

Water is at the heart of farmers' struggle to survive in Benin

Small-scale farmers and local NGOs work together to create resilience in the face of climate change in this Western African country.



Market gardening site of the Itchèléré de Itagui agricultural cooperative in Dassa-Zoumè (Image credit: Megan Valère SOSSOU) For the residents of Dassa-Zoumè, a city in the West African country of Benin, choosing between drinking water and having enough food has become a worrying dilemma.

“Last year, our horticultural production plummeted due to water scarcity,” said Chantal Agbangla, a farmer residing in

Soclogbo, a town located about 30 minutes by car from the capital of Dassa-Zoumé. “We had to travel nine kilometers to find water, mainly for our agricultural and domestic needs.”

Family farming, a pillar of the economy in Dassa-Zoumé, is more threatened than ever by climate change. Small-scale farms cover only about 2% of cultivable land in the area of Dassa-Zoumé, and their very survival seems threatened because water has become an increasingly precious commodity. Residents can no longer rely on the rainy season, as the irregularity of precipitation has made it an unreliable water source. Instead, they have embraced agroecological horticulture as a contingency plan against climate change. Agroecology emphasizes [sustainable farming practices](#) that prioritize water retention in the soil, making this type of farming more resistant to drought.

How climate change is affecting Benin

Benin is already facing climate change impacts like long periods of drought followed by intense downpours resulting in flooding. Despite its marginal contribution to heat-trapping greenhouse gas emissions, representing only 0.05% of the global total, Benin is among the nations [most vulnerable](#) to climate change.

“The commune of Dassa experiences extreme rainfall variability, exacerbated by climate change.” Said Romanic OGOUWALE, a professor and researcher in geography specializing in climatology at the University of Abomey-Calavi, Benin’s principal public university. “A situation aggravated by rising temperatures and decreasing water resources in recent times.”

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In 2010, the country experienced severe flooding that affected crop production. In response to these challenges, the Beninese

government is actively engaged in the implementation of strategies to reduce the country's contribution to climate change and adapt to its effects, including providing farmers with short-cycle crop seeds that can be harvested every two months like corn, soy, peanuts, beans.

How women are responding

In Benin, women are increasingly involved in the creation of agricultural cooperatives to promote empowerment and engagement, as women play a crucial role in the agricultural sector. Like other regions of the country, in Dassa-Zoumè, several women's agricultural cooperatives offer help to local farmers, such as the Itchèléré agricultural cooperative in Dassa.

"Even traditionally humid areas now suffer from drought," said Yves GBEDJI from the Itchèléré agricultural cooperative in Dassa-Zoumè. "We must seek alternative water sources, sometimes traveling long distances to obtain it." The LIFO and Olodjo rivers can supply water, but they are more than five kilometers away from these rural populations, making them difficult to access, especially without transport.

Women are often faced with the dilemma of having to choose between using water for household chores such as washing dishes and laundry, or for irrigating their vegetable crops.

"At times, we are forced to use water intended for our domestic needs to irrigate our horticultural crops, leading to conflicts within households," said Chantal Agbangla.

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Joséphine Koba is one of the many women turning to

horticulture. She is in her forties, a mother of five children and is involved in the Itchèléré de Itagui agricultural cooperative in Dassa-Zoumè. She is a trainer at the cooperative on the production of compost from agricultural waste. “With the instability of the rainy season, we opted for horticulture to provide food year-round, especially in the dry season,” she said. “We grow tomatoes, peppers, vegetables, okra, and many other essential products.”

Before agroecological practices were implemented, most crops were produced with chemical fertilizers. Now, locally made compost feeds these crops. However, access to water remains a major obstacle, especially in areas where the granite rock bed makes well construction difficult.

Building wells

Several projects and programs have been launched to help these vulnerable populations of Dassa Zoumè, particularly young people and women of Soclogbo, better cope with climate change. One recent project enabled farmers to install wells for irrigation, said Yves GBEDJI, a 30-year-old local farmer. The well program is funded by the Dutch Embassy in Benin. It aims to improve the food and nutritional security of rural populations through increasing agricultural productivity and increasing income.

“As for the Benkadi project, it trained us in sustainable techniques such as reforestation, building ditches, and rational water resource management,” said GBEDJI. The Benkadi project is led by a consortium of civil society organizations grouped in four different West African countries including Benin, Ivory Coast, Burkina Faso, and Mali with a Dutch partner, Woord end Daad. This project aims to strengthen the resilience and adaptation of local populations in the face of climate change.

What's next?

This quest for water affects vulnerable individuals in rural communities of Dassa-Zoumè, notably children, women, people with disabilities, and young people.

For Marie Odile HOUNTONDJI, gender and social inclusion expert with the Benkadi project of [the Civil Society Actors Platform in Benin](#), more vulnerable individuals should be involved in the conversations about how to face this problem. The objective, she said, is to achieve inclusive efforts to reduce the effects of climate change, especially in agriculture.

As the residents of Dassa-Zoumè struggle daily to access water, vital for their survival and that of their crops, one truth remains evident: In the face of the urgency posed by climate change, their resilience and determination stand as their most valuable assets.

Megan Valère SOSSOU