



## Understanding the dimensions and context of participation in restoration

Past failures in forest landscape restoration were due in part to less consultative, more top-down approaches and policies, with purely local initiatives often hampered by government rules and limited resources. Based on empirical evidence, local participation must be at the heart of sustainable restoration from programme inception. But what exactly does participation mean and practically entail? There is no shortage of terms to describe participation, but they often lack clear meaning or indicators to measure them. Also, they are often based on the assumption that initiatives are externally led and locals can participate, rather than the other way around. However, participation can be better evaluated and understood by examining the dimension and the context of participation.

The “who?” dimension of participation constitutes the upstream and downstream stakeholders, local leaders, government staff and foreign personnel. The “what?” dimension constitutes the kind of participation that is present throughout the project cycle, in decision-making, implementation, access to benefits and evaluation. The “how?” dimension is the basis, form, extent and effectiveness of participation. It calls for behavioural analysis that gives insights into why participation takes place, continues, declines, or follows a particular pattern. The social, cultural, economic and political context of participation must also be considered. But predicting participatory behaviour has not

proved easy, since people with more or less the same background and involved in more or less the same activity can act and interact very differently.

Evaluating restoration projects often relies entirely on qualitative or short-term assessments by scientists and managers from external partners and local government. They have a vested interest in reporting positive results, rather than relying on objective, quantitative, long-term, field-based monitoring. Five indicators are essential for measuring the effectiveness of participation: (i) decisions are based on shared visions; (ii) implementation is clear and action-oriented; (iii) communities are encouraged to experiment and to articulate their values, which are included in decision making; (iv) open communication and collaboration among stakeholders is fostered throughout; and (v) participation is socially and economically appropriate.

Restoration is a process, not a single act, and will be successful only if undertaken by local people themselves – massive investments alone cannot succeed. Success should therefore not be measured only by the number of trees planted or the number of hectares restored. Instead, it must be assessed by looking through local people’s eyes, relating to their expectations, and understanding whether the process allows them to protect their land in the long term.

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Photo: Women constructing conservation based bench terraces in Gergera watershed, Ethiopia. Niguse Hagazi