

# The influence of land covers on soil quality and carbon storage in Moramo Education Estate, South Sulawesi

*By Pandu Yudha Adi Putra Wirabuana*

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SYAMSU ALAM<sup>1</sup>, SAHTA GINTING<sup>1</sup>, M. TUFAILA HEMON<sup>1</sup>, SITTI LEOMO<sup>1</sup>, LAODE MUHAMMAD HARJONI KILOWASID<sup>2</sup>, JUFRI KARIM<sup>3</sup>, YUSANTO NUGROHO<sup>4</sup>, JERIELS MATATULA<sup>5</sup>, PANDU YUDHA ADI PUTRA WIRABUANA<sup>6\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Soil Science, Faculty of Agriculture, Universitas Halu Oleo, Jl. HEA Mokodompit, Kendari 93231, Southeast Sulawesi, Indonesia

<sup>2</sup>Department of Agrotechnology, Faculty of Agriculture, Universitas Halu Oleo, Jl. H.E.A. Mokodompit, Kendari 93231, Indonesia

<sup>3</sup>Department of Geography, Faculty of Earth Science and Technology, Universitas Halu Oleo, Kendari 93231, Indonesia

<sup>4</sup>Faculty of Forestry, Universitas Lambung Mangkurat, Jl. A. Yani, Banjarbaru 70714, South Kalimantan, Indonesia

<sup>5</sup>Forestry Field Program, Politeknik Pertanian Negeri Kupang, Jl. Prof. Herman Johannes, Kupang 85011, East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia

<sup>6</sup>Department of Forest Management, Faculty of Forestry, Universitas Gadjah Mada, Jl. Agro No.1 Bulaksumur, Yogyakarta 55281, Indonesia

Tel./Fax.: +62-274-548815, \*email: [pandu.yudha.a.p@ugm.ac.id](mailto:pandu.yudha.a.p@ugm.ac.id)

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**Abstract.** This study investigated the influence of different land covers on soil quality and carbon storage in Moramo Education Estate. The information is required as fundamental consideration to determine the best landscape management strategies for supporting soil conservation and climate change mitigation. Data were collected from three types of land cover that are generally found in this area, including Forests, Shrubs, and Savanna. Three permanent sampling plots were randomly placed in every land cover as replicates with a size of 20 m x 20 m. Six parameters were used to describe soil quality, i.e., soil acidity, soil organic carbon, total nitrogen, available phosphorus, exchangeable potassium, and cation exchange capacity. Meanwhile, the carbon storage from every plot was quantified at below and aboveground conditions. Comparison mean of soil quality and carbon storage among land covers were examined using analysis of variance and followed by honestly significant Tukey's. Pearson correlation analysis was also applied to evaluate the relationship between soil quality and carbon storage. The results found soil quality differed significantly in exchangeable potassium and cation exchange capacity. A similar trend was also demonstrated in carbon storage at aboveground conditions. The highest average carbon storage was recorded in Forests (150.50±27.79 t ha<sup>-1</sup>), followed by Shrubs (51±15.02 t ha<sup>-1</sup>) and Savanna (45.97±4.42 t ha<sup>-1</sup>). Total carbon storage at different land covers significantly correlated to soil acidity, available phosphorus, and cation exchange capacity. Carbon storage improved along with the increasing available phosphorus and cation exchange capacity. In contrast, a negative correlation was noted in the relationship between carbon storage and soil acidity. Overall, this study concluded that the different land covers significantly influenced soil quality and carbon storage in Moramo Education Estate.

**Keywords:** climate change mitigation, land cover, landscape management, permanent sampling plot, soil conservation

**Running title:** Soil quality and carbon storage

## INTRODUCTION

Soil conservation and climate change mitigation have become strategic issues in agriculture development (Amelung et al. 2020), particularly in tropical countries. The management of the agriculture sector is currently targeted to stabilize the food supply and provide an essential contribution to maintaining soil quality and reducing carbon emissions in the atmosphere (Castellini et al., 2021). To anticipate these challenges, the optimum scenario of agriculture development is necessary to accommodate the objective of environmental preservation and farm cultivation. This scheme is only possible to implement when land managers know the influence of land cover on soil quality and carbon storage. The statement is also supported by previous studies that record the soil quality and carbon storage principally vary in every land cover due to the interaction between soil and vegetation above it (Sugihara et al. 2014; Chandra et al. 2016; Sadono et al. 2021). For example, higher plant biomass is commonly found in good soil than in poor soil because the availability of nutrients in good soil is more sufficient to support plant growth (Santandari and Zhang, 2019). Meanwhile, higher biomass accumulation will generate more litterfall that becomes the input of organic matter into the soil (Giweta, 2020). When the organic matter decomposes, the amount of nutrients will be released into the soil and improve fertility (Purwanto and Alam, 2020). Therefore, the availability of information about soil quality and carbon storage is highly required by land managers as consideration materials to determine the land conversion strategies in agriculture development.

Moramo Education Estate (MEE) is a special-purpose area managed by Universitas Halu Oleo in Southeast Sulawesi. It is a natural ecosystems with three land covers variation, including Forests, Shrubs, and Savanna. According to the

49 government policy, MEE will become the priority locations for integrated agriculture development. This area is designed  
50 as a research center and site experiment to facilitate the innovation of good agriculture practices (GAP), such as nutrients  
51 management, pest and disease control, crop yield estimation, etc. However, this scheme will provide negative impacts on  
52 the contribution of MEE in ecological functions since there will be intensive land conversion from natural ecosystems to  
53 agricultural land. It will reduce carbon absorption and cause imbalance nutrients cycle. Therefore, a preliminary study  
54 about the soil quality variation and carbon storage distribution at different land covers in MEE is required to determine an  
55 optimum scenario of land transition. This information will [32] the managers to formulate the priority land covers that can  
56 be converted into agricultural land. The effort is expected to minimize the negative impacts of land-use change on MEE  
57 eco 2 stems.

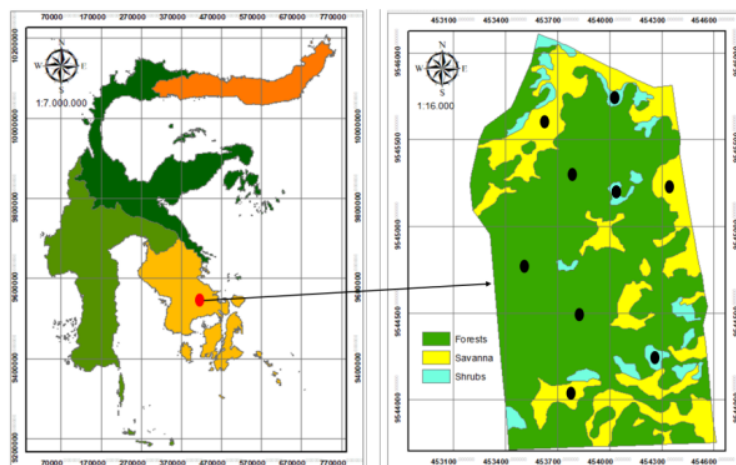
58 This study aims to evaluate the effect of land covers on soil quality and carbon storage in the MEE. The primary focus  
59 of research is to compare the soil fertility and carbon stock among land cover types and examine the connectivity between  
60 soil characteristics and carbon storage accumulation from different land covers. Results will provide adequate information  
61 as basis consideration to select the priority land cover for agriculture development without sacrificing ecological function  
62 of MEE.

## 1 MATERIALS AND METHODS

63

### 64 Study area

65 This study was conducted in the MEE area located in South Konawe District, Southeast Sulawesi. The geographic  
66 [3] position of this site is situated in E4°6'30"-4°7'30" and S122°35'0"-122°35'30" (Figure 1). Altitude ranges from 25 to 137  
67 m above sea level. Topography is predominantly by hilly area with an 8–15% slope level. The average daily temperature is  
68 27.6°C with a minimum of 23.1°C and a maximum of 32.2°C. Annual rainfall reaches 3,179.70 mm year<sup>-1</sup> with an average  
69 air humidity of 81%. The dry period is relatively longer than two months and commonly occurs from September to  
70 October. The land cover of MEE is dominated by forests (70%), followed by Savanna (20%) and shrubs (10%).



71

72 **Figure 1.** The study site of Moramo Education Estate in South Konawe. Black circles indicated sampling plots for data collection.

### 73 Data Collection

74 The field survey was conducted by a stratified sampling method. The different land cover was assumed as the primary  
75 factor that caused the variation of soil quality and carbon storage. To facilitate the measurement activity, three permanent  
76 sampling plots were placed randomly in every land cover with a size of 20 m x 20 m (Grusset al. 2016). The coordinate  
77 of each plot was also recorded using a global positioning system (GPS). It aimed to support long-term monitoring of soil  
78 quality and carbon storage dynamics at the study site. Then, the data collection process in every plot was divided into two  
79 steps, i.e., soil sampling and vegetation measurement.

80 Soil sampling was conducted from three different positions in every plot using ring samples with 8 cm in diameter and  
81 10 cm in height. [30] The soil sample was collected at a depth of 0–10 cm, 11–20 cm, 21–30 cm (Sadono et al. 2021a).  
82 Afterward, those samples were brought to the laboratory to determine their specific gravity, soil acidity, organic carbon,  
83 total nitrogen, available phosphorus, exchangeable potassium, and cation exchange capacity. The specific gravity was  
84 analyzed using the ASTM-D854 method, while soil acidity was determined by a pH meter. The determination of soil  
85 organic carbon was conducted using the Walkey and Black method, while total nitrogen was quantified using the Kjeldahl  
86 method. The HCl 25% extraction method was applied to quantify the available phosphorus and exchangeable potassium.

87 Finally, cation exchange capacity was determined using the ammonium acetate method. The protocol of soil analysis was  
 88 undertaken following the guidance of soil analysis published by (Estefan et al. 2013).

89 The measurement of vegetation was done using a nested method where every sampling plot was divided into several  
 90 sub-plots to support the plant inventory based on their life stages, namely 1 m × 1 m (understorey), 2 m × 2 m (seedlings),  
 91 5 m × 5 m (saplings), 10 m × 10 m (poles), and 20 m × 20 m (trees) (Rambey et al. 2021). Several parameters were  
 92 measured from the vegetation survey, including species, plant density, and diameter at breast height. However, the  
 93 measurement of diameter was only implemented for pole and tree.

94 Carbon storage of vegetation in below and aboveground conditions was quantified using a conversion factor from  
 95 biomass since approximately 50% biomass was composed of carbon elements (Latifah and Sulistyono 2013; Taillardat et  
 96 al. 2018; Wirabuana et al. 2020a). First, aboveground biomass in pole and tree was quantified using an allometric equation  
 97 developed by Chave et al. (2005). Meanwhile, the root biomass of pole and tree was calculated using a conversion factor  
 98 wherein a study recorded the ratio between root biomass and total aboveground biomass of 1:5 (Wirabuana et al. 2020b).  
 99 Next, the biomass accumulation in understorey, seedling and saplings was measured using a destructive method. The  
 100 harvesting process was carried out in every subplot. First, the fresh weight of each sample was measured using a hanging  
 101 balance. Then approximately 500 g sub-sample was brought to the laboratory for drying using an oven at 70°C for 48  
 102 hours (Sadono et al. 2021b). Then, biomass was computed by multiplying the ratio of dry-fresh weight from the sub-  
 103 sample with the total fresh weight. A similar method was also applied to quantify biomass in litter and necromass. In  
 104 parallel, soil biomass was counted based on ring samples' relationship between its specific gravity and soil volumes  
 105 estimated. Then, the result was multiplied by the soil organic carbon content to obtain the carbon stock in the soil. The  
 106 measurement of soil carbon stock was done following the guidance published by Hairiah and Rahayu (2007). Total carbon  
 107 storage in every land cover was counted by summing carbon accumulation in soil, litter, necromass, and vegetation.

108

**Table 1.** Summary statistics of soil quality and carbon storage at different land covers

Land Use	Unit	pH	C-org (%)	TN (%)	Av-P (ppm)	Exc-K (meq 100g <sup>-1</sup> )	CEC (meq 100g <sup>-1</sup> )	AGC (t ha <sup>-1</sup> )	BGC (t ha <sup>-1</sup> )	TCS (t ha <sup>-1</sup> )
Savanna	Mean	4.54	1.44	0.14	4.38	0.16	10.3	6.07	39.90	45.97
	SD	0.29	0.52	0.03	1.05	0.06	1.22	1.45	2.97	4.42
	SE	0.12	0.21	0.01	0.43	0.03	0.50	0.84	1.71	2.55
	Min	4.16	0.88	0.10	3.39	0.09	8.62	4.40	36.70	41.10
	Max	4.92	2.06	0.19	6.03	0.27	11.7	7.00	42.50	49.50
Forests	Mean	4.25	1.64	0.15	5.11	0.30	13.2	114.00	36.50	150.50
	SD	0.47	0.75	0.05	2.62	0.06	2.01	18.00	9.79	27.79
	SE	0.19	0.31	0.02	1.07	0.02	0.82	10.39	5.65	16.04
	Min	3.30	0.98	0.12	2.37	0.24	10.8	96.60	29.60	126.20
	Max	4.50	3.06	0.24	9.07	0.37	16.4	132.00	47.70	179.70
Shrubs	Mean	4.65	1.59	0.13	3.28	0.26	11.3	14.10	38.40	52.50
	SD	0.19	0.53	0.03	1.79	0.09	1.64	9.33	5.69	15.02
	SE	0.08	0.22	0.01	0.73	0.04	0.67	5.39	3.29	8.67
	Min	4.28	0.93	0.10	1.26	0.14	9.94	7.50	32.10	39.60
	Max	4.81	2.29	0.17	6.40	0.39	14.2	24.80	43.10	67.90

109 Note: pH (soil acidity), C-org (soil organic carbon), TN (total nitrogen), Av-P (available phosphorus), Exc-K (Exchangeable  
 110 potassium), CEC (cation exchange capacity), AGC (aboveground carbon storage), BGC (belowground carbon storage), TCS  
 111 (total carbon storage), SD (standard deviation), SE (standard error), Min (minimum), Max (maximum).

112

### 3 Data analysis

113 Statistical analysis was processed using R software version 4.1.1 with a significant level of 5%. The agricolae package  
 114 was selected to support the data analysis. A descriptive test was applied to quantify the data attributes, including minimum,  
 115 maximum, mean, standard deviation, and standard error. The normality of data was examined using the Shapiro-Wilk test,  
 116 while the homogeneity of variance was evaluated using Bartlett's test. Comparison means soil quality and carbon storage  
 117 among three land covers were tested using 10-way analysis of variance and followed by honestly significant Tukey's test.  
 118 The study of Pearson correlation was also used to determine the critical soil parameters that correlated to carbon storage.

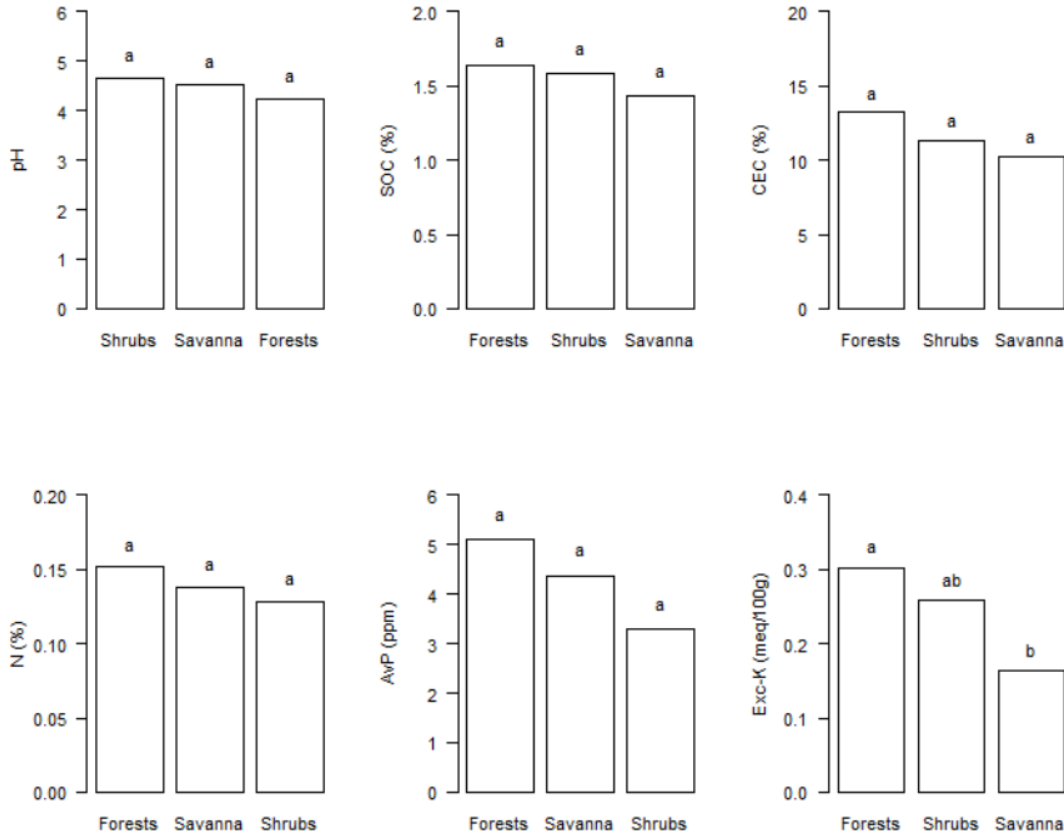
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## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 120 Soil quality distribution

121 Soil quality among land covers was not significantly different in most parameters, except Exc-K (Figure 2). The  
 122 highest average Exc-K was discovered in Forests (0.30±0.06 meq 100g<sup>-1</sup>), followed by Shrubs (0.26±0.09 meq 100g<sup>-1</sup>) and  
 123 Savanna (0.16±0.06 meq 100g<sup>-1</sup>). As one of the soil macronutrients, the availability of potassium in the study location is

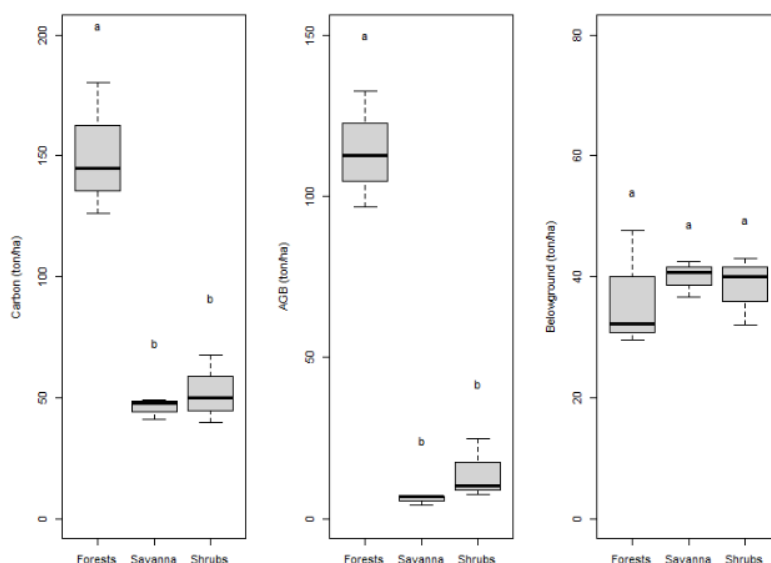
124 highly low because the soil type is categorized into ultramafic soils. It is a mature soil with low nutrient availability due to  
 125 the impact of intensive weathering process for long periods. Therefore, the potassium supply in this soil commonly comes  
 126 from litterfall decomposition. This also confirmed why Forests indicated higher Exc-K than other land covers.  
 127



128 **Figure 2.** Comparison means soil quality among land covers. A similar letter above the bar graph indicated not a significantly different.  
 129

130 The higher availability nutrients in Forests can be caused by dense vegetation that supplies more organic matter into  
 131 soil through litterfall. In this context, more litterfall accumulation at aboveground can maintain land humidity that supports  
 132 microorganism living (Sales et al. 2020). Furthermore, many pieces of literature confirm the abundance of soil bacteria  
 133 plays a significant contribution to accelerating the decomposition process (Jacoby et al. 2017; Grzyb et al. 2020;  
 134 Miljaković et al. 2020). As a result, many nutrients will be released from litterfall to soil layers (Tang et al., 2013). This  
 135 explanation indicates vegetation has a strategic position to improve soil quality since it correlated to the nutrients cycle.  
 136 The concept of soil pedogenesis supports it, wherein organism, including vegetation, becomes one of the fundamental  
 137 factors affecting on weathering process (Catoni et al. 2016). The results also implied the declining vegetation density from  
 138 Forests to Savanna gradually decreased soil quality.





139  
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141

**Figure 3.** Comparison means carbon storage among land covers. A similar letter above the boxplot indicated not a significantly different.

142 **Carbon storage variation**

143 Total carbon storage from three land covers was substantially different, wherein Forests had the highest carbon storage  
144 than other land covers by approximately  $150.50 \pm 27.79 \text{ t ha}^{-1}$  (Figure 3). It was 29 most four times higher than carbon stock  
145 in Shrubs and Savanna. Our study noted the most extensive accumulation of carbon stock in Forests occurred due to the  
146 vast contribution of vegetation at 21 ground. It was seen that the relative contribution of aboveground to total carbon  
147 storage in Forests is around 70% (Table 1). Meanwhile, there was no significant difference in belowground carbon among  
148 land covers. This outcome is not surprising since several publications have explained the essential role of vegetation in  
149 climate change mitigation (Setiahadi 2017; Matatula et al. 2021; Wirabuana et al. 2021). Furthermore, the higher dense  
150 canopy can absorb greenhouse gas emissions, particularly carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>), which is more effective in photosynthesis  
151 than shrubs and grass (Xie et al., 2021).

152

**Table 2.** Pearson correlation analysis between soil parameters and carbon storage

Soil parameter	AGE		BGC		TCS	
	r	p-value	r	p-value	r	p-value
pH	-0.562	0.051 <sup>ns</sup>	-0.282	0.461 <sup>ns</sup>	-0.694	0.037*
C-org	0.398	0.287 <sup>ns</sup>	0.595	0.057 <sup>ns</sup>	0.477	0.193 <sup>ns</sup>
TN	0.488	0.181 <sup>ns</sup>	0.394	0.293 <sup>ns</sup>	0.533	0.138 <sup>ns</sup>
Av-P	0.525	0.071 <sup>ns</sup>	0.392	0.295 <sup>ns</sup>	0.670	0.048*
Exc-K	0.546	0.059 <sup>ns</sup>	-0.238	0.536 <sup>ns</sup>	0.619	0.075 <sup>ns</sup>
CEC	0.537	0.053 <sup>ns</sup>	0.218	0.571 <sup>ns</sup>	0.762	0.016*

153  
154  
155  
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Note: pH (soil acidity), C-org (soil organic carbon), TN (total nitrogen), Av-P (available phosphorus),  
Exc-K (Exchangeable potassium), CEC (cation exchange capacity), AGE (aboveground carbon storage),  
BGC (belowground carbon storage), TCS (total carbon storage), <sup>ns</sup> (non-significant different),  
\* (significantly different).

157 Moreover, this study also recorded a significant correlation between soil characteristics and total carbon storage (Table  
158 2)—three soil parameters significantly correlated to whole carbon storage, i.e., pH, Av-P, and CEC. However, the  
159 relationship among those parameters was relatively different. Total carbon storage improved along with the increasing Av-  
160 P and CEC. In contrast, a negative correlation was demonstrated in the relationship between carbon storage and pH. In  
161 general, the interaction between soil characteristics and total carbon storage in the landscape occurs because soil generally

162 supplies nutrients for vegetation above it (Schjoerring et al., 2019). On another side, the life cycle of vegetation will  
163 provide the amount of litterfall and become organic matter inputs to soil (Sales et al. 2020). pH showed a negative  
164 correlation to total carbon storage since higher pH would reduce some kinds of nutrient availability. At the same time, a  
165 similar condition will also be found at the lower pH level (Feng et al., 2022). Therefore, most plants prefer to grow in soil  
166 with a pH-neutral of 6.5. Higher CEC increased total carbon storage because the increasing CEC would facilitate the  
167 mineralization process to make nutrients available (Costa et al. 2020). Meanwhile, higher Av-P significantly correlated to  
168 total carbon stock since the natural soil characteristics in the study site were classified into ultramafic soils having low Av-  
169 P (Alam et al. 2020). As one of the macronutrients, plants were substantially required to support their growth, mainly for  
170 supporting photosynthesis (Carstensen et al., 2018).

## 171 Implications

172 Overall, this study confirmed a significant influence of land covers on soil quality and carbon storage in Moramo  
173 Education Estate, wherein the highest soil quality and carbon storage was found in Forests. Even though this location was  
174 allocated to develop integrated farming systems, a wise scheme should be formulated to minimize the impact of  
175 environmental degradation due to the activity of land conversion. Referring to these results, we suggest conducting land  
176 transition step by step from the land cover with the lowest fertility and carbon storage, first starting from Savanna and  
177 followed by Shrubs. It is thoroughly recommended to convert Forests at the last priority since the potential function of  
178 Forests in this site is more suitable as a carbon pool.

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