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“Reconcile land system changes
with planetary health”

Transforming agrifood systems around protected areas in Togo: challenges for population health and ecosystem conservation

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Abstract

Protected areas (PAs) in Togo cover 14% of the national territory and are home to abundant biodiversity and valuable resources such as wood, wildlife, water, fodder, medicinal plants, and fertile land. These resources are highly sought after by local populations, primarily farmers, who practice extensive agriculture using uncertified seeds, chemical fertilisers, and unapproved pesticides. This approach results in low yields and has harmful effects on both human health and the PAs' ecosystems.

Faced with low agricultural productivity, farmers often seek new land and additional sources of income. This drives encroachment into PAs for fertile farmland, hunting wildlife, and cutting wood for direct sale or conversion into charcoal. These activities contribute to resource degradation and biodiversity loss within the protected areas.

In the 1990s, weakened state control over PAs led to their widespread occupation by surrounding communities, highlighting the challenges and unsustainability of PA-community coexistence.

Today, the primary challenge for the State and Togolese Civil Society Organisations in the landscapes of these PAs is to promote sustainable agricultural systems that protect human health while preserving PA resources and the environment. Several initiatives have been launched to achieve this goal: i) Raising awareness about the negative impacts of current agricultural practices on both human health and PAs; ii) Promoting agroforestry to provide farmers with wood, fruits, or organic matter to enrich their soils; iii) Implementing field school approaches to disseminate sustainable agricultural techniques, such as using organic inputs, natural or approved pesticides, and creating soil and water conservation structures; iv) Supporting the processing of agricultural and non-timber forest products (NTFPs) to generate added value and v) Encouraging small-scale livestock farming to meet the demand for meat products.

Although still modest, these initiatives are starting to yield tangible results, notably a growing awareness of the harmful effects of chemical pesticides and the advantages of using organic inputs. There is now a heightened interest from the Togolese government, civil society organisations, and donors to provide greater support for this transition, aiming to establish sustainable agricultural systems that safeguard both public health and the environment.

Keywords: Agrifood systems, ecosystem conservation, population health, protected areas