

Excerpts from an interview with Matthew Turner, professor of Geography at the University of Wisconsin Madison

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

Can you tell us a bit more about what prompted you to research the topic of the great green wall?

Yeah. So basically, I became interested largely in terms of its potential impact on local communities. [...] I was actually hired as a consultant by the World Bank to evaluate their great green wall projects, which is the Sahel SAWAP program, I did that with a group of graduate students. And part of that was actually some field work in the country of Niger, where a World Bank team, along with my people that I've been working with for a long time in Niger, went out to find these Great Green Wall projects. And that actually took a lot of time to actually, even despite the fact that there was staff in Niger, you would think that they would be able to find these projects, where these projects are actually physically located, and it took two weeks to actually find these sites. Okay, so that's telling of itself.

And then, yeah, I can talk about some of the our findings, but that led me into kind of a broader, kind of set of interests about what is driving the interest and huge investments into this thing that we call the Great Green Wall, which, as I think you guys have recognized, is a fairly amorphous thing. Certainly the attractive nature from donor countries is the idea of a wall, literally a wall of trees blocking the spread of the desert that is working under a very, let's say, long, discredited and simple view of environmental change in arid areas of Sub Saharan Africa, the marching desert, ie desertification, in addition, it's attractive with respect to kind of the idea of carbon sequestration, much work has been has found that the benefits of carbon sequestration are are probably overly, overly estimated, but beyond that, just from my sense of at least the politics right and the history of North South relations, particularly in the Sahelian region, the idea of the industrialized world using the landscapes, rural landscapes, of people in the Sahel as a way to sequester faster their carbon to compensate for greenhouse gas emissions. We started to get into kind of the on the ground impacts, and then that led me, you know, I've written and talked about and researched ideas of environmental change and desertification, but that brought me more broadly out to kind of, what are the underlying factors that it have led to the donor support for these types of projects. [...]

The Sawap program, which is under the umbrella of the Great Green Wall program, only funds afforestation, would be a huge mischaracterization, right? So that's why this idea, the Great Green Wall, is this kind of amorphous. It's generating donor support. And I'm all for donor support for the region. I've been working in this region for many decades. And it also funds a lot of things, other than attempts to afforest dry land areas. Okay? So it's just important to recognize that, specifically with respect to the Great Green Wall program. We were asked to evaluate it, right? And so we were given kind of internal world bank evaluation reports on these projects. And again, we focused, it focused on afforestation activities, which, again, represented maybe, you know, 10 to 20% of the actual funding that was allocated. [...]

In your opinion, do you think the accelerator phase has led to new outcomes in the management of the projects, specifically in respect to involvement of local communities and involvement of other local actors?

[...] I just can't imagine that actually projects are actually happening outside of Senegal and in certain parts of Niger, there is a Islamic insurgency that is creating a huge amount of insecurity, with areas of Burkina, actually the prime areas that are the focus of the idea of the Great Green Wall in Burkina and Mali - a major target of, let's say, frustration on the part of local people. So basically, in terms of following the literature, there has been this shift, which suggests that there really isn't much activity. I can't imagine how it could happen. There's been a shift towards focusing on Senegal. So Senegal, at least in terms of the Francophone West African countries, is the area where there is activity, and it's fairly my experience. What I've heard reading the literature is it's pretty top down, and it remains fairly top down. Luckily, it focuses on an area that has historically a fairly low population density because of the lack of water, so it has been fairly successful in terms of establishing trees.

I understand that there is major support from the local population for the gardening projects with women, much less for the afforestation activities. The afforestation activities, actually, I've heard anecdotal information that they've been fairly competitive with local needs for water. A lot of the water, the water tables, are not very deep in these areas, very low water tables. And therefore these deep bore holes to water the saplings of these trees are creating conflicts with local communities that are seeking water for their own needs.

Despite that, I do feel like there, there is an issue that I think that we, we observed in the pre acceleration phase, which I think would have to be addressed, and I have no evidence that it has been addressed in the acceleration phase, is that, basically, the way these projects work is that they they visit local village chiefs and ask for: is there any available village land that we can enclose, actually, in some cases, physically fence, to establish trees ? And so there, people are excluded from these areas during the tree establishment phase, and in the longer term, and this is what we found in Niger. [...] And basically what we have found in Niger was that village chiefs were able, because it was under their authority, that land was improved and planted, that they were able to kind of privatize that land in the name of their family, right? So this is consistent with customary land tenure rules as well as state tenure state authorized tenure rules. And so you get a situation where village chiefs allow the trees to grow sufficiently to claim their land, cut the trees down, and plant a millet field for their own family. The most egregious example, is an area outside of Niamey, the capital of Niger, south of Niamey, where village chiefs, following this procedure, claimed land, and then once they had that claim, of these afforested or rehabilitated areas, then sold that those land parcels off to people from the capital city to serve as weekend retreats, right? You know, you know, going back to the land kind of thing for merchants and government officials. The people that lost out were pastoralists, because these areas were formerly pasture areas used by local herders. [...] This is not, you know, I'm sure you guys have heard of land grabbing. This is not like international land grabbing. This is land grabbing at a local level, facilitated by these afforestation programs.

The other thing is that there is very little monitoring and I would hope that in the acceleration phase, this might be one thing that might have been addressed, so that basically, success was measured by the number of trees planted. There was no monitoring of how many of those trees died. We found that often there would be double counting. Double counting in the sense that trees would be planted, half of them would die, then replanting occurred, and you just added replanting effort plus planting effort.

No benefits were described as the grain or money paid for people to do the work of the planting and rehabilitation as well as training, but in terms of like, how those trees often exotic trees, how those trees were actually utilized, or could be utilized or were seen by local communities? Nothing. [...]

But it's not unique to the Great Green Wall. I mean, there's a long history of outsiders coming in, not completely understanding what's happening on the ground, saying, okay, we're just going to come in and do this, right and causing a lot of problems down the line. [...]

Just as desertification, much of it in the 70s and 80s was seen as being caused by humans. It turns out it was aridification. It was just low rainfall. A lot of the regreen is because of improved rainfall. These are complex systems and climate has a huge effect on productivity in these arid areas. And so we have a history of overestimating what humans can and can't do.

Do you think there is still a role for the global level or maybe, I don't know, the NGO's level to support the initiative?

Yeah, I think so. I mean, you know, I have this kind of, I've always been a bit torn about because what I've seen in the Sahelian region is that with this spread, like the big donors, right, because of some of this corruption that I'm talking about, they tend to kind of then send all their money to NGOs, and therefore then, right, the ministries of governments get hollowed out. All the young, smart people end up working for NGOs, and the government is non-existent, right? And to me, there's a cost there, right? Because the government is still governing, right? But it's governing without resources, which just reinforces this issue, the incentives for corruption, and governing without the knowledge gained by engaging with local communities, right? So that's the tension, right? I wish there was, you know, I mean, as we went into the 90s and 2000s, there was a real shift of donor funding directly to NGOs bypassing governments, right? And I really do feel like what we missed was building the capacity of local governments, right? Like at the commune level, and at the circular level in these countries. That's where a lot of this natural resource management and the designation of resource rights, etc. That's where all the action is. It's not at the national level, per se. That's broad policy, etc. But it's really at that local level. And that's an area that those are areas that would have historically been underfunded.