

Supporting the Next Generation of Climate Leaders: The Central African Women’s Initiative for Climate Action

In 2018, Dr. Rene Siwe joined the U.S. Forest Service International Programs as a U.S. Department of State Climate Fellow. In this role, he was embedded in the Republic of the Congo’s Ministry of Forest Economy, where he advised government officials on climate change mitigation and adaptation matters and supported technicians working on the design and implementation of the country’s National Forest Monitoring System. But during his time as a Climate Fellow, Siwe was struck by how few women were working on climate issues. From technical roles to government positions, women were noticeably absent from rooms where important discussions and decisions about climate policies were happening.

“Strengthening the capacities of women and ensuring their active involvement in climate action is essential for Central African countries to comply with their commitments to reduce emissions, enhance removals, and effectively report on their efforts to mitigate climate change and adapt to the effects of climate change,” he said.

For Siwe, this issue was too important to be overlooked. He proposed a new program specifically for women—one which combined technical training, mentorships, and networking opportunities—to the Climate Fellows Program. And so, the Central Africa Women’s Initiative for Climate Action, otherwise known as WICA, was created. WICA aims to provide early-career women and students with training and professional experience to establish and advance their careers in fields related to greenhouse gas emissions accounting, climate change diplomacy, tropical forest management, and other related subjects.

The response was overwhelming. Out of the over 400 women who applied for the program, just over 100 were selected to take part in the pilot year. National workshops were held in Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Gabon, and the Republic of the Congo to launch the pilot phase of the program. At the workshops, participants learned about the basics of climate change, greenhouse gas accounting, the social and economic impacts of the climate crisis, climate finance, and national and international climate policy.



WICA Fellows at COP27 in Sharm-El-Sheikh, Egypt. Photo by Nelly Houtsa.

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After the workshops, five women from each country were nominated to complete a rigorous diploma program in Greenhouse Gas Measurement, Reporting, and Verification offered by the Greenhouse Gas Management Institute. To gain professional experience, some women also undertook internships with government agencies and technical organizations working on climate change issues. Five women were even able to participate in the international climate negotiations at COP26 in Glasgow. With mentors by their sides, they assisted in technical events related to sustainable forest management and connected with other climate actors from around the globe.

Nineteen women completed the diploma program, and these first WICA fellows are already breaking into new climate roles and supporting other women to do the same. While the fellows come from different academic backgrounds and have varying interests, most plan to pursue roles that focus on addressing climate issues. Tirieli Lytina Lokoka Ngoma, from the Republic of the Congo, is one of the nineteen women to have earned a diploma in greenhouse gas management, and she wants other women to do the same.

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Joidie Bilonda from the Democratic Republic of the Congo took an internship at the Ministry of Sustainable Development after completing her WICA fellowship and has plans to do much more.

“With my colleagues from the DRC, we are thinking we may create a new consultancy company working on greenhouse gas management, and we also envision that we will become future mentors to the next generation of climate experts. We also want to use our new expertise in greenhouse gas accounting to help our country further develop and implement climate adaptation and mitigation programs.”

As the program finishes its second year, it has expanded to include women from the Central African Republic. There are plans to add a cohort from Equatorial Guinea and a new training on the application of Earth observation to provide activity data for greenhouse gas reporting in the upcoming year.

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