



Tropentag, September 16-18, 2026, hybrid conference

“Towards multi-functional agro-ecosystems
promoting climate resilient futures”

Aligning restoration with social systems: How household preferences shape social cohesion in landscape restoration in western Rwanda

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Abstract

Landscape restoration is widely recognised as a key strategy for addressing land degradation, enhancing climate resilience, and improving rural livelihoods across the Global South. In Rwanda, restoration approaches such as agroforestry, woodlot establishment, watershed protection, and home gardening have been actively promoted to restore degraded landscapes and support smallholder production systems. While considerable attention has been given to the ecological and economic benefits of these interventions, their social dimensions – particularly how they influence relationships within households and communities – remain insufficiently explored.

This study investigates how household-level preferences for different restoration practices, and the degree of alignment of these preferences among household members, shape social cohesion in rural western Rwanda. Drawing on primary survey data from 300 households across eleven villages in two districts, the analysis combines descriptive statistics, composite index construction, and regression-based methods to assess impacts on both horizontal (community-level) and vertical (institutional) dimension of social cohesion.

Preliminary findings suggest that agroforestry and watershed protection are the most preferred restoration options, reflecting their perceived livelihood and environmental benefits. Crucially, households exhibiting aligned preferences among members report significantly higher levels of trust, cooperation, and effective conflict resolution. In contrast, intra-household preference divergence is associated with weaker horizontal cohesion and a greater reliance on local leadership and institutional mechanisms to mediate disagreements. Moreover, participation in restoration activities is positively associated with improved perceptions of institutional support and engagement.

These results underscore the importance of recognising households as sites of negotiation rather than unitary decision-making entities. They suggest that restoration initiatives that actively incorporate local preferences and intra-household dynamics are more likely to foster social cohesion and sustain collective action. Integrating these social considerations into restoration planning can enhance both ecological effectiveness and the inclusiveness of landscape transformation efforts.

Keywords: Community-level cooperation, household-level preferences, intra-household, landscape restoration, social cohesion