The Governance of Tree Planting and Forest Restoration:
whose decisions, what norms, and what outcomes?

Project Info Brief 1

September 2025

Issues at stake and project overview

⬇ Global forest restoration and tree planting targets...

Since 2011, with the launch of the Bonn Challenge on Forest Landscape Restoration, engaging governments to commit vast areas for forest restoration, the world has seen a boom in tree planting initiatives. Companies and governments have set massive targets, for example, multinational enterprises under the World Economic Forum (WEF) are aiming to grow, restore and conserve 1 trillion trees around the world; the European Union under its Biodiversity Strategy aims to plant at least 3 billion trees by 2030; Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) aim to restore 30% of degraded ecosystems by 2030, and several countries and companies have set many more ambitious objectives.

⬇ The problem...

Yet there is a problem. Frequently, targets are set and decisions taken to plant trees and forests far from the land where they are to be planted. This may be in the capital city, without engaging local communities, or yet more distant, in UN offices or in the headquarters of large organisations based in Europe or North America with funding from other foreign entities. Actors leading restoration may not have the legitimacy to engage in the long term transformation implied by restoration. Non-forest biomes, such as grasslands, may be targeted for tree-planting. Tree planting campaigns may rely on just a few species, including exotics. Policies and processes supporting these decisions may be opaque and driven or skewed by the interest of a handful of powerful actors.

©Alexander Belokurov

⬇ The rationale...

The reason this happens is that trees are fundamentally seen as good, and planting them can only be praised, enhancing one's image or reputation... And indeed, trees and forests play a role in climate change mitigation and adaptation by absorbing carbon and limiting temperatures, they regulate water cycles and harbour important biodiversity of both intrinsic and utilitarian values. Companies like to be seen planting trees. Governments see tree planting targets as a visible demonstration of their apparent commitments to environmental conventions. But trees are also economically valuable for their timber and their carbon or biodiversity monetised through new markets.

The result?

To date, progress against the various targets can best be described as slow. There are many complex reasons for this. One of which is failure to address key governance issues.

Without local ownership, local knowledge, local choices, local decisions and local empowerment, the choice of trees, the choice of sites, the choice of methods, the choice of actors, may all be inadequate. Without some degree of tenure security, supportive policies, participatory decision-making mechanisms, the likelihood of long-term success remains remote.

Restoration guidelines and practice continue to emphasise ecological and biophysical dimensions over human and political ones. To contribute to addressing these challenges, the University of Lausanne (UNIL) is carrying out a 4-year project on governance of forest restoration

The project

The project 'The governance of tree planting and forest restoration: whose decisions, what norms, and what outcomes?' is led by the University of Lausanne with funding from 2023 to 2027 from the Velux Stiftung. Questions we explore under this project include: Who decides what to restore, where and under what conditions? What tools and institutions exist to take, apply and review these decisions? In larger scales – beyond single land-owners or single communities, who defines the perimeter of the landscape? Who is in and who is out? How do landscape stakeholders relate to each other? What (dis)incentives are in place?

The project combines local research in Madagascar with a global assessment and international inter-disciplinary reflections on the challenges and solutions around governance and forest restoration.

Ultimately, this project seeks to bring out and disseminate knowledge and findings about governance challenges and solutions associated with large scale forest restoration and tree planting with a specific focus on two dimensions: tenure and stakeholder dynamics.

By the end of the project we expect to have some answers to the questions we pose and some tools for decision-makers at all levels to better address governance in forest restoration and tree planting more generally.

We also expect to have raised awareness among the diverse networks engaged in the project about the importance of these issues and to have set up a permanent body that can continue to advance on this topic.
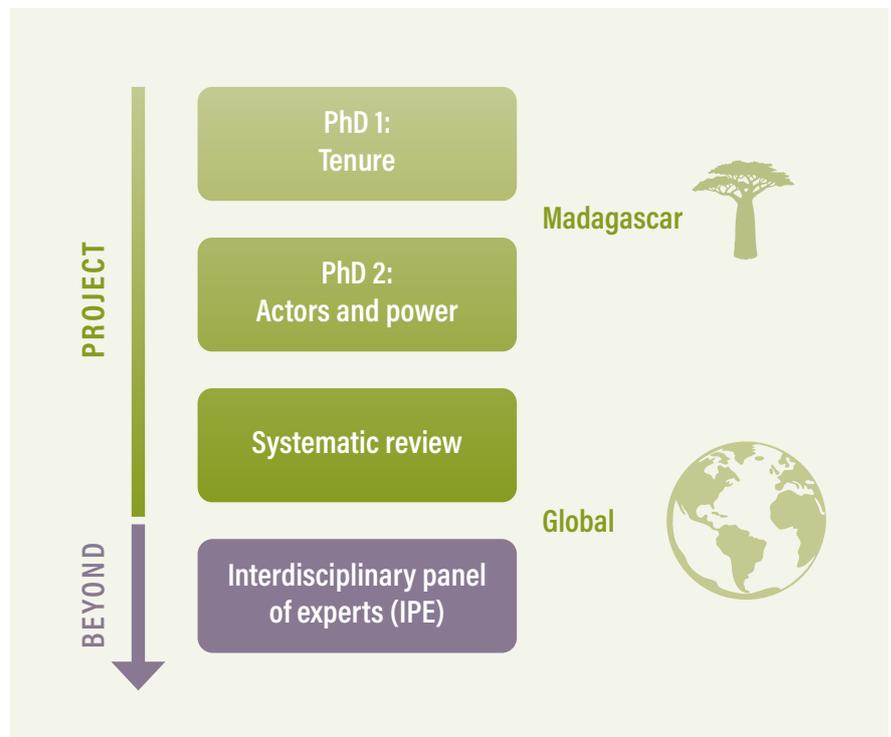

Figure: Project components

Project participants

	Name	Organisation	Country	Disciplines
Principal Investigators	**Christian Kull**	University of Lausanne (UNIL)	Switzerland	• Agroforestry
	Stephanie Mansourian	University of Lausanne; Mansourian.org; University of Geneva	Switzerland	• Anthropology • Botany • Community-based natural resource management,
PhD students	**Manambina Soamampiandra**	University of Antananarivo	Madagascar	• Conservation • Economics
	Antsa Randrianarivelo	University of Antananarivo	Madagascar	• Ecology
Interdisciplinary Panel of Experts (IPE)	**John Parrotta**	US Forest Service (USFS - retired); International Union of Forest Research Organizations (IUFRO)	USA	• Forestry • Forest economy • General environmental practitioners
	Nanie Ratsifandrihamanana	WWF	Madagascar	• Geography
	Gretchen Walters	University of Lausanne (UNIL)	Switzerland	• Natural and rural systems management
	Stefano Pagiola	World Bank	USA	• Natural resource management
	Zo Hasina Rabemananjara	University of Antananarivo	Madagascar	• Political economy of natural resources
	Jack Hurd	Tropical Forest Alliance/World Economic Forum (WEF)	USA/Switzerland	• Sustainable forest management
	Joice Ferreira	Empresa Brasileira de Pesquisa Agropecuária (EMBRAPA - Brazilian Agricultural Research Corporation)	Brazil	...and more!
	Anne Larson	Center for International Forestry Research and World Agroforestry (CIFOR-ICRAF)	USA	
	Roger Villalobos	Centro Agronómico Tropical de Investigación y Enseñanza (CATIE - Tropical Agricultural Research and Higher Education Center)	Costa Rica	
	Karma Bouazza	Society for Ecological Restoration (SER); Lebanon Reforestation Initiative	Lebanon	
	David Ganz	Regional Community Forestry Training Center for Asia and the Pacific (RECOFTC)	Thailand	
	Bill Adams	University of Cambridge (emeritus); The Graduate Institute	UK	