

Combating Desertification in Nigeria with a “Green Wall”

By

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For many years, land degradation, drought and desertification present inexorable challenges to sustainable development of the countries in Africa’s Sahel – Sahara region. In this region, millions of people rely upon the land as a vital source of life. Not only is this natural asset the basis for food security and agricultural production, it also generates employment and mitigates social crisis for the region’s most poverty stricken and vulnerable groups. About 83% of the rural Sub – Saharan people are dependent on land for their livelihoods, yet 40% of the land resources are presently degraded, driving poverty, hunger, unemployment, forced migration and conflict, while exacerbating climate risks, particularly drought and flood. Although numerous initiatives have been enunciated and implemented to trounce these challenges, both poverty and desertification are persistently gaining ground in Africa and eroding the few economic gains that some countries on the continent have managed to attain.

Driven by the urgent desire to ensure sustainable development of the drylands of Africa vulnerable to this irrepressible problem of desertification, the African Union (AU) in 2007 endorsed the *Great Green Wall for the Sahara and the Sahel Initiative* originally conceived by the former President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo GCFR as a strategy to tackle the detrimental social, economic and environmental impacts of land degradation and desertification in the region.

The Great Green Wall Initiative is a set of integrated actions related to issues affecting people livelihoods in Sahel and Sahara. The Great Green Wall is not only afforestation and reforestation initiative or establishment of a Green Wall of trees from Senegal to Djibouti, but a framework of action for rural development. The specific goal of the Initiative is to address land degradation and desertification in the Sahel and Sahara region, enhance food security, and support communities to adapt to climate change. The Initiative is expected to lead to the sustainable management of land, water and vegetation on up to 2 million hectares of croplands, rangelands and dryland forest ecosystem per country, protection of threatened dryland biodiversity, and the sequestering of 0.5 to 3.1 million tons of carbon per year. In addition the initiative has many other merits, such as the capitalization of best practices and integration in national priorities as well as fostering synergies and sub-regional coordination, which could be replicated in other regions affected by desertification, land degradation and drought. In order to ensure the success of the GGW Initiative, local community participation and ownership are central to the planning, implementation and management of most projects that support its objectives. Currently, eleven countries are involved in the programme and these include Burkina Faso, Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sudan and Chad. These participating countries anticipate that by linking national-level efforts across borders, they will tackle policy,

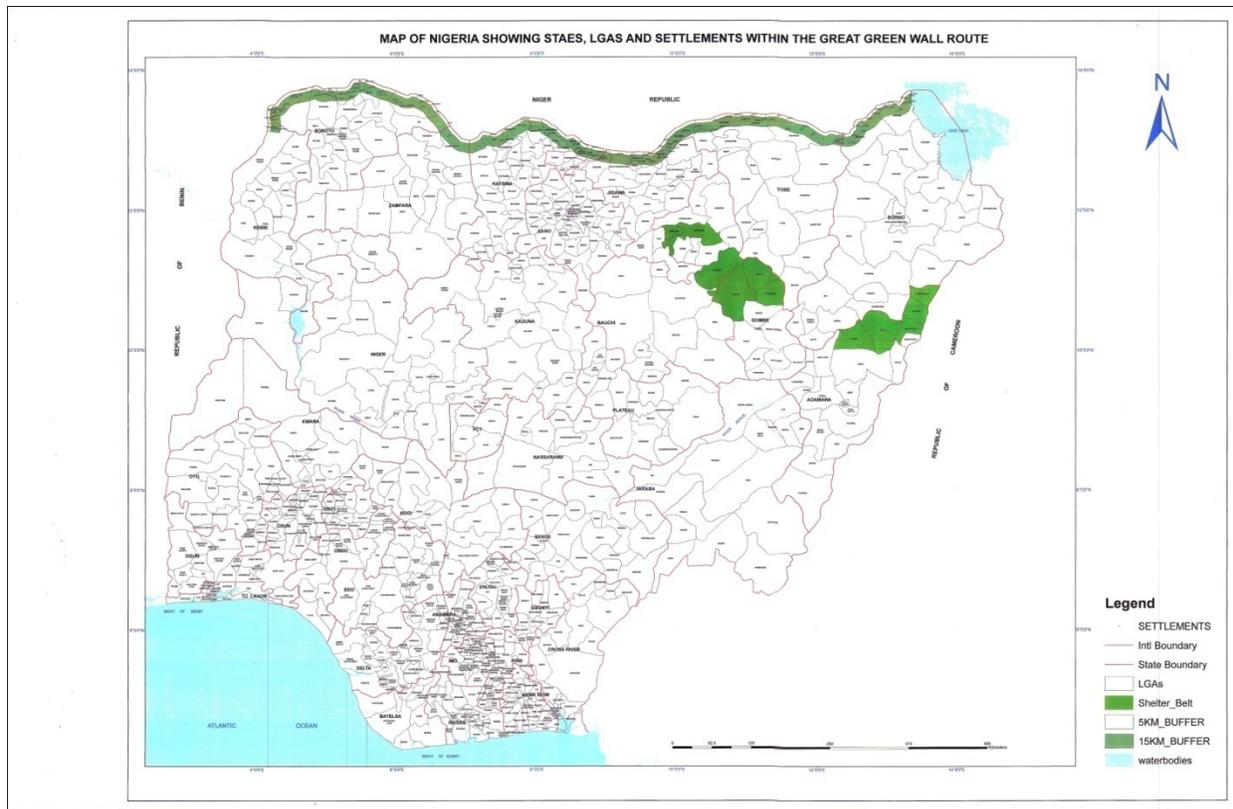
investment, and institutional barriers that exacerbate the effects of climate change and variability, leading to desertification and deterioration of the environment and natural resources and the risk of conflicts between communities.

The 1972/73 catastrophic Sahelian droughts made the specter of desertification in Nigeria more visible. Consequently, various programmes and projects have been initiated and implemented to control its impacts on the affected people and ecosystems. Desertification is certainly one of the greatest ecological disasters in Nigeria with propensity to undermine the socio-economic development of the entire country. The problem which is much more palpable in the eleven frontline States of Adamawa, Bauchi, Borno, Gombe, Kano, Katsina, Kebbi, Jigawa, Sokoto, Zamfara and Yobe threatens the livelihoods of over 40 million people and engulfing about 2,168sq km of rangeland and cropland each year, obliterating human settlements, inducing forced migration, exacerbating rural poverty and social conflicts. Populations in these States are among the poorest and most vulnerable to climatic variability and land degradation. They depend heavily on the fragile ecosystems for rain-fed agriculture, fisheries, and livestock management to sustain their livelihoods. These constitute the primary sectors of employment in the region. Despite numerous policies, strategies and actions adopted to control it, the problem of desertification in Nigeria remains resolute and threatening the sustainable development and security of the affected States.

The Great Green Wall Programme (GGW) offers another entry point in Nigeria for action to effectively address the problem of desertification and many pressing development issues in the drylands. The programme was launched in Nigeria in 2005 but effective implementation commenced in 2013 under the present administration. The Nigeria programme of the Initiative being implemented in the eleven frontline States and involving 46 Local Government Areas is community driven and focuses among others on land rehabilitation and natural resources conservation, poverty alleviation, strengthening food security, employment generation, livelihoods enhancement and enhancing the capacity of communities to improve their resilience to climate change and climate variability.

The earnestness attached to the programme by the Federal Government and in order to ensure its proper implementation, a National Council on Shelterbelt and Afforestation has been established with the Vice President, Arc. Mohammed Namadi Sambo as Chairman and mandated to provide policy guideline for the Programme implementation. Also a National Technical Committee has been put in place to provide technical backstopping for the programme.

The Contiguous Greenwall in the country to wedge the southward advancing desert will run from Arewa Local Government Area in Kebbi State to Abadam Local Government Area in Borno State, a distance of 1,500km long by 15km wide. About 60 million drought resistant tree seedlings are expected to be planted for the establishment of the contiguous belt and over 100,000 people are to be engaged in the planting process. Also about 4,500 forest guards are to be recruited and trained and 450 extension officers to be employed. The contiguous Greenwall is expected to shield over 2,250,000ha of land against the processes of desertification and increase their agricultural productive capacities.



Proposed GGW Route

One of the cardinal aims of the GGW programme is to bring a dynamic change at grassroots level by empowering the affected rural population and extricate them out of poverty, which forces them to destroy or decimate the natural resources. Improvement therefore of the welfare of the affected people, either through the enhancement of their existing livelihoods or the promotion of alternative one is paramount. Infrastructure for market gardening such as water pumps, sprayers, improved seeds; fertilizers etc are to be provided to the beneficiary communities to enable them engage in income-generation activities including dry season farming and over 460 communities are being targeted to benefit from this initiative. The benefitting communities are going to be provided with the necessary facilities free to establish nurseries for raising forestry and economy tree seedlings. The seedlings produced by the communities will be procured by the Government for the Greenwall establishment, development of orchards and other forms of afforestation. In each of the 46 benefitting Local Government Areas, a skill acquisition centre will be built for the training of unemployed youths and women in various skills, such as soap making, carpentry, computer repairs, animal fattening, bee keeping, welding etc. At the end of the training each participant will be provided with some resources or materials to commence business and be self dependant.

Deforestation, especially to meet energy needs is a serious direct cause of desertification and land degradation in the dry region of the country. In order to address this critical issue, 860,000 improved wood stoves will be distributed in each of the forty six beneficiary Local Government

Areas and about 430 youths will be trained in the fabrication of the stoves. In addition, other alternative sources of domestic energy will be popularized and these include solar and biogas.

Water scarcity is a major problem in the dry region of Nigeria and threatens the livelihoods of the people and food security. Water scarcity can also affect the success of GGW programme in this region. In recognition of this, 96 wind and solar powered boreholes are to be provided in all the beneficiary communities in the first year of the programme implementation. The boreholes are to reduce water scarcity in the region and provide water for domestic use and irrigation.



Fetching water from a deep well at a village in Jigawa State

Unsustainable traditional Grazing practices have been identified as among the key drivers of land degradation in the drylands of Nigeria. Overgrazing and unsustainable grazing practices in the dry region aggravate unsustainable and exploitative use of the grazing and other vegetation and natural resources, with consequent land degradation and its downstream impacts. In order to address the problem of overgrazing and unsustainable grazing practices a pilot 800ha Rangeland is to be established in Zamfara, Katsina, Yobe and Borno States for fodder production by communities. Each Rangeland will be provided with veterinary clinic and boreholes to provide water for the people and livestock.

Farmer Managed Natural Regeneration is another important initiative of the GGW programme to be promoted and encouraged in the dry lands of Nigeria to combat desertification, increase land cover and enhance food security. It is a system of growing and reproducing trees and shrubs on farms that provide food, fuel and fodder. Through this process, the farmers can transform large swaths of the region's dry landscape into productive agricultural land and improving food

security for the growing population. The trees protect the land against wind erosion; serve as sources of fuel wood, enhance soil fertility and provide fodder for livestock. 500 farmers are to be identified and trained for the implementation of the initiative and the crop yield of over 3,330ha of land is expected to be improved through this process.

Active sand dunes are very common in Yobe, Borno, Jigawa and Sokoto states and they present great threats to human settlements, farm lands, roads, rivers and streams, oases etc. In many places in Yobe and Borno states human settlements and farmlands have been buried by active sand dunes. 90ha of sand dunes in Yobe, Sokoto and Borno States are to be stabilized in 2014 under the GGW programme using simple technology that can be adopted by the local communities. Also about 200 youths will be trained on the technology of fixing the active dunes.



Active Sand dune at Yusufari, Yobe State

It is widely accepted that environmental management is everybody's responsibility. Private Sector therefore has vital role to play in the implementation of the GGW programme in Nigeria. The Government has created the enabling environment for the Private Sector to invest in some services within the framework of the GGW Programme related to energy, water, commercial plantation, agro-based cottage industries and market chain development. This will create more employment opportunities and strengthen the rural economy.

Clearly, combating desertification, land rehabilitation and livelihood generation cannot be achieved without raising the awareness of the affected people. Ensuring equitable access and community ownership of the intervention initiatives through awareness creation and communication are critical for the success of the GGW programme. Strategies have been developed to sensitize the people and mobilize them towards the implementation of the programme and build their capacity to take ownership of it. Some of the strategies include the use of mobile cinema, sustained radio and TV jingles, school outreach, use of traditional and faith leaders, drama and road side shows, village square campaign etc. Finally, cognizant of the fact that civil society organizations play key role in influencing national, regional and global policy making, their efforts in promoting and enhancing awareness around critical issues are to be harnessed for the success of the programme.

The Great Green wall Programme is surely one of the most promising panaceas to the problems of land degradation and desertification in Nigeria and quite achievable. It is a mechanism that can be used to ensure the sustainable development of the affected rural communities in the drylands. The success however of the programme lies on building an effective and coalesced actions at local level, taking a holistic approach to supporting people's livelihoods, building adaptation measures and reduce their vulnerability to environmental shocks, particularly climate change. Consequently, the participatory approach by involving local communities should be strengthened in all the interventions, as well as improve communication with other partners at all levels until a sustainable environment is achieved for the present and future generations.