

## Igniting a spark for landscape restoration

A growing demand for land, water and other natural resources in combination with human-induced climate change has put increasing pressure on nature while rapidly eroding the basis for people's livelihoods. In order to counter this, development practitioners are increasingly setting their sights on a landscape approach. Experiences gathered by Helvetas.

By Jens Soth and Annet Witteveen

Restoring landscapes has become crucial for sustainable development, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. Here, the landscape approach has become a relevant idea among the development sector, climate change experts and environmentalists alike. It integrates the objectives of all stakeholders at landscape level to establish long-term integrated sustainable development. The vision is to transform degraded landscapes from poverty-stricken areas with shrinking soil fertility and biodiversity into ecologically diverse, but at the same time productive regions with high climate resilience. For the rural population, such landscapes would entail a multitude of economically interesting income opportunities so that the impulses to emigrate would vanish.

### Four cornerstones for successful transformation

Based on experience of their multi-stakeholder projects in Latin America, Asia and Africa, Helvetas has pinpointed four elements as relevant to successful landscape restoration processes. These cornerstones should be seen as pragmatic suggestions that have the potential to make the intended transformation a self-dynamic process with high ownership of the locally involved people and entities:

**Combine action on communal land as well as on farmland.** Traditionally, a lot of projects carrying the label “landscape approach” have been implemented with a strong focus on communal land. And indeed the communal land is where local actors can unfold their potential of collective action. But in light of the upcoming challenges and in view of objectives like biodiversity increase or landscape resilience, the farmland has to be a part of the overall landscape restoration planning, too. While this sounds like increasing the complexity, in practice, there are very good synergies. An active group of farmers with awareness about the interconnectedness of landscape elements and actions can be a strong driving force in the creation of the action plan for the restoration of the municipality landscape or as delegates at higher levels of the ad-



Members of a Village Saving and Loan Association in Tanzania's Singida Region working in their joint nursery, where tree seedlings for landscape restoration purposes are produced.

Photo: Franz Thiel/ Helvetas Tanzania

ministrative spatial planning processes (e.g. the district level).

Whatever particularly smallholders might do on their plots – from regenerative measures to increase soil fertility to erosion control or agroforestry –, as a standalone activity on a small farm, the critical mass of impact cannot be reached to master the upcoming challenges. Only in concert with the restoration measures on communal land will the efforts on farmland turn into a synergistic enforcement of landscape resilience.

**Integrate private sector actors and high agroecological ambition.** A holistic approach to the landscape will not unfold any leverage if the private sector involved in the landscape as a buying or processing entity does not participate. Furthermore, the outlook on the economic resilience of the landscape will not be complete if the opportunity for business and job creation is not utilised and shaped. Ideally, partners for domestic value chains as well as partners for export-orient-

ed value chains are integrated. The presence of export-oriented value chains serves a dual purpose. Firstly, these value chains provide an opportunity to involve a substantial number of small farmers, subsequently facilitating the integration of international sustainability standards into local practices. The engagement of small farmers in export-oriented activities not only enhances their income potential but also aligns with global sustainability benchmarks. In turn, domestic market value chains play a vital role in ensuring local food security and promoting the involvement of local stakeholders. Crops intended for domestic consumption are highly relevant in enhancing the livelihoods of local communities. Additionally, they provide an entry point for local processing, which, while maintaining lower quality requirements compared to export crops, contributes to increased empowerment of local actors. The strategic convergence of both export and domestic market value chains promotes resilience by diversifying income sources, reducing dependency on a single crop, and safeguarding against external market fluctuations.

With a broad spectrum of actors engaged in various stages of production and distribution, the potential for cross-learning and knowledge exchange expands exponentially, presenting a unique opportunity to implement high agro-ecological ambitions. Insights into sustainable agricultural practices, resource management and ecological preservation can be shared and applied. Moreover, the diversity of value chain actors allows for experimentation and innovation. Local knowledge, combined with private sector expertise, can result in the adoption of cutting-edge agroecological practices that align with the landscape's unique characteristics. This dynamic interplay fosters a virtuous cycle of continuous improvement, as each actor's dedication to sustainability inspires others to elevate their ecological commitments.

### Local spatial planning from the bottom.

In order to be able to develop long-term impacts at landscape level, formal and administrative approval of the efforts and actions planned is needed. Many landscape projects witness that despite good resources and well-intentioned measures the acceptance by local spatial planning authorities is either lacking or painfully slow. This can be avoided by a thoughtful and respectful participation of the administrative levels from early on, thereby avoiding that the local authorities see their territory as a “pawn in the game” of external forces. In our landscape projects, a lot of emphasis is put on the integration of the most basic administrative levels (e.g. village planning committees) up to mid-level stages (e.g. district level or region/province level).

In many cases the foundation of a resilient landscape is actually well embedded into the objectives of local spatial planning documents or concepts, but hardly has the chance to materialise (e.g. grazing and livestock management plans, water management plans, infrastructure plans). This is an opportunity to utilise “external impulses” to be seen as a “tailwind for transformation” rather than an overpowering force.

**Inclusion of women and youth.** Appearing to be a well-known principle for the development sector, the question arises again and again how it can be implemented pragmatically. One of the approaches, as implemented by Helvetas Tanzania, is the creation of Village Saving and Loan Associations (VSLAs), thereby allowing women's groups reasonable access to resources and opportunities to create assets and profits. As side effects, such associations give women the skills to engage in decision-making processes. With some supportive capacity

building, these skills can then be transferred to village- or even district-level spatial planning processes, thereby offering women and women's groups the opportunity not only to voice their challenges and needs, but also to reflect their priorities within the decision-making for the local planning and action plans.

Youth engagement can practically be realised on two levels: Locally appointed “youth ambassadors for environment” participate in the environmental planning and action committees. They ensure that the environmental challenges of the municipality and its landscape are well understood by the local youth, but also that the voice of the youth with their scope and wish of long-term stability is well embedded in the local decision-making of the spatial planning. Another level aims at the successive education and development of youth leadership for environmental and sustainability aspects. This adheres to the need to give young people who have the potential for leadership a chance to learn, but also to communicate about sustainability priorities of their region, engage in spatial planning decision-making at higher administrative (e.g. district) levels and network with peers, thereby being enabled to unfold a higher leverage. Both levels need an adequate capacity building and time for the young people to engage and unfold their skills.

### An example from Tanzania

The “Kijani Hai” landscape project (Swahili for “living green”) in Africa's Central Corridor is a good example of how the cornerstones mentioned are capable of kick-starting the transformation from a landscape threatened by soil erosion, deforestation, drought and diminishing quality of livelihoods to a regenerative, diverse and climate-resilient landscape with manifold income opportunities. Here, a consortium led by GIZ International Services and Helvetas is collaborating with the cotton-ginning companies Biosustain and Alliance Ginneries and around 45,000 farming families in the Singida and Simiyu region of Tanzania to combine regenerative organic farming with effective landscape restoration in more than 200 villages. The project belongs to the Regenerative Production Landscape Collaborative, a family of landscape projects supported and guided by the Laudes Foundation, which are, beyond Tanzania, implemented in India, Pakistan and Brazil.

The combination of farmland and communal land is achieved by applying organic and regenerative farming measures on the farmland

and reforestation and restoration of overgrazed areas on the communal land. Only with this combination is it possible to yield results in the complex aspects of biodiversity increase or climate resilience. With the collaborating ginning companies contracting the farmers, there is an obligation for high agroecological ambitions via the applied organic standards (EU organic, NOP of the USA). As it is mandatory for these standards to operate locally adapted crop rotations the legumes produced (groundnuts, green grams, chick peas) serve the local markets and thus food security purposes, whereas the export element – the organic cotton – contributes substantially to the farmers' income. By integrating local authorities and entities the kick-started landscape transformation is becoming a regular element of the local governance and the corresponding spatial planning processes. The intended landscape restoration measures are firm and accepted elements of the formal action plans submitted and agreed upon by village committees' district spatial planning authorities. With the communication of these achievements at regional level, the restoration processes are taken up by other districts. Discussion at national level ensures that these measures and achievements are recognised also on higher government levels. More than 200 women groups (VSLAs) have been established, which give over 5,000 farming families additional income opportunities in sectors like bee-keeping, small livestock raising or vegetable production and processing.

### Scope for adaptation

While the above-mentioned cornerstones form a strong foundation for landscape restoration, it is important to note that other landscape practitioners and implementation entities may add additional elements to enhance the approach. For instance, some may place particular emphasis on soil health as a fifth cornerstone, recognising its critical role in overall landscape resilience. Others might advocate for the inclusion of dedicated water management strategies to address the growing challenges of water scarcity. The strength of the landscape approach lies in its adaptability and responsiveness to specific regional and local contexts.

---

**Jens Soth** is Senior Advisor, commodity projects with HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation in Zurich, Switzerland.

**Annet Witteveen** is Country Director Tanzania for HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation based in Dodoma, Tanzania.

Contact: jens.soth@helvetas.org