

Greening the Shelter Activities Pilot Project After-Action Review Report CRS Central Africa Republic



Photos by CRS/staff

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In 2022, Catholic Relief Services (CRS) piloted an innovative project in the Central African Republic (CAR) titled “Greening the Shelter Response.” Through an ongoing award funded by the Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA) of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and with further funds allocated in 2022 by the Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the initiative aimed to address environmental issues in neighborhoods inhabited mainly by internally displaced people.

In collaboration with the prefectural youth council committee, the project empowered young people, mostly from internally displaced families, to undertake activities such as:

- Producing 127,000 mudbricks and building 100 shelters (4x6 meters), mitigating the risks of deforestation
- Distributing 300 solar lamps to vulnerable households (headed by elders, people with disabilities, widowed women and minors)
- Spearheading community campaigns for cleaner and healthier settlement management and broadcasting educational messages via radio.

To mitigate the risks of deforestation and cutting down very young trees by very vulnerable families, CRS hired local youth to produce mudbricks and hired laborers and masons to build the shelters. The project provided 127,000 mudbricks to 71 households and straw and wood to 42 households, and 10 young masons were hired to build houses for the 100 most vulnerable families in Bozoum. The bricks were made by village youth groups selected from among the project participant families, especially internally displaced people and returnees.

The project purchased and distributed solar lamps to 300 of the most vulnerable participant families whose houses were rehabilitated or repaired. The solar lamps serve as an alternative to wood burning to avoid inhalation of smoke and polluted air while also reducing the use of other fuels and eliminating the risk of accidental fires when families cook inside their houses.

The project supported the purchase and distribution of waste collection equipment to the youth council to encourage waste collection in the city and clearing the drainage channels of stagnant water. Purchased equipment included 40 hoes, 20 wheelbarrows, 40 picks, 100 gloves, 10 rakes, 15 locally made brooms and 10 pushers (locally made wheelbarrows).

At the same time, the project recruited and hired over 250 young women and men from vulnerable families to clean up the town of Bozoum, starting with collecting garbage, cleaning canals for wastewater or rainwater, and weeding the town. Participants were paid between 3,000 and 5,000 Central African CFA francs (\$5–8) per day of work at the end of each work cycle, depending on their responsibilities. In general, each cycle lasted four days a week for five months, and groups alternated so the project could reach as many young people as possible. At the end of the activity in April 2023, there had been four rotations of 60 young people with five supervisors per rotation.

The project raised community awareness of daily environmental concerns through radio spots (twice a day during the months of February and April 2023), banners and T-shirts with community awareness messages on environmental preservation and healthier cities. A mobile team of youth equipped microphones that broadcast cleanliness messages in the central market of Bozoum, in

the neighborhoods most inhabited by internally displaced people, and in schools during a two-day greening city

campaign in April and May 2023.

All planned project activities were completed within the timeframe of the project, between November 2022 and May 2023.

On June 22, 2023, the project manager conducted an after-action review (AAR) with local stakeholders, including local authorities, participant youth and representatives of internally displaced people who benefited from the project, to assess project achievements and potential sustainability. Below are some testimonies on success, lessons learned and project impacts.

1. Key Achievements

Most of the participants in the AAR identified the project's most impactful strategies to be collaborating with the youth council committee, targeting young people for cash-for-work activities, involving young people in awareness-raising, providing hygiene materials, aligning the project with existing government initiatives and involving local leaders. They also appreciated that the program promoted the use of local resources (soil, materials and masons) to build the houses.

The participants praised the transparency observed between the various stakeholders. The main achievements they cited at the AAR meeting included the construction of houses with bricks, wood and straw donated by the project (100 houses), the digging of drainage canals for stagnant water (around 3 miles in total), and awareness-raising campaigns conducted by young people in markets, schools and public places and via radio broadcasts to reach almost the entire population of Bozoum.

2. Testimonies

“Before this project, I was nervous around and angry against humanitarians. As a member of the youth population in Bozoum, we thought humanitarian organizations were ignoring us and not assisting us like other victims of the armed conflicts since 2013. We were hopeless, considered by communities as useless or bandits. This project gave us an opportunity to show that we are good workers, volunteers to community development, and important partners. Not only did we gain money but also social standing and respect.” – A youth council member, supervisor of CFW activities

“For me, this project was excellent but too short. We need more support in our fight to strengthen the culture of safe housing. In this project, I appreciated two things: the targeting of young people and the development of strategies based on what has already been done; that is, the government initiative of devoting one day a week to such activities. These two elements are pathways to sustainability.” – President of the prefectural youth council

“Today, I feel very good. I feel valued and useful to my community. I can buy clothes now without having to ask my parents, who are also very poor.” – A young participant in the cash-for-work activities

“Before this project, I was lost and desperate because I had just spent all my money on treating one of my children, who was suffering from malaria. Now, thanks to this project, I have restarted

my small business of selling doughnuts. I remember that one day, the person in charge of youth asked me if I could work for the town cleaning service. At first, I hesitated, but finally, he convinced me. After four days' work, I was paid 12,000 Central African CFA francs and immediately resumed my business.”
– A young single mother, project participant in cash-for-work activities

“I liked the lamp the project gave us. I use it when I walk around the house or go out at night, and I no longer need to start a fire to light up the inside of my house. With this project, it is like I am living a dream, and my children tell me that it is a miracle that happened to us; we now have a nice house built with the material support and masonry paid by the project.” – A woman whose house was built thanks to the project

“This project is perfectly in line with the country’s policy on cleanliness and urban development; working with young people is a good start to their social integration after the trauma caused by war, unemployment, poverty and despair. What I learned from this project? Living in a clean place is not expensive—you just have to start. This project has shown us that you just need to target the right people and motivate them. We have always ignored the role of young people in these kinds of activities, seeing them as difficult when, in fact, they are a force for change. With these motivated young people and the materials provided by the project, I’m sure we will continue to raise awareness in our communities and change lifestyles.” – The prefect of the Ouham Pende prefecture

3. Recommendations from Local Leaders and Project Participants

- The project was too short and limited to neighborhoods inhabited mainly by displaced people and returnees. In the future, CRS hopes to target all communities in the area to have a greater impact.
- A focus on schools would allow students to acquire and grow up with the habit of better protecting the environment, their homes and their neighborhoods in general.
- The mayor of the town of Bozoum has made a place available for waste disposal, but it is important to think about how to manage this waste, particularly by recycling or turning it into manure for farmers. The town needs a thorough study of waste disposal, town planning and environment management.
- More local masons should be trained in environmentally friendly building techniques.

4. Lessons Learned and Recommendations from Project Staff

- The pilot project in CAR aligned with local government decrees and complemented an existing local government initiative that dedicates Saturday mornings to settlement hygiene and maintenance activities, with a focus on engaging young people. Building on local momentum, involving associations of young people and women increases acceptance and fosters a sure path to success and sustainability.
- The project in CAR was designed to have CRS-trained masons from previous projects to introduce local masons to environmentally friendly construction techniques and locally manufactured materials. These techniques are sustainable, low-cost and easy to



implement by the community. CRS should continue to promote the integration of environmentally friendly construction techniques into all its emergency projects, especially those of shelters.

- In addition to attracting young people through cash incentives, awareness-raising activities have involved young people of all religions and ethnicities. In the past, Muslims and Christians who held different views on politico-military conflicts had problems with cohabitation. Awareness-raising and cash-for-work activities provide a good opportunity to promote social cohesion and integration among young people, some of whom are former combatants. They feel valued through this project.

Conclusion

The "Greening the Shelter Response" pilot project in CAR has been a notable success. Focused on addressing environmental challenges in areas with internally displaced individuals, the initiative empowered youth, promoted environmental awareness and integrated sustainable construction methods. The project's emphasis on engaging displaced youth has transformed their social standing and instilled pride.

Participants' testimonies highlight the project's transformative impact, from improved housing to economic empowerment. However, feedback suggests the need for a longer project duration, broader reach and more sustainable waste management solutions. The pilot underscores the potential of community-driven, environmentally conscious initiatives in post-conflict regions, laying a foundation for sustainable development and social cohesion. Future endeavors should build on this foundation, incorporating lessons learned for greater impact.