

Farmer cross-visits to promote farmer managed natural regeneration of trees in Mali

In the Mopti region of Mali, villages are faced with problems resulting from deforestation and land degradation. In response to this, communities and NGOs have been working together to raise awareness of a proven method which regenerates the land into areas that are productive and full of resources. In this context, the organization Sahel Eco has been supporting natural resource management in Bankass district in the Mopti region.

In Bankass district, the population of Endé village has been developing a strategy to regenerate land. For over ten years, they have been allowing trees to grow while using the land to cultivate staple crops such as millet. This is also referred to as Farmer Managed Natural Regeneration (FMNR). For this purpose, the farmers established an association called Le Barahogon.

It was in June 2009 that Sahel Eco organised a unique cross-visit: farmers from the Tominian area travelled to Bankass to witness and learn from the experience of Le Barahogon. The assumption was that the exposure and first-hand account would convince the visiting farmers to adopt the practice of FMNR in their own fields



On the road

In preparation of the visit, farmer organisations in Tominian selected the participants and organized them into groups. A total of 61 members (among whom 25 women) of 4 farmer organisations in Tominian participated in the visit to Bankass district.

By mini-bus, the farmers traveled from Tominian to Endé village, passing by Bankass district town. They visited farms and farming families that demonstrated the technical aspects of FMNR. The participants discussed the organisational and regulatory aspects of FMNR with the steering committee of Barahogon association. This was followed by a visit to sand dune fixation sites, which is a technique for stabilizing sand dunes by planting euphorbia shrubs.

The many differences between the green landscape in Endé and the degraded areas back home in Tominian was evident. To illustrate how the exchange visit worked in practice, here is a question posed by one participant, Naomie Dembélé, during the visit of the parcel where FMNR is practiced:

"I would like to know how you have been able to water such a large plantation when the closest water point is 4 km away?"

The president of Barahogon association responded, *"Madam, the trees that you see have not grown because they have been watered. The growth of this forest is the result of two activities. First, we ensured protection of the area against devastating logging through an agreement with the forest services. And secondly, many farmers applied the technology of FMNR."*

Following this response, Ms Naomie expressed her recognition of the relevance of FMNR and invited all her co-delegates to present the results of FMNR back home so that as many farmers as possible adopt this technology.



During a visit to land restoration work near the village of Kani Komble participants saw sand dunes for the first time, the end result of severe land degradation.

After a final de-briefing in which all insights and learnings from the visit were summarized, the participating farmers went back home and presented the results to their community members and organizations.

We encountered two difficulties during the visit. One was linked to logistics (breakdown of a vehicle) and one was linked to the language barrier, as we had to translate into three languages.

Results: spreading the practice of FMNR

When evaluating the results of the cross-visit, Sahel Eco used three indicators to assess the rate of adoption of FMNR by households. These were: the amount of households having adopted FMNR, the field area regenerated by each household and the density of trees per hectare.

The results were:

- In all the 20 villages that are members of the participating farmer organisations, 40-50% of households now practice FMNR
- Each participating household practiced FMNR in an area of at least one hectare.
- On the parcels where FMNR has been practiced, tree density ranges from 25 to 50 trees per hectare.

“Before we used the slash and burn technique. Today, we trim, we do not burn. We protect trees and the soil condition is better”

What made the cross-visit effective?

The choice of delegates was important in making the visit a success. Three criteria were used to select them. Delegates had to be active members of the farmer organisation, be able to report the results at the village level and facilitate a practical demonstration at a farmer field school (practical demonstration). These criteria ensured that we had excellent participants.

We also established a quota for participating women. This was included because women play an important role in agricultural activities and are the initial beneficiaries of FMNR. The participation of women allowed the application of FMNR by women in their own fields (groundnut, cowpea, sesame).

While preparing, we realized the cost of the visit was high and we therefore had to plan our budget accordingly.

Another contributing factor is the presentation of the results of the visit by delegates after they returned to their villages. During these sessions, delegates have led farmer field schools, demonstrating FMNR techniques through practice to numerous farmers in the district of Tominian.

What also facilitated the adoption of FMNR, is that the technique is relevant and attractive: it is endogenous, simple and affordable, and provides multiple benefits such as wood, soil fertility, fruit, etc.

Finally, the abundant supply of species of high economic value (shea, néré, wild grape, etc.), the application of the seedling visualisation techniques during fieldwork, and regular rainfall in the district of Tominian had a positive impact on the outcomes noted above.

Factors that impeded greater impact

Some aspects of national legislation and regulations regarding natural resource management in Mali are constraining. This is especially true regarding the ambiguity of the responsibility for control of trees growing alongside crops and the poor application of the law by forestry officials.

It must also be noted that conventional technological packages, popularised by the Compagnie Malienne

de Développement Textile (CMDT), such as the removal of tree stumps in fields, have had a negative impact. These practices, contrary to FMNR, are still used in the areas where cotton is cultivated.

Land insecurity affects landless people and has been one of the limiting factors in the practice of FMNR on a larger scale. Other factors that have limited the adoption of FMNR in Tominian include the shade that some tree species create on food crops, the interdiction to trim trees by forestry officials, and the perception of some farmers that a high density of trees attracts birds.

From this visit, we learned the following lessons:

- Cross visits that allow for experience sharing constitute a relevant and powerful tool for up-scaling new techniques.
- Beyond the technical aspect, it is necessary to take into account the institutional aspects (organisation, legislation, regulation) that can positively or negatively influence the adoption of new techniques.



Leaders of the Barahogon explain to visitors the local rules about tree management, which are enforced by the association.



A group photo of the visitors in front of the Bankass District Council offices, highlighting the number of women participants.

Conclusion

This visit allowed us to confirm the old saying: "A picture paints a thousand words". Without casting doubt on classical training, which is important, we advise to combine it with field visits that provide a framework for allowing mutual exchanges, from farmer to farmer, in order to more effectively spread new agroecological solutions.



In May 2013, organizations from across West Africa convened in Ghana for a workshop on amplifying agroecological solutions. This story was written during the workshop by Drissa Gana and Mamadou Diakité of Sahel Eco in Mali.

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