

FORESTS NEWS

Let learning lead the way to strategic forest and landscape restoration

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Combining the myriad theories and strategies on forest and landscape restoration into a successful recipe for implementation requires not only recognizing their changeability, but also ensuring they are accessible to policymakers and communities through strong foundational training, according to a leading international forestry expert.

Because forest ecosystems store vast amounts of carbon, restoration is considered a vital nature-based solution for keeping global warming in check, conserving biodiversity, and providing essential services such as hydrological regulation and pollination.

Manuel Guariguata, a principal scientist at the Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR), is working on recommendations upon which strategies can be devised for effective forest and landscape restoration policies and practices.

“From both an operational and a capacity development standpoint, implementing forest and landscape restoration is not short of challenges,” he said. “We need to constructively bring together teams with the necessary disciplinary backgrounds, including forestry, ecology, economics, as well as social and political science. We also need to understand that forest and landscape restoration is both a dynamic and uncertain process.”

Definitions of “success” are bound to shift as stakeholder views of what constitutes desirable outcomes evolve, as governments and their policy contexts change, and as mismatches between donor cycles and longer-term forest and landscape goals prevail, he added.

Re-establishing ecological health to degraded areas to derive environmental, health and socio-economic benefits is not a new concept, but in recent years it has been gathering steam as the climate crisis deepens. Under the Bonn Challenge agreement forged in 2014 at U.N. climate talks as

part of the New York Declaration on Forests, countries have committed to restore 150 million hectares by 2020 and 350 million hectares by 2030.

Amid the impetus driven by the impending launch of the U.N. Decade on Ecosystem Restoration 2021-2030, which supports these restoration aims, scientists are more closely scrutinizing how best they might be achieved rapidly and efficiently.

Achieving forest and landscape restoration is a complex venture in part because its realization means engaging a broad range of social and institutional frameworks, including a range of governments and jurisdictions.

At the same time, policies must criss-cross land tenure and access rights, multiple decision maker and stakeholder interests; social- and gender-inclusive implementation and monitoring plans; financial, human and biological resources; and technical and technological knowhow, including traditional and cultural practices and related knowledge.

“To expand human capacities in response to the global restoration agenda, one-way forward is to enhance the availability of ‘continuing education’ on a global scale, including degree-credit courses, non-degree career training and personal enrichment courses,” Guariguata said.

A recent survey of more than 400 restoration professionals throughout Latin America and the Caribbean reveals that the most important constraint hindering capacity development is the limited availability of both curricular and extra-curricular programs, particularly short intensive courses focused on socioeconomic and management dimensions, he said.

However, a structured and strategic approach to introducing curriculums is required. Otherwise, the risk is that an abundance of random single-discipline, one-time-only courses, offered solely at times when funding is available will do little to contribute to a transformation in forest landscape restoration efforts.

Guariguata promotes the idea of courses designed to enlighten students on the interplay between restorative interventions at the plot scale with the broader socio-ecological dynamics of human-dominated landscapes.

Courses should also develop socioeconomic drivers of habitat conservation, transformation and restoration success while incorporating collaborative planning, implementation and monitoring to encourage social learning and foster adaptive management, he said.

“Enhancing multidisciplinary professional capacity is essential for effective implementation and outcome evaluation of integrative landscape management approaches, including forest landscape restoration,” Guariguata added. “Although many planning tools exist, practical approaches to putting forest landscape restoration in place are notably lacking.”

While regional, national and international level capacity development programs already exist throughout the tropics, Guariguata urges inter-institutional coordination to find synergies and establish a minimum level of thematic coherence to continuing education programs.

“At a minimum, ‘connectors’ within teams need essential professional attributes such as expertise in negotiation skills, trade-off analysis, communication and multi-scalar thinking – that is, the skillset of people trained in managing complex socioecological systems,” he said.

Another critical component is the need to design universal effective and functional monitoring tools. Currently, indicators for measuring global progress mostly focus on compliance, such as forest and tree cover gain as opposed to relying on performance-based indicators, Guariguata added.

While it may seem ambitious, a modular program to guide users through progressive learning stages – from fundamental concepts to specialized issues – in a forest and landscape restoration context, taking into account which competencies are to be gained in addition to mere knowledge acquisition is warranted, he said.

He proposes using the six core principles upon which the concept of forest and landscape restoration is built as the building blocks for a coherent worldwide capacity development program to prepare implementers to step up to the global restoration challenge.

They include a focus on landscapes, engaging stakeholders and supporting participatory governance, restoring multiple functions for multiple benefits, maintaining and enhancing natural ecosystems, tailoring to a local context and managing adaptively.

“The recent Guidelines for Forest Landscape Restoration in the Tropics (ITTO 2020) are crafted along these principles and include a set of guiding elements and proposed actions,” Guariguata said. “This was an important step forward for upscaling the guidelines, but there is room to finesse them and to tease out more of the community-based perspective. We can achieve this through consultation with different stakeholders from diverse interest groups across different socio-ecological contexts who have first-hand experience working with them in their day-to-day activities.”

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