



Stories from the field

Women carrying goods to market in Benin
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Putting tested options into practice in Benin

Benin depends on agriculture for some 70% of employment and 88% of exports. Recently farmers have endured consecutive years of extreme climate variation, characterized by flooding, drought, and highly unpredictable changes in rainfall patterns and distribution.

To better equip them for an uncertain future, a project led by *Initiatives pour un développement intégré durable* (IDID-ONG) is working to improve the quality and dissemination of forecasting information, pinpoint vulnerabilities to climate change, and develop and test adaptive practices in agriculture. As a result, rural producers in six of Benin's 12 departments (regions) are gaining access to improved climate information and practical advice for the growing season.

Farmers and other groups at risk from climate change are active members of early warning (pre-alert) committees established in 35 rural communes in six of Benin's departments. In addition, 60 field schools have been set up, involving some 300 farmers in field tests. Four priority options experimented with this year were: mulching; the

use of *Zaïs* – a traditional means of regenerating soil using planting pits; integrated crop management; and the use of organic fertilizers.

With the help of the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (IITA), the team developed a protocol for participatory experimentation and provided training to farmers at each of the sites.

Testing carried out at local level feeds into national-level analysis. A national committee brings together representatives from the National Meteorological Service, the Ministry of Agriculture, the Ministry of Environment, the National Adaptation Programme of Action (NAPA) focal point, and members of the research team. Every two months, the committee produces a bulletin that analyses the patterns observed over the past two months, as well as forecasts for the next two, for each department. The committee also analyses data on crop growth gathered from selected farms. The bulletins contain general recommendations for farmers that can be tailored by local extension agents to reflect local cropping and cultural practices. When needed, the committee issues

separate alerts that may warn of extreme weather events.

These bulletins – distributed in print, by radio in local languages, and through local committees – provide advisory information to some 2 million rural producers.

The research team has observed that many of the farmers who participate in the field experiments are adopting the tested options in their own plots to boost soil fertility and improve water infiltration and retention. They note that choosing influential farmers as experimenters can increase the uptake of tested methods.

Benin's NAPA committee has identified this project as contributing to the national program of action. The team has also been invited to be part of Benin's National Water Partnership, which includes funding for water management initiatives, such as small

dams, wells, and irrigation works. The team will play an important role in seeing commune-level requests and inputs relayed upward to national level.



Planting in preparation for field trials in Nigbogan, in Benin's Couffo department Photo: IDID-ONG/K. Hounkponou



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The launch of the project Strengthening the Capacity to Adapt to Climate Change in Rural Benin coincided with the floods of 2007 that ravaged crops and destroyed close to 50 villages.

Through their extension experience with rural producers, IDID-ONG recognized just how vulnerable these people were to climate variability and change because of a simple lack of clear and accessible information.

According to project leader Saïd K. Hounkponou, involving local people is crucial.

"Although there is evidence of international awareness of climate change risks, we see very little real action at regional, national, and community levels. So, vulnerable populations remain at risk from climatic extremes every day."

By combining field testing of options with multiple platforms for information sharing and analysis, the project aims to ensure that stakeholders at all levels are better informed and prepared.

"In the future," says Hounkponou, "I hope to see policymakers, researchers, the private sector, civil society, and technical and financial partners collaborate on adaptation to climate change. Adaptation needs to be integrated into programs, projects, and development plans at all levels."

*This project illustrates progress towards CCA **outcome area 3**: The poor in rural and urban environments apply their experience of adaptation with the knowledge and technologies generated by research to implement improved and effective adaptation strategies; and **outcome area 4**: Policy processes are informed by good quality science-based work on vulnerability and adaptation, and by the experiences of the rural and urban poor.*