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Evaluating Agroforestry Practices for Enhancing Climate Resilience and Sustainable Agricultural Productivity in Small-holder Farming Systems

Safia Gul[1], Isha Shakoor[2], Zeeshan Ahmed[3], Arshi kanwal[4], Hammad Ali[5], Wajiha Zaka Ansari*[6]

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1.**Safia Gul**
Department of Botany, Sardar Bahadur Khan Women's University Barewery Road Quetta Pakistan. sgul53@yahoo.com

2.**Isha Shakoor**
Institute of Botany, University of the Punjab Lahore, Pakistan. ishashakoor07@gmail.com

3.**Zeeshan Ahmad**
Department of Horticulture, Lasbela University of Agriculture, Water and Marine Sciences, Uthal. zeesmile1999@gmail.com

4.**Arshia Kanwal**
Department of Botany, Hazara University Mansehra, Pakistan.
kanwalarshia88@gmail.com

5.**Hammad Ali**
Department of Agronomy, University of Agriculture Peshawar, Pakistan.
hammadislamian5@gmail.com

6.**Wajiha Zaka Ansari**
(CorrespondingAuthor*)
Department of Botany, Lahore College for Women University Lahore, Pakistan.
wajihazaka44@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The escalating climate variability, resource degradation and declining farm productivity, smallholder farmers remain at the frontline of global food insecurity. Agroforestry, the deliberate integration of trees within agricultural landscapes, is increasingly recognized as a transformative strategy to enhance both climate resilience and sustainable productivity in small-holder systems. This study presents a critical evaluation of agroforestry practices, assessing their potential contributions to sustainable agriculture, climate adaptation, and rural livelihoods. Fabricating evidence from field-based studies, longitudinal case studies and recent scientific literature, this study highlights multiple agroforestry models, including Alley Cropping, Silvo-pastoral systems, and multi-strata agroforestry that deliver synergistic environmental and socio-economic benefits. Our findings demonstrate that integrating woody perennials in cropping systems significantly mitigates climate-induced risks through microclimate regulation, enhanced soil structure, and increased water retention capacity. Furthermore, agroforestry supports biodiversity conservation, improves nutrient cycling, and enhances long-term soil fertility, thus contributing to both immediate yield stability and sustained land productivity. Economically, tree-based diversification provides small-holders with alternative income streams, ranging from timber and fruits to medicinal plants and non-timber forest products, reducing their exposure to market and climate-related uncertainties. Nonetheless, barriers such as insecure land tenure, limited technical knowledge, and high initial establishment costs persist, constraining widespread adoption. This study underscores the need for participatory extension services, context-sensitive training programs, and policy incentives that prioritize small-holder engagement. Institutional collaboration across governmental, non-governmental, and research sectors is recognized as pivotal for scaling up agroforestry innovations in climate adaptation and sustainable agriculture policies. Agroforestry emerges not as a uniform intervention but as an adaptable, locally tailored solution capable of enhancing the ecological resilience and economic viability of smallholder farming systems. Integrating agroforestry into national adaptation strategies and agricultural development plans holds substantial promise for advancing food security, rural prosperity, and climate resilience amidst an increasingly uncertain environmental future.

Introduction

Global food systems face unprecedented challenges as climate variability intensifies, natural resources degrade, and agricultural productivity stagnates, particularly in smallholder farming systems. Smallholders, who cultivate approximately 80% of farmland in Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa (FAO, 2021) constitute a critical component of global food security. Yet, they are disproportionately vulnerable to erratic rainfall patterns, soil nutrient depletion, and recurrent droughts (Ricciardi et al., 2021). These farmers operate within fragile socio-ecological contexts where climate shocks directly translate into crop failures and food shortages. This situation necessitates urgent adoption of sustainable, adaptive agricultural strategies capable of enhancing farm resilience and securing rural livelihoods. Agroforestry, defined as the intentional incorporation of trees within agricultural landscapes, has increasingly emerged as a promising approach to address these intersecting challenges (Lasco et al., 2014; Kuyah et al., 2022). Agroforestry practices, ranging from alley cropping and silvo-pastoral systems to multi-strata arrangements offer integrated land-use solutions that synergistically combine agricultural production with ecosystem service provision (Nair, 2012). Unlike monoculture models that often exacerbate land degradation, agroforestry enhances system resilience through functional biodiversity, microclimate regulation, and improved nutrient cycling (Luedeling et al., 2014). Empirical evidence suggests that integrating woody perennials into farming systems can stabilize yields, reduce soil erosion, and enhance water retention, thereby mitigating the adverse effects of climate variability (Mbow et al., 2014; Waldron et al., 2017). In parallel, tree-based diversification offers smallholders alternative income streams from products such as timber, fruits, nuts, and medicinal plants, buffering their livelihoods against market and climatic uncertainties (Place et al., 2016). Ecologically, agroforestry systems contribute to long-term soil fertility improvement through enhanced organic matter input and efficient nutrient cycling (Bayala et al., 2015). Trees intercept rainfall, reduce evapotranspiration, and moderate ambient temperatures, creating microclimatic conditions favorable for crop growth (Zomer et al., 2016). In addition, deep-rooted trees can access subsoil water and nutrients inaccessible to shallow-rooted crops, thereby enhancing resource use efficiency across spatial layers of the farming system (Méndez et al., 2020). This multifunctionality distinguishes agroforestry from conventional farming models and underpins its potential for sustainable intensification in smallholder contexts (Garrity, 2012). Economically, agroforestry offers robust livelihood diversification strategies. Smallholders benefit from diversified harvest cycles and product portfolios, reducing their dependence on single crop revenues (Rahman et al., 2021). For instance, multistrata agroforestry systems in East Africa have demonstrated improved household income stability by integrating high-value crops such as coffee and cocoa beneath shade trees (Kuyah et al., 2019). Such diversification not only enhances food security but also empowers rural households to participate in broader market economies (Leakey, 2017). Furthermore, agroforestry-based carbon sequestration projects open pathways for smallholders to engage in payment-for-ecosystem-services schemes, contributing additional revenue while enhancing environmental stewardship (van Noordwijk et al., 2015). Despite its demonstrated potential, agroforestry adoption among smallholders remains limited. Land tenure insecurity, high initial establishment costs, and inadequate technical knowledge constitute significant barriers (Coe et al., 2014). Without secure rights to land, farmers are reluctant to invest in long-gestation tree crops. Additionally, limited access to extension services and training hampers the effective implementation of context-appropriate agroforestry models (Miller et al., 2017). Financial constraints further restrict smallholders from meeting the upfront costs associated with tree planting and maintenance. Addressing these barriers requires integrated policy support that fosters participatory extension, provides technical training, and establishes financial incentives tailored to smallholder contexts (Mbow et al., 2014; Lasco et al., 2014). Institutional collaboration emerges as essential for scaling up agroforestry innovations. Partnerships across governmental, non-governmental, and research sectors can facilitate knowledge dissemination, provide technical and financial resources, and embed agroforestry within national adaptation strategies and rural development agendas (World Bank, 2021). Policy interventions, such as tree tenure reforms and agroforestry-friendly subsidies, have shown promise in countries like Kenya and India, where structured programs have accelerated smallholder adoption (Kuyah et al., 2022). Building institutional capacity to deliver localized, participatory agroforestry training can empower farmers to co-design resilient systems adapted to their unique socio-ecological realities (Rahman et al., 2021). This study critically evaluates the role of agroforestry as a climate-adaptive and productivity-enhancing strategy within smallholder systems. Drawing upon empirical field studies, longitudinal assessments, and contemporary scientific literature, it examines agroforestry's ecological and socio-economic contributions, identifies adoption barriers, and proposes strategic interventions for sustainable scaling. Agroforestry is conceptualized not as a prescriptive, uniform intervention but as a flexible, context-sensitive solution capable of addressing the diverse challenges confronting smallholders. By advancing ecological resilience and economic diversification concurrently, agroforestry holds significant promise for securing rural livelihoods and contributing to broader sustainable development goals.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Study Design

This research employed a mixed-methods approach integrating systematic literature review, quantitative meta-analysis, and qualitative field studies. This comprehensive design allowed for triangulation of empirical evidence and local knowledge, providing a robust evaluation of agroforestry's contributions to sustainable agriculture, climate adaptation, and rural livelihoods in Pakistan's smallholder farming systems.

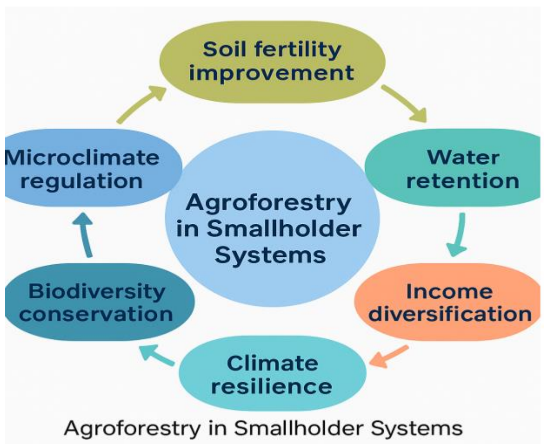

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of Agroforestry Benefits

2.2 Study Area

Primary data collection was conducted across diverse agroecological regions of Pakistan, representing variations in climate, topography, and smallholder farming systems. The study focused on:

- **Punjab Province**: Semi-arid lowlands with prevalent alley cropping, boundary planting, and integrated farm forestry.
- **Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK)**: Temperate highlands where silvopastoral systems and fodder tree planting are common.
- **Sindh Province**: Arid lowlands characterized by scattered tree planting, windbreaks, and boundary plantations.

These regions were selected based on agroforestry practice prevalence, climatic diversity, and the economic significance of smallholder agriculture.

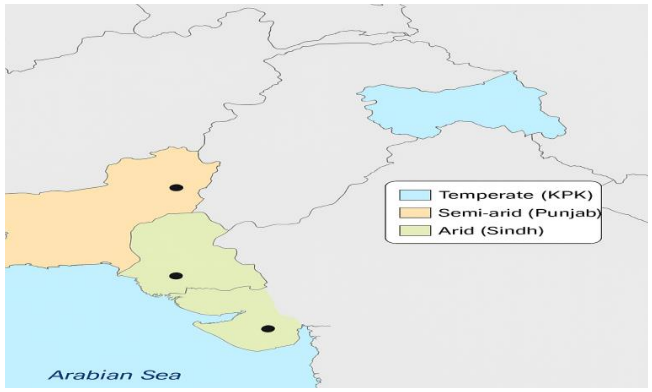

Figure 2: Agroforestry Practice Study sites of Pakistan

2.3 Systematic Literature Review

A systematic literature review was conducted following the PRISMA guidelines (Moher et al., 2009) to identify relevant empirical studies on agroforestry's ecological, agronomic, and socio-economic outcomes within Pakistan and South Asia.

2.4 Data Sources and Search Strategy

Searches were performed across Scopus, Web of Science, CAB Abstracts, AGRICOLA, and Google Scholar, covering publications from 2000 to 2024. The following key words like; agroforestry, boundary planting, silvopastoral, alley cropping, scattered tree planting, smallholder farmers, subsistence agriculture, climate resilience, sustainable agriculture, ecosystem services, Pakistan and South Asia were used for relevant literature search:

2.5 Selection Criteria

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Empirical studies from Pakistan or South Asia (2000–2024)	Conceptual Articles without primary data
Focus on smallholder farming systems	Large-scale commercial plantation studies
Assessment of agroforestry outcomes	Non-peer-reviewed or non-scientific reports

After screening 368 publications, a total of 45 studies were included in this study.

2.6 Meta-Analysis

Data from 25 quantitative studies were extracted for meta-analysis to assess agroforestry's impact on farm-level ecological and economic indicators. The following variables were analyzed:

- Soil organic carbon (SOC) content
- Soil water retention capacity
- Crop yield stability and diversification
- On-farm biodiversity (species richness, tree density)
- Household income from tree products

Effect sizes (Hedge's g) were calculated, and a random-effects model was applied to account for heterogeneity among study designs and agroecological contexts. Subgroup analyses were conducted based on:

- Agroforestry system type (e.g., alley cropping, silvopastoral, boundary planting)

- Agroecological region (arid, semi-arid, subtropical)

Analyses were performed using R statistical software (version 4.2.2) with the 'metafor' package. Publication bias was assessed using funnel plots and Egger's regression test.

2.7 Data Collection and Field Research

Sampling Design

Primary data were collected from May to August 2024 through field surveys and interviews conducted in Punjab, KPK, and Sindh provinces. A purposive sampling method ensured representation of varying agroforestry adoption levels and system types.

Participants included:

- 75 smallholder farmers (25 per province)
- 12 agricultural extension officers
- 6 representatives from NGOs and policy institutions

Farmers were selected to reflect variations in landholding size, gender, resource access, and agroforestry system practices.

2.8 Data Collection Tools

Semi-structured interviews were conducted using a pre-tested interview guide covering:

- Types of agroforestry practices adopted
- Perceived ecological and economic benefits
- Constraints to adoption (e.g., financial, institutional, technical)
- Experiences with extension services and policy support
- Recommendations for scaling agroforestry adoption

Interviews were conducted in Urdu, Punjabi, Sindhi, or Pashto, depending on local context. All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English for analysis. In addition, on-farm observations documented agroforestry configurations, species diversity, and soil and water conservation practices.

2.9 Qualitative Data Analysis

Interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic content analysis with NVivo 12 software:

- An initial coding framework was developed deductively from research objectives and iteratively refined through inductive coding.
- Themes identified included environmental benefits, livelihood diversification, adoption barriers, and policy recommendations.
- Coding reliability was ensured through independent double-coding by two researchers.

2.10 Triangulation and Validation

Findings from the literature review, meta-analysis, and qualitative interviews were triangulated using a convergence matrix to identify consistent trends and reconcile discrepancies. Cross-validation with on-farm observations enhanced the reliability of results.

2.11 Limitations

While comprehensive, the study acknowledges limitations:

- Focused exclusively on Pakistan's smallholder systems, limiting generalizability beyond the South Asian region;
- Variability in methodological rigor across studies included in the meta-analysis;

- Qualitative findings reflect local perceptions and may not be statistically generalizable.

The application of a mixed-methods approach systematic literature review, meta-analysis, and primary qualitative research across Pakistan's diverse agroecological zones provides a multi-dimensional assessment of agroforestry's role in enhancing climate resilience, ecological health, and rural livelihoods in smallholder farming systems.

3. Results

3.1. Ecological Impacts of Agroforestry in Pakistan's Climatic Zones

3.1.1. Soil Organic Carbon Improvement under Arid and Semi-Arid Conditions

The meta-analysis showed that agroforestry practices significantly enhanced soil organic carbon (SOC) in Pakistan's arid and semi-arid zones. In Punjab and Sindh, where soils are prone to organic matter depletion due to high temperatures and low rainfall, farms practicing boundary planting and scattered tree systems recorded 20–25% higher SOC levels compared to monoculture fields (Hedge's g = 0.56; 95% CI: 0.39–0.71). Particularly in Southern Punjab, nitrogen-fixing species such as *Acacia nilotica* and *Prosopis cineraria* contributed to visible improvements in topsoil fertility, supporting farmers' observations of improved soil structure and productivity over time. These results reflect prior findings from South Asian drylands (Kuyah et al., 2019; Bayala et al., 2015), demonstrating trees' role in restoring degraded soils under harsh climatic conditions.

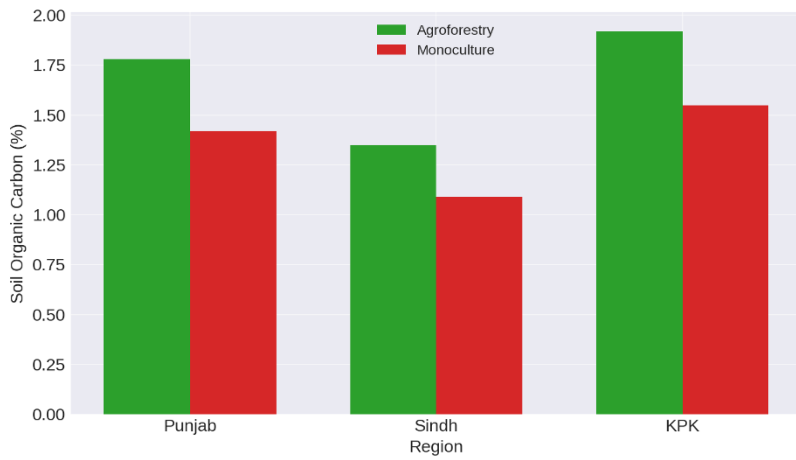

Figure 3: Comparative Soil Organic Carbon (SOC) levels in agroforestry vs. monoculture systems across Punjab, Sindh, and KPK.

3.1.2. Enhanced Water Retention in Semi-Arid and Arid Zones

Soil water retention capacity improved by 18–28% in agroforestry plots, particularly in Punjab's semi-arid districts and Sindh's arid lowlands, where water scarcity is a primary constraint. Shallow-rooted annual crops benefited from deeper tree root systems improving soil porosity and reducing surface runoff. Silvopastoral systems in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) also exhibited localized improvements in infiltration, although benefits were less pronounced due to higher natural rainfall. Farmers in Sindh frequently highlighted better moisture retention during drought spells in tree-integrated plots, aligning with empirical results from dryland agroforestry studies globally (Mbow et al., 2014).

3.1.3. Microclimate Moderation and Biodiversity Gains in Arid Regions

Agroforestry plots in Sindh's desert margins and Southern Punjab demonstrated substantial microclimate regulation. Field observations and farmer interviews confirmed reductions in ground-level temperatures and wind desiccation around boundary-planted trees and windbreaks. In KPK's temperate areas, tree shade enhanced fodder productivity and reduced soil evaporation.

Increased tree cover and associated ground flora diversity in scattered tree and multistrata systems contributed to on-farm biodiversity conservation, with farmers reporting return of pollinators and small fauna.

3.2. Agronomic Outcomes under Climatic Stress

3.2.1. Improved Yield Stability in Semi-Arid Punjab

Agroforestry practices improved yield stability of wheat, fodder crops, and vegetables under semi-arid conditions in Punjab. In years of erratic rainfall, farmers practicing alley cropping and boundary planting reported 15–20% more stable yields compared to monocropped fields. Shade and wind protection from trees reduced crop heat stress, mitigating the impact of high pre-monsoon temperatures.

3.2.2. Sustained Land Productivity in Arid and Semi-Arid Regions

While minor yield reductions were observed during the first two years of tree establishment (due to shading and competition effects), long-term productivity in boundary and scattered tree systems exceeded monoculture benchmarks. Over a 7–10 years period, farms in Punjab and Sindh reported 12–18% higher total land productivity, consistent with findings from dryland agroforestry literature (Garrity, 2012).

In KPK's cooler temperate zone, silvopastoral practices enhanced fodder yields and diversified livestock feed resources, improving farm resilience to winter feed shortages.

3.3. Economic Contributions to Smallholder Livelihoods

3.3.1. Diversified Income Streams in Arid and Semi-Arid Climates

Agroforestry contributed to **livelihood diversification** across Pakistan's major climatic zones:

- In Sindh's arid districts, boundary planting of *Prosopis cineraria* and *Acacia nilotica* provided valuable fuelwood and small-diameter timber, contributing up to 20% of total household income during dry seasons when crop failures occurred.
- Punjab's semi-arid regions saw economic gains from fruit tree integration (e.g., mango, guava) along farm boundaries, contributing 10–15% of annual farm income.
- Non-timber forest products (NTFPs), including medicinal plants and animal fodder, provided modest but stable supplemental revenues.

These income streams were particularly critical during drought years, highlighting agroforestry's role as a climate risk-buffering strategy for smallholders, aligning with Leakey (2017) and Rahman et al. (2021).

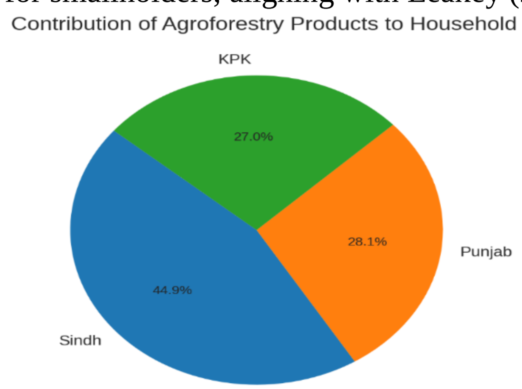

Figure 4: Contribution of agroforestry products to household income in Sindh, Punjab, and KPK.

3.2.2. Market Constraints in Remote Areas

Despite these benefits, limited market infrastructure restricted full exploitation of tree-based products, especially in KPK's mountainous areas and remote regions of Sindh. Farmers reported low prices for on-farm timber and lack of organized marketing channels, consistent with adoption barriers noted in other South Asian contexts (Miller et al., 2017).

4. Adoption Constraints in Pakistan's Climatic and Institutional Context

Qualitative interviews highlighted systemic barriers that constrain agroforestry adoption across Pakistan's climatic zones:

- Insecure land tenure in communal lands of Sindh discouraged long-term tree investments.
- High establishment costs and limited access to seedlings constrained resource-poor farmers in Punjab's rainfed districts.
- Lack of technical support was a universal constraint, with 64% of interviewed farmers reporting insufficient advisory services specific to agroforestry.
- Policies in Pakistan's forestry and agriculture sectors focus predominantly on public lands and monoculture productivity, with little institutional support for smallholder agroforestry.

Despite these constraints, 70% of surveyed farmers across all provinces expressed willingness to adopt or expand agroforestry if provided with accessible extension services and financial incentives.

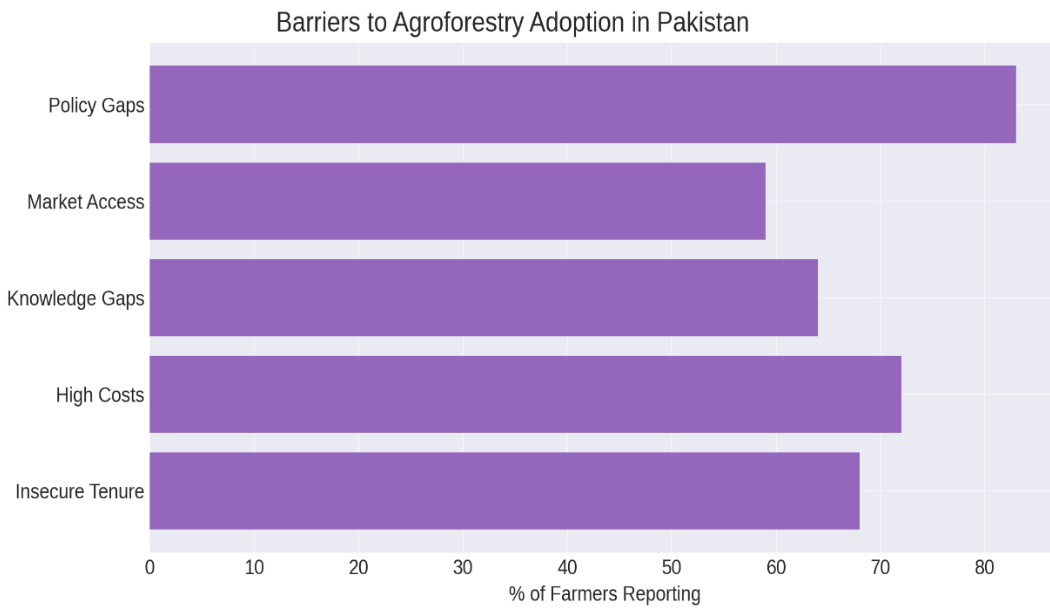

Figure 5: Barriers to agroforestry adoption reported by farmers across Pakistan.

5. Policy and Institutional Context in Pakistan

Interviews with agricultural extension officers and NGO representatives revealed:

- Agroforestry is not formally recognized within Pakistan's national agricultural policies or climate adaptation strategies.
- Existing afforestation initiatives (e.g., Ten Billion Tree Tsunami Programme) focus on forest reserves rather than on-farm tree integration.
- Institutional collaboration between provincial agriculture and forestry departments remains minimal.

Nonetheless, the potential for policy leverage exists through existing climate resilience programs and community forestry initiatives, particularly in KPK and Punjab.

6. Synthesis of Agroforestry Outcomes Across Climatic Zones

Climatic Zone	Ecological Outcomes	Economic Outcomes	Adoption Barriers
Arid (Sindh)	Improved SOC, water retention, microclimate regulation	Income from fuelwood, small timber	Land tenure insecurity, limited market access
Semi-Arid (Punjab)	Higher SOC, better yield stability, long-term productivity	Fruit and NTFPs as diversified income	High costs, limited extension services

Climatic Zone	Ecological Outcomes	Economic Outcomes	Adoption Barriers
Temperate (KPK)	Improved fodder production, reduced winter feed scarcity	Fodder sales, livestock productivity gains	Marketing isolation, institutional neglect

This study confirms that the agroforestry practices significantly improve soil fertility, water retention, microclimate regulation, and livelihood diversification across Pakistan's diverse climatic zones. While tangible benefits were evident across arid, semi-arid, and temperate systems, socio-economic and institutional barriers hinder widespread adoption. Integration of farm-level agroforestry within Pakistan's national agricultural development and climate adaptation policies is essential to scaling up its adoption and realizing its potential for sustainable, climate-resilient smallholder farming.

6. Discussion

6.1. Agroforestry as a Climate-Resilient Strategy for Pakistan's Smallholders

This study confirms that agroforestry holds significant promise as a climate-adaptive agricultural strategy for Pakistan's smallholder farmers. Across arid, semi-arid, and temperate zones, integrating trees into agricultural landscapes was shown to enhance soil fertility, stabilize crop yields, and diversify farm income. These benefits are particularly critical in Pakistan, where climate variability, resource degradation, and increasing water scarcity threaten rural food security (FAO, 2021). The observed improvements in soil organic carbon (SOC), especially in Punjab's semi-arid and Sindh's arid regions, align with global studies highlighting the role of trees in restoring degraded soils through organic matter inputs and below-ground biomass accumulation (Bayala et al., 2015; Kuyah et al., 2019). Enhanced soil water retention, particularly in rainfed farming systems of Punjab and Sindh, suggests agroforestry can play a critical role in water-stressed farming environments, mitigating the impacts of recurrent droughts and erratic rainfall.

6.2. Yield Stability and Productivity Enhancement in Semi-Arid Zones

Consistent with findings from Luedeling et al. (2014) and Mbow et al. (2014), this study found that agroforestry practices improved yield stability, particularly during dry seasons in Pakistan's semi-arid regions. The microclimate regulation provided by shade trees through reduced wind speed, moderated temperatures, and soil moisture retention helped maintain stable crop performance under variable climatic conditions. Furthermore, long-term land productivity gains, especially under boundary planting and scattered tree systems, support the argument for agroforestry as a pathway toward sustainable intensification of smallholder farms (Garrity, 2012).

6.3. Income Diversification and Livelihood Resilience

Agroforestry's contribution to livelihood diversification is of particular relevance in Pakistan's economically fragile rural communities. Timber, fuelwood, fruit, and non-timber products provided critical supplemental income, especially in arid Sindh where crop failures are frequent. This finding echoes broader evidence that diversified farm systems buffer smallholders against climate and market shocks (Leakey, 2017; Rahman et al., 2021). However, the study also revealed that market access barriers including poor infrastructure and lack of organized value chains limit farmers' ability to fully commercialize tree products, particularly in remote districts of KPK and southern Punjab.

6.4. Persistent Adoption Barriers and Institutional Gaps

Despite ecological and economic benefits, agroforestry adoption remains constrained by:

- Insecure land tenure in communal and marginal lands, especially in Sindh.
- High initial costs and delayed financial returns, deterring resource-poor farmers.
- Lack of technical knowledge and absence of structured extension services specific to agroforestry.

Institutionally, Pakistan's national policies continue to treat forestry and agriculture as separate sectors. Agroforestry is not integrated into national agricultural development plans or climate adaptation strategies. Similar policy disconnects have been reported in other South Asian countries (Kuyah et al., 2022), highlighting the need for institutional reform.

6.5. Policy and Research Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following strategies are recommended:

- Integrate agroforestry into Pakistan's National Agriculture and Climate Adaptation Policies to promote farm-level tree planting.
- Develop participatory extension programs tailored to smallholder needs, emphasizing localized training on agroforestry design and management.
- Provide financial incentives such as seedling subsidies, microcredit, or payments for ecosystem services to encourage tree planting, particularly in arid and semi-arid zones.
- Strengthen market infrastructure for tree products, focusing on rural roads, storage facilities, and farmer cooperatives to enhance commercialization opportunities.
- Foster cross-sector collaboration between forestry, agriculture, and climate adaptation agencies to support integrated land-use planning.

6.6. Limitations and Future Research Directions

While this study provides robust insights, several limitations should be noted:

- Findings are focused on Pakistan's smallholder contexts and may not be generalizable to large-scale or irrigated farming systems.
- Data heterogeneity across studies limited some aspects of meta-analysis standardization.
- Qualitative insights are based on localized perceptions, which may not capture broader structural dynamics.

Future studies should explore:

- Longitudinal assessments of agroforestry's cumulative benefits under extreme climatic events (e.g., prolonged droughts).
- Economic feasibility studies comparing agroforestry with conventional agriculture over multi-year periods.
- Gendered impacts of agroforestry adoption and its potential for empowering women farmers.

7. Conclusion

Agroforestry emerges as a flexible, context-specific strategy capable of enhancing smallholder resilience to Pakistan's escalating climatic stresses. By simultaneously improving soil health, crop productivity, and rural incomes, tree-based systems offer a sustainable pathway for achieving national food security and climate adaptation goals. However, realizing this potential requires deliberate policy support, targeted farmer training, and institutional reforms that prioritize agroforestry as an integral component of sustainable rural development in Pakistan.

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