



Ministering to the Needs of a Nation

Christine Ouinsavi always loved nature. But she never imagined that her fascination with plants would lead her to the highest levels of government in Benin, her native West African country.

Focus on Conservation

After secondary school, Christine enrolled at a local agricultural college, but soon realized that the courses offered “might not help me to be a researcher. My wish was to go as far as possible at school—to get the highest degree,” she recalls. She earned a Master’s in science at the University of Ibadan in Nigeria; a biotech training course at Ghana’s Forestry Research Institute persuaded her to focus on conservation of forest resources. “I believed that I could find new ways to help preserve the forests, and contribute to Benin’s national economy,” Christine says.

Research for her Ph.D. in agronomy began in 2003 at Benin’s University of Abomey Calavi, on sustainable management of locust bean fruit, shea butter trees, and rônier palms. She hopes her work will eventually benefit both Benin’s plants and its citizens. “Rural people here rely on the sale or use of forest products to meet their daily needs,” Christine explains. Current harvesting methods put native trees at risk of overexploitation, lowered genetic diversity, and unsustainability. “Research on endangered tree species will help to conserve and reestablish plantations with high-yielding plants, and ensure a stable income source for the rural population.”

“My wish was to go as far as possible at school.”

Call to Service

Christine received a UNESCO-L’Oréal Fellowship in 2007 for her postdoctoral studies. As she was finishing statistical analysis of her data, an unexpected request came: President Boni Yayi of the Republic of Benin invited her to join his new government. “He had been seeking highly educated women leaders who could help him build the country technically, economically, and politically. I was identified as one,” she learned. Following a meticulous selection process, Christine was named Minister of Primary Education, Literacy and National Languages.

“It was an opportunity to reveal the ability of women to contribute to the management of state affairs, as well as a new experience and a chance to be useful to my country.” Deeply committed to girls’ education, Christine was involved in 2008 with a new mobile outreach: an educational program that tours rural districts where girls’ enrollment and attendance rates are low, and stresses to parents the importance of sending daughters to school. She believes that educating girls will improve their own well-being, and the prosperity of their families, communities, and country.

A Global Organizer

“My first role as a minister was related to my skill as an educator and human resource manager,” she reflects. In October 2008, President Yayi reorganized his government, and appointed Christine as Minister of Trade and Industry—one of only four women at this level. “He wants me to use my managerial ability to organize women who sell at local markets, as well as those who are involved in internal and external trading, in order to make Benin’s commercial sector more professional and structured,” she summarizes.

She attends important international gatherings, like December’s UN Conference on Trade and Development in Kenya. Despite a hectic schedule requiring frequent travel,

Christine pursues her research as much as possible. She’s arranged to continue part of her lab work at the Africa Rice Center in Cotonou, and is a lecturer in agronomy at the University of Parakou. She served as president of the Benin National Commission for UNESCO in 2006, organizing and participating in such gatherings as the Regional Conference of the African National Commission of UNESCO.



Encouraging Girls

Christine finds her newest position “interesting, but quite different from scientific research. However, an educated woman who develops scientific and managerial capacity could easily succeed at this job. I would like to encourage girls to be interested in the sciences because I can state with certainty that a scientific woman is a complete one.”

So far in her career, Christine is proudest of “being at the top—among the highest level women in the government. My dream is already partially realized,” she confides. What’s next? “Once my research project is complete, and after my experience in government, my goal is to attain a decision-making position in an international organization or institute, so I can be more useful as a woman leader,” Christine declares.