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with planetary health”

Social cohesion in rwanda: the meaning and indicators of measurement in restoration landscapes

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Abstract

Social cohesion is a vital element for achieving sustainable land use. Optimising land management and farming systems necessitates collaborative efforts among community members, stakeholders, and government institutions. In this context, a clear understanding of the concept of social cohesion, along with measurable indicators, is essential for practitioners, policymakers, and academics seeking to promote effective and equitable land use strategies. However, in Rwanda—a country with a history marked by civil conflict and genocide, exacerbated by competition over natural resources—the concept of social cohesion remains loosely understood and lacks standardised indicators. This ambiguity hinders its practical application in the design and implementation of land use and farming systems development programs.

This study conceptualised social cohesion and established measurable indicators within restoration landscapes in Western Rwanda. Using a mixed method, World Café workshops were held in six villages across two districts, bringing together farmers engaged in agroforestry, watershed protection, woodlot establishment, and homegarden alongside stakeholders involved in restoration landscapes and government officials. Additionally, semi-structured and structured interviews were conducted with farmers in the same villages.

The results reveal that social cohesion is understood as social integration and harmonious living among community members, underpinned by connectedness, shared values, and solidarity. It is characterised by cooperation, mutual support, peaceful coexistence, trust, and socioeconomic inclusion. Key drivers of social cohesion identified include food security, human capital development—represented by skilled and capacitated community members; and healthy environmental conditions that sustain biodiversity and ecosystem services. Moreover, opportunities such as restoration projects contribute to fostering social cohesion by providing a platform for building strong bonds between the community members as they engage in collective action over time.

These findings underscore the significance of operationalizing social cohesion as a foundation for successful landscape restoration. The study contributes to the academic discourse by offering a new concept of social cohesion and proposing context-specific indicators. It

also offers practical insights for policymakers seeking to implement sustainable land use initiatives that are grounded in community collaboration, trust, inclusion, and effective communication.

Keywords: Farming systems, land use, landscape restoration, social cohesion, social integration