

The mirage of the “Great Green Wall” in Senegal

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The Great Green Wall, a vast project to combat desertification in the Sahel, is financed to the tune of billions of dollars. But in Senegal, many local players are denouncing a program that is making no headway.

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Louga region (Senegal)

A few dried-out shrubs, trampled plantations and a dilapidated fence. That's all that's left of the market garden of Fallou Fall [name changed], village chief in the Louga region, 200 kilometers north of Dakar. Straw hat screwed on his head, the fifty-year-old looks gloomily at his sparse field. On this early afternoon, only the goats are out in the hot sun.

For the past four years, his farm has been involved in the Great Green Wall, a vast project to combat desertification in the Sahel. Today, however, lacking the promised equipment and follow-up, he is trying to keep his field going by his own efforts. It's an arduous task, since without equipment and support, plantations don't last more than a few months. "All the reforestation we did last year was for nothing," he says in disappointment. The ambitious Great Green Wall program hasn't produced the results he'd hoped for.



Senegal is the showcase for this pan-African project. Initiated in 2007 by the African Union, the project involves crossing eleven countries with a strip of vegetation almost 8,000 kilometers long and 15 kilometers wide. The aim is to slow the advance of the desert and counter the effects of global warming, from Dakar to Djibouti.

In addition to reforestation, this program promotes an integrated approach: sustainable agriculture, protection of water resources and the creation of economic activities for local populations. But here in northern Senegal, in front of Fallou Fall's desert field, the showcase country seems to reflect a failure. And on a country-wide scale, it's difficult to know the precise list of projects carried out, let alone their state of progress.



“The Great Green Wall doesn't exist in my country, or at least I haven't come across it,” says a bitter Karine Fakhoury, Director of Ecovillages and Green Industries at the Agence sénégalaise de la reforestation et de la Grande muraille verte (ASERGMV) (Senegalese Agency for Reforestation and the Great Green Wall) from 2019 to 2022. On a pan-African scale, according to a progress report published in 2020, only 4% of the objectives set for 2030 at COP21 have been achieved. The figure rises to 18% if we include land restored off the original route.

Yet the money doesn't seem to be missing from the overall project. In 2021, over \$18 billion was pledged at the One Planet Summit in Paris in January and then at COP26 in Glasgow in November. The World Bank, for example, has pledged to invest \$5.6 billion between now and 2025 in the eleven countries concerned. The European Union has pledged more than 700 million euros per year, without specifying the distribution by country.

While some of the funds seem to have reached certain executive agencies, other funding remains hard to trace. During her tenure, even Karine Fakhoury struggled to see the light of day, as she worked on one of Senegal's flagship programs, the Tolou Keur circular gardens. “I often didn't even have a car at my disposal to get to the Tolou Keur projects on the Great Wall, even though it took me around ten hours to get there,” explains the French-Senegalese woman. But there's more: after lobbying hard to obtain funding for ten communes in September 2021 for reforestation and training initiatives, everything was abruptly halted three months later. “I still don't know why, or where the funds went,” she laments.

“This project is not a success”.

Such is the disillusionment that it has even reached Haïdar El-Ali, a colorful ecologist and politician, who was director of ASERGMV between July 2019 and March 2022. “For me, unfortunately, this project is not a success,” he says between two colorful phrases. “The Great Green Wall funds allocated to the country are managed by the FAO [Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations], which has spent a lot on operating costs and study trips, but has not redistributed the money well,” he accuses. Neither the FAO nor ASERGMV's current management have responded to Reporterre's enquiries about the project's results and funding in Senegal.

Faced with the project's lack of results, and the disenchantment that seems to be winning over many of those who are trying to move things forward, the image of the model Great Green Wall country is beginning to fade. For Karine Fakhoury, money is not enough: “Those in charge need ongoing training in this area, and a real awareness of the impacts on their daily lives.”



Goats easily slip inside the nursery dedicated to the Great Wall because of the poor condition of the fence. © Kalaamou/Reporterre

This observation is shared by the GEF, one of the project's biggest financial backers in the Sahel - according to Colonel Gora Diop, director of the Great Green Wall within ASERGMV, \$80 million has been granted by this Fund to Senegal from 2010 to 2021. Ibrahima Sow, the Fund's regional coordinator for Africa, emphasizes the lack of sustainability of these projects. We don't finance indefinitely," he explains. Normally, the state should take over. This doesn't always happen, and sometimes projects die as soon as our funding stops."

But these operational problems are far from discouraging everyone. Gora Diop is enthusiastic: "We're going to make it a resilient socio-economic development hub," he assures us, "taking into account social equity, the economic viability of projects, creating jobs for young people and women." As proof, he proudly presents the installation of 12 multi-purpose gardens, benefiting a thousand women.

Numerous "administrative dysfunctions"

Behind this optimistic rhetoric, however, it is impossible to assess the effectiveness of all the projects, which were announced as being "under evaluation" when we contacted the Agency. Long-term monitoring of projects also seems to have been hampered by the

political context. One day," recalls Ibrahima Sow, "a minister who had decided to allocate resources to a project was replaced, and the new minister, who wanted to make his mark, modified the project.

Such management is not without consequences. In the field, according to a number of testimonies, worksites have been slowed down, botched or aborted, and employees have suffered the fallout. Some reforestation workers have waited months for their salaries to be paid. "We were told it was due to administrative malfunctions", confides one of them. The problem is far from new. "When I arrived in 2019, I found a huge number of debts, and people who hadn't been paid for two years," says Haïdar El-Ali. In June this year, after the arrival of the new director of ASERGMV, the situation "seems to have been regularized", moderates Karine Fakhoury.



Fallou Fall's solar-powered mini-borehole for market gardening. © Kalaamou/Reporterre

This payment problem echoes the failing financial management of the Agence de la Grande muraille verte (the ancestor of ASERGMV), singled out in 2016 by Senegal's Court of Auditors along with other agencies in the country. "Despite the importance of the financial resources made available to the agencies, dysfunctions in their steering and governance as well as in their budgetary, financial and accounting management limit their effectiveness," reads the institution's report.

Mirage and GMOs

At issue: “unsustainable personnel costs due to unnecessary recruitment, low self-financing capacity, and unpaid tax and social security obligations and charges”, says the document. According to the report, shortcomings such as the tax evasion practiced until 2013 have been corrected, but doubts persist about others. A follow-up audit of the recommendations has indeed been initiated by the Cour des Comptes, but has not yet been published.

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For Karine Fakhoury, these dysfunctions have been one disillusionment too many. In 2021, she invoked her conscience clause to resign from ASERGMV. Although she did indeed leave in 2022, she is worried about the future, particularly since the passage of the biosafety law. Passed in June without debate by Senegal's National Assembly, this measure paves the way for the use of genetically modified organisms (GMOs). In particular, the former ASERGMV executive fears that the Tolou Keur program she developed for the Great Green Wall will be used to introduce the use of GMOs. She sums up: "The Great Green Wall remains a mirage, a utopia: everything remains to be done”.