



Gambia RCS Tree Planting in North Bank, Central and Upper River Regions supported by the WFP UN Peace Building Fund Project 2021 © Gambia RCS

RESTORING RELATIONSHIPS AND NATURE: LESSONS FROM THE GAMBIA

NATURE IN ACTION: NATURE-BASED SOLUTIONS
IN HUMANITARIAN CONTEXTS

The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) is the world’s largest humanitarian network, with 192 National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and around 14 million volunteers. Our volunteers are present in communities before, during and after a crisis or disaster. We work in the most hard to reach and complex settings in the world, saving lives and promoting human dignity. We support communities to become stronger and more resilient places where people can live safe and healthy lives, and have opportunities to thrive.

Nature-based Solutions

Nature-based Solutions (NbS) are actions to protect, sustainably manage and restore natural or modified ecosystems that address societal challenges effectively and adaptively, simultaneously providing human well-being and biodiversity benefits (IUCN, 2020). NbS are an institutional priority for the IFRC network – recognized in its Plan and Budget 2021–2025; the Global Climate Resilience Programme of the IFRC; and the Climate and Environment Charter for Humanitarian Organizations. IFRC builds on its decades of expertise in community-based disaster risk reduction as a unique entry point for community-led NbS, focused on disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation. IFRC has already applied NbS in various contexts, as showcased in this case study – and is actively capturing lessons learned as a basis for scaling up its work and partnerships in this area.

Acknowledgements

The IFRC would like to thank Abdoulie Fye, Director of Programs and Operations at The Gambia Red Cross Society (GRCS) for his experience, insights and guidance.

BACKGROUND

The Gambia is highly vulnerable to the effects of climate change. In recent years this small African nation, which occupies a narrow strip of land on either side of River Gambia, has been affected by extreme weather events that have had deadly consequences.

In 2019, and again in 2021, destructive windstorms caused widespread damage to homes, crops, and livelihoods; the wind surges in July 2021 affected every region of the country, and many lives were lost. In addition, heavy and erratic rainfall has subjected people to life-threatening floods and to extraordinary drought patterns. Rising sea levels have exposed floodplains essential for crop cultivation to saltwater intrusion.

Deforestation, urban development, and environmental degradation have increased the exposure of lives, livelihoods, and infrastructure to these extreme weather events. As wetlands are lost, so to are the protective benefits they offer in mitigating the impacts of floods and droughts. In addition, the loss of arable lands for fruit tree and other crops has amplified food insecurity and malnutrition challenges that many Gambians face.

The frequency of windstorms, flash floods, and other climate related shocks in The Gambia are rising at an alarming rate and there is an urgent need to provide durable solutions that increase human security, reduce risk, and save lives, while also strengthen environmental health.

BUILDING CLIMATE-RESILIENT COMMUNITIES

After the 2021 windstorm The Gambia Red Cross Society (GRCS) accelerated planning on how to deliver humanitarian assistance while also providing long-lasting solutions that increase human security, strengthen environmental health, and build climate-resilient communities. With over half of The Gambia's population under the age of twenty-five, interventions that targeted youth were prioritized, as were those that engaged women who play a primary role in securing household livelihoods during extreme weather events.

Together with key partners the GRCS launched two initiatives designed to provide environmental, socio-economic, and disaster risk reduction benefits: the '*Youth Ecobrigade: One Million Tree Planting Initiative*' funded by the United Nations Development Programme, and the '*Climate Induced Conflicts*' initiative, supported by the UN Peace Building Fund (PBF) through World Food Programme.



YOUTH ECOBRIGADE PROJECT

In collaboration with the Government of The Gambia, Department of Forestry, Regional Governance, West African Bird Study Association (WASBA), the private sector, and the National Youth Council (NYC) with funding from UNDP, the GRCS piloted the 'Youth Ecobrigade Project', to mobilize youth to engage in environmental protection activities while benefiting from training to create sustainable livelihood opportunities. Initially launched in the North Bank Region in 2021, the project was scaled up to include the Central River and Upper River Regions through the PBF Project and other initiatives.



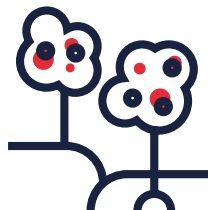
As part of the GRCS's contribution to addressing the climate crisis, and in line with the IFRC's Pan-African Tree Planting and Care Initiative, a project goal of planting one million trees was set. Under the project umbrella, two complimentary initiatives designed to improve ecosystem health were implemented: **creating and strengthening the sustainable management of community forests;** and **protecting and restoring mangrove wetlands.**

The **community forests** component began with GRCS, UNDP, WABSA, NYC and Partners consulting communities to understand the impact of deforestation on livelihoods and ecosystem health.

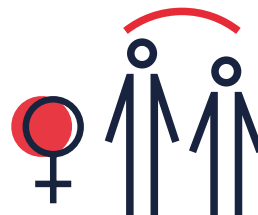
A mapping exercise delivered in coordination with local authorities and communities identified areas to be reforested, and field visits to scout for youth entrepreneurs and to promote community participation and ownership were undertaken. Youth and local community members received training on sustainable forest management, early warning, and clean energy eco-stoves, and GRCS provided technical support to youth eco-entrepreneurs on seed production and nursery development. Together, GRCS volunteers, community members, and partners planted over 94,000 woodlots and 27,250 fruit trees, and 150,000 women and youth from over 30 communities were engaged in the project.



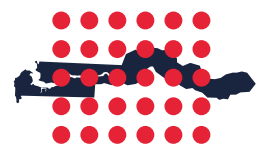
**94,000 WOODLOTS
PLANTED**



**27,250 FRUIT TREES
PLANTED**



**150,000 WOMEN
AND YOUTH ENGAGED**



**30 COMMUNITIES
ENGAGED**

Along with the community forest initiative, through the UNDP Funding the GRCS partnered with the West African Bird Study Association (WASBA) and national and local authorities to **restore mangroves ecosystems** along the banks of the Gambia River “bolongs” and wetlands. Over the course of five months a million mangroves were planted, with the aim of reversing land degradation, restoring biodiversity, and mitigating saltwater intrusion. A year later the project continues to see high tree survival rates. In addition, the success of the restoration efforts inspired the planting of another one million mangroves in 2022 by UNDP, WABSA, The Gambia Environmental Alliance, GRCS and other stakeholders.

GRCS’s extensive volunteer network contributed to the Youth Ecobrigade Project’s success. Volunteer Focal Points who lived in the targeted communities were recruited to coordinate and conduct trainings, tree plantings, and partnership outreaches. Their engagement helped build community ownership and provided continued support and monitoring to ensure project sustainability.

The project has contributed to a wide range of socioeconomic, environmental, and protective benefits. Supplies were purchased from youth cooperatives, and youth and community members were provided incentives during the project period for maintaining the trees. Along with income-generating fruit trees, Indigenous tree species adaptive to local environmental conditions were planted. Over time, these mixed forests will support wildlife habitat and foster biodiversity and provide protective functions against windstorms, flooding, and drought.



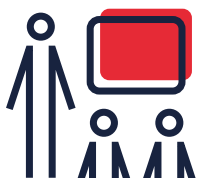
UN PEACEBUILDING FUND: 'CLIMATE INDUCED CONFLICTS' PROJECT

A second key intervention implemented by GRCS was the WFP UN Peacekeeping Fund 'Climate Induced Conflict' Project. Launched in 2021, this two-year project aimed to mitigate growing conflict amongst rural agricultural communities who are increasingly experiencing the impacts of climate change on their lives and livelihoods.

In partnership with the World Food Programme (WFP), Ministry of Environment Climate Change and Natural Resources, Ministry of Agriculture, National Agricultural Research Institute, Department of Community Development, Wowens' Bureau, Department of Forestry, the project focused on promoting unity among communities in the North Bank, Central River, and Upper River Regions who found themselves in conflict over diminishing fertile lands. Recognizing that the women of The Gambia face higher risks and greater burdens from the impacts of climate change, the project included a focus on the promotion of gender equality and the economic empowerment of women.

Together with national and local authorities, the WFP, GRCS and partners brought communities together to engage in dialogue, with a shared goal of understanding how climate change was impacting agricultural production and trade, as well as how people's own activities were contributing to environmental degradation and climate change. Following this a suite of interventions that could be chosen from to best meet the communities specific context were developed.

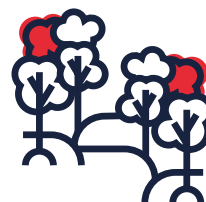
As a result of this initiative, over 1,450 women received access to a wide range of training, including peace building and conflict prevention, climate-smart agriculture, sustainable land management, and the use of eco-stoves designed to limit firewood and charcoal consumption. Thirteen hectares of rice fields were reclaimed from saltwater intrusion. Two new community forests were established, an additional 4 existing community forests were strengthened with other trees including fruit trees, and 43,500 woodlots were planted, together providing agroforestry, climate mitigation, and protective benefits.



**1,450 WOMEN
RECEIVED ACCESS
TO A WIDE RANGE
OF TRAINING**



**13HA OF RICE
FIELDS RECLAIMED
FROM SALTWATER
INTRUSION**



**2 COMMUNITY
FORESTS
ESTABLISHED**



**43,500 WOODLOTS
PLANTED**

The project has also helped to restore peace and stability to many communities who had previously experienced years of tension stemming from resource conflict. For example, two communities, Sambang Mandinka and Sambang Fula, came together and are now calling themselves Sambang United Community. Together they share a joint community forest, farming equipment, and even a football team. This is a great achievement, as the primary goal of the project was to build peaceful co-existence within the communities.

LESSONS LEARNED

1. **Strong collaborations**, where partners bring complimentary expertise and local and technical knowledge, directly contributed to the projects' success.
2. Drawing from a wide network of **community-based volunteers**, the project was able to secure Volunteer Focal Points who were from and were based in the communities the project was implemented in.
3. **Integrating restoration and sustainable management interventions with livelihood and economic development** opportunities fostered youth and community members commitment.
4. The importance of considering **where and what types of species are planted** when planning restoration so as to foster biodiversity and minimize wildlife-human conflict.
5. The **sustained engagement of communities** over time is key to people understanding their relationship to environmental degradation and inspiring them to take ownership.
6. Activities such as mangrove restoration and promoting reconciliation **require longer time investments** but can have benefits that directly address environmental degradation.

CONCLUSION

The work in The Gambia shows how in addition to protecting and restoring ecosystem health and providing livelihood opportunities, nature-based solutions can help heal conflict and build community. Investing in the futures of youth and women is essential to building climate resilient communities that can withstand future shocks and stresses.

BACKGROUND INFO AND DOCUMENTS

- [32971 \(undp.org\)](#)
- [Gambia Red Cross Director urges communities to nurture peace – The Point](#)
- [“Climate change is undoubtedly an issue that impacts our way of living. @GambiaRedCross @WFP_TheGambia will launch the Peace Building Fund Project <https://t.co/wS06JGOZsx>” / Twitter](#)
- [WFP \(WORLD FOOD PROGRAMME\) TARGETS RURAL COMMUNITIES TO RESOLVED LAND DISPUTES | Ministry of Environment, Climate Change & Natural Resource Republic of The Gambia \(gov.gm\)](#)
- [One Million Trees to Protect Vulnerable Gambian Communities – Red Cross Red Crescent Climate Centre](#)
- [One Million Trees to Protect Vulnerable Gambian Communities – The Gambia |Standard News From The Gambia](#)
- [“We are currently engaged on a field monitoring visit to communities provided with trees through the Youth Ecobrigade Project funded by @UNDP_TheGambia. <https://t.co/08qiMdWb6t>” / Twitter](#)
- [“Through the Youth Ecobrigade Project initiated & funded by @UNDP_TheGambia, @GambiaRedCross <https://t.co/b04tAtXfxm>” / Twitter](#)

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION ON NATURE-BASED SOLUTIONS

- <https://preparecenter.org/site/nbs/>