Introducing the Southern and Eastern African Landscape Initiative (SEALI)

Catalyzing collaborative partnerships for resilient, connected landscapes in southern and eastern Africa

UBS

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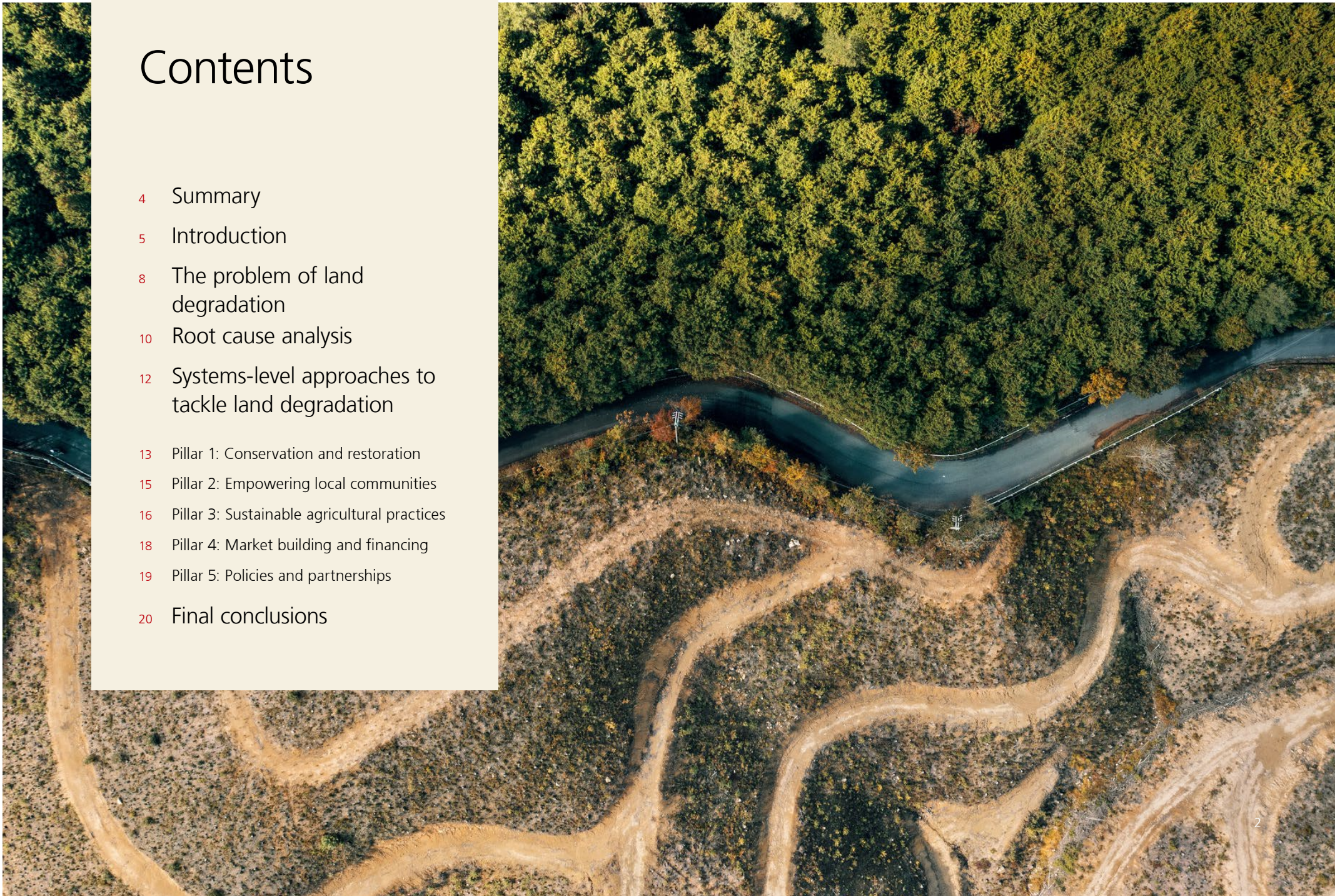

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Summary

The convergence of mass biodiversity loss, climate-driven extreme weather, and land degradation in southern and eastern Africa poses a serious threat to ecosystems and the communities that depend on them. This paper sets out a holistic approach to restoring and conserving landscapes at scale, highlighting the pivotal role of collaborative philanthropy.

Land degradation is a critical issue, not least because it sits at the point where environmental and climatological risks and people's lives are arguably most closely connected. Across southern and eastern Africa, land degradation is accelerating, undermining food security, biodiversity, climate resilience, and rural livelihoods. Unsustainable land use practices, weak governance, insecure land tenure, and intensifying climate shocks interact in ways that can trap communities in cycles of poverty while further degrading ecosystems of global importance.

To break this vicious cycle, there is a need to catalyze and implement natural methods of restoration, regeneration, and better management of degraded lands at scale. Restoring degraded lands can offer a practical pathway towards achieving multiple environmental and socioeconomic outcomes. This paper provides examples that suggest that positive environmental and socioeconomic impacts are durable and meaningful only when implemented at scale, through patient and community-led approaches.

In this paper we introduce a new initiative: The Southern and Eastern African Landscape Initiative (SEALI). SEALI adopts a long-term, integrated approach that aims to restore whole landscapes while seeking to lead towards ecological stability, rural livelihoods and long-term development. Its five-pillar approach brings together:

1. Conservation and restoration;
2. Empowering local communities;
3. Sustainable agricultural practices;
4. Market-building and financing;
5. Policy engagement and partnerships.

By integrating these five core elements, SEALI can enable locally-led solutions that deliver durable environmental and socioeconomic outcomes. While the scale of the challenge is substantial and funding gaps remain significant, philanthropy plays a critical and catalytic role. By deploying patient, flexible capital in a timely manner, it can support community stewardship, strengthen institutions, de-risk innovative financing models, and unlock larger flows of public and private investment.

The UBS Optimus Foundation and the COmON Foundation are committed to supporting high-impact climate and environment initiatives. The ambition is to move beyond isolated projects towards lasting regeneration and protection, in order to better protect nature, strengthen resilience, and improve lives across southern and eastern Africa.

Box 1: What is a landscape?

A widely-used definition of a landscape is that it is a "socio-ecological system that consists of natural and/or human-modified ecosystems, and that it is influenced by distinct ecological, historical, economic and socio-cultural processes and activities."[1]

For the purposes of this paper, wherever appropriate, we will consider a landscape as defined by hydrological boundaries such as river and lake basins. This approach helps make clear and measurable units for holistic landscape conservation and restoration.

[1] Denier, L., et al. (2015). The Little Sustainable Landscapes Book, Global Canopy Programme: Oxford.

Introduction

Box 2: What do we mean by restoration?

The UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) defines land restoration as a set of ecological processes to restore a natural and safe landscape for humans, wildlife, and plant communities.

These processes pave the way to protect our ecosystems, create economic development, help prevent natural disasters such as floods, and increase soil productivity and food supplies.

Land restoration is vital if the world is to protect the environment, build resilience to drought, and help feed a growing global population.

Since 2020, UBS Optimus Foundation has collaborated with the COmON Foundation and have worked closely with our clients and partners to catalyze and deploy over USD 100 million for landscape conservation and restoration projects in sub-Saharan Africa, Northern and Southern America, Europe, and Asia.

Looking ahead to 2030, our ambition is to catalyze a portfolio of co-funded projects across southern and eastern Africa. This will focus on several complex and vital, yet underfunded, landscape ecosystems, including extensive savannahs and rangelands, Miombo woodlands, Karoo/Nama Karoo biomes and Kalahari-Namib ecosystems. Together these span approximately 224 million hectares in southern and eastern Africa,[2] and the rivers, wetlands, floodplains, lakes and groundwater-dependent systems that connect and sustain them. For context, this is more than four times the size of Spain.

The region is home to nearly half a billion people and tens of millions of people in these regions are vulnerable to acute risks arising from food insecurity, water and heat stress. For broader context, Africa's population is projected to reach 2.5 billion (from around 1.5 billion today) by 2050.[3] This is likely to significantly increase competition between people and biodiversity for natural resources and space. As a result, the need for ecosystem services may become even more important to support food and water security and ecosystem integrity. Climate change is expected to further amplify these resource needs and the competition for them. Lands in Botswana, southern Zambia, Namibia, and Angola are expected to become more arid and more prone to regular droughts, but with periodic intensified flooding. Meanwhile, lands in East Africa are expected to become wetter, with a knock-on impact on agricultural productivity, as flash flooding washes away fertile soils, as seen in the Lake Tanganyika basin. The regions are already experiencing the effects of both. These conditions can contribute to in-country and in-region climate migration, which further exacerbates poverty and land degradation.

Against this backdrop, land degradation is emerging as a systemic risk factor and also one of the biggest levers for effecting positive change in the region, as it lies at the intersection of people and planet. It is both a symptom and a driver of climate stress, biodiversity and habitat loss, and cyclical poverty. Degraded soils and ecosystems reduce productivity, deepen food insecurity, and weaken livelihoods, while climate-driven droughts, floods, and heat further erode land health and accelerate ecological decline. At the same time, the loss of vegetation, soil fertility, and ecosystem function can undermine biodiversity and reduces the resilience of landscapes and communities alike. Restoring landscapes offers a practical way to address these interconnected challenges together rather than separately.

[2] UNCCD (2022). Global Land Outlook: Southern Africa: Leveraging the land, water and energy nexus in SADC
[3] IMF (2023). African Century

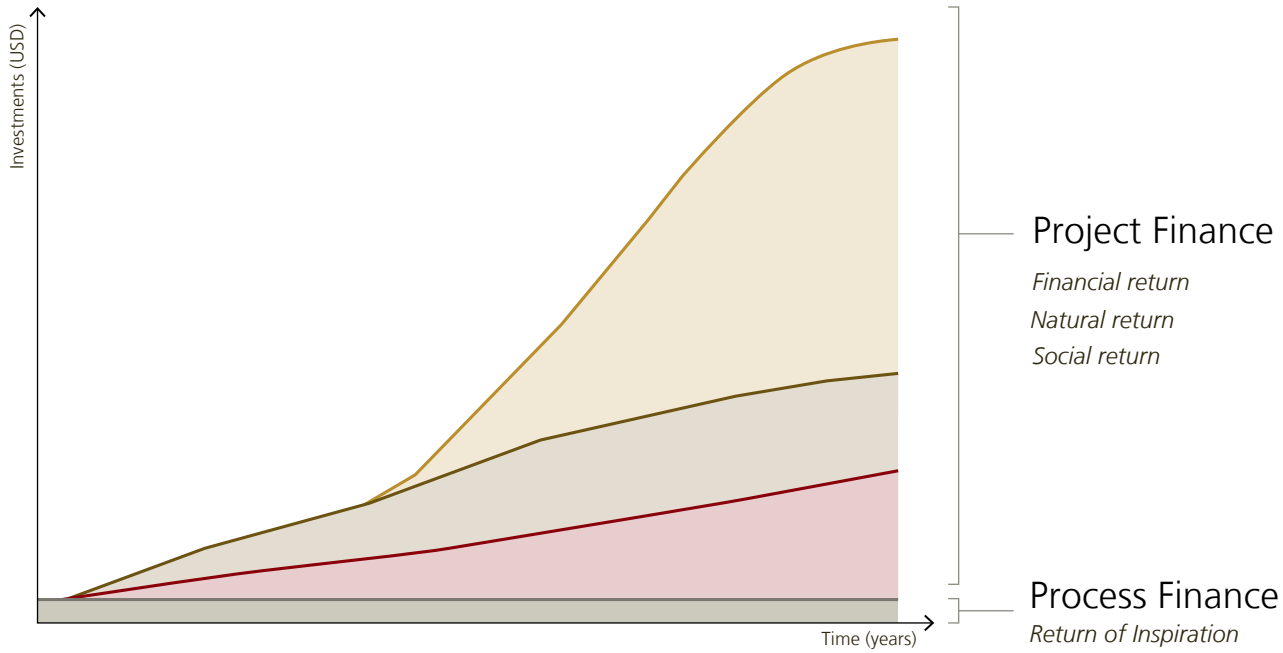
This paper sets out one perspective on the complex, interconnected, environmental, socio-economic, and climatological factors that accelerate land degradation. It presents a holistic approach to achieving landscape restoration in partnership with local communities to promote sustainable land use management practices. Central to this approach is a Theory of Change, which is grounded in a rigorous analysis of root causes rather than symptoms.

Transforming and restoring a landscape requires long-term thinking and sustained action alongside dedicated funding. The costs of restoring degraded landscapes in the southern and eastern African region are generally estimated at between USD 440–USD 530 per hectare per year in project costs.[4] In addition, there are process costs associated with landscape restoration[5] in the region of USD 300,000 to 500,000 per year per landscape.[6, 7]

To restore around 200 million hectares, total costs are estimated at upwards of USD 100 billion. While the costs are significant, so are the potential benefits. It is estimated that every USD 1 invested in land restoration can create USD 7–30 in economic benefits, while protecting biodiversity and fighting climate change.[8] While philanthropy alone cannot fill the funding gap, it can play a critical catalytic role, helping to mobilize public funding and private investments.

The southern and eastern Africa Land Initiative (SEALI) is designed to bring together philanthropic, public, and private partners around a strategic, long-term vision, to catalyze funding, and ultimately to provide a systems approach to landscape restoration.

Figure 1. Process and Project Finance of Integrated Landscape Restoration



Source: Commonland Foundation (2023). Towards financing large-scale holistic landscape restoration in Europe.

[4] Verhoeven D. et. al. (2024). The global cost of international commitments on land restoration

[5] Bertels, J. et. al. (2023). Towards financing large-scale holistic landscape restoration in Europe: Recommendations for EU policy actors to attain inspirational, social, natural, and financial returns.

[6] Project finance focuses on directly funding on-the-ground activities within a landscape through blended finance mechanisms, including grants, loans, investments, and philanthropy. Process finance, on the other hand, supports the alignment and coordination of stakeholders, ensuring the enabling conditions are in place for project finance to deliver long-term impact at landscape scale.

[7] Commonland Foundation (2024). The 4Returns Framework in Practice

[8] World Resources Institute (2021). Entrepreneurs Need Funding to Restore Africa's Degraded Land

It is important to be realistic about the timeframe for meaningful, large-scale restoration. It will take at least one generation (approximately 20 years) to achieve. Adopting a 20+ year time horizon supports multi-stakeholder involvement underpinned by multigenerational planning and helps identify actions worth pursuing, even if they do not yield immediate results. This shift in perspective is essential for policymakers, funders, communities and businesses to align with the pace at which natural systems recover.

Averting the severe costs of inaction is urgent and imperative. A robust scientific consensus indicates that, without effective intervention, climate change will increasingly undermine global food security by reducing crop yields, raising food prices, and increasing the number of people at risk of hunger.[9] At the same time, climate impacts threaten economic stability by disrupting livelihoods, damaging infrastructure, and amplifying vulnerabilities in already fragile systems.[10] These pressures are closely linked to rising human mobility: climate change is expected to increase displacement and migration, often in ways that are involuntary and driven by deteriorating environmental and economic conditions.[11] In turn, such dynamics can contribute to social fragmentation and heightened risks of conflict, particularly where existing inequalities or governance challenges are present.[12] Furthermore, emerging research shows that extreme heat and humidity may push some regions beyond the limits of human habitability, especially under higher warming scenarios.[13] Importantly, these risks are not confined to the distant future: there is clear evidence that many of these impacts are already unfolding across regions, affecting food systems, human security, and environmental conditions today.[14]

It is essential to coordinate actions and interventions at a strategic and systemic level. Piecemeal and isolated interventions seldom succeed as their design is often limited by the available funding, which itself is often reactive, short-term, and fragmented. There is an opportunity to work with other public and private sector initiatives in the region, such as the SADC Transfrontier Conservation Areas Program.[15]

Holistic landscape restoration and management is a critical part of the solution, accelerating the transition to a world where both people and nature can thrive. If mission-aligned philanthropies, public sector bodies, impact investors, and committed individuals can collaborate effectively, they can accelerate restoration efforts in southern and eastern Africa. Together, they can build a systemic portfolio of programs that work with local communities to reverse land degradation, protect biodiversity, and strengthen food security and livelihoods.

[9] IPCC (2019) Climate Change and Land: IPCC Special Report, Chapter 5: Food Security.
[10] IPCC (2023) Climate Change 2023: Synthesis Report
[11] IPCC (2014) Climate Change 2014: Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability, Chapter 12: Human Security
[12] Savelli, A. et al. (2023). Climate change, mobility and violent conflict: a typology of interlinked pathways
[13] Vecellio, D.J. et al. (2023). Greatly enhanced risk to humans as a consequence of empirically determined lower moist heat stress tolerance
[14] IPCC (2023) Climate Change 2023: Synthesis Report
[15] Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) (1999). SADC Protocol on Wildlife Conservation and Law Enforcement

The problem of land degradation

Land and water underpin both our economic and our ecological systems. Yet the way humanity uses and shapes these resources is unsettling a delicate balance, threatening our wealth, way of life, and, in some cases, our very lives. Physical climate risks such as droughts and flooding can turn environmental stresses into systemic risk, in the shape of food insecurity, desertification, human and animal migration, and increased conflict.

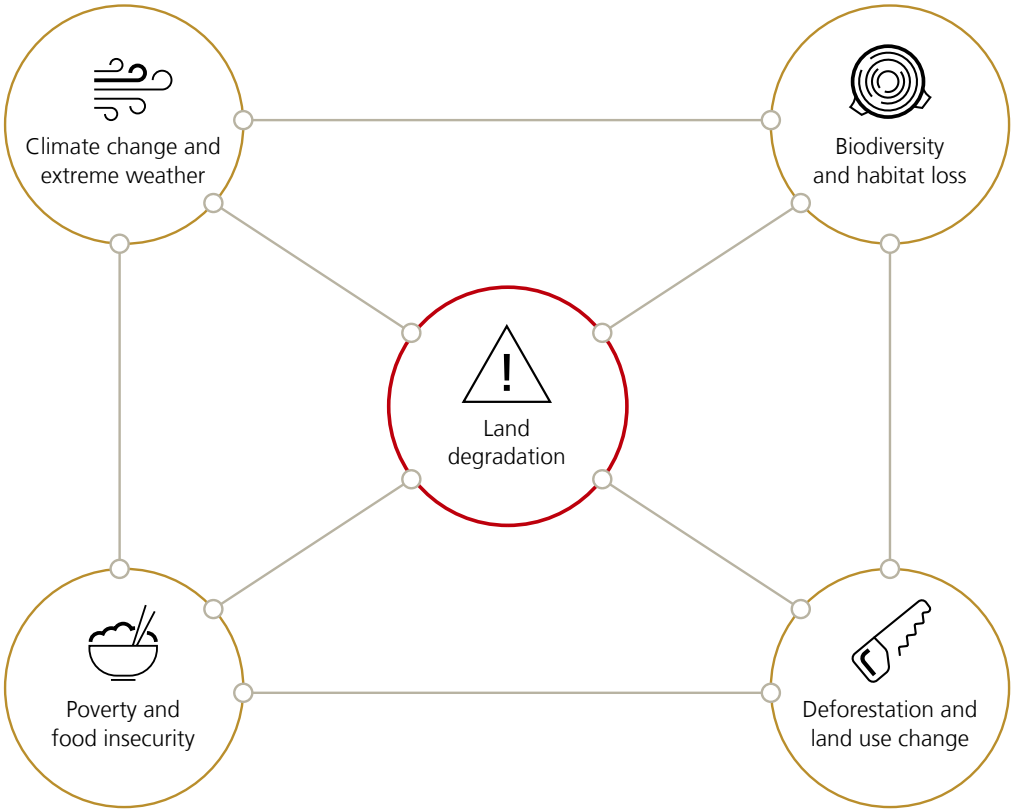
What do we mean by land degradation? Land degradation refers to a reduction in the utility, biodiversity, soil fertility, and overall health of soils and biodiversity.[15] It includes the degradation of topsoil, loss of vegetation, and disruption of ecological balance at the watershed level. Beyond widely known issues such as desertification, deforestation, and erosion, land degradation can also lead to declining water quality, nutrient depletion, soil compaction, waterlogging, salinization, and altered hydrological cycles.[16] It is a global challenge that affects all countries. It is estimated that approximately 40% of the world's land is already degraded.[17] It is an issue exacerbated by other problems like extreme weather events and biodiversity loss. These issues are intrinsically linked to land degradation via a vicious cycle, whereby climate change and extreme weather events further degrade landscapes and accelerate biodiversity losses.

Furthermore, wetlands are essential ecosystems within these landscapes. They are where land meets water, the life-support systems through which many of these foundations are sustained. Rivers, floodplains, lakes, peatlands, marshes, and mangroves regulate water flows, support food production and fisheries, store carbon, protect against floods and droughts, and sustain biodiversity and livelihoods. But they are threatened by wetland drainage and conversion, with over 70% of wetlands lost or degraded since 1900,[18] and we continue to lose them at a rate of 0.52% annually.[19] Disrupted sediment systems and altered river flows make hydrological degradation as critical an issue as soil and vegetation degradation. Erosion and desertification further exacerbate broader processes of land and watershed degradation.

[15] Food and Agriculture Organisation (1999). Poverty Alleviation and Food Security In Asia: Land Resources
[16] UNDRR (2025). Hazard Identification Profiles (HIPS)
[17] European Union (2018), World Atlas of Desertification.
[18] Davidson, N.C. (2014) How Much Wetland Has the World Lost? Long-Term and Recent Trends in Global Wetland Area. Marine and Freshwater Research.
[19] Secretariat of the convention on wetlands (2025). Global Wetland Outlook 2025

Southern and eastern Africa, the focus area of SEALI, is characterised by a remarkable diversity of landscapes. These range from open grasslands and savannahs, to semi-arid, dry scrubland and desert, to deciduous miombo forests, mangroves, tropical coastal lowlands, and more. Land and watershed degradation in the region is closely linked to both droughts and, increasingly, to extreme and frequent flooding and landslides.[20] It is both a driver and a consequence of poverty. Low-income households typically rely heavily on land for fuel, grazing, and subsistence farming. Short-term survival strategies combined with limited access to knowledge of sustainable practices and lack of economic incentives, accelerate land degradation. In turn, declining soil quality and natural resource availability undermines longer term agricultural output and food security, trapping rural households in a cycle of poverty and compromised food security. Yet, while poor rural communities are visible at the frontline of ecosystem degradation, the root causes run deeper. Structural inequalities, insecure land tenure, and the absence of inclusive, sustainable development policies play a decisive role. Addressing these requires a root cause analysis to identify strategic interventions that can tackle the connected issues of land degradation and poverty, while contributing to efforts to counter climate change and biodiversity loss.

Figure 2. Interconnections between land degradation, climate change, biodiversity loss, deforestation and poverty



[20] UNDRR (2024). Horn of Africa floods and drought, 2020-2023 – Forensic analysis

Root cause analysis

Addressing land degradation requires a clear understanding of its root causes. These are complex and multi-layered, ranging from the socioeconomic, to the climatological, hydrological, and environmental. They are also intrinsically inter-connected via feedback loops. Population pressures and cycles of poverty interact with and intensify a range of related challenges, including poor land management, wetland drainage, weak water infrastructure, fragmented governance, disrupted ecological systems, biodiversity loss, and increasing climate risks. Solving these issues therefore requires a systemic and integrated approach. We start with land degradation as a rallying point as it is the most interconnected issue, and provides a pragmatic point of entry to tackling other underlying issues such as poverty and food insecurity.

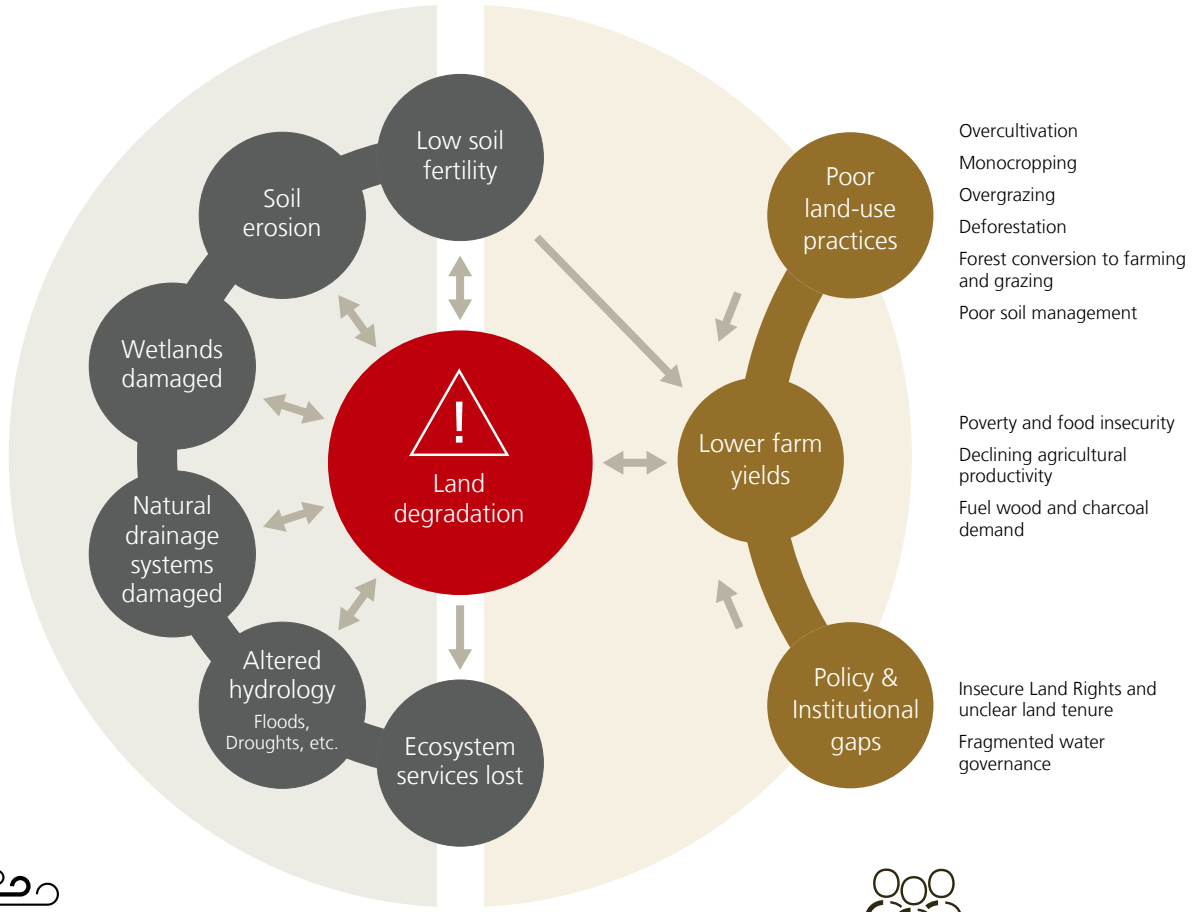
The following root cause analysis presents the interdependencies. In the first instance, contributing factors include a lack of effective grazing management plans and limited access to land management skills and support, which leads to uncontrolled animal movement. The removal of vegetation for fuel and timber, along with rising human-wildlife conflict and hunting, further increases pressure on already fragile ecosystems.

Yet the underlying drivers run deeper. The gradual reduction in available fertile lands means that poorer communities find it increasingly expensive to buy fertile lands, and are therefore likely to be restricted to less productive land, entrenching a cycle of poverty.

Weak land and water governance, fragmented river basin management, and policy frameworks mean that millions of households still lack secure land tenure and access to basic services. Where policies do exist, enforcement is often inconsistent. This reduces incentives for households to invest in sustainable land-use and water stewardship practices that deliver long term benefits.

As extreme weather events become more frequent, climate change amplifies these issues, accelerating the approach of irreversible tipping points and undermining the resilience of smallholder communities in the region. These complex issues and interdependencies are mapped out in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Root cause analysis identifying causal relationships between socioeconomic, climatological, and environmental factors



Conclusions from our root cause analysis:

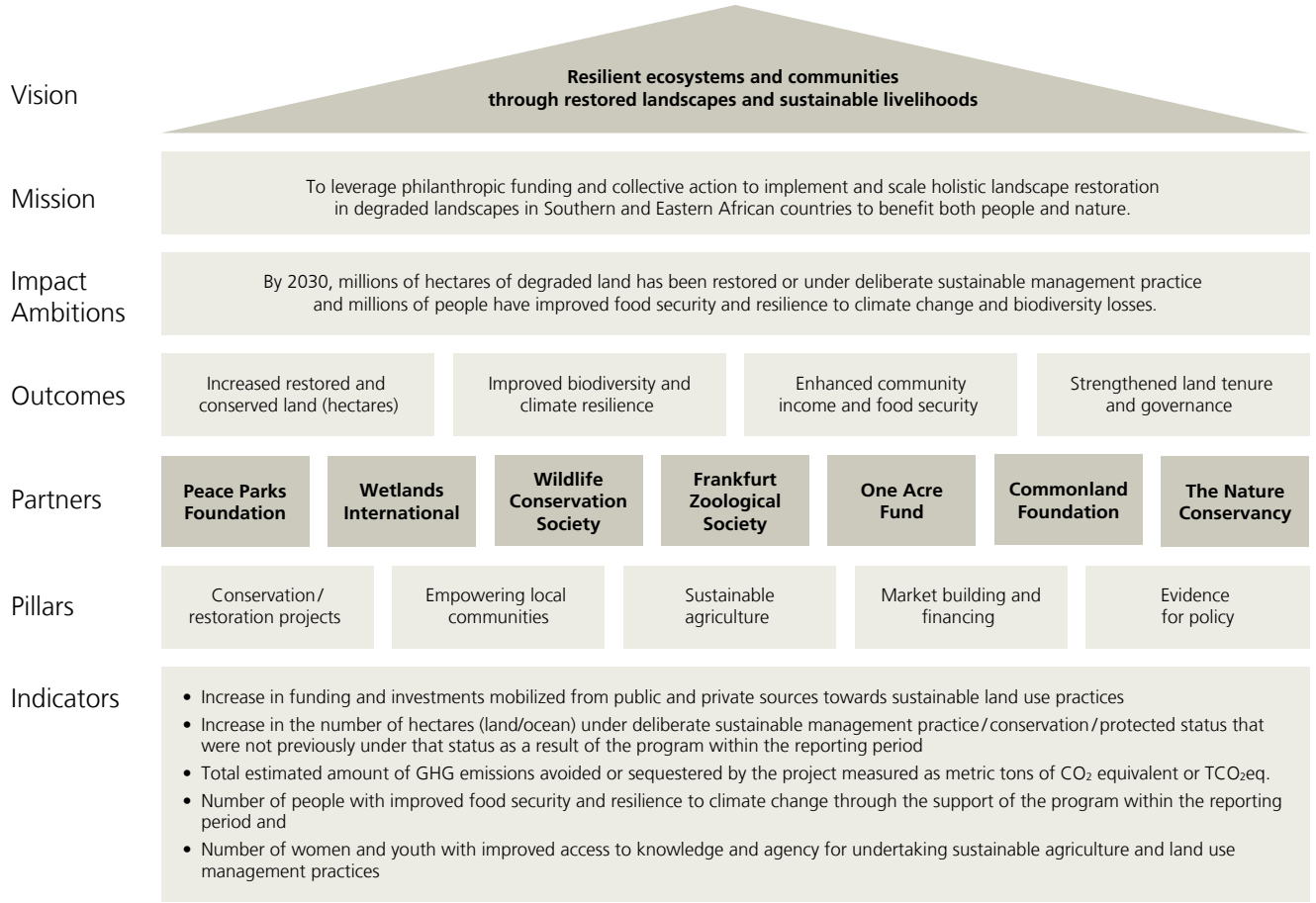
- Tackling land degradation can provide a systemic yet practical pathway towards reducing exposure to climate risks, improving agricultural productivity and food security, enhancing biodiversity and habitat protection and improving livelihoods
- Restoring landscapes through sustainable land use practices can deliver improved socioeconomic outcomes alongside environmental and climate resilience benefits
- Community-led natural resource management models help tackle underlying issues such as weak and fragmented governance, insecure land tenure, and structural inequalities through active community leadership.
- Wetland, river-basin, and watershed stewardship are essential to landscape-scale restoration. This is because ecological flows, floodplain connectivity, water quality, and upstream-downstream dependencies determine the resilience of ecosystems, communities, and productive sectors.
- Solutions and interventions should be led and delivered by local communities. Those communities require capacity and agency to take on active stewardship and management roles in partnership with wider stakeholders to strengthen landscape conservation and restoration efforts.
- Access to knowledge of sustainable agriculture combined with reliable market access is key to breaking cycles of poverty and incentivizing responsible land stewardship among farmers and landowners.
- Supportive public policy is a critical success factor.

Systems-level approaches to tackle land degradation

While the influence of the root causes may vary from country to country, initiatives that seek to prevent and reverse land degradation need to take a systems change approach to tackling them. The focus should be on long-term, large-scale solutions, owned, managed, and driven by local communities, that take an integrated, ecosystem approach.[22]

Drawing on international best practices and our own experience of developing grant-making programs in this region, the UBS Optimus Foundation, in collaboration with the COmON Foundation and other partners, have co-developed a Theory of Change, comprising five core pillars of overlapping and complementary activities (Figure 4). Together, these attempt to capture a systems-level approach to landscape restoration. Across all five pillars, water systems should be treated as a connective element rather than a separate sector. Wetlands, rivers, and floodplains link conservation outcomes with agriculture, livelihoods, markets, climate resilience and public policy, and therefore provide a practical entry point for integrated landscape management. Impact ambition figures have been deliberately kept indicative at this stage and will be refined as programs develop.

Figure 4: Theory of Change



[22] Convention on Biological Diversity (2004). COP 7 Decision VII/11 – Ecosystem approach

Pillar 1: Conservation and restoration

Landscape restoration and conservation requires a long-term, multifaceted approach. It must combine the conservation of existing natural habitats with the restoration of degraded lands and watersheds (wetlands, rivers, floodplains). Maintaining ecological flows and hydrological connectivity is essential to sustaining biodiversity, climate resilience, and ecosystem services across the wider landscape.

Conservation outcomes are tangible when protected areas are well-administered, adequately financed, and professionally managed.[23]

Conservation is more durable where Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities (IPLCs) co-govern land and benefit directly. Equity, tenure clarity, and trusted local institutions increase compliance, reduce conflict, and improve conservation legitimacy.[24] IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature) research confirms that nature-based solutions such as dryland restoration, sustainable rangeland management, and wetland protection can simultaneously deliver biodiversity conservation, climate resilience, and livelihood benefits in southern Africa's socio-ecological systems.[25]

Our implementation partners adopt scientific evidence-based conservation approaches. For example, across Mozambique and Malawi, Peace Parks Foundation implements science-based conservation by coupling robust ecological data, modern monitoring technologies, and adaptive management with long-term governance and financing. This approach aligns closely with IUCN-endorsed best practice. Conservation outcomes tend to be best when driven not by short-term projects, but by continuous evidence-gathering, institutional stability, and learning at landscape scale.

Box 3: Viewing ecosystems as critical infrastructure

Achieving tangible and lasting ecosystem restoration starts with valuing ecosystems as critical infrastructure. For example, Wetlands International works with communities in Ethiopia's Rift Valley lakes region to restore degraded wetlands as part of wider landscape systems. Their approach of rebuilding natural infrastructure treats wetlands as connected hydrological assets that influence soil stability, water availability, and agricultural productivity across entire catchments.

These efforts have contributed to the restoration of 5,540 hectares of degraded land, alongside improved water access for more than 3,500 people. Wetlands International report that over 22,000 people are benefiting from improved water security and more productive land, with reported increases in smallholder incomes. This case study illustrates the ability of wetland restoration to deliver conservation outcomes alongside tangible socioeconomic gains when implemented at landscape scale.

Why it matters for philanthropies

Nature as infrastructure: Ecosystem stability is a foundation for long-term and sustainable socioeconomic development.

[23] IUCN (2020). State of protected and conserved areas in Eastern and Southern Africa
[24] IUCN (2026). Biodiversity Conservation – Local Communities – First Line of Defence against Illegal Wildlife Trade (FLoD)
[25] IUCN (2023). Annual Report

Box 4: Funding conservation outcomes for protection of standing forests

At a global level there is a significant long-term funding gap for conservation of large, intact, tropical forests. Conservation funding has traditionally focused on paying for activities rather than paying for outcomes; the funding predominantly originates from public grants and private philanthropy, and is focused on restoring landscapes after they have been degraded.

Long-term commitments to funding outcomes can ensure precious philanthropic capital is tied directly to measurable, meaningful change, thereby maximizing impact and accountability. The alternative of merely funding activities only supports what is done, not the change which is achieved. In this context, even though some of the world's last remaining intact ecosystems continue to provide invaluable climatological, environmental, and socioeconomic outcomes, like irreplaceable biodiversity, climate regulation, water security, and carbon storage services, these outcomes are undervalued. A key challenge is that these standing forests often generate little direct financial value for the countries and communities responsible for protecting them, creating incentives for conversion rather than conservation.

To address this, the Wildlife Conservation Society has pioneered an innovative financing mechanism called The High Integrity Forest Investment Initiative (HIFOR). This mechanism is designed to mobilize long-term funding for the conservation of large, intact tropical forests. HIFOR generates independently verified conservation outcomes linked to maintenance of ecological integrity, biodiversity protection, carbon storage, climate regulation, and water security. These outcomes, via HIFOR unit certificates, can be purchased by governments, corporations, philanthropies, or others seeking to support large-scale conservation and climate objectives.

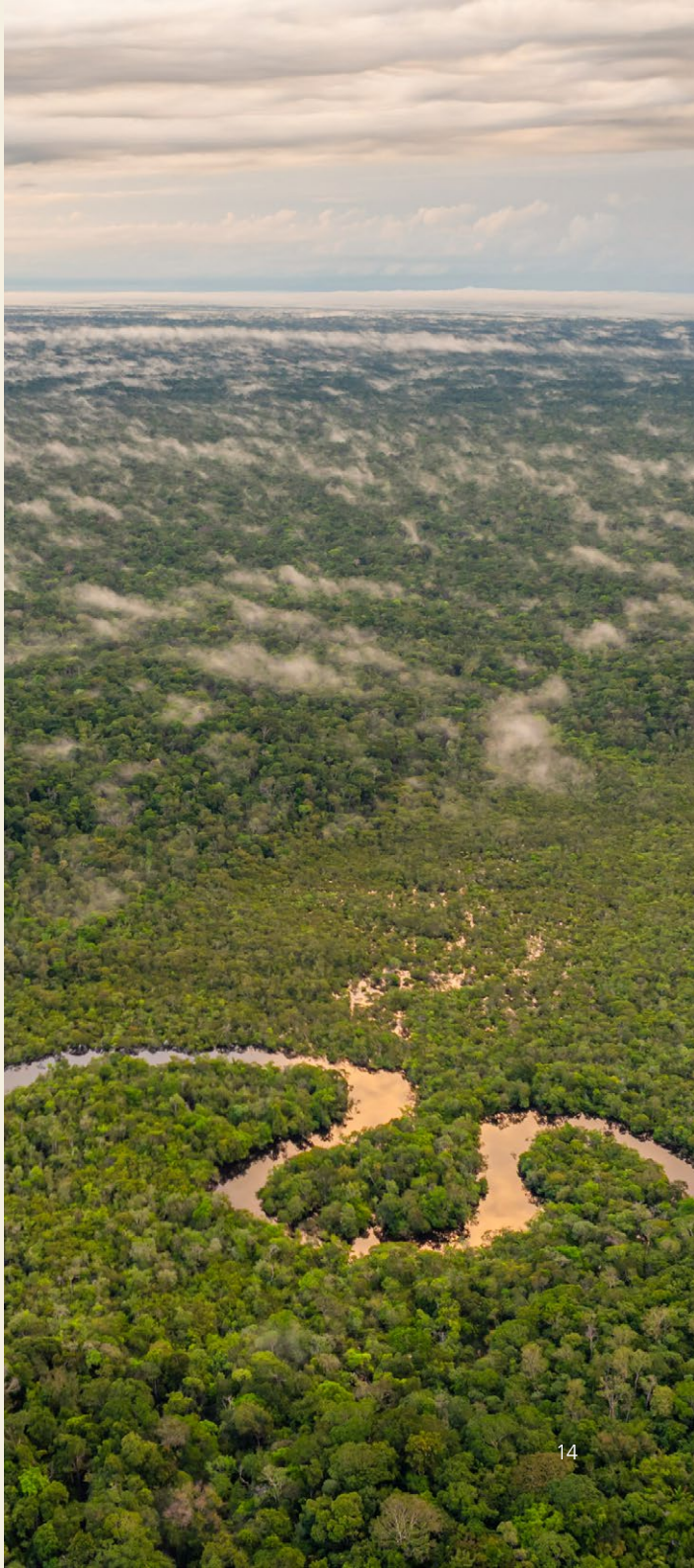
The mechanism is designed to create predictable, long-term revenue streams that strengthen the economic case for conservation while supporting national development priorities and community livelihoods. By linking conservation performance with outcome-based payments, HIFOR helps address a key market failure: the lack of financial incentives to maintain globally important ecosystems before they become degraded.

As countries and investors increasingly seek scalable nature finance solutions, HIFOR demonstrates how innovative financing can complement restoration efforts by ensuring that the world's remaining high integrity ecosystems continue to deliver biodiversity, climate, and social benefits for future generations.

Why it matters for philanthropies

HIFOR demonstrates three principles increasingly valued by strategic philanthropists:

- Prevention over remediation: Protecting intact ecosystems is typically more effective and less costly than restoring them after degradation.
- Long-term sustainability: Outcome-based payments create ongoing incentives for conservation rather than reliance on one-off grants.
- Systems-level impact: By influencing national and market-level incentives, the mechanism operates beyond individual projects to address structural drivers of biodiversity loss.



Pillar 2: Empowering local communities

Successful conservation and restoration efforts tend to depend on empowering local communities, recognizing them as essential partners in protecting and revitalizing landscapes and seascapes, that in turn provide natural climate resilience to vulnerable communities. Central to these efforts is the active involvement of local communities through Community-Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM), which emphasizes participatory decision-making and the integration of local institutions, traditional practices, and indigenous knowledge systems.[26]

This means recognizing the role of communities who depend on wetlands – including farmers, fishermen, women, and young people – in looking after the ecosystems that support not just them, but all of us, via a web of food, water, health, and livelihood connections and dependencies.

Community development and livelihood diversification can help to ease pressures on nature. Inclusive participation should aim to accelerate the use of local knowledge, technologies, and expertise to promote sustainable solutions. Finally, aligning incentives to ensure that communities benefit from conservation and restoration is important to ensure buy-in and the long-term sustainability of initiatives.

[26] Armitage, D. (2005). Adaptive Capacity and Community-Based Natural Resource Management

Box 5: Generating holistic multiple returns

The Commonland Foundation recognizes the importance of working closely with local communities to achieving restoration outcomes. Guided by its 4 Returns Framework, Commonland places community empowerment at the heart of its approach. It strengthens community engagement by helping stakeholders articulate, assess, and communicate impact, while designing interventions that incorporate local perspectives and priorities.

This bottom-up methodology enables all stakeholders, including local communities, to contribute to the development of sustainable, climate-resilient landscapes that generate social, ecological, and long-term financial returns. Today, the framework is being applied in more than 25 countries around the world.

Why it matters for philanthropies

Adopting a holistic framework that places communities at the center of restoration efforts helps to ensure that interventions reflect community needs and aspirations. This in turn can help philanthropies increase the likelihood of achieving meaningful, lasting, and scalable impact.

Return of Inspiration

Connecting people to the land for a regenerative future

Social return

Creating jobs, learning opportunities, networks, and social prosperity

Natural return

Restoring the health, resilience, and prosperity of landscapes

Financial return

Developing long-term, sustainable financing models tailored to each landscape

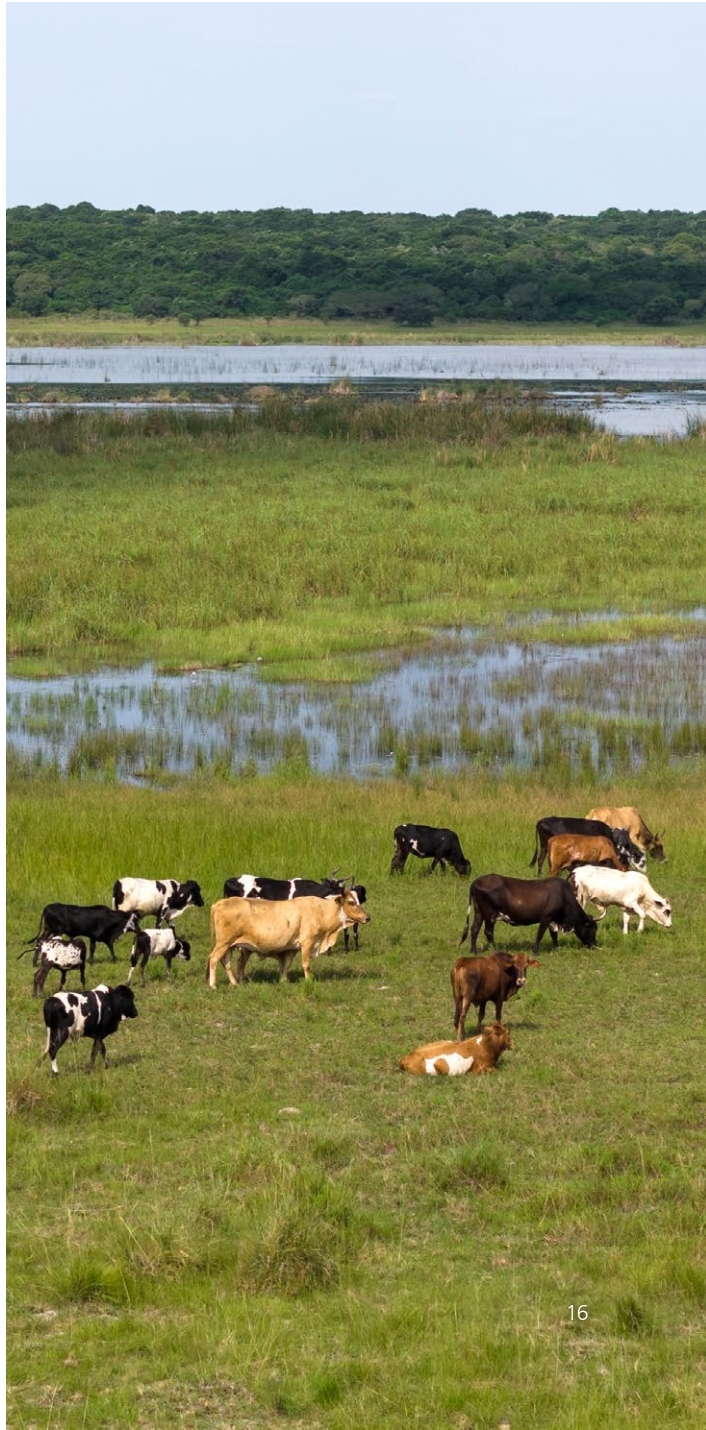
Pillar 3: Sustainable agricultural practices

Sustainable agricultural practices play a vital role in restoring degraded landscapes by combining ecological knowledge with practical, community-based action that also supports improved livelihoods. By increasing productivity over time, these practices, implemented in conjunction with community engagement and environmental education, help reduce pressure on standing forests as higher and more reliable yields enable smallholder farmers to meet their needs without expanding into natural ecosystems. As land degradation is halted, soil fertility gradually increases (although specific management practices may be required in the short-term). This allows farms to support multiple crops in a year. Farmers increase their income when agricultural interventions are bundled with market access (including but not limited to access to inputs, technology, output markets, extension services, and access to financing).

In communities where cattle rearing is common, local landscape governance mechanisms such as grazing committees can help coordinate land use and manage grazing in ways that support biodiversity and animal well-being. They can also help manage watersheds, for example by preventing erosion. Targeted upskilling of herders and farmers by trained field officers can ensure that interventions are context-specific and effective. Examples include helping herders better understand ecosystem and livestock health, improving grazing practices, clarifying grazing rights, and strengthening veterinary care through training and practical support such as health kits (Box 6).

In smallholder farming settings, piloting and scaling proven sustainable agriculture techniques, such as soil amendments, cover crops, and agroforestry, can improve soil health, restore fertility, and boost long-term productivity and climate resilience. Combined with improved access to markets, this can help to create the right incentives for farmers and align economic and environmental outcomes. There are also opportunities to promote the diversification of rural livelihoods. Interventions could include existing best practice such as paludiculture (farming on wetlands without draining them)[27] riparian buffers (strips of vegetation that grow alongside rivers, streams, or lakes, which protect water quality and prevent damage to the land), sustainable grazing and fisheries, and natural flood management.

Together, these efforts not only promote sustainable land use but can also boost food security at both household and regional levels, while contributing meaningfully to landscape restoration.



[27] Wetlands International (2021). A definition of paludiculture in the CAP

Box 6: Herding for Health

There is a growing recognition that sustainable agricultural practices and landscape restoration go hand in hand. Livestock is an aspect of farming that can be particularly problematic, as land is often cleared to provide more room for grazing. For example, Peace Parks Foundation are demonstrating that this does not have to be the case. They are implementing a **Herding for Health** programme in Maputo and Banhine National Parks in Mozambique to help herders and pastoralists undertake planned grazing approaches whilst ensuring better health outcomes for cattle and improved livelihoods for communities.

Herding for Health is a simple, scalable model that uses herding, capacity building and collective governance to reverse degradation trends and biodiversity loss, restore ecological resilience of landscapes, and cultivate resilient livelihoods for local communities. Herding for Health also integrates science and indigenous knowledge to enable adaptation of solutions to the needs of an area.

Herding for Health programs are currently being implemented in Botswana, Kenya, Madagascar, Mozambique, South Africa, Zimbabwe and Zambia.

Why it matters for philanthropies

For philanthropies seeking to maximize long-term impact, investing in smallholder resilience can deliver benefits across multiple development and environmental objectives, such as food and income security, soil health, and watershed and forest protection. By addressing the root causes of vulnerability, these investments can generate durable outcomes that compound over time, creating positive effects for livelihoods, climate adaptation, biodiversity, and rural economic development.

Herding for Health method:

1 **Support** adaptive livestock management with combined herding, planned grazing and strategic kraaling.

2 **Train** herders to implement effective strategic livestock husbandry, herding and kraaling.

3 **Build** market readiness and support development of value chains to sustain stewardship actions.

4 **Facilitate** knowledge-sharing, partner access and adoption of innovative technologies.

5 **Partner** with communities and strengthen community governance and land stewardship.

6 **Establish** systems to monitor impact that enables adaptive management.

Pillar 4: Market building and financing

Market building and financing mechanisms are key tools for aligning economic incentives with sustainable land and water stewardship. Methods including improving access to markets with premium prices, payments for ecosystem services (PES), water funds,[28] conservation easements, and biodiversity credits, have been successfully tested worldwide.[29,30] These mechanisms reward communities and landholders for practices that conserve biodiversity, sequester carbon, and maintain ecosystem services, creating a direct link between ecological health and economic benefit.

Integrating smallholders into markets is another key component of this process. Inclusive value chains that connect smallholders to buyers, processors, and financial services can significantly increase rural incomes while promoting sustainable land use.[31] Access to financial instruments such as micro-insurance or village savings and loan associations can help build local fiscal capacity and resilience.

Blended finance models, which combine public, private, and philanthropic capital, can de-risk investments in restoration and sustainable agriculture, unlocking capital for initiatives that might otherwise struggle to attract the funding needed to scale. These models ensure that restoration efforts are not only environmentally impactful but economically viable.

[28] TNC (2023). The Journey of Africa's Water Funds
[29] GEF (2014). GEF Investments on Payments for Ecosystem Services Schemes
[30] IIED (2013). Payments for ecosystem services: Costa Rica's recipe
[31] World Bank (2018). Working with Smallholders : A Handbook for Firms Building Sustainable Supply Chains (English)

Box 7: Market access for smallholder farmers

Smallholder farmers in sub-Saharan Africa face growing challenges from declining soil health, crop diseases, unpredictable weather, and market volatility. But their biggest challenge is often access to financing, agricultural inputs like seeds and fertilisers, and markets to sell their produce. Recognizing these challenges, One Acre Fund is investing in small-holder farmers through training, capacity building, access to inputs, credits, and markets. **One Acre Fund** is implementing comprehensive strategies, such as their 10-year climate plan focused on four pillars of smallholder resilience: plant health, soil fertility, income diversification, and safety nets.

Why it matters for philanthropies

Strengthening smallholder farmers can help to ensure food security, improved soils and watersheds, more secure livelihoods, and reduced demand for conversion of forest to farmland.

Big Harvests

- More organic matter
- Less erosion
- Better plant health
- Intercropping + trees
- Proper nutrient cycling
- Optimized soil pH

Healthy Families

- Improved nutrition
- Crop diversity
- Dietary diversity
- Regional food security

Rich Soils

- Improved yields
- Farmer livelihoods
- Climate resilience
- No deforestation
- Climate smart agriculture practices

Pillar 5: Policies and partnerships

We recognize that government and regional policies are essential to mobilize and maintain resources for landscape restoration. When policies bring together economic, social, environmental, food, and water priorities across ministries, river basins, and borders, they can unlock large-scale restoration. But to do so, they need to reflect how ecosystems, livelihoods, and climate resilience are connected. If they can achieve this, restoration can be both socially equitable and ecologically sound.

Public policy institutions in southern and eastern African regions recognize that restoration and land degradation reversal can be embedded within broader development agendas. This can help secure long-term commitments and foster collaborative approaches, while addressing data gaps and fragmentation in policy and reporting.[32] For instance, national climate strategies and biodiversity action plans can be an instrument for recognizing restoration as a key pathway to achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs), particularly those related to poverty reduction, food security, and climate action.

Mainstreaming environmental, climate, and biodiversity objectives across all relevant funds and programs can further accelerate the scale-up of restoration. In South Africa, the application of the methodology for Mapping Essential Life Support Action Areas (ELSAA) has supported responses to the global "30x30" conservation initiative and Target 3 of the Kunming Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (KMGBF). Following adoption of the KMGBF, South Africa undertook a consultation to develop a connected, ambitious response to Target 3 positioning it as a key mechanism for conserving nature while sustaining ecosystem services and underpinning livelihoods.[33]

Conducive public policy includes providing land and resource tenure security, integrated land-use and watershed planning, and fiscal incentives to local communities. Provisions for communal conservancies, biodiversity stewardship or communal area management programs are also good practices. Fiscal incentives can further enable communities, basin institutions, and authorities to manage connected landscapes collaboratively. These already exist in southern and eastern Africa, empowering local communities to manage and benefit from wildlife and natural resources on their land in return for agreeing to conserve them.

Finally, policies which incorporate greater public accountability and participation through mechanisms such as community consultations, participatory budgeting, and transparent monitoring, can help to promote the long-term buy-in of communities and the success of the associated initiatives.

[32] United Nations Development Programme (2026). Beyond Conservation Targets: Integrating Biodiversity, Climate and Livelihoods in South Africa
[33] Ibid.

Final conclusions

- **Land degradation is a defining challenge of our time,** eroding biodiversity, food security, climate resilience, and livelihoods across southern and eastern Africa, and threatening both local wellbeing and globally important ecosystems.

- **Its causes are systemic and mutually reinforcing:** Unsustainable land use, weak governance, insecure land tenure, market failures, and intensifying climate shocks interact with one another to trap communities in cycles of poverty while degrading entire landscapes.

- **There is an opportunity to address these drivers and seek to reverse land degradation:** But only through a systemic, long-term approach that tackles environmental, social, economic, and institutional dimensions together, rather than through fragmented, short-term projects.

- **The Southern and Eastern Africa Land Initiative (SEALI) is a long-term, systemic response,** bringing together five mutually reinforcing pillars:

  1. Conservation and restoration;
  2. Empowering local communities;
  3. Sustainable agricultural practices;
  4. Market-building and innovative financing; and
  5. Policy engagement and partnerships.

- **This approach can work because it is locally-led, integrated, and scalable.** It combines community stewardship, sustainable production, enabling markets, and supportive policies, while using catalytic philanthropy to de-risk innovation and unlock larger public and private investment.

- **The importance of catalytic philanthropy.** Catalytic philanthropy – giving which goes above and beyond traditional grants – can play a unique role:

  1. Galvanizing multiple funders towards systems-change approaches
  2. Achieving efficiencies and economies of scale by introducing common standards for monitoring, reporting, and verification of impacts
  3. Introducing, testing, and trialling new and innovative funding and financial mechanisms.

- **Collaboration:** Initiatives, such as SEALI, can provide a structure within which philanthropists and philanthropic organizations can collaborate effectively, helping mission-aligned partners move beyond isolated interventions to deliver longer-lasting landscape regeneration, protecting nature, strengthening resilience, and improving lives.

The COmON Foundation

Fully dedicated to large-scale holistic landscape restoration. Their mission is to reverse land degradation by restoring entire ecosystems in a way that benefits both nature and people long-term.

UBS Optimus Foundation

Dedicated to driving scalable, evidence-based solutions to improve the world for future generations. It supports high-impact initiatives that address environmental and climate challenges through innovation, collaboration, and systemic change.

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