



The Centre of Social Excellence Africa

## Putting community at the heart of conservation

### A Case Study

How one CSE alumnus is helping communities regenerate land in Western Cameroon with the Rainforest Alliance



## Part 1

# The imperative to change

## Facing down environmental challenges

### Worsening land degradation

In the Western Highlands of Cameroon, barriers to environmental conservation are leading to the widespread degradation of soil and arable land. As part of the Rainforest Alliance, Centre of Social Excellence (CSE) alumnus Jacques Waouo has stepped in to help address these pressing challenges.

The challenges themselves are multi-faceted and have created tensions between different groups in the communities. In the past, land protection for Key Biodiversity Areas hasn't been enshrined in law by successive governments, nor has there been adequate monitoring of encroachment into forested land. As a result, resource extraction has been unregulated resulting in increased biodiversity loss. The lack of multi-stakeholder sustainable development plans that bring together governments, local chiefs and producers has arrested progress.

Though stakeholders on all levels report witnessing the visible effects of land degradation year on year, local people don't have the expertise to implement alternative, sustainable practices, nor is there the incentive to do so due to a limited demand for organic produce. One mayor relates trying to produce organic produce, "I need to buy 85 bags of manure at 3,800 CFA (approx. USD 7) each. At that kind of price, you just can't make a profit."

With continuous cultivation of the region's arable land, without rest periods, soil depletion is also forcing farmers to start cultivating land further and further up the hills. This is creating conflicts between local farmers and livestock owners who compete for space.

Driven on by the pressures of an increasing population, intensive farming is taking space from herders who traditionally use these areas for animal husbandry. This conflict obscures the fact that both parties are reliant on each other, with crops supporting animal feed, and the animals supporting crop fertilisation.

### Complicating factors

Over recent years, environmental changes have further worsened local conditions. Climate change has brought more irregular and less plentiful rain, the overuse of pesticides have reduced soil quality and consequently yield sizes, and the unregulated creation of canals are drying up natural water sources. Water depletion is further exacerbated by the lack of trees. On Mount Bamboutos, the main source of water in the western parts of the region, "natural water sources have almost dried up completely due to the disappearance of certain tree species and the proliferation of eucalyptus trees", says one chief.

Though efforts have been made in the past to generate solutions, these have often failed to produce results. Processes that do not engage all levels of society play a role here. "Local customs can often be an issue", reports one spokesperson from the government, "the chief might have a vision that is different to someone in the village", reducing buy-in. This can have unintended consequences. One mayor reported how "In the past, I saw an association that had a problem in agriculture so they just set up a new plantation, but given the lack of due process, it burned down!"



# Addressing the problem

## A new effort to build thriving communities and ecosystems

### A CSE alumnus steps in

In response, the Rainforest Alliance, in partnership with the Global Environment Facility, UN-Environment and Ministry of Environment, Nature Protection and Sustainable Development of Cameroon, launched an innovative new project - the first of its kind - to remove barriers to biodiversity, land restoration and sustainable forest management through community based landscape management and, in the process, build thriving communities that benefit economically from working towards healthy landscapes.

Across three key zones - Mounts Bamboutos, Mount Bana, and the southern parts of the Dja Reserve, the project will impact 3,000 local inhabitants, boost the capacity of 10 civil society organisations and introduce sustainable land management plans over a total of 53,000 hectares. At the heart of this project is the work of CSE alumnus, Jacques Waouo.

Jacques studied with CSE Africa in 2010 in a cohort of 6 other students from 5 countries. During his time at CSE Africa, Jacques explored practical ways to ensure communities are at the centre of land management and the promotion of biodiversity. There, he acquired knowledge of key methodologies, including Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC), which as he says, he's "been using ever since."

Having previously strengthened social management in diverse ways, including in forest management and community conflicts for agri-business companies in Liberia, Jacques was ready to take on the challenge of working with the Rainforest Alliance and local community to build the long-term economic resilience of some of Cameroon's most rural communities and ensure a robust environmental policy was implemented.

### Developing community-led solutions

The project aims to address the complex set of issues faced by these communities. As part of this, it seeks to secure legal protection status for some 7,600 hectares of biodiversity-rich land. By protecting land such as this, there are hopes to "maintain and further develop tourism in the area", reports one village chief secretary.

At its heart, the project works with communities to generate solutions and to offer long-term guidance as these local communities work towards these results. As part of this, aspects of the project will develop the local economy. This involves investing in equipment and technologies to transform and store fresh produce, and promote mixed crops to offset market fluctuations.

Women's empowerment is also a strong pillar of the project. By reinforcing economic rights of women - who make up the primary workforce in local agriculture - the project seeks to make up for past government initiatives, which according to local community interest groups see support typically only going to men.



*Preparing lunch at a local homestead*



Jacques and his colleague with the Jeunes Mamans de Babadjou

## An insight into the local community

### Meeting of l'Association Jeunes Mamans de Babadjou

The Young Mothers association is an independent, local community support group that for the past 30 years has been a source of mutual help for young (and now much older and wiser) women from the community Babadjou. The group shares expertise and operates a rotating savings scheme to support members financially.

On 10th June 2021, 12 members met with project managers from Rainforest Alliance (RA) to discuss the new project. As the meeting began, Jacques's RA team member began, "We're not here to impose anything. We're coming to reinforce your activities and if there are activities that have a negative impact then we can talk together on how we can deal with this."

During the discussion, the women raised key issues felt by this community, who have witnessed the changing land and climate over decades, and their wishes for future change. This includes water depletion, the result of over-irrigation, more irregular rainfall and cutting back trees that act as natural water stores. They also raise the issue of fertiliser, wondering how to reduce use of chemical products, but expressing uncertainty over which alternatives are best, and how to use them. "Our ancestors didn't need fertilisers like we do. The soil has changed", they report. The group has noticed the effects of climate change, saying, "Now, there is a heat we did not used to feel here. We never had that before."

With the arrival of this project, there is a sense of excitement. "There has never been such a project", one of the group's long-standing members explains. "Someone did come a while back to ask questions but we did not see them again. This will be a big value-add for us. We know that some of our practices are not working well, such as using too much pesticide and cutting trees near waterways."

The group has clear goals. "We want to improve our production of potatoes and understand the best use of fertilizers." They're also eager to expand their animal husbandry, to directly trade their own crops and produce new products such as ecological charcoal. There is also eagerness to process the agricultural produce they grow. "Sometimes we have crops harvested that rot and we have to throw away what we could have transformed."

With the technical support and community-led approaches of the project, the Young Mothers association is looking forward to the future.



## Part 3

# Participatory processes

## A new approach to community-led solutions

### Finding allies across society

As the project gets underway, Jacques is putting participatory processes central at every level. As Jacques himself puts it: “We want genuine community based landscape management, with communities at the centre of efforts to increase biodiversity”. To begin, this means getting multisector buy-in from local elites at the same time as raising awareness amongst the community. This initial focus on elites is critical since in the initial stages, in order to create special protected status for the target zones, Jacques needs their full cooperation. In many of these local societies with strong cultures of hierarchy, the chief has an important influence. As one chief states himself, “I am here to think for the population. I, as a father, try to do things and show by example.” As a result, Jacques recognises the importance of allying across layers of society. “I have to start with them”, he says, “to create a strong anchor within local and regional authorities. This is the first step.”

By using FPIC strategies gained at CSE Africa, Jacques is able to effect rapid social change. He goes on to say, “I don’t come with a list of solutions. I wait until the farmers themselves tell me, for instance, that we need to plant trees near the water to help erosion. Then I see how we can build on this and expand and integrate traditional practices.”

Going forwards, Jacques is undertaking an environmental analysis of the region to establish a baseline. This will serve as the foundation for creating a suite of possible initiatives and approaches for better land management. Often, generating an array of possible initiatives is required. As evidenced in one local meeting, when asked what the community ‘want to see in this area’, the response was, “Give us suggestions and we will select.” Taking these options back to the communities, he is carrying out deep consultations with all stakeholders, setting priorities and only then making final decisions with the established multi-stakeholder management committee.



Jacques, after a meeting with the local community



## Part 4

# Gaining community trust

## The early-stage impact of collaborative efforts

### Certification for smallholders

Jacques' approach has met with approval from the local community. He "comes with an open book, not a list of solutions", the local chief says, and he engages the local community in generating these ideas.

This has been in contrast with previous attempts to engage the local community meaningfully. As a government minister reported, "In the past, we have often seen programmes that are top-down which is a problem as people don't then stick with it. But people need to feel involved!"

At a meeting with local farmers and leaders, there is widespread appreciation of Jacques' work. This includes the fact that Jacques has been on the ground, working day-in day-out with the community, rather than, as a village chief stated, developing plans in "an airconditioned office in Yaounde"!

As one mayor states, "He goes to the base" and "he really listens". Meanwhile, the village chief admires Jacques' "direct approach". "He is a man that makes things happen", and never receives any complaints from the villagers - rare praise in such a conflictual and complicated context!



"Jacques is a man that makes things happen and I never receive any complaints."

*Village chief*

His training with CSE and the expertise this brings also reinforced the level of trust local communities feel. It counteracts the fear of the new and supports local farmers to test new technologies and approaches to sustained agriculture, including diversifying crops and sharing land with crops and animals. Jacques goes about this by beginning with what communities already know, and building on that. As a chief reports, "Our people are scared of change. But if your approach is to strengthen what is already happening rather than to make a change, then people are not afraid." The chief's head secretary echoes the same point. This approach "helps counteract the feeling of being scared of the new. You need to go slowly and build on what they already do and know." The secretary also points to Jacques' way of showing by example, encouraging the emulation of plantations that use these approaches and are very successful.

The approaches adopted by Jacques, and gained through his study at CSE Africa, have enabled him to get genuine buy-in from the local communities of Western Cameroon. This in turn has enabled the start of powerful, participatory processes that promise to regenerate the natural landscape and biodiversity of the region. By designing community-led solutions with a high level of ongoing and expert support, Rainforest Alliance's new project in Cameroon is well on its way to achieving its goal of protecting thousands of hectares of biodiversity-rich land, at the same time as building thriving communities that are economically sustainable in the long-term.





*Bringing down a harvest of beans from the plantation*



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The Centre of Social Excellence (CSE) is a strategic programme of Earthworm Foundation. CSE's mission is to create an enabling environment for social harmony and realised human rights by equipping companies, civil society, and governments with well-trained social practitioners from the regions where they operate.

We mobilise diverse social experts who have real-world experience addressing social issues to design and teach courses to students on the front lines of company-community interactions in Africa, Asia and Latin America. CSE's Africa training centre is based in Yaoundé, Cameroon. [Learn more about CSE.](#)

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