

STORIES OF CHANGE: CAMGEW

How Strategic Focus Helped CAMGEW Translate Vision and Passion into Impact



By Jimm Chick

Cameroon Gender and Environment Watch (CAMGEW) works with communities around the Kilum Ijim montane forest in Northwest Cameroon to preserve the forest ecosystem while developing local livelihoods and empowering women. Well Grounded began working with CAMGEW in 2015 and accompanied them over two years, enabling them to develop a clear strategy, and strengthen their internal structures and systems. In this story, dynamic co-founders Emmanuel Wirsy and Ernestine Leikeiki share how working with Well Grounded enabled them to focus and achieve more impact, while growing and maturing as an organisation.

“The strategic plan brought CAMGEW to a very high level”, Wirsy Emmanuel Binyuy, Founder and Team Leader of CAMGEW

Cameroon Gender and Environment Watch (CAMGEW) has blossomed from a small, but passionate organisation working at the foot of the Kilum Ijum forest in Oku Subdivision in the Northwest region of Cameroon, to a global trailblazer in nature conservation, with an effective strategy.

Between 2018 and 2020, the organisation won three major prizes at both the national and international stages, including most recently, the Midori Prize for Biodiversity in recognition of its strategic efforts to preserve the natural resources of the forest while empowering women.

These important and highly coveted prizes



The CAMGEW team in a workshop facilitated by Well Grounded

were in recognition of CAMGEW’s targeted approaches of guiding communities to lead the preservation of the Kilum Ijum forest and safeguard local livelihoods.

Since 2012, CAMGEW has worked relentlessly to preserve and regenerate the 20,000 hectare

Key Information

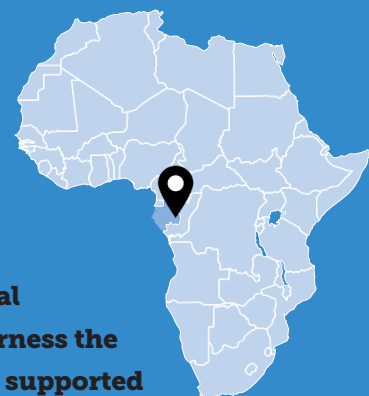
Country: Cameroon

Period of collaboration

CAMGEW collaborated with Well Grounded from 2016 to 2017

Domains of collaboration

Well Grounded supported CAMGEW to conduct an organisational diagnosis, reflect on and develop an organisational strategy, harness the leadership potential of key staff of CAMGEW. CAMGEW was also supported to strengthen its board governance approaches, develop winning proposals and to enhance its communication.



Kilum-Ijim forest. As of 2023, they planted 119,684 native trees, developed three tree nurseries with over 150,000 native species, many of which are bee-friendly. Moreso, CAMGEW is the first organisation in the locality to nurse and plant above 7000 *Newtonia Camerunensis* tree in the Kilum-Ijim forest. This tree is a Critically Endangered species with largest habitat as Kilum-Ijim forest. These are a few of the pragmatic ways the organisation re-engineered its actions to be a global conservation leader despite working at a local level, a practice that characterises the organisation's mantra – 'acting locally and thinking globally'.

Making strategic choices

These strategic efforts stemmed from a decisive action by the leadership of the organisation.

They realised that they had a passion to preserve nature, but the challenge of preserving the natural assets of the Kilum Ijum forest required more than passion.

“We had the passion to work, we had the dream to bring change [in our] society. We wanted to see the forest, the nature, conserved, but at the same time it needed some strategies,” Wirsiy Emmanuel Binyuy, Founder and Team Leader of CAMGEW said.

As a visionary leader, Emmanuel, realised that they needed to leverage their passion and harness the focus of the organisation. “[We needed] some approaches and some skills to be able to make all this work easy to be done, know the type of people who can work [in CAMGEW]. And at one moment, we saw that the workload was too much. And just because there was no clear strategy.” Emmanuel said.

“We had an identity that we thought of, but it was not clearly visible... We needed to see how to be able to meet up with the times and to be able to make partners, donors, communities, know who we are. [...] And this was the time we saw Well Grounded.”

This was in 2015, nine years after its establishment in 2007 and four years after engaging to preserve the Kilum Ijum forest.

Between 2015 and 2017, Well Grounded supported CAMGEW to develop an organisational strategy, improve its communication and improve its board governance.

Emmanuel highlighted how the collaboration with Well Grounded elevated CAMGEW, “The strategic plan brought CAMGEW to a very



The CAMGEW team reflecting together

The strategy review facilitated by Well Grounded resulted in an increased focus on the honey value chain, aiming at supporting sustainable livelihoods for the people living around the Kilum Ijum forest

high level". According to Emmanuel, it elevated CAMGEW from a local organisation to a trendsetter at the national and international level.

"We saw the need to be focused. We saw the need to drop some programmes that we were implementing because they were not clearly linked with our vision, our mission and our objectives." he added.

As Ernestine Leikeiki, Women's Empowerment Officer of the organisation puts it, "Well Grounded's support reinforced CAMGEW's strategic statements: what CAMGEW stands for and what she believes in. This gave CAMGEW focus and a greater sense of, reinforcing CAMGEW broader goals and feeding into everyday decisions and work".

Strategic focus boosts financial growth and conservation impacts

Since working with Well Grounded, the organisation has almost doubled its annual income, from 65,500,000 XAF in 2014 (approx. 100,000 USD) to 112,600,000 XAF in 2020 (approx. 185,000 USD).

The strategy review facilitated by Well Grounded resulted in an increased focus on the honey value chain, aiming at supporting sustainable livelihoods for the people living around the Kilum Ijum forest, as well as a reliable internal revenue stream for CAMGEW. The new strategic orientation enabled the organisation to strengthen its efforts on boosting the honey value chain, beehive production, bee farming, production and sales, and generated an increase in internally generated revenue of nearly 80%

(from 3,780,000 XAF or approx. 6,000 USD in 2014, to 17,290,000 XAF or approx. 28,500 USD in 2020).

Beyond the financial benefits, given honey production and therefore local livelihoods depend on a healthy forest ecosystem, this boost to beekeeping has resulted in the community viewing the forest differently. They now consider it to be a cherished resource and are actively protecting it.

Emmanuel explained how the communities have now become guardian angels of a forest that was once under threat from their activities. Community members initiate forest monitoring visits to eliminate threats to the forest's existence.

"We have discovered that this problem is in this part of the forest. And we are proposing that tomorrow since we are going up to the forest, how can we mobilize the community so that we can go and solve the problem?"

"You see, from that angle, it is no more about us [CAMGEW]. Even in our absence, they will continue cherishing it," Emmanuel adds.

As a result, the community serves as a protection group, guarding against any threats to the forest. They monitor the forest against any fire incidents or any actions that threaten tree and animal species in the forest. As of 2020, not a single bushfire was recorded in the forest, compared to the seven to nine annual incidences of bushfires that ravaged the forest each year before 2015.

Reflecting on CAMGEW's acceptance by the communities they work with and the organisation's ascent to global recognition, Emmanuel commends Well Grounded for the timely institutional capacity-building support.

"Where CAMGEW is found today is thanks to [the] work we did with Well Grounded. We are happy and thank Well Grounded for being our partner in institutional capacity building".

The author

These stories were collected and written by Jimm Chick, an organisation development and communication specialist, based in Yaounde, Cameroon.

