



Wetlands
INTERNATIONAL



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Management Institute



BLUE LIFELINES FOR A SECURE SAHEL

2021-2030

Introduction

The Sahel is a vast region, rich in natural resources. It is connected by rivers, deltas and lakes supporting centuries-old cultures and societies that have developed complex strategies to withstand a harsh environment. However, climate change, weak governance and a growing number of people living in poverty are posing numerous development and security challenges.

"Blue Lifelines for a Secure Sahel" (BLiSS) is a transformative initiative that will bring focus on water management and accelerate the safeguarding, restoration and sustainable use of the region's wetland ecosystems, including rivers, lakes, floodplains and deltas.

BLiSS is a long-term initiative, driven by a unique consortium of international and African partners with decades of experience, regional presence, complementary knowledge and expertise relevant to water management, wetland ecosystems, resilience and peace-building. The core partners are Wetlands International, CARE, International Alert and the International Water Management Institute. Together, we are building a wider alliance in the region of government agencies, private sector and civil society organisations to catalyse change and achieve ambitious [goals and long-term impact](#).



Our vision

We envision fully functioning and biodiverse wetland ecosystems that are integral to Sahelian landscapes and to the safety and resilience of their communities and economies.

Our mission

Our mission is to restore and safeguard Sahelian wetlands, thereby improving the safety and strengthening the resilience of rural communities, supporting inclusive governance of countries in the region and benefiting biodiversity.

The Context

Rivers, lakes, floodplains and deltas across the Sahel are highly productive and diverse ecosystems that are essential for water security, food production and biodiversity. The Sahel's economy, ecology and culture are founded on the dynamic interplay of its wetlands and drylands, driven by seasonal rainfall and flood pulses. Local communities have developed livelihood and economic systems based on catching fish, growing crops and raising livestock in these wetlands. Because of the critical role of water and seasonal patterns of use, the health of the wetlands is essential to maintain and restore healthy, productive drylands. During periods of drought, wetlands are lifelines for millions of people.

Currently, wetlands across the Sahel are degrading as a result of climate stress, poor water and land management, population growth and related intensive resource use. This directly impacts livelihoods in mostly rural areas, fuelling tensions between communities and livelihood groups over access to and control of water and land. This comes on top of wider governance and security challenges. In an effort to cope, some men and women address vulnerabilities and inequalities by reverting to core identities such as beliefs and occupation, joining or supporting armed groups or engaging in riskier economic activities. Consequently, wetland degradation and loss are contributing to political and economic insecurity. This is affecting nations as well

as the wider region and leading to displacement and migration. Certain groups and individuals are affected disproportionately, depending on factors such as gender, poverty, unequal social and political power and other processes of exclusion and marginalisation.

Urgent action is needed to head off these risks. Improving the condition of wetlands can contribute to maintain peace, enhance livelihoods and provide a more stable base for development. Investment in more sustainable use and restoration of wetlands as well as in more inclusive and conflict-sensitive water and land management is essential for safeguarding and re-establishing the basis for community resilience in the region. At the same time, integrating peace-building into wetland management efforts can bring people together across conflict lines, helping to prevent and de-escalate conflict.

BLiSS is not just an additional project or programme. Instead, this initiative aims to add value to existing activities and interventions and to catalyse change towards a more resilient Sahel. Partners and allies across the region will build on the experience and lessons learned from existing initiatives and innovations to enable governments, the private sector and civil society to finance, plan and implement inclusive wetland restoration and management at scale. In doing so, BLiSS will catalyse change by mobilising a multitude of actors, by scaling up impact from local initiatives to landscape and wetland systems, and by addressing the compound risks to Sahelian wetlands.



The wetland hotspots of the Sahel include the Sudd, Lake Chad, the Inner Niger Delta, Senegal Delta, Gambella wetlands and the middle reaches of the Niger River.

Focus on Wetland Hotspots

BliSS will promote interventions to improve water management at the catchment scale, recognising the role of wetlands as core elements of the water systems. The initiative will focus attention on the river and wetland systems of the Sahel where the greatest risks to local livelihoods, security and peace exist. These wetland hotspots include the Sudd, Lake Chad, the Inner Niger Delta, Senegal Delta, Gambella wetlands and the middle reaches of the Niger River. They are integral parts of four major basins: the Senegal, Niger and Nile rivers and Lake Chad.

Challenges and Opportunities

There are many promising examples of local wetland restoration initiatives that have enhanced social stability and livelihoods. But so far, these initiatives are small, highly fragmented and struggle to reach scale. In addition, if interventions are not conflict sensitive, which is often the case, they may even inflame underlying tensions.

The increasing recognition of the importance of safeguarding and restoring wetlands in the Sahel by political leaders, humanitarian agencies and international donors provides opportunity for upscaling. The UN Decade of Action to deliver the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration and Green Recovery initiatives all provide significant incentives to accelerate resilience to environmental and economic shocks. BliSS aims to capitalise on these opportunities by connecting with policy actors to enable conversion of policy signals into major investments that put an essential blue dimension at the heart of existing

regreening and climate adaptation measures, influencing plans of relevant ministries and institutions.

Equally, BliSS partners and allies will enable local communities and civil society organisations to build sufficient capacity to take action themselves and to become change agents, influencing policies and investments bottom-up.

Goals and Impact

BliSS will mobilise a multitude of actors to catalyse change and achieve ambitious goals and impact. Specifically, for 2030 we propose a goal to safeguard and restore 20 million hectares of wetlands in six major wetland systems and four basins across the Sahel, enhancing the resilience of 10 million people to climate risk, poverty, conflict and displacement while benefiting biodiversity.

Local communities, businesses, governments, regional initiatives and organisations, donors and investors all need to play a role to reach this goal and to maintain the impact long after the BliSS initiative has ended. Ultimately, success will mean that:

- Partnerships of connected local communities, businesses and governments have sufficient knowledge, capacity and resources to safeguard and restore resilient wetland landscapes and ensure sustainable local production systems, in line with community needs, while maintaining biodiversity.

- Producers are better connected to their markets and earn a fair income, supporting a sustainable local economy and jobs. Local stakeholders influence development and climate change planning and investments to restore and better manage their landscapes and the water systems that support them.

- Sahelian governments enable inclusive wetland management at landscape scale through locally driven partnerships and plans. They implement existing wetland policies and newly developed wetland action plans, meeting national targets for the sustainable use of wetlands as reflected in country climate strategies such as national adaptation plans (NAPs) and nationally determined contributions (NDCs). There is enhanced trust between states and their citizens, underpinned by inclusion and constructive interaction between various stakeholders.

- Regional initiatives and organisations incorporate wetlands as an integral part of their strategies and address planning and conservation issues related to transboundary wetlands. These initiatives and organisations host a platform for inclusive dialogue on restoring and safeguarding Sahelian wetlands. They encourage the development of wetland action plans, ensure their coherency, help stakeholders to identify and leverage resources and use an online tool to monitor progress.

- Donors and investors support countries and regional initiatives to safeguard and revive wetland ecosystems and cooperate to allocate the financial resources necessary to make changes at landscape and wetland systems scale.

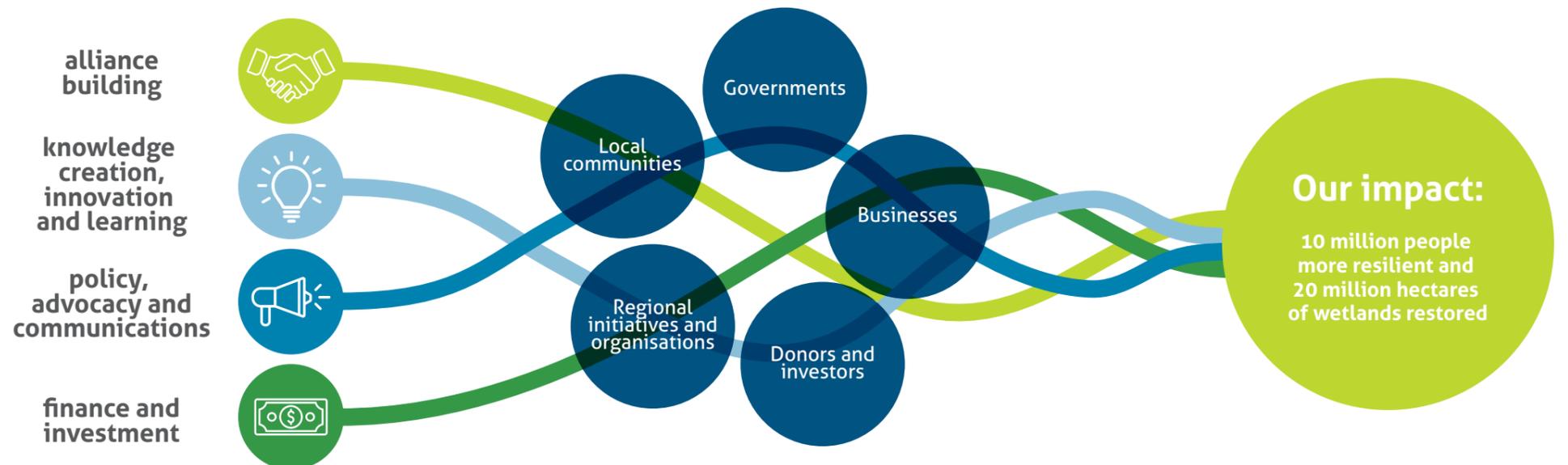
Donors and investors also support new water-related development projects with a strong gender and conflict-sensitivity component and ensure policy coherence within their investment portfolios to maximise the positive impact and minimise the negative impact for communities and wetlands.

Strategy

BliSS aims to improve the resilience of water and wetland systems across the Sahel, placing them centre stage in the regional ambitions for sustainable development, re-greening and climate action. Widespread application of gender and conflict sensitive approaches will contribute to build peace and stability and enhance resilience to water and climate shocks.

To achieve this, partners and allies will build on existing best practices and local water and wetland initiatives, mobilise new inter-sectoral partnerships and influence existing regional investments and programmes.

Fragmented local experience and knowledge will be brought together to inform action at landscape scale and to build capacity of governments, civil society and the private sector to integrate water resiliency into strategies and plans.



Action Tracks

For implementation of the BLiSS initiative, there are four main action tracks: alliance building; knowledge creation, innovation and learning; policy, advocacy and communications; and finance and investment. Activities will be connected in these tracks at all scales.

1.

Alliance building

Building and strengthening alliances will generate ownership and momentum for BLiSS at all scales.

The main actions envisaged:

- collaborate with wetland communities, the private sector, stakeholder platforms and civil society organisations and their networks, knowledge institutes, local governments, specific sectoral ministries, regional initiatives and institutions, donors and investors;
- co-develop plans and propositions for wetland landscape recovery that are inclusive, locally owned and make a strong case for investment in wetland restoration;
- establish a broad alliance to promote BLiSS at regional and global scales.

2.

Knowledge creation, innovation and learning

Making knowledge and experience accessible and stimulating new innovations and technologies stimulates and supports design and implementation of water and wetland solutions.

The main actions envisaged:

- develop tools to support local actors in implementing best practice wetland restoration, working horizontally through community groups, local governments and their networks;
- information sharing and dialogue to strengthen agency in land and water governance and connect local initiatives across whole landscapes;
- set up a system for monitoring, evaluation and learning and develop indicators to measure impact on people and natural resources, complementing what is already available in the countries.



Villagers in the Mopti district of the Inner Niger Delta collaborate on a planning exercise

3.

Policy, advocacy and communication

Communications will connect actors and build understanding. Advocacy and policy dialogues will support government decision makers to align water and wetland management priorities with existing policy commitments.

The main actions envisaged:

- dialogues with key decision makers for wetland revival and recovery in legislation, integrating wetland targets into country and regional plans towards the SDGs, NDCs and commitments to international conventions;
- stimulate community-based wetland management and sectoral policies and plans that are inclusive, participatory, democratic and adequately financed;
- catalyse interest and commitments for long-term investments for wetland recovery across landscapes;
- collaborate with youth networks and BLiSS ambassadors to influence public opinion and attract media interest.

4.

Finance and investment

Facilitating access to finance and investment will enable implementation of plans for wetland landscape recovery and improved catchment management.

The main actions envisaged:

- work with communities, governments, regional institutions and initiatives, to match proposed interventions to sustain and restore wetlands with the interests and finance of potential investors;
- develop landscape restoration propositions for investment that will stimulate sustainable market mechanisms, develop business plans that support the sustainable use of wetlands and promote business principles and standards that are gender and conflict sensitive;
- leverage large multi-donor investments by linking these propositions to wetland and river basin-scale commitments and plans.

Through alliance building and knowledge sharing, women in the Inner Niger Delta have established their own vegetable gardens. Here they are seen harvesting okra.



Support and Get Involved

The founding partners of BLiSS invite civil society organisations, government agencies, private sector and intergovernmental organisations and networks to advise, support, collaborate and invest to realise our joint ambition for Blue Lifelines for a Secure Sahel. Are you interested to support in some way?

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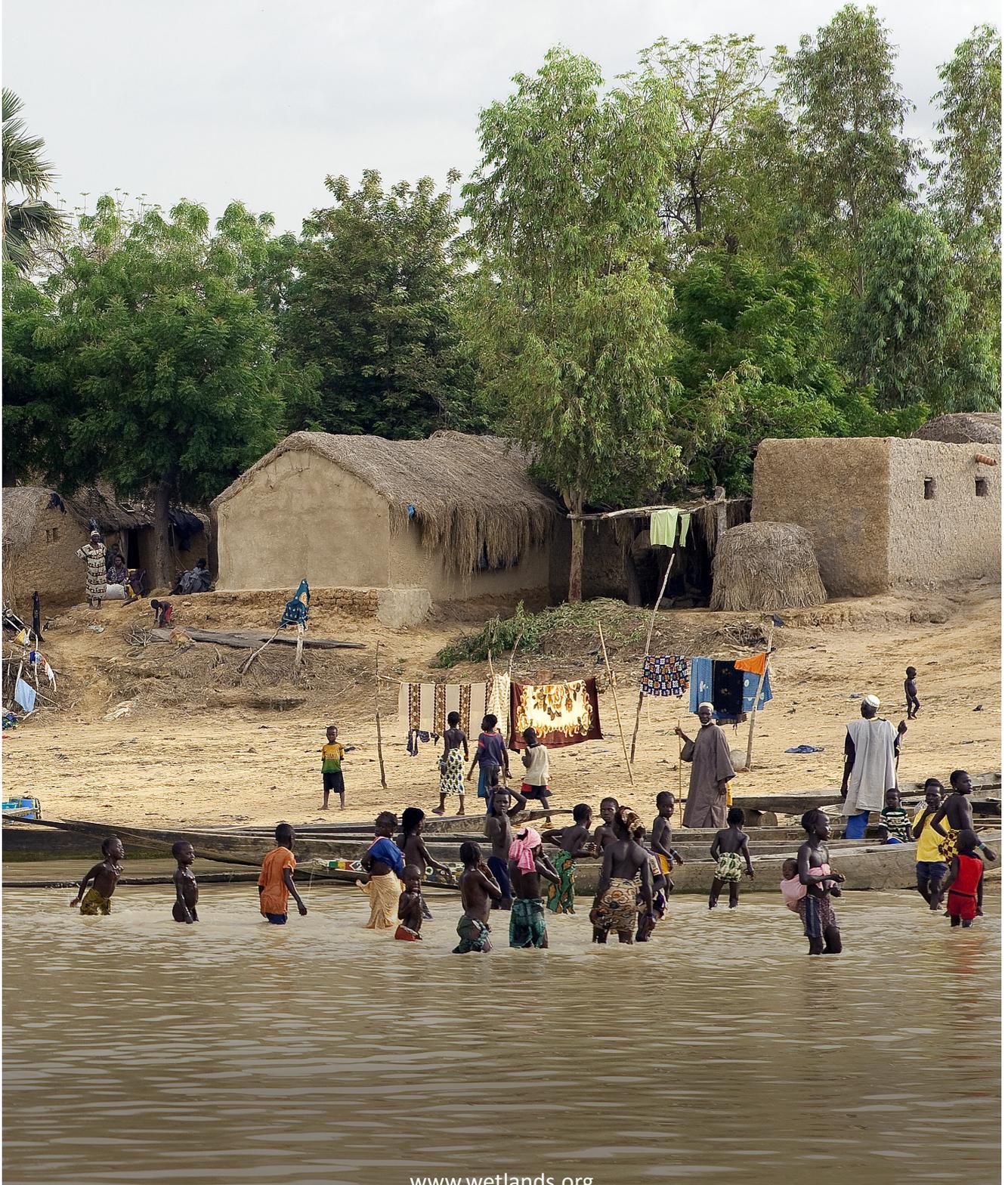
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