

Profits Go Hand in Hand with Hygiene

By Deanne Estrada

Editor and communications coordinator, SANREM CRSP

In Zambia, where hygiene and safety are critical issues in food processing, researchers are using a new tool to get their message across: a coloring book for kids. "Protect Yourself With Handwashing" features three smiling youngsters in a cartoon car of citrus, melons, and vegetables in vibrant hues. Though its target audience is children of employees at food processing and distribution centers in Lundazi and Mfuwe, the book also reminds parents that good hygiene begins at home.

The campaign is part of a broader program begun five years ago by zoologist Dale Lewis of the Wildlife Conservation Society. COMACO—Community Markets for Conservation—is a SANREM CRSP partner organization that uses rural trade in agricultural products to give farmers profitable alternatives to slash-and-burn forest clearing and wildlife poaching. SANREM and COMACO researchers are offering hygiene and safety workshops to expand the sales potential for rice, peanuts, soybeans, and other crops in the profitable export market. The training is essential for COMACO to meet export standards and to win certification to sell HEPS – a high-energy protein supplement for HIV patients and malnourished children.

"COMACO has come up with a novel and effective approach," said Alex Travis, assistant professor of reproductive biology at Cornell University and principal investigator for one of SANREM's five global long-term research activities. "We are helping them by providing research expertise in areas ranging from improving their soil to helping document their impacts on wildlife and the local economy."

This year COMACO began marketing a line of organically grown soybean products, including snack foods, soy milk, and meat substitutes. The latest, Yummy Soy, is a high-protein, high-fiber organic mix to stir into water or milk for an energy drink, or to eat as hot or cold cereal. By posting profits on such products, COMACO hopes to motivate farmers to rotate other crops with soybeans, which improve the soil, thus reducing the need to clear trees for new fields. Researchers also hope the higher prices fetched by organic products will be an extra incentive to farmers not to use unnecessary pesticides or chemicals.

"Protect Yourself With Handwashing" was inspired by a book for children of U.S. farm workers. It was developed by Cornell researcher Elisabeth Bihn and colleagues in the university's National Good Agricultural Practices (GAPs) Program, led by Robert B. Gravani. In May, Carmen I. Moraru, assistant professor of food science at Cornell, and Catalin Moraru, senior food scientist with the International Food Network, distributed coloring books at a workshop in Lundazi where they taught proper techniques for washing hands, controlling pests, and cleaning work surfaces, equipment, and utensils. The team also handed out supplies critical for hygienic food production: protective coats, gloves, hair and beard covers, shoe covers, and goggles, as well as kits for fast evaluation of potential microbial hazards such as *E. coli* and *Salmonella*.

"The entire workshop was a success," Carmen Moraru said. "Many participants were exposed for the first time to the fact that foods can harbor organisms invisible to the naked eye yet capable of causing illness or even death." Particularly helpful was a rapid-test kit containing paper strips to swab wet work surfaces. If the surface is not clean, the strip turns purple within 10 to 60 seconds. "Visual tools gave participants from workers to management a deeper appreciation of what it really takes to produce foods cleanly and safely," she said.

SANREM has been working with COMACO since 2005 to improve food security and rural livelihoods across southern Africa. COMACO, which now involves more than 30,000 families, is owned, led, and staffed by local citizens in ongoing collaboration with Lewis of the WCS. "It is very important for workers to realize that, despite the limited resources available locally, it is still possible to use good manufacturing practices," Moraru said. "They came out of our seminar with a different outlook on their responsibilities as food processors."

Click here to learn more about Alex Travis' work:

http://www.oired.vt.edu/sanremcrsp/menu_research/LTRA-2.Sept.2007.php

Click here to learn more about COMACO:

<http://www.itswild.org/home>