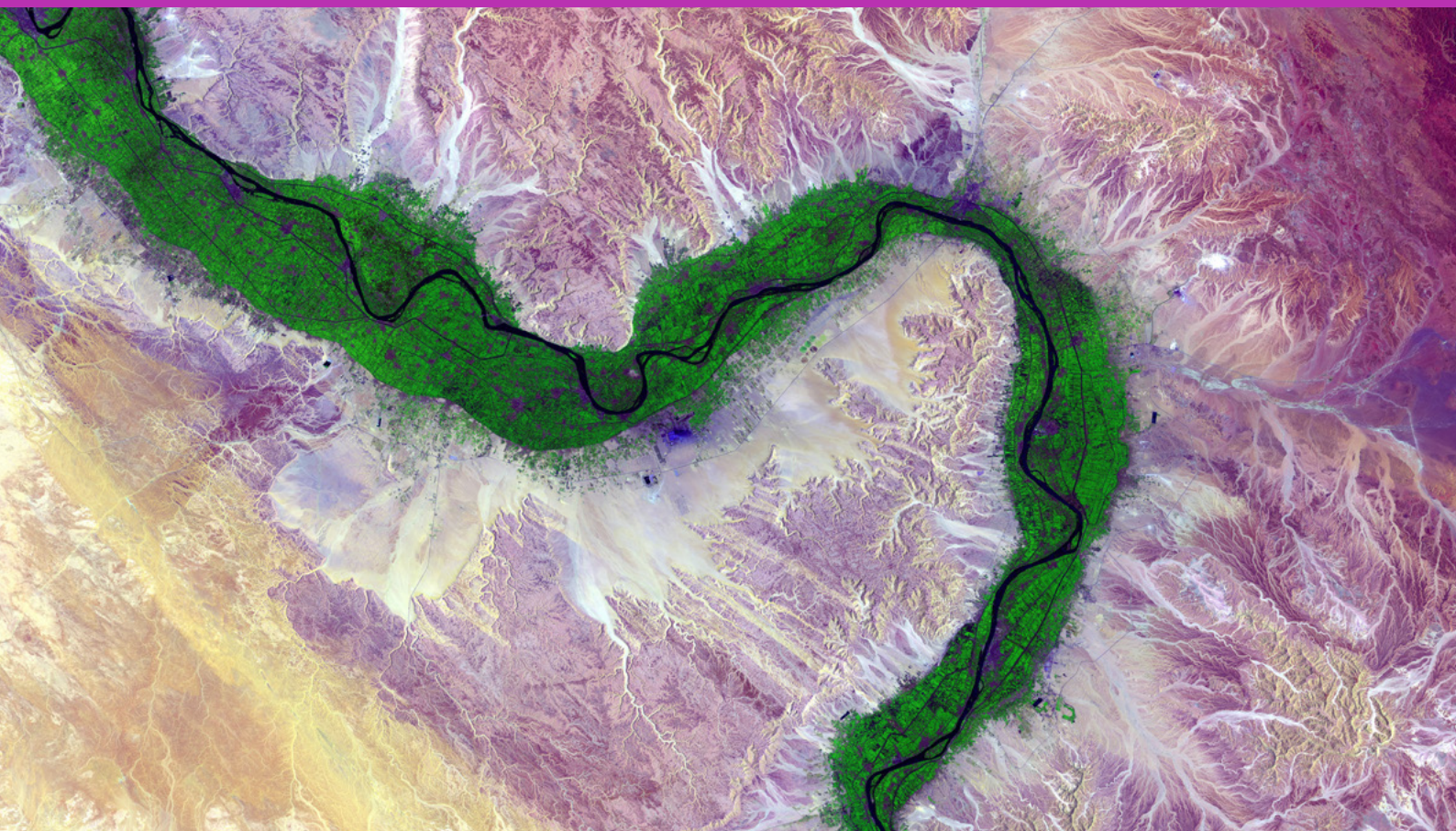


SPRING 2021

The Sahel Renaissance:

Enabling a just rural transition

EVENT REPORT



The Africa Europe Foundation is a platform to facilitate multi-stakeholder dialogue, catalyse collaboration and unlock new opportunities that can transform dialogue into action.

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All indicators are green for a Sahelian rebirth

Just months after international donors pledged to accelerate the greening of the Sahel at the One Planet Summit, there is optimism aplenty about a region that has long suffered from environmental crises, poverty, insecurity and wars. In an online policy dialogue organised by the Africa Europe Foundation on 12 May 2021, part of the 'Talking Africa EU series', a diverse panel of experts debated the opportunities and challenges facing the Sahel.

When we think of the Sahel, many of us form a negative image, remarked **Tamsin Rose**, the debate moderator and Senior Fellow at the Africa Europe Foundation: "Yet its future could be different and much better. The region could be greener, leading to sustainable jobs and economic opportunities. It could offer more stability, less conflict, more participation, as well as a more open, stable and democratic society."

She was keen to find out what a 'Sahel Renaissance' might look like and how participants envisaged a greener region. One that features a restored landscape, regenerative agriculture where soil fertility provides decent livelihoods for local people, plus an agro-ecological transformation, as part of the bigger picture in climate change.

Rose also aimed to come up with a series of key recommendations. Grounded in sustainability and targeting both donors and policymakers with responsibility for the region, these would be included in a Call for Action on a Sahel Renaissance.

"We recognise that any actions will have to be taken at local level. They should be decided with local populations, corresponding to their culture, norms, values and hopes for their region," added Rose. "If we can get a renaissance, if we can achieve this transformation, it will be a stabilising anchor for the whole of Africa."

New narrative

"We're talking here about a Renaissance, which means to be born again. But I don't think the Sahel ever died!" said **Cheikh Mbow**, Director of the Future Africa Institute, University of Pretoria. "Although it has suffered epistemological sabotage, there's no reason why the Sahel should be seen as a place of doom and misery. It's vibrant and rich in natural resources!" he added.

In his view, part of the problem is not getting the narrative right: "For a long time, everybody who heard about the Sahel associated it immediately as a place of drought, misery, hunger and diseases, etc. Yet we all know the Sahel is absolutely rich. It's this richness that justifies why we should relaunch the region's development, based on natural resources." He noted that gold and other resources attracted Europeans and others to the region many centuries ago.

For Mbow, another mistaken perception is the view that the Sahel has always had a poor human rights record. He said people often link it with Islamists and the instability in countries like Mali, Niger and Chad. However, few people realise that the first human rights declaration was made in the Sahel, a region which has had “strong human rights and respected women and people since the 12th century.” Mbow added that the Sahel is seen as a no-man’s land, a place of land grabbing, where many people come to claim different resources. “To reverse this trend, we must first rebuild the rhetoric, based on recognition of the Sahel’s richness, which has been an attraction for millennia from the north and the rich countries.” More broadly, he recommended building on three practical areas or “selling points”: (1) natural resources, (2) job opportunities, and (3) new ways to invest in society. For example, added Mbow, 99% of the region’s groundwater has not been extracted. Using this plentiful natural resource will radically transform the Sahel in terms of food security, land restoration and human wellbeing.

Tapping into the Great Green Wall

“At no time in recent memory has the Sahel been so much in focus, and at all levels – be they political, social, or economic,” said **Elvis Paul Tangem**, African Union Commission Coordinator of the Great Green Wall for Sahara and the Sahel Initiative (GGWSSI). He acknowledged this may sometimes be for negative reasons, such as conflict. “But generally speaking, this is the best time for the Sahel and especially when it comes to restoration and sustainable land management and a potential for investment,” he added.

His comments came as part of a broader conversation around the Great Green Wall for the Sahel and Sahara Initiative (GGW), which was launched in 2007 and is backed by some 11 countries. The African-led initiative aims to re-green the Sahel, calling on policy solutions to tackle issues such as land degradation, drought, desertification, climate change, biodiversity loss, poverty and food insecurity. In January 2021, several bilateral and multilateral donors committed over €14 billion to the GGW, at the One Planet Summit.

Tangem reckons this summit and its major funding pledges indicated a major change in the narrative: “It signalled an engagement with a region considered to be attractive. You can see that the Sahel is also in the news for the right reasons. The policy environment today is so good for the Sahel, for the kind of transformation that is needed.”

The question now though is how to leverage this good policy environment in order to boost investment there. Tangem agreed with the general view that there has been too much investment in arms and confrontation, in trying to solve the issues of the Sahel through wars and fighting of terrorists. “However, if you look at the Great Green Wall, this was created by this continent’s leaders to bring back the renaissance of the Sahel,” he said. “Despite initial scepticism about the initiative, it shows you can only bring sustainable change through a landscape approach.” He noted the GGW also comes with an “integrated approach, bringing together all the international development partners and the private sector, to bring the type of transformative change that we want.”

Tangem called the Sahel one of the richest areas in the world thanks to a dynamic and young population, resources on the ground, and its water and agricultural potential. In his view, “The Sahel just needs investment. We need to encourage the private sector to look at the Sahel not as a basket case, but as a region of opportunities. That’s the only way we’re going to bring the kind of renaissance we want in the region.”

“There is a vast potential for ecological restoration to return land to productivity and bio-geological diversity across the Sahel,” said **Sarah Toumi**, Monitoring officer of the Great Green Wall Accelerator at the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD). Like others in the debate, she agreed that trust will be of utmost importance and explained that with colleagues, she is setting a result management framework commonly used by all the stakeholders.

Toumi clarified that stakeholders mean financial partners, implementing actors, as well as governments and Great Green Wall pan-African agencies and all civil society. “We really believe we can all talk the same language, which is the language of science, collecting data around key indicators so that we can connect financial resources with very good products that are in need of funding,” she said.

The moderator added that she appreciated hearing about this scientific approach to tackling the challenges of development in the Sahel: “This is complex systems thinking, about the need to balance out agriculture, food, water, land, humanitarian aspects, the private sectors, and developments... these things need to be in balance.”

Leonard Mizzi, European Commission Head of Unit for Sustainable Agri-food Systems and Fisheries at DG INTPA, agreed with Toumi about the importance of having a multi-stakeholder approach in the Sahel. He also hoped that the UN Food Systems Summit, scheduled for September 2021, would try to trigger this multi-stakeholder approach. “We in the European Commission are also doing this on cocoa value chains... it’s not easy, as you need to inform and involve everyone across the value chain. But it’s a big component of the solution to have all stakeholders around the table in a robust policy dialogue with a territorial vision. This is the only way forward, but it also challenges the region’s governance infrastructure.”

Fostering better investment

Funding for the region was examined in some depth during the dialogue. **Patrick Worms**, Senior Science Policy Advisor, CIFOR-ICRAF (acting as a Strategic Commentator), said that investment from outside has a role to play, but it can lead to the problem of power relationships. “An outsider that has the financial power and courage to invest in this uncertain region, plagued by insecurity, will have far more power, politically and financially than the villagers with whom he or she is interacting. We’ve got to be very wary of the way that this large-scale investment could work,” he warned.

Worms said that such investment can be “absolutely transformative” – provided it goes into technical assistance to help farmers maximise the productivity of the landscapes. It should enable them to seize the opportunities of the new value chains available in these landscapes, ensure that their rights to the trees and to their land are respected, and help them access the knowledge and the education that they need. However, he added “If investment targets a 5,000-hectare sugar cane plantation or a 10,000 hectare cashew plantation, that’s more concerning. Those investments generate very few local jobs and generally end up kicking people off the landscape and these people have to find a living somewhere else.”

Cheikh Mbow reflected on the poor performance of many financial institutions in the Sahel. “We need a non-traditional funding strategy or funding mechanism to create the deep and rapid transformation we want in the Sahel. The traditional funding mechanism, as others today have mentioned, is not working – because the traditional banking system is not fit for purpose when creating the transformation in the investment and local communities’ bottom-up approach.” He recommended reinventing a new mechanism for capital access for the poor communities, since the issue of trust cannot be established without creating conditions under which people can access funding to invest in natural resources.

Adamou Bouhari, UN Environment Task Manager, had similar views: “One of the development bottlenecks in Africa is access to loans and access to resources. In West Africa, access to loans is very difficult if not impossible, because the financial sector does not lend money to the poor.” Yet he said there are good examples of such loans working well, in the Central African Republic, Togo and Senegal: “Sahelian youth and women are not looking for philanthropy – they’re just looking for the possibility of having resources to invest and produce.”

Other participants shared similar views. **Uzziel Twagilimana**, from We Social Movement, representing civil society organisations and trade unions, said the emphasis should be on investment in human capital. “It’s about investing through promoting different jobs, particularly for youth and women, as well as investing in social protection for us to build our resilience when there is this issue of climate change affecting the people.”

For **Josef Garvi**, Sahara Sahel Foods, it’s vital to keep people on the ground and really build their livelihoods and help them grow: “It’s not just about growing in terms of money, but also acquiring skills, seeing their children being able to learn more than they learned. We must consider how to build systems that are as inclusive as possible, to help people move upwards.”

According to **Agnes Binagwaho**, Vice Chancellor of The University of Global Health Equity in Rwanda, another form of investment could involve returning to the region of the Sahel the riches that have been confiscated, since the colonial times, by various European countries: “This money could finance everything. This unlocked money could help people in the Sahel to exploit the local resources that are untapped now.”

A personal investment success story

Sarah Toumi mentioned another form of investment in the region, as a social entrepreneur, before she joined United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) in Tunisia. “I started a social enterprise in Tunisia, my vision was this team to fight desertification, by creating jobs for youth and women connecting agro-ecological value chains to markets at national and international level.”

She began with a €3,000 crowdfunding campaign and built a company that now generated one million euro turnover per year producing essential oils and food products on the Tunisian and international markets, especially for cosmetic brands. She said that trust was key to this growth. “I got access to seed funding, which gave us the opportunity to finance trainings for the farmers, capacity building for engineers, and research and development on agriculture physical activities.”

Toumi said this system helped her company to solve a complex funding issue. It also improved the lives of a more than 500 families in Tunisia working on hundreds of hectares of land. She added that she is now working on a wider perspective with UNCCD, looking for solutions to offer similar service opportunities to Sahelians to express the rich opportunities that they have.

Mizzi voiced the opinion that one of the big problems, in the Sahel or Africa generally, is a lack of de-risking private investment: “Everyone thinks that private investment is mega-investment or big companies. But there is lack of traction of private investment for small-ticket sized projects in the region, say €20,000 to one million. Here financial institutions still find it difficult to invest, because transaction costs are very high.”

Development Financial Institutions (DFIs) need to tick all the investment boxes, which can make them nervous. For example, they may have to take into account youth, gender, landscape, or land governance. “The nexus dimension – land, water, energy, humanitarian development, and peace. All these different exercises must be synchronised, and that is why private investment doesn’t follow,” added Mizzi.

He explained that this is why the European Commission is trying to target investments which have better impact on the ground, an impact on small-ticket sizes, and an impact on youth. But also a transformation model which departs from the traditional agriculture and food systems of the past. “We’re speaking potentially of a big regional dimension, which will build on the previous programming, for the African region component – which is systems thinking. That’s energy, climate change, environment, and food systems within a digital context,” said Mizzi.

He added that private investment will also be important to help compensate for the growing indebtedness of governments, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet he was unsure if it will be possible to ensure that private investment will always be sustainable: “It’s not automatic, because it’s complicated to invest in food systems.” Furthermore, he strongly recommended continuing to invest in research and innovation in the region – in areas such as neglected crops, water management, irrigation, energy and health.

Worms recommended investing in mobile technology, which can help isolated rural communities with tasks such as mobile banking or remittances. Smartphones can also be employed to do GPS surveys of crops or trees in fields, potentially useful for estimating how much farmers are contributing to biodiversity.

Keeping it local

The concept of trust was mentioned again in reference to local communities. “We need to extend trust to the people who live in the Sahel, particularly in the rural areas. Local people have developed ways of managing local landscapes for local productivity and we see that evidence today,” said Worms.

He highlighted “little flowers growing across the Sahel... landscapes at the scale of a few hundred to a few thousand hectares, sometimes more, which are re-greening because local populations are taking it upon themselves to manage their landscapes.” Practically speaking, that may mean letting trees regrow, adding more trees, exploiting the local nutritional resources, or managing livestock. Worms added: “This ensures the biomass is properly allocated and supported, rather than interfered with by the largest state-level policies. I think that’s where the secret lies.” He also suggested that governments trust local communities to figure out their own ways of greening their landscapes: “Governments have to trust local entrepreneurs to begin to develop new businesses and not try to squash them with too many regulations or too many taxes when they’re still young and fragile.”

Worms favoured “priming the pump of biomass productivity in the landscape.” Techniques such as farmer-managed natural regeneration, companion planting, the management of livestock – these will generate more products for sale. “You’re going to generate more economic opportunities that can be exploited by local youth, such as motorcycle logistics or mobile phone charging or financial services, or simple agri-processing. That is how economic development starts to happen,” added Worms.

In search of superfoods

There was also lively discussion about the value of cultivating native or neglected species, rather than imported crops that are less suitable for the Sahel. “We’re talking about growing superfoods like baobab, moringa, shea butter, cashews as well as many crops like vegetables and legumes,” said Toumi. Worms agreed that the landscape has great potential, noting that he has come across some of these superfoods in supermarkets in Europe: “I was astonished to see baobab powder on sale for €200 a kilogram. I imagine that probably less than 10 cents per kilogram went to the woman who actually harvested the food in the first place.”

Worms said that kind of “financial injustice” is something that also needs fixing. One solution is to encourage local-level processing. Perhaps with the development of simple machinery that can be built and maintained by a village blacksmith in order to do some of the primary processing in the landscape,

where these products are grown. “This is how you begin to accumulate capital in the landscape and this is how that capital can begin to make a transformation in that landscape,” he noted.

Boosting job creation

Employment is a major issue in the region and beyond. “One million jobs need to be created in Africa per month, so we’re speaking about 12 to 15 million per year, yet no one discusses the potential absorption of job creation in the Sahel or in Africa in the areas we are discussing,” said Mizzi.

According to **Debalkew Berhe** of IGAD, “The land is degraded, many people are unemployed. So we should link the restoration of the landscape to creation of jobs for the youth. For example, they could be assigned to protecting land or restoring degraded area.” Historically, he added, creating jobs from restoration of ecosystems in the Sahel has been neglected.

Too many cooks

Mbow called out “the convoluted nature of institutional initiatives” as another problem regionally. He said he had counted about 15 initiatives in the Sahel, all with different methods and different target groups, with different investment skills and different ambitions: “We have a lot of initiatives in the Sahel and they’re not talking the same language.”

Rose responded that this issue is like having too many cooks in the kitchen, which may mean some streamlining is necessary. However, according to Tangem, “The Great Green Wall was created to bring all these initiatives under one umbrella. It was created to bring the development practitioners and the policymakers together.”

The moderator concluded: “There will never be a better year than 2021 to get focus on the Sahel. The policy context is right, there are political interests, financial resources, and a security need to do something to support the region.” She also hoped the planned Call to Action would be something that organisations could support and sign onto, and something the Africa Europe Foundation could use as a political momentum tool.



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