



THE GREAT GREEN WALL: WHEN UTOPIA BECOMES REALITY

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In Sharm El Sheikh, the Member States of the Great Green Wall (GGW) for the Sahara and the Sahel put their all into ensuring this initiative was at the centre of the discussions taking place at the COP27 climate conference. With talks and discussions, exhibitions on techniques, and countries' forest products on display in the GGW area, the whole of the GGW community – driven by the enthusiasm of its creators – swung into action to explore solutions and engage the interest of decision-makers.

The Great Wall of the Sahara and the Sahel represents a slow, green, cultural and political revolution in Africa.

The idea of a wall of forest, 7,000 kilometres long by 15 kilometres wide, crossing the great Sahel region from Dakar to Djibouti, has for too long been criticised as a utopian project. Yet now we can see that this Pan-African programme, launched in 2007 by the African Union, is turning from dream to reality. It was strengthened by a new strategic framework endorsed by Member States in 2015, transforming it into a more inclusive

vision involving each territory and accounting for natural resource diversity and distinct farming practices across unique communities of agricultural and livestock farmers living in the countries of the Sahel.

So why did the sceptics seem to win the argument for over fifteen years? Because, as with any large-scale agricultural project, the first step was to find a suitable location for it. Launching a single agenda between eleven States, under a shared vision of an Africa-led initiative that serves the poorest populations of the driest regions of the continent, was quite a feat. And the African Union had no model to envy in a similarly broad, ambitious program in Europe: After all, did it not take twelve long years from Europe's founding speech by Robert Schumann in 1950, then the 1957 Treaty creating the European Economic Community among only 6 countries at the time, to finally birth the common agricultural policy in 1962?

Today's climate emergency is of course more urgent. And while Africa contributes only 4% of greenhouse gas emissions, the sub-Saharan area is likely to suffer grave impacts from temperature increases 1.5 times greater than average. Simultaneously, by 2050, the Sahel area will grow to more than 500 million inhabitants. It is therefore even more critical to anticipate the region's economic and social development alongside these rapidly changing demographics, such that we can create food systems based on sustainable, climate-smart and informed agriculture.

The Great Green Wall is being constructed to ensure the resilience of the people of the Sahel, over 70% make their living from agriculture and livestock. They have been severely disadvantaged following natural resource degradation caused by the great drought of 1968-1993 on the one hand, and the absence of an agricultural development policy to meet the needs of family and small farmer agriculture on the other. As we are now faced with an impoverished small farmer economy following the great famines of 1973-74 and 1984 – which decimated natural productive capital (land, water resources, biodiversity) and physical capital (livestock, seeds, tools) – we must now reconstruct a more profitable type of agriculture for the Sahel.

The Great Green Wall offers a new ecosystemic approach.

The solutions proposed by international development agencies since independence have been inadequate to supplant significant emergency operations – the latter of which continue to be justified by the multiple crises confronted by the States of the Sahel – and advance meaningful, lasting development. In fact, agency solutions are most often derived from programmes based on traditional “green revolution” models, favouring cash crops such as peanuts, cotton or irrigated rice, expensive in terms of infrastructure and equipment, and heavily dependent on chemical fertilisation and pesticides. More recently, there has been additional focus on ill-suited intensive chicken farming using imported corn.

This agricultural policy imposed on the farmers of the Sahel has failed to produce any benefits to either the local or the national economy. On the contrary, it has exacerbated countries' debts, initially incurred in the early 1990s when structural adjustments were imposed throughout the Sahel. These programs led to the disappearance of systems of agricultural extension, seen as “too expensive” by funding bodies. The result was 30 disastrous years in which the rural world was abandoned and the whole of the primary sector left to wither on the vine. With no financial or human investment, the agricultural and livestock farmers of the Sahel had no other choice than to draw on the few resources of the earth to practise survival agriculture, increasingly uncertain because of climate disturbance.

The exodus to Europe by young people and sometimes whole families is simply the consequence of a market economy that is unfavourable to the continent of Africa in a globalised world. When a young person has no other option than to go into the informal economy of African capitals or dig deep into the earth, usually with their bare hands, in gold mines exploited by unscrupulous companies, their sole objective is to save money for their escape. Yet even escape by migration has become inaccessible to many, now fought over by armed gangs which have expanded uncontrollably over the past ten years.

We may now rue the unfortunate reality that the idea of President Obasanjo and President Wade, presented at the Conference of Heads of State and Government of the Community of Saharo-Saharan States and endorsed by the African Union, did not attract sufficient interest when it was first put forward. The Great Green Wall did indeed constitute “a leading project for humanity and future generations by the positive impacts of its own mechanism for development and adaptation in the face of climate disruption” according to Master Abdoulaye Wade, who continued, “in its conception, the Great Green Wall is a new ecosystemic approach to the integrated development of arid and semi-arid regions, an overarching strategy for the restoration and recolonization of degraded and disadvantaged areas as well as the major African project of the Great Green Wall to fight poverty and migratory flows.”

These leaders saw the opportunity for their countries, region, and beyond – and it is time to deliver on its global promise.

This project extends beyond the interests of forest engineers.

Happily, African farming has strengthened over the past 20 years. With an increase in agricultural production of +4.3% per year in recent years (compared to a global average of only +2.75%), the African farming sector shows the most encouraging growth globally. The 2004 adoption of the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP) at Maputo, followed ten years later by the Malabo conference work to *transform agriculture in Africa for shared prosperity and better living conditions, thanks to the use of opportunities for inclusive growth and sustainable development*, has helped set more ambitious objectives for farming, committing the States to devote a minimum of 10% of their budget to it.

The Great Green Wall aims to restore 100 million hectares of degraded land in arid areas, in part by promoting sustainable agroforestry systems – making it an invaluable contributor to agricultural development, and therefore deserving of a place at the heart of States’ political agendas. Several countries have already realised that the project should not be solely the concern of forestry engineers. For more than ten years, Ethiopia has been making considerable investments in major watershed restoration projects, including promoting the country’s own agroforestry models which are more efficient in coping with climate variations, given their experience across a diverse base of cultures and farming practices. These programmes are now replicated in drier pastoral areas of the lowlands, largely thanks to *Acacia albida* being introduced in pasturelands. In Niger, the Regreening Africa¹ programme is a major contributor to disseminating best practices in natural vegetation conservation, providing valuable cover to cultivated plots in pastoral areas. The conservation methods for woody species (trees and shrubs) have made it possible to increase vegetation cover over more than 7 million hectare – and the total area over which the Great Green Wall is being created now covers almost half a million square kilometres, including eight large regions and 228 municipalities, coordinated through Initiative 3N²,

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/aug/16/regreening-niger-how-magical-gaos-transformed-land>

² <http://www.initiative3n.ne/>

“Nigériens Nourishing Nigériens”. Finally, the Senegalese Agency for Reforestation and the Great Green Wall has drawn up a new masterplan to accelerate creation of the GGW, with in-country progress estimated at 18% in 2022, compared to 4% achievement for all countries combined. The agency is developing an integration model aligned with the Emerging Senegal³ plan – leveraging a systemic approach that links water, energy, fodder production, food-producing forests, education, green markets, and more at a territorial level. At the same time, by integrating agro-ecological practices into agricultural policy, Senegal offers new ways of promoting sustainable agriculture initiatives to the farming milieu, enabling food systems to be constructed based on local and diversified supply. In this way, the Great Green Wall can offer an alternative to the massive import of food products and promote greater sovereignty, especially in supplying the growing number of secondary cities (those with 10,000 or more inhabitants), which increased seven-fold between 1960 and 2015.

By increasing the number of food-producing forests similar to the Touloukeur concept promoted in Senegal, the GGW will also help slow the extinction of the continent’s biodiversity – noting that Africa contains one-quarter of all global species, the most of any continent on the planet. This work can also be strengthened through private sector partnerships like those seen in SOS SAHEL’s Acacia project in Chad, leveraging sustainable management and good harvesting plans of natural acacia forests which now benefit more than 30,000 families who produce over 2,600 tonnes of gum arabic annually. Based on these models showcasing the Sahel’s ecological potential, the GGW may also achieve the objective of capturing over 250 million tonnes of carbon to be used in regenerating life in the soils – thereby demonstrating that, contrary to popular opinion, Sahelian agriculture and livestock farming can generate positive carbon impacts. Satellite images can now be used to identify species planted and their morphological state, accurately measuring the evolving vegetation cover to quantify the Great Green Wall’s carbon impact in a way that enables access climate finance. Building from this further to unlock finance for the poorest communities, the Pan-African advisory and investment bank Southbridge designed a platform to monitor impact down to the family farm level.

This is all our business, in every corner of the planet.

A persistent challenge for the Great Green Wall is that it is still not widely understood by the general public – but even more concerning is the lack of understanding among its main beneficiaries, the Sahelian communities. As we consider ways to build familiarity, community, and momentum, we must focus on the most effective levers to inspire people to drive change – including those in popular media. For example, in THE GREAT GREEN WALL documentary film by Fernando Meirelles⁴, Inna Moja tells a story weaving together the cultural, political and social values at the foundation of the initiative during her long journey from Senegal to Ethiopia, which culminates in the viewer’s and her own realization of our collective responsibility for the Great Green Wall because it will shape all our futures as a frontline in the fight against climate change. Especially in inspiring young people desperate for a brighter future, comedy and music are much more effective than long speeches, as expressed by the comedian Mamane alongside the singer A’Solfo – Magic System in the Francophone area at COP27: *“Our words are a weapon, they can be both destructive and the means of salvation.”* Going even further, Magic System has already created its own foundation to promote the well-being of populations through the environment, health and culture.

Critically, the GGW also presents the opportunity to construct a new narrative for the

³ <http://www.senegal-emergent.com/>

⁴ <https://www.greatgreenwall.org/film>

countries of the Sahel, which are too often associated with crises and famines. For example, Chef Pierre Thiam promotes the region's culinary arts and diversity of food resources to tell a new story that he shares with some of the major personalities on the planet. He finds inspiration in the traditional dishes of Sahelian mothers, who cooked perfectly balanced food based on local cereals such as fonio, leaves, and vitamin-rich fruit from the wide range of forest species, including the legendary baobab, along with just the right amount of vegetable or animal protein needed by humans. Thiam uses his company, Yolélé, to celebrate the potential of Sahelian products, thereby opening the door to a new and too little explored world. We see through him and can imagine further the additional opportunities presented by the GGW to promote products laden with history, such as gum arabic, shea and *Balanites aegyptiaca* (also known as the "desert date" or "soap berry bush"). Each of these offer new stories that simultaneously can reinforce value chains in the Sahel, as described in a September 2022 by the World Economic Forum⁵ reviewing its 1t.org programme. Constructing sustainable use systems and robust communities of ecopreneurs through the Great Green Wall is not only powerful storytelling – but could generate meaningful livelihood growth for Sahelians, with a long-term goal of creating 10 million new jobs throughout the initiative.

And so, the GGW reaches far beyond professions of reforestation and agriculture. It opens new pathways in the social sciences, particularly those related to local development, technology, culture and entrepreneurship. We must not miss this opportunity to weave new links between the countries of the Sahel, its neighbours and countries on other continents; we must endeavour to create new spaces of collaboration and discussion, and to volunteer ourselves for the hard yet meaningful work of fairer trade. Above all, the GGW must be built on and help build additional relationships based on knowledge sharing, home-grown training and co-construction of future development pathways with stakeholders at all scales. The ground is fertile for this shared work, and we also see the shoots of emerging partnerships that hold the promise of possibility – in the model of the new venture between Senegalese Agency for Reforestation and the Great Green Wall in Dakar and students at ISTOM – School of International Agricultural Development in Angers, in GGW Partners Platform⁶ championed by SOS SAHEL and pan-African institutions to enable learning communities between local actors, and more.

Funding the future through new models of finance.

The ultimate success of the GGW will depend on the capacity of States and major international stakeholders to develop new finance models that are more inclusive, led by local players, and coordinated at the local, national, and regional levels for long-term investment. One such model to build on is the GGW accelerator at CNULCD⁷ which has already raised more than \$17 billion following commitments made at the One Planet Summit (January 2021). Additional examples exist on a smaller scale, such as the collaboration between the SGP-GEF⁸ programme in the United Nations Programme for Development and SOS SAHEL, who combined efforts to support agro-ecology projects in 7 countries of the GGW.

Municipalities have a major role to play in planning and local project management, which means that local authorities must also be aware of GGW objectives to devise "certified" projects that can be recognised by the National Agencies and the Pan-African GGW

⁵https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_1t.org_SahelLe_potentiel_inexploite_des_chaines_de_valeur_de_la_Grande_Muraille_Verte.pdf

⁶ <https://panegmv.org>

⁷ <https://www.unccd.int/#>

⁸ <https://sgp.undp.org/>

Agency. That could require even greater flexibility in defining parameters for qualifying GGW projects, such as strictures around rainfall requirements (currently limited to the 400mm rainfall line or “isohyet”, seen as the dividing line between semi-humid and semi-arid climates). As stated by Mohamed Ould Amara, Mayor of Chinguetti municipality in Mauritania, “Oases are also legitimate areas to include in the GGW because they are part of the Sahelian ecosystem.” The countries of southern Africa have already formulated their strategy, and the more coastal countries of West Africa, also increasingly impacted by desertification phenomena, are also thinking of affiliating. Building more opportunities to thoughtfully expand engagement and advancement of the GGW should be encouraged to increase our long-term chances of success.

As so openly expressed by young people to Emmanuel Macron at the new Africa-France Summit in 2021 in Montpellier, Africa expects a new attitude from its partners, respecting the initiatives and cultural values of the continent – a partnership of equals for development designed by Africans and for Africans. Together we must elevate and pursue the vision of an “Integrated, prosperous and peaceful Africa, run by its own citizens and representing a dynamic force on the international scene” (Agenda 2063 of the African Union). And while progress may have been too slow in the past, through the Great Green Wall Initiative for the Sahara and the Sahel, we have the opportunity to correct for previous inaction – driving momentum for a greener, more prosperous Africa, celebrating and led by Africans, and shaping our shared global future for the better.