



# ASB Voices

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After a day of fieldwork in the forest surrounding her village in Cameroon, 13-year-old Prisca Oye walks home on a logging road. She is carrying a machete used to clear forest and a shotgun her stepfather uses for hunting. Prisca's village was settled early in the 20th century when the German colonial administration compelled people to live near main roads. Logging trails cut in the last five years make access to isolated forest plots easier—but the logging was conducted without consulting the villagers. People are moving further into the logged-over forest, once again cultivating forest fields farmed by their ancestors.

Prisca is a big help to her parents, Evelyne Mbóo and Marcel Assam. Like other children living in the forest margins of Central Africa, Prisca started helping in the fields when she was about 8 years old. And like most families here, Prisca's family depends on agriculture and forest-based activities for their livelihood. Marcel slashes and burns the logged forest to plant mixtures of egoussi melon, cocoyams, and plantains on the fertile soil. Then, after a year or two of foodcrops, these plots return to long forest fallow of 20 or more years, or are planted with cocoa trees; both of these systems are sustainable in this area of low population density. While working in the forest, the family gathers nuts and wild fruit, such as bush mango. Marcel also hunts bushmeat. On plots closer to the village, Evelyne manages production of cassava, cocoyams, vegetables, groundnuts, plantains and other foodcrops for the family's needs and for sale. Prisca helps her mother with all the tasks in the foodcrop fields as well as with preparing meals and washing clothes. The whole family gets involved in the forest plots, where Prisca helps to plant and harvest melons and to carry cocoa pods. Prisca says hoeing and planting cassava are her hardest chores.

In addition to meeting the family's daily needs, farming and forest activities are the foundation on which they hope to build a better future for the ten children that Evelyne and Marcel are feeding and schooling. These include three belonging to Marcel's sister, who is a single mother and lives in their household. Eighty percent of

**"I hate hoeing in the fields!"**

—PRISCA OYE, AGE 13 YEARS

ASB Voices is published by the Alternatives to Slash-and-Burn (ASB) Programme. The series aims to convey for a broad audience the insights and perspectives from people's real-life experiences and challenges in the humid tropics.

Developed with contributions from Prisca Oye, Evelyne Mbóo and Marcel Assam; Chimere Diaw and William Mala of CIFOR; Joyce Kasyoki and Thomas Tomich of ICRAF; and Julie Billart Mbazou Ondo, Valentina Robiglio and Stephan Weise of IITA and with funding from the Government of the Netherlands.

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their cash income goes to school fees and other education costs. This cash comes mainly from sale of cocoa and melon seeds and from the selling cassava and cocoyams when output of these staples exceeds the family's food needs. Occasionally, they also get cash from sale of bushmeat, bush mango, and nuts gathered from the forest.

But none of the ten children in their household plan to follow Evelyne and Marcel into farming and forest gathering. Prisca, for example, plans to be a teacher. Mathematics is her favourite subject in school and Evelyne proudly reports that her daughter is a good student. Marcel and Evelyne both support Prisca in her aspiration; they are pleased she is interested in a profession. Many parents and children throughout the tropics share similar hopes. But this process—and the related trend toward urbanisation—carries social and economic risks for coming generations as well as opportunities for bright individuals. To ease this difficult transition, ASB scientists are working with communities like Prisca's to identify practical steps to enhance their livelihood options. These include organising cocoa marketing groups and facilitating communities' assessments of alternative futures for themselves and their children, especially the social and environmental effects of their ongoing decisions about the forest and other natural resources on which so much depends.

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