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From one tree to one million: Planting the seeds of Namibia's future

Johnson Ndokosho's connection to nature began to take shape in 1994, when he went on a week-long school excursion to a national park and wildlife education centre. Together with his classmates, he saw snakes, giraffes and other wild animals up close. Johnson was fascinated. "That was when I decided I wanted to work with wildlife and protect nature," he recalls.

Three decades later, Johnson is Director of Forestry in Namibia's Ministry of Environment, Forestry and Tourism. Looking back, his career has followed that childhood conviction. He studied Natural Resource Management and later Environmental Management, joined the Ministry in 1998 and spent years working in wildlife and national parks before moving into forestry in 2022. For Johnson, protecting wildlife and forests go hand in hand. "It is all connected," he says. "If you do not protect habitats and forests, you cannot protect wildlife or the people who depend on them." Forests provide food, medicine and building materials. They support livelihoods and help protect ecosystems. In a country facing the challenges of food security, poverty, land degradation and climate change, Johnson sees healthy forests as part of the solution. "Whenever we talk about food security and fighting poverty, protecting our forests has to be part of the conversation."

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One million trees – and a starting point

Namibia's forests not only need to be kept healthy; they also need to expand, after 30 years of deforestation. Johnson and his team in the Forestry Directorate looked to Kenya for inspiration, where the government has launched an ambitious campaign to grow 15 billion trees by 2032. A visit to Kenya gave the Namibian team the opportunity to see how such an initiative could mobilise government, communities, businesses and other parts of society around a common goal. Back in Namibia, Johnson and his team set themselves the clear target to plant one million trees by 2030. One million: a number that is deliberately ambitious, yet achievable and visible enough for people to imagine their contribution. At the same time, it leaves room to grow. "We have to start somewhere," Johnson says. "If we can plant one million trees, that can give impetus to the next million, and the next."For Johnson, this is only the beginning – a starting point for creating the structures and mechanisms needed to strengthen forest protection.

From one ministry to the whole of society

One important part of the initiative is who takes the responsibility for planting the trees. Following a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach, the initiative moves tree planting beyond the remit of the environment ministry. Government institutions, businesses, schools, hospitals, youth organisations and communities are all being invited to take part. Public institutions and private companies pledge how many trees they are prepared to plant. A digital platform will track the collective progress, counting down from one million over a five-year period. The aim is to make the effort visible and to turn environmental action into something people encounter in their everyday lives.

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One of the contributing institutions is the National Youth Service. Young people who voluntarily join the Service receive several months of structured training and can then gain practical experience through placements in government institutions and projects. Training includes vocational and practical skills, including areas related to agriculture and land rehabilitation. Biodiversity protection is also part of the Service's broader mandate. For Commissioner Dr. Felix Musukubili, the idea of planting trees carries a personal meaning. As a primary school pupil at Sangwali Combined School in the Zambezi region, he and his classmates were each asked to plant a tree. The trees were named after the children who planted them. His tree is still standing today, providing shade and fruit to the children of the school. Felix wants to pass on that spirit with the National Youth Service and has pledged to support the initiative, bringing young people into an effort that links environmental action with skills, participation and national development.

Other institutions are preparing to do the same. Hospitals are exploring how tree planting and greener spaces could create more welcoming environments for patients, while schools can involve children directly in growing and caring for trees. The message is simple: protecting nature is not only the responsibility of those who work in the environment ministry. It is something that can be woven into how a government, a business, a school or a community operates.

> "Trees are tangible. They grow, provide shade and food, long after the person who planted them has moved on."

Planting for the future

The tree planting initiative translates Namibia's commitments on restoration and biodiversity into something tangible. Forests sit at the intersection of biodiversity, climate change, land degradation, food security and livelihoods. What happens on the ground contributes to national commitments and, ultimately, to global goals. On behalf of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD), GIZ's project *Strengthening National Implementation of Global Biodiversity Targets* has played a vital role in developing and launching the National Tree Planting Strategy. The work forms part of GIZ's wider support to Namibia to put its National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan into action, particularly Target 2 on ecosystem restoration. Beyond Namibia, the project also supports Brazil, Colombia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Madagascar and Peru. Across these countries, GIZ creates opportunities to exchange knowledge and learn from one another.

For Johnson, however, the initiative brings his story full circle. At 51, he finds himself looking back to the schoolboy who first discovered his fascination with wildlife – and ahead to what he can leave for future generations. "Policies, strategies and international negotiations matter", he says. "But they can remain abstract. Trees are tangible. They grow, provide shade and food, long after the person who planted them has moved on." One million trees will not solve all of Namibia's challenges, but they can contribute to a greener country – and, Johnson hopes, to a lasting sense that protecting Namibia's natural heritage belongs to everyone. He is convinced: "This initiative will be my ultimate achievement and legacy."

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