

HOW A 24-YEAR-OLD BECAME THE STAR CASHEW NURSERYMAN FOR BENIN'S MINISTRY OF AGRICULTURE



PHOTO: CATHOLIC RELIEF SERVICES



Twenty-four-year-old cashew farmer Donatien Kouaknou produced about 3,000 cashew seedlings on his half-acre plot in Benin's Ouémé region in 2018. Yet after losing 30 percent of his grafted plants Kouaknou questioned his future as a cashew farmer.

Kouaknou continued to supplement his income by working as a laborer for various cashew producers in the region. In 2019, Kouaknou participated in a two-week training on cashew nursery management and grafting at the Regional Union of the Cashew Producers of Ouémé and Plateau (URPA-OP), one of Kouaknou's employers. The training, arranged by Farmer-to-Farmer implementer, Catholic Relief Services, was conducted by volunteer Dr. Joshua Idassi, an Agriculture and Natural Resources Specialist at North Carolina State University. It covered specific techniques to increase yields in cashew seedling and best practices in cashew nursery management.

"Donatien is a young cashew farmer with an outstanding attitude. He has great leadership potential," Idassi said. "He participated in hands-on demonstration exercises on how to graft the cashew seedlings using the wedge-cleft grafting technology with ease. He is a great mentor to the new, young and beginning cashew growers." Through the training, Kouaknou learned that his current cashew nursery was not planted in an optimal area. The same year he moved it to a larger location away from his garden crops, as Idassi recommended. Eight months later, Kouaknou's nursery produced 8,000 cashew seedlings – a yield with less than 1 percent of loss and an earning potential of \$2,780.

Impressed by his results, URPA-OP introduced Kouaknou to representatives at the Departmental Direction of Agriculture, Livestock and Fishery of Ouémé and Plateau. Their meeting and Kouaknou's success were subsequently reported to Benin's Ministry of Agriculture. The ministry recognized Kouaknou as one of the country's top nurserymen and included his name in their cashew nurserymen directory. They will follow up with him on an annual basis to track his progress.

The ministry anticipates buying thousands of grafted cashew seedlings in 2020 to help promote plantations with grafted plants, and Kouaknou hopes to capitalize. This year he sold about 8,000 seedlings and helped other nurserymen sell more than 20,000 seedlings to the Ministry of Agriculture. At 24 years old, Kouaknou now sees a future as a cashew farmer.