



United Nations Decade for Deserts and the Fight against Desertification

Greening a grey land

Naelson Medeiros was born about 30 years ago in Sombras Grandes, a small community in the vast 'grey land' of the Caatigna forest in north-eastern Brazil. The forest gets its nickname from the monochrome colours of the landscape evident due to the annual nine-month drought when there is precious little green to be seen. Medeiros remembers the difficult times of living in this harsh landscape, when survival seemed almost impossible.

For families living in the community, firewood collected for charcoal production and temporary farming were the only sources of income. "Firewood was becoming scarce," says Medeiros. "Stones were all we had, and you could see people breaking them to sell the gravel to building companies."

Working with the federal government, an IFAD-funded project introduced irrigation schemes and technologies to ensure efficient provision of water. Today, the community has been transformed into an oasis. Water tanks capable of storing up to 16,000 litres and filled by only 200 mm of precipitation are now supplying good-quality water to families. Small underground dams and a range of different wells have allowed rainwater to be stored under the soil without flooding the best land for planting.

Local families are now growing enough vegetables to feed themselves and earn a better living. "Today we see our land as full of potential," says Medeiros. "We are happy to see that it is worth investing and staying here. We do not need to migrate anymore."

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