

Great Green Wall: Africa showcases its solutions and accelerates its momentum towards COP17



Cairo, Egypt – On the sidelines of the African Group of Negotiators' preparatory meeting for COP17 of the UNCCD, to be held from 2 to 4 June 2026, a special session dedicated to the Great Green Wall (GGW) Initiative and projects supported by the Global Environment Facility (GEF) highlighted the progress, lessons learned, and new perspectives of this landmark continental initiative. This session took place within the framework of the African preparatory meeting organized by the African Union Commission in cooperation with the host country, Egypt, and several international partners. Bringing together nearly sixty African experts, this meeting aimed to harmonize the continent's positions ahead of COP17, scheduled to take place in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, on the challenges of desertification, drought, and land degradation.

Led by Papa Alassane Mbaye, Head of Communication, Marketing and Advocacy at the Pan-African Agency of the Great Green Wall (PAGGW) and Adamou Bouhari, Regional Coordinator of the GEF Programme for the Great Green Wall, the session brought together representatives of African States, technical and financial partners, regional organizations, civil society and environmental experts.

Key lessons learned from over a decade of implementation

In his introductory presentation, Mr. Mbaye shared several lessons learned from evaluations of the Great Green Wall's implementation since its launch. The first lesson concerns the crucial importance of local community involvement. According to him, the most successful experiences have demonstrated that communities must be placed at the heart of land restoration efforts to ensure the sustainability of results on the ground. He also emphasized the need to link ecological restoration activities to local economic development. This integrated approach, combining natural resource conservation and the creation of economic opportunities, has been particularly exemplified by Integrated Community Farms (ICFs), now considered promising models for scaling up. Another key lesson is the importance of valuing local solutions and indigenous knowledge. Innovative community initiatives must now be strengthened through science, innovation, and strategic partnerships. However, he stressed that several challenges

remain, including sustainable financing, technical capacity building, monitoring and evaluation, and the need to accelerate large-scale investments.

A new dynamic driven by the PAGGW

During his address, Mr. Mbaye also presented the new dynamic underway within the Pan-African Agency of the Great Green Wall (PAGWW), under the leadership of Executive Secretary Almoustapha Garba. This new direction is based on two strategic pillars: i) strengthening institutional governance and accelerating partnerships; and ii) modernizing communication, now focused on impact, results, and the visibility of African achievements. In this context, the PAGWW plans to organize a strategic side event during COP17, in partnership with the African Union Commission, the African Development Bank (AfDB), the UNCCD, and several partner institutions. Scheduled for August 25, this event will focus on scaling up the Great Green Wall through continental integration and the African Union strategy. The objective will include mobilizing public and private funding, strengthening partnerships, promoting bankable projects with a high impact and marking the start of a facility with the support of the AfDB.

The GEF 8 project: \$78 million to strengthen resilience in nine countries

Speaking online, Mr. Adamou Bouhari presented the regional program funded by the Global Environment Facility (GEF), with a budget of \$78 million and covering nine Sahelian countries, as well as a regional coordination project. This program aims to strengthen the technical, institutional, and political capacities of the participating states to accelerate the transition to sustainable and resilient landscapes in the Great Green Wall area. Each beneficiary country has a national project, coordinated regionally with support from the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the West African Development Bank (BOAD).

The program is structured around several priorities: i) strengthening the capacities of national institutions; ii) restoring degraded lands and forests; iii) promoting sustainable value chains; iv) integrating gender and youth issues; v) developing impact investments involving the private sector; vi) improving monitoring and evaluation and knowledge management.

Adamou Bouhari stressed that this initiative constitutes a major innovation by integrating several GEF intervention areas — biodiversity, climate adaptation and the fight against land degradation — into a single programmatic approach.

From the Sahel to the SADC: the Great Green Wall is accelerating its continental expansion

Speaking on behalf of the UNCCD Global Mechanism, Catherine Mutambira presented the progress of the Great Green Wall Initiative in Southern Africa (SADC), illustrating the gradual expansion of the Sahelian model to a continental scale. Structured around priorities such as access to water, combating drought, restoring ecosystems, and resilient agriculture, this regional initiative relies in particular on the Zambezi River basin as a priority landscape for climate resilience actions.

Approved by SADC ministers since 2015, this regional dynamic has gradually structured itself around a common roadmap, with a particular focus on the Zambezi basin, identified as a priority landscape for restoration and climate resilience actions.

She also announced several projects supported by the Climate Investment Funds and the GEF, focusing on drought, gender, youth, and capacity building. For Catherine Mutambira, this momentum confirms that the Great Green Wall is now extending beyond the Sahel region to become a true continental platform for landscape restoration and climate resilience, already inspiring other regions of the world such as the Middle East.

Africa as a global model of resilience

The discussions also highlighted the growing interest in the Great Green Wall beyond the African continent. Several speakers noted that similar initiatives are now emerging in other regions of the world, particularly in the Middle East with the “Middle East Green Initiative,” inspired by the African experience. Participants unanimously emphasized the need for Africa to capitalize on this continental expertise and to have the Great Green Wall recognized as a major African solution to desertification, drought, and climate change.

A strong African voice for COP17

At the close of this session, participants called for increased mobilization of African states and international partners to accelerate the implementation of land restoration and climate resilience commitments. They also advocated for greater integration of African experiences, particularly those related to the Great Green Wall and land degradation neutrality, into the decisions of COP17. Through this meeting, Africa reaffirmed its commitment to no longer be perceived solely as a vulnerable continent, but as a true global laboratory for innovative solutions to climate change, biodiversity, and sustainable development.

