

A Migrant's Regal Effort to Help Her People

As young Ghanaian men leave their villages in search of work anywhere else, the queen mother of a traditional area in Ghana, doubling as a nurse in Italy, has stepped forward with an ambitious plan to rescue her people from poverty and put an end to the out migration from her region.

By Jemini Pandya, IOM Geneva, in Ghana

Trying to reach the Suma Traditional Area which lies in the north west corner of Ghana's Brong Ahafo region is not easy. At some point an hour and a half before one reaches the capital, Suma Ahenkro, the tarmac ends and a very bumpy dirt road begins.

To the left hand of what serves as a road and just a stone's throw away is the border with the Côte d'Ivoire. There is a remoteness here and with it a certain isolation reinforced by the lack of proper roads that inhibit business development.

Consisting of 30 small towns and villages, 80 per cent of the population of Suma Traditional Area is made up of subsistence farmers with the burden of work and responsibility for feeding the family lying with the woman. With the exception of schools, there is little else in terms of facilities and certainly not much opportunity for finding work in the area, making labour plentiful and very cheap.

It is because of this, the resulting poverty and perhaps the proximity of the border with Côte d'Ivoire filling heads with dreams of a new, riches-filled life in Europe that are significant factors to emigration from the area. No one here knows exactly how many people have left.

But looking around in Suma Ahenkro, there is a visible lack of young men amidst the people going about their daily business. Lots of old men and women, children and mothers, young and

old. But few young men. They tend to leave to find work in Ghana's urban areas or abroad – if they are lucky enough to make it. Several village boys and men have died making the long and perilous journey to Europe.

It is partly to prevent this heartache and that of those who do manage to make it to Europe and who soon realize that the streets there are not paved with gold but much pain and suffering, and partly to lessen the suffering of the women in the area, that Belinda Comfort Damoah felt pushed to act.

Alias Nana Akwamma Trepfo Odiakotene, Belinda is no ordinary person. She is the Queen Mother of the Suma Traditional Area (STA) although she is now a resident of Lecco, near the northern Italian city of Milan, and another recipient of IOM support under its Migration for Development in Africa (MIDA) programme for Ghana. It encourages African migrant diaspora to contribute to the development of their country of origin through skills transfer and investment in enterprise with co-funding from partners including IOM.

Belinda's successful proposal put forward in the second phase of the MIDA Ghana programme funded by the Italian government is an ambitious plan to revolutionize agriculture in Suma and with it, provide

▶ Belinda shows the haphazard way subsistence farmers in her region plant crops. More productive use of land can be made in order to help her people lift themselves out of poverty (Photo: © Jemini Pandya/IOM, 2007)

decent new job opportunities for people and improve the lives of the women there.

With thousands of acres of land lying fallow in the area, Belinda has created an agricultural cooperative society supported by the Suma Rural Bank as well as IOM with plans to utilize 500 hectares in the cultivation of much prized cash crops such as cashew and teak as well as vegetables and fruit such as mangoes, cassava and okra. Traders from India are already beating the path to Suma for the well-loved nut and the



▶ The support of Nana Adane Okofrobour-Krontihene, Paramount King of the Suma Traditional Area, is critical to Belinda's plans. He and other chiefs have offered the use of fallow land in Suma for mass scale farming (Photo: © IOM, 2007)



cooperative could soon be selling their produce directly to the Indians.

She bemoans the current waste of subsistence farming and has plenty of ideas for diversification. Take the cashews, for example, which grow well and easily in the area with the district in which Suma lies being the biggest producer of cashew nuts in Ghana.

"There are many things we can do with the cashew but we only take the seed and sell it. While the fruit, we can have juice or can conserve it or make marmalade," she explains.

By also organizing local farmers into co-operatives and with plans to access adequate storage facilities, the current lack of which forces farmers into selling any little surplus produce at ridiculously low prices during glut periods, she's hoping that agriculture here can become large scale and a real business. It's an ambition backed by all the traditional chiefs.

Speaking at the official launch of the Suma Agricultural Cooperative Society accompanied by much pomp and ceremony, Nana Adane Okofrobour-Krontihene, Paramount King of the Suma Traditional Area, reiterated support through the provision of land held in trust by the chiefs and queen mothers for large-scale farming.

"With arable land and energetic workforce, there is no over-emphasizing the agricultural potential of the Suma Traditional Area," he says.

The women in Suma Ahenkro are ecstatic about the project. Belinda has already organized them into a baking cooperative which provides bread for the whole village.

"The burden of life is on the women here. They do everything. They provide everything. The economic contribution of the men is negligible. The women are really happy and excited about this development. They feel very strongly about organizing a cooperative," says Martin Adane, Advisor to the Suma Agricultural Cooperative Society.

Belinda is passionate about making a difference to the lives of the people here. She'd left her home in 1984 for Libya where she worked as a nurse for five years before trying to reach the UK.

But fortune favoured her and she ended up as a regularized migrant in Italy. Since the birth of her last child in 1992, she's been working as an auxiliary nurse and is now taking exams to be a general nurse.

There is a purpose. Not content to revolutionize the livelihood potential of Suma and help stop her people leaving their villages in search of work, she's been instrumental to the building of a primary health care centre in Suma Ahenkro. At some point soon, she's planning to come to Suma for several months at a time, allowing her to contribute her nursing skills at the health centre.

And then there is this other passion. A good education for all children. She's already supporting 80 children in the village to attend school. But the building at the moment is a collection of kiosks and with the number of children now going to the school increasing, she is trying urgently to raise funds for a proper building for them.

"I have learnt a lot. I can help them, the women especially. I want to bring all the knowledge that I have acquired in Europe to help my people because I know they need me. They need my knowledge," says Belinda.

No-one would dispute her. Otherwise, who knows, heads might roll..... **M**



▲ Villagers show Belinda an old, dried piece of yam. With no way of storing their subsistence crops, what little food villagers have left between harvests is usually poor in taste and nutritious content (Photo: © Jemini Pandya/IOM, 2007)



▲ "The burden of life is on the women here. They do everything. They provide everything..." Back-breaking work for women searching for the highly prized cashew nut among the leaves in a cashew grove (Photo: © Jemini Pandya/IOM, 2007)