

Big bucks from Baobabs

The Phiri family lives in Ngwenyama village, in the Neno district of southern Malawi. They have five hungry mouths to feed and, up until recently, Mr Phiri's main way of supporting his family was through selling charcoal to passing motorists for some US\$2 a bag. Because of land pressure and poverty, trees have become increasingly scarce, and now the charcoal business is not what it used to be.

Recently, however, the Phiris have found a new way of supporting their family. They collect surplus baobab pods and process the fruit pulp to make Malambe, a delicious fruit drink that is now found on supermarket shelves all over Malawi. As well as earning extra cash, the Phiris have acquired useful business and technical skills. Mrs Phiri has also been appointed chairperson of the local Malambe producers' association. Because the Phiris now have an alternative source of income, they are less inclined to use the trees in the surrounding forests for charcoal production.

Even more exciting for the Phiris, is the fact that products from Neno district's baobab trees look set to hit the European export market. Their Malambe business has recently become a member of PhytoTrade Africa, the Southern African Natural Products Trade Association. PhytoTrade members are drawn from Malawi, Botswana, Namibia, Zambia and Zimbabwe and include rural producers, manufacturers and processors, government and non-government stakeholders and academic and scientific research institutions. PhytoTrade's goal is to develop a viable natural products industry in Southern Africa, based on the sustainable exploitation of indigenous botanical resources that are accessible to people like the Phiris. In addition to creating new income and employment opportunities, the commercialisation of these products will lead to high-value international trade and is increasingly recognised as a more ecologically sustainable form of land use in Africa.

PhytoTrade Africa has commissioned targeted research and development on baobab pulp as a nutritional ingredient and flavouring in food products. Not only is baobab pulp rich in Vitamin C and calcium, but it also contains significant quantities of the Vitamin B complex, magnesium, iron, phosphorus, and complex carbohydrates. Because of its nutritional profile, baobab pulp is already being used in Southern Africa as a key ingredient in high-energy children's porridges, and current R&D has shown that it has enormous potential for the European market as a delicious and nutritious ingredient for many different health foods, including fruit smoothies and cereal bars.