

Gender equality through women-led agroecology



Last autumn, members of the Inter Pares team visited our counterparts in Senegal, Guinea-Bissau and Togo as part of the *Scaling Up Gender Equality through Women-Led Agroecology in West Africa* project. Alongside our counterparts, we advocate for agroecology that cultivates autonomy. Agroecology that respectfully and sustainably centres communities – women in particular. Increased food autonomy, more access to land and better seed management will ultimately lead to the recognition and exercise of rural women's political, economic and social rights... and ultimately to improved food security.



Farmers in Madina Sara stand proudly in their rice fields.

Photo credit: Eric Chaurette/Inter Pares

Agroecology led by women in West Africa

The bright green of the rice fields is what you notice first. The fields are lush, and the rice is nearly ready to harvest. A group of women stand proudly in their fields and explain that 12 varieties of rice are grown here. ►

◀ In Madina Sara, their community in Guinea-Bissau, the conversation flows between men and women. Farmers explain how their community has set up a bank to save seeds from one harvest to the next, and how they have created a food reserve on which families can draw in times of scarcity.


Around each house is a diverse vegetable garden, and the majestic mango trees are in flower. This idyllic description seems too good to be true, but that's life in Madina Sara.

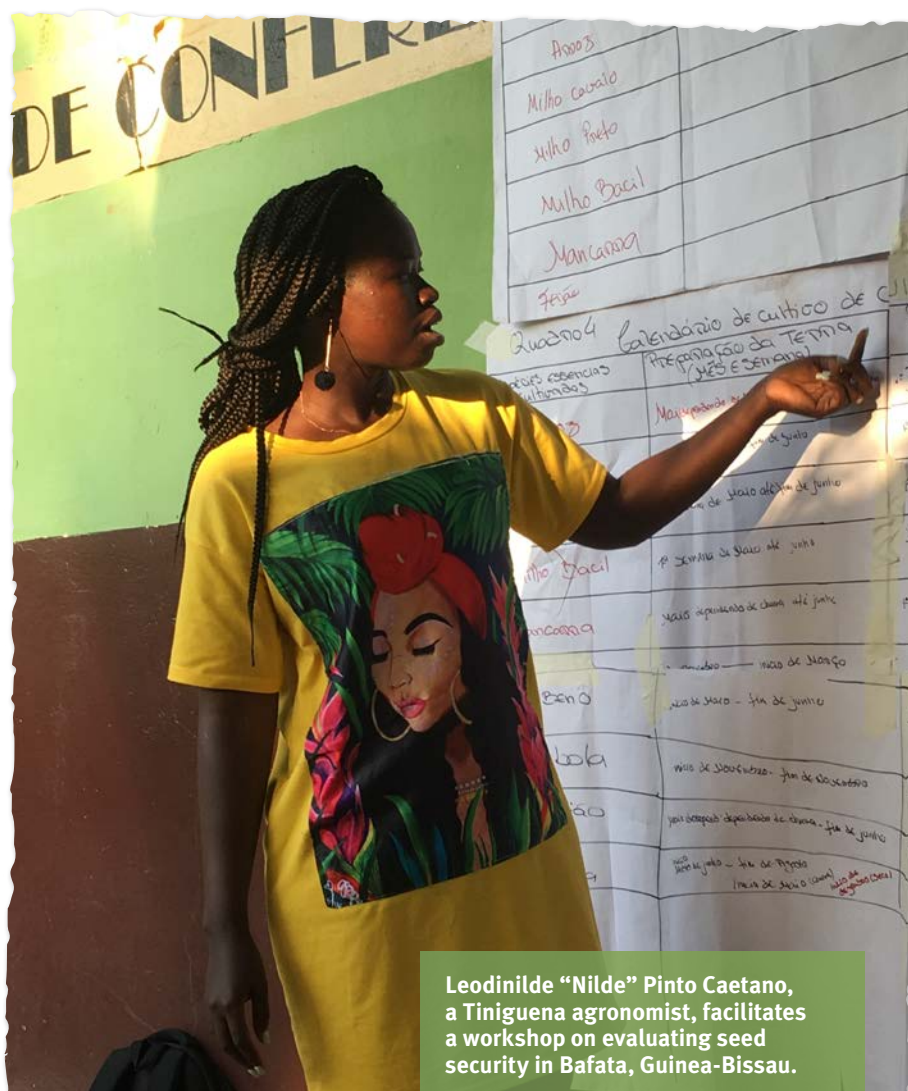
The fields are lush, and the rice is nearly ready to be harvested.

Our counterpart Tiniguena has been accompanying Madina Sara for a number of years and is here as part of a new joint initiative: *Scaling Up Gender Equality through Women-Led Agroecology in West Africa*. This five-year project, in the amount of nearly \$5.6 million, aims to increase the power of rural women through advocacy and the promotion of agroecological food systems. The project impacts around 25,000 people, mainly women, in Burkina Faso, Guinea-Bissau, Senegal and Togo.

Unlike farming practices that promote dependence on foreign seeds and on harmful chemical fertilizers and pesticides, agroecology cultivates independence. It taps into local knowledge and bolsters communities' seed heritage. It also boosts production capacity for organic inputs rather than relying on expensive chemical inputs. The approach recognizes the crucial

role that women play in food systems and works to remove barriers to accessing land and decision-making spaces.

The story of Madina Sara and the other articles in this *Bulletin* show what we hope to achieve in working among equals with our counterparts in West Africa. We are grateful to our community of donors who make this work possible. 



Leodilinde "Nilde" Pinto Caetano, a Tiniguena agronomist, facilitates a workshop on evaluating seed security in Bafata, Guinea-Bissau.

Without seed security, no food sovereignty

“Peanuts and millet must be together in the stomach and in the field,” says a farmer about the two main crops in his community of N’diongolor, Senegal. In one sentence, he makes the link between nutrition and crop diversity.

His words demonstrate a common theme throughout a seed security evaluation workshop organized by Inter Pares and SeedChange, a Canadian organization that promotes ecological food systems and seed preservation.

For farmers, seed security is the guarantee of producing or having access to quality seeds that are adapted to their environment and meet their needs.

Representatives from various counterpart organizations in West Africa had a discussion during the workshop. Together, they explored the role of seed security in agroecology. Women-led agroecology aims to improve access to this vital aspect of agriculture in addition to addressing access to land and to markets.

The methodology learned during the workshop puts the knowledge of communities and the experience of women at the core of the process.




Cowpea is the most important seed legume in the tropical savannah areas of Africa.

Photo credit: Lise-Anne Léveillé/Inter Pares

“Peanuts and millet must be together in the stomach and in the field.”
- Farmer in Senegal

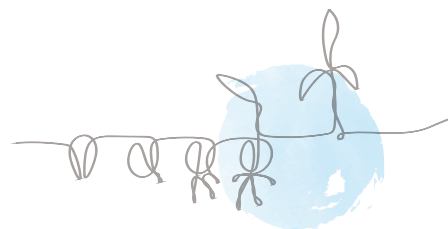
Discussions around which seeds to sow, and who is assigned to clean them, help to make visible the work women do, as it often goes unnoticed.

Participants left with tools to explore this topic in their own communities, taking with them the words of our host in the village of N’diongolor: “We have hope that the results of this workshop will help us to strengthen our resilience.” 



Lively, often joyful, discussions to fill in the charts. This one represents the relative importance of the main problems associated with seed security with stones.

Photo credit: Lise-Anne Léveillé/Inter Pares




Agroecology: Helping women in West Africa access land

If it is recognized that women's access to land is instrumental in the transition to agroecology, we hear less about the reverse: the role that agroecology can play in strengthening women's access to and control over land.



The experience of our counterpart, Inades Formation-Togo (IFT), is compelling. The organization found that after receiving training in agroecology, rural women tended to develop strategies to access land so they could put into practice the techniques they had learned. In Kodjo Adja, in the highlands of Togo, women fonio producers who are members of the ENOULI cooperative said that the training allowed them to organize collectively to access land.

In the opinion of Donou Afi, president of the cooperative, communal fields have allowed village women who didn't have enough land to grow fonio to benefit from plots. Even though they do not own the land, they can at least access it.

In West Africa, legislation recognizes women's land rights, but these rights are generally weakened by customary patriarchal norms. IFT's work has laid the foundation for social recognition of the importance of rural women having access to land. It is now a matter of building on this foundation to remove barriers that rural women face in relation to land. 



Donou Afi (right), president of the ENOULI cooperative in Kodjo Adja.

Photo credit: Mariétou Diallo/Inter Pares

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