

Is Africa's Great Green Wall at risk of being forgotten?

France and other international donors are hatching a new forest conservation plan. This must not come at the expense of existing initiatives.

Not just another summit. This is how the Élysée Palace, the office of France's President Emmanuel Macron described last month's high-level One Forest Summit, co-led by France and Gabon. The focus of this year's event was on protecting forests and biodiversity in the face of climate change. It was hosted by Gabon, most of which is forested, and was held in Libreville. The event did garner some eye-catching headlines. France announced that it will contribute half of the funds for a €100-million (US\$110 million) project to pay communities to protect forests and ecosystems. Under a scheme called the One Forest Vision, scientists will have the task of mapping carbon (including carbon sequestration) and biodiversity in the world's tropical forests in the next five years. And business leaders have promised to create 10 million jobs related to the sustainable management of forests by 2030.

These initiatives are part of what is called the Libreville Plan. The world needs it to succeed to have even a fighting chance of limiting global warming to within 1.5 °C of pre-industrial levels and turning the corner on the decline in species and ecosystems. But more than a month after the event, no further detail has been published to explain how these initiatives will be achieved – whether through existing institutional mechanisms or by creating new ones. The organizers must remedy that quickly. At the same time, they should explain how their new project fits in with continuing priorities from previous summits.

For example, what about unfinished business from the last summit, which took place in Paris in 2021? The One Planet Summit for Biodiversity ended with delegates recommitting to the Africa-led Great Green Wall initiative, one of the world's most ambitious ecological-restoration schemes.

The Sahel–Sahara region is home to many of the world's poorest people, who live in some of the driest conditions and are among the most vulnerable to climate change. The green-wall project was formally adopted by the African Union in 2007, five years after the union's creation. It was championed by two powerful heads of government: Nigeria's Olusegun Obasanjo and Senegal's Abdoulaye Wade. The aim is to restore 100 million hectares of degraded land in 11 countries straddling the

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Sahel south of the Sahara, from Senegal in the west to Djibouti in the east – all by 2030. Originally conceived as a 7,000-kilometre wall of trees, it has evolved into a more complex set of activities, including not only planting new trees but also improving soils, setting up community gardens and protecting existing forests.

The project also aims to create 10 million jobs and to sequester 250 million tonnes of carbon dioxide. International donors promised to provide most of the project's budget. But as *Nature* and others have pointed out, the pace of financing is too slow to achieve this target.

As of 2020, one-fifth of degraded land (20 million hectares) had been restored and 350,000 of the promised 10 million jobs had been created. That is mainly, although not solely, because just US\$2.5 billion of a required \$30 billion has been spent since the project began.

A United Nations representative told *Nature* that donors have committed \$15 billion to a pipeline of 150 projects. But a UN report published in February acknowledges that it's not clear how much of this is grants, how much is loans and how much is existing funding relabelled as Great Green Wall money (see go.nature.com/3uhwtae). Moreover, coordination between Great Green Wall countries and donors is weak.

The report suggests that trust between the African Union and international donors is in short supply. Donor nations seem to be picking and choosing which countries to invest in, with a preference for those in relatively stable regions. So Ethiopia, Eritrea, Niger and Senegal are among the most active participants. The less-involved countries – Chad, Mali, Burkina Faso and Sudan, for example – also happen to be the ones that are ruled by their armed forces, with instability, insurgencies and high rates of internal displacement, lost livelihoods and poverty as people flee fighting. The situation in Sudan has become particularly precarious, because military and paramilitary forces are now in open conflict. Conservation and economic-development projects are challenging to achieve in such conditions. The tragedy is that international donors seem to be pulling away (or moving only slowly) just when the people of these countries need their help the most.

The project has also found it hard to excite Africa's top leaders in the way it did Obasanjo and Wade, both of whom saw it as something the continent could unite over in the early days of the African Union. Now, the continent's Great Green Wall is at risk of becoming its Great Green Walled Garden – a network of isolated activities in a relatively small number of countries. It is also in danger of seemingly abandoning the people most in need of it. There are lessons here for the Libreville Plan. In embracing a new project, donors don't want to give the impression that they are done with the Green Wall and ready to move on.

International summits are not difficult to organize if you have the money, and pledges are easily made. But unkept promises fuel anger and mistrust, at the same time worsening both poverty and the environment. While we await details of the new forest conservation plan, it's essential that the original vision of Africa's Great Green Wall is not filed away in the 'too difficult' box.