

Master's Degree Scholarship Recipients Help Strengthen Environmental Management in the Congo Basin

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Létycia had the opportunity to present her master's thesis research to other scholarship recipients from around the region at a recent networking event. Photo courtesy of Eva McNamara, U.S. Forest Service International Programs

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Before she finished her master's degree, Létycia Ning-Bala was working as an assistant in the recently formed National Protected Areas Agency in the Republic of the Congo. While passionate about working to promote sustainable environmental management in her country, she lacked the training to move into a more specialized role, and Létycia's job was one that didn't offer much opportunity for advancement.

In order to build the capacity of ministries like the one where Létycia works in the Congo, the U.S. Forest Service has been offering competitive scholarships for government officials in the environmental management and forestry sector at top ranked universities in the region since 2014. This scholarship program, supported by USAID's Central Africa Regional Program for the Environment and the U.S. Department of State, has supported more than 24 students to date, many of whom have been able to leverage their experience and training to advance to more specialized and senior jobs in their respective environmental ministries. The program not only enables promising ministry officials to further develop their skills, but also encourage professionals from around the region to forge working relationships and networks, increasing regional cooperation and collaboration in the environmental sector.

When Létycia finished her degree in 2016 at the top of her class, her success made it clear to colleagues that she was a valuable asset who could be instrumental in helping the young agency develop. She now heads the Office of Public Affairs, and is responsible for coordinating with donors to obtain grants for the National Protected Areas Agency to expand their program. This job requires not only the ability to understand the principles of protected area land management, but also the skills to communicate complex technical knowledge to people from around the world with varying levels of knowledge on the subject—something Létycia now has the confidence and skills to do successfully.

In December 2017, twenty-one scholarship recipients, past and present, had the opportunity to travel to Brazzaville, in the Republic of the Congo, to attend a two-day networking event. Scholarship recipients and professors came from Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Republic of the Congo, and São Tomé & Príncipe. Over the two days they had the opportunity to discuss their work, develop professional contacts, and debate the most pressing environmental challenges in the region. Like university alumni around the world, they decided to set up an online platform to share information, continue discussing solutions, and create and build upon existing regional collaborations.

For many of the students and alumni who were able to attend, the ability to connect and exchange with experts from counterpart environmental agencies in neighboring countries was an invaluable opportunity which was new for them. For Létycia, it was a chance to share the results of research she had undertaken during her studies exploring different species of native trees and their roles in addressing climate change—and to discuss challenges and opportunities for protecting the forests of Central Africa.

“With this scholarship, I was not only able to get a master’s degree, but I also gained professional skills, completed valuable internships, and participated in professional trainings—all of which helped me to develop my professional portfolio,” she said. “I also now have a network of colleagues from around the region that I can reach out to, and hopefully collaborate with, in the future.”

USAID's Central Africa Regional Program for the Environment has worked since 1995 to help protect and preserve forests and biodiversity within the region. Building capacity of government staff is an essential part in ensuring that effective environmental management policies are enacted at national and regional levels. As an implementing partner, the U.S. Forest Service is committed to working with partner governments to offer specialized programs that help them succeed in protecting and preserving their forests and natural resources.

