify key challenges. Based on his observations, he developed an action plan that recommended increasing women's visibility in the value chain and diversifying processed nut products that could positively impact farmers' incomes. To implement these recommendations, ICAS applied for funding from the AWE Innovation Micro Fund (AIMf) to purchase cashew processing equipment, such as a cooking drum, a hulling table, and hulling machines. This equipment will significantly reduce the Mbao Classified Forest's workload, boost their productivity, and enhance their competitiveness in the marketplace.

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## The African Cashew Alliance (ACA) Conference

ICAS also sought Catalyste+'s expertise to support the preparation of the 17th African Cashew Alliance (ACA) Conference and Exhibition, held from September 18 to 21, 2023. Founded in 2006, the African Cashew Alliance is an association of African and international companies dedicated to advancing a globally competitive African cashew industry. ACA currently comprises around 130 member companies (including ICAS) representing all segments of the cashew value chain, such as producers, processors, traders, and international buyers.

The conference provided a platform for global cashew industry stakeholders to exchange ideas, establish partnerships, and address crucial issues such as regulation and policies related to agricultural logistics, transportation and distribution of cashew nuts, and tracking and traceability technologies in the cashew value chain. Over 350 people attended, including a representative from Senegal's Ministry of Environment, Sustainable Development, and Ecological Transition; the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), and the head of Gender and Inclusion at the Mastercard Foundation, among others. The event consisted of two main segments designed to foster dialogue and collaboration across the cashew value chain.

The first segment called the "scientific" session featured in-depth discussions on strategic issues across several themes. The central theme, *"Senegalese cashew and sustainable development: strengthening processing and promoting local consumption,"* addressed key topics such as the sustainability of the African cashew industry, access to financing for actors in the cashew value chain, and necessary policy reforms to enhance sector competitiveness. Elhadji Diouf, Catalyste+'s Country Representative in Senegal, led discussions on logistical challenges within the value chain, including transportation and shipping issues. Elhadji also highlighted sustainable logistics practices in the production and distribution of cashew nuts in Africa and other countries, emphasizing proper waste management, the reduction of carbon footprints, responsible resource usage, and the health of women processors.

The second segment, known as the "exhibition village", brought together Senegalese companies and exhibitors from Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Benin, and Burkina Faso to showcase their products and expertise. Some exhibitors also presented innovative equipment designed to improve the processing of mahogany apples and cashew nuts. In total, 262 participants, including women's organizations, local businesses, the Ministry of Agriculture, and both national and international bodies, attended the segment.



*Panel animation by CR Elhadji on new trends in logistics for a sustainable value chain*





*On the left: Women producer and processor of the Casamance – supported by Catalyste+ through Interprofession Cajou Senegal. On the right: Binta Wane, President of the Market gardening groups and women processors of the Mbao Classified Forest (FCM)*

Warda Belaribi, one of the Catalyste+ Advisors who supported ICAS in preparing for the conference, significantly strengthened the organization's capacity to coordinate the event. In terms of priority management, she emphasized the urgency of mobilizing financial resources to hire a courier service to handle urgent correspondence near the venue, targeting potential sponsors and partners. ICAS addressed this recommendation by promptly informing Executive Board members and securing the necessary approval and funding from the President. The organization also implemented a robust tracking system to record all couriered correspondence to ensure the efficient monitoring of correspondence for the event.

In addition, CA Warda supported ICAS in formalizing partnership agreements for the conference through written documentation, ensuring clarity and accountability. She also collaborated with the partner to enhance organizational planning and monitoring by developing a detailed calendar and agenda, facilitating information sharing, and fostering effective collaboration among stakeholders.

Warda's overall coaching equipped ICAS's members with valuable experience organizing large-scale events, which they can now harness during future activities. Her support and training strengthened their ability to communicate across functions and prioritize their tasks effectively in their day-to-day jobs.

### **Impact on the Cashew GSVC**

More than 50 women ICAS members participated in the conference, contributing to panel discussions and asking insightful questions, which according to the partner, significantly boosted their self-confidence. Through capacity building with Warda Belaribi on logistics and finance activities, the women gained a deeper understanding of their ability to access essential resources such as credit, raw materials, technologies, and markets. This new awareness, combined with their active involvement in the event, fostered a culture of female entrepreneurship, providing women a

platform to apply their knowledge to expand their market reach and promote their products at regional, national, and international levels. They exchanged business cards and engaged in discussions with potential customers and distributors from various retail chains, opening doors for new business opportunities.



*CA Warda Belaribi posing with ICAS and ACA staff members at the Minister of Agriculture's office after a training session on August 14, 2023*

Furthermore, women involved in processing activities were offered to train their peers from other African countries in producing cashew meat, cashew juice, cashew honey, and other by-products, enabling them to share their expertise, expand their networks, and enhance their economic and leadership prospects within the industry. Although quantifying the direct income generated through the conference remains difficult, Mr. Lamine Sarr, Executive Secretary of ICAS, confirmed that all displayed products, including cashew nuts, skewers, charcoal bags, cashew paste, roasted cashews, and chili, were sold, indicating strong market demand.

The exhibition village highlighted the creativity and cultural influences behind cashew-based products, offering participants the opportunity to explore new flavors and sensory experiences. ICAS recognized women's innovation and their growing efforts to diversify their activities, including the use of previously underutilized by-products to produce cashew apple juice, cakes, and doughnuts. Additionally, women started to integrate innovative themes such as hygiene, food safety, and the circular economy into their production—key topics discussed during the conference.

To further empower women and other value chain actors, the government established six modern industrial processing units, including one in Ziguinchor, to support the growth of the cashew industry in the country. These units are expected to produce nearly 500 kg of cashew nuts per day and significantly improve the living conditions of local populations, especially in rural areas, upon their opening in March 2025.

Through the preparation of the conference, ICAS strengthened its position as a key player in the advancement of women's empowerment and the growth of the cashew industry across the continent. It enhanced its collaboration with Catalyste+, established partnerships with the African Cashew Alliance (ACA), and worked closely with the International Cashew Advisory Council (CICC), a

pan-African organization based in Abidjan that represents the main African cashew-producing countries. As noted by CA Warda:

“ By prioritizing local participation, the partner increased the visibility of cashew nut value chain stakeholders in Senegal as well as those involved with ICAS. ”

- Warda Belaribi, Catalyste+ Advisor

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## Conclusion

The collaboration between Catalyste+, CCIABZ, GIE DEMIIR, and ICAS demonstrates the transformative power of inclusive, gender-sensitive approaches in advancing social and economic development. By leveraging strategic partnerships, technical expertise, and innovative solutions, these initiatives have empowered women to take on leadership roles, foster sustainable businesses, and strengthen their economic independence within the cashew value chain.

From capacity-building workshops to improved production techniques and enhanced market access, the ripple effects of these efforts are evident—not only in the lives of the women directly involved but also in their communities. GIE DEMIIR stands as a powerful example of women's resilience, innovation, and contributions to strengthening the cashew value chain, while ICAS's commitment to fostering collaboration across the value chain further solidifies the potential for sustainable, long-term growth in the sector.

Looking ahead, GIE DEMIIR and ICAS plan to continue amplifying these initiatives. With funding from Catalyste+'s AIMf, GIE DEMIIR aims to begin operating its new juice extractor, which is expected to significantly enhance production capacity and efficiency. Once operational, this equipment will open new market opportunities and further strengthen the group's sustainability. Meanwhile, with support from the AIMf, ICAS plans to purchase essential equipment, including a cooking barrel, a stainless-steel skinning table, two shelling tables, and two shelling machines. This equipment is expected to reduce the women's workload while improving both production and the quality of processed nuts, further strengthening their role in the cashew value chain. Together, these efforts will contribute to a more inclusive and prosperous agribusiness sector, fostering lasting change within the cashew value chain.



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