

## Biochar Fund successfully completes first phase of project in Cameroon

Biochar Fund successfully completes first phase of pilot project in Cameroon Kumba, South-West Region, Cameroon, 28 March 2009 -- The Biochar Fund is pleased to announce that it has successfully completed the first phase of its pilot project in the South-West Region of Cameroon, Central Africa. There, 75 grassroots groups of subsistence farmers are testing the effects of biochar in different soil types. Each farmer association counts between 10 and 20 members. Thus, in total, 750 to 1500 resource-poor farmers are being introduced to the new agricultural concept which aims to fight climate change, deforestation, soil depletion and rural poverty. Interest in the project is spreading rapidly, with many more groups applying for participation. After two months of producing char from a variety of widely available feedstocks (palm fronds, cassava stems, weeds and three types of wood), the product was distributed amongst the farmer associations, in different villages around the town of Kumba. The groups were then assisted in establishing their small test plots, on which they currently grow maize, a local staple crop. Despite erratic rains, the maize has emerged and looks healthy on most of the test plots. Each test field is divided into 12 sub-plots, which allows us to study the effect of biochar. On a control line of sub-plots, soils received no inputs, organic fertilizer, mineral fertilizer and a combination of both types of fertilizer. On a next line, the same inputs were combined with the equivalent of 10 tonnes of biochar per hectare. The last line received similar inputs, this time with the equivalent of 20 tonnes of char per hectare. Ambitious Ladies, one of the grassroots farmer groups, participates in a biochar demonstration. With the aid of workshops and extension work, the participating farmers were introduced into some basic aspects of soil science, climate change and deforestation. Most participants had never heard of the threat of global warming, but now they understand its dangers and its potential solutions, most notably biochar. As the farmers routinely rely on slash-and-burn cultivation and on fire to burn off their fields each year, they were quick to grasp the potentially beneficial effects of adding char to nutrient-poor soils. They also agree that using fire on the field contributes to climate change and that it is an inefficient use of waste biomass: burning the farm residues in the open air generates a lot of greenhouse gases, destroys soil life and yields little char. Pyrolysing the residues off-site is smarter. Bags of biochar made from farm residues (in this case weeds and cassava stems), ready to be distributed amongst the farmers -- subsistence farmers who make less than a dollar a day -- were excited to hear that in the near future, they may benefit from the emerging carbon market. As a social profit organization, the Biochar Fund is committed to distributing 80 percent of its profits amongst the communities it works with. Thus, in case it manages to tap the carbon market, the poor farmers of its projects stand to improve their incomes in a substantial way. The second phase of the pilot project in Cameroon is now underway. It involves monitoring and evaluating farm management, and a variety of soil tests. In June, the maize is expected to mature. With the harvest, data on the effects of biochar on crop growth and on nutrient dynamics will become available. The Biochar Fund collaborates on this project with Key Farmers Cameroon, a non-profit self-help organisation with the mission of promoting sustainable agriculture and rural development in the country's South-West Region. Key Farmers is an umbrella organization of more than 50 autonomous groups with more than 1,500 members. Members come from 25 different villages. The Biochar Fund is a small social profit fund dedicated to tackle the key problems facing the poorest of the poor, with a focus on subsistence farmers in sub-Saharan Africa. The recently established fund thinks these people can become part of a solution to more global problems, including climate change. More information can be found at our project website: <http://www.biocharcameroon.org>