

Tackling post-harvest losses in Cameroon

(by Chantalle Okondo)

Australia Awards alumni Blanche Etongwe is driving positive change in Cameroon. Her contributions are helping to address a critical issue: post-harvest losses.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, post-harvest losses are estimated to range between 20-30%. This lost food is enough to feed about 48 million people for 12 months. Blanche's work is tackling the problem in Cameroon, with particular focus on women who are the primary agents of food production in her country – and across much of Africa.

“The skills and knowledge I gained in my studies in Australia afforded me the opportunity to help farmers reduce post-harvest losses in the supply chain, which is a critical issue in this region. I gained respect and trust in the community, in addition to other critical skills, such as community engagement. More importantly, my studies in Australia have enabled me to become a resource person on post-harvest management in the community,” says Blanche.

In 2012, Blanche received a scholarship funded by the Australian Government and completed an Africa Fellowship course in Post-harvest Management of Maize, Rice and Legumes at the University of Sydney. On return and as part of her role as Coordinator at the Better Life Foundation for Women (BELFOW), Blanche embarked on a training effort which targeted women farmers and aimed at reducing high post-harvest losses in the target region.

Research informed the training program. Blanche formed a team to carry out baseline research in the three villages of Bakumba, Betenge Balue and Dikombe Balue located in the South-Western region of Cameroon. The study targeted a random sample of 100 farmers, 95% women.

“The baseline study revealed that maize storage is a critical aspect in the region, an issue that has never been fully addressed apart from the traditional methods which have proved ineffective,” explains Blanche.

The issues identified in the baseline research informed the design of a training program that was led by Blanche and her team from BELFOW with technical support from the Agricultural Research Institute for Development. The training focused on appropriate techniques for maize storage, such as the use of gas tight containers, an example of which are the mini silos, and local testing of maize dryness before storage. The training was successful in raising awareness among farmers about effective post-harvest management techniques that can help avoid the losses recorded in the past. Currently, BELFOW has sensitised about 200 farmers from nine villages, with the training program to be expanded to other areas in Cameroon.

Leveraging on her role as a Post-Harvest Research Expert, Blanche is using information from the baseline study and feedback from the training activities to steer her organisation toward embracing a supply chain approach to tackling the post-harvest loss issue rather than concentrating on production only. Part

of this strategy is the development of linkages between maize producers and market agents, with efforts currently underway.



Fig. 1 Blanche delivering training



Fig. 2 Participants observing mold contamination in grains