

TERRAVIVA EUROPE

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BENIN: COTTON AT THE HEART DESERTIFICATION

by Michée Boko

COTONOU (IPS) - Cotton production forms a key part of the Beninese economy. However, Armande Zanou-Aivodji -- point person for desertification in the Ministry of the Environment -- says this production is also leading to soil degradation in the West African country. IPS talked to her about this concern, and the dangers posed by desertification in general.

IPS: Is Benin experiencing problems with desertification?

Armande Zanou-Aivodji (AZ): In the context of the convention (the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification) which defines desertification as, amongst others, the degradation of soil, we can say that Benin is already in the throes of desertification...The regions of the north are more affected than those of the south, notably the areas of Borgou and Atacora -- especially places like Ouaké, Karimama and Kalalé. Nonetheless, there are areas in the south where desertification is equally advanced, such as Djidja (and) Savalou.

IPS: What percentage of Beninese territory is affected by desertification?

AZ: It's estimated that more than 50 percent of Beninese territory is affected by desertification.

IPS: Is agriculture still possible in the affected regions? Are there still small-scale farmers who work these lands?

AZ: Yes, there are still small-scale farmers who continue to carry out agricultural activities in these areas, but this (land degradation) is affecting harvests...Harvests are not what they were 20 years ago.

IPS: Is desertification in Benin already at a worrying stage?

AZ: Compared to Sahelian countries such as Burkina (Faso), Chad and others, the situation in Benin is not worrying. But, if we do not take the necessary steps...Benin could well find itself in the situation of Sahelian countries like Burkina Faso, because the plant cover in northern Benin has already become very eroded by migration and the climate hazards that we are experiencing today.

IPS: In how many years, more or less, will a critical point be reached if nothing is done?

AZ: This critical threshold will be reached 15 or 20 years from now in terms of what we're experiencing in northern Benin. With steep population increases, climate hazards and inappropriate traditional practices, we have reason to fear that the phenomenon (land degradation) will worsen in the years to come...What is aggravating the situation is cotton farming. Cotton degrades the soil.

IPS: But in the north of Benin, they only grow cotton...

AZ: They only grow cotton!

IPS: How does cotton farming lead to soil degradation?

AZ: It has to do with the pesticides...used to protect the cotton, which are destroying the soil nutrients. Another cause of desertification (relates to how) farmers say that the cultivation of cotton requires sun. They thus destroy trees in the vicinity of their fields to allow cotton to benefit from the rays of sun, and develop well.

IPS: Are you saying that, with time, the lands will not yield anything at all?

AZ: The farmers themselves know this already. When questioned, they say that the soils are no longer giving good harvests. They are therefore obliged to over-dose with chemical products to continue to have good yields...(and) they degrade the soil more and more. And, they are conscious of this. They do comparisons between themselves and say that ten years ago, 20 years ago, it was not like this. Asked why they continue, then, they answer that they do not have a choice. They live off cotton...

IPS: Should cotton farming be banned?

AZ: We cannot forbid them to grow cotton, given that cotton is important for the economy of Benin. We can only give them advice on preserving the environment and help them to follow the advice...

IPS: If one should ban crops that degrade the soil, like cotton, are there others that can be used as substitutes?

AZ: Certainly, there are crops that can be substituted, which colleagues from the Ministry of Agriculture are already showing them (farmers) -- such as cashew nuts, shea trees etc. I have seen in Burkina Faso that gum arabic brings in as much (earnings) as cotton. The Burkinabé are conscious of this and they are now looking for ways and means of gradually shifting away from cotton farming, and perhaps abandoning it.

IPS: Can it be said that there is awareness at all levels that the fight against desertification must be won?

AZ: Yes...The communities that are experiencing the effects of the desertification are conscious of this...(and) are working in collaboration with state structures. The government is also aware of this, since the attention of President Boni Yayi was drawn to the trend. He has said that there is little time to preserve the environment...He knows that difficult actions must be carried out to prevent desertification.