

Sustainable Forest Transitions

Project Brief

Dr. Johan Oldekop

October 2023

Improving forest cover while alleviating poverty is critical for a socially just transition to sustainability.



The Sustainable Forest Transitions project will conduct ground-breaking research to better understand how reforestation drivers affect forests and the communities that depend on them.

The project

From capturing carbon, to safeguarding biodiversity and sustaining millions of livelihoods, the immense value of forests is increasingly recognised around the world.

Over the next five years, Dr. Johan Oldekop and his team will study the changing nature of forest cover and human development at unprecedented scale and detail. The project will start working in Mexico, Brazil, India, Nepal and possibly expand to other countries.

This analysis will form the basis for a new framework of Sustainable Forest Transitions. This framework will support the design and evaluation of forest-sector interventions, highlighting feasible options for improving forest cover and human development.

Research approach

The team will combine socioeconomic (e.g., national census) and environmental data (satellite-based forest data) with state-of-the-art statistical methods to answer three questions:

- ⬡ What are the effects of reforestation drivers on both forests and rural poverty, and how do these drivers interact?
- ⬡ How are reforestation drivers affected by socioeconomic, political, and biophysical contexts, both within and between countries?
- ⬡ Which combinations of reforestation drivers and contexts lead to simultaneous positive forest and rural poverty outcomes?

The team

Dr. Johan Oldekop will lead a team of two post-doctoral researchers and three PhD students based at the University of Manchester's Global Development Institute. The team will work with four in-country partners and an international advisory board. Together they will engage with policy makers and practitioners to implement research findings.



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This project emerges from a decade-long research agenda on forests and livelihoods. Key outputs from this agenda include:

Five mega-trends impacting forests and livelihoods

1. Forest megadisturbances
2. Changing rural demographics
3. The rise of middle-classes in low- and middle-income countries
4. Increased availability, access and use of digital technologies
5. Large-scale infrastructure development

These five trends highlight novel mechanisms and actors likely to affect forests and communities. Gaining a better understanding of the extent that they will impact forests and livelihoods is critical for policy and advocacy.

*Oldekop et al. 2020.
Nature Plants 6: 1400-07.*

Global forest restoration must prioritize local communities

Global conversations about sustainability rarely acknowledge the social dimensions of forest restoration. We find that 294.5 million people live on tropical forest restoration opportunity land in the Global South, including 12% of the total population in low-income countries. Forest landscape restoration that prioritizes local communities by affording them rights to manage and restore forests provides a promising option to align global sustainability agendas.

*Erbaugh...Oldekop et al. 2020.
Nature Ecology & Evolution 4: 1472-76.*

Global analysis of community forest management

Communities manage 28% of forests in low- and middle-income countries. Using 643 cases in 51 countries, we find that while most cases reported positive environmental and income-related outcomes, forest access and resource rights were often negatively affected by policies to formalize community forests, countering one of community forest management's principal goals.

*Hajjar, Oldekop et al. 2021.
Nature Sustainability 4: 216-24.*

Community forests reduce poverty and deforestation

We estimate impacts of community forests by integrating census-based poverty measures with high-resolution forest cover change data, and near-complete information on Nepal's >18,000 community forests. We find that community forests reduced poverty and deforestation across Nepal, and increased the likelihood of win-win outcomes.

*Oldekop et al. 2019.
Nature Sustainability 2: 421-28.*



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About the author

Johan Oldekop is Reader in Environment and Development at the Global Development Institute and the Principal Investigator of the Sustainable Forest Transitions project.

About Sustainable Forest Transitions

Sustainable Forest Transitions examines how drivers of reforestation can benefit the environment and local communities, while improving the design and evaluation of forest-sector interventions. The project was selected by the European Research Council (ERC) and funded by UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) under grant number EP/X023222/1.

For more information and outputs

<https://sites.manchester.ac.uk/sftresearch/>