



indigenous peoples of africa co-ordinating committee  
comite de coordination des peuples autochtones d'afrique

## **New threats to Saharan biodiversity and indigenous peoples**

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Agadez, Niger

*The Guardian newspaper reported last week that a UN Convention on Combatting Desertification (UNCCD) conference in Bonn has approved a plan for a pan-African Green Wall running across the Sahara desert, as part of an international strategy to fight deforestation.*

*IPACC's women's representative for West African nomadic women, Mme Sada Albachir, was asked as the Global Forest Coalition's African representative to respond to the content of the Green Wall initiative.*

*Albachir, who is Director of Association Tunfa, a Tuareg health and human rights organisation based in the desert city of Agadez in northern Niger, framed the discussion in terms of the repeated threats by investors to marginalise indigenous peoples from large scale mitigation and industrial activities in the Sahara. International agreements have in the past introduced alien invasive species into the Sahara, without tackling the root problems of poor governance, dangerous uranium mining, and a failure to conserve biodiversity and water security in the arid region.*

*The Sahara is being used as a pawn in international political and economic relations, without the prior informed consent of the indigenous peoples, both nomadic and oasis dwelling. Most seriously for biodiversity is the over use of wood and water by the mining industry, radioactive pollution, and wildlife poaching and deforestation by the military and foreign interest, including royals from the Arabian Gulf States.*

*Below is Albachir's analysis of the context of the Green Wall initiative.*

*"All these factors are compounded by the greed of multinational companies attracted by the huge reserves of uranium and oil below Niger, resulting in the distribution or sale of mining permits by the authorities and other people close to central power.*

*These multinationals take over the vast pastoral areas and there is no alternative for poor pastoralists whose herds are already being decimated by various calamities caused by*

climate change (droughts, floods etc ..). In locating their factories, the rest of our meagre vegetation suffers because they always "liberate" the land to exploit it. This will, no doubt, destroy small natural forests that still remain here and there.

There are also military actions for which many trees have been felled to secure the barracks, in rural areas but also it is the same in cities such as Agadez.

Today our countries advocate the construction of a "Green Wall", which is a policy that is understood by me as a continuation of REDD policies.

In 1974, after the coup d'état of General Kountché in Niger, August 3 was proclaimed "Tree Day" to commemorate the anniversary of independence. Thus, each year thousands of trees are planted, including those which are alien to our pastoral areas (such as *prosopus juliflora* "mesquite" which drains water from the soil and grows like a cancer throughout, often dispersed in animal droppings, and therefore is a hazard to livestock because it provides conditions that can affect the mouth and stomach of ruminants).

In any effort to reforest / afforest the Sahelian-Saharan zone of Africa, it would be wise to reflect on the history of forest management over the years, and to analyze and adopt traditional water management techniques (e.g. the drip irrigation in Egypt). It is especially important to take into consideration that the level of our groundwater is very low. The quality of water is for the most part polluted due to by-products used in the extraction and washing ore.

I think the idea of planting a Green Wall across Africa is not to be entertained by indigenous people living in the proposed sites, unless the project has been studied in collaboration with them and they are also involved in the implementation.

The concern today is the fragmentation and distribution of land between mining companies and the injustice in the distribution of profits. Recently there have been efforts to pay mining royalties into pooled trust funds, but there are always shortcomings as regards good governance and management of these resources that are sometimes used without the knowledge of indigenous peoples without their consent or even without proper use of these mining benefits as prescribed in the trust agreements.

Today, the challenge for us outside of this Green Wall is to ensure that our leaders emphasise the responsibility of the international community, partners, policy makers and donors to restore the integrity of our desert ecosystems and the fight against excessive poaching by the princes of the Arabian Gulf.

We must revitalize the socio-economic means of pastoral nomads through the expansion of natural oases palm groves where they are endangered, to rehabilitate the oases by

planting palm trees (e.g. date palm, doum) through the Sahara system of ancestral techniques of land management, introduce other agricultural techniques such as market gardening and the cultivation of wheat, which can significantly contribute to food self-sufficiency of people.

In addition, we must consider:

- Transhumance (nomadic Pastoralism) as a way of protecting and renewing the natural ecological system;
- Capitalize on the existence of salt pan areas of the Sahel-Saharan Africa as a means of reducing carbon emissions;
- Establish a system of management and protection of small forests that are regenerated naturally over time;
- Allow Indigenous Peoples to decide on how to manage and protect their biodiversity;
- Create green spaces around towns and villages (e.g. the green belt of Niamey) to mitigate the effects of desert encroachment;

We should strengthen the capacity of traditional authorities on all matters concerning the rights of indigenous peoples and the various legal instruments relating thereto, adaptation, minimizing the effects of climate change, desertification. What is most important is their involvement at all levels of decision-making about their resources.”

Sada Albachir, Association Tunfa

IPACC Executive Committee member

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