

Social innovation for protecting trees in Kabre Community in Bongo District, Ghana

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Tree Chief (in the middle) during innovation-sharing session
(Photo: Dominic Avea, NABOCADO Field Project Manager)

The local social innovation

Kabre is a small community in Bongo District in the Upper Region of northern Ghana. The main occupation of the people is subsistence farming. Poverty is high in the area because of declining agricultural income and limited alternative sources of income. Women's role in food security and survival of households is key in the community. The community is severely affected by high environmental degradation and rapid loss of economic trees because of human activities including indiscriminate cutting and burning of the vegetation.

In his quest for a solution to the predicament of the community, Ayisanga Akanyagle, a now 65-year-old small-scale farmer with great interest in growing and protecting trees on his farm and in the community, volunteered ten years ago to be a "Tree Chief" or "Tisenaaba" in the local language, a popular nickname earned for his high interest and voluntary service to the community on environmental issues. Based on this interest and commitment to the community, in 2015, the Community Chief officially recognised the title of Akanyagle by installing him as Tree Chief and giving him the authority to function as such. His duties involve helping the community protect the economic trees, educating and supplying tree seedlings to community members, and reporting cases of indiscriminate tree felling to the local chief for prosecution. The Community Chief strongly recognises and supports him in this role, which the dignified Tree Chief discharges with pride.

In 2016, this social innovation was identified by partners in the Promoting local innovation in Food and Nutrition Security (Proli-FaNS) project supported by Misereor/KZE (Catholic Central Agency for Development Aid) in the Bongo action-learning area.

How the Tree Chief operates

Within the framework of this socio-institutional arrangement by the community to protect its economic trees and forest resources, the Tree Chief Akanyagle created a committee of young men in the community to support him in monitoring activities affecting trees in the area. During visits, when they come across people harvesting or cutting down trees indiscriminately or unsustainably, they assess the effects of those activities on tree survival and, when the damage to the tree is minimal, the offenders are warned verbally and taught the right way to harvest or prune a tree. However, where there is greater damage, first-time offenders are sanctioned to replace the damaged tree by planting a new tree and taking care of it so that it grows well. Recalcitrant offenders are reported by the Tree Chief to the Community Chief and the Forestry Commission Officer responsible for the area for further actions or sanctions, including legal action or reporting to the Paramount Chief of the Bongo Traditional Area.

However, this arrangement still faced some challenges of compliance and enforcement of the rules, which were verbal and not documented. The indiscriminate cutting of trees persisted, and community cooperation, interest and involvement in making the system work were not encouraging. Collaboration with District Assembly authorities and the Forestry Commission needed to be strengthened to make the social innovation work more effectively. In 2017, the community led by its Chief, his elders and the Tree Chief decided to work jointly with a team from Navrongo-Bolgatanga Catholic Diocese Development Organization (NABOCADO, the local partner NGO), the Bongo District Department of Agriculture (DoA) and the Upper East Regional Forestry Commission to collectively develop and enforce local bylaws within the framework of formal policies and rules of the government institutions and the District Assembly in a participatory innovation development (PID) process. The partners thought that this could build greater climate resilience to sustain local agriculture and food security. The specific objectives of the PID process were to:

- support the community to draw up local bylaws to govern and protect economic trees, with enforcement by the innovator in his function as Tree Chief;
- involve relevant stakeholders and institutions to support and recognise the Tree Chief concept for integration with formal rules and laws;
- increase community involvement and support for the operations of the Tree Chief.

The major activities undertaken to develop the bylaws and institutionalise the concept included: community consultations and awareness-raising meetings; training of men and women in the community on environmental conservation practices and the laws of Ghana governing trees and forest protection (this was done by the Forestry Commission); community meetings to develop the rules and bylaws drawing on cultural beliefs, taboos and traditional processes; engagement with the Bongo Paramount Chief and the District Chief Executive (DCE) to contribute to draft bylaws and give approval; and formal “outdooing” of the Tree Chief with explanation of the final bylaws to the community members.

Impact achieved

Although efforts by local chiefs and government authorities in protecting trees in the fragile ecosystem of Bongo District are not new, the social and institutional innovation by the Kabre Community to protect its vegetation is outstanding in its approach and success, especially with respect to sustaining women’s sources of livelihood from tree products.

Within two years after the “outdooring” of the Tree Chief, trees in the Kabre Community – especially economic trees such as shea, baobab and dawadawa, which support the livelihoods of women and their families by providing fruits, nuts and leaves – are better protected and more productive. Farmers have also increased the planting of exotic trees and indigenous economic trees on or around their farms. This, together with the reduction of burning of the vegetation in the community and the surroundings, is beginning to make a difference in terms of more wood and non-wood forest products available for use as rafters, fuel, medicines, fodder and pasture. In fact, the community area is gradually becoming greener. Akolpoka Atule, a woman in Kabre-Zua (a suburb of Kabre), stated: *“In previous years, I couldn’t harvest baobab leaves to cook food because the lower branches had been cut and I cannot climb to the top of a tree to harvest the leaves, but now the Tisenaaba has helped people like me a lot, as the unpruned baobab now produces leaves closer to the ground, so I can stand and harvest the leaves without climbing.”*

Women are now empowered to report cases of indiscriminate cutting of trees, which they were culturally prevented from doing before the local bylaws were developed and the Tree Chief was officially installed. The social innovation has also strengthened collaboration between the Forestry Commission, the Bongo Paramount Chief, the Bongo District Assembly, the DoA and the community in protecting the trees and environment. The work of the formal institutions is thus being enhanced. For instance, through the increased awareness and vigilance of community members, illegal timber-logging activities of foreign nationals in the protected forest around the community have been curtailed.

Lessons learnt

Communities and farmers have innovative ideas and capacities for improving their natural resources, food security and livelihood situation. If these potentials are identified, recognised and supported by external development agencies, the interventions made by these agencies will have greater chance of spread and sustainability.

Community members will better respect and cooperate with laws and rules to govern their natural resources or social systems when these laws and rules have been initiated or developed by them with support of higher authorities from outside the community. The success of the community participatory development process can be attributed to the complementary roles played by existing institution-based services. This is exemplified in the Tree Chief social innovation to protect and develop the vegetation of the Kabre Community to sustain its farming activities and livelihoods through strong multi-institutional stakeholder involvement.

Encouragement of women’s participation in community initiatives and processes helps build their confidence, bringing to the fore their interest in and support for the initiatives and the benefits they stand to gain from them.