An official conducts a training session on biological seed coating in Gambour, Cameroon. Photo Credit: Colette Maba/CIFOR-ICRAF

Cameroon's climate-smart villages combat desertification

By Ngalame Elias

DESERTIFICATION in the northern region of Cameroon has historically made it difficult for local communities to cultivate crops.

Rivers are dry most of the time with the local water catchment depleted while soil degradation is widespread.

To combat the effects of desertification, the Adaptation to Climate Change (INNOVACC) project was started in 2022 to enhance the communities' resilience to climate change. The project promotes sustainable practices to restore degraded landscapes for crop cultivation such as vegetables, groundnuts and improve access to more efficient energy resources needed for the improvement of livelihoods for rural households.

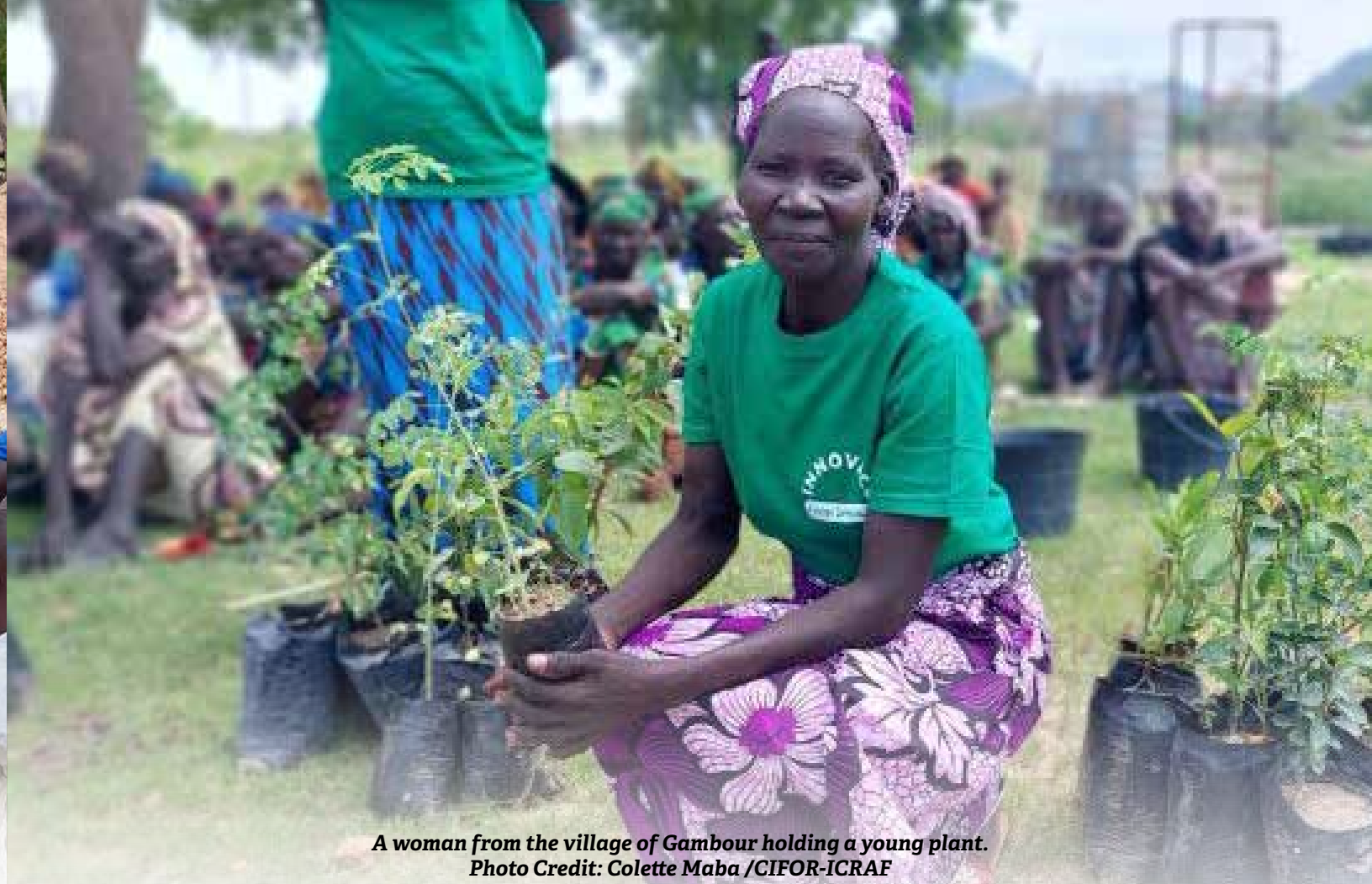
Central to the project are the community nurseries established in pilot sites, known as climate-smart villages: Tollore, Pintchoumba, Bamé and Bang in the North region, and Gambour in the Far North. These nurseries focus on agroforestry and the sustainable management of wood energy resources.

"Community nurseries and tree planting play a key role in combating desertification, serving as tangible resilience measures for drought mitigation and land restoration for agriculture," says Emmanual Djilla, one of the nurseries coordinators in Gambour, where the project is already bearing fruit.

In the past, parched land was a common feature in Gabour and Nguni River, which cuts through villages, dried up.

"Now with trees we have been planting we have improved the environmental condition and the agricultural fortunes of the community," Abdalah Rosina, a local farmer.

"The rains have become plentiful and the water volume in the Nguni River, a lifeline in the village, has increased."



A woman from the village of Gambour holding a young plant.
Photo Credit: Colette Maba /CIFOR-ICRAF

Cameroon launched its national tree planting drive in 2020 with the aim of having 20 percent of the country's Northern desert prone region covered b forest by the end of 2025.

Government and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) worked hand in gloves on the tree planting drive.

"We needed to move quickly and develop a strategy and guidelines for engaging partners that ensure trees don't die after planting them," Cameroon's Minister of Forestry and Wildlife, Jules Doret Ndongo, said.

The initiative got the local communities, especially women and youths, directly involved in not only planting but also taking care of the trees.

The government committed to paying for the care of the trees for at least three years, by which point they are considered strong enough to withstand droughts, floods and other climate-linked stresses.

"We are now emphasised on the growing trees as opposed to just planting them," the minister said. Scientists say protecting forests is one of the most effective ways to curb climate change because trees suck the carbon dioxide, the main gas heating up the planet, from the atmosphere.

The project involves planting a variety of trees, including cedar, cypress and olive tree, and training community groups on how to care for them.

The government pays for the seedlings and their care, including raising saplings on their nurseries, and erecting electric fences to protect young trees from disappearing.

Community members make additional income selling seedlings to other organisations involved in the project.

"They are also using the freshly planted areas to farm among the growing trees which serves as shade for young crops from intense sunlight and help the soil hold moisture," says Onana Gregoire, the head of communication unit in the Ministry of Forestry and Wildlife.

Making other non-state organisations responsible for specific forest areas means progress can be monitored, audited and managed over time, which is not always possible with more traditional planting projects, he added.

Onana encouraged greater commitment and participation to provide resources for growing trees in the long term.

"That is the only way tree planting will help Cameroon curb its greenhouse gas emissions, while also expanding scarce income opportunities for women and young people," he said.