

TAA AWARD FUND

Joana Coutinho - Case Study

Following a BSc degree in organic agriculture and 5 years work in organic horticulture I completed an MSc in International Natural Resources Development at Bangor in 2006. I received an award from TAAF which enabled me to undertake research over an 8 week period with forest dependent communities in Madagascar for my MSc dissertation. I was then unable to find a job which would get me on the right track to what I really wanted to do: working in International Development. I decided to apply for a further TAAF 6-months award to enable me to increase my work experience as well as to help the Madagascar communities to implement the findings that had come out of my MSc research. This was the best decision I had made in a long while...



Vegetable plots and compost pile.



Wating



Work in Andranolava

Sustainable Forest Gardens and more

I worked for 6 months in 2007/08 as part of a large forest conservation project which aims to protect and restore parts of the eastern rainforest in Madagascar. My job was to work alongside 7 local NGOs, coordinating the implementation of a sustainable livelihoods programme in the project area. This involved working directly with local communities in order to find alternatives to the traditional practice of slash-and-burn agriculture... a task to which many were resistant, and one for which we had no funds.

Using a range of participatory methods, we carried out detailed diagnostic workshops to understand the problems at the local level, and to seek sustainable solutions for forests and people alike. In most cases, these solutions consisted of implementing sustainable forest gardens as buffer zones to natural forest, complemented by intensive vegetable production for both subsistence and income generation.



Planting together

We managed to find small grants available to community organisations to carry out this sort of activity, and started on a long and fruitful process of community training and capacity building. We (me and my team of local NGO workers) split our technical expertise over a number of villages, so that over 100 remote rural farmers suddenly found themselves learning a number of varied subjects, ranging from small budget management to composting, terracing, agro-forestry and sustainable horticulture.

The Balance sheet for them

The success of the undertaking was welcomed by the senior partners in the project and we were able to secure a large grant that will cover the costs of running a sustainable livelihoods programme across the project area for the next year. So, the many technicians who came out to work with me simply because they believed in what we were trying to do are now salaried on a full time basis and are out there giving technical support and hope to the extremely poor farmers who live around this incredibly important ecosystem. Their work is serving both human development goals and those of global biodiversity conservation as you read this.

Although there are still many issues that are difficult to overcome, our work has brought hope to more than 25,000 farmers who live in the rural communes around the project area. The 8 hectares of demonstration sustainable forest gardens and vegetable plots we initiated serve as a model for other farmers to see and replicate, and the training provided during my stay is being cascaded through the local NGOs and into the farming communities.

The Balance sheet for me

Apart from having had an amazing personal experience, and a time of personal growth which I could never forget, I also got a lot of professional benefit from my TAAF award. I have gained an on-going consultancy with the project through a large international conservation NGO, which consists of distance work as well as annual field visits to the project in order to evaluate progress and help determine the way forward.

I have built on my CV, accumulated valuable international development experience, carried out work I am proud of and got a foot in the doorway of the area I have always wanted to work in. I could not have done that without the technical and financial support I received from TAAF.
