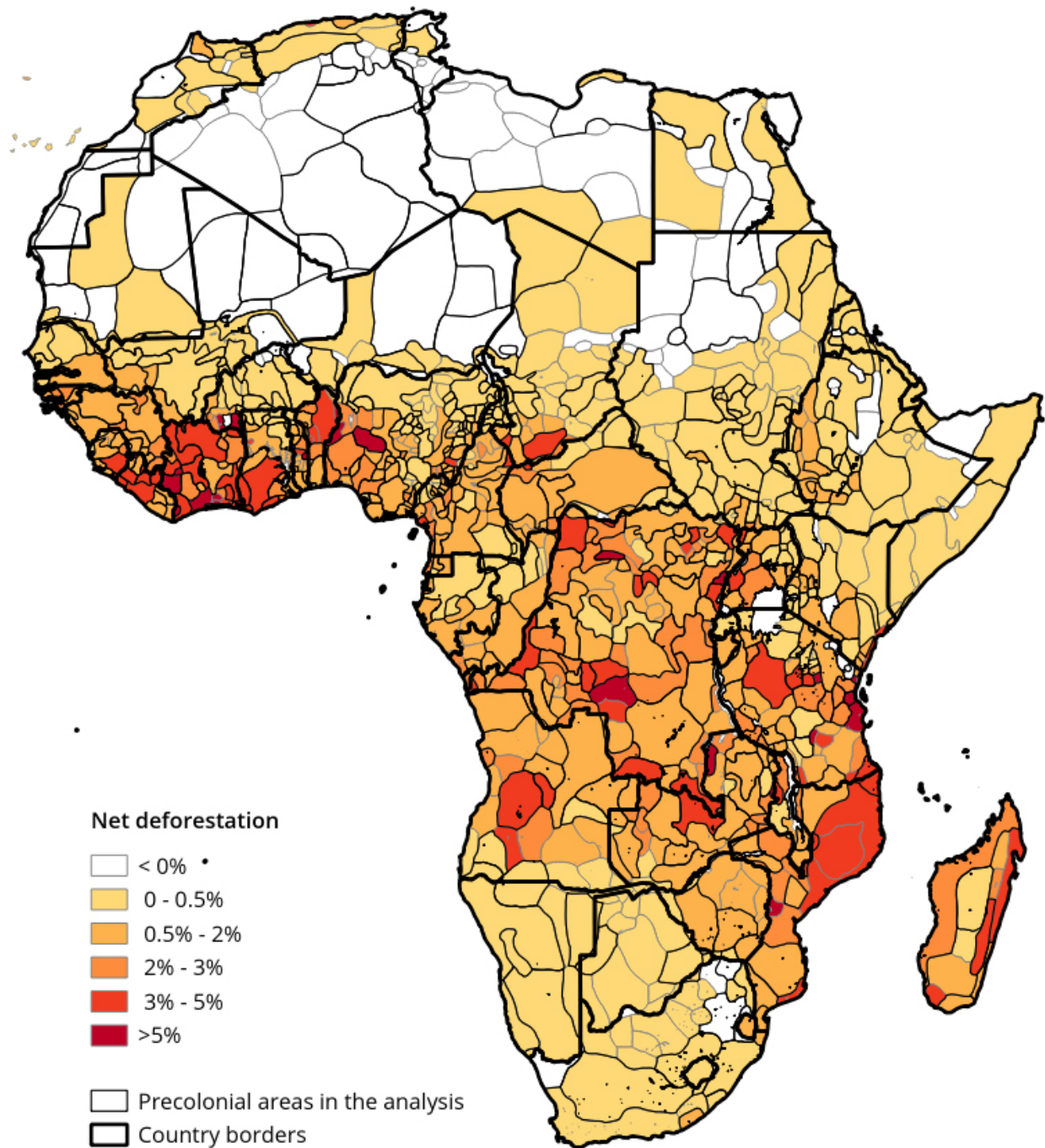


'Traditional authority' linked to rates of deforestation in Africa

November 24 2015



Deforestation within precolonial and national boundaries

New analysis reveals a strong correlation between precolonial institutions in Africa and current levels of deforestation. Researchers suggest that many of these structures still operate at a local level, controlling and exploiting natural resources under the radar of the state, and that such legacies of governance pose a major challenge for implementing conservation policies.

The first study to link precolonial African leadership and current levels of deforestation has shown a strong correlation between areas with historic leadership structures more susceptible to corruption and higher rates of forest loss today.

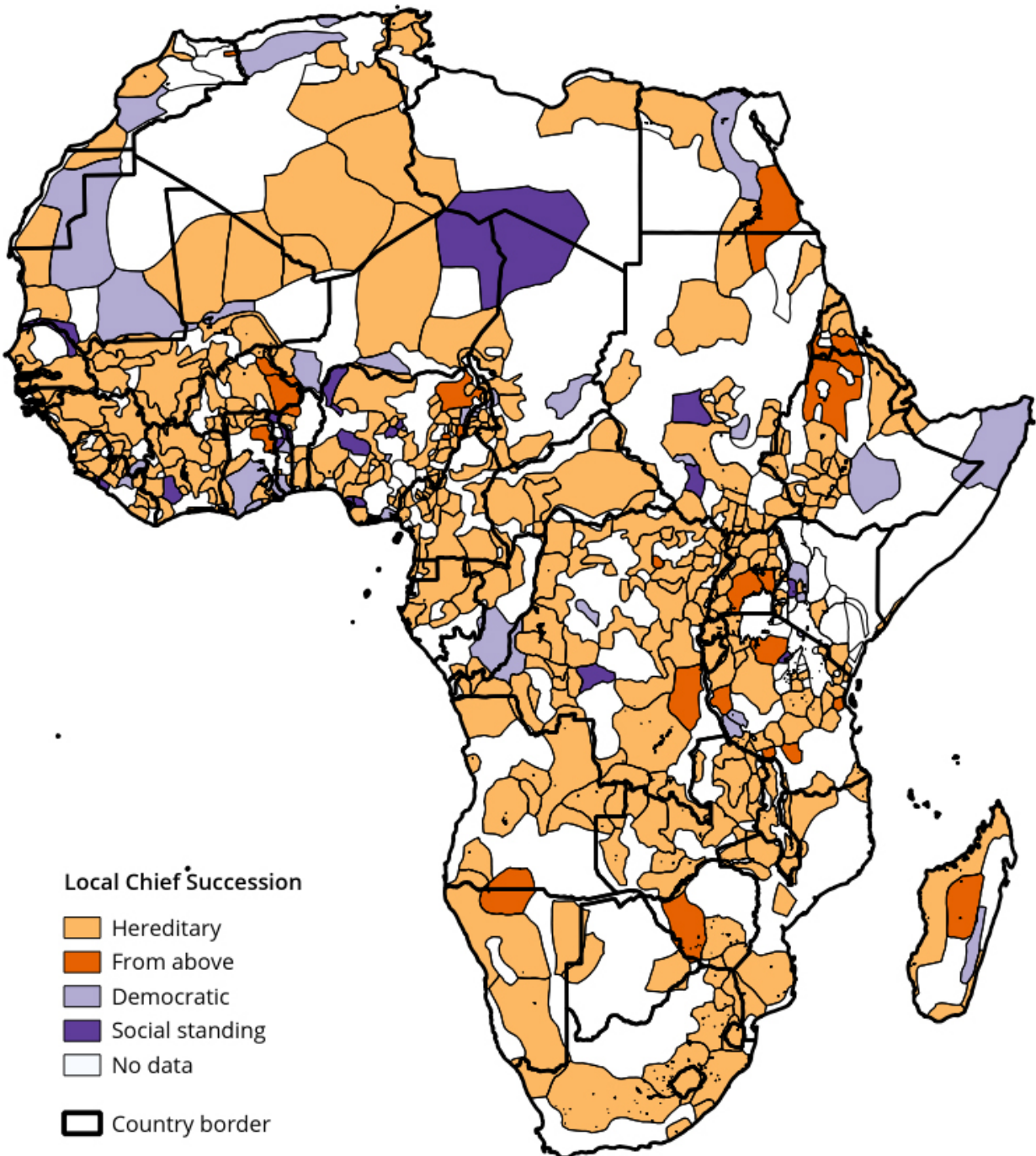
The study suggests that a "legal pluralism" exists across large parts of Africa where many local leaders continue to hold sway over natural resources through precolonial "traditional authority"; old power often not recognised by the state.

By using satellite image data from 2000 to 2012 and analysing it in combination with historical anthropological data, researchers found a relationship between high deforestation and precolonial succession rules of 'social standing': village heads appointed through wealth or status rather than for example hereditary lineage or democratic election.

Those areas with 'social standing' leaderships in precolonial times have approximately 50% more deforestation than the average rate of forest loss for Africa over this period.

Leaders who draw on traditional authority are often vested with resource control rights by local communities, regardless of whether the state recognises these rights. The study's authors say that those local leaders who can claim power through their own influence – or 'social standing' – are more likely to use natural resources to leverage short-term economic gains.

The research team, from the University of Cambridge's Department of Land Economy and its Centre for Development Studies, cite cases of loggers providing gifts such as motorcycles and paying traditional leaders to secure 'logging permits', despite the leaders having no state authority to grant them.



Precolonial boundaries of Africa

They say the findings suggest that conservationists need to go beyond state law and engage with local leaders who, despite having no apparent authority, may have a vital influence over Africa's shrinking forests and biodiversity. The study has been published in the Journal of Land Use Policy.

"This work highlights the importance of legal pluralism in relation to deforestation in Africa, and should encourage those who want to conserve Africa's remaining forests to look below the surface of state law to where resource use decisions are actually made: at the local level by leaders who often have little or no state authority," said Dr Shaun Larcom who conducted the study with Cambridge colleagues Dr Terry van Gevelt and Dr Aiora Zabala.

"While such a shift in focus undoubtedly increases the complexity of research and of the policy agenda, it may actually be necessary if we want to make meaningful inroads into deforestation in Africa and the rest of the developing world," he said.

While most of Africa's remaining forests are protected, owned and managed by the state, rapid deforestation continues, despite ongoing international efforts aimed at state capacity building and reducing official corruption.

Over the period from 2000 to 2012 Africa lost approximately 18 million hectares of its forests. However, when these losses are broken up into ethnic boundaries that existed prior to European colonisation, the rate of deforestation varies considerably in relation to the type of local governance structure formerly in place, says study co-author Dr Zabala.

"African countries are among the ones with fastest acceleration of deforestation worldwide. Complex governance legacies pose a major challenge for the implementation of policies to address forest loss,"

Zabala said.

The most common precolonial leadership structure was hereditary succession. Other structures used as base cases for the analysis were local leaders elected from above and those elected democratically.

But it was the analysis of leadership appointment through social standing that proved most distinctive, with 0.8 percentage points more deforestation compared to base cases. Compared to an average loss of 1.6 percentage points over the same period, this suggests that these regions have around 50% higher than average deforestation rates.

Social standing is "appointment by age, seniority, influence, wealth or social status", says Dr van Gevelt. "In practice, this means that those with the most power can claim local leadership, and consequently secure further control over local natural resources," he said. Ethnic groups where these practices occurred in precolonial times include the Kabre people of Benin and the Isoko people of Nigeria.

The researchers suggest that there are likely to be more ownership disputes in these areas, where the legitimacy of local leaders is weaker and more 'up for grabs' than in an hereditary power structure, for example. Leaders from 'social standing' areas may grant logging access to forests to raise funds for what Larcom describes as "patrimonial largesse": the need to give generously to the local community in order to retain social standing, and consequently leadership.

"Acknowledging the reality of legal pluralism – where both the state and non-state authorities, often with different sources of authority, compete in the same regulatory space – and the importance of non-state regulators, both as a force for good and harm in relation to deforestation in Africa, might be the missing link needed for halting large scale deforestation in Africa," added Larcom.

"In addition to focusing on state corruption, those wishing to halt rapid [deforestation](#) also need to focus on non-state corruption."

More information: S. Larcom et al. Precolonial institutions and deforestation in Africa, *Land Use Policy* (2016). [DOI: 10.1016/j.landusepol.2015.10.030](#)

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