

Excerpts from an interview with Chinedu Bassey, who previously worked at the Civil Society Legislative Advocacy Centre (CISLAC) in Nigeria

conducted in spring 2025 by Gabriella Cohen, Lou Ducarteron, Alice Gales, Ewa Jarosz, Giorgia Ravera and Katharina Reisenbauer.

So, first, we would like to ask you how you first got involved in the Great Green Wall project, when did you hear about it and why did you choose to work on this topic?

I became involved in the Great Green Wall project through Nigeria's participation in the Open Government Partnership, where one of our key commitments was environmental conservation. Given Nigeria's history of environmental degradation—particularly due to oil exploration in the Niger Delta—this became a central focus. In 2022, the country also signed onto the Paris Agreement and committed to a Net Zero 2060 Agenda, which led to the establishment of the Energy Transition Agency and broader initiatives around energy reform. The Great Green Wall ties into all of these efforts, especially as a Pan-African initiative combating desertification and land degradation. My work has therefore centered on these interconnected areas: environmental conservation, energy transition, and improving the sustainability of extractive industries.

Maybe I've got a question because I'm very familiar with the ongoing issues in the Niger Delta and the oil spills that are caused by Shell and other oil companies that have operated in the territory. And to me, it seems quite absurd that while these practices are still ongoing, you know, on the other hand, we're talking about revegetation and, you know, greening of a territory that has been so devastated by the oil spills. So maybe I wanted to ask you, you know, like, to what extent do you see this as a problematic issue? Have you, like, based on your experience, how has the Great Green Wall Initiative kind of interacted with the devastation that is going on in the Niger Delta? And, you know, does this represent a controversy within the public debate?

Yes, this is undeniably a major controversy—one that goes beyond environmental concerns to encompass social and deeply entrenched political dimensions. The situation in the Niger Delta, where oil spills and gas flaring continue despite being officially outlawed, is a stark contradiction to initiatives like the Great Green Wall. While on one hand there are efforts focused on revegetation and land restoration, on the other, we are still witnessing the widespread destruction of ecosystems due to extractive activities. Gas flaring, for instance, remains a particularly destructive practice. Its impact on vegetation is devastating—grasses and trees simply don't survive, and the human cost is also immense. The heat and pollution from flares make life unbearable for communities nearby. It's not just a technical or environmental failure; it reflects a broader lack of political will. Laws and policies exist, but they are not enforced, and companies that violate them often go unpunished. This contradiction creates a deep sense of frustration and, frankly, a feeling of hypocrisy. The Nigerian government has made bold commitments in its energy transition plan—including an annual pledge of \$10 million to support implementation—but so far, we haven't seen those promises materialize on the ground. Even with Agenda 2030 looming just five years away, there's little evidence of tangible progress. Resources are being spent, campaigns are being run, but very little is translating into real change for communities affected by environmental degradation. That gap between rhetoric and reality is at the heart of the controversy.

So based on all of that, and also based on the bigger issues that Nigeria is facing, do you believe in the success of the Great Green Wall?

Yes, I do believe in the success of the Great Green Wall—because, ultimately, it's not a matter of choice but of necessity. The impacts of environmental degradation are all around us in Nigeria: we're witnessing increasing floods, the loss of lives and property, and escalating ecological instability. These aren't distant concerns; they're part of our daily reality. In that context, efforts like the Great Green Wall are essential. It's not just about following global trends toward environmental action—it's about survival. A healthy environment is the foundation for everything else: our health, our safety, our economy. Without a livable environment, we're exposed to disease, disaster, and a general decline in well-being. So yes, I believe in the project's goals because they align with what's urgently needed. The Great Green Wall represents a proactive effort to mitigate disasters—both natural and human-induced—and to preserve what's left of our ecosystems. There really isn't an alternative if we're serious about building a sustainable future. [...]

My next question was, do you think that the Great Green Wall, the initiatives that are being implemented in the Great Green Wall project, do they protect these trees? Well, do they protect the biodiversity in a meaningful way?

Having the initiative is one thing. Then implementing it is another.

And how does it differ?

In theory, the Great Green Wall and related initiatives—like the energy transition plan, anti-spillage laws, and broader environmental policies—are designed to protect biodiversity and promote ecological restoration. These frameworks do exist, and on paper, they sound promising. But in practice, the story is quite different. Take the example of Shell. We've been locked in long-standing battles just to get them to compensate communities or even carry out basic remediation in areas they've degraded. And now, the federal government has signed off on their divestment contract, essentially allowing them to walk away from decades of environmental damage. It's frustrating because the same institutions that draft these laws are also enabling the exit of the very companies responsible for large-scale destruction—without ensuring accountability or restoration. So while there are mechanisms that are supposed to protect biodiversity, the problem lies in implementation. It's not enough to have policies on paper. Without strong political will, these initiatives cannot achieve meaningful impact. That gap between commitment and enforcement is what continues to undermine the goals of the Great Green Wall. It's not a lack of knowledge or resources—it's the absence of genuine follow-through that makes the difference.

Thank you very much. That's really interesting. Next we have a few questions on the issue of participatory governance. So the involvement of local communities in the reforestation projects that are carried out in the context of the Great Green Wall Initiative in Nigeria.

So generally we'd like to ask first, has participation of local communities been implemented within the Great Green Wall Initiative in Nigeria and to what extent?

Yes, local community participation has been implemented to some extent within the Great Green Wall Initiative in Nigeria, but there are significant limitations. One of the biggest challenges is the education level of many community members, especially in rural areas. While laws exist that support community involvement—like the principles of free, prior, and informed consent—the reality is that many people don't fully understand the documents they're asked to sign or the implications of the projects they're being included in.

This gap in understanding isn't just incidental—it's systemic. Ideally, the government should be investing in community education and capacity-building so that people can engage meaningfully, ask informed questions, and hold authorities accountable. But in many cases, there's a reluctance to do that. Educating people comes with a cost, and more importantly, it

empowers them to challenge decisions that may not align with their needs or the project's stated goals. Frankly, there's often more interest in keeping communities uninformed.

So while participation may formally exist—people are brought into the room, so to speak—it doesn't necessarily mean they're meaningfully involved. True participation would require equipping communities with the tools and knowledge to contribute actively and critically. And in many rural settings, that capacity simply isn't supported or facilitated at the level it should be. [...]

In my experience—over a decade working in this space—true community participation goes beyond ticking boxes. It requires speaking the local language, respecting traditional practices, and framing the issues in ways that resonate with local knowledge. If communities truly understand the project, you'll start to see that reflected in their actions: how they adapt their practices, what feedback they give, even the stories and testimonials they share about how their lives are being affected. So yes, saying that we want meaningful local participation is good—but we have to ask: what did people say? What changed as a result? If it ends with just recording attendance or numbers in a report, then honestly, it's little more than a formality.

You mentioned that it's very important to present and like to consult in a way that is understandable for the local communities. Do you have any examples of successful participation projects which involved local communities and how were they reached and how was it implemented?

Yes, there have definitely been successful examples of local participation, and one that stands out is a campaign I was involved in that was supported by Oxfam. It focused on rural women working in agriculture and was built around the idea of community ownership from the very beginning. The success of the project came down to the fact that it wasn't something imposed from the outside—it was rooted in the community's own practices. The people weren't told what products to use or which unfamiliar techniques to adopt. Instead, the campaign worked by building on what they already knew and did, and improving those practices in a way that felt natural to them. That made all the difference. The process was staged and participatory. It included identifying individuals within the community—especially women—who were already doing well in these areas. These people became local champions. Their farms, their methods, and their results were used as relatable, real-life examples. This made the concept feel familiar and attainable rather than foreign or abstract.

In a word, it was about *ownership*. When communities see a project as something they own—not something done *to* them, but *with* them—they embrace it. We found that trying to introduce brand new concepts often didn't resonate. People don't want to relearn everything from scratch. But if you show them how what they're already doing aligns with the project's goals—and how it can be enhanced—they engage much more willingly. One particularly effective tactic was using community role models. For example, you might point to someone who already maintains a green space or certain trees in their compound—without necessarily knowing that it aligns with the Great Green Wall objectives. Then you highlight the benefits they're already seeing. When others recognize that, especially if the person is a respected figure in the community, the idea spreads more organically. That campaign ultimately led to the creation of cooperative societies run by the women themselves. They formed unions, organized background support systems, and continued practicing the core tenets of the campaign. So while they were working toward the official objectives of the project, they were doing so in a way that felt entirely their own. That's real, sustainable participation. [...]

There's really no one-size-fits-all strategy when it comes to involving marginalized groups in projects like the Great Green Wall. From my perspective, what's most important is to start with a proper risk assessment and context analysis. You need to understand the dynamics of

the specific community you're working with and identify which group is best placed to lead or participate meaningfully. In many rural and community settings, women tend to be more engaged and participatory by default. That's often the case, but not always. It shouldn't be assumed. Sometimes, based on the specific social structure or the nature of the project, it may actually be youth who are more suited to take the lead—or men, or another subgroup within the community. [...]

When we read about your work we also noticed that you worked on issues of corruption and we were wondering whether you think that corruption has an impact on the implementation of projects such as Green Wall Initiative in Nigeria and if so what is it?

Yes, corruption absolutely plays a role—it's one of the underlying issues affecting the implementation of projects like the Great Green Wall in Nigeria. The moment finances are involved, there's a risk that corruption will follow. It doesn't matter how good the objectives are; if there's any benefit to be gained, people may find ways to divert funds or manipulate processes for personal gain. One example is the lack of accountability in environmental remediation. Companies like Shell have been able to delay or avoid their responsibilities, in part because, allegedly, they've paid off certain government officials who were meant to hold them accountable. That's corruption, plain and simple—and it has real consequences on the ground. But it's not just about money. Corruption also manifests in process hijacking. Sometimes, project implementers partner with so-called "community gatekeepers"—people who may not actually represent the broader interests of the community. These individuals can take over the implementation process, skewing it for their own benefit or for the benefit of a select few. When that happens, the outcomes suffer. You lose trust, local ownership, and ultimately, the project fails to deliver on its promises. So yes, corruption operates at multiple levels: financial diversion, manipulation of leadership, misrepresentation of community interests—each of these erodes the integrity and effectiveness of initiatives like the Great Green Wall. Addressing this challenge is critical if we want these projects to succeed. [...]

True transparency isn't just about publishing reports or data—it's about making the information accessible, relatable, and actionable for everyone involved, particularly those at the grassroots level. Right now, I'd say the initiative feels too distant from the people on the ground. The language, the process, the entire framing of the project still leans toward the educated and policy-minded classes. That may make for good literature, but it doesn't always translate into real, tangible impact. What's needed is a deliberate effort to popularize the project in a way that resonates with ordinary people. If rural communities truly understand what the Great Green Wall is about—how it connects to their livelihoods, their environment, their health—they'll embrace it. Nobody resists something that clearly benefits them, especially when it's communicated in a language and form they can relate to. Of course, no initiative will ever achieve total, unanimous buy-in. But if we can reach a majority, especially among those who are directly impacted, we can begin to shift the narrative and build real, community-level ownership. That's what transparency should look like—not just making information available, but ensuring it's meaningful and actionable for all.

In one of the previous discussions that we had um we talked about the issue of enclosure and land grabbing after an area that were that was previously used for communal purposes um was revegetated and according to the person that we spoke to the issue is that people are not aware that they've got communal property rights um over that area that was previously part of communal management and afterwards get seized by the elites um because it's more profitable. So two things that I wanted to ask are: to what extent this is an issue in Nigeria and do you think having better defined property rights can help to combat this issue of land grabbing and enclosure?

Yes, the person you spoke to was right—this issue definitely exists in Nigeria, but it's more complex than just elites seizing land. At the heart of it is the Land Use Act, which places all land under the authority of the federal government. That means land ownership isn't really in the hands of communities—it's under what we call exclusive legislative control. So even when people have used land communally for generations, the government can reclaim it at any time in the name of national interest. Legally, the only obligation is to offer compensation. Now, the problem is that many rural communities don't fully understand their rights. And when compensation is offered—often just a cash payment—they accept it quickly, sometimes without fully grasping the long-term implications. They see the money as more valuable than the land, perhaps because they've never really seen the land deliver any major benefit in economic terms. Meanwhile, those in power—people who understand the potential value of that land—step in, take over, and reap the future benefits.

So while land grabbing can happen through force or manipulation, in many cases it's more subtle. The communities themselves agree to give up the land—not because they don't care, but because they don't know what they're giving up. That lack of awareness is the core issue. If people don't understand their rights, they won't fight to protect them. That's why I believe improving knowledge and awareness at the community level is crucial. It's not just about better defining property rights on paper—though that's important too—but making sure people understand those rights. When they do, they can make more informed decisions, push back when necessary, and avoid being taken advantage of. Ultimately, it's all tied to education, empowerment, and the capacity to act on what's legally theirs.