

Snail farmers make trails in refugee income generation project

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Ivorian refugee Sardia explains how to prepare a snail for eating.

SACLEPEA REFUGEE CAMP, Liberia, May 14 (UNHCR) – Papa Tokpa Sadia, 45, is all smiles as he picks up a snail and explains how it is extracted from its shell to prepare a meal. "Snail meat is very delicious and nutritious," says the Ivorian, who is learning how to rear and harvest the tasty gastropods.

Sadia is one of 30 refugees from Côte d'Ivoire, 20 of them women, studying to become snail farmers under a UNHCR income generation programme launched last year in Saclepea Refugee Camp in north-eastern Liberia. It's a business with bright commercial prospects, according to several experts.

The students are enthusiastic about the new skills they are learning and about their product and its money making potential – snails are a popular delicacy in both Liberia and Côte d'Ivoire. Many of the refugee trainees said they used to collect snails in the forest for their own consumption and to sell.

Some claimed eating snails was excellent for the health and prevented several diseases because they were rich in nutrients, high in protein and iron, low in fat and contained amino acids.

The refugees are being trained, thanks to funding support from UNHCR, by the War Victims Assistance Programme, a Liberian non-governmental organization whose executive director, Dismas Cupson, learned about snail farming while a refugee in Ghana. He said that many people had consumed snails in

desperation during the Liberian civil wars (1989-2003) at a time when trade was frozen and people ate what they could find.

Forced to consume strange flora and fauna, like snail meat, to survive, people began to acquire a taste for it. "The consumption rate increased tremendously during and after the civil war," Cupson noted.

The students at what is believed to be Liberia's only snail farm have learned all the basics about how to breed and raise healthy, meaty "free range" creatures, including use of soil high in organic content.

Mensor Marie used to eat snails in Côte d'Ivoire. "When we were small, we used to go into the forest to look for snails. It was very exciting," said the middle-aged student, who was delighted to be on the course. "What we are breeding here is called the *achatina achatina*," she told UNHCR.

The *achatina achatina*, commonly known as the Giant Ghana snail, is native to West Africa. Some people in Western countries keep them as pets because of their size and distinctive marking, but here they are a valuable source of protein, especially for forest dwelling folk.

Marie said the snails were easy to take care of. "We give them things like potato leaves, cassava leaves, pawpaw [papaya] and oil palm residue," she explained.

Cupson, meanwhile, said that the Liberian health authorities and aid organizations specializing in nutrition recommended that people eat snails and this was helping to fuel demand, which "currently outstrips supplies."

He said that a 50 kilogramme bag of wild snails sold for 8,000 Liberian dollars (US\$125) during the rainy season, but in the dry season only imported snails from Côte d'Ivoire were available at 14,000 Liberian dollars (US\$200) per 50kg bag.

Cupson claims that the snail farm in Saclepea, which houses around 1,300 refugees still in Liberia more than a year after last year's brief civil war, is the only one in Liberia. And although it's a modest operation, with slightly more than 3,500 snails being reared to maturity, which takes three years, the project is helping to prepare people to become self-sufficient.

The 30 trainees, when qualified and back home, will be able to start their own businesses. Not surprisingly, a lot of other refugees as well as members of the local community have expressed interest in the project.

The UN refugee agency is currently assessing the impact of this and other income-generation projects aimed at benefitting refugees and their host communities. One possibility is to extend the scheme to other areas.

Andrew Mbogori, head of UNHCR's sub-office in Saclepea, said the snail farming experiment had certainly made a difference. "The project is unique," he concluded.

By Sulaiman Momodu in Saclepea Refugee Camp, Liberia