



Restoring shea parklands across the Sahel, under the leadership of women: Global Shea Alliance (GSA)

Shea trees grow naturally on nearly 275 million hectares in traditional farming systems in 21 countries across the Great Green Wall. They are the dominant species of a parkland agroforestry system in which trees are scattered across smallholder farms, fallows, and community forests. This ecosystem provides multiple functions, including a source of livelihood for 16 million women and their families, a carbon storage mechanism that stores 1.5 million tonnes of carbon annually, and a mitigator of drought impacts through increased soil infiltrability.

Shea communities are also disproportionately affected by climate change impacts. For example, between 1991 and 2009, Burkina Faso suffered from three major droughts impacting 96,000 people. In Togo, the shea zone has seen the highest increase in temperature in the country, around 0.31 °C per decade.

At the same time, the shea ecosystem is at risk. The Global Shea Alliance (GSA) estimates that about 8 million shea trees are lost yearly due to a lack of regeneration linked to reduced fallow systems and tree removals for commercial agriculture, charcoal production, and mining purposes. Few actions have been undertaken to correct this situation. Shea parklands are perceived as producing women's crops and are often excluded from tree and forest protection laws. As a result, local economies, security, and drought resistance are negatively impacted while, at the same time, placing at risk the ability of the shea industry to meet global demand. Women face the brunt of this impact, as shea income represents up to 32 per cent of the household cash and is invested in their agricultural production. They also have to travel longer distances to collect shea and fuelwood.



Initiative overview

Launched in 2020, the “Action for Shea Parklands” (ASP) initiative seeks to restore 4 million hectares of shea parklands across the Sahel through three main technical interventions: GROW (increase the number and diversity of parkland trees); PROTECT (improve tree management and parkland governance); and PROMOTE (advocate for parkland restoration).

The first component, GROW, is implemented through tree-growing initiatives that include direct seeding, setting up a network of community-based nurseries for seedling production and planting, and training local communities in assisted natural regeneration. In addition, the GSA has developed and scaled up a shea agroforestry farming model to increase and showcase the benefits for farmers to maintain diverse trees on their farms. The second component, PROTECT, is implemented through parkland management training to promote best practices to ensure healthy trees, such as bush fire management or parasite control, as well as through the establishment of community by-laws. These community by-laws provide a space for multistakeholder dialogue, in which women cooperatives, livestock herders, charcoal producers, traditional authorities, and others agree on parkland exploitation rules and restoration plans to ensure that all benefit from healthier shea parklands. The third component, PROMOTE, seeks to foster behaviour change in communities around tree removal and to advocate for local and national policy change. This component relies heavily on participatory measures, such as local advocacy or participatory radio shows.

A key innovation of the ASP initiative is its design and implementation through multistakeholder engagement and public-private partnership between private sector companies, women cooperatives, local communities, and governments. Women shea collectors are leading the implementation and recently called for action to provide more support on the initiative through the Abuja Declaration.

All technical processes, from shea agroforestry farming to community nursery establishment or grafting techniques, have been piloted and validated four years into the programme. In addition, 901,211 shea and native trees have been planted, and 18,666 hectares have been protected through partnerships with the private sector, cooperatives, and donors. Engagement with local communities is also starting to bear fruit, with more than 300,000 people impacted by a ban on shea tree -cutting in the Gonja Kingdom in Ghana.



Women's involvement

Women are integral to the SLM of shea parklands in the Sahel region, playing multifaceted roles that contribute significantly to ecosystem restoration and economic development.

Women constitute a substantial portion of the agricultural workforce in the Sahel, typically farming smaller, remote, and less fertile plots compared to men. While their lack of land ownership limits direct investment in soil restoration, their crop choices contribute to reversing land degradation. Women often cultivate a diverse range of crops, including legumes and vegetables, for household consumption, which enriches soil nutrient content, carbon, and moisture.

For instance, in Mali, women cultivate up to 60–70 per cent of the diverse crop varieties grown in the country, showcasing their significant agricultural contributions.

Women play a pivotal role in the sustainable management of shea parklands by directly demonstrating its economic benefits. Traditionally responsible for collecting, processing, and utilising non-timber forest products, like shea, women generate substantial income from these activities. The annual income from shea production alone amounts to over USD 200 million in producing communities, providing vital cash during lean seasons when other income sources are limited.

Additionally, women serve as advocates and knowledge transmitters within their households and communities, promoting SLM practices. For example, in Nigeria, the GSA developed a sustainable shea farming agroforestry model that involved 1,500 women producers and farmers. Within two years, 63 per cent replicated the model on their farms and 93 per cent shared climate-smart practices with community members. Women leverage group structures, like shea cooperatives, at the community level to preserve and manage shea parklands effectively. For instance, women cooperatives in Burkina Faso secured land for shea tree planting. At the same time, those in Benin implemented local by-laws to ensure landscape regeneration and sustainable management, prohibiting harmful practices like tree removal for charcoal or livestock grazing on shea seedlings.

Women champions

Amanpulie Yakubu was born in Kunkwa, in the Yagaba Kubori District of the Northeast Region of Ghana. Although she has no formal education, Yakubu was able to create a network that supports her agenda of women and youth empowerment in her area. She is currently the chairperson of the Amachaab Cooperative Society in Kunkwa, leading a group of 600 shea-picking and processing women to restore degraded shea parklands through the management of a large tree nursery, transplanting shea and native species, and campaigning against bush fire.

Khadija Hassan is the secretary of the ASUMALI shea women cooperative in Tufa, Niger state, Nigeria, which piloted the shea agroforestry farming model. She led the cascade of training for other women in her cooperative on climate-resilient farming and farm practices. She mobilised other women in the community and surrounding villages for training and dissemination of learning on the model. She has become an advocate for shea parkland restoration in her community, where she speaks against bushfires and cutting shea trees, as well as at national and international conferences. She has been involved in shea nut picking and processing for the last 15 years.



Sadia Neindow, a 48-year-old woman from the Latagim community in Yendi Municipality in Ghana, embodies resilience and dedication. Despite her responsibilities as a wife and mother of eight, Neindow plays a central role in the local ecosystem through her work in the community tree nursery established by the Ghana Shea Landscape Emission Reductions Project (GSLERP). Overseeing the process of raising tree seedlings, planting trees, and safeguarding tree shrubs, Neindow's efforts contribute significantly to environmental conservation in her community. Her dedicated approach to tasks, such as Assisted Natural Regeneration activities and creating fire breaks, ensures the survival of the local greenery. Her dedication extends to sustainable living, as she and other women in her community have learned to construct energy-efficient cook stoves, reducing fuel consumption and environmental impact. Beyond her contributions to the tree nursery, Neindow's commitment to sustainable living extends to her small-scale farming endeavours. She applies sound agronomic practices, maximising yield while minimising environmental impact. Moreover, Neindow's entrepreneurial spirit shines through her engagement in picking shea nuts for sale.

Mamatou Djaffo, born in 1956 in Benin, has four children and more than three decades of experience in the shea industry. Djaffo has organised training sessions for women in the shea industry, focusing on best practices for collecting, processing, and storing shea kernels. She has also provided guidance on good practices for shea butter production, semi-manufactured processing of soap, and shea butter-based ointments. Djaffo is the President of the Fédération Nationale des Productrices d'amandes et de beurre de Karité du Bénin (FNPK-Bénin), a federation representing over 70,000 women shea collectors and butter processors. In 2023, as part of their engagement to protect and restore the Shea parklands, women from FNPK planted 600,000 shea trees through direct seedlings. Djaffo has been an executive committee member of the GSA since November 2018 and currently chairs the organisation as the President of the Executive Committee.

Félicité Yameogo, a Burkinabe woman known as 'Maman Karité', has dedicated most of her life to women's empowerment through her engagement in the shea industry in Burkina Faso and beyond. In Koudougou (Burkina Faso), Yameogo works with a network of more than 10,000 women shea collectors and butter processors. She is also the founder of New Karikis, a small- and medium-sized enterprise (SME) that produces handcrafted shea butter for export. She raises awareness around the role of the shea trees in local communities through training and capacity building, and is key in engaging rural women in activities and initiatives that protect and restore the parklands, especially creating shea tree nurseries. Yameogo is a strong advocate who encourages Burkina Faso's government to fight against deforestation practices while promoting agroforestry at the community level. Yameogo's engagement has enabled her to travel across various African countries and the United States, pledging further action in favour of women's empowerment through the shea sector.

Sanou Fatimata is a shea collector and butter processor from the Association Song Taab Yalgre (ASY), a cooperative of more than 3,000 women in Burkina Faso. In addition to shea activities, the association grows moringa, baobab, fonio, and vegetables to increase women's income while improving the living conditions of women, young people, and vulnerable groups. Although she is in her early forties, Fatimata has been involved in cooperative activities for over 30 years and sees herself as the segue between two generations.

Challenges

While implementing the Action for Shea Parklands initiatives, the GSA encountered challenges related to the enabling environment and gender dimensions.

Enabling environment: The deteriorating security situation in the Sahel was the most significant challenge, making it difficult to restore remote land. To address this challenge, the GSA focused its restoration activities on land closer to villages and on which shea cooperatives were already active, either through farming or non-timber forest product collection activities.

Gender dimensions: Obstacles include a lack of land ownership and a lack of right to conduct tree planting activities as these are often associated with a claim of ownership on specific land, as well as time poverty due to care duties, and the prioritisation of the women's husbands' farms over their own. The GSA addressed this challenge through extensive community engagement and a group empowerment model that does not conflict with existing community social structures. With this model, every woman in the community is empowered, value chains are developed, and market linkage activities are conducted. This model, thus, enables the community to see that the community as a whole, not just individuals, benefits from sustainable shea parkland management.



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