

*Ignoring the role forests play in local livelihood strategies can undermine restoration success*

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The Trillion Trees Initiative has recently gained traction in political dialogues about climate change but using large-scale reforestation to capture and store carbon isn't a new idea. Many countries have already made ambitious commitments to restore forests under the 2011 Bonn Challenge. While tree-planting sounds like a win-win solution, in many developing countries, governments are attempting to establish or re-establish forests on public land that provides subsistence resources for communities. Many rural households still depend on small-scale agriculture for their income; if crops fail, public forest lands support the local "gig economy." Making charcoal, collecting firewood or felling timber to sell might provide much-needed income until the next harvest. When government steps in to implement intensive tree-planting on the land, it often generates conflict. Learning from these conflicts is critical to the success of future reforestation efforts.

Malawi, one of the poorest countries in the world, provides an excellent case study. Under the Bonn Challenge, the government committed to reforest over 30% of the country by 2030, but at least in the south, few trees planted under government projects survive. To understand why these efforts fail and how to turn the tide, I organized eight focus groups with stakeholders from across the poverty spectrum. Citizens living in forest-adjacent villages, forest researchers from the government and university, and government staff from agricultural extension programs were separated into small groups to address two questions: What has kept forest restoration in Malawi from being socially or ecologically successful? What is the one thing that will be critical to "get right" in order for future restoration efforts to have socially and ecologically beneficial outcomes? Each group developed a Bayesian Belief Network—basically, a conceptual map—of the one critical thing and the factors that affect the outcome.

Seven groups identified the same reforestation barrier: poverty. Multiple groups agreed that training and funding for entrepreneurs, access to improved agricultural technologies, and alternative employment opportunities were crucial to poverty alleviation. Citizens and practitioners emphasized that until Malawi's government invests in economic development in forest-adjacent communities, the poor have no back-up livelihood strategies except exploiting forest lands, undermining reforestation. This study suggests that diverse stakeholders shared a lot of common ground when they envisioned solutions, and that giving the poor a voice in reforestation planning is imperative to addressing underlying socioeconomic problems, preempting conflicts, and poising future reforestation efforts for success in drawing down carbon.



*Looking across the fields to the Zomba-Malosa Forest Reserve on the mountains, Malawi. Photo credit: Abigail Whittaker.*

Plain language summary from article: Whittaker, AR. Why we fail: Stakeholders' perceptions of the social and ecological barriers to reforestation in southern Malawi. *People Nat.* 2020; 2: 450– 467. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pan3.10084>