



KNOWLEDGE is POWER

Rita Weidinger



Ms Rita Weidinger, the Executive Director of Competitive Cashew initiative (ComCashew Formerly African Cashew initiative/ ACI) has a long list of accolades to her credit. A well-read woman that believes in joint efforts and team work for higher success and better life, she is the kind of person that the cashew industry is blessed to receive.

Ms Weidinger has lived and worked in Ghana, Benin, Sierra Leone, Tunisia, Ecuador, Argentina, Honduras and India. She holds an MSc in Agricultural Economics and Sociology and a post-graduate certificate in Rural Development from universities in Germany. She is a practitioner in organizational and institutional development from the Cleveland Gestalt Institute (U.S).

Agriculture attracted her even as a child

Her interest in agriculture is probably as old as her, for from the time she was a child, she remembers being attracted to it. Growing up with her seven siblings, she was deeply involved in the work carried out on their family farm. For example, after school and during holidays, her siblings and friends helped out on the farm by milking cows with machines and collecting stones from lands to enable smooth ploughing by help of equipment.

She also learnt other talents such as driving, accounting, doing wood and mechanic works on the farm.



As a school going child, the relationship she built with the farm that gave her the base to engage in practical work, grew stronger once done with school. Keeping her past experience in mind, she decided to enter a 2-year apprenticeship in agriculture. During this time, she learnt a lot about animal husbandry, as well as crop farming, seed multiplication and pasture management. Being the only woman in a male dominated area, she strove to be better than her mates.

Work shaped her interest further

Her efforts have paid off for today, Ms. Rita Weidinger is the Executive Director of the Competitive Cashew initiative (ComCashew/GIZ, formerly ACI), a sub-regional public-private partnership programme (PPP), which is jointly financed by the German Government (BMZ), the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and several private companies, governments and development agencies. Ms. Weidinger is an organizational development advisor with over 20 years of experience in agricultural and private sector development focusing on PPPs for pre-competitive alliances and sustainable supply chain linkages.

Sensing the opportunity in cashew sector

While she was deeply involved in agriculture, Ms. Weidinger's involvement in the cashew sector specifically began while she was working in rural development at the German International Cooperation - GIZ. As part of her work, she travelled to various countries of West Africa, including Ghana and Benin, where she observed that cashew trees were often grown through forestry programmes in a bid to control soil erosion and mitigate climate change. She also noticed, to her dismay, that children threw the cashew nuts away after eating the apples. From her interactions with the farmers, she realized most farmers had little knowledge about the high economic potential of the cashew tree.

Making a beginning with right partners

Over time, she met and frequently exchanged ideas with pioneers who were determined to make cashew kernel and apple processing viable businesses in Africa. Finally, through two trading companies – OLAM and Trade and Development Group both convinced that processing could be competitive in Africa, she better understood some of the bottlenecks for the unorganized African cashew value chains.



Building the team and spreading the vision

Using these expert insights, a small development-spirited team kicked off the idea of a large cashew sector project with private and public partners. Starting a first project with one company in three countries in 2006, *the Competitive Cashew initiative (ComCashew/GIZ, formerly ACi), currently operates in 7 countries and has supported the training of more than 400,000 farmers and almost 40 processing companies. This initiative has led to an additional accumulated farmer income of \$250 million, which continues increasing.*



Thus, her observance of the lack of knowledge on the farmers' part to value the potential of the cashew plants helped her to take the first step towards correcting the situation thereby establishing the foundation for change. By spreading valuable information and shedding light on the great benefits of growing cashew, she has been able to provide help to various farmers who were otherwise clueless on such an interesting market.

Her work mainly revolves around cashew sector development and while she does not have any family member in this field nor did she receive trainings specific to it, she learnt much from experts. Some were project partners, others were hired through the project. Up to this day, she believes in continuous learning as the sector changes fast.



Finding common ground critical for success

Besides, it goes without saying that a task as big as this was not a cakewalk. As an initiator of strategies that have brought ComCashew(formerly ACi) this far, one key difficulty Ms. Weidinger encountered is the act of dealing with existent hierarchies and bureaucracy when it comes to making urgent decisions. Defending

her vision, opinions and finding a common ground with funding and partnering agencies and companies are significant challenges she has to deal with in the Executive position.



Introspection and listening are key to continuous growth and improvements

“Leadership is about having a vision and thriving for it, with a humble spirit, discipline and encouraging teamwork. *Whilst extrovert, rhetoric and language skills are important to keep a multi-stakeholder project in many countries functional, it is equally important to constantly keep a learning mind, do self-introspection and listen carefully to advice and other opinions.* “To date, I enjoy advice and immense support of all partners in the project, as well as technical and leadership consultants - a personal and a team coach, a market

expert and a strategic management consultant, showing me and the team ‘blind spots’, market opportunities and risks, strategic and management options,” Ms. Weidinger says.

“There is a saying which goes like this: The more tasks you manage successfully, the more tasks you receive. Work looks out for busy people.” With these words, Ms. Weidinger and her team are entering a third project phase. ComCashew/ ACi’s secret recipe to success is a blend of practical skills and experiences with sound theoretical background and research linkages. “The German dual education system taught me to always expose staff equally to hands-on experiences, rather than mere talking and teaching perspectives”, she adds.

Comcashew in a nutshell and Ms. Rita’s role as a catalyst

When asked to give us a brief summary of her work, she says, at ComCashew, which is a development project addressing all segments of the cashew value chains – production, processing, supply chain linkages, sector organization, she has a big role to play in taking important decisions for a long-term fair business sector. Along with her, she has 16 board members, who meet two times a year and have equal roles in decision making. They analyze cashew sector gaps, search for potential solutions, support private sector led pilot projects, support public actors in policy and strategy issues. ComCashew/ ACi with all its partners to date have initiated change and accomplished great heights. They also take pride in supporting about 40 processing companies with technical and BDS assistance.

Results along would bring acceptance and acknowledgement

One challenge Ms. Weidinger has encountered as woman leader in a male-dominated environment is the discriminating perspectives some men hold of women. The only way to discount such behaviors, she advises, is by maintaining solid professionalism and striving for visible results speaking for themselves. For as the old saying goes, actions speak louder than words.

Balancing work and family- tough but must

Apart from this, the most taxing issue she faces is continuous travelling in her job. Speaking of her family, she says



that this job requires compromises. With her partner being equally busy and the children grown-ups, enjoying their own space, balancing all roles can prove to be a test. However, she says they are able to manage it through good communication and sometimes, when work permits, she tries carrying out her chores from home so as to be able to spend more time with family.

Women would increasingly take leadership role in cashew sector

In relation to women's involvement in the cashew sector, Ms. Weidinger has observed that 75% of harvesting and processing activities are done by women. However, very few are in supervisory and management positions. She feels that *factors such as education, self-esteem, social roles interfere in the journey of women to leadership* but is deeply convinced that a transparent and balanced trade can create good income potentials for the underprivileged, especially rural populations and women.

Continuous capacity development and empowerment can serve as equally motivating factors to reach a better situation in terms of development of women in this sector. This is something she hopes to contribute to. For women in leadership positions, she wishes to be an encouraging example, and support them through exposure in trainings and public events.

Balanced and determined, she already has a set plan when it comes to the future. She has decided that in 2018, she will go into a sabbatical year, and work on another commodity/ value chain afterwards.

In summary...

To Ms. Rita Weidinger, her profession is the best choice to live her dream. She is driven by development vision and goals. Influencing change and ensuring balanced and fair development for the underprivileged provide her immense happiness, deep fulfilment and a reason to work.



“Titles are not what define you - What you do with the title defines who you are”

