

Considerations for Engagement Processes in Soil Ecosystem Restoration

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This work by Alice Stephan with the title “Considerations for Engagement Processes in Soil Ecosystem Restoration” submitted on January 19th, 2023, covers how engagement processes can support short- term and long-term/durable beneficial outcomes in restoration projects.

Soil is a key foundation of life on earth. It provides us with ecosystem services such as flood prevention or the production of food and therefore directly or indirectly benefits human well-being. Soil and its functions are however under serious threat. Up to 60% of land in the world is slightly to severely degraded threatening food security and increasing carbon emissions. There is the potential to reverse degradation and fight desertification by using sustainable land management practices.

Restoration projects provide one opportunity in the fight against desertification. Due to the diversity of stakeholders in land management, deliberative approaches are needed to reach the environmental and social goals of restoration projects. To understand how participatory approaches influence the success or failure of restoration projects, this work focusses on the “theory of participation”. It highlights how four categories of factors in engagement approaches can influence whether a project delivers beneficial environmental and social outcomes. These four categories are context, power, scalar fit and design. The most important emphasis should be laid on design, which ideally incorporates all relevant aspects of the other three categories. When considering certain design recommendations such as systematic representation of stakeholders, the inclusion of different knowledge sources or the professional facilitation into the engagement process, the likelihood for beneficial outcomes will increase. Beneficial outcomes delivered by a well-thought through, and effective design can range from increased mutual trust or acceptance of solutions to learning by participants that include value changes. These beneficial outcomes may in turn result in durable outcomes such as implementation support by stakeholders and the overall success of the restoration project.

The potential of deliberation processes to change values of participants and the way stakeholders perceive their relationship with nature provide great opportunities to move away from a world of exploitation and land management practices that lead to and support land degradation. It creates opportunities to change mindsets towards a stewardship for nature and the well-being of future generations. However, more research is needed to better understand how engagement processes in the management of restoration projects in the context of human well-being should be designed and how these can be scaled. This work concludes by highlighting living labs and arguing to utilize their establishment to study engagement in a trans-disciplinary approach.