

# UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration 2021-2030

## Partnership, Outreach and Communication Strategy

### Summary Version

#### Background: A Decade for Action

When the United Nations Decade on Ecosystem Restoration was adopted by the General Assembly (UNGA) on 1 March 2019, it was backed by unusually broad support from member states. More than seventy countries came together to sponsor the proposal.

This enthusiasm is rooted in the many significant promises that restoration holds: Protecting critical ecosystems and bringing back what has been lost makes up one third of the climate solution needed by 2030, according to scientists. Over one million species – from tiny insects to mammals like leopards and apes – are currently threatened by extinction. Restoring the habitat they depend on is critical in the fight for their survival.

But it's not only nature that is being damaged. Experts estimate that one third of Earth's agricultural land is already severely degraded due to monocultures and excessive use of agrochemicals. Shifting to more sustainable farming methods will help secure nutrition on a planet that soon has to feed nine billion.

Healthy ecosystems are therefore critical to the achievement of all Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the Paris Climate Agreement, the UN's Land Degradation Neutrality goal<sup>1</sup> and the Convention on Biological Diversity's (CBD) new global framework, currently under discussion. Under the Bonn challenge, more than sixty countries have already pledged their contribution to restoring 350 million hectares of landscapes by 2030. In the marine and coastal sectors, regional collaborations around key biodiversity hotspots like Southeast Asia's Coral Triangle, Micronesia or the Mesoamerican reef have led the way in restoration commitments. The Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries outlines international standards for restoration and recovery at sea.

Rather than setting new targets, the Decade on Ecosystem Restoration will act as accelerator towards the achievement of these global goals under one shared vision:

*A world where we have restored the relationship between humans and nature: Where we increase the area of healthy ecosystems and put a stop to their loss and degradation – for the health and wellbeing of all life on earth and that of future generations.*

#### Strategic approach: Creating a restoration imperative

In the context of the Decade, ecosystem restoration refers to a wide continuum of practices ranging from tree planting to increasing the capacity of agricultural fields to store carbon and the recovery of fish stock along resilient coasts and reefs.

What all these approaches have in common, however, is that they offer positive actions: The more we do in support of restoration, the better the outcome for our shared planet. Lately, this positive message has captured the imagination of a wider public – especially in relation to trees: Countries have set new records, planting millions of trees within just one day, fundraisers in support of reforestation raise millions of Dollars in record-time and scientific publications debating the global restoration potential make splashes in mainstream media.

---

<sup>1</sup> Under the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD)

Despite this recent swell of attention, restoration is not a new idea. Practitioners around the world are working on reviving damaged ecosystems – from large-scale programs covering millions of hectares to plots managed by smallholder farmers or communities. However, restoration is fraught with difficulties and not a straightforward endeavour – just as planting a tree is not the same as growing it.

The Decade’s overarching Strategy identifies a set of barriers common to most restoration initiatives:

- **Public awareness:** Despite the recent attention to prominent efforts, the global public is still largely unaware of the extent to which ecosystem degradation is impacting the well-being and livelihoods of billions of people, the costs of this degradation, and the profound benefits that would come with restoration.
- **Political will:** Partially resulting from this lack of societal awareness, restoration still does not rank high as priority with many governments, and some policies – such as the structures of agricultural subsidies – are even detrimental to restoration goals.
- **Implementation capacity:** Ecosystems are complicated beasts and trying to recover them from a degraded state is fraught with difficulties. Capacity constraints that restoration practitioners are facing stretch from technical know-how to managerial skills, dealing with tenure systems, access to support structures. These limitations prevent them from going to scale.
- **Research and development:** Restoration outcomes are tricky to capture in all their dimensions and only show their full effect over time. This makes restoration not only complicated, but complex. Long-term scientific research is needed to inform the design of effective ecosystem restoration techniques at site level.
- **Financing:** The benefits of restoration outweigh expenditures, and the costs of inaction are far higher than the costs of action. But due to the complex and long-term nature of the global restoration challenge, innovative instruments that blend private and public resources are needed. Policy makers have the power to shift financial flows from those that incentivize the degradation of ecosystems to those that lead to protection and sustainable use.

Based on interviews, surveys and workshops engaging hundreds of participants – including a dedicated stream for youth – the Decade’s overarching Strategy identifies three pathways to realize the global restoration vision:

1. Generation of a **global movement**, focused on shifting societal norms and behaviours towards those in support of restoration
2. Fostering **political will** to change legislative, regulatory and policy frameworks in order to catalyse ecosystem restoration
3. Building **technical capacity** by providing the best available methods for designing, implementing and sustaining ecosystem restoration initiatives to restoration practitioners

### Communication approach: New Power and lasting momentum

Communication plays a substantial role in paving and guiding each of these pathways – but just as restoration itself is fraught with challenges, so is communicating it:

1. **There is enthusiasm for restoration, but not necessarily deep understanding of it:** Positive messaging and a spirit of friendly competition have fuelled media stories and fundraising around individual tree planting efforts. This is a success for the wider environmental community, which has long focused on raising awareness around the importance of forests and trees. However, experts now voice concerns that the prominence of tree planting paints a misleading picture of restoration. In the worst case, well-meaning efforts can even have detrimental impacts. For example, if the wrong species is selected or brought to ecosystems where it can cause serious harm. Neither do public tree plantings and the communications around them reflect the links between ecosystem degradation and consumption and

production patterns like food systems. Despite the enthusiasm for positive local acts of restoration, the topic still does not feature prominently in global climate and environment movements. Here, calls to action center on addressing energy and transportation issues. Impactful restoration communication must therefore surf the tree-planting wave while simultaneously trying to guide it towards a more nuanced understanding.

- 2. Crossing the knowledge-practice gap:** Surveys and studies point towards growing environmental awareness across most countries. Environmental topics feature more often in traditional and social media, understanding of environmental issues is increasing and people rank these topics highly on the list of priorities that the government, society or they themselves should address. At the same time, there is a significant gap between people's cognition and affection on one hand and behaviour on the other. The Decade's communication aims to go beyond awareness-raising by providing actionable knowledge to people in their various roles as consumers, farmers, teachers, parents, students, investors, voters or members of clubs.
- 3. Making restoration globally relevant, locally tangible:** Different from other big environmental challenges, restoration can only ever be understood in its local context. Planting trees is critical at the buffer zones of tropical forests or in mountainous areas threatened by landslides but is detrimental in grasslands. Barriers to restoration are equally varied: In some localities, it may be economically competing land uses, whereas in others tenure rights and legal issues hinder the conversion of land to its original state. To deal with this complexity, the Decade's communication has to empower practitioners and initiatives to tell their stories while providing them with a network of champions, influencers, peers and supporters.

These three communication needs seem like overwhelming asks to a lean Decade core team. But again, restoration is nothing new and has been spearheaded by thousands of practitioners and hundreds of networks across the world for years. What is new is the renaissance of environmental movements, from those focusing on local landscapes and coastlines to those calling for action on global issues. This is the energy that the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration will tap into – translating increased awareness, motivation to engage and a sense of urgency into positive action and support for healthy ecosystems.

The Decade will build on existing communities rather than creating its own structures, unleash potential rather than manage deliverables and guide new initiatives rather than drive implementation. This approach to communication builds on insights from movement theory, behavioural science and the study of “New Power”.

New power is not about progress in technology or (social) media, but nothing less than a fundamental shift in values. While old power rests in institutionalism, competition, a culture of experts and long-term affiliation, new power thrives in informal networks, collaboration, a “do-it-ourselves” ethic and wide, spontaneous participation.

### Communication goals and objectives: A network of engaged participants

There is one common factor that cuts across these theoretical insights and experiences: Identifying and carving out meaningful opportunities and incentives for all participants. This requires understanding their specific needs and interests. Current academic literature and surveys like the

Edelman Trust Barometer highlight an increased hunger for engagement and active participation – albeit at varying levels of capacity, motivation and loyalty.

Participation can be thought of as a ladder with mere complying and consuming at the lower rungs and going up to sharing, affiliating, adapting, funding, producing and shaping. Offering meaningful participation therefore translates into providing audiences with different avenues that take them along to higher levels of engagement. Interested readers who have started with consuming information about the benefits of tree planting could move to crowdfunding for an initiative they support or even start their own local group.

In the context of restoration and based on the consultations and interviews, the Decade’s communication strategy differentiates between three broad groups of participants:

#### Global Actors

These are the organizations, corporations, institutions and influential individuals that are well-connected at the international level and aware of current discourses and debates relevant to the Decade. This participant group crosses sectoral boundaries – it includes UN organizations, member states, larger NGOs, international research institutes, thought leaders, celebrities, leading academia as well as multinational corporations and banks. Global Actors influence restoration goals by using their own voices, programmes and channels to support the cause, implement larger initiatives – or shift away from harmful practices.

#### General Public

Members of the general public are as diverse as the group of global actors. They also cross sectoral boundaries and can make significant contributions to achieving global goals. Their greatest impact is within their immediate environments. Collectively, their choices and activities influence the state of ecosystems and the wider political and societal landscape.

#### Local Implementers

This group could also be dubbed the “missing middle”: In contrast to the general public, local implementers have a direct impact on a global goal such as restoration in their professional or semi-professional capacity. They have greater technical knowledge and awareness of the specific barriers to restoration. However, they are also often financially volatile and lack access to global networks. Similar to the two other participant groups, this group transcends sectors. For example, it includes restoration initiatives active in a particular landscape, farmers managing their lands, those advising and building technical capacity as well as local financiers.

Specific communication messages and participation avenues will be tailored to the members of these broader groups, guided by careful analysis. The full communication strategy breaks down the asks, vision, barriers and barrier removal tactics for relevant groups such as policy makers, consumers, investors, teachers, parents, youth, farmers and others with a significant impact on restoration goals.

Crucially, however, these groups are not treated traditionally as “audience” to be addressed in a top-down manner, but as active participants that have an impact on the Decade’s shape and – even more importantly – each other.

The **Theory of Change** underlying the Decade’s communication efforts builds on these dynamics:

IF the Decade facilitates a **global movement** that connects global actors, local implementers and the general public around restoration

THEN the potential and successes of existing restoration, regeneration and protection initiatives will be amplified

RESULTING IN broad public support and **political will** in favour of restoration across sectors and segments of society

THEREBY

- Engaging citizens in ecosystem restoration – through active involvement, financial and political support
- Shifting consumer behaviour to support sustainable restoration value chains
- Inspiring policy leadership in designing frameworks that incentivize restoration and discourage unsustainable ecosystem management and destruction
- Increasing investors' and larger companies' understanding of and appetite for investing in ecosystem restoration

IN TURN boosting the **capacity** of existing restoration initiatives to scale, as well as the initiation of new ones

CONTRIBUTING TO the achievement of ecosystem protection and restoration goals by 2030

### Activity sets and partnership structure: Creating a #GenerationRestoration

To turn insights and momentum into action, the communication strategy recommends seven major activity sets. They are designed to be jointly implemented by interested participants – and to the benefit of all.

#### Activity Set 1: Forming an alliance of connected connectors

Activating and continuously including connected connectors – those individuals and entities that are highly credible and motivated in their contributions to ecosystem restoration – underpins the Strategy's entire approach to communication. Establishing the basis for a movement-driven and networked approach to the Decade's implementation is more than a communication activity. It is the foundation for all activity sets.

Examples of specific activities include:

- Selection of Decade partners and governance structures (*see below*)
- Engaging prominent voices, ambassadors, champions and far-reaching media platforms to elevate messages and calls to action by all partners
- Volunteer program to place interested participants with restoration initiatives in need of skilled support
- Journalist network dedicated to reporting on Decade progress and highlights

#### Activity Set 2: Building the Decade's digital home

An interactive, digital platform will play an essential role in the Decade by fulfilling three central functions:

1. **Connecting** the three groups identified above – global actors, local implementers and an increasingly engaged general public – in support of each other
2. **Tracking** the combined impacts of individual efforts against global goals
3. **Building** the world's largest database of ongoing restoration initiatives and engaged supporters

Examples of specific activities include:

- Partnerships with leaders from the technology space to build and guide digital development
- Collaboration with the start-up and digital technology ecosystem to incentivize innovation for restoration
- Innovation challenges to solve the world's biggest restoration challenges

### Activity Set 3: Establishing pathways for meaningful youth engagement

Youth have emerged as the most influential voice in the global climate and environmental movement. The Strategy recommends building on this enthusiasm by transforming anxiety about climate change and biodiversity into positive actions for restoration. At the same time, however, it cautions that all engagement opportunities for youth should be meaningful and contribute to the development of skills and competency.

Examples of specific activities include:

- Empowering a Decade Youth Network led by the young champions behind existing initiatives
- Youth-focused media collaborations engaging the leading sources of information for young people such as online video streaming and new social platforms
- Restoration lessons, modules and the initialization of restoration plots at schools and informal education institutions

### Activity Set 4: Leading regular activations for mobilization of the wider public

The development of communication infrastructure, partnerships and networks is an important prerequisite for the Decade's movement-driven approach to communication. However, it will not be enough. To stimulate and keep momentum across the Decade's lifetime, the Strategy recommends regular activations aimed at mobilizing the general public. The ultimate goal is to motivate members of the general public to become active participants in ecosystem restoration – and use their influence to support existing initiatives, especially those of local implementers.

Examples of specific activities include:

- Knowledge, attitude and practice surveys to gauge the status of current awareness and action
- Public-facing Decade launch campaigns to elevate the cause and actions of all partners
- Challenges and competitions to portray the many and ever-changing faces of restoration
- Creative collaborations with artists and the creative industries to build a culture of restoration

### Activity Set 5: Leveraging key events and conferences

Events constitute the only opportunity for a large set of participants from different sectors and regions to interact directly with the Decade. Events can take place on-site or virtually, in the form of discussions and exchanges or celebration of holidays and achievements. These occasions are fundamental to the communication approach the Decade is taking.

Examples of specific activities include:

- Reaching key decision makers and millions of participants through the UN's and other international events
- Building out sectoral and cross-sectoral conferences as decision-making and debating platforms for the Decade
- Online activations around current news and media stories with a relevance for restoration or popular internet holidays to reach billions worldwide

### Activity Set 6: Advocate for changes in policy and business practices

Social mobilization and individual behaviour change alone are insufficient to achieve global ecosystem restoration and protection goals. They need to be complemented by changes in the wider policy and business environment that enable restoration and discourage ecosystem degradation.

Communication plays an important role for advocacy by activating member states, putting a spotlight on the latest knowledge and sharing good business practices.

Examples of specific activities include:

- Preparing restoration best practice toolkits for member states
- Celebrating and honouring restoration champions alongside key policy events
- Publishing regular assessment reports around restoration potential, best practices and conducive policies
- Collaboration with leaders from business and finance to directly fund restoration by restructuring value chains or providing incentives

#### Activity Set 7: Implement targeted communication efforts in focus countries

Communication efforts tailored to local contexts in focus countries can help shift policies and behaviours in the places where this is most needed – be it based on countries’ restoration potential or their footprint as financiers and consumers. Furthermore, focus countries play an important role in ground-truthing the Strategy’s Theory of Change, assumptions and predictions. The full communication strategy provides suggestions for focus countries based on places where prospective Decade partners and flagship initiatives are already active.

Examples of specific activities include:

- Media training to raise awareness around ecosystem restoration among nationally important outlets and reporters
- Communication, marketing and behavioural insights training for local restoration leaders to scale successful initiatives
- Inspiring in-country restoration networks to act as local coordinators and ambassadors

None of these activity sets can be implemented by the organizations officially tasked with leading the Decade – UNEP and FAO – alone. Likewise, benefits accruing from increased attention to restoration will benefit all active partners.

The strategy therefore proposes an open and transparent approach to partnership building, based on five categories:

**Core Partners:** Core partners are the organizations tasked by UNGA with implementing the Decade – UNEP and FAO. They will be the sole partners at this level throughout the Decade.

**Decade Partners:** Entities engaging with the Decade at the top level with representation at all relevant committees and highest visibility on relevant communication products. Decade Partners provide financial or in-kind support to deliverables outlined under the Decade’s strategies. They commit to linking their own members, audiences and networks to the Decade and its activities. In turn, they have the power to “verify” contributing initiatives – including their own local partners and members – to benefit from the Decade’s support structure.

**Contributing Initiatives:** Organizations involved directly in restoration initiatives and leading restoration at the local level. This partnership category is most suitable for the participant group of local implementers identified earlier but could also include global actors who do not become Decade partners. To measure impact and additionality, contributing initiatives are expected to self-report on predefined indicators, such as hectares restored, or people involved. Contributing initiatives can tap into the Decade’s support system which could take the form of fundraising, crowdfunding, advocacy and exposure to global media.

**Funding Partners and Sponsors:** Funding partners and sponsors directly support the Decade financially or through in-kind support. In contrast to Decade partners or contributing initiatives, they do not necessarily implement restoration projects themselves but rather seek collaboration with the Decade to channel their resources in support of restoration. Funding Partners will receive the highest level of visibility on all relevant products and updates on the Decade's progress.

**Connectors:** Individuals, media outlets, corporations or new media platforms with the ability to spread the Decade's message and engagement opportunities beyond the group of its partners and their constituents. The primary purpose of engaging connectors is to elevate restoration as positive environmental action on the global agenda and put a spotlight on successful local champions.