

Commentary

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Developing and Growing the ‘Ebibiduro’ (Natural Medicine) Industry in Ghana: What about Cocoa?

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Ghana is endowed with a wide range of natural products which are high in therapeutic values. From the shrubs behind our various homes to the bark of the big trees in the deep green forest lies natural compounds with great therapeutic values. Known in the local Akan parlance as ‘Ebibiduro’, it has been documented that a proportion of the Ghanaian population use these natural medicinal products for their primary healthcare needs and in the management of both communicable and non-communicable diseases [1]. Indeed, Ghanaian have used various parts of plants from Caripa papaya, Moringa oleifera, Hibiscus sabdariffa, Azadirachite indica and others for the treatment of common ailments as well as to ensure perfect wellbeing [1]. The word ‘Natural product’ used here in this commentary refers to traditional medicines, herbal products, tree barks, as well as food products with medicinal values among others.

Though in the recent past the natural medicine industry in Ghana has been given unprecedented boost regarding policy direction and the rejuvenation of appropriate institutions, yet majority of the natural medicinal preparations used in this country have not undergone appropriate scrutiny and often not approved by the Ghana Food and Drug Board. Whereas in places like China, natural medicine have been well developed and plays a crucial role in health delivery and impact significantly on their economy, the same can’t be said about Ghana at the moment. A study carried by Asase in 2023 indicated that the prospects of the medicinal plant trade in

Ghana are huge, and if given the necessary attention could lead to a reduction in the national health budget, become a source of foreign and domestic income, as well as create employment and reduce poverty [2]. He further stated that the industry is currently bedeviled with several challenges, such as registration of natural medicinal products and practitioners, a lack of clinical trials for herbal products, standards and quality control issues, shortage of raw plant materials for production, and insufficient scientific research to support traditional claims on the pharmacological effects of medicinal plants.

These assertions are indeed true and needs a careful scrutiny as soon as practicable. It is therefore imperative for Ghana to initiate the process of exploiting our natural resources for health and economic gains. There is the need for government to partner with the private sector in order to execute a well-planned national research and development policy and implementation for the natural medicine industry. In this regard, it has been suggested that the development of our cocoa beans into products with health benefit should take the lead [3]. The use of cocoa power and allied products of the beans in ameliorating disease conditions have been highly touted. The antimalarial activity of cocoa powder had been variously assessed and published [3,4]. In all cases natural cocoa products were found to exhibit significant antimalarial activities. Natural cocoa also possess other medicinal activities: Synopses by WebMD (2023) on their website indicate that the “seed of cocoa is used for infectious intestinal diseases and diarrhea, asthma, bronchitis, and as an expectorant for lung congestion [5]. Furthermore, the seed coat is used for liver,

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bladder, and kidney ailments; diabetes; as a tonic; and as a general remedy. Cocoa butter is also used to treat high cholesterol [5]. Some people apply cocoa butter to the skin to treat wrinkles and to prevent stretch marks during pregnancy [5]. In the pharmaceutical industry, cocoa butter find itself as a base for various ointments and suppositories made by drug companies” [5].

One of the significant health properties of cocoa is highlighted in the current issue of the Health Sciences Investigations journal. The article authored by Aidoo and others demonstrated the therapeutics potency of natural cocoa [6]. The group sought ‘ultrastructural evidence for previously demonstrated amelioration of Plasmodial damage in murine hepatic tissue to facilitate comprehension of the phenomenon at the mechanistic level’. Their conclusion was intriguing as it suggest that ‘mitigation of liver ultrastructural damage in *P. berghei*-infected rats given natural cocoa product was better than treatment with Artemether-Lumifantrine (a recommended antimalarial

drug for the treatment of uncomplicated malaria in Ghana). The authors linked this occurrence to the anti-inflammatory activity of cocoa. Cocoa is known to contain a variety of chemicals, including antioxidants called flavonoids which are thought to be responsible for the noticed therapeutic benefit [7]. There is the need to exploit these chemical constituents scientifically for the benefit of mankind. For instance, we could concentrate these identified beneficial active constituents into products that could be prescribed as medicines. Ghana is the world’s second largest supplier of cocoa beans with the quality of it beans described as the best in the world [8] and must take the lead in this!. A serious research to develop and grow cocoa as a health icon must be vigorously pursued. Meanwhile, campaign or education to encourage people to patronize cocoa products for health benefit must also be pursued. In conclusion, well thought through strategies should be developed or adopted in order to boost the use of natural products such as cocoa products in Ghana’s development.

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