

/CSE Centre of Social Excellence



The Centre of Social Excellence Africa

Victor Yuh Tamanjong: childhood environmentalist to international certification practitioner

A Case Study

How one CSE alumnus has gone from impacting one
company to palm oil production throughout Africa

Part 1

A social need

Introducing Victor Yuh Tamanjong

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Across Africa, many palm oil companies continue to operate without the skills and understanding of best environmental practice. Many have not yet sought or are unable to obtain the critical Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) certification that is not only a guarantee of sustainable practice, but a commitment to continuous improvement.

Addressing these needs is Victor Yuh Tamanjong. Victor, a graduate of the 2015/16 Centre of Social Excellence (CSE) Africa long course, has been harnessing his passion and expertise for agile and solution-oriented thinking to unlock major environmental and social benefits for companies and communities reliant on agriculture. For over 6 years, he's supported companies in acquiring the reputed RSPO certification and kept local communities invested and informed all along the way.

But Victor didn't start out as an expert in certification! Growing up in Oku, North West Cameroon, it was Victor's father who first instilled a love for conservation in him. Spending time outdoors, learning the names and uses of local plants together with his father, Victor always imagined his life would be spent impacting his own village. "Now it is a broader scale of impact", he says, "and I'm happy with that. It's changing lives and improving relationships between companies and local communities."



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Victor Yuh Tamanjong, on the CSE course

The impact of CSE's long course

After a masters in forestry, Victor joined CSE Africa, following an intense 4-month programme in Yaoundé and a subsequent internship at a palm oil company in the Ivory Coast.

As Victor says himself, during this course, "I grew up. I came as a boy and left as a man." The course was not only rigorous in its training, offering best-in-class training and resources, but even more importantly according to Victor, "I took away values, and these resonated deeply with my Christian values". According to Victor, learning in such an intense community requires being tolerant, not being judgemental, and not always concluding that the way we have done things is necessarily the best way to do things.

This value-based training gained at CSE Africa had an immediate impact during the first days of his internship in one of Africa's largest palm oil companies. On seeing plantation workers heading out to spray the fields without personal protective equipment (PPE), Victor recalls, "I could not believe my eyes!" Holding true to his beliefs and training, he immediately reported it to the company and, despite initial opposition, eventually got the company to buy PPE for everyone.

As time went on and with similar experiences, the company grew to trust and rely on Victor's input. It hired Victor immediately following his internship. In time, and especially after the initial application of the company for RSPO failed shortly after Victor's arrival, he was given a free hand to implement best practices on the ground and, as a result, Victor observed that working conditions within the company and relationships with smallholders "improved drastically." RSPO certification followed not long after.



Part 2

From company to continent

Taking on responsibility for certification across Africa

Working on a broader scale

Since then, Victor has joined the RSPO Secretariat, working to galvanise broader change in the palm oil sector in Africa. His line manager remarked that Victor has been a very resourceful addition to the team. He further stated that Victor was able to hit the ground running, without much hand-holding and supervision.

Bringing to bear his expertise, Victor is now supporting companies and smallholders across Africa to improve their socio-environmental practices. Working on this scale, Victor is able to positively influence rates of deforestation, reduction in the use of pesticides, more robust analyses of changing land use, and the setting aside and management of riparian buffer zones and protected areas within the management units of RSPO members.

Despite working on a much broader scale, Victor remains personally and professionally committed never to leave behind local communities. He is motivated to draw on different perspectives - the voices of companies, NGOs, local authorities, and crucially members of the neighbouring communities to ensure all stakeholders are fairly represented in the RSPO process. The multicultural environment of CSE enriches his work daily now that he travels throughout Africa, and he recognises the value of small gestures that demonstrate his cultural awareness to local cultures and customs which must be respected.

Staying close to community

Victor is convinced that better conservation must go hand in hand with improving livelihoods. "If we ask these people to conserve nature, we need to improve their livelihoods. Otherwise we are sacrificing these populations." That's often where companies go wrong according to Victor. But with community-led processes and tools such as participatory mapping and Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC), taught by CSE's experts, communities can also benefit.

Looking forward, Victor intends to continue galvanising positive change in the African palm sector by putting the focus on certification of independent smallholders. Collectively, they account for around 70% of palm production, and achieving their certification promises to radically improve social and environmental practices on a transnational level. In line with this, Victor has provided technical support leading to the initial certification audit of a group of nearly 5,000 independent smallholders in Sierra Leone. It is hoped that this group will soon receive their certification making them the first in Africa.



Victor's first visit to the RSPO head office





Victor Tamanjong at a palm oil plantation in Malaysia



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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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