



25 NOV 2022 | STORY | NATURE ACTION

## Laureate pushes for women's rights and a greener future

Photo: UNEP/Duncan Moore

Growing up in a remote part of Cameroon, Cécile Bibiane Ndjebet was acutely aware of the hardships endured by rural women. She saw her mother and others labouring from dawn to dusk, growing crops, tending to animals and raising children. Many did back-breaking work on land that, because of traditional sociocultural practices, they could never own.

### RELATED



STORY

**2022 Champions of the Earth award to honour ecosystem restoration efforts around the world**



STORY

**Renowned economist strives to calculate the value of nature**

"I realized that women were struggling a lot," Ndjebet recalled "I wanted to protect my mother and to advocate for these rural women, to improve their lives. They were suffering too much."

Those early experiences would shape Ndjebet's life. She would go on to become a leading voice for women's land rights in Africa, spending three decades advocating for gender equality while also repairing hundreds of hectares of nature marred by development. This includes over 600 hectares of degraded land and mangrove forests which have been restored under her stewardship of Cameroon Ecology, an organization she co-founded in 2001.

For that work, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) has named Ndjebet a Champion of the Earth for Inspiration and Action, one of the United Nations' highest environmental honours.

Humanity has significantly altered [three-quarters](#) of Earth's dry land, chopping down forests, draining wetlands, and polluting rivers at rates experts [warn is unsustainable](#).

Ndjebet is among the leaders of the movement to repair that damage.

Securing land rights for women in Africa supports reforest...

Her vision has resulted in a project by Cameroon Ecology to train women to revive more than 1,000 hectares of forest by 2030.

Since 2009, Ndjebet has also spearheaded efforts to promote gender equality in forest management across 20 African countries as the President of [The African Women's Network for Community Management of Forests](#) (REFACOF), an organization she co-founded. Ndjebet's advocacy both at home and abroad has focused on encouraging women's interests to be represented more widely in environmental policies.

In 2012, she was elected Climate Change Champion of the Central African Commission on Forests for her leading role in mobilizing civil society organizations to sustainably manage forests. Ndjebet is also a member of the advisory board of the [UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration](#), a global push to revive degraded landscapes.

### Keeping the forest alive

Women make up almost half the agricultural workforce in sub-Saharan Africa and can play a key role in fighting hunger and poverty. Yet women, especially in rural areas, often encounter problems owning land or inheriting it after their husband dies.

Despite this bias, women continue to protect forest ecosystems in countries such as Cameroon, where roughly [70 per cent of women live in rural areas](#) and depend on gathering fruits, nuts and medicinal herbs from forests to earn income for the family.

"Women are really driving restoration. They are reforesting degraded areas, they plant trees, they develop nurseries. They do agroforestry. Even those engaged in livestock production have trees. They keep the forest alive," Ndjebet said.

REFACOF has supported women's groups to reforest degraded land and mangrove forests, establish nurseries and plant orchards across Cameroon and other member countries. It has also worked to persuade village chiefs to allow women to plant trees on coastal land as part of a buffer against rising sea levels caused by climate change.

Through its broader, continent-wide advocacy work, REFACOF has proposed forest policies to governments in 20 states to secure women's rights in forestry and natural resource management.

Studies have found that if women in rural areas had the same access to land, technology, financial services, education and markets as men, agricultural production on their farms could increase [by 20 to 30 per cent](#) – enough to transform lives.

Ndjebet said when she asked women what their hopes were for the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration, they named three things: recognition and support of their role in restoration, access to funding and knowledge sharing.

Ndjebet said she has been guided by a long succession of women, including her grandmother, mother and sisters. An encounter with Wangari Maathai, the Kenyan environmental activist and first African woman to win a Nobel Peace Prize, also left a lasting impression that has shaped her work ever since.



*Ndjebet is a leading voice for women's land rights in Africa. Photo: UNEP/Duncan Moore*



*Ndjebet's vision has resulted in a project by Cameroon Ecology to train women to revive more than 1,000 hectares of forest by 2030. Photo: UNEP/Duncan Moore*



*Humanity has significantly altered three-quarters of Earth's dry land, chopping down forests, draining wetlands, and polluting rivers at rates experts warn is unsustainable. Photo: UNEP/Duncan Moore*

“She said, ‘Tell African women to care for their environment as they care for their babies. Tell them to plant fruit trees. They will give them food, money and the trees will stay there for the environment and for humanity,’” Ndjebet recalled.

## About the UNEP Champions of the Earth

The UN Environment Programme’s [Champions of the Earth](#) honours individuals, groups, and organizations whose actions have a transformative impact on the environment. The annual Champions of the Earth award is the UN’s highest environmental honour. It recognizes outstanding leaders from government, civil society, and the private sector



*REFACOF has proposed forest policies to governments in 20 states to secure women’s rights in forestry and natural resource management. Photo: UNEP/Duncan Moore*

## About the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration

The UN General Assembly has declared the years 2021 through 2030 the [UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration](#). Led by UNEP and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the UN together with the support of partners, it is designed to prevent, halt, and reverse the loss and degradation of ecosystems worldwide. It aims at reviving billions of hectares, covering terrestrial as well as aquatic ecosystems. A global call to action, the UN Decade draws together political support, scientific research, and financial muscle to massively scale up restoration.

## TOPICS

[Nature action](#) / [Forests](#) / [Gender](#)

[Champions of the Earth](#) / [Restoration](#) / [Rights](#)

## Further Resources

- [United Nations Champions of the Earth](#)
- [UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration](#)

## Related Sustainable Development Goals

