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Restoring more than forests

How rights-based forest restoration can empower communities, recover biodiversity, and tackle the climate crisis

This executive summary of "Restoring more than forests: how European support for rights-based restoration could empower communities, recover biodiversity and help tackle the climate crisis" uses a Ghanaian case study to explore the principles and practice underpinning different types of restoration. The findings show a lack of consensus about what restoration means and reveals inadequate support for the kinds of restoration that work best for people and forests. The analysis affirms that the best types of restoration are locally designed and implemented in a participatory way, driven by the wellbeing of communities and ecosystems rather than profit, and take into account the whole landscape rather than just individual projects. The report, therefore, proposes a definition of rights-based forest restoration inspired by these successful initiatives.

Europe is a global player in the trade, investment and consumption that drives deforestation and the United Kingdom (UK) and the European Union (EU) have promised to protect and restore forests. Such restoration must tackle the drivers of deforestation, but also reinforce human rights, land and tree tenure, forest governance, and sustainable livelihoods. If restoration is implemented with these objectives, it will protect and enrich both the remaining forest ecosystems and the lives of the people within them.

Different stakeholders working together at Lake Bosomtwe CREMA.

"Because our livelihood is tied to the forest, restoration is important. It is the heart of us."

An overview of Restoration

Ecosystems and communities across the globe face the negative impacts of the intensifying socio-ecological crisis: deepening inequality, loss of biodiversity, climate breakdown, and ecosystems unable to function properly. The public is also increasingly aware of the far-reaching social, political, and ecological impacts that global temperature rises will have.[1] Scientists warn of ice caps melting, increased extreme weather events, drought, food production failures, and accompanying social unrest. As such, climate breakdown is seen by some as an existential crisis for humanity.[2]

There's growing consensus that if done right, restoration could not only capture carbon, but also recover ecosystem functions and enhance livelihoods. Restoration therefore appears in several key bilateral agreements,[3] and is treated as a silver bullet for confronting the climate and biodiversity crisis. Recently the United Nations (UN) announced the UN Decade of Ecosystem Restoration, which "aims to massively scale up the restoration of degraded and destroyed ecosystems as a proven measure to fight the climate crisis and enhance food security, water supply and biodiversity". This will intensify and accelerate efforts made under the African Restoration Initiative (AFR100), the Bonn Challenge and Initiative 20x20.

Whilst there are some interesting restoration models,[4] there's still a disconnect between ambition, method, and outcome. Restoration lacks a coherent, agreed definition and guidelines are not adhered to. This means the word "restoration" can be co-opted by companies and projects that don't benefit ecology, climate and community. This is in part due to the prioritisation of projects that focus on offsetting or short-term return on investment such as planting fast-growing exotic trees for timber, paper, pulp and biofuel production in the global South. Tree planting initiatives attract disproportionate attention and funding but are often poorly planned and implemented with little restorative effect.[5] These large-scale mostly monocultural projects fail to help ecosystems recover and capture carbon,[6] let alone redistribute power or strengthen land and resource rights.[7] Often, restoration is conflated with plantations, which has justified land grabs, the planting of monocultures, further privatisation of national forest reserves, and unsustainable production of commercial forest goods.

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[1] https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/concern-about-climate-change-reaches-record-levels-half-now-very-concerned
[2] https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/oct/09/tipping-points-could-exacerbate-climate-crisis-scientists-fear
[3] Including NDCs, Bonn Challenge, REDD programmes, UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration 2021-2030, The Convention on Biodiversity and Aichi Biodiversity Targets, The New York Declaration on Forests, African Restoration Initiative AFR1000.
[4] See the WRI Global Restoration Initiative, the IUCN Restoration Initiative (TRI), WeForest, International Model Forest Network, Global Landscapes Forum, Global Partnership on Forest and Landscape Restoration, Society for Ecological Restoration for some examples.
[5] One particularly striking example of a large-scale tree planting project being poorly managed and causing more degradation is the SADA project in Ghana, see page 36 in the long report.
[6] Research shows that "natural forests are 40 times more effective than plantations for storing carbon"
[7] See CLARA Missing Pathways to 1.5 degree executive summary

Current restoration practice doesn't always address the causes of deforestation, so even if forests are restored, they can be deforested or degraded again.[8] Many 'restoration' initiatives are led by forestry, conservation or business organisations, leading to a lack of community participation or consideration of human rights. These are often steeped in a worldview that separates humans from nature, rather than seeing them as inherently interconnected. The restoration trend risks endorsing unsustainable forest management and strict protection – which can both have detrimental impacts on local people – diverting attention and funding from more important forest issues such as protecting community land rights, promoting participative forest governance, and combatting illegal logging.

Community rights have been widely accepted as fundamental to long-term forest protection and there is now a growing movement to put rights at the centre of restoration. Given the accelerating interest in forest restoration and the historic emphasis on economic gains over just socio-ecological solutions, it is essential that the forest and rights movement becomes more engaged in restoration practice and policy to ensure that rights-based rhetoric becomes reality. We need clarity on what activities are genuinely restorative and a definition of restoration that includes people as part of the ecosystems – this is the gap in knowledge that this report hopes to fill.

"Monoculture plantations of exotic species can never and should never be referred to as restoration because they do not come anywhere near 'restoration' as defined by ITTO, IUCN, and WRI."

GHANAIAN CIVIL SOCIETY ADVOCATE IN CONVERSATION, AUGUST 2020

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[8] This was a key finding of the New York Declaration of Forests five-year assessment.

Restoration in Ghana

Local communities use trees for "non-timber forest products" (NTFP), like these fruma seeds which have important medicinal qualities and can be sold at markets.

In 2019 the World Resources Institute (WRI) and Global Forest Watch reported that amongst tropical countries, Ghana had the highest rise in primary forest loss[9] and accelerating tree cover loss.[10] Our Ghanaian non-governmental organisation (NGO) partners raised concerns about the increase in plantation-based "restoration programmes" that are securing climate finance ahead of initiatives working to restore natural forests. We therefore chose to review restoration practice in Ghana and explore wh ether rights-based approaches offer a sustainable, long-term solution. Lessons from Ghana have the potential to inform other tropical countries with similar circumstances.

The kind of restoration programmes that are supported, and the type of support available, depends on the political and economic context. Many initiatives draw on worldviews that treat people as separate to ecosystems and prioritise economic interests. The plethora of Ghanaian initiatives identified as restorative[11] fall into six categories, with each group sharing some common features.[12]

[9] https://www.wri.org/blog/2019/04/world-lost-belgium-sized-area-primary-rainforests-last-year

[10] Global Forest Watch. Tree Cover Loss in Ghana. Accessed on 27th June 2019 from www.globalforestwatch.org.

[11] The research began by looking for projects using variations on the term 'restoration' in their descriptions – i.e. identifying themselves as restorative. Through interviews with practitioners we found that many CSO-led initiatives deliberately do not use the term "restoration" because it is associated with monocrop tree planting.

[12] Twenty-three initiatives are described and analysed in the full report.

1 · PUBLIC-LED RESTORATION INITIATIVES

These are managed by the Ghanaian Forestry Commission following the Ghana Forest Plantation Strategy 2016-2040 . Primarily publicly funded, they focus on replenishing degraded forest reserves for economic purposes and ecosystem services.

Analysis: Trust between farmers and government personnel is crucial to the success of these programmes. Under-resourcing of local government operations compromises the longevity of interventions, as newly planted trees may be neglected or not protected sufficiently from fire, illegal logging and conflicts over land. Ghanaian NGOs are concerned about the disproportionate number of exotic tree species being used. However, some programmes like the Community Resource Management Areas (CREMA) show political will to increase community-led forestry and restoration, and there is potential for NGOs to advocate for rights-based approaches in governmental policy reviews.

2 · INTERNATIONAL RESTORATION PROGRAMMES LED BY INTERNATIONAL NGOS (INGOS)

These are led by partnerships between iNGOs and the government, and are funded by EU, international aid, or private donors. Many are connected to AFR100. Generally, they plant mostly indigenous species and do not use monoculture techniques. They aim for 'win-win' outcomes for both ecological and livelihood resilience.

Analysis: Whilst project reports suggest effective partnership with local NGOs, it is unclear how far initiatives are directed by communities, whose land trees are planted on and what the tenure rights are. These projects combine social and ecological goals, and provide helpful models for implementation, monitoring and evaluation. There is a strong awareness of gendered livelihoods, roles, access to decision making and social impacts which other projects could learn from. INGOs may be more easily granted larger sums of funding so there are opportunities to work with local NGOs to scale up locally-defined restoration and influence national policy.

3 · LOCAL NGO-LED PROJECTS

Led by local NGOs, these small-scale initiatives take a holistic approach to the restoration of landscapes, by enhancing livelihoods, ecology, and quality of life. Funded primarily from development donors, these projects acknowledge and try to address some of the root drivers of degradation e.g. inequality, land tenure and governance, and are informed by communities who understand the local realities. They plant mostly indigenous trees that provide multiple benefits to local people.

Analysis: These projects illustrate that restoration is most effective when inclusive of and responsive to local communities. People are seen as part of forest ecosystems. This means that participatory governance, diversified livelihoods and social justice are all priorities, as well as ecological biodiversity. Enhancing community rights goes some way to protecting forests and land from appropriation and privatisation. Many organisations leading this work are in the Ghanaian forest NGO network (FWG), which contributes to collective strength, accountability, advocacy and effective systems for community monitoring of unsustainable or illegal practices in forest areas. The projects are usually small scale; however, the report found two models which could be scaled up or replicated.

4. PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS (PPP)

These are agreements between the government of Ghana and (usually) foreign private companies based around market-oriented land uses. Typically, PPPs give timber concessions to companies in accordance with the Ghana Forest Plantation Strategy. These are predominantly monocrop plantation projects in commodity landscapes – i.e. cocoa, timber, palm, and rubber. They prioritise the ongoing profitability of economic forests.

Analysis: The PPP project examples highlighted in the full report have all secured multi-million dollar climate finance investments. Most trees are exotic species in monoculture plantations
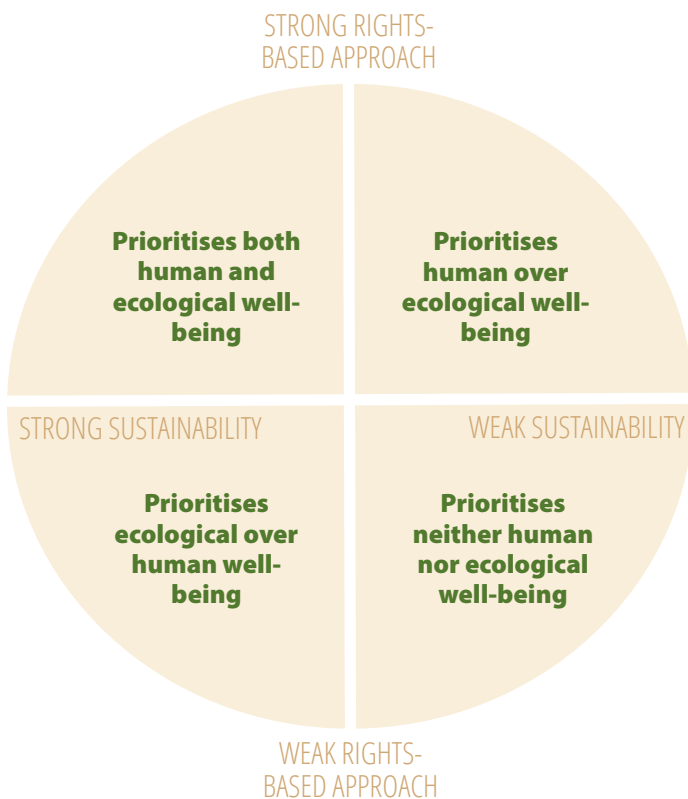
STRONG RIGHTS-
BASED APPROACH

Prioritises both
human and
ecological well-
being

Prioritises
human over
ecological well-
being

STRONG SUSTAINABILITY

WEAK SUSTAINABILITY

Prioritises
ecological over
human well-
being

Prioritises
neither human
nor ecological
well-being

WEAK RIGHTS-
BASED APPROACH

DIAGRAM 1

demonstrates how landscape project priorities can be understood based on their approach to rights and sustainability.

and there are few community benefits in comparison to the company profits. There are reports of local people being dispossessed of their land, conflicts between company staff and local farmers, low wages and job contracts being ended prematurely without full pay. The involvement of the state means that projects are subject to political dynamics. Ghanaian NGOs believe that whilst plantations have their uses in easing pressure on natural forests, PPPs should not be classified as restoration.

5 • PRIVATE-LED INITIATIVES

These are mostly private plantation projects, usually run by foreign companies, as 'sustainable' forestry or agriculture. These market-oriented monoculture projects are typically in off-reserve areas.

Analysis: These corporate private-led initiatives offer few benefits to local communities, focusing instead on economic returns to the company. They increase tree cover and economic productivity of land, but do not restore ecosystem resilience or human wellbeing. Land appropriation and displacement is a common theme with empty promises of jobs or income for local people. NGOs agree these projects shouldn't be called restoration.

6 • SMALL ENTERPRISE-LED INITIATIVES

Led by small to medium sized Ghanaian businesses including sawmills, sometimes working in collaboration with local NGOs, these projects restore forests to ensure sustainable economic forestry and/or forest-based business. They vary in style, focusing predominantly on planting indigenous species and integrating exotic species for economic purposes. They support both local livelihoods and ecological function through small-scale for-profit models.

Analysis: These initiatives provide good examples of how to enable local people to reap benefits from planting trees on their farms. Their strength lies in building cooperation, community ownership and increasing accessibility for smallholders. Success depends on securing tree rights for farmers. Cooperatively-owned production equipment for timber value-addition increases the revenue for farmers and tree owners. Enterprise-led initiatives sometimes provide incentives or advance payments for farmers nurturing trees; these programmes should be expanded so that more people can take part in.

INSPIRING EXAMPLES

A Rocha Ghana is working with twenty-six communities around Lake Bosomtwe near Kumasi to restore the forest and lake ecosystem. The project is designed with local people using the CREMA model of governance. Trees are planted that contribute to community livelihoods and well-being, including coconut, mango, timber trees and those which hold important medicinal qualities.

Coconut trees are grown to restore the soil previously damaged by crop farming and the use of chemicals.

Community members working with ARDO to nurture trees. (© ARDO)

ARDO (Accelerated Rural Development Organisation) is working with communities in the Volta region to restore forests by identifying and protecting sacred groves. This project maps the area with local people, provides training in diversified livelihoods, creates fire breaks around restored forest, and enables the sharing of traditional knowledge. The sacred groves are looked after by participatory multi-stakeholder governance groups.

Both of these models could be replicated and scaled up in other parts of Ghana.

STRONG RIGHTS

Rights-based forest restoration

A Rocha

ARDO   NDG

CREMA

Regreening Ghana

Greenglobe Ghana

Portal Forest Estates   Modified Taungya System

DOLTA   REDD+   Tree Aid

Afforestation Volunteers   FIP DGM   One Tree Planted

STRONG SUSTAINABILITY   WEAK SUSTAINABILITY

Enrichment Planting   Youth in Plantation

SADA

Miro Forestry   Sustainable commodities

Form Ghana   Plantations Socfinaf Ghana

Vision 2050   APSD
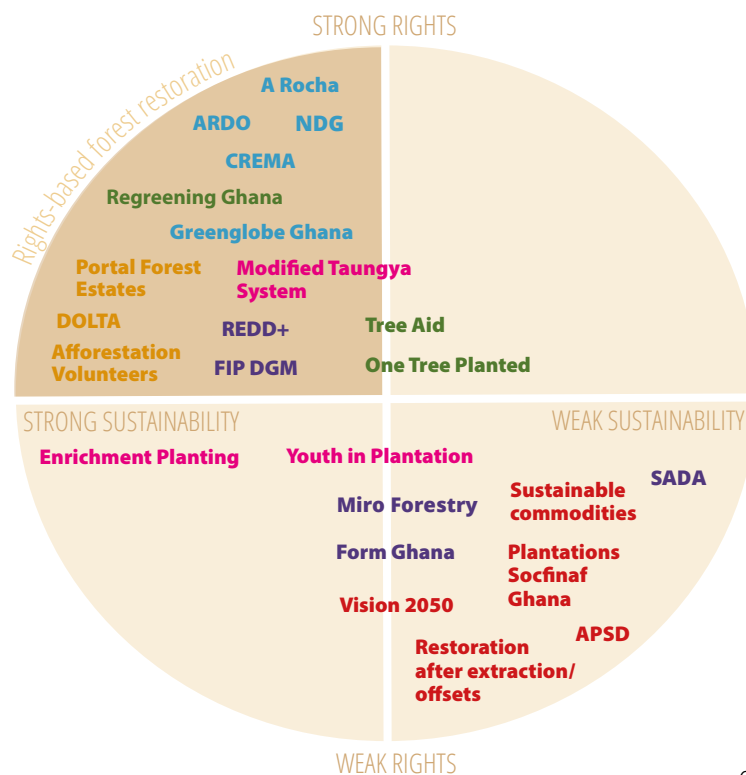
Restoration after extraction/ offsets

WEAK RIGHTS

DIAGRAM 2

shows the projects reviewed in the full report plotted on these two axes. Rights-based restoration initiatives fall within the top left quadrant as they prioritise both human and ecological well-being.

COLOUR KEY

Public-led
International Initiatives
CSO/NGO-led
Public-Private Partnerships
Private-led
Small enterprises

Defining Restoration

A major critique of restoration is the lack of consensus in definition, the separation of people from ecology, and the absence of rights-based approaches within existing guidelines. Most recently, the UN state in their Decade of Ecological Restoration strategy that "realising the human rights of all people, including for example the local communities and indigenous peoples living in many of the ecosystems requiring conservation and restoration, will be central to all activities of the UN Decade".[13]

To move beyond rhetoric, it's vital institutions define and follow guidelines for genuinely restorative activities that improve outcomes for humans and ecosystems. Therefore, this report offers a definition for rights-based restoration that centres people, and provides five rights-based principles for putting this into practice:

> Rights-based Forest Restoration is designed, governed and implemented with the communities who best understand the local reality. Recognising that ecological and social well-being are connected, it increases forest biodiversity and secures local community rights. Restored forests should be more resilient to climate change and increase carbon absorption.

The definition is extrapolated from the principles for rights-based restoration agreed by the CLARA coalition,[14] which view people and their livelihoods as part of forest ecosystems. To ensure projects take an ecologically appropriate approach, this definition and the following rights-based principles should be used together with SER International Principles and Standards for the practice of Ecological Restoration.

"Restoration is not plantation. We want to bring back the forest. Not for timber, but to restore the indigenous ecosystem that used to exist."

FORESTRY EXPERT IN INTERVIEW, AUGUST 2019

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[13] Page 1, paragraph 2 in the UN Decade of Ecological Restoration strategy document.

[14] CLARA (Climate Land Ambition and Rights Alliance) is a coalition of member organizations who are leaders in the climate justice movement, forest protection and land rights protection movements.

Five Principles for Practice

The are many frameworks and principles for restoration, however, most fall short of protecting or enhancing human rights because restoration is undefined and influenced by economic forces. Drawing on patterns emerging from the Ghanaian case studies, this report recommends the following five rights-based principles. The full report provides greater detail for each and a list of resources that can be used by practitioners to implement them.

1. GENDER EQUITY

Deforestation, privatisation of forests and uneven development have disproportionate impacts on women's livelihoods in rural areas. Women are often the direct stewards of forests and primary collectors of non-timber forest products (NTFP), yet are far less likely to have recognised land rights.[15] When women are not included in planning and delivery of restoration projects, the positive outcomes are skewed against them.[16] This report recommends that rights-based restoration takes a gender-responsive approach from conception to evaluation.[17] This approach is endorsed by the GEF,[18] one of the core funders of CSO-led rights-based restoration projects.

2. SECURE LAND AND TREE RIGHTS

Restoration projects that enhance local rights have the best outcomes for local people, as they form the basis from which equitable benefits and participation in planning and governance take root. Numerous studies confirm that securing local people's land and tree tenure rights is fundamental to the long-term success of restoration, community forestry and community-based natural resource management.[19] Similarly, farmers in forested landscapes are more likely to nurture naturally occurring trees and plant new ones if they have secure tenure.[20]

3. PURSUE SOCIAL JUSTICE THROUGH PARTICIPATORY GOVERNANCE AND PLANNING

This report echoes previous findings that good forest governance is key for protecting and restoring forests.[21] Projects which ensure representative, deliberative and inclusive governance structures enable the best outcomes for people and forests. Rights-based restoration should be community-led to ensure social and ecological relevance, with participation at every stage. Multi-stakeholder platforms should be created or strengthened as places that enable information and resource sharing, as well as openness to scrutiny, accountability and

15 https://www.thegef.org/news/multi-stakeholder-dialogue-gender-and-environment-held-advance-55th-gef-council-meeting

16 https://www.iucn.org/news/forests/201803/gender-specialist%E2%80%99s-view-responsive-forest-landscape-restoration

17 See CIFOR's publication Gender Matters in Forest Landscape Restoration: A framework for design and evaluation and IUCN's publication Gender-Responsive Restoration Guidelines

18 https://www.thegef.org/news/new-policy-gender-equality-gef

19 Olden and Wainwright 2019, Pearce 2016

20 Danquah, 2015; Oduro et al., 2018

21 Fern's Return of the Trees report gives many examples of this from around the world

deliberative decision-making. Participatory structures must take account of social power dynamics – for example, by being aware of those who are marginalised from decision-making spaces and ensuring their equal inclusion. This type of governance may take more time, but CSOs and community groups have repeatedly shown that it pays off.[22]

4. ENSURE EQUITABLE BENEFITS AND EFFECTIVE SAFEGUARDS

Formalised structures for equitable benefits and safeguards were another strong feature of rights-based restoration initiatives studied in this report. These rely on participatory governance structures (see 3.) that ensure processes for collective revenue management, Free Prior Informed Consent (FPIC), grievances, and accountability. Revenue & safeguard mechanisms need to consider how to be gender responsive, rights-affirming and power conscious in their design. This should ensure they are not purely economic, but sensitive to cultural, social and ecological dynamics.

5. DEVELOP A LONG-TERM SOCIO-ECOLOGICAL APPROACH

Finally, rights-based restoration initiatives all take a long-term, socio-ecological approach. They view people as a part of forest ecosystems and look for ways to integrate ecological principles within sustainable livelihoods. They do this by enhancing land rights and governance structures – enabling communities to manage their own forests – which, when constituted, also helps protect the forests and communities from short-term profit-driven companies.

Taking an ecological approach means restoring ecosystem integrity and the health of biodiverse landscapes, rather than monoculture plantations. It protects and enriches what is left, both on and off reserve, to enable the regrowth of natural forest (or the most restorative option)[23] and the forest-based livelihoods of communities. The SER provides eight guiding principles for delivering 'ecological restoration' that protects biodiversity, improves human health and wellbeing, increases food and water security, and supports climate change resilience. Similarly, the six principles of forest landscape restoration strengthen resilience across landscapes over time to enable ecological functionality and human wellbeing.

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[22] Ibid.

[23] In areas where ecosystems have been degraded so far and/or where climate change has altered the feasibility of restoring the original ecosystem, the SER recommends selecting an alternative ecosystem that is "the most restorative option" informed by different types of knowledge (traditional, local and scientific)

A farmer looks out from his pineapple farm across a ravine to a forest reserve.

Conclusion

This report illustrates what community-led, rights-based restoration looks like compared to projects which use the term restoration to justify monoculture plantations, land appropriation and extraction. It recommends that policy and climate finance support rights-based approaches by scaling up models oriented around community management of forests and participatory forest governance. It argues that monoculture plantations and conservation projects that violate community rights or displace livelihoods should not be supported with restoration funding.

Restoration must always be context-specific and take account of different forest ecologies, the local and national socio-economic situation, agricultural and livelihood systems, and human rights. Shifting the global policy narrative towards rights-based restoration will ensure restoration is genuinely good for forests, the climate and people.

"I see restoration as being about more than trees. It is about wildlife and livelihoods. If my forefathers could go into the forest and pick snails and mushrooms, I should be able to do that too. This is why we nurture the native forest. This is restoration."

A ROCHA PRACTITIONER IN INTERVIEW, JULY 2019

Policy Recommendations

1.

Policies and funding bodies should prioritise rights-based approaches to restoration by distinguishing between different types of forest landscape projects and redirecting support to rights-based restoration models

This report finds that rights-based forest restoration has the best outcomes for people, forests and climate. Therefore, policy and funding bodies should prioritise restoration initiatives that operate according to these principles. Given that many policies and funders do not yet define what they mean by restoration, we propose they adopt the following definition to enable increased support to rights-based approaches:

> **– Rights-based Forest Restoration** is designed, governed and implemented with the communities who best understand the local reality. Recognising that ecological and social well-being are connected, it increases forest biodiversity and secures local community rights. Restored forests should be more resilient to climate change and increase carbon absorption.

Initiatives that are led by for-profit companies benefiting from the economic output of land (i.e. plantations of exotic species) should not be eligible for restoration funding, or funding for climate change mitigation, biodiversity or sustainable development. Finance should instead be redirected to support the scaling up of initiatives that align with the rights-based forest restoration definition and principles, that are good for forests, climate and people.

2.

Restoration projects initiatives should be led by national experts in community forestry and forest governance, in partnership with local civil society and communities

Restoration initiatives should be led by national community forestry experts and multi-stakeholder groups working together through deliberative forest governance platforms. Since restoration is location and ecosystem specific, NGO platforms (local, regional and national) should be strengthened and trusted to lead on rights-based restoration strategies. Communities should be represented at every level of decision

making and local governments should be brought on board as part of the multi-stakeholder approach.

3. • **Restoration funds should be established within countries from national commodity taxes and distributed to rights-based restoration initiatives through local authorities and CSO platforms**

To finance Recommendation Two, ring-fenced restoration funds should be created using levies on commodities driving deforestation. These could include timber, agricultural and mining levies. This fund should be collected and managed by a third party NGO or other impartial organisation, and governed by a board of representatives from across stakeholder groups. Fund management should be transparent and accountable to minimise the risk of vested interests. It could be distributed by the CSO platforms and local governments to rights-based restoration initiatives, enabling them to appropriately scale up their operations.

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