



She Grows: project update

Alice Flannery gives an update on She Grows, TREE AID's women's environmental development project in Mali.

Drylands are defined by a scarcity of water. They cover over 40 per cent of the Earth's land surface, including 66 per cent of Africa [1]. TREE AID is working with the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) to grow trees across the drylands of Africa in support of the Great Green Wall [2], an African-led initiative to grow an 8,000-kilometre natural wonder, which will span the Sahel from Senegal in the west to Djibouti in the east.

Trees provide nutrition, generate income and help to create a healthy environment. Trees are essential to the survival of people in these areas. That is why, since 1987, TREE AID has been supporting people in the Sahel

Above, left to right: Sitan is one of the women in Koulikoro, Mali, who is taking part in TREE AID's She Grows project; Through the She Grows project, TREE AID is supporting women in Koulikoro, Mali, to grow and protect trees. Photos: TREE AID.

and dry savannah zones around the Sahel to grow and protect trees, and to lift themselves out of poverty for now and for generations to come.

In 2019, Reforesting Scotland supported TREE AID's She Grows appeal and thanks to support from the UK public and match funding from the UK Government, TREE AID raised more than £600,000. This money will help to fund the She Grows project in the Koulikoro region of Mali, a landlocked country in West Africa. Earlier this year, TREE AID began work on the three-year project, the aim of which is to support one thousand women with the tools and training they need to save and replant their local forest, and earn a sustainable income from trees.

Why Koulikoro?

While planning the She Grows project, TREE AID's team in Mali visited the Koulikoro region, one of the world's poorest places. Speaking

with some of the women most affected by poverty, they saw that the decision-making power at the household and community level lies almost entirely with men.

The majority of women depend on the land for survival but deforestation, frequent droughts and the climate crisis are making this even harder.

Clearing land for agriculture and cutting trees to sell as firewood is very common as it is a ready source of cash in a country with few employment opportunities. But this is having a devastating effect on the land, and the people who depend on that land. And while it is women and their households that rely on forests for income, food and firewood, those same women are prevented from managing the few trees that remain.

Sitan's story

Sitan is one of the women who is taking part in the project. She lives

in Ouolodo with her husband and children. Every year, she struggles to find enough food during the rainy season to feed her family.

“When things are in short supply”, she says, “there is no one to turn to and there is nowhere to go. I therefore try to do what I can with limited resources.”



Engrained gender inequality in Mali makes things particularly difficult for women like Sitan. They have less access to healthcare, education and jobs. Sitan knows first-hand how the inability to manage the trees and the land that women depend on is holding her back. “Women have the biggest responsibility of the family. But they don’t have access to the means of production. If there is a lack of rain before the harvests, the women and children are those who suffer the most.”

And that is where the She Grows project is making a difference, by supporting women with the training and access to the equipment they need with which to earn an income from trees and grow a way out of poverty. By empowering women to gain financial independence through the project, they will increase their ability to support their children and their status in the home. When a woman can earn an income from trees, she is able to send her children to school and help lift her family out of poverty. What’s more, when she

Above: The She Grows project is supporting women in Koulikoro, Mali, to set up enterprise groups and process shea nuts into shea butter to sell and generate an income. Photo: TREE AID.

learns how to grow trees to protect her fragile environment and keep the soil fertile, the positive effects are felt by the whole community.

The Covid crisis

The She Grows project got underway in February 2020, kicking off with a baseline survey to measure participants’ living standards before the project began, including indicators like household income, use of trees and forests and women’s decision-making powers. Conducting a thorough baseline survey is vital to being able to effectively measure the impact of the project on beneficiaries’ lives.

Covid-19 was declared a pandemic on 11 March 2020, just as the baseline study was getting underway. This meant that TREE AID was able to adapt the survey to include a ten-minute section providing participants with essential information on Covid-19. In rural communities in Mali, knowledge on coronavirus is low, and misinformation can spread easily. During the baseline surveys, TREE AID staff used the time to explain and answer any questions the communities had on the virus, including information on how it spreads, who is most vulnerable, and what hygiene and social distancing measures communities can implement to prevent its spread.

Women from ten cooperatives in the region have been encouraged to form smaller Village Tree Enterprise groups. In these groups, women work together to process tree products, such as producing shea butter from shea nuts which they then sell at market. Profits are shared equally between the cooperative members and they support each other financially by running saving and loans schemes.

What’s next?

As I write in June 2020, the rainy season has started and communities will shortly begin planting 5,000 tree seedlings. Each woman is being given

the training and tools she needs to propagate her own seedlings, meaning the women can choose which trees would be most beneficial to them and their families, and giving them the ability to grow more seedlings in the future. This is an approach that TREE AID has found to be particularly effective in helping communities feel ownership of the seedlings they plant. Training and workshops will teach the women the practical skills required to regenerate the land and plant and care for trees. These sessions will also help to empower women’s groups to negotiate with local authorities and secure long-term access to land and trees.

As with the baseline surveys, project staff are adapting the way they will conduct these sessions due to coronavirus. In the past, some workshops would involve the whole community at once. Now, with social distancing measures in place, project staff will work their way more slowly through communities to deliver training in smaller groups. Although this will take longer, it will allow the sessions to be more engaging and provide the women with more opportunities to ask questions. The Village Tree Enterprise groups will be trained in key business activities such as planning, financial literacy, business registration and market information gathering to help them market their produce and fetch a good price at market.

TREE AID will also provide women with the tools they need to make shea butter, harvest honey and earn an income together as a group. The tools will help them process tree products more efficiently and improve the quality of produce, helping to increase their income.

treeaid.org.uk

References

1. unccd.int/
2. treeaid.org.uk/great-green-wall/

Alice Flannery is TREE AID’s Digital Communications Assistant, supporting the organisation’s digital communications including social media and film production. To find out more about the project, visit: treeaid.org.uk/shegrows.