The Great Green Wall: Towards Transparent, Participatory, and Equitable Restoration

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Background

The Great Green Wall (GGW) is a multi-stakeholder revegetation project in Sahelian Africa, launched in 2007 by the African Union in collaboration with the European Union (EU), the World Bank, and the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD). The project was designed to create a barrier of vegetation across 7,000 km of the Sahel region, to combat desertification, protect local biodiversity, improve livelihoods, and reduce migration. However, almost 20 years after its commencement, the project is largely considered to have failed: 80% of the planted trees have died, land degradation has continued, and the project's philosophy has radically evolved from its original conservation intent. Furthermore, the GGW has covered only 4% of its target area, despite being more than halfway through its 2030 completion timeline.

What began as a cross-state project in 11 countries in the Sahel region has turned into a continental initiative involving over 20 African countries, including Senegal, Nigeria, Niger, Ethiopia, Chad, and Mali, among others. Each country implements the project within its own borders through national agencies or coordinating bodies that manage activities at the local level. These national entities are responsible for planning, restoration work, monitoring, and community engagement. International donors, both multilateral and bilateral, provide funding, while select United Nations agencies, including the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), provide technical and policy support as well as funding. NGOs such as the World Resources Institute, SOS Sahel, and Tree Aid complement these efforts by supporting community-based initiatives, offering technical expertise, and aligning restoration work with broader sustainable development goals.

Given its technical role in the initiative and its mandate to facilitate multilateral decision-making among member states, working with donor agencies, national implementing agencies, as well as NGOs, we address this brief to the UNCCD.

Figure 1: Governance Diagram of the GGW Initiative.

Problem statement

The supposed overall "failure" of the initial GGW project and the many attempts to reform, relaunch, and improve it, including the Accelerator, have been the focus of lively debates and critical research on the shortcomings of the project.
While tree planting was initially conceived as a solution to halt desertification in Sahelian Africa and combat climate change, as well as spur growth and improve food availability, the focus on tree planting has since been strongly questioned. The idea has been deemed Eurocentric and ill adapted to the Sahelian context, highlighting the soil desiccation risks of dryland afforestation and the intensifying competition for water resources. Furthermore, international and national officials being responsible for the planning of reforestation projects rather than local communities has been identified as a key issue: the exclusion of local knowledge from the planning of these projects limits the effectiveness of restoration measures and does not use potential of the extensive knowledge of local communities about their land.

Beyond the ecological aspects and issues of the project, its governance structure has also been criticized. The strong influence and decision-making power of Western donor institutions, combined with the low participation of local communities, has led critics to describe the project as "eco-colonialism". Although framed as a grassroots, pan-African initiative, in practice the GGW has relied heavily on top-down planning, international governance, and external investment, echoing the same issues seen in other contemporaneous land-based projects: a senior World Bank advisor observed that many "multinational development projects are being pushed out from the centre by people who really don't know Africa". Weak governance and a lack of focus on local communities has even been shown to lead to land privatisation and community displacement, as reforested areas become appealing for wealthy investors or local elites and communal property rights are often not well-defined. Beyond negatively affecting ecological outcomes, this has also resulted in lack of socioeconomic benefits for local communities, sparking resistance even in countries like Senegal, where the GGW has been most successful despite the policies of landscape regeneration clashing with the desire of indigenous communities to conserve their identitarian practices.

Beyond top-down governance issues, the GGW suffers from political instability, corruption at multiple governing levels, and a lack of transparency, with the fragmentation of funding obstructing monitoring of financial flows and lack of independence in certain National Agencies. These factors explain why afforestation has fared better in countries like Senegal and Ethiopia, while in those facing higher conflict and corruption, like Burkina Faso and Chad, it remains limited despite substantial funding.

The GGW project thus faces several issues. Nevertheless, nature restoration projects like the GGW remain vital as desertification continues to threaten livelihoods, food security, and ecosystems in the Sahel region. In this policy brief, we thus aim to address key flaws of the GGW and develop recommendations to realize the initiative's full potential. In this, we especially focus on the governance structure of the GGW, which appears to be the overarching factor causing issues in the social, political, economic, and ecological dimensions of the project.

The Great Green Wall (GGW) project, has therefore despite its ambitious goals of halting desertification and promoting sustainable development in Sahelian Africa, been undermined by a lack of community involvement, top-down governance, opaque financial management, and political instability, calling for greater transparency and local participation to achieve its transformative potential.

Key findings from the research

Through our research on GGW governance structure and implementation, several key issues emerge: **the exclusion of local communities from project design and decision-making, a narrow focus that sidelines local realities and social issues, and a persistent top-down approach and opacity in the allocation and use of funds.** These issues are key barriers to effectiveness across all studied contexts. Our findings below, based on literature review as well as interviewee testimonies which have been anonymized[1], illustrate these dynamics and reasons why they must be addressed to improve the GGW's outcomes.

Top-down approaches, where initiatives are imposed on communities rather than initiated by them, are widely recognized as drivers of failure of community-based natural resource management. In our research, we find evidence that this is also the case for many GGW projects. Official GGW guidelines include no binding requirement for community involvement, and in Niger, for instance, most projects "half fail" before their implementation due to a lack of local community engagement (B). For example, due to community's negligence, not watered trees may decay.

On the other hand, different GGW projects which implement processes of participatory governance, i.e. which include and empower indigenous groups in the management of local projects, appear to be more successful. Such initiatives include agroforestry programs in which local communities resume tree-growing practices forbidden during the colonial time (T), integrated community farms in Senegal managed by women (D) and inclusive local management committees composed by local representatives who take local decisions on lands management (S).

The lack of community involvement in many GGW projects despite its clear benefits has several root causes. Using overly technical language, not providing translations into local languages, and the absence of accessible reports make the GGW incomprehensible to many local populations (C). This lack of transparency and knowledge sharing limits community capacity building, and may reflect a deliberate political strategy to prevent local actors from questioning the project's objectives or implementation (C). Furthermore, many communities do not to take ownership of the GGW due to its lack of meaningfulness to their daily concerns (B). Without access to basic services such as electricity or running water, local populations already persevere in difficult daily conditions, seeing little reason to invest time in a large-scale initiative like the GGW.

The recovery of fodder plots in Senegal offers a promising example of how the GGW can help address these social issues: it supports Fulani herders by enabling them to remain settled, thereby reducing the need for transhumance, a practice that disrupts children's education, access to healthcare, and social stability. However, such locally responsive interventions remain the exception rather than the norm across other participating countries, and often community participation remains surface-level and "tokenist". Even where such participation is pursued, it is frequently carried out in the form of education and consultation activities, which are important but sit at the lower rung of the participation ladder as they often come without a real chance to negotiate with the traditional power holders and are thus a one-way flow - especially if these activities are carried out at late stages in the decision-making process.

(Better) involving local communities thus emerges as a key issue for the GGW.

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[1] Note on the anonymization format used: random letter assigned to each person interviewed
        D: Research engineer at the CNRS and working in the National Agency of Senegal
        B: Member of the Transparency Agency in Niger.
        S: Sergeant living with local communities in Senegal and working for the National Agency
        P: University teacher on environmental issues
        T: Researcher and Nature-society geographer
        C: Official at a national development agency in a donor country

This top-down approach also manifests itself in the **allocation of funds** in many GGW projects. The **"strong donor-led conception"** of the GGW, where resources are largely allocated to international NGOs and government programmes that often fail to align with local needs and expertise, is a key issue: the supposed trickle-down effects of this model rarely occur because interventions are not adapted to country-specific contexts (D). Even efforts targeted at equitable compensation often miss the most vulnerable (T), and costly infrastructures remain unused due to their misalignment (B). These issues are partially rooted in donors' unrealistic expectations about rapid results (evident even in the name of the "Accelerator" and the large amount of criticism about the project moving too slowly), clashing with the GGW's inherently gradual and long-term nature. Moreover, the monitoring criteria, to which funding is contingent, is lacking in several aspects. World Bank evaluations, for instance, only measure afforestation, despite the projects including several other ecological and social dimensions (T, TI, D).

Furthermore, "transparency in the governance of the GGWI is severely limited", an issue exacerbated by the decentralized and fragmented nature of the initiative's financing. At the local level, lack of information and transparency enables practices like land-grabbing, as awareness of rights and of the terms of funding remains low (T), and capture of funding by local elites; at the donor level, national agencies dispense funds to the UNCCD with limited oversight of their final allocation (C). These information asymmetries can be exploited - governments may deliberately withhold information to avoid the costs of community education or redirect funds to more "convenient" areas to secure quick results. Both state and local actors may also manipulate outcomes to attract continued funding. This highlights a need for improved visibility and checks and balances between the different actors.

Finally, the political fragility of several countries in the initiative also poses funding challenges. Large shares of funding are allocated to more stable countries, such as Senegal, for various reasons like lesser corruption concerns and higher willingness of aid workers to be on the ground. This approach, however, can further weaken already-unstable countries, draining resources and local talent and denying them opportunities to build effective local government institutions.
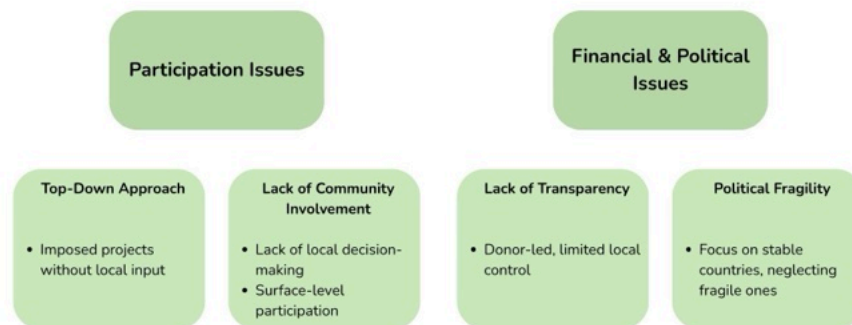

Figure 2: Key findings overview

Policy Recommendations

These insights lead to key policy recommendations on how the UNCCD can enhance participatory governance and transparency in the implementation of the Great Green Wall (GGW) Initiative.

1. **Participation**

Few current GGW projects display effective community involvement, with much of the initiative being top-down and many efforts at involvement being tokenistic and focused solely on consultation.

Consequently, we propose actions promoting [deeper community engagement](deeper%20community%20engagement), shifting from mere consultation toward partnership and citizen-led governance.

a. Conduct site-level assessments of tenure, stakeholders, and vulnerabilities
The UNCCD should require local NGOs and national agencies to assess land tenure, identify key stakeholders, and map vulnerable groups to gain a detailed and nuanced understanding of the local context before initiating any project.

b. Develop targeted education frameworks for underrepresented groups
Educating communities on the benefits of regeneration, but also on how to get one's voice heard is key to shape favorable attitudes towards environmental protection and ensure meaningful participation in the implementation stage. It has been shown that women, young people and pastoralist groups are less confident in public interactions as a result of the scarcer consideration of their viewpoints and interests by male-dominated majority groups. Creating exclusive groups aimed at encouraging mutual exchanges, public interaction and consolidation of their position is essential to overcome this participatory barrier.

c. Ensure accessible, relevant, and easily accessible information
Translate materials into local languages and ground them in community knowledge systems. Avoid legal jargon and expert-centric presentations. Cross-disciplinary teams, including social scientists, should facilitate community engagement to reflect the social dimensions of conservation.

d. Establish local management committees with inclusive governance mandates.
The UNCCD should mandate the formation of local participatory committees for all GGW projects. These committees must have a clear governance structure and project-specific decision-making powers. Membership should be open to all affected stakeholders, with special measures to ensure the inclusion of marginalized groups. Establishment of these groups should start in the pre-implementation phase to allow ample time for inputs to be taken into account.

e. Promote peer learning through local success stories and village-to-village exchanges.
To support grassroots conservation, the UNCCD should identify and disseminate local examples of successful conservation practices. Highlighting communities that succeed despite resource constraints can inspire peer learning. Organizing study visits between places involved in GGW projects can help spread appropriate techniques and strengthen community-led conservation networks.

f. Partner with other UN agencies to create favorable socio-economic conditions.
To effectively enable populations to spend time and energy on meaningful engagement with GGW projects, the UNCCD should partner with other UN agencies to address other socio-economic challenges in project areas which may hinder the ability or willingness to participate in GGW processes.

2. **Monitoring**
Current GGW projects lack accessible, transparent data on their outcomes. We propose policies to improve monitoring practices and restore credibility and efficiency.

a. Introduce a requirement of comprehensive impact metrics for each project.
It is crucial to measure both environmental indicators, such as biodiversity, and socio-economic impacts and governance improvements, beyond just tree counts. Regular evaluations should assess progress, impact, and areas for improvement, reinforce oversight and accountability.

b. Transparent data sharing platform and local access to information
A centralized public platform should be developed to provide up-to-date information on each project's goals, budgets, progress, and evaluation outcomes. This data should be collected and verified by local enforcement agencies to enhance trust and legitimacy. In affected areas with limited internet access [(e.g., Niger, where it's only 24%),](e.g.,%20Niger) provide printed updates at local community centers and ensure that translators and experts are available to facilitate understanding and engagement.

c. Provide dedicated funding for monitoring.
Allocate specific resources to ensure comprehensive and continuous oversight of the GGW projects.

3. Transparency and safeguards in funding allocation

The issue of fragmentation of funding, donor-led funding, and corruption threaten the success of GGW projects, reduce local involvement, and contribute to land rights violations. We propose policies that address these issues and lead to more transparent, bottom-up funding with increased safeguards.

a. Direct funding to national agencies

Where possible, funding should be directed to national agencies rather than NGOs. This approach allows for more local, rather than donor-led, control over resource allocation and a clearer picture of where the funding is going.

b. Implement transparent spending oversight

Within the monitoring platform, ensure that the full financial pipeline from donors to recipients is tracked and reported. Transparency is essential to ensure resources are used effectively and to make sure that desired trickle-down effects actually manifest.

c. Address legal gaps at the national level to avoid land grabbing

In countries with centralized land laws, such as Nigeria's Land Use Act, protective mechanisms should be put in place on GGW projects to secure community land rights. These mechanisms will help to ensure vulnerable populations are not displaced or excluded from the benefits created by GGW funding.

d. Use local committees to strengthen awareness and enforcement of communal land rights

Local committees, as recommended in point 1., should serve as platforms to raise awareness of communal property rights and promote collective management of GGW projects to counter land grabbing and corruption at the local level.

Policy Area	Proposal
Participation	Conduct site-level assessments of tenure, stakeholders, and vulnerabilities.
	Develop targeted education frameworks for underrepresented groups.
	Ensure accessible, relevant, and easily understandable information.
	Establish local management committees with inclusive governance mandates.
	Promote peer learning through local success stories and village-to-village exchanges.
	Partner with other UN agencies to create favorable socio-economic conditions.
Monitoring	Introduce a requirement of comprehensive impact metrics for each project.
	Create a transparent data-sharing platform and local access to information.
	Provide dedicated funding for monitoring.
Transparency & Funding	Direct funding to national agencies instead of NGOs.
	Implement transparent spending oversight.
	Address legal gaps at the national level to avoid land grabbing.
	Use local committees to strengthen awareness and enforcement of communal land rights.

Figure 3: Key recommendations

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