

Out of Africa,

AN ENTREPRENEURIAL MISSION



One of the hundreds of women who extract shea butter for Out of Africa from the nut of the karite tree in Benin, Africa.

Three years ago, California serial entrepreneur Victor Lulla, decided to start a business that would help others. “My wife and I adopted twin girls from China, and that got us started talking about creating jobs in a Third World country that would help that country’s people,” he says.

As fate would have it, two years ago Lulla was at Natural Products Expo West looking for products to enhance his own health. He ran into an old friend who introduced him to Gilles Adamon, a member of a well known family in the tiny Western African country of Benin (population about eight million), and someone Lulla calls “a fabulous human being.”

Adamon, in turn, introduced Lulla to shea butter, the fatty substance from the

nut of the karite tree. The karite, which Lulla says has resisted all attempts at transplanting on other continents, is also known as the ‘tree of life’ in Benin. “It’s really the gold of Africa,” he says. “It’s been used for eons for beauty and healing of the skin, and as a cooking oil and in the best chocolate.”

Thus began Out of Africa, a company founded to benefit Benin’s people by providing employment, and by educating its children through its School Children Unite programme – three per cent of Out of Africa’s sales are donated to the Benin Education Fund, which provides Benin’s children with health care and education.

“We were fortunate to find a fellow [to run the fund] who was educated by the Peace Corp in Benin, and who subsequently became part of the World Bank,” Lulla says. “We partnered with the International Monetary Fund and the Peace Corp to provide health care and education for these kids.”

So far, he says, the company has been able to educate 250-300 children, he says. “It costs about \$100 a year,” he says.

Adamon works with two women’s cooperatives in Benin, an acutely poor nation with high unemployment and typical corruption problems. Lulla says the cooperatives provide hundreds of women with work. “The butter is produced in the fields,” he says. “Ours

is absolutely unrefined. Nothing is ever extracted from it, whereas all the rest you’ll see in the marketplace is machine made.”

Lulla has a kernel of advice for others with inclinations to begin businesses in Third World countries, whether or not for philanthropic purposes: “The key is finding a partner. Without it you’re dead ... and you have to be fortunate enough to find someone of quality. My guy has two degrees from the University of Paris, and we spent a year and a half discussing this before we started.” Through his contacts and prestige, Adamon was able to convince government officials to waive its punitive import (up to 50 per cent) and export duties (up to 40 per cent).

Today, Out of Africa’s sales are going well enough that Lulla is now looking for partners in Europe for expansion, and he’s guardedly optimistic about the future. “My vision was to build something very big so that we could bring education to lots and lots of kids,” he says. “Because of its health aspects, shea butter could reach far beyond the cosmetics and natural products marketplace. We’re looking for the economy to change a little bit so that we can do more.

As for the fateful encounter that introduced him to a tiny nation halfway around the world, Lulla says, “I’m very happy that we’re doing what we’re doing. I think things happen in life for a reason.”

— James Townsend



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