

Excerpts from an interview with Sergeant Badji, from the Senegalese Agency for Reforestation and the Great Green Wall

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

Could you introduce yourself and explain what your role as a sergeant entails?

I am Sergeant Badji, I am a technical officer for water and forests and head of the Widou forestry service, and at the same time I am responsible for the Great Wall activities in the Widou region. I have a dual role: I am responsible for monitoring the forest area, everything related to reforestation and restoration of degraded land, and as part of the Great Wall, I am also in charge of coordinating activities, from plant production to the implementation of reforestation activities in the field. I have been here since May 2020, so I have been in Widou for almost five years now.

Could you explain to me specifically what types of activities you coordinate as part of the GW? Is it one main activity or a variety of activities?

Yes, yes, there are a variety of activities. As part of the GW, we start by producing plants that are intended to be planted during the rainy season in plots that will be selected. The species were selected a long time ago by researchers who proposed eight species that were chosen based on their resistance or adaptability to the area. So our production focuses more on these selected species, but we sometimes add species that are requested by local populations, particularly for the plantations they create at home. We also include species that we choose for landscaping schools and public places.

Can you explain more precisely your position, given that you live in the village? How are the sergeants distributed across the territory?

We have bases scattered along the GW route. Each base has a base commander, but not all of them are sergeants. At one base, we have a technical agent who graduated from school but is not a civil servant. He was recruited by the GW to manage this base. There are 30-40 km between each base. Training is done at the regional level, so we try to coordinate actions at that level.

And to become a sergeant, did you have specific training?

Yes, I went to the University of Dakar. After that, I took the entrance exam for the School of Water and Forestry. Practically all the technical staff in the water and forestry department come from this school. So, it's a three-year training program. You graduate with the rank of sergeant. And after that, if you are recruited by the government, you become a civil servant. But when you are assigned to the area along the Great Wall, you have two roles: on the one hand, you manage activities related to the water and forestry department, but you also coordinate between the water and forestry department and the Great Wall agency. So you are also required to manage Great Wall activities.

Could you share a little bit about your vision for the Great Wall, this project that has been around for a very long time? Are there any particular difficulties with the Great Green Wall?

Well, there are difficulties. But personally, I always tell myself that there have been achievements, from the various teams that have succeeded one another. There are teams that have managed to do

something. Take, for example, the 2008 plot we have, the plot that was set up between 2008, 2009, 2010. This is the plot where we put in place measures that have enabled us to achieve certain results. So, if you go to this plot, you will find that there is good regeneration, the plants have reached a certain height for harvesting, and the people living in this plot can enter it to harvest gum arabic. This is the whole point of setting up this plot in these localities.

If we have a plot in a locality populated exclusively by people who are involved in livestock farming, these are people who need to have biomass nearby at all times, fodder for their livestock. So, with regard to the privileged farm in the area, if we have the possibility of having a fodder bank nearby, that is to say, what the Great Wall did, having plots all around that are surrounded by concessions that come from the villages. So, the people living around these plots have access to fodder during the two or three months leading up to the rainy season—a very critical period. There is no more grass in the area, so you either have to process it or resort to aerial fodder (i.e., you have to cut the grass to keep your herd alive).

Now, we have found that in areas where there are plots, it is possible to have fodder up to one month or less before the rainy season. We can allow people to enter these plots and have grass to keep their livestock alive. So, the approach we initially took has succeeded. It showed that it was a good approach and that the means that had been put in place to achieve these results were very valid. So, if we maintained the same principle, it would attract much more interest from the population in these plots. And now, we have changed a lot of things.

These plots that had been set up at the time, since there was not enough rain, were being watered. Plant maintenance activities were carried out.

That is to say, we came, dug basins around the trees, and watered them from time to time to help them survive the hot season. So, the trees we have on these plots clearly show that if we maintain the same practices we had in 2008-2009, we can still achieve results. And now we are setting up plots. Okay, we are planting. Now, security is also a problem. At the time, we took care of the guards with support from the WFP, the World Food Program. With the food we had, we could hire guards who were paid with this food.

Excuse me, they are paid with what?

Food, WFP food. It's bags of grain, oil. In a way, we gave you a ration for your month. So we didn't pay you in cash, but we paid you with food.

And for example, for the inhabitants of the region who use the plots to feed their herds, how does the use of the plots work? Do they have to pay anything?

Yes, you know, the plots are community plots. They belong to the people, and you manage the plots. Now, if you are given a plot, you do everything you can to set up a management committee to manage the sale of straw, security, and everything else. Now, after selling the straw from the plot, we use that money to either pay the people who took the time to guard it, which means they stay there for two or three months to protect the fodder in the plot. Either the proceeds from the sale of this straw will be used to help the municipality generate some income, or the management committee on site will use the proceeds to participate in anti-fraud activities.

And who is on this management committee?

The people who are chosen to manage this committee are from the villages surrounding the plots.

Okay, so it's the residents who are represented?

Yes, the residents and beneficiaries of the plots, in a way.

And do you think this community organization and distribution of plots works well?

As long as the crops are growing, it works fine.

So what changed after 2008? Why did the projects change the organization of the plots, etc.? What has changed today?

Well, there is certainly a lack of resources. Are the resources being allocated properly? Because there were projects that were underway. People were much more enthusiastic about the Great Wall than they are now. And now, we see that more and more people want to have plots of land next to their homes. But the enthusiasm we had at the time, with students coming from all over, is no longer there.

And can you explain why? Is it because there is less awareness, or why is there no longer this enthusiasm?

Personally, I think it's a question of financial resources. Because at the time, practically all the bases had their own vehicles. But now, we don't have enough vehicles. So the systems that were in place, which used the road, maps, and so on, are no longer there. So in a way, there is a logistical problem.

Could you talk a little about your interactions with the local population? They express their opinions during this management committee meeting. Are there other initiatives or moments when they can talk a little about their ownership of the Great Green Wall project?

No, it's the management committee, even before the plots are set up. To delimit the sites. If the local authorities, i.e. the mayors, approve, they cede areas where they request the Great Wall, here you can put plots with the help of your partners or something like that. We come to the field to see which villages are closest to the chosen site. Now we ask these populations to set up management committees. Now, it is these management committees, whose members are chosen at the level of the different villages that have surrounded the plots, that set up these committees and define the terms of use of their plots. Yes, so they can express themselves at that point.

[...] Everyone wants to have their plot next to each other, so the problem doesn't arise at that level. To try to convince people of the importance of the plots, the problem doesn't arise at that level. Everyone is aware that we need to have plots, and it also provides activities for young people. You know, when we have to plant, we recruit young people from the surrounding area to come and participate in reforestation activities. [...]

And have you ever, during your five years in this job, really faced any disagreements with the population?

I had the opportunity to set up two plots of land. So I had two groups of people who came to me saying they needed plots of land nearby because they had already approached my predecessor here. So when I was informed that we had now acquired land for these two plots, I called on the people who had made their requests to me. So when we went to choose the site, after choosing the site, another part of the population came to say that the site was poorly chosen. That's where their cattle graze, so we have to move it a little.

When we moved to another area, there were others who stood up and said that if we put a plot there, it would block their passage from their village to the city. But then they talked it over, and everyone wanted

us to continue with the project. So we relocated the project to another village. Now they are chasing after this plot. They couldn't reach the consensus we wanted.

We were forced to relocate the project. Now they see the benefit, because the families living around this plot can get fodder. To get fodder, they sometimes have to ask these people, "Can you help us get a few bags?" to get fodder. This is to maintain our livestock. As a result, they are now promoting this plot of land to us, indicating that they want us to establish the plot there. However, they are attempting to reach a broader consensus regarding the choice of site.

And does that usually happen? Do you manage to find consensus over time despite the different interests?

Yes. If we call on the mayor and the imam, the daily leader of the area, who manages to support us, sometimes support us, we manage to find solutions. In this case, we were facing an election year. So the mayor didn't want too many projects in the area. Because if there was a division between the populations, he would be forced to take a position. And if he sided with one group, he would surely lose the others. He asked us to put it on hold. So, since the partner couldn't wait either, we decided to choose another site. [...]