

(UNCCD, also see article on pages 22–23), financial support has also been advanced. In January 2021, a corresponding acceleration mechanism (The Great Green Wall Accelerator) was adopted at the One Planet Summit. Meanwhile, more than 19 billion US dollars (USD) has been raised by several multilateral and bilateral organisations for 2021–2025 for the GGW initiative – nearly 60 per cent of the 33 billion USD needed to meet the 2030 targets.

Moving forward with traditional methods

GGW officials know that ultimately the initiative can only succeed if it focuses on diverse greening and sustainable land management instead of a fixed belt of trees across the Sahel. Arbitrary afforestation, as practised in many places in the past, is of little use; many seedlings soon die. With a continuous wall, trees would also be planted where there are no people to care for them. To be successful, the GGW initiative must draw on local knowledge and involve local people as well. Studies such as *Restoring African Drylands* by the European Tropical Forest Research Net-

work (ETFRN) show how natural and climate-adapted farmer-led regeneration projects, simple water collection methods, and binding community land use rules have restored productivity in degraded soils.

The GGW initiative has had to contend with difficult conditions. Its success is threatened not only because of global warming, but also because of political corruption and insurgent groups. And the region has a long history of escalating violence. Governments working together to fight corruption and terrorism, investing in the education of their people, and providing money for irrigation will be crucial for the success of the Great Green Wall. If such measures are taken, a green landscape could indeed blossom across Africa.

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“ More cohesion across existing frameworks is desperately needed ”

It's been nearly 15 years since a vanguard of African countries first committed to restore degraded farms, forests, grasslands and other ecosystems through the Great Green Wall movement. Salima Mahamoudou, a Research Associate at the World Resources Institute, gives an account of challenges facing restoration efforts, what has already been accomplished and strategies needed to still achieve the goals which have been set.

Ms Mahamoudou, given the scale of the challenge and country commitments, many are asking critical questions about progress made with the GGWI. Are locally led land restoration movements in the context of the GGWI on track to achieve their promise?

Answering this question is difficult because monitoring restoration – in Africa and elsewhere – is notoriously complicated. It will still be difficult to estimate the real state of restoration across GGW countries due to a lack of cohesion across tools and methodologies by partners and research centres. Furthermore, one has to bear in mind that it takes years for trees to grow to the point

where they can be counted as part of a viable restoration project. We can't expect to see positive restoration data in the early years of these projects – that's just how nature works.

Do you believe it is at all still possible to achieve the goals set by 2030?

Reaching GGW targets by 2030 is indeed going to be challenging, but it is far from being impossible. In fact, we have a clear roadmap consisting of six items for how to achieve this goal. First, accelerate the adaptation and implementation by local communities of tree planting practices, farmer-managed natural regeneration – FMNR – and other soil/water conservation methods. Second, establish strong tracking systems for measuring



the biophysical and socioeconomic progress and impact of restoration. Third, build local ownership of restoration efforts at the national and local level. Fourth, create an enabling environment, with the right strategies, policies and local bylaws to incentivise land restoration at scale. Fifth, increase investment in grassroots restoration projects and businesses, including in agroforestry value chains. And sixth, investment in communication and knowledge sharing. Communication at the landscape, national and global level can shed light on innovative grassroots methods and champions.

Do you see a policy failure in the countries participating in the GGWI?

This isn't really about policy failure. Every country has its own approach based on its contexts, including economic, cultural, social and so many other factors. In reality, the places where restoration efforts are faltering are those places where in some cases there are insufficient policies that could otherwise create incentives and a vision for smallholder farmers and landowners to restore degraded land at scale.



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Photo: World Resources Institute

The World Resources Institute is a global research organisation that works with governments, businesses, multilateral institutions and civil society groups to develop practical solutions that improve people's lives and ensure nature can thrive. The Institute organises its work around seven global challenges: Food, Forests, Water, Energy, Climate, the Ocean and Cities.

You mentioned smallholders. How can they contribute to the success of the initiative?

One indeed has to admit that top-down reforestation efforts have failed. If we want to achieve GGW goals by restoring millions of degraded landscapes, we will need to further support bottom-up approaches by investing in smallholders to protect and restore their lands and ecosystems, while building resilience to climate change and ensuring food security. If we want to increase the contribution of smallholders in the restoration movement, we must first of all clarify land ownership: Land and resources rights can be challenging in many African countries, especially across the Sahel, where resources are scarce. In addition, resource rights have to be secured. In many Sahelian countries, if a smallholder plants a tree, he automatically owns that tree. But if he naturally regenerates that tree, it is owned by the government. This is particularly problematic because one of the most promising restoration options for the Sahel is Assisted Natural Regeneration. As a result, if the smallholder does not have the right to harvest the trees he has protected, there will be little incentive to do so. But, by working with various government agencies and decision-makers, an enabling environment can be created, thus ensuring that farmers can be allowed to legally harvest and sell their tree products and thus benefit from their efforts.

One further important aspect is extensive sharing of knowledge. Our experiences of large greening efforts show that sharing knowledge, especially at the local level, is a key element of promoting the adoption of good practices and creating change at scale. And as a final issue, afforestation has to be made lucrative as a viable business enterprise. Today, restoration practices are still seen as humanitarian and development solutions, but not as business ventures. But if we want to reach our goals, we need to promote restoration as a business option, and grow commercially-viable products out of restored landscapes to further incentivise communities to invest in land restoration practices.

Can you give an assessment of which countries have been particularly successful?

It is hard to give a fair assessment because efforts across GGW countries are underreported. At the global and regional level, we often talk about the success of Niger, with more than five million hectares restored since 1985 using Assisted Natural Regeneration. But there are millions of other small-scale examples and

successes across the Sahel. Unfortunately, these smaller successes are often hidden in project reports and as a result are barely known by the larger public. Communication is increasingly being recognised as a key element of a successful GGWI.

Do you think "The Great Green Wall Accelerator" will help to make the initiative a success?

The creation of the GGW Accelerator provided new momentum to the initiative. A multi-actor approach has the potential to create a shared vision and targeted actions across restoration actors. It involves learning from our past challenges and linking up dispersed efforts which may now be without a clear or shared pathway. But to increase its functionality, it needs to work closely with the Pan-African Agency of the GGW – if not transfer the accelerator responsibilities entirely to them – for greater ownership of the processes and durability of efforts.

At the UNCCD COP 15 meeting, participants summarised that the biggest challenge is the scale of the project. How do you see this?

Building solid alliances and cohesion across monitoring systems is one of the biggest challenges for the GGW and other restoration initiatives. During COP 15, there was a recurring discussion around the existence of "Too many reporting frameworks and insufficient cohesion". There are a lot of different monitoring or reporting frameworks, with various indicators and requirements, and as a result, definitions of success depend on which measure is used. Countries and some partners are concerned that we'll get to 2030, with 80 million reporting frameworks, but with no clarity on how much progress has been made. More cohesion across existing frameworks is desperately needed to reduce the burden on countries and make reporting user-friendly and achievable.

How can this be accomplished?

To break that cycle, countries need to make their own assessment of what indicators and frameworks are most appropriate to their needs and ecosystems. With a shared understanding on what to measure, how to measure, the costs associated, the frequency of collection and the entities in charge of that, it becomes easier to build cohesion across various stakeholder and contributors.

Interview: Patricia Summa