Land and Investments in Africa: Reflections from community engagements by the Land and Investments Research Cluster of the Future Earth Africa Hub Leadership Centre (FEAHLC)

The ISER's Science Cluster on Land and Investment visits the chilly Eastern Cape

Members of the ISER-led Science Cluster on Land and Investments in Africa (SCOLIA) visited the Eastern Cape province for the first time on the week of the 8th of September 2024. This was the first meeting of the cluster, which is funded under the Future Earth Africa Hub Leadership Centre (FEAHLC) at Rhodes University and University of Pretoria.

The main objective of the visit (and events) was to foster stronger ties across three regions of the continent on community engagement, research, and skills co-development. To do these, members attended various planned events to learn about the ISER and its research interests in the province. Other activities included discussions of developing training materials for short learning programmes to support and co-develop varied skills in communities where research is conducted across the continent. The week started with a planning meeting in the ISER's research seminar room on the morning of the 8th. After this planning session members travelled through the vast landscape via the former Ciskei homeland towards the border of Lesotho in the towns of Matatiele and Cedarville, including the surrounding villages like Black Diamond. Below are summaries of the week in text and visuals by the team.

1. Background and context

Land and its associated investments are critical to Africa's sustainable development and represent land tenure, land restoration, and environmental, and household impacts. Future Earth Africa Leader Hub Leadership Centre (FEAHLC) hosts several research clusters on sustainability science in Africa. The Land and Investments in Africa research cluster of FEAHLC comprises a multidisciplinary team of natural scientists, social scientists, ecologists, economists, and early career researchers. Livestock auctions animate the dynamic and complex value chain that links land, farmers/communities, investments and markets. The team recently visited a cattle auction at CCM in Matatiele South Africa and participated in ERS community engagement meetings to understand community-driven restoration efforts' local practices, challenges, and success stories. The reflections from the field visit provide valuable lessons that integrate ecological, economic, and social perspectives on sustainable land management.



Above: Members of the FEALH Lands and Investments Cluster on a field trip to Matatiele 08 - 13 September 2024

The team engaged and learned from the community's experiences, explored the intersection of ecological restoration and economic viability, and identify opportunities for collaborative research and capacity-building.



Above: Stakeholders meeting in Matatiele

Community Profile:

Matatiele is a semi-arid region where agricultural productivity is threatened by land degradation and climate variability. Some of the primary agricultural activities of the community are crop farming, and livestock farming, amongst others.

They also engage in land restoration practices such as erosion control and water management, engage in free-range farming and organise regular cattle auctions as a source of income.



Above: Meeting with the community in Matatiele

Cattle Auctions



Above: AAM cattle auction in Matatiele Economic viability and livelihood strategies The team noted the importance of linking environmental conservation with livelihood diversification through cattle auctions, which serve as both a market event and a community gathering. Free-range farming is a cost-effective practice that enhances cattle health and quality, fetching better prices at auctions. The key lesson is that integrating sustainable land management with market-driven strategies can enhance economic resilience and reduce vulnerability to climatic shocks.



Environmental restoration and ecological benefits:

The community employs traditional restoration practices in agroforestry to prevent soil erosion. The key lesson was that combining traditional knowledge with scientific insights can optimise restoration outcomes and foster ecosystem resilience. Community Engagement and Social Capital



The success of land restoration initiatives heavily relies on funding, support from government and civil society, strong community cohesion, local leadership, and knowledge exchange. The presence of women highlighted the role of women in driving restoration efforts. Ultimately, social capital and inclusive participation are essential for the sustainability and scalability of environmental restoration projects. The key lesson is that strengthening institutional support, access to resources, and adaptive capacity is crucial for addressing challenges in land restoration.

4. Lessons learned and recommendations

4.1. Integrating ecological and economic goals

Land restoration projects should aim to balance ecological health with economic benefits. Diversified income-generating activities like cattle auctions can complement restoration goals. Future interventions could explore value-added products (e.g., organic meat and dairy) to enhance market opportunities.

4.2. Building capacity and empowering local communities

Training and capacity-building programs are needed to enhance technical skills in sustainable land management, water management, and climate-smart agriculture. In addition, empowering women can lead to more inclusive and sustainable land management and environmental restoration outcomes.

4.3. Leveraging partnerships among government and civil society

Collaborations between local communities, research institutions, and NGOs can facilitate knowledge exchange, resource mobilisation, and the co-creation of context-specific solutions. Creating platforms for peer-to-peer learning among stakeholders can inspire and drive change, promote policy, and strengthen institutions. This is also important to support community-led land restoration, sustainable agriculture practices, and institutional frameworks that provide technical support and financial incentives to encourage sustainable practices.



Challenges identified

Among the key challenges identified are drought and veld fire. Drought leads to the loss of soil moisture, reducing the fertility and structure of the soil making it prone to erosion. In addition, drought causes water scarcity which affect restoration projects as new plants cannot thrive, particularly in dryland areas. Prolonged droughts have impacts on wildlife and delays in ecological recovery

Veld fires (wild fires) destroy large areas of vegetation, including forests, grasslands, and wetlands, which are crucial for biodiversity. This disruption affects land restoration efforts by eliminating native plant species and altering soil conditions. Moreover, soils are often left exposed and vulnerable to erosion after veld fires. Repeated veld fires can fundamentally alter ecosystem structures, making it difficult to restore the land to its previous state and leading to decline of species.



Above:

Universities as partners in finding sustainable solutions to societal challenges

• Touching base at the Institute of Social and Economic Research (ISER) at Rhodes University

The field visits generated a lot of interest amongst cluster members and served as an eye opener to some of the pressing sustainability challenges of communities. This necessitated further discussions. Thus upon return to Rhodes University, cluster members engaged in lively debates and interactions on how to address some of the issues observed from the field. Cluster members also exchanged ideas and explored opportunities for collaborations and research.



• Working visit to the Institute for Water Research (IWR) at Rhodes University

South Africa being a semi-arid nation makes the issue of sustainable water supply an urgent issue for key stakeholders. The Institute for Water Research (IWR) at Rhodes University is a one of the leaders in the field of research towards the management of water resources. Members of the Land and Investment cluster paid a working visit to the institute where they were received by Prof. Nelson Odome. Prof. Nelson gave a background of the institute and informed the delegation that the institute has a core mandate of proffering solutions to the pressing water-related challenges faced in South Africa, Africa and the globally. Moreover, the IWR is producing knowledge, advancing sustainable solutions, and promoting informed water policy and management. The IWR incorporates the African Research Universities Alliance (ARUA) Water Centre of Excellence (COE) and the Centre for Environmental Water Quality (CEWQ). It is also the lead of the African Water Resources Mobility Network (AWaRMN), the Water Sustainability Science Cluster as well as being the co-host of the Africa-Europe Cluster of Research Excellence (CORE) in Water.



5. Conclusion

The field visit provided rich insights into land management and land restoration. It highlights the interlinkages between ecological sustainability, economic viability, and social dynamics. The reflections and lessons learned will guide future research, collaboration, and policy advocacy to promote sustainable land management and community resilience. By fostering a holistic approach that integrates diverse perspectives, it is possible to create sustainable and thriving landscapes that benefit both people and nature.



Above:

Above: Gabriella Yeboah chats with Dayne Weber and Fiedler Björn after the meeting

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