

Overview of the Great Green Wall initiative in the Sahel region

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INTRODUCTION

The Great Green Wall (GGW) is an initiative spanning 18 countries in the Sahel region of Africa, to halt desertification (UNCCD, n.d.). It is one of the biggest environmental projects in the world. This project strives towards restoring 100 million hectares of degraded land, sequester 250 million tons of carbon and create 10 million green jobs in rural areas by 2030 (Tangem & Lyonga Edimo, 2021). With the completion of the GGW the Sahel region should become sustainable and the quality of life within these regions might increase substantially (UNCCD, 2020).

DESERTIFICATION IN THE SAHEL REGION

The Sahel region is a semi-arid climate belt which stretches across Africa just south of the Sahara. This is one of the world's most vulnerable and prone areas to desertification, however millions of people still depend on the land in these areas, even though much of it is rapidly losing its productivity due to desertification (Mongabay, 2023; RBG, 2014).

Desertification is a natural or human driven process where fertile land gradually degrades into desert. Here there are several factors that might be causing desertification such as climate change, drought, overgrazing, deforestation, and even unsustainable farming practices (Goffner et al., 2024; RBG, 2014).

THE HISTORY OF THE INITIATIVE

The idea of a GGW originated in 1950's when a British biologist named Richard St. Barbe Baker put forth the idea of the "Green Front" during a trip across the Sahara Desert (RBG, 2014).

The idea resurfaced in 2002 during a meeting in N'Djamena, Chad. This was a special summit, which was held on the World Day to Combat Desertification and Drought (GGWI, n.d.). Hereafter the Community of the Sahel-Saharan States showed a strong interest to actively start a large-scale project in 2005 (ADBG, n.d.). Shortly after (2007) the African Union started to support the project, which made the GGW initiative become much larger. It accelerated the GGW-project and the need for all countries involved to collaborate at a much larger scale than previously (GGWI, n.d.).

The GGW project has been inspired by many projects e.g. Algerian Green Dam & Chinas Green Wall and it evolved into a program that focusses on several environmental issues and helps people with socio-economic problems across the Sahel region (HandWiki, n.d.).

This initiative has active projects across 18 countries, where the communities are working together to restore the land and grow food in a way that supports them and halt the desertification (GGWI, n.d.). Even though the initiative has faced several challenges, the GGW has made steady progress, as illustrated in Figure 1. The timeline highlights the most important milestones from 2019 to 2024, including hectares of land restored, seedlings planted and financial commitments made by international partners.

GOALS, CURRENT STATUS AND RELATION TO SDG15

To achieve the goal of restoring the degraded land, they use both an active and passive approach. The active approach means planting seedlings and "actively" regenerating land. The passive approach means that land is set aside to regenerate on its own over a longer period, often being several years (UNCCD, 2020; UNCCD, 2022).

By 2024 GGW achieved to regenerate around 30 million Ha of land, indicating that they must regenerate 70Ha more before 2030 to achieve their aim. To do this, they set forth the goal of having 10Ha of land regenerated each year from the start of 2024 to complete this initiative before 2030 (Springfield, 2024).

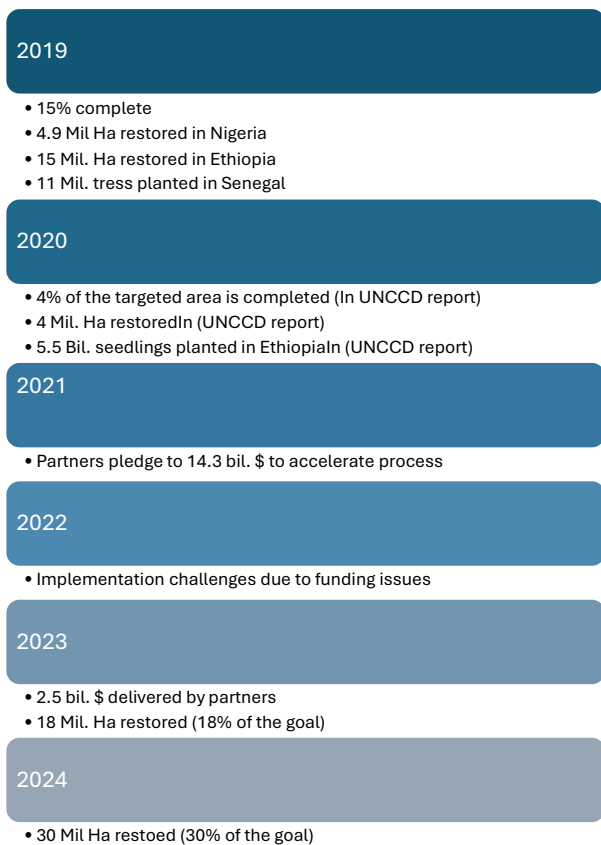


Figure 1: Timeline from 2019 to 2024 of the progress made towards the initiative.

The GGW has several points which are also related to the Sustainable development goals (SDGs) made by the United Nations in 2015. This project and goal number 15 of the SDGs have a large interconnection with each other.

“Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”

The GGW also predates the SDGs, and it is therefore a true indication of how the GGW initiative was innovative for its time. Not just by starting a collaboration across many African countries, but also by prioritizing sustainable development in several different ways. With the introduction of the SDGs in 2015 it just further highlighted the need to stop the desertification of the sub-Saharan region. The SDGs also highlighted how the lives of the people in the affected areas are of great concern, and how it should be the aim to create more sustainable living areas for these communities (UNCCD, 2020).

STRUCTURE & STAKEHOLDERS

According to the UNCCD (2020), the GGW is structured around five Major Strategic Axes (MSAs). All actions taken can be seen to relate to either one or several of these MSAs. The five MSAs are presented in Figure 2 and together form the thematic pillars of the initiative. They ensure that environmental, social and institutional dimensions of the project are addressed in parallel across all participating countries. In general, these MSAs were needed to manage this large-scale initiative, involving multiple countries. The progress is supervised at the regional, national and local levels (UNCCD, 2022).

Despite a structured approach, the UNCCD highlights several key difficulties in implementing the GGW, including weak organizational structures, insufficient coordination among stakeholders, and a lack of mainstreaming of environmental action into national sector strategies and policies. These challenges have slowed progress and underscore the need for the GGW Accelerator, which was established to address gaps in coordination, monitoring, and resource mobilization across participating countries (UNCCD, n.d.).

The UNCCD (2020) report states that to get an overview of the progress made through the implementation of the GGW, the initiative has used 4 different cycles. The four cycles are shown in Figure 3, with each cycle building on the results of the previous one. Together they move the initiative from its initial pilot phase to the final upscaling



Figure 2: The Major Strategic Axes (MSAs) of the GGW.

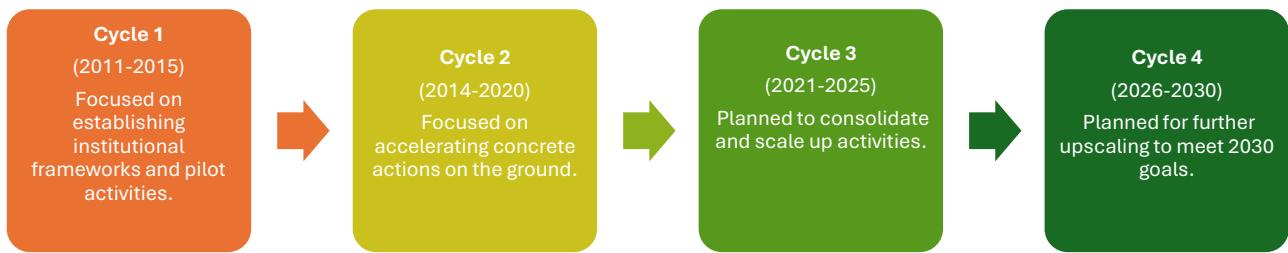


Figure 3: The four cycles of the GGW (“The Global Harmonized Strategy”), and what is implemented in each of these.

needed to reach the 2030 goals. Just as the African Union funded the GGW with a large sum of money in 2007, many other stakeholders have done the same. This is seen with the creation of the Sahel and West Africa Program (SAWAP), which is a jointly created program by the World Bank and the Global Environment. SAWAP has channelled over one billion dollars into sustainable land and water management across GGW countries, which has had a great impact on reaching the aim of the GGW (UNCCD, 2020).

To implement the GGW on a technical scale, it can be seen to be mostly driven by the Food and Agriculture Organization, while the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification co-finances regional projects and leads global awareness campaigns (UNCCD, 2020).

DIFFICULTIES & UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

The social impacts of GGW remain understudied (Turner et al., 2026). The project design targeted technical goals with measurable outcomes, such as the quantity of trees planted, hectares restored, and people trained. This narrow focus has led to unintended consequences, which are problematic (Turner et al., 2021).

In Senegal, increased water demand for GGW nurseries has resulted in families being forced to reduce their water use and livestock being denied access to water (Turner et al., 2021). Critical livestock migration routes have been blocked by afforestation, and rangeland access to local herders has been obstructed by rangeland enclosures and tree plantations (Turner et al., 2021). In Niger, projects have created opportunities for local elites to privatize communal lands against the interests of the rural poor, this outcome is consistent with GGWs goals to restore land and make it more attractive for outside investment (Turner et al., 2026). In the Sudano and Sahelian

regions local elites are often benefited by afforestation programs. However, the risks and vulnerability to rural communities which depend on livestock production and wild foods for livelihoods are intensified (Briske et al., 2024; Turner et al., 2021).

Along with these social impacts there are also many other difficulties, such as widespread degradation which has led to severe consequences for biodiversity and food security, with ecosystems deteriorating at a rate that threatens both wildlife and the millions of people who depend on the land for their livelihoods (National Geographic Society, 2025).

OPINIONS & RELEVANCE

GGW is widely praised as a powerful symbol of African-led climate action, which combines environmental restoration with economic empowerment. However, critics point out that Western funding and the focus on desertification echo colonial narratives, since Indigenous sustainable farming methods were historically dismissed under colonial rule. Practical issues also remain, as funding tends to favour more stable nations, leaving vulnerable countries behind. Still, with over \$14 billion pledged and momentum growing, most see it as one of the most relevant and ambitious environmental projects in the world today.

CONCLUSION

The GGW is a project that is still ongoing and will keep evolving. It has improved the livelihood of several communities in Sahel region; however, it does face difficulties. The project has many stakeholders, making it necessary to manage this large-scale project efficiently. It highlights the need for a collaborative approach across the 18 partnering countries of the GGW, if they are to reach their goals by 2030.

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