How down-top natural based solutions can bring peace: Africa's Great Green Wall

What if we told you that examples of green peacebuilding initiatives already existed? We just have to learn from them.

María Olazar, 02.02.2022

While conflicts and extremism are caused by different factors, it is clear that environmental climate degradation can jeopardize peace efforts and therefore a green approach to peacebuilding is needed (Peace on Climate, 2020).

Numerous studies have shown that the Sahel region in the centre of the African continent is one of the areas most affected by climate change. Rising temperatures and the area's geographical position on the edge of the Sahara Desert are fuelling desertification. Given the circumstances, the affected countries that make up the Sahel launched an initiative to reforest and protect the area from being absorbed by the sand waves.

Image source: National Geographic website

Consisting of an 8,000-kilometre-long wall of acacia trees, the Great Green Wall will span the eleven countries of the Sahel region to contain the advance of desertification on the southern shores of the Sahara's dune sea (Moncada Lorén, 2018) – note that Sahel means "coast" in Arabic, thus the states referred to above are Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Sudan, Chad, Nigeria, Niger, Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania and Senegal. Although it was these countries that initially promoted the Wall project along with the African Union in 2007, numerous public and private actors have since joined the initiative.

The Great Green Wall of trees would cross the African continent from East to West, preventing the area from becoming a barren dusty expansion. Desertification has forced thousands of people to flee their homes in the Sahel, as the inability to grow subsistence crops due to lack of water and erosion of arable land exacerbated the severe drought problem that plagues the region, especially during the dry season. Fihima Mohamed, leader of the Women Initiative Djibouti, remarked that the lack of training in

farming techniques fed the abandoning of the land by long-time farmers. The latter issue is commonly known as climate migration, which remains an unseen problem in the eyes of the international opinion (Moncada Lorén, 2018). In addition to migration, "*droughts increase the risk of civil war primarily when they strike vulnerable and politically marginalized populations in agrarian societies*" (Theisen et al., 2011).

Agriculture and cattle support nearly two-thirds of the population in the Sahel – almost 30% of each country's GDP comes from those sectors. Inhabitants of the region are increasing rapidly in number – it is estimated to be well above by 2050 (Theisen, et al., 2011) – yet arable land is diminishing year after year. The majority of Sahelian countries are already dealing with food insecurity, and the region is likely to be struck hard by climate change (Theisen et al., 2011).

In addition, the following scenarios are presented in several of the countries that will be crossed by the wall, as an example of climate change being a cause of conflict:

As the extent of arable land in northern Nigeria diminishes, desertification and interruptions have increased conflict between farmers and herders. Furthermore, 14 million hectares of the 27.9 million hectare area where restoration is ecologically and economically sustainable are inside the perimeter of devastating conflict areas (Vyawahare, 2021). Access to these areas has been restricted due to a Boko-Haram-

led Islamic insurgency, which is motivated by the poor living conditions. Chikaodili Orakwue, a research fellow at the Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution in Abuja specialized in environment and conflict, expressed the concern of Boko Haram being a huge difficulty for the execution of the Great Green Wall.

Some analysts dubbed the Darfur conflict in Sudan as "*the first climate change war*" (Carrington, 2019), with UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon declaring in 2007 that among the numerous political and social underpinnings, it began as an ecological crisis, deriving at least to some degree from climate change.

Regarding Mali, Lionel Badal, a young scholar for the Red Cross/Red Crescent Climate Centre, stated that 80% of the population depends on traditional agriculture or fishing, both of which are particularly sensitive to climate change (Badal, 2011). Climate change will exacerbate the two main factors that contribute to disasters: social vulnerability and climate hazards, if nothing is done (Mamby Fofana, climate expert for the Swedish Embassy in Bamako).

Those are little examples of the situation in the countries that will be hit the hardest by climate change, which is why the Great Green Wall initiative will be of a high success. Among the benefits of the wall, it is to report that the leaves of the trees of vegetation provide compost for the soil and the leafy canopies raise

humidity and shade for the locals, which also helps to reduce water consumption in a region accustomed to water rationing. Tree roots keep water trapped underground and protect the soil from erosion, allowing water to flow back into dry wells thanks to this green armour against the desert.

In the fight against desertification, five million hectares of land have been restored in Nigeria, for instance, and twenty thousand green employments have been generated. More that eleven thousand trees have been planted in Senegal, reclaiming twenty five thousand hectares of land (Fröhlich, 2020). Janani Vivekananda expressed that "*the project would be a good way to create peace. But if investments are only made in stable states* – which is what many international actors are defending – *then it will harm the weakest who, without investments, are exposed to further conflicts and climate change*".

Image source: Great Green Wall website

The reforestation movement has mobilized thousands of people who used to go hungry but now only have to walk the green wall in search of work, so the Great Green Wall of Africa has

revitalized the local economy. *"With all hands on deck and concerted efforts at land restoration by African leaders, I am optimistic that Africa's ambition of restoring over 100 million hectares of degraded landscape for productive agriculture is achievable*" (Buhari, 2021). This environmental victory will translate into livelihoods, jobs and futures for the inhabitants who have this arid corner of the world as their home, the frontier of climate change.

It is thanks to projects like this one, which tackle both climate change and conflict at the same time by creating a better life for their surrounding communities, that humanity has a chance to move forward. It is now only up to decision-makers to position themselves, take action and support and fund projects like this one worldwide.

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