Can communication help speed up the greening of Africa's drylands?

Keynote speech summary

Chris Reij
World Resources Institute,
Washington, USA.

ABSTRACT

In Africa's drylands food security is facing serious challenges. With the current population growth in, for example Niger, the population is estimated to have doubled in a period of 20 years. Unsustainable land management practices, the effects of climate change and a growing population pressure are causing soil degradation at an unprecedented scale. National governments of African countries have set ambitious goals to restore degraded land. However, these targets are not ambitious enough, when we take into account the future population growth. The pace of regreening needs to be speeded up, as soon as possible. One very promising initiative is regreening of Africa's drylands. Since the 1980 a growing number of innovative farmers and local communities in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger have started to practice simple, low-cost farmer-managed natural regeneration on their field. However, this innovation needs to be spread over a large region, so that many farmers start to do it on their fields. A communication strategy is extremely important, to speed up the scale of regreening successes and reverse the trends of soil degradation and desertification.

1 SUMMARY

To respond to the serious problems, confronting rural populations in the Sahel, reforestation, i.e. planting trees, often proposed by NGOs and national governments, is often put forward as a solution to fight desertification. However, tree planting is very expensive, and does not often lead to success. Out of every ten trees planted, only two or three survive. In the current situation, deforestion is expanding faster than reforestation in, most Sahel countries.

Luckily there are also positive trends in the battle against soil degradation. An example are African regreening initiatives, driven by farmers and communities in for example Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, in which farmers change the way they use their lands and start to increase the numbers of trees on their fields. One of the (simple and inexpensive) techniques to bring about regreening is farmer managed natural regeneration (FMNR). This consists of protecting young bushes and sprouts and letting them grow on the farming land until they become full-grown trees. FMNR as a local farmer innovation is now spreading to various African countries. Regreening has already led to a considerable increase of food production in the areas where farmers have applied regreening techniques. FMNR is not expensive for farmers (mostly subsistence farmers who live from only on e or two dollars per day), as it does not require big investments. The only maintenance is that trees need to be pruned every year. Key to regreening is the farmer-led management of natural vegetation (don't cut the trees!).

Apart from reversing the trends of soil degradation, regreening has many other positive effects. It leads, for example, to more soil fertility and higher groundwater tables, due to better ground infiltration. By pruning the trees, the branches and leaves taken off can be used (as cooking fuel, as fertilizer, etc). The benefits of regreening can already be perceived by local farmers after 1-2 years, which is quicker than previously assumed by recent studies. The practice of farmer managed natural regeneration and its large scale success have remained under the radar for a long time. Apparently researchers and practitioners do not monitor or evaluate the innovative work of poor rural farmers, when this is not part of a (donor-funded) development project.

A communication strategy is extremely important to spread knowledge about regreening techniques and the ensuing benefits of regreening, among a large number of farmers, as to speed up the diffusion of regreening as a local innovation. Communication can be done, for example by organizing farmer-to-farmer visits and letting farmers discuss and share information face to face. That is very impactful, but expensive, and far too slow. Mass media such as ural radio can be of great help. Farmers' success stories about regreening can be shared on the radio. Local testimonials are far more trustful and therefore more convincing, than the voice of any foreign expert.

Various communication initiatives can be linked to increase the reach to a broader base of farmers. Context-aware ICT systems using what is already there (simple mobile phones, radio) can be deployed for maximum rural reach and scale of information, communication. Mass media can be used to communicate and increase the scale of regreening successes. To make regreening a success, communication will be the key.