



Reforestation - A Pathway to Achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Sikandar Ali Mandan¹, Khairur Rijal Jamaludin¹, Ayaz Ali Mandan^{1,2}

¹Faculty of Artificial Intelligence, Department of Smart Engineering & Advanced Technology Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur

²The Benazir Bhutto Shaheed University of Technology and Skill Development, Khairpur Mirs, Sindh. Pakistan

Corresponding Author: ali.sikandar@graduate.utm.my Author¹ and Author¹

ABSTRACT

Reforestation is a vital process for the restoration of forest ecosystems in areas affected by deforestation or ecological degradation. This practice has been developed to contribute to several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) such as SDG 13 (Climate Action), SDG 15 (Life on Land) and SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation). Forest ecosystems are important for regulation of ecological processes like carbon sequestration, conservation of biodiversity, control of water and provision of local livelihoods. The current research examines the link between reforestation and the SDGs concerning environmental, social, economic and governance parameters. It also points out key issues such as competition for land use, lack of long-term financing, ineffective implementation and monitoring, and limited participation of communities. Illustrative endeavors include the Great Green Wall in Africa and Pakistan's tree-repair programs to show the scope and variety of contemporary restoration efforts. Restoration can contribute to environmental sustainability, socio-economic development and climatic resilience through the linkage of reforestation projects with the SDGs.

Keywords: Reforestation, Sustainable Development Goals, Climate Change, Biodiversity

¹ Corresponding author.

Email address:

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1. Introduction

B1. Introduction

Reforestation, the process of restoring forested areas that have been depleted or degraded, has emerged as an important strategy for addressing global environmental challenges and advancing the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Forests play a pivotal role in mitigating climate change, conserving biodiversity, and supporting livelihoods, making forest restoration relevant to multiple SDGs, including climate action (SDG 13), life on land (SDG 15), and poverty reduction (SDG 1) (United Nations, 2015; Chazdon & Brancalion, 2019). Recent studies highlight the multifaceted benefits of forest restoration. Natural climate solutions, including restoration and improved management of forests, can contribute to climate change mitigation (Griscom et al., 2017). Restored forests can also recover ecosystem services, including carbon storage, soil functions, and biodiversity, although recovery varies with restoration strategy and site conditions (Chazdon et al., 2020; Chazdon & Guariguata, 2016). Reforestation and landscape restoration can also create social and economic opportunities when restoration is integrated with local livelihoods and landscape planning (Chazdon & Brancalion, 2019; Brancalion et al., 2019). A bibliometric analysis by Ma et al. (2022) identified 11 SDGs and 19 targets as relevant to forests and forestry. The study also identified 47 interactions between SDG 15 and other targets, comprising 35 synergies and 12 trade-offs. These findings demonstrate that forests and forestry intersect with a broad range of sustainable-development objectives.

Wan Mahari et al. (2020) emphasized the need to connect rainforest conservation with the UN SDGs, because deforestation affects climate, biodiversity, human health, and socioeconomic conditions. In the Malaysian context, Wan Talaat et al. (2012) examined forest biodiversity management and the policy and legal framework, highlighting the importance of effective laws and administrative measures for sustainable forest management. The role of reforestation in climate change mitigation is well documented. Forests and regenerating forests are important contributors to the global terrestrial carbon cycle although the amount of carbon sequestered varies with ecosystem type, region, forest age and management practices (Pan et al., 2011; Griscom et al., 2017). Another important dimension is biodiversity conservation: forest restoration can recover habitat and ecological functions, but outcomes are strongly dependent on species composition, landscape context and restoration practice (FAO, 2020; Holl & Brancalion, 2020). Reforestation can also contribute to socio-economic objectives by restoration-related employment, agroforestry and livelihood diversification. However, these benefits are context specific and should not be assumed to occur automatically (Chazdon & Brancalion, 2019; Chazdon & Guariguata, 2016). Urban green spaces have also been linked to the SDGs. Xiaohui et al. (2024) conducted a bibliometric analysis of the relationship between urban green space and the SDGs using Scopus data. Because this literature concerns urban green space rather than reforestation specifically, it is used here only to illustrate the wider relationship between vegetation-based interventions and sustainable urban development. Community involvement is also important in forest restoration because restoration outcomes are influenced by local institutions, land tenure, participation, and livelihood needs. Evidence on community forest management is mixed, indicating that local participation alone does not guarantee ecological or socioeconomic success (Bayrak & Marafa, 2016; Arts & de Koning, 2017).

Tree planting should also be distinguished from ecological forest restoration. Holl and Brancalion (2020) emphasized that tree planting must be carefully planned and should not be treated as a universal solution to complex environmental problems. Natural regeneration can provide an alternative or complementary pathway, where ecological and socioeconomic conditions are suitable (Chazdon & Guariguata, 2016; Chazdon et al., 2020). The IPBES (2019)

global assessment further emphasizes the importance of considering biodiversity, ecosystem services, human well-being, and local knowledge together when addressing environmental change.

Figure 1. Conceptual framework linking reforestation to selected SDGs

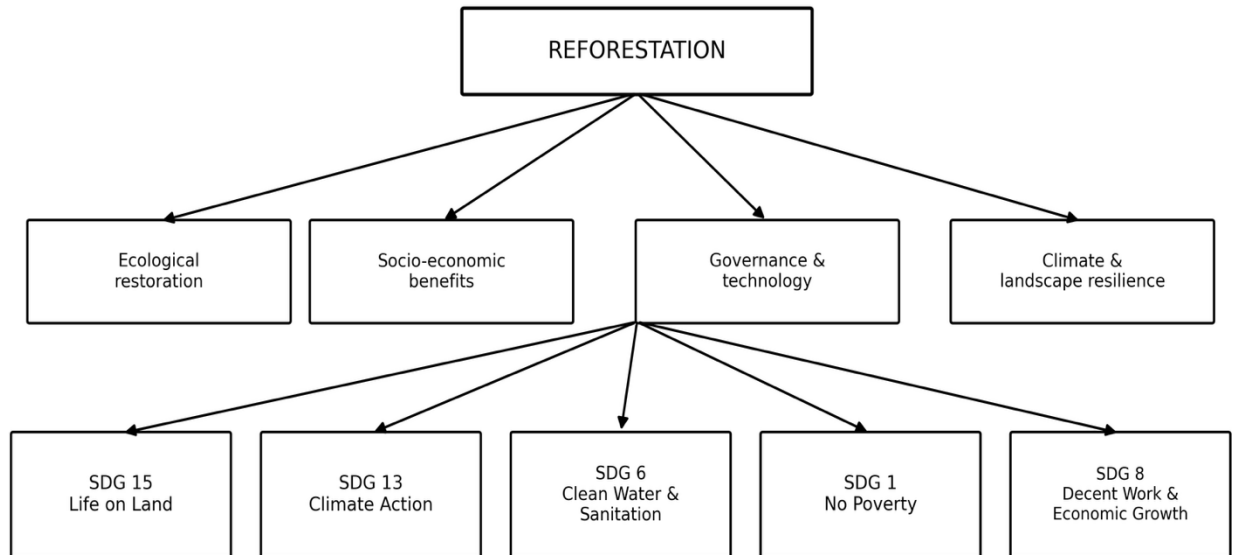
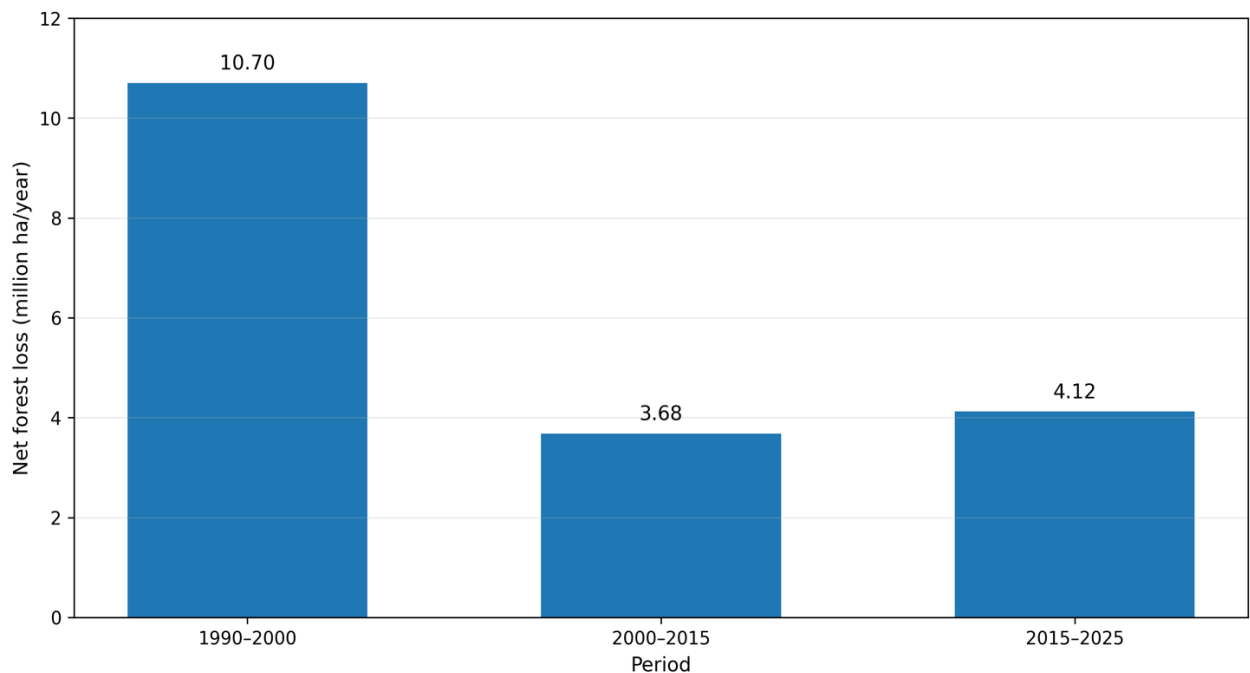


Figure 2. Global Net Forest Loss, 1990–2025

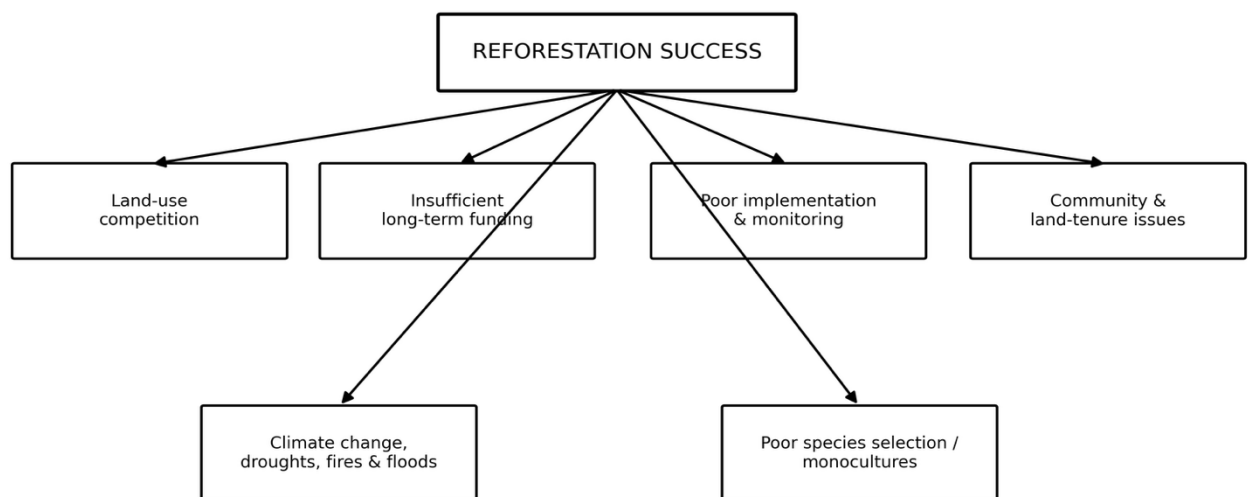


Source: FAO, Global Forest Resources Assessment 2025 (FRA 2025).

2. Key Challenges in the Intersection of Reforestation and Sustainable Development Goals

Reforestation, generally viewed as a tool to help in achieving multiple SDGs, faces several critical challenges. Land availability and competing land-use interests are a major issue. Agricultural expansion, urbanization and infrastructure development can compete with restoration objectives, making it difficult to secure appropriate land for meaningful forest restoration (Seymour & Harris, 2019; Brancalion et al., 2019). Yet another challenge is the need for long-term funding and policy continuity. Restoration projects often take a long time before ecological benefits can be seen. Short-term funding and changing policy priorities may therefore disrupt continuity and monitoring (Brancalion et al., 2019; Chazdon et al., 2020). Another challenge is weak implementation and inadequate supervision. Large-scale tree-planting programs may focus on numbers of seedlings planted rather than longer-term ecological outcomes. Survival and successful restoration efforts can be greatly affected by planting techniques, seedling condition, site conditions, and post-planting care (Preece et al., 2023). Ecological trade-offs can also be generated by monocultures or poorly chosen species (Holl & Brancalion, 2020). Other considerations are community engagement and indigenous rights. Projects imposed from above without due regard to local institutions, land tenure or community priorities may encounter difficulties in implementation. Community forest management research reports that results are context-specific and mixed (Bayrak & Marafa, 2016; Arts & de Koning, 2017). Reforestation is complicated by climate change itself. Temperature and rainfall changes can affect tree survival and planting zone suitability, and droughts, floods, fires and other extremes can influence restoration outcomes. Climate-smart reforestation must take into account both mitigation and adaptation objectives (Locatelli et al., 2015).

Figure 4. Major challenges affecting reforestation success



3. The Role of Reforestation in Sustainable Development Goals

Reforestation can contribute to several of the SDGs set up by the United Nations (United Nations, 2015). As a nature-based intervention, forest restoration can support SDG 13 by enhancing carbon storage and contributing to climate adaptation, although the scale of climate benefits is context-specific to ecosystems and management (Griscom et al., 2017; Locatelli et al., 2015). Pan et al. (2011) estimated a global forest carbon sink of 2.4 ± 0.4 petagrams of carbon per year for 1990-2007. This historical estimate is not a present day global annual value for reforestation alone, but rather indicative of the important role of forests in the terrestrial carbon cycle. Reforestation also supports SDG 15, by restoring degraded land and recovering habitat and ecological functions. According to FAO (2020), forests hold about 80% of the world's terrestrial biodiversity. Restoration can therefore contribute to biodiversity goals, but results depend on whether projects restore ecologically appropriate forest communities, not just increasing tree cover (FAO, 2020; Holl & Brancalion, 2020). Forest and landscape restoration can contribute to SDG 1 and SDG 8 from a socio-economic perspective, by providing employment and diversifying livelihoods through activities such as agroforestry, restoration work, ecotourism and non-timber forest products. Evidence suggests that benefits are contingent on local conditions and the design of restoration interventions (Chazdon & Brancalion, 2019; Chazdon et al., 2020). Reforestation also can affect SDG 6 through its role in watershed processes. Forests have an impact on water availability, runoff, erosion, sediment transport and other hydrological processes, but the direction and scale of effects depend on forest type, climate and management (Calder, 2007).

Overall, the literature shows that reforestation is not just an environmental activity; it can intersect with social, economic, climate, water and biodiversity objectives. Thus, how restoration is designed, implemented, monitored and governed affects the SDG contribution (Kim et al., 2021; Ma et al., 2022).

Figure 3. Selected SDGs supported by reforestation

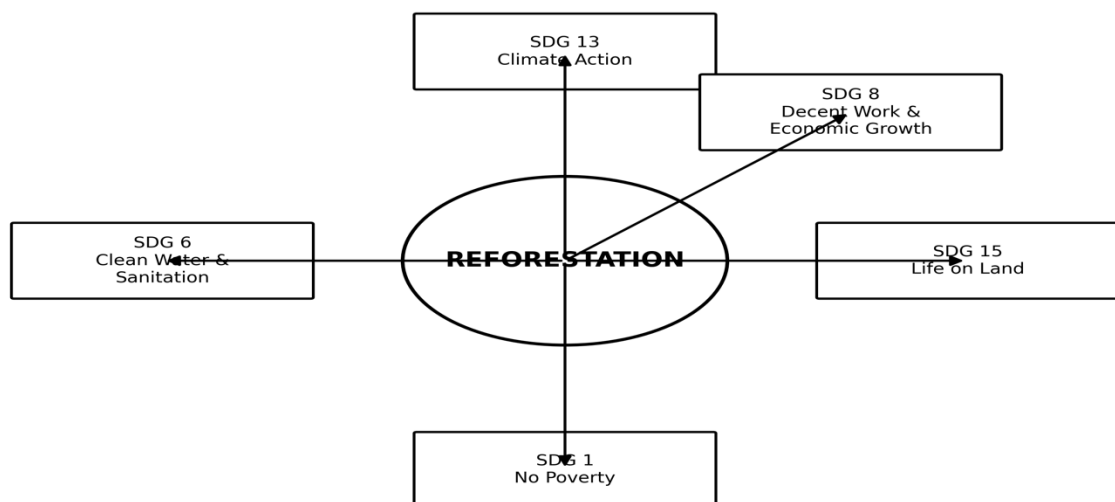


Table 1. Selected global forest-loss indicators

Indicators	Value	Source
Annual net forest loss, 1990-2000	10.7 million ha/year	FAO (2020)
Annual net forest loss, 1990-2000	10.7 million ha/year	FAO (2020)
Annual net forest loss, 2000-2015	3.68 million ha/year	FAO (2020)
Forest lost through deforestation since 1990	489 million ha	FAO (2020)
Annual net forest loss, 2015-2025	4.12 million ha/year	FAO (2025)
Annual deforestation, 2015-2025	10.9 million ha/year	FAO (2025)
Global forest area, 2025	4.14 billion ha	FAO (2025)

Table 1 shows Global Forest loss is declining, but deforestation remains a major environmental concern

4. Methods to Mitigate Deforestation and Initiate Reforestation

Effective forest governance is therefore a mix of regulatory measures, economic incentives, community participation and long-term institutional support. Restoration policies should be tailored to local ecological and socioeconomic conditions, rather than based on a single intervention (Brancalion et al., 2019; Chazdon et al., 2020).

4.1 Payment for Ecosystem Services

Payment for Ecosystem Services (PES provide financial or in-kind incentives to landholders or resource managers to maintain or improve ecosystem services. There is evidence from a range of contexts that PES can affect land-use decisions, but effectiveness of programs depends on design, targeting, conditionality and local institutions (Samii et al., 2014; James & Sills, 2019). Costa Rica is a notable example of a national PES program that supports forest conservation, restoration, regeneration and agroforestry.

4.2 Promoting Community-Based Forest Management

Involvement of local communities can increase the social legitimacy and local relevance of forest-management activities. However, evidence indicates mixed results, and therefore community participation needs to be supported by the right institutions, clear rights, technical support and accountability mechanisms (Arts & de Koning, 2017).

4.3 Adopting Agroforestry Practices

The integration of trees into agricultural systems bring environmental as well as socioeconomic benefits such as soil improvement, erosion control, biodiversity benefits and potential income diversification. The impacts are context-dependent as well as agroforestry should be created according to local crops, soil, climate, markets and land-tenure conditions (Castle et al., 2021).

4.4 Utilizing Technological Innovations

Forest monitoring, change detection and assessment of restoration outcomes can be supported by remote sensing, GIS, machine learning and other digital technologies. These technologies may be combined with field-based monitoring, especially where large areas need to be monitored repeatedly (Haq et al., 2024).

4.5 Supporting Natural Regeneration

Natural regeneration is a low-cost restoration approach when ecological and land use conditions allow forest recovery. It may contribute to native biodiversity, local adaptation and ecosystem resilience, but requires enabling governance, monitoring and protection from recurrent disturbance (Chazdon & Guariguata, 2016; Chazdon et al., 2020).

4.6 Enforcing Legal Frameworks and Land-Tenure Rights

Clear legal structures and secure rights can support sustainable forest management by delineating responsibilities, reducing uncertainty and enabling local actors to participate in resource governance. Wan Talaat et al. (2012) have discussed forest biodiversity policy and legal framework in Malaysia.

4.7 Encouraging Sustainable Supply Chains

Sustainable commodity supply chains can alleviate the pressure on forests driven by demand, thereby contributing to their protection. Measures such as certification, traceability, corporate commitments, and enhanced governance may support this objective; however, their effectiveness is contingent upon implementation and market conditions (Seymour & Harris, 2019).

4.8 Integrating Climate-Change Mitigation and Adaptation

Sustainable commodity supply chains can help reduce pressure on forests caused by demand and thus help protect them. Such measures may include certification, traceability, corporate commitments and improved governance to support this goal, but these measures are only effective when implemented and depend on market conditions (Seymour & Harris, 2019).

4.9 Fostering International Collaboration and Funding

Reforestation can contribute to both climate mitigation (carbon sequestration) and adaptation (watershed protection, habitat, and landscape resilience). Locatelli et al. (2015) contend that climate-smart reforestation should incorporate mitigation and adaptation goals and foresee climate risks.

5. Content Analysis

The content analysis integrates the literature in terms of environmental, socioeconomic, governance and technological dimensions of reforestation. Reforestation is generally

understood as the regeneration of forest cover on deforested land that has been degraded or cleared. Restoration may contribute to the recovery of biodiversity, climate mitigation, protection of soils, water regulation and socioeconomic goals (Chazdon & Brancalion, 2019; FAO, 2020). Interest in forest restoration is increasing worldwide, as indicated by international commitments such as the Bonn Challenge and the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration (2021-2030). FAO (2020) reported that since 1990, deforestation had led to the loss of about 420 million hectares of forest, whereas the net rate of forest loss has declined during the 1990-2020 period. These figures show the scale of loss over history and the continuing need for restoration and conservation.

Broadly, reforestation strategies can be split into natural regeneration and active planting. The first involves natural regeneration with minimal direct intervention, while the second involves active restoration, including deliberate planting or other interventions. Agroforestry favored natural regeneration and approaches combining ecological and socio-economic objectives can be mixed species. The right approach is context dependent (Chazdon & Guariguata, 2016; Holl & Brancalion, 2020) dependent on local environmental, social and economic conditions. The possible advantages of restoration are often overshadowed by land-use conflicts, lack of funding, poor planning, absence of community participation and climate-related risks. Projects that place a premium on planting numbers as opposed to ecological outcomes may not provide durable restoration benefits (Holl & Brancalion, 2020; Preece et al., 2023). Reforestation can enhance environmental conservation by recovering habitat, improving soil functions, and increasing carbon storage, but restored ecosystems do not necessarily reproduce all functions of intact forests and may require decades to recover (Veldkamp et al., 2020). Restoration has socio-economic impacts in terms of employment and potential diversification of livelihoods. However, benefits need to be equitably shared and connected to local needs and institutions (Chazdon & Brancalion, 2019; Chazdon et al., 2020). Effective policy instruments include land-use planning, PES, community participation, legal frameworks, and international cooperation. Monitoring and enforcement are essential for assessing whether restoration activities produce intended ecological and social outcomes (Bayrak & Marafa, 2016; James & Sills, 2019). Technological advances such as GIS, remote sensing and AI-enabled analytics can improve the scale and timeliness of forest monitoring. These technologies are to be used as a complement, not a substitute, to field observations and institutional monitoring systems (Haq et al., 2024).

6. Future Gaps and Limitations

Future research should focus on landscape-level restoration that integrates social equity, climate adaptation, biodiversity conservation, and long-term monitoring. More evidence is also needed on restoration outcomes across different ecological and socioeconomic contexts. Reforestation should not be treated as a one-size-fits-all solution; its effectiveness depends on species selection, site conditions, governance, community participation, monitoring, and long-term maintenance. A limitation of the present manuscript is that the literature synthesis was not originally documented using a fully reproducible systematic-review protocol. Future work should report database selection, search strings, inclusion and exclusion criteria, screening procedures, and coding methods so that the evidence synthesis can be replicated.

7. Conclusion

Reforestation can contribute to multiple Sustainable Development Goals through climate mitigation, biodiversity recovery, watershed functions, livelihood opportunities, and landscape resilience. However, successful outcomes depend on context-sensitive planning, ecological appropriateness, community participation, secure governance, adequate financing, and long-term monitoring. The evidence reviewed here supports an integrated approach in

which reforestation is treated as one component of broader forest and landscape restoration rather than as a stand-alone tree-planting activity.

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