

# Unrooting Neo-colonial Assumptions within Tree-Plantations

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***Many of today's tree-planting initiatives have severe consequences for local communities and ecosystems. Most importantly, they hide neo-colonial assumptions surrounding nature in the Global South. An academic at Utrecht University explains this in her research and spotlights the potential role of so-called 'boundary organizations' in increasing the inclusivity of tree-planting practices.***



Sunset in the Kenyan Savanna landscape in Africa.

We've probably all heard about ambitious tree-planting projects, search engines, and fundraisers that paint a world full of lavish forests that counteract the problem of carbon emissions. However, a darker truth obscures the success of such initiatives. What most of us don't know, is that many of today's tree-planting practices enclose neo-colonial ideals and objectives. These turn a blind eye to the well-being of local communities in marginalized regions of the world, depicting ancient grasslands in the Global South as arid ecosystems in need of saving.

A recent study by Annaflavia Tarullo, an academic at Utrecht University in The Netherlands, spotlights the neo-colonial foundations underpinning tree-planting practices in the Global South. She proposes that the work carried out by so-called 'boundary organizations' could be a possible solution to ensuring more equitable practices related to tree-planting.

## The hidden risks of tree-planting

Before digging into the biases of tree-planting practices and possible solutions, here is a short recap of the two biggest risks of such initiatives. To begin with, replacing natural grasslands with tree plantations, such as eucalyptus, reduces an area's streamflow. This is because plantations require a much bigger amount of water, and in naturally more arid grasslands, their uptake of water might exceed annual rainfall. This decreases the availability of water supply for local communities, drastically impacting their well-being.

Additionally, tree-planting in previously unforested areas pushes out native animal and plant species which prefer open and bright environments. A large part of the grasslands in Sub-Saharan Africa, for instance, support the remaining herds of Pleistocene megafauna and are rich in local biodiversity. Importantly, local communities rely on this land for livestock and have deeply rooted cultural and spiritual ties to it. Projects like the Bonn Challenge aim to plant trees in these grasslands, without accounting for existing fauna and flora and the practices of local individuals.

## Can the past affect today's tree-planting practices?

As Tarullo explains, many of today's tree-planting projects start off with the assumption that the land they target is 'degraded' and 'deforested'. The problem with this is that often such claims are not sufficiently grounded in scientific empirical research and are actually incorrect. Now you might be wondering, why are these claims proliferated then? Well, the short answer is that certain types of ecosystems, such as grasslands and savannas, have often been perceived as inferior compared to more Eurocentric ecosystems - like forests. This is mainly because of past processes of colonialization, which have shaped the way we perceive nature today.

Because of this, global maps of deforestation and degradation have, for centuries, portrayed unwooded ecosystems as in need of restoration and reforestation. Even if research on the negative consequences of tree-planting in unsuitable ecosystems is emerging, these faulty maps seem to have a hold on what policymakers and private firms base their decisions on. This is clearly problematic, especially in light of the heightening impacts of climate change on already vulnerable communities and ecosystems in the Global South.

## A quick dive into the work of boundary organizations

Now that we have touched upon the neo-colonial foundations of many of today's tree-planting initiatives, it is time to look at possible ways forward. In her research, Tarullo defines boundary organizations as formal institutions that work at the frontier between science and policy. By this, she means institutions that gather scientific information to provide advice to decisionmakers. While this may sound like something consultants would do, boundary organizations work at much larger scales.

An example of such an organization is the renowned Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, or simply the IPCC. Such institutions have the power to coordinate the efforts and relations between scientists and policymakers to inform decisions. As they are supposed to maintain a neutral stance, they have the ability and responsibility to ensure that the interests of all actors and stakeholders are heard and considered. This leads to them being able to foster more inclusive and transparent processes of knowledge exchange between important actors.

## Unrooting neo-colonial assumptions: The way forward

In her research, Tarullo decided to explore the possible role of boundary organizations in unrooting the neo-colonial assumptions supporting many tree-planting initiatives in the Global South. Her results ultimately show that boundary organizations could have a strong potential in achieving this, but only if critical areas of their work are improved.

First of all, Tarullo was surprised to find that these organizations also tend to follow biased assumptions surrounding grasslands, proving how embedded certain narratives are in our society. It is therefore pivotal for boundary organizations to acknowledge their biases and address them by instead relying on more novel and accurate maps of degradation that are free of neo-colonial legacies.

Since boundary organizations also work at the site of the tree-planting projects, they often engage with local stakeholders to coordinate their relations with decision-makers. However, similar to the pervasion of biased assumptions around grasslands, these organizations are not always successful in providing local groups with an equal footing in the cooperation process. This is why Tarullo highlights the importance of addressing the power imbalances that exist within boundary organization's work itself and underlines the need for more participatory, intercultural approaches to decision-making.

All in all, it is important to make use of existing institutions that have the potential of mitigating the remnants of colonial legacies, such as boundary organizations. However, it is also important to maintain a critical outlook on their equitability, given the depth to which colonial roots can survive. By doing so, the ongoing presence of colonial residues can be exposed and the colonial structures that drive climate change solutions eradicated.