

Building the Great Green Wall: Combatting Sahel's Economic and Political Instability with Climate Policy

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Home to impressive monuments such as Timbuktu and Djenné, the Sahel Region, an eco-climate zone that encompasses nations such as Sudan, Mauritania, Mali, Nigeria, Senegal, Niger, Burkina Faso, and Chad (Somalia and Ethiopia are occasionally included), was at the center of the global gold trade for centuries and boasted spectacular civilizations such as the Benin Empire (which lasted from the 13th century to the 19th century). But today, in contrast to the region's rich history, the people of the Sahel suffer from extreme cases of chronic food shortages and droughts, which is why the region has been the center of recent international development efforts. In order to combat regional hunger, military and political strife, and deteriorating environmental conditions, developed nations have continued to pour resources into the region through military aid and traditional development assistance. However, rather than spend its assets on methods that have been empirically proven to be ineffective, the international community should prioritize the innovative Great Green Wall project as a means of promoting regional development.

The Sahel suffers from a vast scope of difficulties that range from hunger to environmental degradation, political instability to fragile economies and regional instability instigated by terrorism, and they are all inextricably linked. Environmental degradation, for example, not only leads to food shortages but also stagnates the region's agricultural economy which, in turn, leads to regional and political instability. The issues in the Sahel are linked in such a way that they have formed a perpetual cycle of degradation.

Currently, millions of people in the Sahel are at risk of going hungry. Locals tell horrifying narratives of villagers in Chad digging through ant hills in order to scavenge the grains the ants had stored. In 2017, 30 million people are projected to experience food insecurity while 12 million of those will suffer at near-crisis levels. The worst-affected nation in the Sahel, Niger, constitutes one-sixths of the entire world's child deaths from malnutrition. According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Human Affairs, despite years of pouring resources into the region, the Sahel still requires \$2.66 billion to combat food shortages in 2017.

The increasing rate of deforestation and low rainfall have only exacerbated the food crisis in the region. The Sahel suffers from climate variations and highly irregular rainfall, damaging agricultural conditions for the locals. Recently, these severe conditions have only worsened; according to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 80 percent of the

region's once tillable land has deteriorated. Malam Garba, a farmer in the town of Dalli, Niger, explains that although his field is three times larger, his harvest is only a seventh of what it was 40 years ago. According to Garba, the rainfall that used to happen on a daily basis during the 25-day rain season has now completely ceased. Furthermore, due to deforestation and the eradication of vegetation in agricultural zones, the wind has been eroding the soil, leaving vast swathes of desolate land. In fact, reports of sand dunes rising to roof levels illustrate the extent of soil degradation. Predictions for the future of the Sahel's environmental conditions are grave: Not only will temperatures increase by 3 to 5 degrees Celsius by 2050, but, according to the Director of the National Department of the Environment in Niger, 250,000 hectares of land will be lost each year in Niger for the foreseeable future.

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These deteriorating environmental conditions have had significant impacts on the region's economy; the agricultural sector accounts for a large portion of the Sahel market. In fact, agriculture constitutes up to 45 percent of certain Sahel nations' economies. Due to the countries' high dependence on agricultural exports, deforestation and decreasing crop yields have upset the region's economy. The Sahel's performance on UNDP's Human Development Index is a clear demonstration of the region's economic and social fragility. Countries such as Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mali have previously ranked 177th, 175th, and 174th out of 177 nations respectively.

Recently, the Sahel was thrust into the forefront of international scrutiny after the terrorist attacks on the Radisson Blu Hotel in Mali and the Splendid Hotel in Burkina Faso. Both incidents, with a combined death toll of 52 people, have attracted media attention, with the BBC referring to the region as a "new frontier" in the war on terror. However, the Sahel region is hardly a 'new frontier'; in fact, the Sahel has been characterized by terrorism-induced strife since 2003, when President Bush called the Sahel "a second front in the global war on terror." Terrorism and political strife in the region only worsened after the collapse of the Gaddafi regime in Libya in 2011. With Gaddafi's downfall, the Tuareg people, who had served under the Libyan military, scattered throughout the Sahel, returning primarily to Mali and Niger. The Tuareg migration not only scattered Libyan weaponry throughout the already politically unstable region, but it also helped further spread instability as rebels (primarily the Tuareg) attempted to capture northern Mali. With regional crisis mounting, France provided military aid by directly intervening in January 2013. However, the West's military presence only heightened the Sahel's political strife – as the French military intervened in Mali, the jihadists scattered through neighboring nations. The dispersing of terrorist forces throughout the entirety of the Sahel region allowed radical groups to get a firmer grasp of the entire region. By 2015, extremist groups like Boko Haram had spread their presence to Nigeria, Niger, and Chad.

In order to combat such political and social fragility, the international community has traditionally relied upon military intervention and development assistance – both have been ineffective in improving the conditions in the Sahel and have also proven extremely costly.

In fact, military aid has only exacerbated political instability within the Sahel. According to Princeton Lyman, the former US ambassador to Nigeria, US involvement has led 250,000 people to be displaced and failed to reduce militia conflict in the region. Furthermore, US-trained

African troops in the Sahel, despite American policy-makers' optimism, have performed miserably. Kisangani of the Professors World Peace Academy elaborates how US-trained Niger forces have been humiliated, losing more than 100 soldiers in just 2006. US-trained forces in Niger and Mali have not only displayed combat deficiency, but they are also accountable for many civilian deaths due to their lack of discretion on the battlefield. Western military presence in the Sahel has simply boosted the expansion of radical extremist groups creating greater regional instability.

Despite its ambitious promises, traditional development assistance has failed in the region as well. Food production projects, for example, have had little to no results; despite their high costs, the projects have failed to produce any substantial development outcomes throughout the last several years. Moreover, according to Rob Bailey of Chatham House, because development aid follows a rigid timeline for delivery, individuals receiving the aid are forced to acclimate to the delivery deadlines, which is not the adaptable strategy the Sahel needs. The Sahel must undergo thorough internal development in order to manage the regular famines on its own rather than continuously rely on foreign aid.

Certain reports even point to development assistance agitating local violence. According to Doug Bandow of the Cato Institute, half the food aid distributed in Somalia was diverted to private contractors and radical militias. Troubling reports indicate that Somali soldiers have been bolstering their income by stealing and selling the food distributed for aid while radical groups have diverted the food aid to supply their efforts to attack Ethiopia. Of course, this analysis is not to say that development assistance and military aid are deficient all the time; rather, it is to show that there may be other, less traditional methods that are more effective in this specific context. For the case of the Sahel, the international community should invest in the Great Green Wall project.

The African Union, in 2007, proposed that the international community aid in creating a 7,700 kilometer wall of trees that would cross the Sahel region. This wall would combat deforestation and restore degraded soil so that villagers could farm once again. Not only would this ambitious project target environmental concerns, but it would also effectively ease the Sahel's hunger problem, economic stagnation, and regional instability. The Great Green Wall was initially met with scholarly skepticism. Scientists' concerns are aptly captured by Dennis Garrity, a senior research fellow at the World Agroforestry Centre, who said: "This was a stupid way of restoring land in the Sahel" upon hearing the proposal.

However, after traveling across the Sahel region, scientists discovered that local farmers, by utilizing ingenious and traditional agriculture and agroforestry practices around the Green Wall, transformed degraded soil into productive land that could support food production for 3 million more people. Senegal, through the Great Green Wall, has already restored 4 million hectares of land. It has already planted 27,000 hectares of trees, restoring environmental conditions for hundreds of thousands of farmers along the southern frontier of the Sahara.

The positive outcomes of the project extend beyond environmental concerns: The Great Green Wall would also provide thousands of jobs to local communities. Many young people in the region, who are often in danger of joining radical groups to escape poverty and unemployment, have joined the Great Green Wall brigade with the hopes of restoring their communities by planting trees and building farms. Ambitious policy-makers believe that by 2030, the Great Green Wall will be able to support 300 million people across the Sahel and create at least

350,000 jobs. Thus, the Great Green Wall is more than just an environmental development project – it can serve as an encompassing mode of development for a region whose far-reaching problems require creative solutions.

Despite the project's promising initial impact, it still needs more participation on an international level. Although the World Bank recently pledged \$1.9 billion to the project at the COP21 in Paris, scholars are still wary of the project's slow progress; in order to satisfy the rate of population growth in the Sahel, reports estimate that the greening project must be completed within the next 15 years. The international community must allocate greater funds to the project while expanding partnerships to more agencies and institutions. Due to the grand scale and ambition of the project, nation-states cannot realize it alone – Sahel countries must open their doors to more NGOs, private sector actors, and institutional donors. NGOs such as the Nigerian Conservation Foundation (NCF) and the Nigerian Environmental Study/Action Team (NEST) have already started to participate in funding and negotiations.

Furthermore, Sahel countries should quickly establish a stronger legal framework for sustainable land management; at the moment, due to a lack of formal governance and institutional framework regarding desertification control and land management, nations have been struggling to coordinate their efforts on a domestic and international level. The Sahel region should update its environmental policies with the help of scientific and technical partners.

Finally, the Sahel region should prioritize educating local farmers on the re-greening project. Chris Reij, a senior fellow at the World Resources Institute, believes that the best way to manage the project is to “put responsibility in the hands of the farmers.” Farmers of the Sahel are best equipped to effectively regenerate the region's soil due to their vast knowledge of localized agroforestry techniques. The proposals from scholars such as Reij are clear: Expand partnerships. Gather funds. Give resources to the farmers. Educate the farmers and let them restore the Sahel region themselves. The solution to the unique intersection of issues in the Sahel may be just as unique to the region.