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In Niger, Trees and Crops Turn Back the Desert

Published: February 11, 2007

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Such problems raise the question of whether the success of some of Niger's farmers can be replicated on a larger scale, across the Sahel. While Niger's experience of greening on a vast scale is unique, scientists say, smaller tracts of land have been revived in other countries.

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A Green Revolution

"It really requires the effort of the whole community," said Dr. Larwanou. "If farmers don't take action themselves and the community doesn't support it, farmer-managed regeneration cannot work."

Moussa Bara, the chief of Dansaga, a village in the Ague region of Niger, where the regeneration has been a huge success, said the village has benefited enormously from the regrowth of trees. He said not a single child died of malnutrition in the hunger crisis that gripped Niger in 2005, largely because of extra income from selling firewood. Still, he said, the village has too many mouths to feed.

"We are many and the land is small," he explained, bouncing on his lap a little boy named Ibrahim, the youngest of his 17 children by his three wives.

[Climate change](#) is another looming threat. Kerry H. Cook, a professor of atmospheric science at [Cornell University](#), said that improved rains in the Sahel are most likely a result of natural climate variability from decade to decade, and that while the trend is positive, the rains have not entirely recovered to what they were in the 1950s.

The Sahel, like other parts of Africa, has experienced big swings in rainfall in recent years. Severe droughts in eastern and southern Africa have led to serious hunger crises in the past five years, and a drop in precipitation in Niger in 2005 contributed to the food crisis here that year.

Dr. Cook's long-term projections, based on a variety of climate models, point to longer and more frequent dry periods in the Sahel, caused by rising temperatures in the Gulf of Guinea.

"This is the place in the world that just stands out for having vulnerability for drought," she said.

Still, more trees mean that Niger's people are in a better position to withstand whatever changes the climate might bring. "This is something the farmers control, and something they do for themselves," said Dr. Larwanou. "It demonstrates that with a little effort and foresight, you can reduce poverty in the Sahel. It is not impossible or hopeless, and does not have to cost a lot of money. It can be done."

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