

Catalyzing grassroots regreening through concerted communication

The Great Green Wall aims to increase tree cover on 100 million hectares by 2030 and countries have made other pledges to restore millions of hectares of drylands through other commitments. But these will never be met with conventional tree planting or integrated landscape projects alone.

The lowest hanging of all fruit is to implement strategies for smallholders to share with millions of other land users how they have successfully increased tree cover on their own fields.



In the Sahel and Greater Horn of Africa, many land users already have experience with restoring the productive capacity of their land and building resilience to climate change [[ETFRN news 60: Restoring African Drylands - Tropenbos International](#)]. What is remarkable is that so many smallholders have spontaneously adopted farmer managed natural regeneration especially, amongst other practices, after witnessing themselves the economic and environmental benefits of more trees on other farmers' fields. And the practice was easy for them to implement, requiring no special equipment or expensive inputs. **Promoting experience sharing between farmers is probably the cheapest and easiest way to scale up restoration successes in Africa's drylands.**

Examples of regreening successes

- **Niger** – Farmers in the more densely populated south of the country have regreened more than five million hectares in two decades through farmer managed natural regeneration [[ETFRN 1.2](#), [1.9](#)].
- **Senegal** – Hundreds of villages in central regions now have more trees than 20 years ago because of successful community-based forest restoration [[ETFRN 1.6](#), [1.8](#)].
- **Mali** – on the Seno Plains, smallholder farmers have increased the number of on-farm trees on half a million hectares since the mid-1990s, linked to a change in the 1995 forest law which recognized their rights to trees [[ETFRN 1.5](#)].
- **Burkina Faso** – Yatenga province in 1980 was considered to be the country's most degraded area, but is today much greener because of the spread of simple water harvesting techniques that also created better conditions for trees as well as for crops [[ETFRN 1.4](#)].
- **Ethiopia** – Some 1.5 million hectares of very degraded land in Tigray has been set aside since the 1990s to allow natural regeneration, complemented by tree planting and water harvesting [[ETFRN 1.3](#)].

Large scale restoration can be achieved only if millions of smallholders choose to invest their own scarce resources in sustainable land management practices. Current development thinking is that integrated landscape approaches are the way forward, but this often leads to overly complex projects that can take years to start and mature. One important lesson is that complexity constrains implementation, so project design should start as simply as possible, with communication as the first stage, and not as a final 'add-on'...

Programme implementation must begin by investing in different forms of communication to mobilize smallholders in drylands to restore the productive capacity of their land through farmer managed natural regeneration and associated practices to build productive climate-resilient farming systems and improve the economic perspectives for youth.



Fund farmer to farmer exchanges – as a proven practice between regions and internationally, especially where language is not a barrier, but much more can be done if more resources are made available.



Organize field visits – specifically for journalists so they can film, interview and report on restoration successes, and to help develop a positive narrative about dryland restoration and to increase national and international support.



Train youth in communication – to build the capacity of NGOs, CSOs and government departments to create and disseminate success stories using a variety of media and especially through social media channels with huge potential to promote and scale out successes.



Develop radio programs – not with technical specialists telling farmers what to do, but for men and women farmers to share experiences on why they decided to invest in on-farm trees, problems faced, how they overcame them, and the benefits they gained.



Make documentaries – to showcase innovator farmers and their villages as examples of how land users have adapted to climate change and have built more productive and climate-resilient farming systems in the drylands that address climate change.



Arrange fact-finding visits – as policy makers and donors will benefit from listening directly to land users about the multiple impacts of greening, seeing what has already been achieved and what more can be done with further support.

The life and impact of an innovative farmer in Burkina Faso, Yacouba Sawadogo, was told in the award-winning documentary [The Man Who Stopped the Desert \(2010\) - IMDb](#), and as a result he received the Right Livelihoods Award in 2018 and the UNEP Champion of the Earth Award in 2020. See also [What Yacouba did next... - YouTube](#), and [Re-greening in Niger, a road trip with Dr Chris Reij](#) - YouTube including the benefits from international exchange visits. In Ethiopia, the village of Abreha We Atsbeha won the UNEP Equator Prize in 2012, and village leader Abu Hawi starred in [Ethiopia Rising - Journeyman Pictures](#) that showcased how they had achieved such a remarkable transformation through dryland restoration. This are just some examples...

In the context of the Great Green Wall, each of its 11 participating countries should urgently develop and implement a communication plan that incorporates all options, accompanied by monitoring and evaluation to assess how to best 'spread the word' regarding greening and restoration successes. This is also likely to be the most cost-effective approach, and that can be initiated immediately with significant impacts expected in the first few years..

For comments or requests for further information, contact:
nick.pasiecznik@tropenbos.org and chris.reij@wri.org

Issue date: September, 2021

Photo: Yacouba Sawadogo (right) and Ousseni Zorome (middle) sharing their experience with natural regeneration and water harvesting at a radio station in Ouahigouya, Burkina Faso (Anna Bon).

This publication has been made under the Working Landscapes programme financed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Government of the Netherlands.



www.tropenbos.org