

# Togo | Crocheting against waste

A crochet hook – that is all it takes for Baraka Oukpedjou to get rid of her household plastic waste. She lives in Sokodé, Togo's second biggest town, and is one of 100 people taking part in training workshops organized by German NGO Urbis Foundation. A story on how to link an income generating activity to recycling.

The idea came from neighbouring Benin and has been introduced to Sokodé by five women trainers from Papatia, a small village in the north of that country. The training team, led by Odile Sannou, made a six-hour car journey over bumpy roads to come and train the women of Togo. For these women from Benin, it is quite an adventure to leave their village and cross the border to train women who speak a different language and who live in a big city. They are going to teach a technique that they themselves learned four years ago, with support from a German development agency – how to crochet with plastic waste.

Odile Sannou stresses the importance of recycling. As part of her introduction, she asks the women of Sokodé a question: "Why should you never discard plastic in the environment?". Not all the participants have a very clear understanding of what the environment really means, but Sannou uses convincing arguments: "If your goat tastes salt on a plastic bag, it will eat it. And tomorrow, your goat will be dead".

But if you cannot discard plastic in the environment, what are the alternatives? Waste is poorly managed in Togo. Projects involving incineration or recycling have had little success in resolving the problem. You see rubbish everywhere: along the roads, piled up in informal dumps and in the rivers. Large numbers of plastic bags, used to carry shopping from the market, are a particularly serious problem. Once back in their homes, people throw the bags away because they are too fragile to reuse. But if you crochet them instead, you can make strong bags that can be used time and time again!

Before the crocheting begins, the plastic bags have to be made into lengths of yarn. To do this, the bags are first folded into strips and cut, so as to obtain rings that are then knotted together to make the yarn.

On the third day of the training, Baraka Oukpedjou proudly poses with the handbag that she has just finished crocheting. Three days earlier, when asked what she did for a living, she shyly replied that she did not do anything. Even though "nothing" is not a true description of the daily workload of a woman in Togo



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who has a family to look after. Oukpedjou sees crocheting as an activity that could bring in a small income. This could help her to become more independent – and not just in the financial sense!

Some of the women had already heard about similar projects on television. But no report can fully explain the technique. Aware now of the importance of recycling and of protecting the environment, the participants are really motivated and keen to share the idea. Their relatives, daughters, sisters and neighbours, who were not able to attend the workshop, will be able to benefit from private training sessions. At the close of the workshop, Mounifa Saou, a teacher in Sokodé, explains: "When I show my crocheted bag to my colleagues, they will ask me how I made it. And I will be able to show them."

Due to the newly acquired technique, the women are now making plans, such as selling crocheted accessories to people in Sokodé or exporting some of their creations to Europe. The money that they earn from these sales will help to motivate women by providing them with a start-up capital. Maimouna Idrissou can already imagine a better future thanks to these

bags: "Maybe one day I will be able to open a small workshop and sell the bags in a shop". This young woman, who is 22, is studying accounting at the technical college. "During the breaks between lessons, I will be crocheting myself a school bag. Of course, my whole family will now have to start collecting plastic bags for me!"

Madame Angèle, who is in charge of the social sector at Urbis Foundation-Togo, is happy with the results of the crocheting initiative: "I have seen participants collecting plastic bags in town," she said. "I too often collect pieces of plastic that are lying on the ground. I take them to my daughter-in-law. She is good at crocheting and needs a great many bags as raw material for her work."

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