

SHEANE GROW'S

Project Progress Report: Community-Driven Shea Tree Restoration (2022–Mid 2023)

1.0 Background & Community Context

For over a decade leading up to 2022, communities across Northern Ghana, particularly in Kumbungu and its surrounding districts, have been immersed in the shea value chain, a lifeline for thousands of rural households. Women remain the backbone of this industry, expertly harvesting and processing shea fruits into butter used in cosmetics, food, and pharmaceuticals across the globe. Their hands drive a value chain that sustains livelihoods, fosters regional pride, and powers both local markets and international exports.

Yet beneath the surface of this economic story lies a growing ecological crisis: the rapid and largely unregulated destruction of shea trees. In a region where charcoal and firewood remain the dominant energy sources, mature shea trees, high in calorific value are routinely felled for short-term fuel needs. This practice not only undermines the sustainability of the shea industry but also destroys trees that take up to 20 years to mature and can produce fruit for more than two centuries. What takes decades to grow is often reduced to ash within minutes.



As the tree population declines, the burden disproportionately falls on women. Once easily accessible near villages, shea trees are now increasingly scattered across distant parts of the savannah. Women must travel 3-4 hours each way, often under scorching heat, to locate and collect fruit. These journeys carry real dangers: encounters with snakes or wild animals, dehydration, and physical strain from carrying back loads weighing 30 kilograms or more.

Despite these challenges, many women have not waited for policy change or external aid. In a show of resilience and foresight, several have begun planting shea seedlings in their communities, often on family lands owned by male relatives. While some of these trees have successfully matured and now provide fruit, their survival is precarious. Land ownership remains deeply patriarchal, and trees planted without formal tenure rights are vulnerable to land sales and development.

In one particularly heartbreaking case, a collective of seven women reported the loss of over 500 planted shea trees, many nearing fruit-bearing age, when their plots were reallocated for housing development. These losses represent not only years of unpaid labor and hope but also a direct blow to women's economic autonomy and environmental stewardship.

This unfolding crisis calls for urgent attention, not only to protect a fragile ecosystem but to uphold the rights and contributions of the women who sustain it.

2.0 Our Early Interventions: 2022–Mid 2023

Recognizing the urgency of shea tree depletion and its far-reaching consequences on local ecosystems and women's livelihoods, we launched a structured intervention in mid-2022. Rooted in grassroots leadership and ecological sensitivity, our initiative began with a pilot planting effort in collaboration with respected local leader, Mr. Yakubu. This project sought not only to restore lost tree cover but also to reframe community relationships with land, fuel, and ecological stewardship.



2.0 (a) Natural Regeneration Through Community Trials

Rather than establishing commercial monoculture plantations, we opted for a nature-aligned approach. Seeds were germinated in homes and manually transplanted onto open land across four trial sites in the Kumbungu area, covering approximately 12 hectares. By mimicking wild dispersal patterns, spacing seedlings sparsely and organically, we aimed to maintain biodiversity, reduce interspecies competition, and improve long-term tree survival.

2.0 (b) Key metrics from this phase include:

- 200 seedlings planted per location, totaling roughly 800 trees estimate
- An estimated 67% survival rate, achieved without fertilizers or chemical enhancers
- Planting aligned with native vegetation patterns to promote ecosystem integrity

This foundational stage emphasized environmental observation, rooting behavior, and early-stage community ownership models. All operations were fully self-funded, driven by grassroots contributions, and carried out with a strong commitment to low-cost, high-impact practices.

2.0 (c) Community Involvement and Early Discoveries

The pilot involved 41 women, 10 men, and 27 youth across multiple communities. Labor was cooperative: while men assisted with heavy digging and fencing, women and young people took lead roles in planting, daily monitoring, and informal knowledge-sharing circles. We used localized communication, alternating between English and Dagbani, to ensure broad comprehension and encourage intergenerational dialogue.

During this phase, 11 sub-communities were engaged directly, often through field visits to active farms. Through informal interviews and community dialogues, we uncovered a significant gap in ecological awareness. Many participants, despite their daily reliance on the shea economy, were unaware of how deforestation, especially the felling of mature shea trees, was eroding their own long-term income security and contributing to microclimatic changes such as hotter temperatures and drier soils.

2.0 (d) Insights and Emerging Strategies

The early trials provided valuable insight into both ecological and social dynamics. In response, we began laying the groundwork for a three-part reengineering model, focused on seedling nurturing models, best practices for tree survival rate increase, land security (policy), and behavior change. Emerging priorities included:

- Seedling tagging and tracking systems to monitor survival rates over time
- Advocacy education around land ownership, particularly for women who plant on male-controlled or communal land
- Exploration of alternative fuel sources to reduce demand for firewood and charcoal from native tree species

- Localized climate education, connecting environmental decline to health, water scarcity, and food insecurity

This multi-dimensional model is designed not just to reforest, but to shift the structural barriers that lead to tree loss in the first place.

3.0 Phase Two: Scaling with Purpose (2023–2024)

Building on the success and lessons of the pilot, we are entering Phase Two in mid-2023 with a renewed commitment to scale and sustainability. Our goals include:

1. Tripling the number of engaged communities, extending outreach across neighboring districts
2. Identifying and partnering with clean fuel companies for alternatives such as improved cookstoves and biomass briquettes
3. Launching land rights dialogues, particularly for women-led planting initiatives
4. Enhancing documentation capacity, using smartphones, GPS, and visual storytelling tools to track growth and engage external funders

This evolving program stands as both a local climate action initiative and a gender-responsive environmental restoration model. It highlights how indigenous knowledge, grassroots leadership, and community commitment can intersect to safeguard one of West Africa's most valuable trees, and the women who depend on them for survival.

4.0 Some Gallery

