



SDG synergy between agriculture and forestry in the food, energy, water and income nexus: reinventing agroforestry?☆

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Among the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) three broad groups coexist: first, articulating demand for further human resource appropriation, second, sustaining the resource base, and third, redistributing power and benefits. Agriculture and forestry jointly interact with all three. The SDG portfolio calls for integrated land use management. Technological alternatives shift the value of various types of land use (forests, trees and agricultural practices) as source of 'ecosystem services'. At the interface of agriculture and forestry the 40-year old term agroforestry has described technologies (AF1) and an approach to multifunctional landscape management (AF2). A broadened Land Equivalence Ratio (LER) as performance metric indicates efficiency. Agroforestry also is an opportunity to transcend barriers between agriculture and forestry as separate policy domains (AF3). Synergy between policy domains can progress from recognized tradeoffs and accepted coexistence, via common implementation frames, to space for shared innovation. Further institutional space for integral 'all-land-uses' approaches is needed.

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Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability 2018, **34**:33–42

This review comes from a themed issue on **Sustainability science**

Edited by **Ken E Giller, Ira Martina Drupady, Lorenza B Fontana & Johan A Oldekop**

For a complete overview see the [Issue](#)

Available online 10th October 2018

Received: 05 February 2018; Accepted: 23 September 2018

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cosust.2018.09.003>

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"The existence of large numbers of people in the fragile ecosystems of the developing world, and the fact that these ecosystems occupy the greater proportion of the land of the developing economies, suggest that means must be devised which will assist in increasing the productivity of these ecosystems while at the same time either rehabilitating them or arresting the process of degradation. Agroforestry is a system of land management which seems to be suitable for these ecologically brittle areas. It combines the protective characteristics of forestry with the productive attributes of both forestry and agriculture. It conserves and produces." (King) [1]

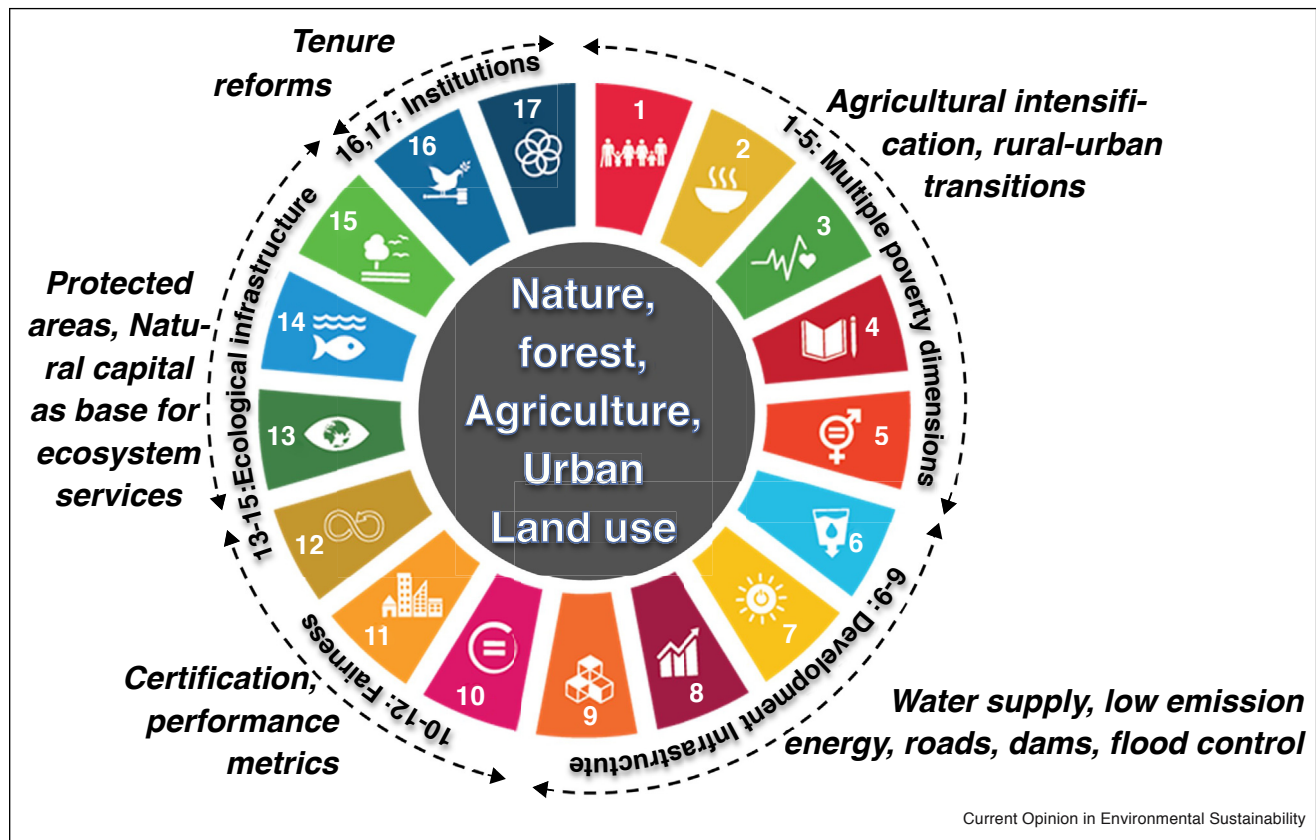
Introduction

The formulation of Millennium Development Goals, precursor to current Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) brought the ending of poverty and the need for environmental sustainability on the same 'goal' level in high-level discourse [2]. It allowed multifunctional land uses, such as agroforestry, to gain wider support [3]. With the SDG agenda⁴ of the United Nations, agreed upon by 193 countries in September 2015, the debate has shifted from 'willingness' to 'ability to act'. Because the human brain is challenged when a list contains more than 3–5 items, there have been many attempts to group the 17 SDGs [4,5]. One way (Figure 1) is to recognize five groups: first, SDG 1–5 deal with multiple dimensions of poverty (food, income, health, education, gender), second, SDG 6–9 with development infrastructure (water, energy), third, SDG 10–12 with the fairness-efficiency balance, fourth, SDG 13–15 with ecological infrastructure, and fifth, SDG 16 and 17 with institutions. A further grouping sees a group of goals that articulate increased demand for resources (including food, energy, water) [6], a group that tries to maintain the resource base and a group modifying access to resources, power and benefit distribution (including gender and youth-based distinctions beyond homogeneous household perspectives) [7]. Despite critique on the goals ('By attempting to cover all

☆ Celebrating 40 years since the establishment of the International Centre for Research in AgroForestry

⁴ <http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/development-agenda/>.

Figure 1



Land use can be seen as a key connecting issue for all 17 SDGs, with tradeoffs between increasing demand, shifting benefit distribution, and compromised supply of ecosystem services.

that is good and desirable in society, these targets have ended up as vague, weak, or meaningless') [8] and comments from the science community [9] that were only very partially taken to heart, they are still the most legitimate attempt at global governance so far, deserving efforts to try and make it work [10].

Progress within each of these SDG groups probably requires efforts that are at least compatible with goals in the other groups (being neutral to or with modest tradeoffs), while providing the focus and clarity needed to address a specific target. Having 17 single-goal implementing policies is not efficient; the Tinbergen rule about the need for the number of policy instruments to match the number of goals [11] can be softened where goals in practice (at least in a given local context) align. Central to all groups of SDGs is 'land use' as a meeting point for material and immaterial needs. Sustainable land use as target has been debated since long ago [12,13], but could still be the key to progress (Figure 1). It connects the need for further human appropriation of resources, the efficiency with which existing land is used for achieving agricultural and forest production of goods and services,

and the rights and governance agenda of who decides, controls and benefits.

The debate on planetary boundaries [14,15] as next step beyond limits to growth [16] has connected current human resource appropriation to a 'carrying capacity' perspective on what the energy, water, nutrient, pollutant and further cycles can afford. Similar to earlier carrying capacity debates [17], the agility of humankind to adapt and modify technology can shift the hard limits proposed. There are, however limits to adaptation [5,18] and current progress may be hindered by a fall back to earlier 'denial' phases by important stakeholders in the debate. The planetary boundaries concept, just as the earlier limits to growth may be most useful if it is a self-unfulfilling prophecy that triggers a just-in-time human adaptive response. Smarter technologies, however, need to go hand in hand with efforts to contain current global environmental change by enhanced and sustained agility [19,20], once goals have been set.

The various SDGs have from their start and political platform in the discussion, been associated with existing

sectoral perspectives. SDG2 for example is seen as the domain of ‘agriculture’ and SDG15 of ‘forestry’. It seems logical to relate SDG2 on ‘Zero hunger’ primarily to agriculture. However, current understanding of the multiple dimensions of food security (adequacy of supply, economic and physical access by all, absence of factors restricting utilization, stability and sovereignty [21]), has opened up to wider perspectives [22]. The concept of ‘outsourcing’ of staple foods (but not of other elements of healthy diets) in tropical forest margins [23], has pointed at rural income security as basis of food security. A wide range of forest and tree crop products can be a basis for income and thus food security. In many countries, food insecurity and undernutrition are not the result of a lack of availability of food but are related to unequal distribution of resources and unequal access to healthy natural resources, productive inputs, credit, social protection and information. Lack of clean water (SDG6) or energy to cook (SDG7) link forests and trees to underachievement of SDG2. Efforts to achieve food security and nutrition thus require dealing with challenges in production, distribution, pricing and information, access to healthy land and water. However, it also deals with problems of insufficient health care and education, inadequate sanitary systems, or factors such as economic decline and climate change impacts on production and distribution [24]. Rural societies need to deal with all SDGs, rather than SDG2 alone, just as they deal with agriculture, forestry and everything in between.

Three agroforestry concepts

Agriculture and forestry have a long history as separate and often antagonistic sectors [25], but reality in the landscapes shows a much smoother continuum. In the four decades of its existence [1], agroforestry as a concept has been understood and defined by reference to various system scales of interest: plot-level practices [26], soils [27], development goals [28] or climate change [29]. Where earlier definitions of agroforestry (Figure 2) focused on the technology of plot-level integration of trees [30] (AF1), subsequent landscape interpretations have embraced a much larger share of the natural resource management and rights agenda [31,32] (AF2), leading to current perspectives on removing the conceptual and institutional barriers between agriculture and forestry (AF3) [33]. The relationship between the two has largely been analysed as competition for space in a zero-sum (land-sparing) game [34], but the existence of other ‘planetary boundaries’ than space as such, including the causation of climate change, may urge for a reanalysis [35,36] of the underlying discourses. The latter are shared, structured ways of speaking, thinking, interpreting, and representing things in the world [37], and represent one of the highest level ‘leverage points’ identified by systems analysis [38]: from parameter settings to the dynamic structure of feedback loops, their strengths and time-lags, to differential information access, goal setting,

paradigms and self-organization. Publicly held paradigms and existing segregated institutions are key bottlenecks to SDG attainment.

The SDGs call for new alignments across sectors that don’t have a history of smooth cooperation in many countries [39,40], including agriculture and forestry as part of natural resource management. The opportunities for a coherent SDG approach to ‘all land uses’ across the full spectrum of human use intensity and measurable tree cover, will be bounded by the degree of success in overcoming institutional divides. A seven-point scale has been proposed to describe interactions between goals [41], ranging from ‘Cancelling’ (−3) through ‘Neutral’ (0) to ‘Indivisible’ (+3), which can be applied to agroforestry at the agriculture/forestry interface as a contribution to climate change adaptation with co-benefits for mitigation within SDG 13, while addressing food, energy and water issues of SDGs 2, 7, 6 along with human health (SDG3) and healthy terrestrial ecosystems (SDG15), while never losing economic progress (SDG1) out of sight. An earlier analysis described how the way adaptation and mitigation dimensions of the global climate change debate can move from competing silos towards complementarity and further to synergy [42] and took stock of current practice in developing countries in this regards [43].

Following earlier agroforestry reviews of food security and climate change in Africa [44,45], water and climate change adaptation in Indonesia [46], nitrogen fixation as SDG friend or foe [47], and multifunctional agriculture [48], the rest of this review focuses on the need for a comprehensive ‘land use’ SDG agenda, transcending existing sectoral views on agriculture and forestry. Four steps in such a process of enhancing synergy can be coupled to the four knowledge-to-action chains [5] that relate understanding of ‘public concern’ issues to willingness to act, ability to act and capacity to innovate:

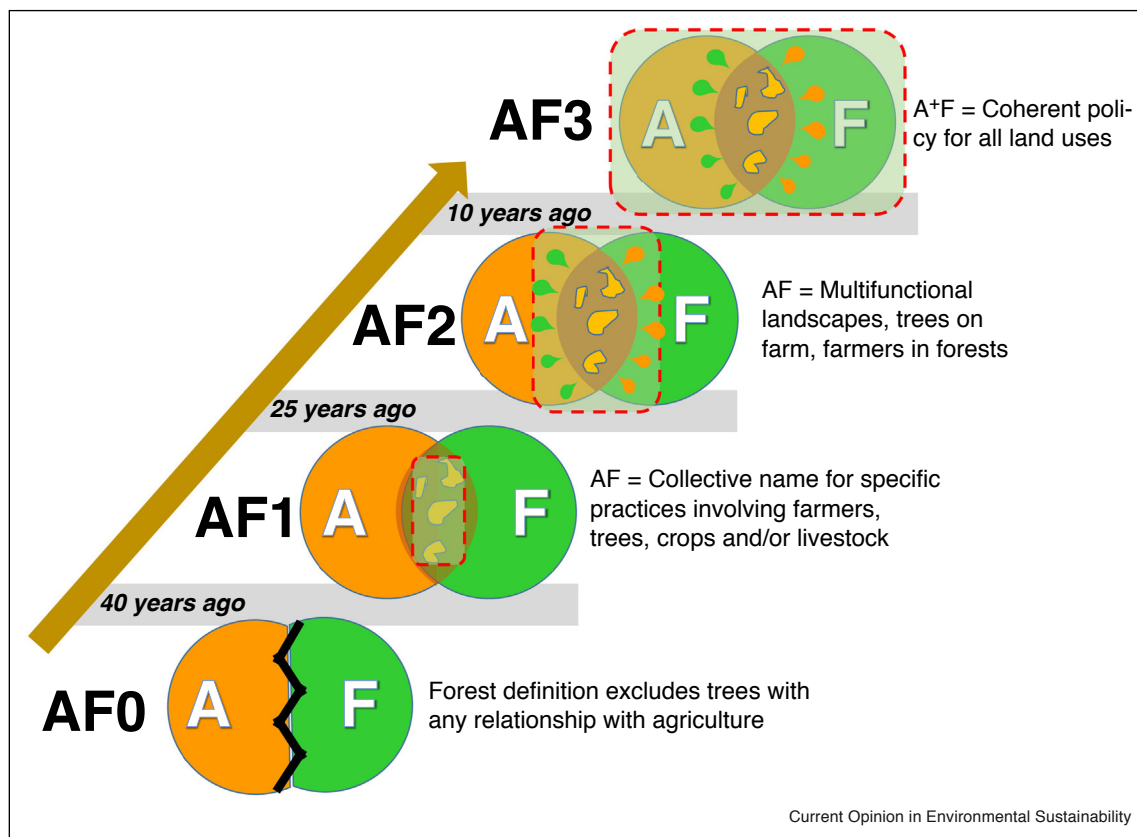
- 1 Science-based understanding of prioritized issues and their tradeoffs,
- 2 Willingness to act on ambitious goals,
- 3 Ability to act across goals with common programs, funding and institutions,
- 4 Shared monitoring, evaluation, support for innovation.

Progress in resolving issues of public concern can be constrained by any of these four chains [5].

Science-based understanding of prioritized issues and their tradeoffs

Increased demand for food and healthier diets, renewable energy and reliable clean water, as part of the SDG portfolio, all imply claims on land. Increased functionality

Figure 2



Venn diagrams of the evolving agroforestry (AF) concepts as relationship between agriculture (A) and forestry (F), which initially were perceived as having no interface (AF0); specific land use practices in the intersection formed the first agroforestry concept (AF1), followed by a multifunctional landscape perspective on the intersection (AF2) and the union (A⁺F3) that can be the domain for policy and regulation [83].

per unit land is needed to reconcile footprints and available space. Intensification (greater use of inputs and energy per unit land to obtain more output) has been the main strategy in agriculture and production forestry to reduce competition for land with other societal functions. In trying to close ‘yield gaps’, however, a common pathway to intensification has widened other ‘efficiency gaps’ [49]. In a major review of the diversity of impact pathways by which (international) agricultural research can increase rural prosperity [50^{*}], 18 pathways were identified. The first five describe the traditional core area of such research in the Genotype × Environment × Management interactions of high-yielding germplasm and associated input markets (Figure 3a). The next eight broader issues of natural resource management, property rights, gender, skills and value chains, and the last five policies relating to health, safety nets, food waste and international trade (Figure 3b). The three interpretations of agroforestry of Figure 2 relate to the first five (AF1), the first nine (AF2) and the full set (AF3).

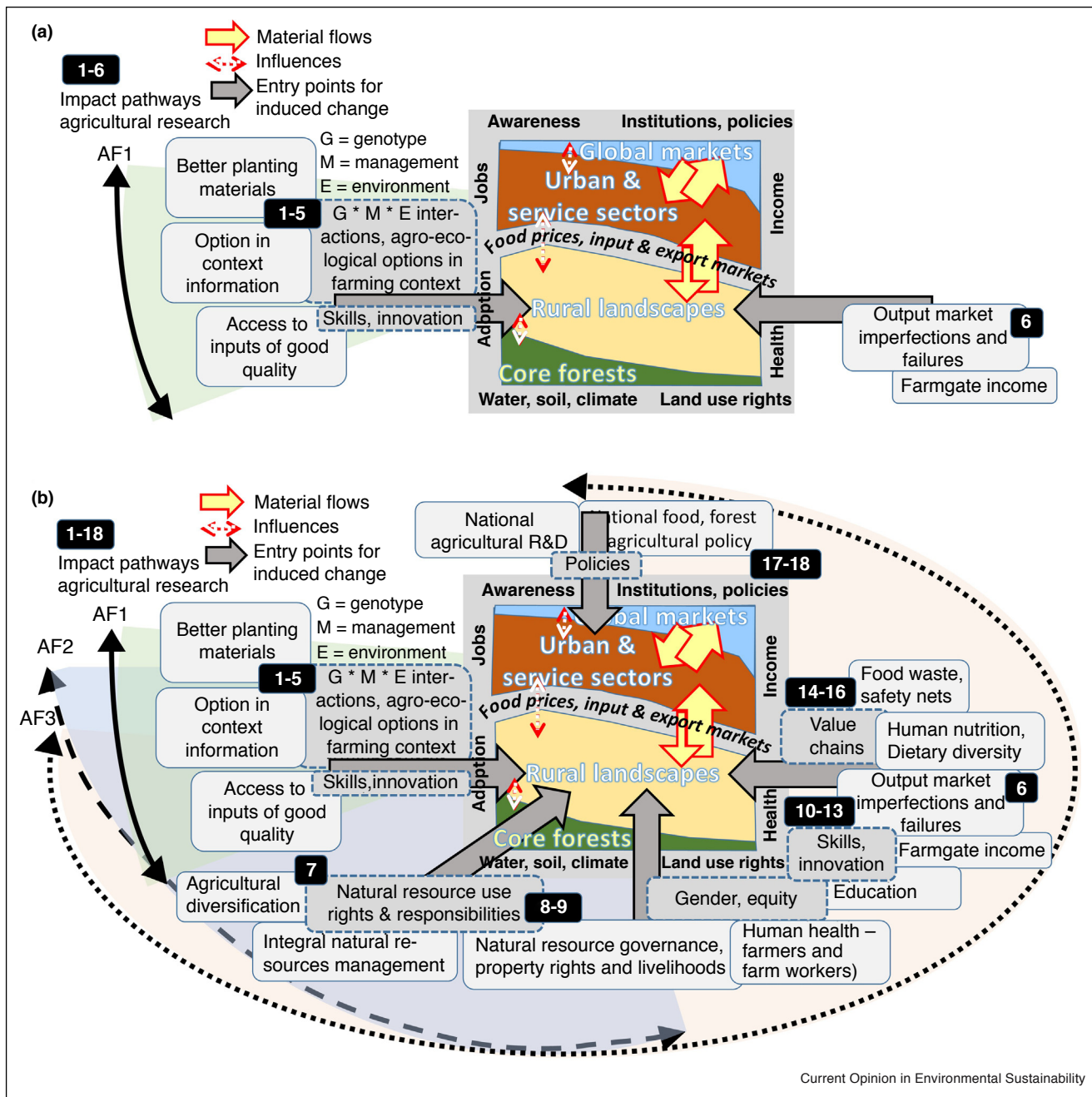
Current understanding of the complexity of the forest-rural and rural-urban interfaces of land use thus gives

space for new discourses on how land use as an integral concept can be managed, in line with societal priorities. This is especially relevant in developing countries before and around their demographic and economic transition where more than half of the population and economy is urban. With current projections Africa is the only continent where rural populations are expected to still show absolute increases⁵, elsewhere rural population densities are expected to be stable or on the decline [51]. This transition has consequences for an increasing space for forests, but tree densities in densely populated (peri-urban or suburban) subcatchments of the tropics, are higher than those for purely agricultural ones [52]. Evidence for a global increase in trees outside forest [53] can be seen in this light.

Recent debate [54,55] has focussed on the relevance of a diversity of conceptual frameworks [56], beyond what the Millennium Ecosystems Assessment [57] promoted, especially in connection with the ‘payments’ concept [58,59]. The new language promoted by the IPBES

⁵ <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.RUR.TOTL.ZG>.

Figure 3



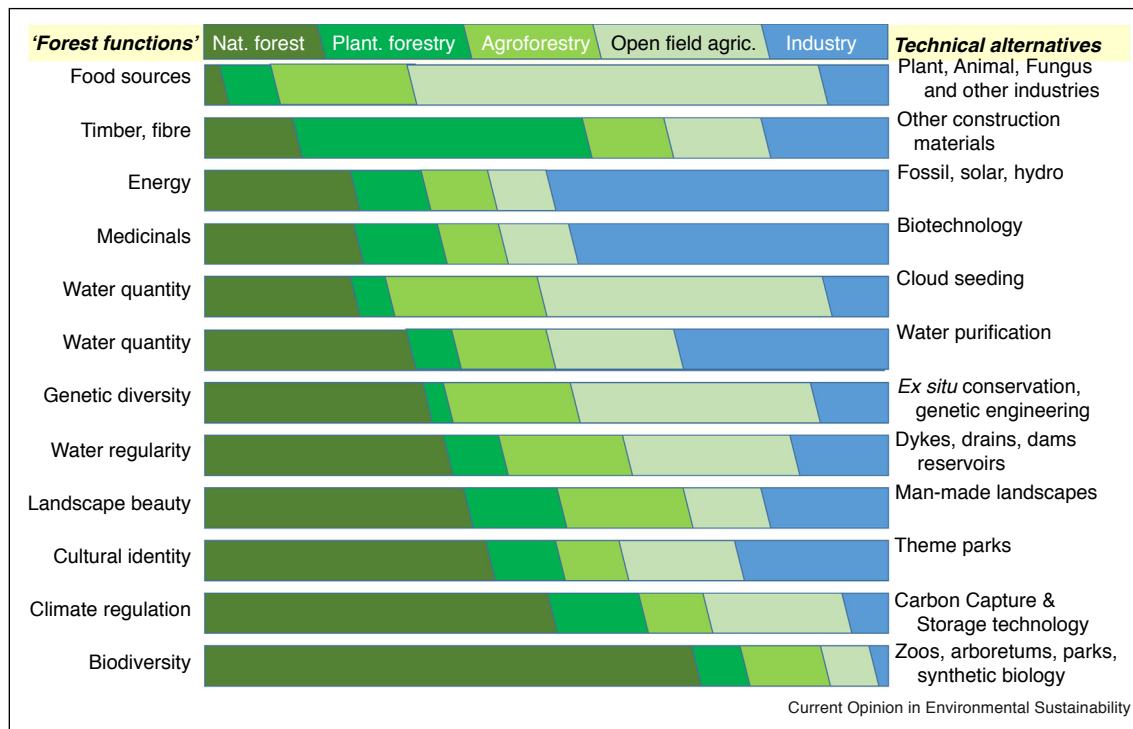
Systems perspective on aspects of agriculture, rural development and national economies, with multiple impact pathways for agricultural research; **(a)** Focused on the initial strength of international agricultural research; **(b)** With the current agenda [51]; three interpretations of agroforestry are indicated as AF1, AF2 and AF3 [33].

assessment [60] of ‘nature’s contributions to people’ expresses the same degree of anthropocentricity as the ‘ecosystem services’ it tries to replace, assuming a ‘free and prior informed consent’ on the other side of human resource appropriation⁶. While the terminology debate

⁶ <http://science.sciencemag.org/content/359/6373/270/tab-e-letters>.

may have relevance for part of the audience, a more empirical approach may see that many of the functions, services or contributions of ‘wild’ nature are taken over by more ‘domesticated’ land uses and/or non-land-based technology (Figure 4). A further quantification of these relations will undoubtedly lead to a refinement of the options and context-specificity of the various substitution

Figure 4



Conceptualization of the degree to which a range of 'forest functions' are provided by natural forests, plantation forestry, agroforestry, open-field agriculture or industry, with an indication of the technical alternatives that can substitute for 'contributions from nature' to match human needs.

processes, but a first mental step is to see land uses as a continuum open to empirical exploration, rather than as forest-agriculture dichotomy.

The continuum can be described by a single metric: the degree to which land use in its current form achieves the goals set, relative to other ways of achieving these. The Land Equivalent Ratio (LER) concept, so far focussed on productivity, can be expanded to do so. The conventional LER concept (Eq. (1)) that is central to AF1, can for AF2 be expanded to a multi-functionality land equivalent ratio (LERM, Eq. (2)).

$$\text{LER} = \sum_i P_i / P_{i,\text{ref}} \quad (1)$$

$$\text{LERM} = \gamma_{P,S} \sum_i P_i / P_{i,\text{ref}} + \gamma_{R,S} \sum_j R_j / R_{j,\text{ref}} + \gamma_{C,S} \sum_k C_k / C_{k,\text{ref}} \quad (2)$$

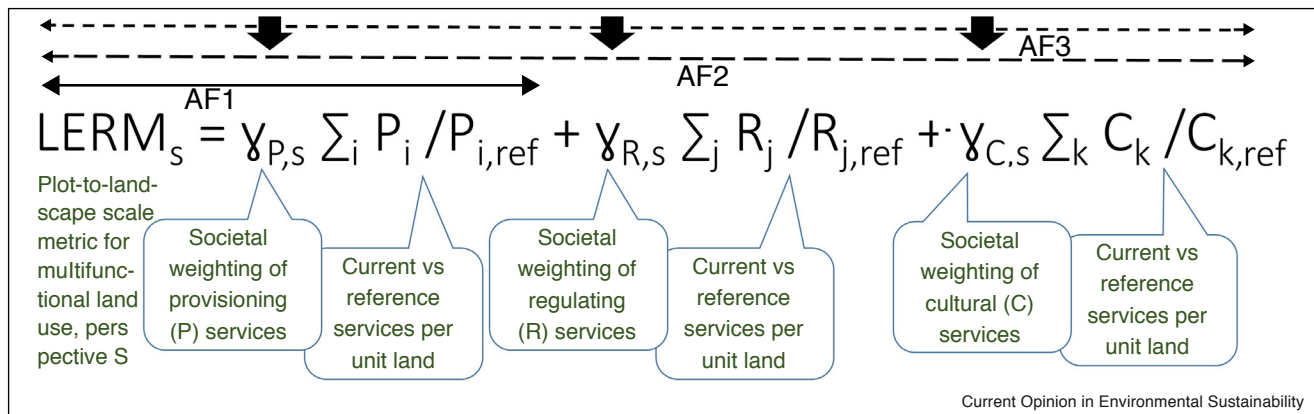
Where P_i , R_j and C_k represent the attainment (in any metric of choice, per unit area) of a range of provisioning (P), regulating (R) and Cultural (C) services provided by a landscape, $P_{i,\text{ref}}$, $R_{j,\text{ref}}$ and $C_{k,\text{ref}}$ the attainment (in the same metric) of such services in a landscape optimized for that specific service (often a 'monoculture') and $\gamma_{P,S}$, $\gamma_{R,S}$ and $\gamma_{C,S}$ the weighting functions for the importance of the three groups of ecosystem services from perspective S. Full representation of all weighting factors γ_S may in fact represent the

AF3 concept (Figure 5). A comprehensive analysis of properties of alternative cropping systems was recently completed for cacao [61], quantifying various tradeoffs.

Willingness to act on ambitious goals

Research on land use, especially that on tropical forest margins, has quantified tradeoffs between production (local income) and conservation (global wellbeing) goals [62–64] and clarified the need for policy instruments to align land use choices across scales by internalizing externalities. Although the SDGs do not provide a hierarchy among the 17 goals, domestic policy platforms for the various goals have not (yet) converged as much as the international agreements suggest. Within countries and governments a strong preference for 'development' over 'sustainability' dimensions can still be observed. The same may be true where international organizations, and parts thereof, that have so far focussed on single goals, now face new challenges to achieve a higher level of coordination and integration [65,66]. Although accepted as goal by all countries, the effective integration of the gender agenda on land use and natural resource management remains a challenge [67,68]. Complementarity between international, national and local policies needs to be met in raising the 'ability to act'.

Figure 5



Land Equivalent Ratio for Multifunctionality (LERM) as landscape (AF2) extension of the plot-level (AF1) productivity LER; if $LERM_s > 1$ the mixed system, from perspective s and its weighting parameters γ , spares land relative to a segregated mosaic of monofunctional reference land uses.

Ability to act across goals with common programs, funding and institutions

The historical institutional divides between ‘mitigation’ and adaptation’, as well as between ‘forestry’ and ‘agriculture’ remain a barrier for effective SDG attainment, as project proposals have to target one of the two as goal, as basis for eligibility for international or national funding [69]. An analysis of 201 project design documents from adaptation funds, mitigation instruments, and project standards found that 37% of the documents explicitly mentioned a contribution to the other objective [70], though often as unsubstantiated co-benefit. The drive to integrate climate change mitigation and adaptation includes urban areas [71], ‘climate smart’ landscapes [72].

Despite challenges in its operationalization, an integrated landscape approach [73–75] still appears to be the best way of coherently targeting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through new forms of collaboration between stakeholders (which can include scientists) based on long-term commitments [76]. It requires a perspective on land use that integrates beyond what has currently been mainstreamed in ‘green economy’ policies, both at the national and subnational level. Local governance systems, linked with existing jurisdictions, have to reconcile compliance with national rules, especially where forests are concerned, and local interests that more directly align with agriculture. Beyond land use planning, clear performance metrics for landscape functions and systems for monitoring and evaluation of achievements are essential to a culture of innovation.

Shared monitoring, evaluation, innovation

Once institutional constraints to synergy have been addressed, innovation and co-learning can take place. Non-state actors have played essential roles in moving

forward debates where national governments are entrenched, such as in the debate on oil palm [77,78].

Multi-sectoral platforms are processes which often become institutionalized bodies drawing together multiple stakeholder representatives from different sectors to make decisions. They are convened to harness the benefits of collaboration in tackling planning problems that span more than one sectoral jurisdiction and therefore require a co-ordinated response in policy formulation and implementation. Examples include platforms to address planning issues around climate change, food security, biodiversity conservation, timber legality and so on—many of which have nested processes from international level right down to local level. A key question, however, is whether ‘certification’ can avoid prescribing ‘solutions’ and create space for goal-oriented innovation [79]. With the history of forests as part of the landscape that were to be protected from local, innovative resource use, it is particularly challenging to frame space for further agroforestry innovation in its poly-centric governance context, avoiding the temptation to overdefine and overregulate at the highest level. Jurisdictional certification might address the above problems. The approach taken by the Common Agricultural Policy of the European Union [80], leaving specifics on what agroforestry is or can be to be further defined at country level is a step in the right direction. Similarly, the Indian agroforestry policy focussed on removing institutional hurdles between agriculture and forestry, rather than on creating agroforestry as a segregated policy domain [81].

Discussion

From our review of science-based understanding (chain 1) we found strong support for a ‘continuum’ understanding of ‘land use, rather than a dichotomy of forests and agriculture as sectors. Tradeoffs between functions are important for

the SDG portfolio as a whole; the multifunctionality version of the Land Equivalent Ratio can guide a search for synergy and complementarity. Where willingness to act on ambitious goals (chain 2) is secured for the SDG portfolio at a high level, the ability to act across goals (chain 3) with common programs, funding and institutions is in many cases still a bottleneck. Shared monitoring, evaluation and support for innovation (chain 4) will be essential to allow the synergy options to become reality. The innovation and boundary work literature [65,82] suggests concrete steps to move to a higher level of integration:

- 1 **Resources:** It is important that there is an allocation of financial and human resources to encourage the integration of forestry and agriculture, potentially to reemerge as 'agroforestry' (AF3). Donors could also give integration more space in their resources allocation processes and calls for proposals.
- 2 **Time:** Policy formulation and implementation issues are often slow processes which require deliberation at multiple scales in the form of consultation and learning. The growing quest for evidence in the policy spaces will require clarity on what difference integration can bring to the wider goal of achieving the SDGs in an effective and efficient way.
- 3 **Institutional space:** creating a space or a unit within the existing frameworks without complicating the management hierarchy can promote efforts to integration.
- 4 **Performance indicators:** existing key indicators across the SDG spectrum will be the direct test of integrated land use perspectives, but only if institutional agendas can be contained.
- 5 **Integrating scenarios** in local development planning for SDGs need to build on existing land use systems, regardless of their current 'agriculture' or 'forestry' labels. At national and global levels bottom-up and top-down models need to be reconciled in view of planetary boundaries and limits to adaptation.

In conclusion, the SDG portfolio can indeed trigger a major step towards more holistic land use perspectives at the agriculture-forestry interface and can, if used well, trigger institutional change to enhance dynamic sustainability.

Acknowledgements

The underlying research was carried out as part of the Forests, Trees and Agroforestry (FTA) research program of the CGIAR. We appreciate the critical reviews and helpful suggestions an earlier draft received.

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