

Excerpts from an interview with Kabirou Boubacar, from Transparency International Niger

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

We have worked with the Robert Bosch Stiftung Foundation in Germany, and the Secretary-General of Transparency International. What was this work about? First of all, we studied the governance of green agriculture, the integrity and responsibility of the investments in the context of the great green wall.

We concentrated on the aspects of governance, on the very participation of the community, on how communities monitor climate investments, on what is the view of the community in the implementation of projects related to agriculture, related to land recovery, related to the protection of biodiversity, related to the environmental responsibility of the companies that work in the locality. We have experimented with this project in 21 communes, 7 in the west of Niger, in the Tel Aviv region, 7 in the north, in the northern centre of Niger, in the Tawa region, and 7 in the southern centre of Niger, in the Maradi region.

In these communes, we have set up community climate observers. It is a kind of local cell composed of local doctors, usually local elected officials, members of the local municipal council, members of the local civil society, and technical agents, technicians of the environment, technicians of agriculture, technicians of rural development, and hydraulic technicians. With these people, we set up a committee to monitor the effective implementation of green projects.

You know, here in Niger, development organisations, development associations, collect funds in the framework of the fight against climate change to implement activities. These funds that the organisations collect are often not used in a good way. They are not invested to improve the performance of public services.

They are not orientated where they should be. So we have set up projects so that investments in favour of climate are not lost because of corruption. Why? To fight against corruption, so that people are integrated, we have to integrate, so we have to involve communities in monitoring and implementing climate projects. I think I went too far.

It's the principle of an interview. We're just going to bounce back on several points because you told us a lot of information and they are very interesting for us. Maybe just to clarify, can you explain if the choice to work on the issue of the Great Green Wall was made by the Transparency Agency of Niger and the fight against corruption, or does it come from the international agency? What is your link between Transparency International and the antenna in Niger?

We are a section. First of all, we are an NGO, an association of Nigerian rights. An association of Nigerian rights created in 2001 and which became a section accredited by Transparency International in 2006. So we put together projects that we design ourselves. We think about these projects, we design them and we put them together. But the projects on the Great Green Wall, it's true that we have thought about it for a long time.

We participated in several meetings like this on discussions around climate change. But it's a project that the headquarters proposed to us. But before that, we had the habit of working several times with the headquarters on what is happening, on the management of climate change, especially on the behaviour of certain organisations, of certain civil society organisations and certain human rights agencies in the framework of the recovery of land.

Because generally here, what is it? People work to gain their daily substance. It's food for work or cash for work. Food for work is during the day, you work during the day, you are given the daily ration. Or cash for work, you work during the day, you are given cash, you are paid. What do the agencies of the United Nations and certain NGOs do? The population, especially women - rural women, work for food. Instead of restituting the weekly ration, some rich agencies give the ration for two or three days to the woman who works for seven days. You see, there is a kind of detour, there is a kind of injustice, there is a kind of inequality between the work and the result that the woman earns. [...]

Can you perhaps tell us a little about the results of this work and also the results that you have had on transparency and also the involvement of local populations in these projects? Thank you.

We have seen results before the capitalisation of the project in the 21 municipalities that are concerned by the project. We have already made reports on ongoing projects because there is a kind of surveillance of the projects that have already come to an end. We want to see clearly the projects that are completed in the municipalities, if these projects really respect the spirit of citizen participation, if these projects take into account local priorities. There are 22 municipalities, 22 observatories, that have presented reports before the capitalisation.

On these reports, there are several projects that we, technicians, have judged as irregular. We wrote to the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Environment to contact them about the projects that we found defective. These are projects managed by the public entity, by the Ministry that do not take into account local priorities.

For example, in a pastoral area, a project was implemented that focused a lot on agriculture. You see a little contrast. In an agricultural area, we intensify, we bring a project that focuses a lot on farming. Or we only bring projects, we choose the site, we do the implementation without involving the community. And the community will never appropriate the implementation.

I will give a little example. Here in the west, in the Tilapia region, there is a hydro-agricultural dam that has been implemented since the 90s. The construction market was given to China. When the Chinese entrepreneurs came, it was a State project, it was the Ministry that organised the project. So when the company came, it went directly to the site and delivered the dams. It didn't involve the population. 20 years later, the local communities call them 'the

Chinese dams' because they don't use them. They were not involved in the choice of the place, they were not involved in the construction, they were not involved in the management after the Chinese left. They never felt concerned by the dams. Currently, the dams are a very underrated implementation because the community was not involved. There were several cases like this. We wrote to the Ministry concerned, to tell them in which locality certain projects should be initiated. We think that the community should be aware of the use of these dams so that the young people are not invested for nothing. [...]

We read your report, I think it was published in 2023, on transparency and local participation in the projects of the Great Green Wall. You overviewed the different structures, and you talked about the intention of the Pan-African Agency of the Great Green Wall to establish support centres for resilient local development, so centres to work on this issue of local participation, but I think you also say that it may not have been done or not yet. I wanted to ask you if you have more information about where we are today, does it work, or are there other initiatives that worked?

The Pan-African Agency of the Great Green Wall, I should have mentioned it, or mentioned the National Agency of the Great Green Wall with which we have worked on these projects, or with which we still work on issues related to the Great Green Wall. In fact, the Pan-African Agency agreed with the idea to set up centres to promote local participation. But I think these were just words, because three or four months ago, we spoke with our colleague from Nigeria, who was the project's ambassador with us for a while. It is still static. What is happening here is that our National Agency of the Great Green Wall is not autonomous, it does not have management autonomy, it does not have a consistent programme in the supervision of the activities of the Great Green Wall.

Here, the National Agency of the Great Green Wall depends on what the governments or civil society organisations are doing. The National Agency of the Great Green Wall of Nigeria is still in the hands of the regional management of the Niamey environment. It is a national agency, but it sits in the hands of a regional management. We raised all these issues at the beginning of the project with the Minister of the Environment at the time of the former president. We submitted the report, our report on the governance of the Great Green Wall to President Bazou. We made recommendations to improve the visibility of the National Agency of the Great Green Wall to allow it to monitor what the NGOs and international organisations are doing in the context of the fight against climate change and in the context of land recovery.

We made several recommendations, but unfortunately, we did not have much luck, because if there had not been a coup d'état, I had a lot of hope. I always believe that the coup d'état has really hindered the implementation of all the recommendations that we had the opportunity to submit to the President of the Republic who instructed the Minister of the Environment, the Minister of Agriculture and the Minister of Hydrology to create the conditions for at least justice and equity the context of the implementation of activities, especially land recovery. [...]

In this hierarchical issue, did you identify corruption problems regarding the Great Green Wall? Do you have any visibility on this? And does it constitute a barrier for the project?

There are several projects, especially from the Ministry of Agriculture, which have been incriminated in several reports from the Court of Auditors. But there were not many cases of consequential corruption involving the administration. There was only one project, I believe, which was cited in a report of the Court of Auditors in 2020, which came out in 2021. Apart from that, there is no visible corruption like that. But hey, we are in Niger. How does corruption work? Mainly, it is in the context of the attribution of the markets. Imagine that in Niger, this is not even illegal. All you need is to have good friends in the administration. You can sell a work of 10 million to the state, there is no law that will penalise you, there is no problem. So, it is in the context of the attribution of the markets that generally, there is a lot of corruption, especially in the projects of the Ministry of Agriculture. [...]

When there is funding, who decides where the money goes and whether the local population is involved?

The funding comes from the United Nations, the partners involved in the development. But the partners decide what to do. The NGOs and the government. But are the communities involved? No, the communities are not involved.

We believe that the communities have to say what they want for themselves. The problem is that the partner who has the money, will do its job, and fulfill its objectives. Or the partner will give his money to a NGO that will take it, and will execute what they want. The communities were not involved in the definition of priorities. This means that the project is almost half-failed. That's what we told our partners. Because another aspect of the project that I would like to mention is that we have worked with the big national NGOs that implement projects in the context of climate change. We asked them if they had once asked for the perspective of the local community before engaging in a project. No NGO has ever done that. They assured us that they often consult the community during the implementation of the project, but not during its conception. Do you see the difference?

The accelerator of the Great Green Wall, a few years ago, did it boost investments? Was there more funding? Or did it change something else in the project? What do you think about this accelerator and its impact?

The accelerator has boosted the investments. But has it reached an appreciable level? I don't think so, because we were too far behind before the accelerator. But it has boosted and contributed to the fact that investors are more and more interested in the issue. In May 2023, almost a year ago, we had a meeting here in Niamey in the presence of the former President Bazou to gather private investors in favour of the Great Green Wall. The Chamber of Commerce in Niger brought the big investors, the big entrepreneurs, the business owners. After that, we saw the engagement of several private companies in agricultural projects, in agricultural and investment projects. It started to work. With the coup d'état, some investors stopped investing in production because bringing in the machines became very expensive with the sanctions of the CEDAO and the sanctions of the European Union.