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Message from the Director

The year 2020 – which was marked by the COVID-19 pandemic – was very different compared to what most of us have ever experienced. Following the detection of the first case of COVID-19 in Benin on 16 March 2020, the government put in place movement restrictions and imposed measures to limit the spread of the disease. These measures proved successful in the fight against the pandemic. Although goods were spared, the restrictions nevertheless created distortions in the food supply chains with losses of income for economic actors in the food systems. At ACED, we have been monitoring the situation and helping the producers we support to acquire inputs and market their products.

Despite these challenges, we experienced some happy events and progress towards achieving our mission. We celebrated 10 years of existence and launched our new Strategic Plan 2020-2024. As we embark on the second year of implementing this plan, we are pleased to share our key achievements of 2020.

Frejus Thoto
Several agricultural producers who are beneficiaries of our initiatives recorded an increase of up to 30% in their productivity through the use of water hyacinth compost. Market gardeners were supported in the composting of water hyacinth as well as the application of the compost on their fields. Yield improvements were achieved in key crops such as tomato, chilli pepper, and amaranth. A total of 1,000 market gardeners from the municipality of So-Ava was supported and monitored through 40 cooperatives.

Women basket makers from So-Ava were trained and supported to diversify their products and increase their income. The monitoring of sales showed a 35% increase in their annual turnover, mainly boosted by new sale points installed to facilitate the marketing of their products. This support was particularly useful during 2020 when many producers saw their incomes decrease due to a drop in production caused by disruptions in the input import markets as a result of the pandemic.
In 2020, we expanded our mangrove protection initiative into mangrove zone 1017 through the development of beekeeping activities with local communities. During the year, 37 beekeepers started their beekeeping production cycle in mangrove areas. Unfortunately, the installation of the sanitary cordon due to the COVID-19 health crisis prevented the follow-up of honey harvesting activities planned for May 2020, resulting in the loss of beekeeping production. To avoid such a situation in the future, beekeepers have been further trained and strengthened to harvest honey themselves.

Local communities have also been sensitized on the need to reduce the consumption of wood for energy. To this end, local communities contributed to the construction and adoption of 80 improved stoves. To ensure the sustainability of the adoption of the improved cook stove technology among communities living in mangrove zone 1017, the beneficiary villages were provided with molds so that they could manufacture their own improved cook stoves.
The immediate benefits for the communities have been:

- **The acquisition of new technical knowledge**: two new skills were acquired by local people. First is the ability to produce and extract mangrove honey for sale. This knowledge will enable local people to establish a new source of income as an alternative to selling wood. Secondly, there is the ability to make improved stoves to reduce wood consumption and reduce pressure on the mangroves.

- **Increasing the area covered by mangroves**: by planting more than 1,500 mangrove trees, local people have increased the area covered by mangroves. This will directly contribute to their daily needs for wood energy to the conservation of their resources.

- **The promotion of a local product**: the production of “Mangroves 1017” honey will affirm and promote the local territory as a place for honey production. This will have a positive impact on ecotourism and the local economy in due course.

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**Policy support in decision-making**

Our purpose to support evidence-based and informed policymaking was achieved this year in two ways.

**Deepening the understanding of the evidence-based policymaking landscape at the municipal level.** The success of our activities depends on our understanding of the evidence use landscape at local and central levels. Therefore, we conducted bilateral consultations with policymakers at the local level, and policy dialogues were held in August 2019 and again in August 2020 to deepen our understanding of the complex process of planning and decision-making in the area of food and nutrition security.

These discussions provided an opportunity to take stock of the culture and use of evidence in municipalities. Mayors, deputy mayors, local development and planning officers, local agricultural development agencies, and prefectural representatives participated in the dialogues. Local government technical officers and policymakers are aware of the need to use evidence to inform decisions but do not do so systematically. Furthermore, their understanding of the concept of ‘evidence’ or ‘proof’ is limited to statistics from the National Institute of Statistics and Economic Analysis; they are not very familiar with research results and evaluation findings as sources of evidence, proving the need to build their capacity and support them in the use of evidence.
Institutionalization of the use of evidence by municipalities: good signals are emerging. We expect that institutionalizing the use of evidence in decision-making will take time and will require continued engagement with policymakers. In 2020, some important steps were taken. For example, the municipality of Águégué issued two decrees on the institutionalization of the use of evidence. One stated that decisions and planning processes related to development issues should be based on evidence, and the other designated two focal points to coordinate activities in this area. This is a ‘small victory’ for the use of evidence, as we now have a stronger institutional environment to continue the process in this municipality. We are working on getting more municipalities on board and moving from decrees to action.

→ ACED’s contribution to the management of COVID-19

ACED’s response to the COVID-19 health crisis was articulated in two phases. First, we conducted consultations with experts to guide decision-makers. Second, we launched a study with the Amsterdam Center for World Food Studies on the effects of COVID-19 on food systems.

Quick answers to questions of interest to policymakers. The measures taken to deal with COVID-19 at the international, regional, and national levels, while salutary and sovereign, have had unprecedented social and economic consequences, the magnitude and duration of which are still largely unknown. At the beginning of the pandemic, we submitted questions to experts on how to prevent the health crisis from becoming a food crisis, to alert and guide decision-makers on the consequences that it could have on food. From their answers, it is clear that in the wake of the health crisis, humanity will face an economic, financial and food crisis. If not sufficiently anticipated and proactively managed, the latter will claim more victims in Africa, including Benin, than the pandemic itself. International (UN, FAO, WFP, and IFPRI) and regional (ECOWAS) bodies have warned of the risk that the pandemic will cause a food crisis in the medium term. This shift is mainly due to the weakening of food production and distribution systems, particularly in urban and peri-urban areas, and the decline in household purchasing power due to the global economic slowdown.
Understanding the effects of COVID-19 on food systems. The effects of the COVID-19 crisis on demand for food are multifaceted. The installation of a sanitary cordon in Benin led to an increase in the demand for food products due to panic buying. These purchases were mainly made by middle-class households with savings, leading to a sudden increase in food demand. On the other hand, the sluggishness of economic activities reduced the purchasing power of households, especially the poor, and consequently led to a decrease in the quantity and variety of food products in demand. The most affected were daily workers and those whose economic activities were directly and negatively affected by the crisis, such as people who worked in the transport sector.

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on agri-businesses cut both ways. For example, some businesses that depend on regional and international trade have had difficulty selling their products, while businesses that are positioned in value chains whose products and services are in high demand by households (especially middle-income households) have seen an increase in sales. In both cases, the disease crisis itself and the measures put in place to contain it have impacted agri-food businesses, and further analysis is needed to better assess the impact and identify the most efficient solutions.

Coupled with poverty and food insecurity prevalent in Benin’s urban areas, the COVID-19 pandemic has created a major gap in the availability, accessibility, and diversity of food for poor households. Compared to other poor households, those with urban gardens have mitigated the effects of the pandemic and associated measures on their food security through the availability of fresh food from their gardens. This confirms the relevance of urban agriculture as a useful policy intervention in improving the living conditions of the urban poor.
International recognition for ACED’s work

Two more pieces of good news made us proud at ACED during 2020. Our Director, Fréjus Thoto, won the 2019 Agro Food Broker Award, organized by the Netherlands’ Food and Business Knowledge Platform, and the 2020 Africa Evidence Leadership Award, organized by the Africa Evidence Network. Both recognize our commitment to strengthening the use of evidence for more informed decision-making, particularly in the area of food and nutrition security.

Sharing knowledge at the international level

ACED has been heavily engaged in international conferences during the last half of 2020.

#EVIDENCE2020ONLINE. The Africa Evidence Network organized #EVIDENCE2020ONLINE from 23-25 September. The event aimed to foster collaboration, facilitate dialogue and advance the use of evidence in decision-making in Africa. Some members of ACED participated in the event. Our Director was one of the main speakers. He gave a keynote presentation on 24 September on the need to go beyond policymakers and build the capacity of implementing organizations on the use of evidence.

Final Food & Business Conference. The theme of the Final Food & Business Conference, hosted by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO) and the Food and Business Knowledge Platform on 9-10 December, was: “Making knowledge relevant for food and nutrition.” Our Director made a co-presentation with Wageningen University’s Sietze Vellema on how to mobilize knowledge to improve food and nutrition security. During the same conference, Donald Houessou, ACED’s Director of Operations, presented on “Meal diversification with local foods” with Ben Sonneveld from the Free University of Amsterdam.
Our publications

Scientific publications

- What constrains the expansion of urban agriculture in Benin? (https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/12/14/5774)
- The private sector in knowledge processes and partnerships for food and nutrition security in the global south: A case study from the Dutch Food and Business Applied Research Fund programme (https://www.km4djournal.org/index.php/km4dj/article/view/481)
- Disentangling challenges in mainstreaming smallholder farmers’ perspectives into knowledge co-creation processes: evidence from Benin (https://www.km4djournal.org/index.php/km4dj/article/view/486)

Blogs

- What if we were wrong about whose capacities to build for evidence use? (https://www.aced-benin.org/en/what-if-we-were-wrong-about-whose-capacities-to-build-for-evidence-use/)
10-year anniversary and new Strategic Plan 2020-2024

We are delighted to announce that ACED celebrated its 10th anniversary in 2020. Since ACED’s creation, our mission has remained unchanged: to improve food and nutrition security in Benin. We are also working to develop local solutions that can help address the global challenges of climate change, natural resource degradation, urban poverty, and youth unemployment.

Together with the communication agency WRENmedia, we produced a report that summarizes the impact of ACED’s interventions in Benin over the past 10 years.

The year also marked the end of our first strategic plan, and we launched our new Strategic Plan 2020-2024. Over the next five years, our work will be organized around three pillars:
We thank our partners for their continued trust and support. Here are some of the partners we worked with in 2020.

#ImpactACED2020

Recherche - Politiques - Action

Vision

A world where all communities live a decent life in a sustainable environment.

Mission

To strengthen communities with sustainable solutions to poverty and hunger in a healthy environment.