



Tropentag, September 10-12, 2025, hybrid conference

“Reconcile land system changes
with planetary health”

Purpose-driven partnerships for ecosystem rehabilitation in fragile environments: insights from expert interviews across the greater horn of Africa

MICHAEL HAUSER¹, KAI MAUSCH², STEPHEN MWANGI MUREITHI³, MIEKE BOURNE⁴

¹*BOKU University, Dept. of Sustainable Agricultural Systems, Inst. of Development Research, Austria*

²*The Center for International Forestry Res. and World Agroforestry (CIFOR-ICRAF), Nairobi, Kenya and Bonn, Germany*

³*University of Nairobi, Kenya*

⁴*The Center for International Forestry Res. and World Agroforestry (CIFOR-ICRAF), Office of the Director General, Kenya*

Abstract

Ecosystem degradation across the Greater Horn of Africa poses escalating threats to economic stability, livelihoods, and ecological resilience, affecting hundreds of millions of people. Regional initiatives such as by the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) in the Horn of Africa, the Great Green Wall and national projects highlight the need for large-scale ecosystem restoration. Limitations of purely technical approaches and even community integrated approaches especially in areas prone to conflict and contested land use have been reported, however.

Partnership challenges and conflicting perspectives on implementation often appear as imitations. Interestingly, recent bibliometric trends indicate a fivefold increase in scholarly publications referring to “purpose-driven companies” since 2015, reflecting a growing recognition of purpose as a central driver of collaboration. Yet, purpose has rarely been conceptualised in ecosystem restoration efforts and the institutions involved.

Thus, our research investigates how purpose-driven partnerships – which we define as alliances of multiple actors across scales guided by a shared mission - fosters effective, inclusive, and adaptive ecosystem rehabilitation across Kenya, Somalia, Uganda, and Tanzania.

Using qualitative comparative analysis and grounded theory approaches, we assess how alignment between individual values and collective mission contributes to resilient, inclusive restoration strategies and sustainable impacts. We explore how purpose clarity influences task prioritisation, how it reconciles conflicting interests, and how it contributes to long-term ecological and social outcomes. We give particular attention to the role of actors such as communities and their restoration partners, and alignment between their personal and a collectively defined purpose in relation to restoration. We identify knowledge gaps around how partnerships navigate conflicting interests, balance short- and long-term goals and remain adaptive amid political and environmental uncertainty.

Findings contribute to conceptual understanding and practical guidance for designing purpose informed ecosystem restoration initiatives in fragile contexts. Eventually, we also

work towards a framework to operationalize purpose as a strategic asset in ecosystem rehabilitation.

Keywords: Ecosystem restoration, fragile environments, shared purpose