



Global  
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Forum

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## Regaining their lost paradise

Communities rehabilitating mangrove forests in the drought-affected Saloum Delta, Senegal

### Background

Since the 1970s, the Sahel region of northern Africa has been experiencing ongoing drought. The ecological, economic and social impacts are far-reaching, and coastal and estuarine ecosystems have not been spared. In Senegal, this has caused a “brutal and dramatic” loss of mangrove forest, and thus of the terrestrial and marine natural resources that are connected to these environments, says Abdoulaye Diamé, Executive Director of the West African Association for Marine Environment (WAAME).

The Saloum Delta, in the Fatick region in the west of Senegal, expands over 300,000 hectares, and is a zone of global economic and ecological importance. In 1980, mangroves covered almost 60% of the delta. But since then, the forest has steadily decreased, through drought impacts and over-exploitation: by 2006, this figure had dropped to around 38%.



Figure 1. Location of mangrove rehabilitation efforts.

The mangroves, which are community-owned, play a central role in local socio-economic and cultural systems. They provide timber and fuelwood, protect against coastal erosion and flooding, secure the health of fisheries, and harbour traditional remedies and sacred sites. The forests also provide a barrier against storms and coastal erosion in fragile areas. “Since our

village was founded, its stability has been linked to the mangroves,” says Betenty village resident Moussa Sarr. “We often hear that the sea invades certain places because they have no barrier separating them from the ocean. If you see that the ocean waves break weakly on our shores, it is because there are mangroves here that protect us,” he explains.

## Taking action

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Given the mangroves’ importance for so many elements of their lives, many community members were highly motivated to halt and reverse the degradation that was occurring, and “regain their lost paradise,” says Diamé. He himself grew up in the area, and always hoped to play a role in finding sustainable solutions to the forests’ decline.

In the mid-1990s, Diamé and a number of his young contemporaries from the delta founded a range of environmental and youth associations – among them, WAAME. Meanwhile, at the University of Dakar, a research team on marine and coastal issues was turning its attention to the issue of mangrove reforestation.

And so it was that in 1995, in collaboration with local communities, international NGOs, aid agencies and the researchers from Dakar, WAAME initiated a campaign to restore the mangrove forests of the Saloum Delta. Since then, they’ve restored around 8,500 hectares of mangrove forest.

WAAME carries out education and training programs to ensure local communities are on board and well equipped to sustain the reforestation efforts. They are trained in basic species biology and replanting techniques, and educated on the importance of mangrove conservation at all levels. Popular theatre, football tournaments and exchange visits between communities help to create the connections and shared motivations to make a difference for the mangrove forests in the Delta and beyond.



Photo 1. Women of Bassoul gather to organize for mangrove monitoring.

# Perspectives on success

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The work has already led to considerable behavior change and the adoption of more sustainable practices at the local level, says Diamé. In general, there's a renewed appreciation of what these ecosystems provide. "A sea without mangroves is nothing," pronounced one woman after a successful reforestation effort near the village of Djirnda.

The program has also made a big impact on biodiversity in the area, says Diamé, because mangroves provide a spawning ground for many species of fish. For the Niominka, an aquacultural ethnic group based on the delta's islands, healthy fisheries are particularly important. "Fishing is our main activity," says one woman from Fayako village, "and it is dependent on the mangroves."

Further, thanks to the regenerating forests, and technical support from outside partners, communities have been able to diversify their livelihoods into areas such as agroforestry, salt harvest, tourism and beekeeping, says Diamé: a critical outcome in an area where income and resources are stretched and malnutrition can be an issue.

Women have been most heavily involved in the reforestation efforts to date, because "they are more organized than men on community issues such as reforestation," says Diamé. "They develop structures, and they work together much more than the men."

He notes that through the reforestation process, women have gained expanded rights, which appear to have extended to other areas of their lives. Initially, gendered traditions prevented many women from playing decisionmaking roles in the reforestation work. For example, the first reforestation meeting on Bassoul Island was held just after Friday prayers on the esplanade of the mosque. As was traditional, this meeting was attended only by men, who then granted Diamé's team permission to discuss the project with the women of the village.

At that point, a local and extremely charismatic woman leader, Aminata Diankong Sagar, asked the women, "Is it really right for the men to meet first by themselves, and then allow women to be involved?" According to Diamé, the tradition was little more than "an old routine," which when challenged, did not stand up to the test of time, or to strong leadership like Sagar's. Since that transformative moment, the women of Bassoul have freely gathered without men's consent for all kinds of projects.

For many community members, the work has also prompted reconnection with ancient cultural knowledge. Historically in the area, mangrove forests were considered sites of worship, where people would go to offer prayers, gifts and protection, and where they gathered traditional medicines and sacred objects. Since the forests have been restored, these practices are being revived, and they're becoming increasingly popular, says Diamé.

Amath Thiaré, a wise man from the village of Mbam, told organizers during the first mangrove reforestation meeting held in 1996 in the town square: "You are seeking to clothe the naked body of Pacciin [a sacred site that is perceived as a goddess] through this reforestation program, so you have all our blessing and the unwavering support of the protective spirit of the mangroves."

According to Diamé, this comment exemplifies what has made the project so successful to date: fusing technical forestry training, and elements of contemporary community development practice such as gender awareness, with local realities, beliefs and values. This combination, he says, has helped to cement community commitment to the process, and produce an end-point that is culturally and ecologically sustainable. "We've developed real social technology for reforestation," says Diamé, "that's based on both traditional and modern sources of knowledge."

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– Moussa Sarr

Betenty village, Saloum Delta, Senegal

## Scaling up?

Financing remains an unresolved issue for the program. WAAME has worked with a number of donors to date, but reliable financing is sorely needed to maintain the work. It's also important to support families in the area to become more financially secure, says Diamé, so that they are able to meet their needs without overexploiting the mangroves. "Reforestation will only be sustainable once the economic constraints on community members are lifted," he states.

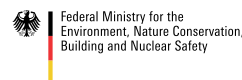
So to accelerate the project, "we need to make a link between reforestation and livelihood-generating activities, which can support the work financially." To do so, he says, good partners will be required, as well as a multi-year funding program.

WAAME has also set up an agro-ecological farm, which will grow species for reforestation, and support market gardening, poultry farming and beekeeping. In a couple of years, this enterprise will hopefully be able to help finance reforestation and capacity building. "We need to find alternatives," states Diamé. "We are thinking about the future of reforestation now."

WAAME's work thus far has paved the way for other associations and NGOs in different regions and countries to run similar programs, says Diamé. "We should all share our knowledge, methods and energy to grow this even bigger and broader," he urges.

Story was developed by Esther Mwangi (CIFOR) and Monica Evans  
Photos by WAAME

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