

# ISSUE BRIEF

JANUARY 2023 | WEST AFRICA

## Safeguarding West Africa's Fouta Djallon Highlands A field-based roadmap for ecological restoration & development

by Joël Ruet & Hamed Semega

As a Champion of the Great Green Wall, let me tell you how convinced I am that the Fouta Djallon in Guinea, but also the inland delta of the Niger River in Mali, the Liptako-Gourma in Burkina Faso and in Niger, collectively constitute its roots and “strategic depth”.

As Erik Orsenna rightly said, “water guarantees the unity of life”; I will add that water must guarantee the unity of our territories, the unity of our societies, of our ecosystems, and the prospects for our homes.

Mahamadou Issoufou, former President of the Republic of Niger,  
Champion of the Great Green Wall for the African Union;  
Speech delivered during the Fouta Djallon Special Session  
organised by OMVS, IAGF, The Bridge Tank at the 2022 World Water Forum in Dakar, Senegal

The COP15 of the UN Convention to combat Desertification is hosted by Africa, with a presidency held by Cote d'Ivoire in West Africa. While Africa is serving the world through COP15, notably in an effort to unite the conventions on desertification, biodiversity and climate, the world should reciprocate by not forgetting Africa's most salient ecosystems.

In one of the most landlocked and difficult to reach parts of Africa, the Fouta Djallon highlands of Guinea are dying. Often called “the water tower of West Africa” as they water a region of nearly 300 million people, these highlands and the headsprings of seven of the region's largest rivers which are found there are drying up.

The combined effects of climate change and the impact of mis-development on local populations and livestock have put severe pressure on this vibrant but fragile ecosystem. As deforestation, desertification, and the erosion of soil increase, the future stability and development of an entire region find themselves threatened. The very survival of West Africa's rivers depends on successfully safeguarding the Fouta Djallon.

### KEY POINTS

#### ► The challenges facing the Fouta Djallon:

- **Climate change**, e.g. reduced rainfall, cyclical droughts, and desertification;
- **Unsuitable traditional agricultural methods**, e.g. shifting cultivation and slash-and-burn agriculture leaving land overexploited;
- **Decreasing vegetation cover**, e.g. expansion of farmlands, and abusive logging for firewood;
- **Declining soil quality**, due to overgrazing leading to accelerated erosion and desertification;
- **Depletion of water resources**, due to increased siltation and sedimentation of headwaters, decreasing vegetation cover and soil quality.

#### ► A roadmap for ecological restoration & development :

- **Supporting & mobilizing local communities**, e.g. disseminate catalogues of best practices of traditional and modern agro-forestry, ecosystem restoration, awareness-raising and training of local populations;
- **Fostering research and innovation**, e.g. increase knowledge & data on resources-ecosystems, incubation of local technological startups, support research on nature-based solutions, local environmental engineering;
- **Political will & regional cooperation**, e.g. assemblies of river basin organisations, regional cooperation frameworks around a common resource to ensure social & environmental sustainability;
- **A green-blue bond for the Fouta Djallon** supported internationally to mobilise finance for the restoration of resources and the social development of the highlands.

#### Authors

Joël Ruet, is an economist of natural resources, President, The Bridge Tank

Hamed Semega, Founding Board Member of The Bridge Tank, was High Commissioner of OMVS, the Senegal River basin organisation, 2017-22

Cédric Terrasson, Editor, The Bridge Tank, studied Media & International Conflicts, UCD, Dublin



---

**WATER IN WEST AFRICA: CENTRAL FOR LIFE & ECOSYSTEMS, CENTRAL FOR CIVILISATION, HUMAN DEVELOPMENT & PEACE**

The centrality of water in sustaining life is a well-established notion. As the lifeblood of human civilisations around the world, water is a necessary prerequisite to any form of socio-economic development. From food production to sanitation and health, water also plays a crucial role in early childhood development, as water scarcity and the absence of safe water are associated with increased child mortality, stunting, and a loss of cognitive ability, irreversibly impeding children's mental and physical development. "We forget that the water cycle and the life cycle are one," French explorer and oceanographer Jacques Yves Cousteau once said. Or to quote Erik Orsenna, renowned writer and chairman of Initiatives for the Future of Great Rivers, "water guarantees the unity of life."

This unity and circularity of life and water is found in the course of rivers, from their sources to their deltas. In West Africa, the region's rivers are the very veins of the earth, driving life and development to its remotest corners, creating along their path, in the river basins, a wealth of natural ecosystems and basins of life for entire communities, enabling farming, transportation, and power production.

As the region grapples with climate change, having faced cyclical droughts over the past

decades, witnessing decreasing rainfall, and suffering from rising desertification as the desert continues its steady advance in the Sahel, concern over water has been both a challenge and a driver of sustainable development. The question of how to best manage these limited water resources flowing across borders, from one country to the other, has inspired new methods of sustainable agriculture and has been a driver of regional integration, cooperation, and ultimately peace.

---

**THE REGION'S BEATING HEART: THE FOUTA DJALLON HIGHLANDS**

Sustaining the existence and flow of West Africa's rivers, the region's beating heart is found far up in the highlands of Guinea, in the Fouta Djallon, a mountainous region of plateaus at altitudes ranging between 500 and 1500m (from 1600 to a little less than 5000 ft). These forested Fouta Djallon Highlands, with a central area of 60,000 km<sup>2</sup> and with foothills spreading to Guinea's neighbouring countries, i.e. Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Senegal, and Sierra Leone, over an area of more than 300,000 km<sup>2</sup>, are commonly referred to as the "Water Tower of West Africa." They are the birthplace of 7 of the region's largest rivers, e.g. the Senegal River, the Niger River, the Gambia River, the Konkouré River, the Corubal River, the Little Scarcies River (Kaba), and Great Scarcies River (Kolenté).

And while geographers have helped create the misconceived popular belief that a river has but one source, river headwaters are in reality the result of complex, finely tuned, and balanced ecosystems. In Guinea's tropical highlands, the Fouta Djallon forests store and provide the water forming the early stages of what then grow to become powerful streams watering West Africa, a region home to more than 300 million people. The waters flowing from the Fouta Djallon highlands have played a foundational role in the development of West Africa's civilisation and cultures, flowing as far as Dakar, Senegal to the West, the Niger Basin in Nigeria to the South-East, and to the edge of the Sahara in the North.

With this reach to the North, throughout the westernmost parts of the Sahel, the Fouta Djallon and its rivers are major contributors to the development of these water-scarce lands. Although much smaller in size than the Sahel region spreading across the continent, the Fouta Djallon highlands are the very roots and strategic depths of peace-building, food security, and stability of the Sahel.

**But the Fouta Djallon, this water tower of West Africa, is today more than ever at risk. Its rich ecosystems are slowly dying out, amidst general indifference of the international community.**



### A DYING ECOSYSTEM

The degradation of the Fouta Djallon Highlands' natural resources and ecosystems are the result of a wide array of factors, from climate change's overall effects in West Africa to the actions of the highlands' local populations. The many underlying issues driving this alarming deterioration of the Fouta Djallon's soil and water resources are best illustrated with the example of the accelerated deforestation and desertification of the highlands.

One of the main issues facing the Fouta Djallon is indeed the reduction of the highlands' vegetation cover. Some of the most prominent reasons for that include:

- The expansion of farmlands to meet the needs of the region's growing population, driven by traditional methods of agriculture based on shifting cultivation and slash-and-burn agriculture. These methods are unsuitable and contribute to the degradation of the Fouta Djallon's forest and soil, as lands are

overexploited and lying fallow for shorter periods of times. Additional damage is caused by slash-and-burn methods often resulting in uncontrolled bushfires.

- Severe overgrazing, due to the increase in livestock, leaves the soil to dry out, infertile, and exposed to erosion and advancing desertification.
- Abusive logging to meet the rising demand for firewood and the need to meet growing energy needs in the region have put the highlands further at risk.

This slow agony of the Fouta Djallon's ecosystem and forests has a direct impact on the very sources of the region's largest rivers. The gradual disappearance of the headsprings in the Fouta Djallon Highlands has been observed since the 1980s. Many locations that once overflowed with water are left today with nothing but shallow puddles. Sources drying up and diminishing underground resources are a direct consequence of: 1) reduced rainfall as a consequence of climate change, 2) the

degradation of the vegetation cover resulting in soil unable to collect and store water, 3) desertification impeding the flow of water, with headwaters suffering from increased siltation, sedimentation, and invasive aquatic weeds, 4) the increasing demand for water as a result of demographic and livestock growth.

These changes also threaten the diversity of fauna and flora found in the highlands. A biodiversity sanctuary, the Fouta Djallon is home to numerous rare and endemic species:

- 190 species of mammals, 17 of which are endangered;
- 256 species of birds, 16 of which are endangered;
- 88 endemic plant species, 36 of which are endangered.

Source: Fawzi Bedredine, Observatory of Fouta-Djallon, OMVS

The challenges facing these lands are therefore numerous, they are environmental, social, societal and agricultural, sanitary, educational, and cultural, affecting water supply, food security and energy demands.

### THE CONSEQUENCES OF INACTION

The stakes are high and the consequences of inaction to preserve the headsprings of West

Africa's rivers in the Fouta Djallon would be dire. In the region's context of ever-growing hydric-stress, the inefficient use and management of water resources and the inability or unwillingness to act in the face of this accelerating deterioration of the Fouta Djallon ecosystem would see water scarcity soar and affect the lives of hundreds of millions who are already at risk of finding themselves in severe hydric stress in the decade to come.

This would result in a catastrophic social, economic, and humanitarian crisis, as dwindling water resources would lead to famines, unemployment, and the violent escalation of conflicts over access to water. The example offered by the disappearance of Lake Chad has shown that as water disappears and as hydric stress increases, so do violence, terrorism and insecurity.

West Africa's urban centres would face similar difficulties, as they would witness an influx of internally displaced populations having to leave behind their parched lands. The pressure on the region's biggest cities and urban areas would thus be severe as well. Today, Senegal's capital Dakar draws 60% of its drinking water from the Senegal River. In Mauritania's Nouakchott, the Senegal River accounts for the entirety of the city's drinking water.



---

**A STRATEGY FOR CONCRETE ACTIONS AND SOLUTIONS: PROTECTING THE RESOURCE BY EMPOWERING LOCAL COMMUNITIES, WITH THE SUPPORT OF THE GLOBAL COMMUNITY**

Despite this undoubtedly alarming situation, all hope is not lost as people are rising to respond to this crisis, with initiatives to preserve the Fouta Djallon Highlands blooming across the region. Solutions and paths of action are being developed but these are still insufficient and in desperate need of support and greater global and local awareness. It is not only water that is missing to safeguard the Fouta Djallon and its sources, but concrete solutions regarding the region's socio-environmental structure, knowledge of the resource, scientific data & technological innovation, political action, and financing.

In a speech during the 2022 World Water Forum in Dakar, Niger's former president Issoufou Mahamadou gave a message of hope in the face of the degradation of existing ecosystems, saying that "political mobilisation can stop deserts; science can turn them green."

These words shed light on the fact that statements and political will, though necessary, cannot suffice, but that all stakeholders must be involved in the collective efforts to preserve the Fouta Djallon; this includes the scientific community, the private sector, startups, NGOs, farmers, and local communities. It is therefore this report's aim to explore and present some of the solutions that exist, mobilising people across the board to preserve the Fouta Djallon's forests, sources, and ecosystem.

Direct protection of the Fouta Djallon and its resources means tackling the underlying social and economic challenges local communities are facing. The expansion of farmlands, increased logging, or overgrazing are direct effects of local communities' growing needs for food and energy. Protecting the resource therefore necessarily means finding alternative pathways to meet the needs of these populations, to guarantee life for both communities and ecosystems all whilst reversing existing trends of deforestation and desertification. This protection of the Fouta Djallon's natural resources thus goes hand in hand with the social and economic development of the region.

An example for such an alternative pathway can be found in the agroforestry projects that are already being developed across the region, and which present valuable and

sustainable alternatives to existing agricultural methods. By protecting farmlands from desertification, erosion, and the resulting loss of soil fertility, these agroforestry projects enable a better management of farmlands and can restore degraded soil. To maximise the efficiency of those agroforestry initiatives, local NGOs have also launched projects to build dykes in order to protect nurseries and young plants used for reforestation from desertification.

In order to reduce disruptions to the flow of source streams, the development of water infrastructure like groundwater wells or rainwater harvesting would help provide access to water to rural populations whilst preserving surface waters. Infrastructure development must also be pursued in the energy sector to provide populations with sustainable and decarbonized energy alternatives to the firewood and charcoal that is produced through the logging of the Fouta Djallon's forests.

---

**A FOUR-PRONGED ROADMAP**

A roadmap to success in our mission to safeguard the Fouta Djallon can be built around four essential levers of action: (1) supporting local populations in establishing what existing tools and traditional methods can be mobilized for the preservation of these ecosystems and what needs to be changed; (2) this community action provides the early diagnosis and basis on which to then develop scientific research and data collection, supported by technological innovation driven by local entrepreneurs; (3) moving up the ladder, political decision makers and multilateral organizations across the region, supported by the international community, have to provide the enabling environments to tackle this global issue and ensure social and environmental sustainability; (4) the data and the institutional and democratic legitimacy generated by the first three levers will provide the transparency framework required to mobilize greater financial resources, particularly through green and blue finance initiatives.

---

**1. Local populations at the forefront**

All these initiatives and conservation projects must imperatively be conducted while involving local communities, particularly women and youth, as they are all key stakeholders in the management of the Fouta Djallon's resources

and are the ones most affected by their degradation. Preservation not only aims to secure to the Fouta Djallon's ecosystems and the rivers that flow from it, it hopes to secure income, employment, and food security for the whole region.

A path of action to protect the Fouta Djallon must consequently capitalize on traditional tools and existing knowledge of the resource by local populations on the one hand and be able to question and rethink those traditional agricultural methods that are neither efficient nor suitable and sustainable in this context of population growth and of an already agonizing ecosystem. Assisted natural regeneration initiatives, like the aforementioned agroforestry projects, very much rely on the awareness and participation of local populations in the active restoration of their environment. Awareness raising and the training of local populations are indispensable steps towards the preservation of

the Fouta Djallon. And while these are already being done by government programs and NGOs, their reach and scale is still relatively limited and needs greater support and financing.

How to best preserve the Fouta Djallon's springs and ecosystem must rely on a continued involvement and dialogue with local populations, pursuing a deeper understanding of local communities' needs and challenges in order to better adapt the solutions to their needs. Solutions must thus be developed and adapted to the region's natural and social characteristics.

As the examples from different transboundary cooperation frameworks in the region have shown, the basic foundation for water cooperation is knowledge, i.e. knowledge of the resource, knowledge of local populations, and knowledge of their needs and challenges.



---

## 2. Fostering scientific research and technological innovation

This need for both a better understanding of the Fouta Djallon's ecosystems and for concrete solutions to preserve its natural environment and sources, and to meet the needs of local communities will require support for scientific research and technological innovation around the highlands.

Developing hydro-meteorology and setting up monitoring stations of water resources would for example allow to better understand the variations in water levels, flow rates, and the impact of rainfall on springs and headwaters. All in all, what is required is more qualitative and quantitative data on the Fouta Djallon's ecosystem and water resources in order for policy makers and other local stakeholders to adapt their actions to rapidly changing conditions. Science based policy making and a sustainable management and planning of water resources must be built on data, which is currently lacking.

Processing this data however represents another challenge for which both human and technological resources are needed. Indeed, for these monitoring stations to be set up, for data to be collected and analysed, regional public institutions, international development agencies and private sector benefactors must foster academic research, develop appropriate university research programmes, and encourage scientific collaboration and partnerships with and within the region.

The development and support of regional business incubators is another important avenue of action to create this knowledge and innovation ecosystem required to meet the challenges of the Fouta Djallon's degradation. Such incubators would help harvest the creativity of young entrepreneurs and local startups to develop new tools and support technological innovation and experimentation. Mobilising the private sector's existing expertise and capital in support of the development of these new activities and innovations would not only contribute to the preservation of water resources and headsprings but would help meet the social, economic, and environmental challenges facing the Fouta Djallon.

---

## 3. Combining political will and scientific knowledge

This pursuit of knowledge, of a deeper understanding of the Fouta Djallon's complex environment has been the cornerstone of multiple projects to develop a regional observatory of the Fouta Djallon. Echoing Issoufou Mahamadou's words that "political mobilisation can stop deserts; science can turn them green," multilateral regional organisations have for years worked on the idea of establishing a regional observatory to monitor the Fouta Djallon's environment and natural resources and to analyse the changes they are undergoing in order to halt or mitigate them.

The reasoning behind this regional observatory recognised very early on the need for regional concertation and collaboration on an issue that affects communities not only in Guinea's Fouta Djallon but across the region. An observatory would represent a valuable cooperation tool to pursue a sustainable management of the Fouta Djallon's shared lands and resources, all while strengthening data collection, analysis, and its spread to all stakeholders involved in this management.

Such a programme of regional observatory was first pursued by the African Union (AU) with the Regional Observatory of the Natural Resources and the Environment of the Fouta Djallon Highlands. This observatory was to be developed within the framework of the Regional Programme for the Integrated Development of the Fouta Djallon Highlands (RPID-FDH), an initiative first launched in 1981 by the Organisation of African Unity. This early development programme of the Fouta Djallon aimed for the preservation and development of natural resources in order to contribute to the improvement of living conditions of the region's populations, i.e. all who were impacted by the rivers flowing from the Fouta Djallon. Unfortunately, the AU's observatory project remained at the level of planning and never materialised.

In 2018, the AU handed over the reins of the RPID-FDH to the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), which took on the mission to establish this observatory. While ECOWAS has helped revitalise the RPID-FDH, the observatory has still not yet been established. Despite a truly global regional observatory still being the ultimate goal, inspiration can be drawn from other existing initiatives, particularly

those developed by some of the region's river basin organisations (RBOs). These institutional bodies are dedicated to the shared development, management, and regulation of water resources in a river basin, operating at the level of the basin, which can be either national or transboundary. One such transboundary RBO which has set an early example of what such an observatory might look like is the Senegal River Basin Development Organisation (Organisation pour la Mise en Valeur du Fleuve Sénégal, OMVS). Established in 1972 by Mali, Mauritania, and Senegal and with the addition of Guinea in 2006, the OMVS has been a crucial architect of the integrated development of the Senegal River Basin. In addition to aiming to improve the income of populations, the socio-economic development and resilience of the economies of its member states, and to ensure food security, the OMVS has made it one of its foundational missions to preserve the basin's ecosystems, from the river's springs to its delta.

To succeed in this mission, recognizing the Fouta Djallon's role in the Senegal River's present and future, the OMVS launched its own observatory project in March 2015. The purpose of the "Regional Water and Environment

Observatory of the Fouta-Djallon massif" is first of all to improve knowledge of the highlands, their waters, & environment, and to federate the region's data producers and collectors. Additionally, the observatory has a mandate to provide support, education, and training for local populations and stakeholders by creating a training centre for best practices in conservation and restoration and by compiling documentation on the evaluation and preservation of the Fouta Djallon. This mission involves direct activities for reforestation, the building of dykes to protect nurseries, soil restoration and the protection of springs.

To involve the whole region in these efforts, the observatory hopes to lead to the creation of a platform of exchange between the different RBOs (e.g. the Niger River's Niger Basin Authority, the Gambia River's OMVG, the Volta River's Volta Basin Authority) in matters of water resources management and environment protection. Sharing the collected data and information with all the existing RBO observatories and development programmes in the Fouta Djallon is an important component of the regional cooperation which needs to be bolstered around the highlands.





---

#### 4. Green and Blue Finance: Innovative mechanisms for the preservation of the Fouta Djallon

Good will, ambitious solutions, and good ideas will remain at grassroots level if they are not backed with the necessary financial support. But financing inevitably requires transparency frameworks; it needs hard data to measure the impact of investments and the achievement of objectives, making the aforementioned technological innovation and the multiplication of monitoring and measuring systems key drivers of any preservation efforts.

Many of the local initiatives, NGO activities and transboundary frameworks discussed thus far still lack funding to scale up their activities as they often heavily rely on public funds and small scale financing at the level of individual projects. While incubators have already been introduced as possible breeding grounds for small initiatives and startups to expand their reach, channelling funds to the protection of the Fouta Djallon could also be facilitated by the new financial mechanisms which have emerged and been developed in recent years to respond to the challenges resulting from climate change.

Climate finance, green finance, or blue finance are more than just buzzwords taken up during the COPs. They are a very concrete way of putting the financial system in motion to support climate change adaptation and mitigation and to have a positive impact on the environment by helping build a low carbon world. These financial mechanisms are very diverse in scale, structure, and in their areas of action. The example of blue finance deserves careful attention. As its name suggests, blue finance has a particular focus on climate action connected to water resources, be it for seas, oceans, rivers, or lakes, making it of particular interest for the Fouta Djallon and West Africa's rivers.

These innovative financial mechanisms could play a vital role in the preservation of the Fouta Djallon. Because while development action and river co-management initiatives often act upstream, midstream, and downstream, all the way to the deltas, the springs and headwaters are often neglected in these efforts. Hydro-power, irrigation, farming, or transportation investment projects undoubtedly display a more measurable impact and scalability, and have greater return on investment. However,

the very resilience of the investments and efforts made along West African rivers depend on the survival of the springs and headwaters in the Fouta Djallon, making it imperative to put these green finance mechanisms at the service of the preservation of biodiversity.

The portfolio approach offered by new large scale blue and green finance mechanisms offers a possible answer to this financial challenge. The Blue Peace Financing Structure developed by the United Nations Capital Development Fund (UNCDF) in partnership with the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) is an apt illustration of a blue finance initiative supporting the sustainable development and management of a West African transboundary river achieved through a multi-stakeholder cooperation framework.

In 2023, the UNCDF will issue the first ever Blue Peace Bond to promote the access to public and private capital for the implementation of the Gambia River Basin Development Organization's (OMVG) Master Plan and Joint Investment Plan. The portfolio approach of Blue peace will finance projects with higher reliance on subsidies by combining them in a bond with projects with higher return on investment and cashflow. Thus, Blue Peace hopes to mobilise nearly \$2 billion in the coming years for projects along the Gambia River ranging from hydro-power, drinking water infrastructure, all the way to forestry and irrigation.

If such an initiative could be created to support an RBO like the OMVG, then it is imperative to develop a similar initiative in direct support of the socio-economic development of the Fouta Djallon and the preservation of its ecosystems and biodiversity. Developing a cooperation framework gathering the region's countries and RBOs to collectively work on an action and investment plan for the Fouta Djallon would provide the basis on which to build such a Fouta Djallon green-blue bond.

---

#### MULTI-STAKEHOLDER FRAMEWORKS: HYDRO-DIPLOMACY FOR PEACE

As can be seen with the example of the Fouta Djallon Observatory, political will and awareness of the issues facing the highlands do exist and have done so for a long time, not only in Guinea but across West Africa. Faced with the risk of possible future conflicts and recognizing what has already been achieved along the Senegal River and other

transboundary rivers in the regions to preserve peace and foster cooperation around a contentious issue like water, political will, combined with necessity, can really transform what is a conflictual issue into building stability and peace.

One way of achieving this requires approaching international rivers and their sources in the Fouta Djallon as a common good. This would mean that the responsibility and burden of the protection of the Fouta Djallon and its resources ought not to be left only to Guinea. If riparian countries in West Africa have been able for decades to jointly manage the mid- and downstream of their respective rivers within transboundary RBOs, then addressing the challenges upstream, at the source, in a joint manner can be achieved. The multi-stakeholder and cross-sectoral frameworks RBOs have built around river basins and water resources are living proof that hydro-diplomacy and cooperation can flourish and sustain peace. What the Fouta Djallon needs today is a hydro-diplomacy moving beyond the scope of individual river basins, towards what Issoufou Mahamadou described as “a dynamic of exchange gathering the diversity of actors regulating the course of the great rivers taking their source in the Fouta Djallon.”

In 1998, the ECOWAS made a first step in that direction when the region’s countries

committed to a regional process of Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) to pursue a more just and efficient management of water, ensuring the sustainability of its uses. Another important milestone was reached in 2009, when the GEF-funded (Global Environment Facility) “Fouta Djallon Highlands Integrated Natural Resources Management Project” was launched by the AU and ECOWAS in collaboration with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). Such frameworks of regional cooperation around the integrated management of water resources must be bolstered on all fronts, i.e. institutionally, politically, technologically, and financially, to create momentum and be carried out successfully.

Recognizing this priority, the OMVS and OMVG therefore have been working on a common manifesto for the preservation of the Fouta Djallon, in which they shall call for all West African heads of state to make the preservation of the Fouta Djallon highlands an African and worldwide priority. This manifesto will also call for international development partners to support the development and implementation of a holistic preservation and restauration programme for the Fouta Djallon capable of raising the funds needed.



Description:

Top left – Hamed Semega (middle) in a village in the Fouta Djallon

Top right – Dialogue with local populations

Bottom left – Joel Ruet (left) and the TRADITIONAL guardian of the spring of the Senegal River (right)

## CONCLUSION

As stated by Sulton Rahimzoda, Special Envoy of the President of Tajikistan for Water, "water could be a dealbreaker but we are striving to show that water in most cases is a dealmaker and [...] water could be a source of peace and development." In the Fouta Djallon, the alarming ecosystem degradation affecting the sources and headwaters of West Africa's largest rivers presents a clear threat to the region's future development, stability, and peace.

But with initiatives and solutions being slowly developed on the ground and political will rising across the region to tackle this global issue, there is a need to synergize these efforts at all levels, across sectors and borders. To reverse existing trends and ensure the future of the Fouta Djallon, we propose a 4-point action plan:

1. Supporting and mobilizing local communities by establishing a catalogue and an academy of durable best practices, combining both traditional and modern agricultural and ecosystem preservation methods, e.g. resilient agroforestry, to raise awareness and train local populations;
2. Fostering local and regional research and innovation to increase knowledge and data of the Fouta Djallon's resources and ecosystems. This will be achieved by establishing and supporting incubators of technological startups, supporting academic research projects, local environmental engineering, and the development of nature-based solutions;
3. Creating an assembly of West African states, RBOs, and multilateral organizations, backed by the international community, for the Fouta Djallon in order to develop a regional cooperation framework around this common resource and to ensure social, societal, and environmental sustainability in the highlands and across the region;
4. Mobilising new green finance mechanisms in support of the Fouta Djallon by establishing a green-blue bond dedicated for the preservation of biodiversity and the development of the highlands with international support.

During The Bridge Tank's High Level Panel on hydro-diplomacy in December 2022, Dr. Diaka Sidibe, Minister of Higher Education, Scientific Research and Innovation of the Republic of Guinea stressed the urgency of this situation: "Failure to act today to safeguard the Fouta Djallon Highlands threatens water security for our children and future generations."

