

# ASSOCIATION OF NURSERY WORKERS AND HORTICULTURISTS OF WEST TONE

Togo



## Equator Initiative Case Studies

Local sustainable development solutions for people, nature, and resilient communities



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Local and indigenous communities across the world are advancing innovative sustainable development solutions that work for people and for nature. Few publications or case studies tell the full story of how such initiatives evolve, the breadth of their impacts, or how they change over time. Fewer still have undertaken to tell these stories with community practitioners themselves guiding the narrative. The Equator Initiative aims to fill this gap.

UNDP's Equator Initiative, in partnership with ENDA Tiers Monde (ENDA), Open Society Initiative for Southern Africa (OSISA), United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), and funded by the Global Environment Facility (GEF), identified examples of local ingenuity, innovation, and leadership in sustainable land management (SLM) in drylands in Sub-Saharan Africa. The following case study is one in a series that describes vetted and peer-reviewed best practices in SLM management, with the purpose of inspiring the policy dialogue needed to take local success to scale, to improve the global knowledge base on local environment and development solutions, and to serve as a model for replication.



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## Togo

### PROJECT SUMMARY

Family farming and mushroom cultivation are the twin tools of the Association des Pépiniéristes et Planteurs de Tône-Ouest (Association of Nursery Workers and Horticulturists of West Tone) in responding to the land degradation, low agricultural yields, and high rates of poverty that have resulted from decades of slash-and-burn farming. Mushroom farming – a traditional agricultural practice that had fallen into disuse due to deforestation – has been successfully reintroduced in this dryland ecosystem to address poverty, improve soil fertility, promote organic agriculture, and reduce incidence of fires during the dry season.

Local incomes have doubled, with new revenue streams invested in over 100 villages into education, health, and childcare. Association activities have helped to reduce bush fires and uncontrolled logging, as well as restore soil fertility. The group has also undertaken reforestation efforts in 20 communities that have improved forest cover and restored ecosystem functioning. These actions have increasingly reinforced the level of solidarity among local communities on the ground, in a region where social cohesion suffers from an excessive demographic pressure on the lands.

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### KEY FACTS

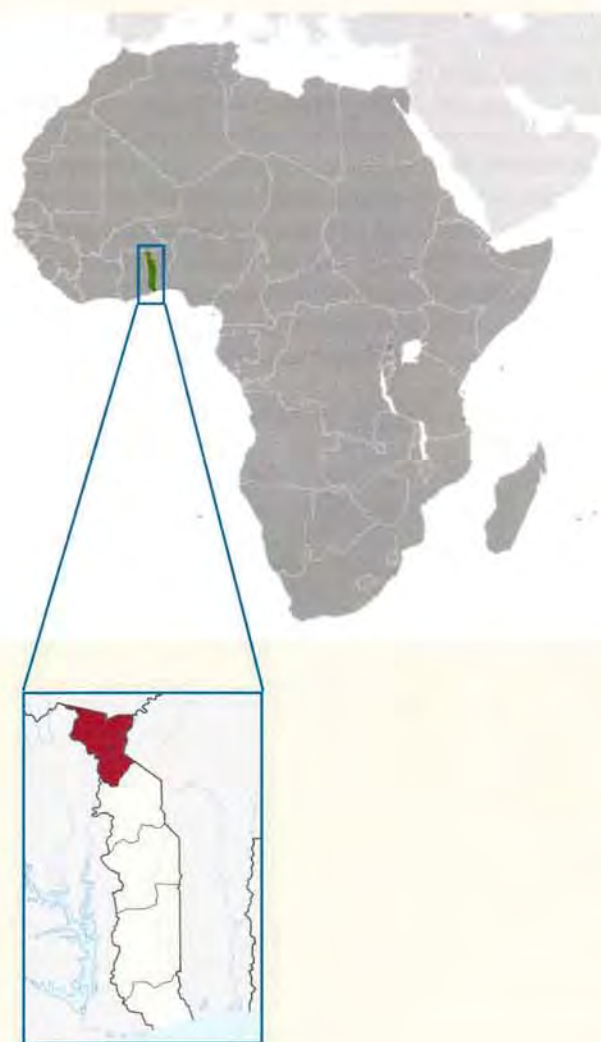
EQUATOR PRIZE WINNER: 2014

FOUNDED: 2007

LOCATION: Tône, Savanes region, northeast Togo

BENEFICIARIES: 105 villages, 9,000 people

AREA OF FOCUS: Biodiversity, Shrub savanna





# Background and Context



The Association des Pépiniéristes et Planteurs de Tône-Ouest (Association of Nursery Growers of Tône-Ouest), also referred to as Songou-Man ("the shade is pleasant" in local language) was founded in 2007. This local association mobilizes communities in northeastern Togo to sustainably manage natural resources and protect biodiversity. The organization operates in a region where human activities such as logging, bush fires and the overuse of chemical fertilizers pose serious risks to threatened plant and animal species and contribute to the degradation of the fragile savanna ecosystem. The organization has had substantial achievements in awareness raising, improving social cohesion, poverty alleviation and reforestation. They use ecosystem-based approaches that are easily replicated in similar areas across the country, which has led to wide-scale replication of their best practices.

## *Development challenges in Tône*

The prefecture of Tône is located in the Savanes region of Togo, among the driest and poorest areas in the country. It is characterized by a multi-ethnic population, principally the Mobas, Tchokossis, Gourmas, Ngam Gam, and nomadic Peuhls people. More than 90 percent of the population lives below the poverty line and the region has the highest population growth rate in the country at 3.18 percent. The primary economic activity is subsistence agriculture. Due to population growth and a lack of alternative livelihood options, local land and forests are under increasing pressure and resource conflicts between communities are increasingly common. Migration from rural areas to urban centers is also eroding social cohesion in the more remote villages of Togo. Young people (in particular young men) are increasingly migrating to the capital city Lomé or abroad in order to look for employment. This leaves behind an aging population that depends on a young, healthy workforce for food security, economic wellbeing and on-farm productivity.

## *Environment, climate and land use in Tône*

The region of Tône is covered with flat shrub savanna. Dispersed settlements dot the countryside, identifiable by the traditional conic

mud huts, which are known for their gendered space enclosures and outside kitchens. Subsistence farming and livestock rearing constitute the main livelihood activities of the local population. Over 90 percent of the population relies on agriculture for their income as well as natural resources found in local forests. The rainy season only lasts for four months, which leaves the farmers in a prolonged state of inactivity for the rest of the year. The forests are also an important source of livelihoods, with much of the population being highly reliant on logging, medicinal plant cultivation and non-timber forest products.





The region is experiencing a dramatic decline in forest cover and biodiversity. As a consequence, similar to many areas across the country and throughout Africa, Tône is experiencing a sharp decline in wildlife and key populations of threatened species. Big mammals such as lions, buffaloes and elephants – to name just a few – have all but disappeared from the territory. Demographic pressures, high rates of poverty and few options for pathways out of economic marginalization are primary drivers. Perhaps the single largest driver of deforestation and land degradation, however, is the widespread and unregulated use of slash-and-burn agriculture. An overdependence on chemical fertilizers and overgrazing of livestock has also left local soil quality diminished and the land susceptible to desertification.

### *Genesis and evolution of Songou-man*

In 2002, a group of 25 men, each working on reforestation and managing tree nurseries in different regions of the country, came together to address the challenge of soil loss and the negative impacts this was having on local farmers and environmental health. Their vision was to grow and plant tree seedlings as a way of restoring the landscape, rebuilding the forest canopy and regenerating soil health. With this vision, they were able to get sponsorship and support from the Institut de Conseil et d'Appui Technique (ICAT, or the Institute of Council and Technical Support), a public institute linked to the Ministry of Agriculture that has a mandate of bringing technical and financial support to farmers who are working in rural areas. At this point, Songou-man lacked legal status, which was an impediment to gaining deeper connections with government authorities and limited how effective they could be in their work and the reach they could have with local farmers.

Five years after the initial project was launched, ICAT enlisted an Executive Director to transform what was an informal group into a legally established association, thereby giving Association des Pépiniéristes et Planteurs de Tône-Ouest official status. At the same time, the association undertook a new project on intensive reforestation and sustainable agriculture that would ultimately shape its mandate and its future achievements in important ways.

The goal of the newly formed Association des Pépiniéristes et Planteurs de Tône-Ouest was to work with local farmers on reforestation and to change the orientation of local farming practices away from indiscriminate slash-and-burn agriculture toward organic farming, biodiversity conservation, and reforestation. The early stages of the association were fraught with skepticism from local farmers, requiring a long campaign of sensitization and outreach on the benefits of linking conservation and reforestation with sustainable agriculture. The leadership of the association travelled from village to village raising awareness and communicating in the local language to foster behavioral change. They focused on topics related to soil management and tree planting, highlighting the negative linkages between traditional natural resource management practices in the region and climate disruptions, land degradation, desertification, poverty and food insecurity. As a complement to its door-to-door outreach, the association also worked through media outlets – radio, magazines and newspaper articles – to reach its target population.

The strategy proved highly successful. The association gained credibility and traction with local communities and with government au-

thorities. They were able to attract new funding from L'Association des Amis de Daluag et Dapaong (the Association of Friends of Daluag and Dapong), enabling them to expand their reforestation projects to cover the entire Savanes region. Their success and reach also brought them into contact with the Global Environment Facility, who has been a key partner through their Small Grants Programme.

The current objectives of Association des Pépiniéristes et Planteurs de Tône-Ouest include raising awareness of the impacts of climate change and the actions needed on the ground to tackle these impacts; reforesting ecosystems through both communal and family plots; rehabilitating ecologically important sites in village forests, protected areas, and classified forests; protecting and cultivating threatened plant species, including important food crops and medicinal plants; promoting rapid organic composting that uses mushroom, providing an alternative to expensive and environmentally harmful chemical fertilizers; and marketing local farmer produce.

### *Governance and institutional structure*

Association des Pépiniéristes et Planteurs de Tône-Ouest is a volunteer-driven initiative. The association has an Executive Director who is elected by a General Assembly every two years. The General Assembly meets on an annual basis to review association programs and actions and to determine the budget and program of work for the coming year. A Board of Directors has also been established to provide strategic guidance and enrich its base of expertise.

Local communities and farmer groups participate in the association's governance and decision-making through a Local Project Management Committee, which brings together one man and one woman from each community, as elected by the community themselves. Women tend to hold responsibility and representation on the Irrigation Committee, while men do the same for the Committee on Surveillance and Operation of Community Plantations.





# Key Activities and Innovations



## *Mobilizing farmers to advance sustainable agriculture*

Among the most important activities undertaken by the association is grassroots mobilization. Association des Pépiniéristes et Planteurs de Tône-Ouest provides a service approximating farmer extension services, which takes them village to village in this increasingly vulnerable and environmentally degraded region. The association works directly with each community to identify and address their specific needs and to work on village-level plans that will advance sustainable agriculture techniques. This approach and the care and attention given to each distinct community makes the association effective in changing practices related to soil management, forest use, agricultural techniques and sustainable livelihood activities. The organization's legitimacy with their target population is exceptionally high, positioning them as effective agents of socio-economic and land-use change.

## *Community-based reforestation*

The association's other main area of work with local farmers focuses on reforestation and tree planting as a means of restoring degraded land, enhancing agricultural productivity and building local resistance. The target population for this work consists of small farming communities in northeastern Togo. Launched under the awareness raising campaign "Let's also cultivate the trees," reforestation efforts focus on demonstrating the positive effects of trees for local communities, including reinforcing soil quality and fertility and increasing agricultural productivity. To illustrate this ecological reality, the association created a demonstration plot in Sankpédigbente where farmers could witness for themselves how reforested land could also transform soil fertility and agricultural landscapes.

Since the most vulnerable in each community are dependent on natural resources and forests and are highly vulnerable to ecosystem decline, the association holds as a guiding principle that they must be a part of the solution. The association works with women and other vulnerable groups that they believe need to be empowered as leaders in conservation, restoration and reforestation efforts.

## *Mushroom farming and sustainable agriculture techniques*

One of Association des Pépiniéristes et Planteurs de Tône-Ouest's innovative contributions has been the promotion of mushroom farming and the use of mushroom compost as an alternative to chemical fertilizers (which are cost-prohibitive for smallholder farmers and which have negative environmental impacts). The association has been supported in this activity by AGIDE, a pioneering NGO in the country that promotes mushroom farming, and is the association's primary technical partner. The objective is to teach communities about rapid mushroom composting, which is highly effective in revitalizing soil. Mushroom compost is inexpensive, enriches the soil and supplies essential nutrients to crops. It has the added benefit of increasing the capacity of the soil to hold water, an important consideration in this water-stressed region.

Indeed, the dry climate in the northern regions of Togo has shaped other association activities and informs in important ways the plant-





ing techniques that are taught to local farmers. One of the methods being used is the maintenance of communal nurseries, where villages can pool reforestation and sustainable agriculture efforts. The nurseries are planted in the dry season prior to the planting of individual farmer fields. By collectively planting at the very beginning of the rainy season, the communities ensure that as much water as possible is retained in the soil.

A related challenge that the association has helped overcome is that, during the dry season, livestock have typically been left to graze indiscriminately, leading to the loss of plants and grass and to the destruction of unprotected tree seedlings. In fact, this lack of protection for budding trees is among the main reasons why previous reforestation efforts were unsuccessful. The association has put in place a closure system to protect communal plantations from

livestock, allowing plants and trees to thrive. The fences are left for three years until the animals no longer represent a danger to the seedlings. The fences are then reinstalled for another communal plantation. Through this method, 80 percent of the planted trees reach maturity.

The association has also established and maintains a botanical garden, which has a permanent nursery that supplies local farmers with plant stock. The garden displays a diverse range of medicinal plants and food crops from the region as a living library of agricultural assets available to farming communities. The botanical garden further functions as an education center, where farmer federations, schools, researchers and the general public can learn about sustainable agriculture, reforestation and biodiversity conservation.



*"I saw the natural calendar of the environment, food habits, sanitation and even culture change due to the effects of climate change"*

*Salifou Bounele*



# Impacts



## BIODIVERSITY IMPACTS

Association des Pépiniéristes et Planteurs de Tône-Ouest has a far-ranging impact on local ecosystems and environmental regeneration. They are active in 105 village communities where they have worked with local farmer groups on tree planting and land restoration. They operate a botanical garden that has a permanent tree nursery and that acts as a learning center and a resource for target farmer communities. The association has helped to establish 21 communal tree nurseries and plantations, each roughly one hectare in size, across the same number of villages. These nurseries cultivate tree seedlings that are used to reforest farmlands and fragile, degraded ecosystems. The association has rehabilitated three village forests that cover over 60 hectares of protected forest. In total, the association has planted over 57,000 trees and trained 50 farmers in nursery management, 46 in agroforestry techniques, and eight farmer groups in mushroom composting. In addition, their techniques have been shared with hundreds of other farmers through partner organizations.

Through communal, farm-based reforestation and forest preservation activities, the association is improving livelihoods while also restoring biodiversity and ecosystem services. Slash-and-burn farming, previously prevalent in the region, has been reduced dramatically, as have related bush fires. New forest growth and organic compost use are helping to rehabilitate soil, leading to decreased land degradation, soil runoff and vulnerability to floods.

The botanical garden is home to 39 regionally endangered plant species that are highly relevant to local farming communities. By putting these species on display, the association is playing an important role in environmental education and sensitizing the local population to the farming benefits of biodiversity conservation, sustainable forest management and environmental stewardship. The garden is a learning center and information hub where communities gain knowledge about pressing environment issues, and how these issues can be effectively addressed through collective action. It pro-

motes the integration of biodiversity and ecosystem considerations into village-level development plans and is a powerful driver of behavior change in local farming communities.

## SOCIOECONOMIC IMPACTS

Association activities focus on rural populations of subsistence farmers in the Savanes region of northern Togo. The sale of seedlings, reforestation, forest conservation and sustainable farming all generate additional incomes for local farmers. These activities have made a significant dent in local poverty levels. Since 2008, between three and 12 hectares of communal forest have been planted each year. These reforestation activities required 11,000 seedlings, costing the association about 2,400,000 CFA Francs (4,200 USD). Over that same time, community-run nurseries have sold 46,000 seedlings, bringing in over 10,000,000 CFA Francs (17,400 USD). Farmers have also





benefited from reforestation activities in terms of greater agricultural productivity, access to organic fertilizer, crop diversification and strengthened food security.

Farmers invest revenues generated from new activities into health and education services. The sale of seedlings happens primarily at the beginning of the school year and revenues are invested into school fees and education projects. Indeed, education is a prominent feature of the association's work and investments. Whether with school children or adult farmers, the association concerns itself with the acquisition of new knowledge and of learning and creating the conditions for new approaches that will help respond to local needs. Beginning in 2011, the association started work on seven secondary schools, focusing on helping students to understand the importance of forests, and encouraging them to plant trees in their schoolyards and at home. Given the success of this program in fostering a conservation ethic with youth, the association went on to carry out similar interventions with 13 primary schools, where children learned how to water and care for trees in their community territories during the dry season.

Inclusion of medicinal plants in environmental restoration and community management projects has improved community resiliency and preserved traditional knowledge. There is a deep cultural tradition in the Savanes region of cultivating and using medicinal plants for treating illnesses and for overall wellbeing. Such practices have been the basis of local healthcare needs for generations. With desertification and environmental decline, however, this tradition and its health benefits were under threat. The association works to address this issue by supporting local farmers to cultivate medicinal plants both on-farm and in communal nurseries.

The central concept of the association is simple: the people on the frontlines of the problems have to be the ones to initiate the solutions. It is the local communities and farmers who know the land and who will ultimately have to choose sustainable management over deleterious practices. The association has been very successful at using collective action as a way of building social cohesion and tack-

ling shared problems. The communal plant and tree nurseries have become rallying points for village solidarity.

## GENDER

The inclusion and empowerment of women has also been a priority for Association des Pépiniéristes et Planteurs de Tône-Ouest. In the Savanes region, women constitute 52 percent of the population. They typically assume responsibility for the collection of firewood and water for their families. Because the initiative has focused on addressing desertification, forest loss and water insecurity, women have been positioned as central agents of change. Greater access to wood and water has reduced the amount of time women need to forage, creating space for them to pursue other income generating activities. Women occupy positions of leadership in the organization and take responsibility for irrigation projects, water access and the marketing of tree seedlings.

## POLICY IMPACTS

The association has established itself as a credible and legitimate grassroots movement in Togo, and has gained the trust of both communities and government authorities alike. Its sustainable agriculture and forest management programs have been directly incorporated into important public policies. In 2013, the Ministry of Environment asked the association to participate in the inaugural Caravane Nationale pour l'Environnement et le Développement Durable (National Caravan for the Environment and Sustainable Development), a national event created to promote and share sustainable development ideas, knowledge and innovations.

Partnerships have also helped the association shape public policy. The association participated in the establishment of the Great Green Wall of the Sahara, as well as the Sahel Initiative, a project designed and carried out by the African Union in response to desertification taking place in sub-Saharan countries where a wall of trees was planted across the continent at the southern edge of the desert.





# Sustainability and Replication



## SUSTAINABILITY

The association is working in a region of Togo that urgently needs action on environmental restoration, food security and poverty reduction. Based on the association's connections and credibility with the local population, as well as the great lengths they have gone to understand village needs and their approach to responding in ways that empower local farmers, there are good reasons to believe that the initiative will be sustainable over the long run. They operate with a high level of legitimacy and support from their target communities, which is an essential element of institutional sustainability when working on rural sustainable development.

Through the operation of tree nurseries and the sale of tree seedlings, the association has achieved a certain level of financial sustainability and autonomy. It has certainly proven to be a group that generates a high return on investment, making the most of its model and scaling-up through the support of donors like the UNDP-implemented GEF-Small Grants Programme. It is important to note that the grants and financial support from other donors in the formative stages of the association were critical to the initiative gaining the momentum it needed to be effective and to achieve the impressive reach it currently has.

The trust that Association des Pépiniéristes et Planteurs de Tône-Ouest has developed with government authorities is another key part of their success and will shape their sustainability going forward. The Government of Togo has been supportive in working through the association to provide technical services on environmental management, agriculture and forestry-related issues. The government has introduced new policies that are supportive of community-based action and local practitioners, and the continued success of the association hinges on the ongoing collaboration and support of government authorities. An effective policy environment will make all the difference for the association to expand and to thrive.

## REPLICATION

From its humble beginnings, growing through village-to-village outreach, the association has become an important actor in peer-to-peer learning, knowledge exchange and best practice transfer. The initiative took a viable and in-demand model of reforestation, sustainable livelihoods and organic agriculture on the road, quite literally planting the seed of the concept and the theory of socio-economic and land use change in each and every community it has targeted. The success the initiative has had at the village level has made its model of interest to other civil society organizations and NGOs operating across the country. Over the last four years, six organizations have sought the advice of the association and expressed an interest in replicating their project model. The association has





also been shared as a national best practice through forums such as the Caravane Nationale pour l'Environnement et le Développement Durable. The initiative has high potential for replication across the entire sub-region of West Africa, where challenges around food insecurity, desertification, deforestation and poverty are prevalent.

## PARTNERS

The French organization, Association des Amis de Daluag et Dapang, has partnered with the Association des Pépiniéristes et Planteurs de Tône-Ouest since 2008, soon after the organization was legally incorporated. They funded the first nursery fence at Sankpédigbente and have gone on to fund several more. The Global

Environment Facility-Small Grants Program (GEF-SGP) financed fences and awareness raising campaigns, allowing the association to expand its activities across the Savanes region of northern Togo. GEF-SGP also supported the construction of the botanical garden. AGIDE, a local NGO, provided technical expertise and mushroom spawn for cultivation and compost. Togo's Ministry of Environment and Forestry Resources helped secure property titles to land so that the association could undertake its reforestation work and create communal nurseries. A number of local civil society organizations, including Association Don Bosco, Code Utile Afrique, IT Village, Association des éleveurs APEB, and Nouvelle Elite, have worked with Association des Pépiniéristes et Planteurs de Tône-Ouest and have agreed to replicate their reforestation activities in their locales.



*"Our work aims to repair and preserve nature to enhance and perpetuate the livelihoods of local communities, hence the importance of resilience in our work."*

*Salifou Bounele*

0228-90148506



## FURTHER REFERENCE

- Sangou Man [brochure](#)

## PROJECT PARTNERS

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The Equator Initiative brings together the United Nations, governments, civil society, businesses and grassroots organizations to recognize and advance local sustainable development solutions for people, nature and resilient communities.

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