

Desertification Nigeria

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So far, Nigeria, Africa's largest oil exporting country, hasn't done much about the problems in its countryside. With more than 130 million people, Nigeria is the country with the largest population in Africa. Its people are badly affected by drought and a fast rising population, especially in the arid Northern part of the country. The amount of rain fall is also decreasing each year, and so the battle over fertile land often ends in violence. Thomas Mösch reports from Nigeria about some small signs for hope but also a large amount of ignorance.

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1. O-Ton Atmo Wind

Sand is blown around by the hot wind in the village of Yadai. The clay houses in the village look like they're trying to hide from the sand storm. Few people are out on the streets, but then, there's nothing unusual about that in the dry season. The farms all lie idle anyway. And even when rain does start to fall, the crops - millet, beans, and peanuts - don't grow as well as they used to. Everything's covered by a thin layer of sand. And yet, the desert's actually far away - Yadai isn't even 100 kilometres north of Kano, which has millions of inhabitants. So here, the savannah should in theory still be fertile. But 20 years ago, the area started to be covered in sand, says the chief of the village, Kabo Kadayade.

2. O-Ton Kadayade, Hausa:

"Before the desert came, we all grew crops very successfully. But the sand has dried out the soil. We don't harvest enough crops nowadays. If we want to yield anything at all we have to use chemical fertilisers."

Kadayade looks over to the flat dune with a worried expression – it's about 200 metres outside the village, but it's getting closer every year. Sandy islands like this one are mushrooming all across the North of Nigeria, threatening entire villages. About 400 of Yadai's 3,800 inhabitants have left the village already because their fields have been swallowed by the sand, says Kadayade.

But not long ago, the people of Yadai started to regain some hope. A fence has been put up around the dune, and seedlings are growing in the sand. The hope is that within a few years', eucalyptus and fruit trees will grow here alongside the healing Niem trees – and, that this will stop the dune from moving further. The project was financed by the state of Kano's local government, and 9 people from the village have found a job here. They water the plants, check the fences and chase away goats that sometimes jump over the barriers. A well has also been built on the edge of the dune. Village chief Kadayade is very grateful for this:

3. O-Ton Kadayade, Hausa

"We get our drinking water from the well. That helps us a lot and makes life easier for us. We don't have to walk for hours any more to get water from the river. If the project continues our soil will be fertile again and our life will be better."

The well and the small trees won't be able to completely solve the problem of desertification in the area. So far, there are very few reforestation projects in the North of Nigeria like the one in Yadai. To most politicians, it seems, the fate of the rural population on the border with Niger is only important during their Sunday speeches. The city of Kano has an authority which promisingly calls itself the "Federal coordination unit for re-forestation" - but there's not much to co-ordinate these days. One discouraged employee says that its activity varies from state to state. And he adds that more forest is lost than can be planted. When you compare maps of Nigeria's vegetation today with maps from 30 years ago, the extent of the crisis becomes strikingly visible: 30 years ago, the maps showed almost the entire country in bright green – today, a dark yellow marking the dry zones has become the dominant colour.

4. *O-Ton: Water*

Two men are fetching water from a well by a field path. Here, the people can't complain about a lack of water. A two hour drive South from Kano, and the scenery is completely different from the one in sandy Yadai. Even in the dry season tomatoes and rice grow in lush gardens on the river banks in Rogo. And even away from the river, the fields are fertile in the dry season here.

5. *O-Ton: Atmo Zaunöffnen*

Alhaji Magaji na Rimi, a gentleman in his mid-50s, opens the gate of the fence that surrounds his sugar cane field. The dark green plants grow knee-high here. Magaji admits that there is less rain nowadays than in the past, but, he says, this is not in fact the problem. Magaji says the farmers in Rogo are more worried about the nomads who drive their cattle across the fields.

6. *O-Ton: Magaji, Hausa*

"There are problems everywhere in the region. The nomads come from Cameroon even. Often they arrive in November when we're not even done with harvesting the crop. It's the government's responsibility. They can protect us. We harvest our crops until December or even February. If the cattle herders came when we're done they wouldn't get in trouble with anyone."

Magaji is a comparably rich farmer. In the dry season, he can even afford the diesel for the pump which he uses to water his fields.

7. *O-Ton Atmo Dieselpumpe*

But most farmers depend on rain to water their fields. And so when nomads arrive with their cattle that eat the crops, says Magaji, it puts the farmers' existence in danger.

8. *O-Ton: Magaji, Hausa*

"This year's the worst. There were fewer of them in the past, now there are more. Many have lost their lives and property because of the conflicts."

Alhaji Suleiman is the head of the farmers union in Rogo. He says that the problems are worst on the outskirts of the district.

9. *O-Ton: Suleiman Hausa*

"One man died this year because we have less and less land for feeding the cattle. We'd like to grow more cotton but cotton needs more time before it can be harvested. That's why we can't expand our cotton-growing activities."

Suleiman regrets that the cattle-herders ignore the harvest, especially when they come from far away. The local union of cattle-growers agrees that the foreign nomads are the biggest problem. But their chairman, Alhaji Ibrahim na Kwalya, says that the reason for the conflict lies in an increasing drive to get more land by all farmers.

10. O-Ton Ibrahim, Hausa

"Pasture was turned into farming land because there are more and more people, more and more farmers. Cattle-herders are having a hard time passing through the fields because the paths between fields are also used as farming land these days. And that becomes difficult especially in the rainy season."

The emir of Kano's local representative does his best in his role as arbitor, but he has very little influence on the nomads who come from far away to pass through the farmers' fields. Sometimes these conflicts are intensified further if there are other problems between the two parties, and then, little is needed to make them explode. Numerous ransacked villages and towns in Nigeria are proof of this.

The Federal government in the new capital Abuja, has published an entire collection of brochures and reports in the last couple of years, describing their policies in the battle against desertification and soil deterioration. The brochures speak of a green belt and of model villages with solar pumps and solar ovens, and biogas facilities. They describe how pasture land is to be fenced in and how nomads are to be settled in the area. But real life tells a different story: in reality, hardly any of these projects has made it beyond the planning or pilot phase.

Experts like the deacon of the Faculty of Environment at the University of Jos, Professor Abudu Adepetu, say he simply doesn't understand. But he says he's been sure of one thing for a long time now:

11. O-Ton Adepetu Eng:

"Personally I feel that overtime these people will be settled, maybe, in the development process. Otherwise we will witness more conflicts between the farmers on the one hand and livestock rearers on the other hand."

Adepetu says it was time that Nigeria started modernising its agricultural sector and creating opportunities in other business sectors for the rural population. That would give the entire country the chance to eat what is grown in the fertile soil. But so far, Nigeria's elite has never modernised its economy because they earn so much from the export of oil...meanwhile, the rest of Nigeria's population continues to suffer.