A rubber agroforestry programme characterised by intercropping food crops is rekindling hope, raising incomes, improving livelihoods and helping smallholder farmers in Nigeria to turn a new page.
The World Agroforestry Centre (ICRAF) is a CGIAR Consortium Research Centre. ICRAF’s headquarters are in Nairobi, Kenya, with five regional offices located in Cameroon, India, Indonesia, Kenya and Peru.

The Centre’s vision is a rural transformation in the developing world as smallholder households strategically increase their use of trees in agricultural landscapes to improve their food security, nutrition, income, health, shelter, social cohesion, energy resources and environmental sustainability.

The Centre’s mission is to generate science-based knowledge about the diverse roles that trees play in agricultural landscapes, and to use its research to advance policies and practices, and their implementation, that benefit the poor and the environment.

The World Agroforestry Centre is guided by the broad development challenges pursued by the CGIAR. These include poverty alleviation that entails enhanced food security and health, improved productivity with lower environmental and social costs, and resilience in the face of climate change and other external shocks.

We receive our funding from about 50 different investors; including governments, private foundations, international organizations and regional development banks. Our work is conducted with partners from a range of scientific and development institutions.
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Nigeria is an up-and-coming country with huge natural and human resources. Interestingly too, the people are receptive to new ideas and are ready to adopt new agricultural techniques. We are proud to bring hope, contribute to food security and good health, and to help improve on the income of smallholder farmers.

In the past, the long gestation period of rubber which delayed return on investment did not encourage many farmers to take on rubber cultivation. Sustainability of the farms and households was a challenge, an ordeal many could not bear. This discouraged many farmers from planting rubber coupled with the fall in prices. Consequently, Nigeria’s rubber production had declined by more than 50%. These trends motivated the World Agroforestry Centre (ICRAF) and partner Rubber Research Institute of Nigeria (RRIN); to develop a rubber-based agroforestry system that could sustain itself and the farmers especially during the very long gestation period. In this system, farmers have a wide variety of options to intercrop within the inter-rolls ranging from vegetables, spices, roots and tubers (cassava, yam and cocoyam), plantain and with the possibility of planting high value indigenous fruit trees around the periphery of their farms. The high value or economic trees provide food for the households; enable farmers to generate more income and would also serve as wind break for the young rubber trees.
More importantly, in the past, many rubber farmers in Nigeria were not exposed to vegetative multiplication techniques and budding of rubber was reserved for very skilled technicians in the Rubber Research Institute and some big rubber estates. With the coming of the project, things have changed and we are happy with the level of adoptability of our technology. Farmers are using the knowledge acquired to propagate other tree species of their choice and integrate in their farms or sell for income. It is amazing to see local women and youth doing budding.

Technology transfer has created employment opportunities and sources of income for the local people. Some young people are making a living from budding as rubber nurseries are sprouting in many communities. More importantly, farmers can now buy budded stumps at affordable prices and more rubber farms are also being established.

For a country like Nigeria that has lost most of its natural forest, this is good news. Rubber trees will help fix some of the environmental problems, serve as timber for furniture/firewood after their economic life. The project successfully introduced mini livestock (rabbit, snail and apiary) to help provide alternative sources of income and protein to the household.

We are happy to know that the successes registered by the project have attracted more farmers even beyond the project sites.

Zac Tchoundjeu
Regional Coordinator
1. Introduction

About rubber agroforestry

Rubber agroforestry system is the description of intercropping rubber with a diversity of arable crops, (mini)livestock and high value indigenous fruit and medicinal plants on the same piece of land in a spatial arrangement that permits optimal growth/performance of the different components of the system within the immature phase of rubber (before 6 years). This land-use pattern optimizes the use of resources, while increasing the overall value of the system. For example, during the immature phase of rubber, farmers start deriving food and income from arable crops while awaiting the continuous and sustained income that the combination of carefully selected perennial trees (rubber, high value indigenous fruit and medicinal) will provide when they come to maturity. These elements render Rubber Agroforestry System, robust, resilient, socially (food and nutritional security) and economically attractive (employment opportunities and income generation) and environmentally friendly (safeguard of biodiversity, carbon sinks) acceptable to farmers.

About 70% of Nigerian natural rubber comes from smallholders. As a result of the long immature phase to tapping of rubber, coupled with price swings at the global level, smallholder abandoned their rubber plantations while others cut down the trees and cultivated other crops that could yield expected returns for family sustenance. Rubber Agroforestry System therefore, appears to be the breakthrough technology for smallholder rubber farmers responding to their much desired early and diverse returns from their investments before rubber starts yielding latex.

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2. **Model rubber agroforestry farms sustaining farmers**

Many farmers have described the rubber agroforestry system as “self-sustaining” because of its design of double rolls of rubber with an avenue of 8m which makes 70% of the land available for intercrop. These intercrops which are mainly arable provide sources of food and income during the immature stage of rubber (before the rubber canopy covers after 7 years of cultivation). The choice of crops intercropped in the avenue is determined by a number of factors including market forces, geography, cultural background and even the experience of the farmer.

The model farm reduces susceptibility to market crashes. “The system of intercropping is a very good idea because if one crop does not do well you will harvest the other and balance up” says John K. David of Eruere Cooperative Society Edo state.

“Without this new technique which makes it possible to make some money while the rubber is still young, I am not sure I would have been able to maintain the farm…I sell cassava and use the money to buy inputs for the rubber and cassava also serves as shade at the early growing phase of the rubber”.

N.A. Disu of Ogun state intercrops water melon within the avenues. Disu believes “water melon gives me more money ... if you plant 1ha and maintain it well you can make up to NGN350, 000 – 400,000 as net profit…I make more than NGN600, 000 (about USD3,797) each year from water melon alone”. In 2013 he planted maize and harvested 3.5 tons. Disu further said he preferred to plant rotational crops that matures within 3 months than cassava which will mature in 9 months.
The most common intercrops are cassava, plantain, maize and vegetables. With cassava being the staple food in many localities in southern Nigeria, many farmers are going for it because of the ready market for its products.

Adewale Onabekun has 2ha of rubber model farm. He intercrops plantain and cassava. “After every three weeks, I sell at least 4 dozens of plantain…I sell a dozen for about NGN4000 ($25)”. Adewale generated about NGN200,000 (about USD 1,265) last year from cassava. This system is wonderful because within the same farm I plant plantain, cassava and do not need extra effort to weed the rubber farm…while working the cassava, we are maintaining the rubber at the same time. Adewale has eight children with two of them in university. Thanks to the money from the intercropping, I was able to take care of my children’s education with ease”.

Sunday Ajayi also has 2ha model farm developed with the assistance from the project. He intercrops plantain and cassava which is mainly for home consumption while the excess is sold. “I use the money to buy inputs for my rubber” says Ajayi.
3. Acquiring life changing skills

With the introduction of the rubber based agroforestry techniques under the CFC sponsored project in Nigeria, there is a growing interest in rubber and high value fruit and medicinal trees in the traditional and non-traditional rubber growing regions of Nigeria and even beyond. Through the rubber agroforestry project, many farmers have learned new cultivation and management techniques leading to a growing number of people planting improved materials of rubber, and fruit and medicinal trees within and beyond the project sites. The project organized several trainings for farmers and interestingly, some participants came from states that were not involved in the project.

In the past, vegetative propagation techniques were not at the reach of the local farmers. With the coming of the project, things have changed. Many lead farmers have been trained on the various improvement techniques and they too have successfully trained other farmers. Thanks to the project, many farmers have been trained on spacing technique, crop mixture, appropriate fertiliser use, pesticide handling, tree domestication and improvement and tapping techniques. They have equally received training on mini livestock rearing. With all these, many farmers are writing new chapters in their lives.

Kicking-out poverty

Solomon Ebhodaghe, a farmer in Edo State Nigeria says he is using early fruit materials of high value indigenous trees to change his family’s fortunes for good. He was one of the beneficiaries of the training on participatory tree domestication organised in 2010. After the training, Solomon was able to build his own propagators and raise his own plants. “I appreciate the technology (vegetative propagation) especially marcotting and rooting of leafy cuttings. I am using the technology to propagate bush mango (Irvingia wombulu), and star apple (Chrysophyllum albida).” Solomon has integrated 41 grafted
Irvingia wombulu trees, 30 leafy cuttings of Dennettia tripetala and 30 marcotts of Chrysophyllum albidum in his farm and all are doing great. He has been motivated by the success and intends to extend his farm and plant to at least 1000 trees before the end of 2014. “There is a high demand for star apple” he says. He emphasized that star apple fruits when taken to market, sells faster than any other fruit in his locality. “I was able to sell fruits for up to N30, 000 (about USD 187) from one tree alone”. Another farmer, Dominic Enakifo says after a training held in 2011 on participatory tree domestication of indigenous trees, he has been able to increase production and consequently the sale of plants in his nursery. Dominic says he has increased the production of planting materials from 2,500 to 12,000.

Musiliu Oyeku of Ogun state now produces good quality honey and he has plans to specialise in bee farming. Oyeku and his colleagues are in the process of creating a cooperative and they look forward to processing and labelling their honey to fetch better prices in the local communities and also beyond local markets.

Adding value

In 2013, the project sponsored an exchange visit of a selected a number of farmers from all five states to study best practices on rubber production in India. While in India these farmers had the opportunity to see how their peers are adding value and quality through the use of lohashilpi sheeting machines. These people upon their return are sensitising their peers. “With the machine, we will add value and improve the quality of our rubber... and we look forward to making more money... and will be able to process rubber for farmers from neighbouring villages... more importantly, we will be able to influence the market price” says Peter Irorere, president of the multipurpose cooperative society of the Iguoriakhi farm settlement in Edo state. Peter says they sell better than others because they sell as a group. “We always sell to the highest bidder”.

The cooperative has hired the services of a sales manager and they collectively produce between 20-35 tons of rubber each month. With the new machine, the cooperative will be able to produce up to 1500 sheets per hour. Mbakare Samson Willie of Akwa Ibom was one of the farmers who travelled to India. Upon his return, he has rallied his peers to create a cooperative and they too are looking forward to receiving the lohashilpi machine.
4. Rubber Agroforestry Nurseries

Rubber agroforestry nurseries are sprouting in almost every community where the project works. And with the people’s high business spirit, they are making the best of the newly acquired technology to improve on their income. After a series of trainings organised by the project, things have changed.

Farmers have acquired skills on nursery establishment, management and budding of rubber stumps with high yielding clones. With this technology transfer in budding of rubber, farmers’ skill has been enhanced to perform ‘surgery’ on rubber seedlings (rootstock) with a high rate of success.

Empowering women and youth

Technology transfer is bringing good tidings to many farmers in Nigeria. It is creating new employment opportunities and helping some young people including women to open a new chapter in their lives.

Adetola Tonyn, is a young Nigerian woman, who does budding of rubber as an alternative source of income. Adetola and four others resident in the Ibiade Farm Settlement in Ogun state, were trained in 2013 by a farmer who himself was trained by the project. These women are regularly hired by rubber nursery owners in their community. Adetola says after the training, they are hired regularly by owners of rubber nurseries. “On a good day, I can bud upto 500 stumps’” she admits. The owner of the nursery where we met Adetola and her colleagues endorsed the information adding that “the success rate is very high”. Adewale Onabekun says he pays NGN10 (about USD 0.06) for each budded rubber stump”. 
In Nigeria, where women in the rural areas have fewer options of income generation, budding of rubber has positively imparted the life of Adetola and her colleagues by providing them with an opportunity for a complementary source of income. Rubber seedling undergoes improvement through vegetative propagation (budding) using a superior clone that is disease resistant and yields more latex. The project has introduced both Nigerian (NIG 800 series) and exotic clones (GT1, RRIM 600 and RRIM 624) which are highly adapted to the environment. The improvement process of budding could be likened to a surgical operation that must be performed by skilful hands.

The transfer of technology is not only facilitating the establishment of new rubber plantations, but also creating more jobs especially amongst women and youth. Some farmers have created their own rubber nurseries from where they sell budded plants.

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Lucrative nursery business

Adewale Onabekun was one of the beneficiaries of the training on nursery establishment, management and budding organised by the project in Benin City. “Upon my return, I decided to train six people” says Adewale. Blessing and her colleagues were trained by Adewale and he hires them to bud rubber stumps in his nursery. He has established his nursery at the entrance of the settlement close to a borehole to facilitate the watering of his plants.

“I simply do the supervision to make sure they do not mix up the different clones”. Adewale says there are some farmers who have particular interests in certain clones. “When people come to buy rubber stumps, I should be able to show them where the different clones are. I label the different clones for easy identification”.

In 2013, Adewale successfully raised 25,000 budded plants. “I planted 5,000 budded rubber stumps in my farm and sold the rest. The income realised was about NGN 2 million (about USD 12,300)”. There is a very high demand for improved rubber planting material and the success of the previous year has motivated Adewale. “This year (2014), I have raised over 40,000 plants”, I intend to generate over USD 24,000 from sales of planting materials from my nursery alone.

The main buyers are individuals who come from far and near. “Some customers have started calling me asking for plants...they have already placed an order for 4,000 plants”. He plans to drop the price of plants to attract more rubber farmers. Many farmers across Nigeria are establishing rubber nurseries and they are generating good money out of it. Adewale believes the rubber nursery business holds great prospects and he is already preparing two of his children to take over when they graduate from University.

Adewale Onabekun

« This year (2014), I have raised over 40,000 plants, I intend to generate over USD 24,000 from sales of planting materials from my nursery alone »
The introduction of mini livestock (rabbit, snail and bee keeping) has added both sources of income and nutrition to the lives of the rural people. Gabriel Ogwu, a Nigerian farmer based in Okeze village, Edo State who did not have previous knowledge of rearing of rabbits is currently raising rabbits and these animals are doing excellently well. In 2013, after receiving training on mini livestock handling, nursery and plantation management at RRIN Iyanomo he was offered a rabbit hutch and three rabbits; one male and two female as assistance from the project. Gabriel like the other beneficiaries decided to keep the hutch in his homestead to ease the monitoring, feeding, and security of his animals. During a recent visit, we observed that the rabbits had littered and he constructed another hutch to accommodate the increasing number of rabbits. Gabriel now has 22 rabbits and it will translate into more income for him. He was excited because his source of income has been diversified. He now generates income from both his rubber-based intercropping system and from the rearing of rabbits. “I have already started selling to other farmers and I have also eaten a few with my family” says Gabriel. To make sure the animals do not suffer in case he travels, he has taught his wife and children how to care for the rabbits.

Meanwhile, Richard Okoh an enthusiastic farmer in Mbiri Farm Settlement in Delta State, has successfully combined rabbit, snail and bee keeping. In April 2013, he received a two weeks training on mini livestock handling, nursery and plantation management at RRIN Iyanomo, Benin City affording him a very good knowledge of the different aspects of snail rearing. Due to the growing population of the rabbits, Richard has built more hutches. “The rabbit business holds great prospect that is why I am building more hutches to accommodate the growing population” says Richard. “Last month we ate some as well”. A few months ago, Richard was able to support another farmer with a female rabbit when his own died.
Richard likes the African giant snail breed that was given to him by the project. “Snails are very expensive here…just a few can fetch me a lot of money…and there are ready buyers”. Richard eats some with his family on very special occasions. “Last Christmas we harvested about 40 which I ate with my children who were spending the holiday with me”. Richard plans to increase his snail pen so as to get a reasonable quantity that could bring big customers from the neighbouring city, Asaba. “We have a cooperative and we are encouraging more members to rare snails...if we produce more, we can get even better prices” says Richard.

Regarding honey, production is still low but there are a few farmers, especially those with mature rubber farms, who are already making good money. Francis Eromosele, is a bee farmer in Iguoriakhi Farm Settlement, Edo State. “In 2012, I harvested 20 litres of honey and each litre was sold at NGN1200 (about USD 7.3). Another farmer in the same locality, Peter Irorere says he uses some of his honey as home remedy for the treatment of cough.

Besides the medicinal uses, the socio-cultural value of honey is making the business lucrative in certain parts of Nigeria. Musiliu Oyeku, of Ogun state says buyers come looking for him even in the middle of the night to buy honey either for marriage, child naming ceremony, inaugurating a new house or when an apprentice is graduating. It is believed that life after will be as sweet as the honey. Due to the success registered so far, Oyeku has been motivated to add five more hives to the one he received freely from the project. He is expecting to get over 50 litres in his next harvest. In the coming years, Oyeku plans to have at least a hundred hives. “I want to specialise in bee farming”. He has trained 16 other farmers who are all practising bee farming. Oyeku and his colleagues are in the process of creating a cooperative on honey. “In the future we intend to have a processing machine and to label our honey to fetch better prices in local and international market” says Oyeku.

Richard Okoh

« Snails are very expensive here... just a few can fetch me a lot of money... and there are ready buyers »
6. Planting high value indigenous fruit trees

Indigenous fruit trees and agroforestry tree products or non-timber forest products contribute to food security, nutrition, medicine, income to the life of the people and also provide environmental services. In Nigeria, these trees are currently exploited in their natural stand.

The most commonly planted trees include Irvingjia gabonensis/wombulus or bush mango (commonly used for cooking of soup), Garcina kola or bitter cola, Dacryodes edulis or Africa black pear (safou), locally referred to as bush pear, Chrysophyllum albidum or white star apple and a variety of spices and medicinal plants.

With the relatively high demand for their fruits in local, regional and even international markets, a decline in the number and products of these fruit trees could pose threats not only to food security but also to wildlife environment, health and genetic conservation. Farmers have been encouraged to successfully integrate these high value indigenous fruit trees and medicinal plants in their rubber-based farming systems. Currently, farmers in Nigeria are involved in the planting of fruit trees and they hope to make good money in the near future.
“We have trained farmers on vegetative multiplication techniques and we encourage them to plant early fruiting and true-to-type materials” say Chioma Okwu, ICRAF Nigeria team leader.

Charles Ojianwuna of Egbudu-Akah in Delta state has planted 25 trees of bush mango around his 5 ha farm and has more in his nursery. “Besides using it in cooking soup at home, I also generate lots of income from it… I have one matured tree in another farm and last year I was able to sell the fruits for up to NGN11, 500 (about USD 73)...with the coming of the project I have planted more”. There are very many farmers like Ojianwuna who have planted these high value or economic trees in their farms across the different states of Nigeria. It is also important to know that Ojianwuna is not planting wild mango only for the money. “I am planting them because they will serve as wind break for the rubber”.

While in Edo state, Stephen Omoaghe says he opted for these high value trees, especially bush mango because unlike the other cash crop trees, they are better protected and thieves do not disturb them. “With bush mango I am sure to generate money from it every year...it is consumed locally and there is always a ready market for it” says Omoaghe. He has over 40 of this fruit tree within the periphery of his young rubber farm.

“With bush mango I am sure to generate money from it every year...it is consumed locally and there is always a ready market for it” says Omoaghe. He has over 40 of this fruit tree within the periphery of his young rubber farm.

Umana Okoko of Akwa Ibom state says he has many high value trees around his farm, mostly wild mango, black pear and spices. “The value of these plants is very high in this community. Most of the people in my community eat bush mango (Ogbono) soup and so there is a ready market”. Umana has planted several dozens of these high value trees and he estimates that there are more than 50 bush mango trees in his farm.

Umana Okoko
« The value of these plants is very high in this community. Most of the people in my community eat bush mango (Ogbono) soup and so there is a ready market »
7. The spill over

Ben Egbune Okolie and James Ufia Umoh are two Nigerian farmers who may never have met each other but have similar stories relating to rubber-based agroforestry system. Ben resides in his native village Egbudu-Akah in Delta State, while James is in Ntaikut-Use in Akwa Ibom state. Both men started cultivating rubber recently after being attracted by the transformation in the lives of their relatives and neighbours working with the CFC funded Rubber project, ‘Promoting Development of Economically viable Rubber Smallholdings in West Africa’ being executed in Nigeria by the Rubber Research Institute of Nigeria (RRIN) in collaboration World Agroforestry Centre (ICRAF).

“I saw how the new technique of rubber agroforestry, characterised by intercropping rubber and food crops was turning things around for my uncle and I developed interest” says Ben. He returned home a few years ago when he could not find a white-collar job in the city after graduating with a degree in Accountancy. “I have not sought any other job since then, because I do not think none can pay me as much as I am earning from my farm” he says.

In 2013, Ben bought budded rubber from a local dealer and with the help of his uncle, he was able to establish a nine hectare (9ha) rubber plantation. He intercropped the rubber with plantain, a technique introduced by the project. Today his farm stands out tall in his community, and the leaders are full of praise for him and are using him as a role model. Ben says he is encouraging many young people to come back home and invest in agriculture. Presently, he has opened up 16ha of land for rubber agroforestry farm and has also established a rubber nursery with 5000 rootstocks with the help of his uncle, this will enable him get planting materials with ease for his farm.

Ben Egbune Okolie

« I saw how the new technique of rubber agroforestry, characterised by intercropping rubber and food crops was turning things around for my uncle and I developed interest »
“I do not know how to carryout budding, but the scientists from RRIN have promised to train me and my staff to enable me produce my own improved rubber clones to expand my farm”.

Last planting season, he intercropped rubber with plantain and maize. “Most of the money we generated from the sale of maize was reinvested into the farm”. In the next few months, Ben will be a big supplier of plantain from his rubber agroforestry farm. “I am really myself now…”

The story of James Ufia Umoh is similar to that of Ben. After being attracted by what he saw happening to his friends on the project, he decided to cultivate rubber. In 2011 he bought budded rubber stumps from a local dealer and established a 2ha rubber, cassava, plantain, water melon and vegetables agroforestry farm with the assistance of his friend collaborating with CFC-sponsored rubber agroforestry project. James was able to generate substantial income from the sale of cassava, plantain, water melon and vegetables from his farm. “I reinvested most of the money into the rubber agroforestry farm”. This year James plans to learn rubber budding techniques and to increase the size of his farm. After seeing the benefits, James has brought in three other of his family members to join the local cooperative.

The story of Ben and James are similar to many other farmers across Nigeria who now plant rubber after seeing the positive impacts of the rubber agroforestry project.
8. Fixing the environment with rubber

Nigeria has lost most of its natural forests and with the ever growing population and demand for food, timber and other raw materials, there is fear that more forest could be destroyed. The planting of rubber therefore holds great prospects in fixing some of the environmental problems. Timothy Esekhaide, scientist at the Rubber Research Institute of Nigeria (RRIN) believes by the time the rubber comes into tapping, it forms a climax vegetation, helping to remove the excess carbon and mitigating climate change. “If we have more rubber plantations it will help to preserve our forest because rubber can be used as furniture. Instead of going to cut down the iroko and mahogany trees, we can use rubber”. With the new clones being introduced by RRIN, farmers could cut after twenty or twenty-five years, use the wood for furniture and then replant.

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