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Ecosystem restoration and social cohesion interlinkages: The case study of western Rwanda

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Abstract

Ecosystem restoration (ER), often referred to as restoration, is recognised as a response to global land degradation. Common approaches to ER include agroforestry, watershed protection, woodlots and homegarden. However, ER is complex, and each approach can sometimes produce unpredictable outcomes. While increasing attention is being given to social dimensions in ER design, the dynamics between ER and social cohesion (SC) can differ from context to context, and this remains insufficiently explored, particularly in post-conflicts countries. This study investigates the interrelations between ER and SC for the case of Western Rwanda. We apply the methodology based on systems thinking to explore how each ER approach: agroforestry, watershed protection, woodlot and homegarden interrelates with SC dimensions. The results depicted through causal loop diagrams revealed that ER, depending on different drivers, can produce both negative and positive feedbacks. ER enhances different dimensions of SC, such as social relations such as social interactions, cooperation and trust, social integration, shared norms and values, and collective wellbeing, as well as a sense of belonging for the financially marginalised community members. SC dimensions also support the effectiveness and enhance ER community ownership. Differently, ER also reinforces resource competition, spatial marginalisation and conflicts among the community members. Based on these findings, policymakers and practionners should move beyond a tokenistic community participation to co-designing ER with the community beyond, empower traditional institutions to resolve conflicts, aligning ER design with local livelihood needs and promoting local resource sharing such local knowledge and skills sharing, tools and materials, through ER policies and implementation strategies to enhance restoration resilience.

Keywords: Agroforestry, causal loop diagram, homegarden, social cohesion, watershed protection, woodlot.

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