



Seeding Solutions:

Why Community-led Conservation is Critical for People, Biodiversity, and Climate Change in Africa





About Maliasili

Maliasili believes in the potential of community-led conservation, and we exist to help talented local African conservation organizations overcome their challenges and constraints so that they can become more effective agents of change in their landscapes, communities, and nations. Our role is that of a supporter, enabler, partner, and advocate. Through long-term partnerships with a portfolio of more than 50 leading community-led conservation organizations in Africa, we are on a mission to mainstream community-led conservation, ensuring it receives the acknowledgment and support it rightfully deserves.

We wrote this report because we are deeply inspired by the work and impact of local people and organizations working across Africa, and we want to spark excitement and inspire new commitments, leading to increased direct funding for community-led conservation.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Brendan Buzzard, the lead author of this report. We would also like to thank all of the individuals who took time to provide their experiences and perspectives that inform this report.

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Community-led Conservation Deserves More Support



62% of rural Africans are directly dependent on natural resources¹ (75% and more in some countries).

80% of the continent is community land subject to various forms of customary uses and tenure.²

COUNTRY	LAND DESIGNATED FOR COMMUNITY-CONSERVATION*
Namibia	20% of the country (this is an area greater than the 17.6% in government protected areas.) ³
Kenya	16% (Community and individual conservancies for conservation)
Uganda	600,000 hectares
Tanzania	7% of the country
Zimbabwe	12% of the country

**Each country has different land registration, titling and legal frameworks, but all the above refer to areas designated for conservation and community management.*

Those living with and depending on natural resources are best placed to manage and steward them.

Namibia's conservancies helped **triple the elephant population** to 24,000 over 20 years.

Community managed fisheries reserves in Southwest Madagascar's Velondriake Locally Managed Marine Area show **189% more fish biomass** than non-protected areas.⁴

Zambia's Luangwa Valley community forests protect **1.2 million hectares**, offsetting 2.9 million tons of CO2 per year, and benefiting over 200,000 people by increasing household income by 171%.

65% of wildlife is found outside of national parks and formal protected areas in some countries such as Kenya.



Bottom line:
Community-led conservation matters for people and our planet. It's time we catch up to the action on the ground by supporting and investing in those leading these efforts.

Introduction

75% of the earth
is impacted by human
activity, and at least
1 million species
face extinction⁵

“Local communities are the stewards of the environment. By empowering them, we can tackle climate change effectively. Their intimate knowledge of the land and resources is invaluable in creating sustainable solutions.”

- KOFI ANNAN (FORMER UN SECRETARY-GENERAL)

Locally led conservation efforts provide a beacon of hope amidst the rapidly escalating biodiversity and climate crises. With 75% of the earth impacted by human activity, and at least 1 million species facing extinction,⁵ the loss of habitat and degradation of ecosystems is deeply threatening the resources and environments people depend on for their well-being. At times, the scale of the challenges seems unmanageable. Yet at the same time, inspiring local efforts show that people are addressing these challenges, and community-led approaches are providing important conservation, climate, sustainable development, and social justice outcomes simultaneously.

This report seeks to recognize and celebrate these efforts and commitments across Africa, showcasing what community-led conservation is and highlighting some of its approaches and outcomes to show its importance for people, climate and nature.

The Context

Community-led conservation isn't just a project or an idea; it is a tried-and-tested way of life.

Today there is increasing global recognition of the important role of Indigenous Peoples and other local communities, whose lands account for at least one-third of the globe,⁶ and whose practices and relationships with nature position them as essential custodians of biodiversity, ecosystems, and carbon.⁷ Globally, the practices of these groups conserve and manage an area equivalent to formal protected areas.⁸ Their lands comprise 36% of all intact global forests,⁹ 22% of tropical forest carbon,¹⁰ and 36% of the planet's Key Biodiversity Areas,¹¹ and provide a habitat for the majority of the world's terrestrial mammals.¹² Recognizing these important contributions to conservation and climate solutions, these local-level, communal efforts are increasingly seen as a key arena of action. The Global Biodiversity Framework, for example, "acknowledges the important roles and contributions of Indigenous Peoples and local communities as custodians of biodiversity and as partners in its conservation, restoration and sustainable use."¹³

The recognition of rights and the relationships people have with nature is a core foundation of community-led conservation. As an area of practice, it emphasizes a reframing of the center of decision-making and power, supporting Indigenous Peoples and other local communities to meet their livelihood needs and aspirations while conserving the environment and promoting the sustainable use of resources. Across Africa, it continues to grow and evolve.

To illustrate its growth and achievements in Africa, this report highlights diverse regional examples, emphasizing that the local-level management and decision-making structures that are catalyzed through community-led conservation initiatives will be increasingly important platforms and entry points for





addressing complex social-environmental challenges. However, we know that community-led conservation is hard, faces numerous obstacles, and does not always get it right. Importantly, community-led

conservation in Africa is layered on top of and seeks to overcome the colonial legacies of conservation on the continent, whereby local people were historically marginalized and excluded instead of being recognized as the custodians that they are. While we acknowledge these legacies and complexities, our intention with this report is not to analyze the ups and downs of community-led conservation, but rather to showcase its potential as a broad and ever-expanding movement, and to highlight the efforts by local people who are already taking action in their own lives and landscapes. By illustrating its importance, we emphasize the key problem and roadblock that hinders its potential: it lacks sufficient support.

There are some positive developments, and we are seeing a growing awareness of the need to invest in frontline local efforts. One example is the Glasgow Climate Pact, where the governments of the US, UK, Germany, Norway and the Netherlands, along with 17 funders, committed \$1.7 billion to “support the advancement of Indigenous Peoples’ and local communities’ forest tenure rights and greater recognition and rewards for their role as guardians of forests and nature.”¹⁴ **Yet given the importance of community-led conservation**

initiatives, the pace of investment is too slow and too fragmented, and more needs to be done. Globally, initiatives led by Indigenous Peoples and other local communities receive less than 1% of global climate funding, while local conservation organizations in Africa receive less than 10% of philanthropic funding invested on the continent.¹⁵ Furthermore, partnerships intended to support them are often inequitable, transactional, and exploitative.¹⁶

In seeking to strengthen support for community-led approaches in Africa today, conservationists need to confront resilient biases—including that community conservation is just a small-scale or local initiative compared to more “traditional” fortress conservation methods; that it would work better if it was done by “professionals”; that it is to be supported just to be on the right side of diversity discussions, not because it is actually effective. These biases need to be interrogated and addressed through both personal reflection and systemic reform.

Community-led conservation isn’t just a project or an idea; it is a tried-and-tested way of life. It represents a wide diversity of approaches to living harmoniously with nature that support both people and the environment. When viewed holistically and as a movement, community-led conservation has immense large-scale impact and has the potential to create lasting, transformative effects on people, wildlife, and our climate.

As this report illustrates, community-led conservation in Africa is an exciting space of innovation and change. Local people are not waiting around for some kind of greenlight—they are mobilized, they are acting, and they are delivering transformative positive change for nature and for their own lives. They need allies, and right now is the time to get behind them.

Framing conservation: a note on terminology

We use the term ‘conservation’ to refer to a wide variety of approaches that sustain the diversity of the earth’s living systems. It is just as much about people as it is about biodiversity, ecology, climate, and the environment.

Within this broad framing, ‘community-led conservation’ – terminology our partners advocate for – is a more nuanced subset of approaches, emphasizing those initiatives whereby local people, particularly Indigenous Peoples and other local communities, are mobilizing and leading communal efforts to secure their own rights and recognition and are the key decision-makers in how they govern, manage, allocate, and benefit from the lands, waters, and resources their livelihoods and identities depend on. In these cases, strategies and agendas are in their hands, and external actors play roles of enabler, funder or catalyst. Importantly, under ‘community-led approaches’, these external actors are invited by

local communities to be partners and participants, where their role is defined collaboratively with the local communities leading these initiatives.

We see ‘community-led conservation’ as an evolution of earlier ‘community-based conservation’ approaches that emphasized the engagement and involvement of local people to strengthen communal approaches to conservation and resource management. It is important to recognize that this distinction is fluid and changing, and that many initiatives are still evolving to fit into a true ‘community-led’ paradigm. Key to this growth is shifting the center of decision-making and power, which needs to be accompanied by a reflection and adjustment process by external stakeholders to truly get behind ‘community-led’ approaches. In this report, we use ‘community-led’ because that is ultimately where we see the movement going and where we want to get to.



Growing Challenges for People and Nature in Africa



The importance of community-led conservation is evident when viewed against the scale and urgency of environmental and social challenges in Africa. The continent contains over 2,000 Key Biodiversity Areas, 9 of the planet's 36 biodiversity hotspots, 25% of the world's mammals, the greatest terrestrial large mammal populations on the planet, a fifth of the world's birds, and one sixth of the earth's remaining intact forests.¹⁷ This rich diversity of life is under threat.

Biodiversity loss:

The continent is experiencing significant biodiversity loss, having lost 66% of its biodiversity over the last 50 years.¹⁸ For example:

- **Large mammals**, which need connected and healthy habitats and can easily conflict with people while also being susceptible to land use change, have declined by 59%.¹⁹ Some individual species are being lost at even higher rates, such as a 75% decline in lion numbers.²⁰
- **Raptor species**, with their large ranges, have declined by 88%.²¹
- **Coral reefs**, extremely sensitive to warming temperatures driven by climate change, are facing ecosystem collapse, with a decline of 25% over the last 25 years.²² 70% of them are fished below sustainable levels.²³

Habitat loss and ecosystem degradation:

The main driver of biodiversity loss is the fragmentation and degradation of ecosystems and habitats, which in turn affects the ecosystem services that support people. For example:



- **African forests** are being lost at a rate of ~4 million hectares each year:²⁴
 - The Congo Basin forests are the second largest expanse of tropical forest on the planet, supporting the livelihoods of over 80 million people.²⁵ They are being lost at a rate of half a million hectares each year.²⁶
 - In central and southern Africa, the Miombo woodlands span 2.7 million sq km across ten countries, supporting over 150 million people. They are being lost at a rate of 1.27 million hectares each year.²⁷
- **African rangelands** are becoming increasingly altered:
- **Rangelands**, which cover about 40% of Africa, supporting the livestock-based livelihoods of 268 million pastoralists across 36 countries,²⁸ are becoming increasingly fragmented and degraded. In East Africa, where rangelands support over

While Africa has experienced some positive trends recently, it is still expected that by 2030 at least 20% of the population will be confronting extreme poverty.³²

half of Africa's livestock keepers as well as the greatest diversity of wild large mammals on the continent, a combination of land privatization and enclosure, agricultural expansion, and reduced mobility are impacting pastoral livelihoods, rangeland productivity, and biodiversity.²⁹

- **Agricultural expansion:** The expansion of agriculture is the largest driver of habitat conversion, and small-holder agriculture is the biggest driver of forest loss in Africa.
- **Desertification and degradation:** Desertification is affecting 45% of Africa's land, and almost half of the continent's land is degraded.³⁴
- **Expanding development and infrastructure:** Africa contains the world's fastest growing urban areas, with settlements expanding by 18% between 2000-2019.³⁵ In West Africa, for example, the 600-mile coastal stretch from Ivory Coast to Nigeria is projected to become the planet's largest contiguous urban area.
- **Global resource demands:** There is significant global demand for Africa's resources, such as minerals, fish and wildlife, and forest products. Natural resource exploitation and extraction is associated with increased economic disparity between consumer countries and Africa. In addition, Africa's own demands for resources are increasing. It has the fastest growing human population on the planet, and its current population of 1.4 billion is expected to double by 2050. This will expand the human footprint as people need more space, require more resources, intensify agriculture, expand development, and increase consumption and pollution.
- **Governance, resources, and policies:** A host of political and governance challenges escalate environmental change and hinder conservation. Limited resources, corruption, lack of enforcement or adverse policies, limited recognition of local tenure rights, and an undermining of local governance and management institutions all compound the challenge.
- **Climate change:** This is exacerbating many of the social and environmental challenges, creating greater vulnerability, uncertainty, and variability.

Human well-being and social change:

These significant and ongoing changes are driven by a range of interlinked factors that affect human well-being:³⁰

- **Resource-dependent livelihoods:** 62% of rural Africans are directly dependent on natural resources,³¹ and in some African countries it is over 75%. 52% of Africans directly rely on nature to meet their four basic needs of water, energy, occupation, and housing materials.³²
- **Poverty and wealth inequality:** This is a multidimensional issue that goes beyond income to include things like education, health, social inclusion, and well-being. While Africa has experienced some positive trends recently, it is still expected that by 2030 at least 20% of the population will be confronting extreme poverty.³³ People experiencing poverty are particularly dependent and reliant on access to natural resources.³⁴



Addressing these challenges requires holistic and integrated approaches that conserve ecosystems and biodiversity while addressing human needs. Community-led conservation offers a critical solution.

Community-led Conservation is a Critical Solution



“We call for support to Africa’s Indigenous Peoples, local communities, women and youth, working in partnership with governments, civil society and private actors, to sustain the wisdom, traditions, scientific and traditional knowledge, and customary approaches that will result in effective conservation and the long-term resilience of nature, culture, livelihoods and human well-being.”

- KIGALI CALL TO ACTION FOR PEOPLE AND NATURE, AFRICA PROTECTED AREAS CONGRESS, 2022³⁸

Conservation from the ground up:

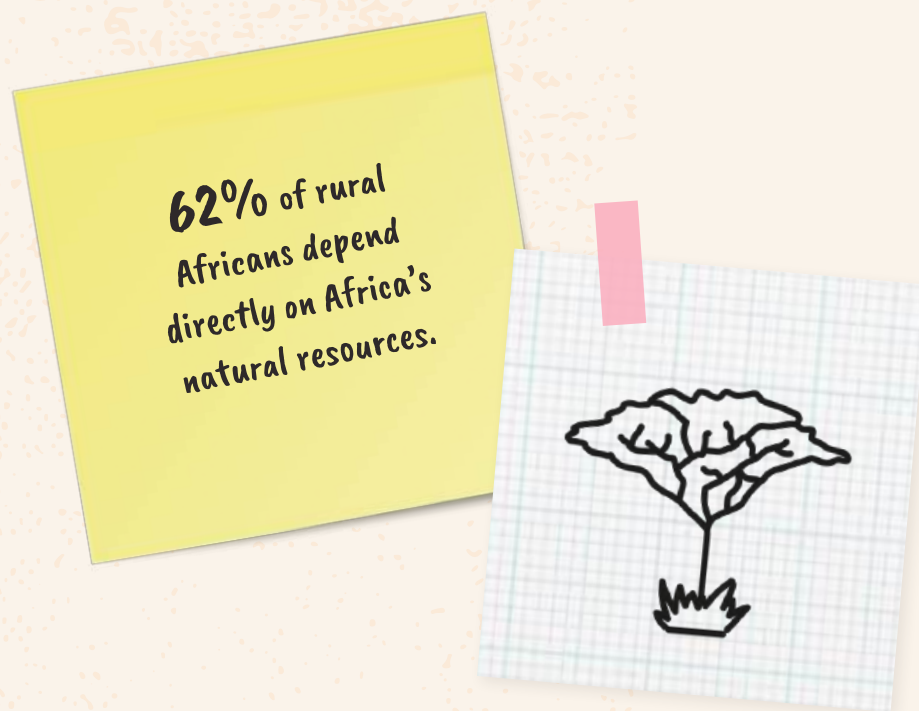
Community-led conservation aims to support people’s livelihoods and needs, while also protecting the environment and promoting the sustainable use of resources. In Africa, both Indigenous Peoples and other local communities have long been stewarding and managing nature, yet the conservation field has not always recognized their role. Historically, the field of conservation emphasized the separation of people and nature, exemplified by the creation of government protected areas that sought to create places free of human disturbance, in the process often alienating and displacing people. Over the last few decades, however, there has been increasing recognition of the role of rural people in managing nature, and that their cultures, knowledge systems and ways of being are integral to African ecosystems. As a result, community-led conservation has increasingly grown into a prevalent conservation paradigm in Africa, placing rural people at the center of conservation efforts. Consequently, the continent has played a leading role in the development of innovative community-led models.

Indigenous peoples and other local communities are key stakeholders for the following reasons:

- 80% of the continent is comprised of community land subject to various forms of customary uses and tenure.³⁹



- The relationships between people, their cultural practices, and nature are a key component in sustaining Africa's biodiversity and ecosystems:⁴⁰
 - For example, the lands and practices of pastoralist communities in East Africa have supported some of the continent's most important wildlife populations, such as sustaining the 65% of Kenya's wildlife that live outside protected areas.⁴¹
 - 62% of rural Africans depend directly on Africa's natural resources. Through their direct use of resources like grazing lands, forest products, or fishery resources, communities are well-placed to be custodians and managers of these resources.



Despite being the users and managers of most Africa's lands and resources, however, Indigenous Peoples and other local communities confront a key barrier that hinders the potential of community-led conservation:

- Many lack statutory rights to their land or resources, impacting their ability to sustainably manage them over the long term. This restricts their abilities to make management decisions or to resist external pressure, and as a result ecosystems are more vulnerable to exploitation and development.
- In some African countries these rights have never been recognized, while in others they are being rolled back as policies and governments become more restrictive and less-enabling.⁴²

Community-led conservation, therefore, focuses on the linkages between rights, governance, identity and livelihoods, and conservation.⁴³ It is a key strategy in aligning and addressing social justice along with the interlinked challenges of biodiversity loss, climate change, and equitable sustainable development. In seeking to achieve these combined outcomes, community-led conservation emphasizes:

- **Promoting rights:** Ensuring local people have the rights to own, use, and manage their lands and resources is foundational to community-led conservation, and influences the effectiveness of their governance institutions and associated social and conservation outcomes. Alongside local initiatives, community-led conservation as a movement also emphasizes broader policy changes in African countries focused on conveying these rights to local people.
- **Strengthening local governance institutions:** There's need for the empowerment and recognition of locally-led governance institutions that can make decisions, manage lands and resources,

and receive and distribute benefits to conserve nature over the long-term while contributing to human well-being.

- **Recognizing knowledge systems:** Traditional ecological knowledge is important to the cultural identity of Indigenous People and other local communities and informs their management and conservation practices. Recognizing and building on these knowledge systems is an important feature of community-led conservation and helps to better support multiple outcomes for people and nature.
- **Supporting livelihoods:** Community-led conservation recognizes that local people use and depend on the lands and resources they conserve and manage, and supporting local livelihoods and the environments they depend on is a core piece of community-led conservation. To be successful, community-led conservation initiatives must provide tangible gains, enhance livelihoods and economic opportunities, improve resource access and quality, and support cultural continuity.

Local platforms for multiple outcomes:

Community-led conservation takes many forms, yet a common factor includes the presence and strengthening of local institutional structures that mobilize communities, enabling them to advocate for their rights and to effectively manage and benefit from resources.⁴⁴ When this occurs, these institutions become local platforms and entry-points to achieve multiple social, conservation, and climate outcomes simultaneously.

Community-led conservation recognizes that local people use and depend on the lands and resources they conserve and manage





*In the following sections,
we highlight these diverse
outcomes by drawing from
examples of community-led
conservation around Africa.*

Community-led
Conservation
Benefits Healthy
Ecosystems and
Biodiversity



Most of Africa's biodiversity exists and depends on lands and territories owned and managed by local communities. These communities are on the front line, and their conservation practices are key to sustaining and restoring healthy ecosystems and biodiversity.



Community-led conservation initiatives are resulting in significant positive conservation impacts:

Scaling conservation:

Sustaining habitat: As community-led conservation becomes more widespread across Africa, it is becoming a crucial tool for the sustainable management of large landscapes and key habitats:

- The establishment and expansion of community-led conservation areas is an important trend in African conservation. These are comprised of diverse models across and even within different countries, yet at their foundation they are areas of land governed by locally led decision-making structures that manage land, wildlife, and other natural resources, and generate benefits to local residents and landowners:
 - In Namibia, communal conservancies that are collectively managed by rural communities cover 20% of the country, an area greater than the 17.6% in government protected areas.⁴⁵
 - In Kenya, diverse conservancy models have emerged that reflect their land ownership arrangements, comprising those that are community owned and managed, as well as those owned and managed by private landowners or groups of



landowners.⁴⁶ These diverse models have expanded to 16% of the country⁴⁷, securing more conservation land than the ~12% under formal protected areas.⁴⁸

- In Uganda, conservancies are also expanding, growing from three in 2015 to 18 in 2023, collectively conserving 600,000 hectares of important wildlife habitat around national parks.⁴⁹
- In Tanzania, 21 gazetted Wildlife Management Areas cover 7% of the land area, with 16 more proposed.⁵⁰
- In Zimbabwe, community-conserved land under the CAMPFIRE program—one of the early, innovative models in African community-led conservation—covers 12% of the country.⁵¹

- **Community-managed forests** are also expanding in different regions of Africa, securing important habitat:

- In Zambia, for example, 80 community forests have been established over the past decade, protecting over 1.5 million hectares of forest that provide important wildlife habitat and sustain connectivity between protected areas.⁵²
- In the Congo Basin, strengthening forest communities' rights is increasingly being recognized as a key forest conservation approach, and policy reforms are enabling new opportunities for community-led forest management. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, for example, over 150 community forests have secured 3 million hectares, with potential for tens of millions more.⁵³
- In Ghana, Community Resource Management Areas (CREMAs) provide a way for local people to secure collective management rights to resources such as forests. There are over 80 of these local institutions, which are important to buffering and sustaining state protected areas.⁵⁴

- In the marine environment, **Locally Managed Marine Areas (LMMAs)** are expanding as important community-led conservation areas to protect Africa's marine ecosystems and biodiversity:

- In the Western Indian Ocean, LMMAs help protect over 11,000 sq km. In some countries, they are far more extensive than government marine protected areas,



In the Democratic Republic of Congo over 150 community forests have secured 3 million hectares



such as in Tanzania where they cover 3.5 times the area, and in Madagascar where it is 2.6 times the area.⁵⁵

Species protection and recovery

Promoting wildlife recoveries: Community-led conservation initiatives are having positive impacts on wildlife populations and are promoting the recovery of specific species. Some examples include:

- In Namibia, communal conservancies have contributed to conservation measures that have tripled the elephant population over the last 20 years, increasing the population to 24,000.⁵⁶
- Conservancies in Kenya are helping to stabilize wildlife declines and to support species recovery.⁵⁷ With the establishment of conservancies in the Maasai Mara, for example, wildlife is recovering, as seen in the increase of densities and recovery of key species such as the lion.



In Namibia, communal conservancies have contributed to conservation measures that have tripled the elephant population over the last 20 years, increasing the population to 24,000

In a recent survey, 83% of wildlife in the ecosystem was found in conservancies.⁵⁸

- The establishment of Community Wildlife Management Areas in Tanzania is linked to increasing wildlife populations in those areas, with some showing similar wildlife densities to national parks.⁵⁹
- In Madagascar, Locally Managed Marine Areas are contributing to fish recoveries, with some showing 186% more fish biomass than non-protected areas.⁶⁰
- In Angola, the training and involvement of community monitors and rangers has been critical to the recovery of wildlife populations. In southeast Angola, the elephant population has grown from 3,300 to almost 6,000 over the last eight years.⁶¹

Reducing illegal wildlife killing: The increased level of decision-making and control that communities have through locally-led conservation enable them to manage the uses of wildlife on their lands and improve livelihoods. This has a clear knock-on effect as engagement in wildlife crime and illegal killing reduce drastically.

- In Northern Kenya, for example, where insecurity has historically been a major challenge, illegal killing of elephants has been reduced through the establishment of community conservancies. To illustrate this, it dropped by 35% over a three-year period (2012-2015), with no elephants killed in conservancies in 2023.⁶²

Promoting co-existence and addressing human-wildlife conflict: Conflict can deeply impact wildlife populations, as evident in the decline of lion populations from poisoning and other retaliatory killings in response to livestock depredation. Community-led conservation helps to promote coexistence.

- In Botswana, for example, predator alert systems and organized

communal herding practices have reduced human-lion conflict by 50%, from 25 annual lion killings in 2013 to three today.⁶³

- In Zimbabwe, community guardians alongside improved livestock enclosures have reduced human-carnivore conflict by almost 60% between 2021-2023.⁶⁴

Enabling large scale and connected conservation landscapes

In Zimbabwe, community guardians alongside improved livestock enclosures have reduced human-carnivore conflict by almost 60% between 2021-2023.⁶¹



Conserving connected landscapes: Community lands often border formal protected areas, providing important habitats and dispersal areas, and promoting landscape connectivity. In some cases, these lands sustain more biodiversity than the protected areas themselves, highlighting their important ecosystem value.

- In Kenya's Maasai Mara, for example, 24 conservancies sustain ~25% of the ecosystem, maintaining habitat connectivity and seasonal grazing areas for East Africa's wildebeest migration of over one million animals. In a recent survey, 83% of wildlife in the ecosystem was found in the conservancies, highlighting higher wildlife densities compared to the neighboring Maasai Mara National Reserve.⁶⁵

Enabling regional-scale conservation: Similarly, community land is critical in sustaining connectivity and promoting collaboration across national boundaries.

- In southern Africa, for example, the Kavango Zambezi is the world's largest transfrontier conservation area (KAZA TFCA), spanning five countries. It supports immense wildlife populations, such as the world's largest contiguous elephant population of 220,000. Community lands comprise 75% of this area and are integral to maintaining connectivity and collaborative conservation of this landscape.⁶⁶

Community-led
Conservation
Improves
Livelihoods and
Supports African
Economies



Community-led conservation contributes to the well-being of African societies in a wide variety of ways, exhibiting the interlinked themes of conservation, livelihoods, and rights and equity. Community-led conservation initiatives that deliver proven and positive social outcomes show better conservation results.⁶⁷

In some cases, income from wildlife resources generated through CAMPFIRE has reduced the number of community members living below the poverty line by over 50%.⁶⁸

The positive social outcomes from community-led conservation are felt locally and, more broadly, across African societies:

Contributions to communities and rural livelihoods

Revenue to communities: This is one of the more direct and important contributions of community-led conservation. It can take different forms depending on the design of specific initiatives, ranging from visitor conservation fees to tourism and hunting concession lease fees, and even employment. It is an important income source for rural people. Some examples include:⁶⁸

- **Ecotourism:** In Kenya, conservancies collectively host 142 ecotourism facilities and revenue impacts over 700,000 households.⁶⁹ In the Maasai Mara, for example, conservancies earn \$7.5 million annually from ecotourism lease payments, directly contributing to the monthly incomes of over 16,000 landowners.⁷⁰
- **Salaries:** In Namibia, communities earn \$5.7 million from ecotourism lease payments, and another \$2.8 million in salaries to employees for tourism and other ventures.
- **Hunting fees:** In Zimbabwe, communities involved in the CAMPFIRE program earned \$16.8 million from hunting revenue between 2010-2015, with 200,000 households as direct



beneficiaries. In some cases, income from wildlife resources generated through CAMPFIRE has reduced the number of community members living below the poverty line by over 50%.⁷¹

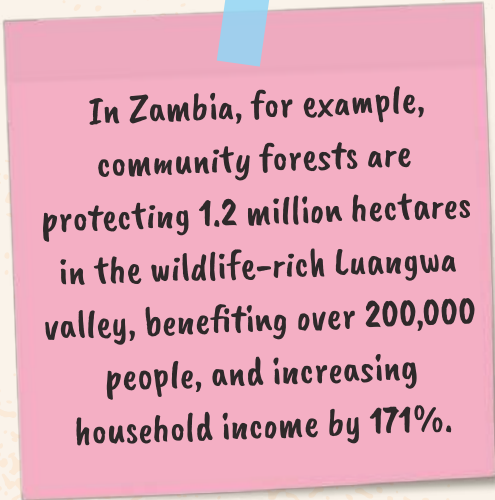
- **Carbon payments:**

Community carbon projects continue to grow in Africa as an additional layer of financial support

to conserve and restore habitat, reduce carbon emissions, and generate revenue to local communities. In Zambia, for example, community forests are protecting 1.2 million hectares in the wildlife-rich Luangwa valley, benefiting over 200,000 people, and increasing household income by 171%. In 2020, 13 communities earned \$2.3 million.⁷² In Northern Kenya, the Northern Kenya Rangelands Carbon Project earned the 14 participating community conservancies almost \$2.4 million in 2023, benefiting over 200,000 people.⁷³

Community-level, social services: Some community-led conservation initiatives distribute benefits at the community level, focused on providing services that will impact the community broadly. These can significantly improve livelihoods in rural areas, that are often neglected or do not have access to wider social services. This includes things like:

- **Community development funds:** Conservancies in Northern Kenya have developed a livelihoods fund, to support conservancy communities to design and implement their own livelihood



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projects. Between 2015 and 2020, this provided \$4.2 million to support 162 projects.⁷⁴

- **Other services:** Education and healthcare are two other examples of focal points across many community-led conservation initiatives, impacting not just individuals and families but also communities as a whole.

Enhances natural-resource dependent livelihoods: Since community-led conservation links conservation outcomes with well-being, it can have positive outcomes for local resource-dependent livelihoods, both in terms of improving the resource base and enabling communities to better sustain themselves. Community-led conservation initiatives are also playing an increasingly important role in facilitating fair and equitable market access. Examples include:

- **Sustaining rangelands and improving grazing:** Healthier rangelands have a number of benefits for livestock-dependent communities. In Kenya, for example, conservancies are playing an integral role. Before conservancies were established in Kenya's Maasai Mara ecosystem, community grazing lands were at risk of subdivision, fracturing the lands that comprise 75% of the ecosystem and threatening conversion to agriculture. The conservancies have kept lands intact for both livestock and wildlife. In Northern Kenya, similarly, the establishment of conservancies is helping restore grasslands that both pastoral livestock and wildlife depend on, and so far, have seen 11% more vegetation cover and improved rangeland health inside conservancies compared to outside.⁷⁵
- **Healthier marine ecosystems and better fishing:** For some communities involved in Locally Managed Marine Areas in Madagascar, small-scale fishing provides 99% of their protein. Through short-term fishing closures targeting the recovery of

octopus populations, fishers are catching larger octopuses and, in some cases, increasing their catches by up to 718% and doubling village-level income.⁷⁶

Helps address inequity and secure tenure rights:

- **Strengthening communal land and resource rights:** Community-led conservation emphasizes land tenure and resource rights as a way to strengthen local decision-making and management. This is also foundational to Indigenous people's identities. In Northern Tanzania, for example, communal tenure and rights are being secured through Certificates of Customary Rights of Occupancy (CCROs) that secure land and resource tenure for both Indigenous pastoralist and hunter-gatherer communities alongside habitat for wildlife. So far, 1.7 million hectares have been secured through 117 CCROs, with over 60,000 hectares for the Hadzabe and Akie hunter-gatherers' traditional use, helping safeguard the future of these unique ethnic communities.⁷⁷

Contributions to African societies and economies

National-level economic contributions: There is growing recognition across Africa of the value and importance of nature in regional economies, leading to a growing focus on 'wild economies' and the comparative economic advantage inherent in Africa's natural wealth.

- Wildlife-based tourism is a major economic force, directly dependent on conservation. It contributes to 7% of African GDP,⁷⁵ generating \$29 billion annually. It creates 40% more jobs per unit investment than other sectors, employing 3.6 million people.⁷⁹
- Community-led conservation plays an important role in growing this, with significant scope to scale it further. In Namibia, for example, the conservancies contribute \$60 million in net national income.⁸⁰
- Recreational hunting is also an important economic driver and a well-established industry in some African countries. In Tanzania, between 2004-2014, hunting generated an annual average revenue of \$31.7 million, much of it dependent on community lands.⁸¹
- In addition to wildlife-based tourism, community-led conservation helps drive the



economic contributions of other diverse activities. The African carbon market, for example, is expected to generate billions. Much of this is framed around natural climate solutions that emphasize habitat conservation, restoration, and management, and will be dependent on community lands and conservation initiatives.

Sustaining ecosystem services: Communities help to sustain important services through their conservation practices, highlighting the importance of strengthening their management and decision-making rights. This includes things like:

- **Non-timber forest products:** 67% of Africans use non-timber forest products for subsistence or cash income. This includes things like medicinal plants, nuts and seeds, and oils and honey. These contributions are hard to quantify, yet the global trade is estimated to be \$11 billion, potentially contributing significantly to national economies and local livelihoods.⁸² Sustaining or growing these contributions depends on the conservation and management practices of local communities.
- **Household energy:** 80% of Africans use wood fuel or charcoal



80% of Africans use wood fuel or charcoal for household energy such as cooking,⁸⁰ and demand is projected to triple by 2050 even amidst efforts to shift to alternative fuel sources.⁸¹

for household energy such as cooking,⁸³ and demand is projected to triple by 2050 even amidst efforts to shift to alternative fuel sources.⁸⁴ In Tanzania, the wood fuel sector is estimated at ~\$1 billion, where over 90% of both rural and urban households depend on wood fuel, with demand exceeding supply and greatly impacting forests. Community forest initiatives seek to address the sustainability of this sector by linking a formalized and permitted charcoal business with the establishment of community forests and guided by clear land-use and management plans.⁸⁵

- **Other services:** These include sustaining and managing healthy watersheds.

Better and more durable governance: Community-led conservation initiatives often involve the strengthening of local decision-making and governance institutions, growing local capacity and leadership, and promoting the

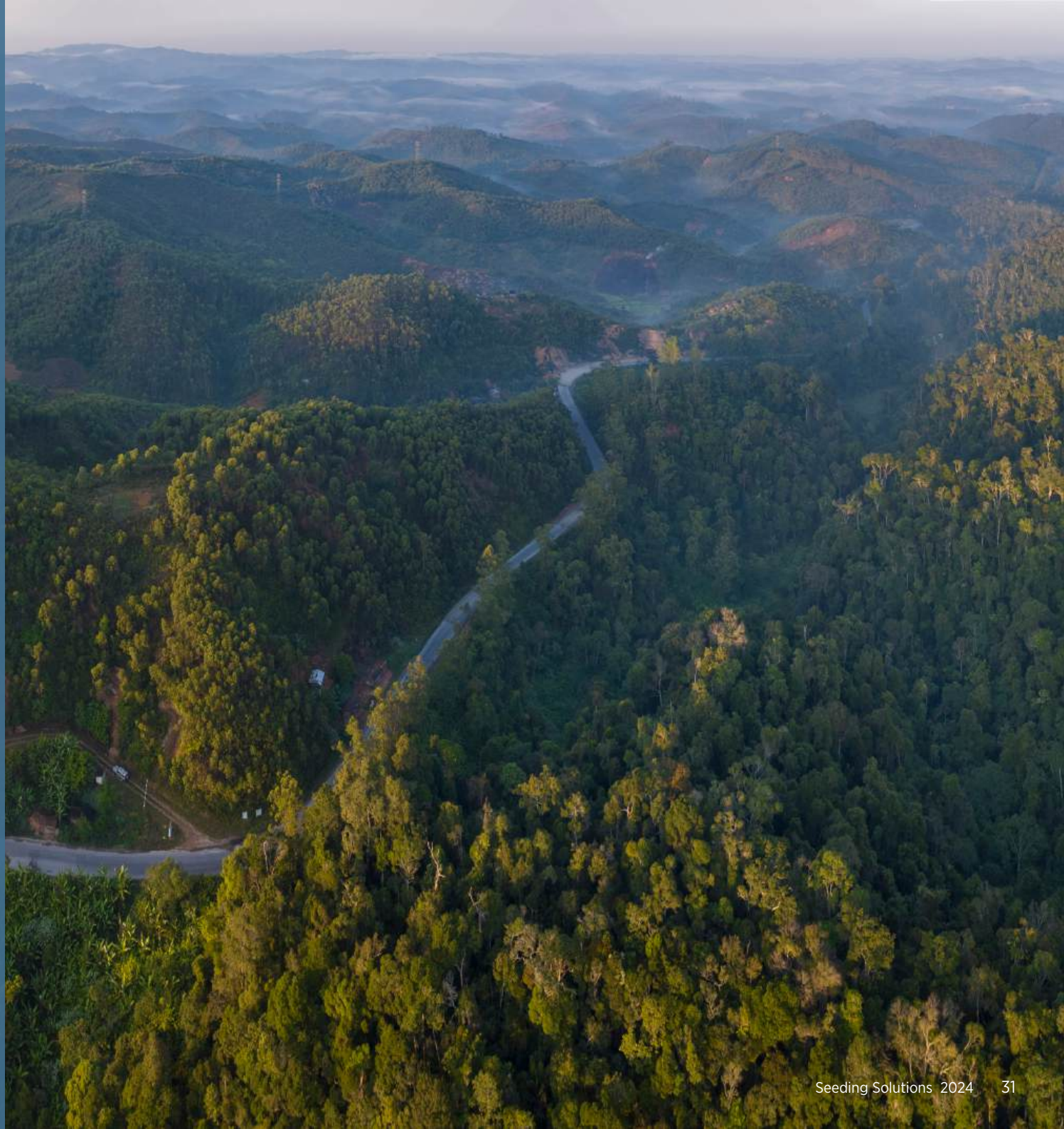


inclusion of marginalized groups of people, which in turn lead to better conservation outcomes. These processes have broader impacts across African societies, such as:

- **Improving local governance:** Communities with long-term community-led conservation initiatives experience better local governance, including leadership, participation, and accountability, as has been seen in some cases in Tanzania.⁸⁶ In Zimbabwe, where communities developed strong local institutions through the CAMPFIRE program, effective local governance was sustained even amidst national political and economic turmoil.⁸⁷
- **Empowerment:** Through governance strengthening and participatory processes associated with community-led conservation initiatives, marginalized groups have been able to gain more rights and agency. For example, Women's Rights and Leadership Forums have been established in 55 villages in Northern Tanzania alongside community-led conservation initiatives, promoting better leadership in governance and natural resource management.⁸⁸
- **Mobilization and advocacy:** The collaborative networks and mobilization that have emerged from community-led conservation initiatives are catalysts for community engagement and leadership in conservation decision-making, strengthening communities' ability to advocate for their rights. In Kenya, for example, the growth of a national conservancy association as an umbrella body and representative voice has been instrumental in the formal recognition of conservancies, in advocating for management rights, and in channeling national and international support for conservancies.⁸⁹

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Community-led
Conservation
Provides Climate
Mitigation and
Adaptation
Benefits



As managers of a significant portion of Africa's ecosystems, local communities are fundamental to addressing climate change, for both adaptation and mitigation outcomes. Through their local decision-making and management systems they help achieve multiple goals simultaneously, including conservation, restoration, and promotion of their own ability to adapt to the impacts of climate change.



There is increasing recognition of the importance of healthy ecosystems in addressing climate change, emphasizing the conservation of intact habitats that store carbon along with landscape restoration as a way to sequester emissions.⁹⁰ These natural climate solutions that link land conservation and stewardship with reduced emissions can potentially provide 30% of global carbon reductions as needed to meet 2030 targets, namely keeping global warming below 2°C.⁹¹ Given the rich biodiversity in Africa, its diversity of ecosystems, along with the rapid conversion of habitat and the extensive area of degraded land, the continent can contribute significantly to addressing climate change through conservation and restoration. In West Africa, for example, it is estimated that a combination of forest conservation and restoration can sequester 30% of 2030 projected regional carbon emissions.⁹²

Despite Africa's marginal contributions to the overall global carbon emissions driving climate change, estimated at about 4%, Africa is the continent most vulnerable to climate change and addressing it is a priority. Rural African communities will be disproportionately affected by climate change, given the higher vulnerability that comes with direct dependence on natural resources. This makes climate change a social justice and rights issue as well as an environmental one. At the same time, land conservation and restoration can be a central part of helping African countries meet their international commitments,⁹³ such as the mitigation and restoration pledges they have outlined in response to international agreements such as the Paris Climate Agreement, the Bonn Restoration Challenge, and the AFR 100 initiative, an Africa-wide commitment to restoring 100 million hectares of degraded land by 2030.



Diverse African environments require different approaches to sequestering carbon and mitigating climate change:

Africa's diverse environments and ecosystems all play important roles in mitigating climate change. They depend on different management practices and approaches that support healthy ecosystems. Balancing carbon storage and sequestration, biodiversity conservation, and the livelihoods of people are important considerations in deciding on management and restoration approaches, and in establishing what is appropriate in what context.

Forests

Forests have been the main focus of mitigation efforts and play a vital role, and in these areas both reducing deforestation and forest restoration are important management activities. The forests of the Congo Basin, for example, absorb 1.1 billion tons of CO₂ annually, almost as much carbon as Africa emits each year,⁹⁴ and conserving these forests is critical for climate change and to forest-based livelihoods.

Rangelands

In other areas, such as Africa's rangelands, which cover about 40% of the continent, most of the carbon is stored in its soil, and management practices need to emphasize the link between healthy rangelands, people, and biodiversity.⁹⁵ In East Africa, for example, rangeland restoration, planned grazing and livestock management, along with avoiding the conversion of rangelands to agricultural land, can enhance carbon sequestration.⁹⁶ Community-led conservation institutions are facilitating these kinds of management practices, particularly those in pastoral areas where they are already managing land for people, livestock, and wildlife.



The forests of the Congo Basin, for example, absorb 1.1 billion tons of CO₂ annually, almost as much carbon as Africa emits each year⁹¹



These realities put communities at the center of African climate change solutions given the significant role they play in stewarding biodiversity and ecosystems. **Local, community-led conservation institutions provide important management structures that can align biodiversity conservation, landscape restoration, and promotion of the adaptive capacity of rural livelihoods. At the same time, these local efforts support African nations and the world in addressing climate change.** Some of these positive contributions include:

Ecosystem conservation and restoration to sequester carbon:

Conserving habitat and restoring ecosystems: The strengthening of local governance and management institutions, the securing of communal land and resource rights, and the recognition and support for Indigenous knowledge systems are all important entry points to achieving multiple outcomes, such as aligning restoration, conservation, and livelihood goals.⁹⁷ Natural climate solutions can be more equitable, successful, and better sustained over the long term when they work with and through community structures and systems.⁹⁸ Community-led conservation structures, such as conservancies or locally managed forests, are therefore critical to addressing climate change and growing the adaptive capacity of rural people. In addition to their conservation and social outcomes, these local structures act as entry points and the foundation for projects specifically intended to store and sequester carbon. These carbon projects are growing rapidly in scope across the continent, expanding the multiple outcomes of community-led conservation initiatives. Some carbon project examples built around community-led conservation initiatives include:

- In Zambia, community managed forests are providing the foundation for carbon projects that also conserve wildlife, restore forests, and support local livelihoods. In the Luangwa Valley, community forests are managing over one million hectares, offsetting 2.9 million tons of CO2 per year, equivalent to the annual emissions of about 630,000 passenger vehicles.⁹⁹
- In Kenya, conservancies are providing an important entry point and on-the-ground management structures to facilitate carbon projects while also conserving wildlife and restoring habitat. In the Chyulu hills of southern Kenya, a partnership between government agencies, conservation organizations, and community conservancies has developed a carbon project to reduce deforestation and restore habitat. Since 2013, the project has conserved and restored 400,000 hectares of important wildlife habitat and planted over 11,000 trees. The project prevents 700,000 tons of emissions each year as a result of reducing forest clearance, and there has been an 83% reduction in habitat loss and degradation.¹⁰⁰
- In Tanzania, community lands and wildlife management areas provide structures for carbon projects that sustain intact habitat and conserve biodiversity while also supporting local livelihoods. A project in



conserving these forests is critical for climate change and to forest-based livelihoods.

the Yaeda Valley, for example, protects 110,000 hectares of important dispersal habitat for wildlife in the Serengeti and Ngorongoro Crater. It offsets almost 200,000 tons of CO₂ annually, while also strengthening the governance and land tenure of hunter-gatherers and pastoralists.¹⁰¹



Adaptive capacity:

Promoting livelihood resilience through effective resource management:

The majority of rural Africans depend directly on natural resources and will become increasingly vulnerable amidst climate change. Broad scale warnings point to an increase in extreme events such as drought, and food security, water, and health are adaptation priorities for many African countries.¹⁰² By empowering communities to take action and sustain healthy resources that support sustainable livelihoods, community-led conservation initiatives create more agency among rural people to manage change.

- In South Africa's eastern Cape, for example, rural herding communities are experiencing a suite of challenges related to climate change, including a 68% reduction in the availability of freshwater and a 64% reduction in available pasture.¹⁰³ Through community mobilization and the strengthening of governance institutions, community-led conservation initiatives are promoting management approaches that protect important water sources and

improve grazing, promoting better livestock production and in turn strengthening household resilience.¹⁰⁴

- In the Kavango-Zambezi Transfrontier Conservation Area of Southern Africa (KAZA), 71% of community households face moderate or severe food insecurity, with many dependent on subsistence agriculture that is further threatened by shorter rainy periods along with longer dry seasons expected with climate change. This is accompanied by unpredictable water and vegetation availability for wildlife, along with agricultural encroachment into conservation areas, and as a result 58% of households experience crop damage from elephants.¹⁰⁵ In southeast Angola, a key headwater area for the water sources that sustain KAZA, community-led conservation initiatives engage this complex suite of issues by strengthening community resource governance and management. By promoting conservation agriculture and increasing crop yields up to 87%, establishing fisheries reserves alongside river basin management, and community engagement in wildlife management, community-led conservation diversifies and expands household opportunities, strengthening the agency of communities to manage their own adaptation.¹⁰⁶

community-led conservation diversifies and expands household opportunities, strengthening the agency of communities to manage their own adaptation

Conclusion: Generating More Support for Community-led Conservation in Africa



The community-led conservation examples in this report illustrate a diverse set of outcomes yet represent only a small sample of a widespread and growing movement.

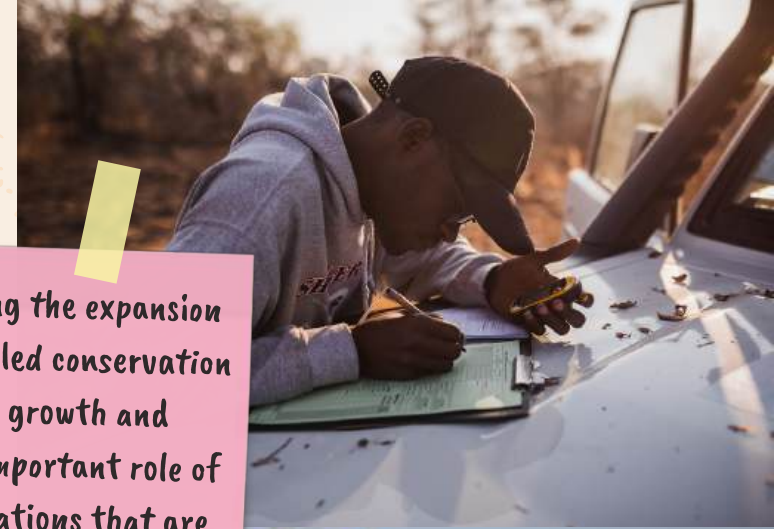
As communities mobilize, and assume ownership and leadership of conservation, they are proving that local-level initiatives are a key solution for addressing global conservation, sustainable rural development, and climate outcomes simultaneously. The expansion of this movement is promising not only to meet local, regional, and global conservation goals, but also to address inequity and social justice, recognizing the agency of local people and reframing decision-making and power. This is exciting, deserves celebration, and the diverse and widespread examples highlighted in this report illustrate the potential of the movement and why it needs more support.

Supporting local organizations: the levers of change

Despite its growth and the inspiring outcomes of community-led conservation, it continues to face numerous barriers and obstacles. Not only do many community-led conservation initiatives work in challenging conditions with limited resources, but they depend on the leadership and commitment of individuals who operate tirelessly in their communities with little recognition or reward. At the same time, it is an ongoing struggle to create the conditions within African nations that can help community-led conservation thrive, such as ensuring Indigenous Peoples and other local communities have rights, that their decision-making and management institutions are recognized, that Indigenous knowledge and practices are valued, and that policies are in place that allow for local-level ownership and leadership.

At times, these barriers appear persistent and difficult to overcome. Yet accompanying the expansion of community-led conservation we see the growth and increasingly important role of local organizations that are either comprised of, or work closely with, community-led conservation initiatives. Across Africa, local organizations are helping to mobilize communities, strengthen their

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capacity and help them define their strategies, create momentum around advocacy and policy change, and bring in resources and partnerships for the communities they work with and represent. As long term partners and allies, they do not need an exit plan, and are rooted in the places and contexts in which they work.

Supporting community-led conservation by resourcing and supporting these local organizations is a key lever of change. Depending on the stakeholder, we see the following opportunities:

- **For funders:** Local organizations provide ideal entry points and partners for funders who are looking to invest in and support the growth of community-led conservation in Africa. Many of these organizations need core organizational support along with support to deliver impacts and outcomes, and by investing in their capacity these organizations can better engage the barriers to community-led conservation and support their communities to deliver solutions. Funders would want to reflect on their own practices and approaches, so that they can build trust and support local organizations over the long-term.
- **For international organizations and technical partners:** Communities and the local organizations that work alongside them continue to need to build their capacity,

and there will always be new technical skills and needs that can be provided by international organizations that have more reach, access, and resources. There are numerous opportunities for partnership and support, and these can be defined collaboratively with local communities and organizations in terms of what they need to implement their own strategies and goals.

- **For African governments:** This is a unique opportunity to recognize the important contributions that community-led initiatives are having in particular countries, to acknowledge their role in meeting national conservation and climate commitments and targets, and to reflect on and adjust any policy or governance barriers that continues to hinder community-led conservation.

As this report illustrates, community-led conservation holds significant promise, is delivering important results and outcomes for people, biodiversity, and the climate, and is a growing movement that is here to stay and will continue to increase in size and scope. Getting behind the local agents of change, the communities and the organizations that stand alongside them, is a transformative opportunity to deliver meaning for people and nature across Africa.

Supporting community-led conservation by resourcing and supporting these local organizations is a key lever of change.



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