

Land Reclamation of Abandoned Artisanal Mined out sites in Nongowa Chiefdom Kenema District, Sierra Leone

Project No: SLE/SGP/OP7/Y3/STAR/LD/1/11/2022/32

Grantee: Youth Emergency Auxiliary Service Sierra Leone (YEAS-SL)

Location: Nongowa Chiefdom, Kenema District

SGP Contribution: \$20,000 USD

Cash Co-Financing: \$5,000 USD

In-Kind Co-Financing: \$5,084.7 USD

Project Duration: 12 months

Number of people served: 100 direct, 4,000+ indirect

Focal area: Community-based conservation of threatened ecosystems & species/ Land degradation/sustainable Land & Forest Management.

BACKGROUND

In recent years, the adverse environmental impacts of unregulated artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) have intensified pressures on rural communities across Sierra Leone. In Nongowa chiefdom, Kenema districts, this destructive activity has led to widespread environmental degradation of pristine forests and fertile farmlands through devastated uncontrolled excavation, while streams and rivers have become severely polluted with sediment, mine tailings, and hazardous chemicals such as mercury and arsenic. These toxic substances, used in rudimentary gold refining processes have jeopardized aquatic biodiversity and posed serious health risks to miners and nearby communities.

The consequences of artisanal mining extend far beyond environmental pollution. With little to no regulation, illegal mining operations have encroached upon wetlands, protected ecosystems, towns, and villages. Entire landscapes have been transformed, resulting in the destruction of roads, bridges, homes, and economically significant cash crops. As a result, the potential for alternative, sustainable livelihoods particularly agriculture has diminished. This unchecked degradation has increased food insecurity, contributed to biodiversity loss, and threatened the socio-economic resilience of local populations. If left unaddressed, these pressures risk displacing entire communities, creating environmental refugees and intensifying land related conflicts.

Recognizing the urgent need for sustainable land restoration, **Youth Emergency Auxiliary Service Sierra Leone (YEAS-SL)** a CBO, in collaboration with community stakeholders, identified the critical need for intervention. This led to the development of a community project that received funding support from the Global Environment Facility (GEF) Small Grants Programme (SGP). With GEF SGP support of USD 20,000, the project introduced integrated agroforestry and land reclamation strategies to rehabilitate degraded lands and restore ecosystem services in Nongowa and its surrounding communities.

Through practical, community focused techniques including reforestation, soil stabilization, and sustainable farming practices the project has successfully reclaimed mined out areas, revived forest cover, and restored agricultural productivity. It specifically targeted key drivers of land degradation such as illegal mining, deforestation, overgrazing, and poor wetland management.

One of the most impactful outcomes of the project has been its ability to engage and empower local youth. More than 50 young people were trained in land rehabilitation and agroforestry techniques. These trained youths have since organized themselves into a registered community-based organization, called **Nyanhun Buiima Youths Development Association**, under the Kenema District Council. Their mission is to lead ongoing land restoration efforts and mediate conflicts related to land scarcity.

Today, the project stands as a model for community resilience and environmental stewardship directly benefiting 500 people and 4,000+ indirect beneficiaries. It has enhanced biodiversity conservation, improved access to food and water, and increased agricultural productivity through the revival of pasturelands and the rehabilitation of degraded farming zones. By integrating sustainable land use practices with inclusive community mobilization, the GEF SGP-supported initiative in Nongowa showcases how grassroots action can drive long-term environmental and socio-economic transformation in some of the most vulnerable communities.



A group of youths leading their own reclamation initiative on the degraded community land

PROJECT OBJECTIVES AND KEY ACTIVITIES

The main objective of the project was to promote environmental management in the artisanal sector and to foster sustainable livelihood and well-being of artisanal mining communities in Kenema District. Specifically, the following achievements were made during the 12 months implementation period

- Increased food and economic security for 500 beneficiaries through the conversion of degraded lands into agricultural land to accommodate mixed farming, agro forestry and fish farming for improved living standards of more than five vulnerable communities in Nongowa chiefdoms in Kenema District.
- Rehabilitated and conserved wetlands in targeted communities by reclaiming over 50 hectares of degraded lands resulting from unregulated artisanal mining.
- Strengthened the human capacity of at least 4,000+ people in 5 target communities by increasing their knowledge on the effects of artisanal or small-scale mining and environmental management through the implementation of climate smart agro ecological strategies that include rangelands management, organic farming, polycultures, seed banks for indigenous crops and reduced tillage to increase crop yields.
- Addressed land degradation through gully reclamation, afforestation, reforestation and woodlots development within the targeted communities.
- Promoted environmental policy dialogues and information dissemination through facilitating climate change Participatory workshops and the establishment of Natural Resources

Management Leadership Forums that will facilitate the collection and sharing of information within the landscape.

These were achieved within the 12 months and the communities are now aware and have seen the project's significance as well as the causes and effects of artisanal mining and the negative impact of climate change on agriculture and food insecurity.

The project has enhanced the capacities of 100 local farmers, miners and youths from 5 communities and reclaimed 50 hectares of degraded lands within Nongowa Chiefdom in Kenema District.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

The establishment of **Community Project Management Committees (CPMC)** has been instrumental in enhancing environmental stewardship and reducing land degradation in the target communities. The governance structure has empowered residents to take ownership of land restoration activities, leading to tangible improvements in both environmental conditions and community safety. One of the most significant outcomes of the project has been the **restoration of over 50 acres** of severely degraded land, which had remained barren and unproductive for more than 30 years. Today, the once abandoned lands have been rehabilitated and are now suitable for agriculture, contributing directly to local food security and sustainable livelihoods.

Beyond agricultural recovery, the project has also helped improve community safety. Prior to the reclamation efforts, the presence of overgrown and degraded areas posed serious threats, including increased encounters with dangerous wildlife. During restoration activities, community members encountered and neutralized multiple highly venomous snakes, including three large vipers, which had previously posed life-threatening risks to women and children fetching water. These threats also extended to domestic animals, many of which had been killed in past encounters. With reclaimed lands now under productive use, these hazards have been significantly reduced. In addition, women in the community have embraced **backyard gardening**, growing vegetables and other crops that contribute to household food supplies. This shift has improved nutrition and reduced women's economic dependency on men thus promoting greater gender equity and household resilience.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACT

The project has delivered significant economic benefits to local communities, particularly women and youth, by promoting sustainable forest management and climate-smart agricultural practices. Through hands on training in agroecology and climate resilient farming, over 100 women from beneficiary households have gained vital skills that have transformed subsistence farming into a viable source of income. Prior to the project, many of these women had little or no income. Today, each participating woman earns an average of \$42.30 USD per month, effectively doubling their previous household income levels. This shift has had a ripple effect throughout the community and women are now able to contribute meaningfully to household expenses, including paying school fees for their children and affording basic home utilities.

In addition, the project has created direct employment opportunities for more than 50 young women, who now generate at least \$50 USD per month through the sale of produce from backyard gardens established during the project. These micro enterprises, built around sustainable agriculture, have become a reliable source of revenue and economic resilience for vulnerable families. As a result of increased household income and greater financial stability, there has been a measurable improvement in community wellbeing. One of the most remarkable outcomes is the surge in school enrolment with over 500 children now attending school, marking a 60% increase compared to the previous year. Families are also better able to access healthcare and other essential services. This economic transformation underscores the power of integrating environmental restoration with inclusive livelihood support. The project has enhanced biodiversity and restored degraded lands, and empowered women and youth with sustainable income streams, laying the foundation for long term socioeconomic and ecological resilience.

POLICY IMPACT

The Community Project Management Committee has positively influenced local bylaws by engaging the village headmen in constructive dialogue on sustainable land managements, every community now has an effective land management bylaws. Bylaws and penalties (fines of \$40) are instituted for any land degradation activities. Generally, no one is now allowed to do random artisanal mining. In addition, sustainable land management initiative have been adopted where the community youths have established and legally registered their own CBO that is now responsible for local land management projects.

YOUTH ENGAGEMENT AND PARTICIPATION

The project was initiated and managed by a small group of youths in Nongowa chiefdom Kenema district. Upon hearing information about the call for proposal from GEF Small Grants Programme, the youth leader organized a visit to the communities where they conducted community dialogue and informed the communities about the SGP funding opportunity . The community leaders prioritized land degradation among several problems that were identified in the five communities in Nongowa chiefdom, Kenema district. The youth organization prepared and submitted the proposal to GEF Small Grants Programme, which was approved by the National Steering. The planning and implementation were solely led by the youths. The youths from the five communities were fully involved during the implementation.



GENDER MAINSTREAMING

During the project planning phase, focus group discussions were held with the women groups to identify impacts of the project on their members. These women are most vulnerable in terms of

climate change impact and environmental hazards. This project then designed a social and management framework to mitigate the impact on women leading to activities that support them with regular income and some form of independence which has contributed to self-confidence.

REPLICATION AND UP SCALING

The formation of the Community Project Management Committee and the establishment of the CBO by the community youths have been a successful model which is being replicated by other communities. Already, three communities out of five targeted by the project in Nongowa chiefdom, have emulated the approach, and this is yielding the desired results such as making bylaws and identifying sustainable land management best practices.

LESSONS LEARNED

This project has shown that communities have solutions to their own problems. They only to group and be trained in organizational development to handle these problems. The formation of Community Project Management Committee, CBO and the relentless efforts to restore degraded environment have served as a sustainability strategy to promote community support and ownership of the initiative. There is better coordination and willingness to work when communities do so by themselves, which is guided by self-realization about the need to address common problems. They monitor the project themselves, and it is much easier to get everyone involved.

Status of the land before project implementation.



Status of the land after project implementation

