

Advancing Rights-based and Community-led Conservation in Africa

Evidence, Lessons, and Recommendations



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Content

Acknowledgments	i
Acronyms and abbreviations	ii
01 Executive Summary	3
02 Introduction	7
03 Context for Community Conservation in Africa	11
04 Overview of Community Experiences with Conservation in Africa	17
Informal Community Conservation: Local Governance, Knowledge, and Practices	17
Formal Community Conservation	21
05 Key Community Conservation Results	27
06 Elements of Successful Community Conservation: Lessons from Experience	31
Secure Collective Rights to Lands, Territories, and Resources	31
Empowered and Inclusive Community-led Governance	37
Sustainable Livelihoods, Economies, and Financing	39
07 Conclusion and Recommendations	44

Acronyms and abbreviations

Acronym	Full term
AICA	Alliance for Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities for Conservation in Africa
ANAPAC	Alliance Nationale d'Appui et de Promotion des Aires et territoires du Patrimoine Autochtone et Communautaire (DRC network supporting ICCAs/APACs)
APAC	Aires du Patrimoine Autochtone et Communautaire (Indigenous and Community Conserved Area)
APAC	African Protected Areas Congress (also referred to as the Kigali Congress)
CBD	Convention on Biological Diversity
CBNRM	Community-Based Natural Resource Management
CCRO	Certificate of Customary Rights of Occupancy
CAMPFIRE	Communal Areas Management Programme for Indigenous Resources
DRC	Democratic Republic of the Congo
DUAT	Direito de Uso e Aproveitamento da Terra (Right of Use and Benefit of Land, Mozambique)
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN
FIDEPE	Cameroon Focal Point for Territories of Life
FPIC	Free, Prior, and Informed Consent
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
ICCA	Indigenous and Community Conserved Area
IIFB	International Indigenous Forum on Biodiversity
IP	Indigenous People
IPBES	Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services
ITT	Indigenous and Traditional Territory
IUCN	International Union for Conservation of Nature
KMGBF	Kunming-Montréal Global Biodiversity Framework
KWCA	Kenya Wildlife Conservancies Association
LC	Local Community
LMMA	Locally Managed Marine Area
MPA	Marine Protected Area
NBSAP	National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan
OECM	Other Effective Area-based Conservation Measure
RRI	Rights and Resources Initiative
WMA	Wildlife Management Area



Today, we are faced with a challenge that calls for a shift in our thinking, so that humanity stops threatening its life-support system. We are called to assist the Earth to heal her wounds and, in the process, heal our own—indeed to embrace the whole of creation in all its diversity, beauty and wonder.

Professor Wangari Maathai, Nobel Laureate, 2004

01

Executive Summary

Indigenous Peoples and local communities govern a large proportion of the lands and resources significant for biodiversity conservation in Africa. An estimated 78 percent of the continent's land area is held and managed by communities under some form of customary tenure, and more than 80 percent of Africa's biodiversity lies outside of formal state-protected area systems. **Indigenous and local community knowledge, governance systems, and practices have created and sustained biodiverse ecosystems for generations, and it is increasingly clear that the future of Africa's biodiversity depends on community-led and rights-based conservation**

Since the colonial era, Indigenous Peoples and local communities have been legally disenfranchised from control over their ancestral lands and resources and often forcibly displaced to make way for national parks, forest reserves, and other protected areas. Despite this, many communities have maintained traditional governance and knowledge systems for conservation and sustainable use of their environments. Indigenous and local community agroecological practices, livestock and fisheries management, respect for wildlife totems and taboos, and the protection of sacred natural sites have sustained biodiversity in community lands.

Since the **1980s**, many governments across Sub-Saharan Africa have also recognized and invested in more decentralized approaches to conservation and sustainable use of natural resources that devolve some rights and benefits to communities. Policies and programs for community wildlife conservancies, community forestry, and locally managed marine areas have been widely adopted and implemented across the region. Documented evidence demonstrates the significant scale and positive environmental, social, and economic benefits generated by formal community conservation initiatives.

Despite these significant reforms, aspirations for rights-based and community-led conservation in Sub-Saharan Africa continue to face serious challenges. State-led and often exclusionary protected areas remain the predominant approach to conservation. Formal, legal recognition of community land and resource tenure rights—widely recognized as a critical foundation for community conservation—remains limited. The reluctance of governments to cede control over valuable resources is reflected in both the slow pace of tenure reforms and ongoing actions to exert control where resource rights are devolved.

While community conservation contributes significantly to sustainable livelihoods, the ability of local people to realize benefits from devolved resource rights varies across geographies and often remains insufficient to achieve genuine community well-being. Meanwhile, state-led and exclusionary approaches have not succeeded in preventing biodiversity loss, with strictly protected areas estimated to sustain less than 10 percent of the remaining indigenous plants and animals of Sub-Saharan Africa.

Responding to these challenges, Indigenous and local community organizations have mobilized across Africa to promote more transformational reforms. Global policy developments are also providing new openings for the promotion of rights-based and community-led conservation. In particular, the Kunming-Montréal Global Biodiversity Framework (**KMGBF**), adopted in December **2022**, marked a turning point in international biodiversity policy in its recognition of the contributions of IPs and LCs to global conservation and the obligations of states to respect their rights, including rights to their lands and resources.

78%

of the continent's land area is held and managed by communities under some form of customary tenure

To leverage these new opportunities, it is essential to understand the successes and challenges of community conservation in Africa to date and how it must be strengthened and expanded to fulfill its promise for people and nature. This analysis looks at the rich and diverse experiences of community conservation in Africa and identifies the following key elements for success that must be consistently strengthened:

-  **Secure collective rights to lands, territories, and resources:** strong legal frameworks for community land and resource tenure, effective implementation of community tenure and conservation frameworks, and resolution of conflicts with state-protected areas in law and practice.
-  **Empowered and inclusive community-led governance:** genuine devolution of decision-making authority from governments to community institutions, community leadership in partnerships with external actors, robust local institutions that are able to govern effectively and guard against elite capture, and the inclusion of women and youth in community conservation governance.
-  **Sustainable livelihoods, economies, and financing:** effective resolution of governance weaknesses that limit the extent to which community conservation benefits reach communities, measures to address pervasive human-wildlife conflicts, and adequate and diverse sources of income and financing

To achieve the KMGBF's ambitious 30x30 targets, African nations must prioritize rights-based, community-led initiatives as the most effective and equitable mechanism for scaling area-based conservation in line with international and national commitments. Strengthening rights-based and community-led conservation requires stepped-up investments in **securing collective tenure rights to lands, territories, and resources, empowered and inclusive community-led governance, and, sustainable livelihoods, economies, and financing.**

Securing collective tenure rights to lands, territories, and resources

-  Enact and strengthen legal frameworks for community tenure while prioritizing the robust recognition of community tenure rights and enacting or strengthening policies that enable communities to establish community-led conservation areas in their lands.
-  Accelerate the implementation of existing community tenure and conservation frameworks, ensuring that opportunities provided in national legislation are realized on the ground.
-  Resolve conflicts with state-protected areas in law and practice, including by recognizing the customary rights of Indigenous Peoples and local communities overlapping with protected areas, strengthening policies for free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) and their implementation, and establishing dialogues and grievance mechanisms to resolve ongoing conflicts.

Sustainable livelihoods, economies, and financing

-  Ensure that revenues from community conservation primarily and equitably benefit Indigenous Peoples and local communities by reforming systems that enable governments to retain a high proportion of benefits and addressing power asymmetries between communities and private investors.
-  Minimize the harms caused by human-wildlife conflict by drawing on community knowledge to establish locally effective strategies to reduce conflict, strengthening grievance and compensation mechanisms, and elevating attention to human-wildlife conflict as a rural development issue.
-  Promote and support diversified sources of income and financing for community prosperity and effective resource governance through diversified income streams. Redirect larger shares of direct international financing for biodiversity conservation to IP and LC organizations.

Empowered and inclusive community-led governance

- Devolve genuine decision-making authority to community institutions, enabling them to set locally-determined priorities and undertake land and resource management activities without burdensome state interference.
- Ensure community organizations take the lead in external partnerships with civil society partners providing support that is responsive to the priorities of community organizations and includes institutional strengthening, where and when requested.
- Promote and support the vitality of local institutions, especially guarding against elite capture, through robust governance mechanisms for regular community oversight and accountability of government and community leaders.
- Ensure robust inclusion of women and youth in community governance by integrating their distinct knowledge, roles, and priorities in community decision-making.

As countries pursue their KMGBF commitments, implementation of “30x30” targets must strengthen, not undermine, these key elements of community conservation. A critical priority is to ensure rigorous adherence to KMGBF safeguards obligating states to respect the rights of IPs and LCs, including rights to their lands and resources, to prevent further negative impacts from the expansion of state-protected areas and drive investment toward community conservation alternatives. In addition, countries should establish flexible options for IPs and LCs to pursue recognition of their conservation areas through the pathways they deem most appropriate.

Recommendations for governments to integrate rights-based and community-led conservation into national biodiversity goals:

- Ensure that National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans (NBSAPs) are developed with the full and effective participation of IPs and LCs, collaboratively identifying pathways for recognition of community-led conservation as part of national targets (whether through protected areas, Other Effective area-based Conservation Measures, or Indigenous and Traditional Territories).
- Collaboratively develop and put in place frameworks for identifying and recognizing Other Effective area-based Conservation Measures and Indigenous and Traditional Territories, ensuring that these provide flexible options for rights-based and community-led conservation.
- Integrate concrete support for community-led conservation in Biodiversity Financing Plans, including financing and support for Indigenous Peoples and local communities to obtain recognition for their conservation areas under Target 3 pathways under the KMGBF, where they choose to pursue this.
- Ensure that NBSAPs and their implementation comprehensively uphold countries’ obligations under the KMGBF to adopt a human rights-based approach. Ensure respect for IPs and LCs’ rights, traditional knowledge, values, practices, FPIC, and their full and effective participation in decision-making in all conservation actions.



02

Introduction

Indigenous Peoples (IPs) and local communities (LCs) govern a large proportion of the lands and resources significant for biodiversity conservation in Africa. An estimated 78 percent of the continent's land area is held and managed by communities under some form of customary tenure,¹ and more than 80 percent of Africa's biodiversity lies outside formal state-protected area systems.² Indigenous and local community knowledge, governance systems, and practices have created and sustained biodiverse ecosystems for generations, and it is increasingly clear that the future of Africa's biodiversity depends on community-led and rights-based conservation.

Since the colonial era, IPs and LCs have been legally disenfranchised from control over their ancestral lands and resources and often forcibly displaced to make way for national parks, forest reserves, and other protected areas. Despite this, many communities have maintained traditional governance and knowledge systems for conservation and sustainable use of their environments. Since the 1980s, many governments across Sub-Saharan Africa have also recognized and invested in more decentralized approaches to conservation and sustainable use of natural resources that devolve some rights and benefits to communities, such as community wildlife conservancies, community forestry, and locally managed marine areas. **Over time, growing evidence and awareness of the ways that Indigenous and community governance, knowledge, and practices contribute to conservation have led to increased formal recognition in national and global policy frameworks.**

Despite these significant reforms, aspirations for rights-based and community-led conservation in Africa continue to face serious challenges. State-led and often exclusionary protected areas remain the predominant approach to conservation. Formal, legal recognition of community land and resource tenure rights—widely recognized as a critical foundation for community conservation—remains limited.

The reluctance of governments to cede control over valuable resources is reflected in both the slow pace of tenure reforms and ongoing actions to exert control where resource rights are devolved. While community conservation contributes significantly to sustainable livelihoods, the ability of local people to realize benefits from devolved resource rights varies across geographies and often remains insufficient to achieve genuine community well-being.

Meanwhile, state-led and exclusionary approaches have not succeeded in preventing biodiversity loss, with strictly protected areas estimated to sustain less than 10 percent of the remaining indigenous plants and animals of Sub-Saharan Africa.³

Responding to these challenges, Indigenous and local community organizations have mobilized across Africa to promote more transformational reforms. Efforts range from local conservation initiatives to advocacy for national policy reforms to Africa-wide mobilization such as at the African Protected Areas Congress (APAC) in Kigali, Rwanda in 2022 and a regional Community Conservation Congress held in Windhoek, Namibia in 2023. Through these mobilizations, IPs and LCs have called for recognition of their customary rights to lands and resources, an end to the exclusionary fortress conservation model, and increased recognition and support for inclusive rights-based and community-led conservation action.⁴

Global policy developments are also providing new openings for the promotion of rights-based and community-led conservation. In particular, the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (KMGBF), adopted in December 2022, marks a turning point in international biodiversity policy in its recognition of the contributions of IPs and LCs to global conservation and the obligations of states to respect their rights, including rights to their lands and resources.⁵

These policy openings offer enormous opportunities to advance the recognition and protection of community-led conservation approaches in Africa. However, realizing these opportunities requires a clear understanding of the successes and challenges of community conservation efforts in Africa to date, as well as how they must be strengthened and expanded for the benefit of people and nature.

In this context, **the purpose of this report is to review and assess experiences with community conservation in Africa to better understand its scale and significance, identify current strengths and limitations, and distill lessons on key elements for success.** Based on this analysis, the report also identifies progressive policy reforms and investments that can accelerate progress to achieve rights-based and community-led conservation in the region.

Since inclusion of Indigenous and community conserved areas in national reporting toward countries' KMGBF commitments can and should create incentives for increased policy and financial support for community conservation, the report also considers how new KMGBF pathways for the recognition of community conservation can be leveraged to advance their implementation.

A Note on Terminology

Terms to describe conservation approaches grounded in the increased rights and engagement of IPs and LCs have evolved over the past several decades. Early efforts in Sub-Saharan Africa tended to use the term **“community-based conservation”** to highlight the role of community management, in contrast to predominant models of conservation management by governments. In recent years, the term “community-led conservation” has gained more traction to emphasize both the local stewardship roles communities are already playing and the need to enable and support community leadership in formal conservation governance and decision-making.

This report uses the term **“community conservation”** as an umbrella to encompass these evolving terms and approaches over time. At the same time, this work is motivated by a commitment to promoting and supporting a shift toward conservation approaches that are genuinely community-led and also **“rights-based”**. This means they are rooted in the secure recognition and protection of the human rights of IPs and LCs, including their rights to customary lands, territories, and resources. Accordingly, the terms community-led and rights-based are used where the analysis seeks to highlight these higher standards.

Methodology

The methodology for this report included literature reviews, case studies, draft/internal sub-regional and regional syntheses, expert reviews, and global analyses. A phase of work initially conducted in 2022–2023 included a series of draft case studies, internal sub-regional reports, and a draft synthesis. Drawing on the case studies, a brief produced as a background document for the Community Conservation Congress in Namibia in 2023 outlined key lessons and challenges. Discussions at the Community Conservation Congress further informed this work with the views and priorities of the Indigenous and local community organizations who gathered from across Africa. Building on these foundations, additional research, analysis, and writing was conducted in 2026 to prepare and update the findings and conclusions presented in this report.

Report Structure

1. Executive summary
2. An introduction to the report's context, purpose, terminology, and methodology
3. Section 3 outlines the historical and policy context for community conservation in Africa, and the imperative for its increased recognition and support.
4. Section 4 provides an overview of community conservation experiences in Africa, including informal community initiatives and formal approaches adopted by governments.
5. Section 5 assesses the scale and benefits generated by community conservation to date
6. Section 6 shares lessons learned.
7. Conclusions and recommendations

Map 1. List of 23 Countries Assessed in this Study



The countries are: Benin, Botswana, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Eswatini, Gabon, Ghana, Kenya, Liberia, Madagascar, Mozambique, Namibia, Nigeria, Republic of the Congo, Rwanda, Senegal, South Africa, Tanzania, The Gambia, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe.



03

Context for Community Conservation in Africa

Prior to colonization, rural peoples in Africa shaped and managed the continent's diverse ecosystems through locally adapted land and resource governance systems, rooted in the biocultural knowledge, practices, and traditions of communities. Most rural lands and resources were held communally, under the authority of kings, chiefs, elders, and other community institutions that ensured access to and regulated the use of productive resources by community members.⁶ Land management was based on extensive knowledge of local ecosystems and governed by cultural and religious norms with binding sanctions to limit overuse of natural resources central to communities' ways of life. For example, these included measures to conserve water sources, protect forests, and maintain grazing lands.⁷ Spiritual dimensions were an integral part of these practices, as seen in the adoption of clan totems and the protection of sacred forests and other natural features linked to deities and ancestral spirits.⁸

The colonial era was characterized by widespread expropriation and disruption of these customary resource governance and knowledge systems, as community lands and resources were claimed as state property by colonial regimes. Communities were legally dispossessed of their farmlands, pastures, and fisheries, and wildlife species became the preserve of colonial elites who were granted rights to hunt for consumption and sport in countries like Kenya, while traditional use by communities was prohibited.⁹ Along with their devastating impacts on African peoples, these changes in resource ownership resulted in massive resource degradation and biodiversity loss, as local and customary regulatory systems were replaced by distant government control.¹⁰

In these ways, natural resources changed from being customarily managed and locally used to being the exclusive legal preserve of European settlers while the exercise of institutional power shifted from ensuring to denying communities' access to vital natural resources.¹²

Colonial powers also over-exploited natural resources such as forests and hunted prized wildlife species to the brink of extinction. Observing the results, some colonial interests began promoting conservation measures under a "fortress conservation" model, which aimed to exclude human presence and viewed local people as a threat to conservation—an approach that became the foundation for Africa's national parks.

What is Fortress Conservation?

A dominant conservation model in Africa during the colonial period, "fortress conservation" aimed to exclude human presence from protected areas and viewed local people as a threat to conservation—an approach that became the foundation for Africa's national parks. The practice of setting aside large tracts of land for strict conservation led to the establishment of some of the continent's most emblematic protected areas, including Serengeti National Park and Ngorongoro Conservation Area in Tanzania, Virunga National Park in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kruger National Park in South Africa, Hwange National Park in Zimbabwe, and Etosha National Park in Namibia.

In the early post-colonial era, state centralization and fortress conservation largely persisted. Governments across the continent maintained legal state ownership and control of land and natural resources. Fortress conservation remained the dominant model for nature conservation, while local hunting continued to be criminalized as "poaching." Limited investment in conservation by governments also gave significant latitude to international conservation interests and organizations that often lacked knowledge of and relationships with communities and perpetuated exclusionary models.¹³

In the 1980s, however, new conservation policies and practices began to recognize and support the rights and roles of communities to varying degrees and in relation to different types of resources. As discussed in the following section, formal support for community conservation has spanned a range of approaches, including community wildlife conservancies, community forestry, and—more recently—locally managed marine areas. These new policies and practices have created pathways, some still very limited, for the recognition of community rights and governance over traditional lands and resources as well as their governance and leadership roles in conservation.

Openness to these new approaches was spurred by rapid declines in biodiversity despite the presence of protected areas and formed part of broader global and national shifts toward political decentralization and economic liberalization.¹⁴ They reflected a growing recognition that communities must benefit from sustainable use of their natural resources, reinforced by evidence that challenged conventional conservation approaches and demonstrated the value of community conservation, including that:

 **Most of Africa's biodiversity is on community-held land.** Despite legal claims and disruptions of the colonial and early post-colonial periods, it is estimated that almost 80 percent of Africa's land—or around 2 billion hectares—remains held under customary tenure, and at least three-quarters of which consists of rangelands, forests, woodlands, wetlands, deserts, and other communal areas.¹⁵ This massive land estate contains much of the continent's biodiversity. A 2025 Nature study highlights that approximately 84 percent of the remaining wild organisms in Sub-Saharan Africa are in natural forests and rangelands outside the formal protected area system where people live with and depend on biodiversity.¹⁶ Many of Africa's most critical carbon sinks, including vast savannas, wetlands, and forests, are also under community stewardship.¹⁷ IPs and LCs are essential stewards of these vital lands and natural resources, often exercising governance far beyond the reach and capacities of government or other non-local institutions.¹⁸



Communities' knowledge and stewardship conserve nature. Pastoralists, farmers, and forest peoples possess deep ecological knowledge of their environments and have the most direct vested interest in protecting natural resources. When communities are empowered with secure tenure rights, devolved governance, and appropriate support, evidence shows that ecosystems rebound, wildlife populations grow, and conflict is reduced.¹⁹



Community conservation contributes to sustainable livelihoods and mitigates conflict. Land and natural resources are the foundation of livelihoods in rural areas. Community conservation enables local people to benefit from their natural resources, including through direct uses, ecotourism, employment, local enterprise development, and investments in social services. In contrast, contested land rights and exclusionary conservation have been significant drivers of conflict in Africa.²⁰ Communities across Africa have declared their opposition to the creation of additional state-protected areas on their customary lands,²¹ while evolving international commitments and standards require the recognition and protection of IPs' and LCs' rights in conservation.²² Community conservation aligns human rights with environmental sustainability, enabling both nature and community stewards to thrive.

84%

of the remaining wild organisms in Sub-Saharan Africa are in natural forests and rangelands outside the formal protected area system where people live with and depend on biodiversity.

Despite this clear logic and decades of investment, rights-based and community-led conservation remains hampered in many ways. The dominant approach to conservation across Sub-Saharan Africa is still state-protected areas,²³ often using fortress conservation models characterized by persistent conflicts and human rights violations.²⁴

Indigenous and local community organizations across Africa are increasingly mobilized, demanding recognition of communal land rights, an end to human rights abuses associated with state-protected areas, and recognition and support for community conservation grounded in their rights and leadership.

In addition, less than 10 percent of lands are legally recognized as owned by IPs and LCs, and a similar amount is legally recognized as designated for community management and use.²⁵ However, an estimated 78 percent of lands are held customarily.²⁶ This tenure recognition gap leaves communities vulnerable to displacement for extractive industry, agribusiness, infrastructure, exclusionary protected areas, carbon projects, and private safari concessions, and fails to provide the necessary foundations for communities to continue conserving and benefitting from their lands and resources over the long term. As detailed in Sections 4 and 5, even where community conservation frameworks have been formally adopted, challenges with genuine devolution and insufficient investment mean that their promise is not consistently realized. The current situation has prompted movements for change from multiple directions.

At the first IUCN Africa Protected Areas Congress in Kigali in 2022, IPs and LCs put forward their own Kigali Declaration,²⁷ condemning the violent land appropriation and displacement of communities in the name of conservation, the ongoing loss of life and land, and the criminalization of community livelihoods. The Declaration called on governments to advance the recognition of IPs' and LCs' customary, collective rights and prioritize community-led conservation approaches while committing to deploy their own knowledge and governance capacities for conservation and the sustainable use of nature. Subsequently, Indigenous and community organizations mobilized to organize an Africa-wide body (the Alliance for Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities for Conservation in Africa, AICA) to advance community conservation agendas in line with this Declaration. At the First Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities Conservation Congress convened in Namibia in October 2023, participants resolved to unify the voices of IPs and LCs across Africa on conservation issues, promote community tenure recognition and communities' contributions to conservation, resolve human-wildlife conflicts, and further develop AICA as a mechanism for advancing rights-based conservation in Africa.²⁸

In parallel, at the global level, adoption of the KMGBF²⁹ in 2022 opened new opportunities to strengthen and revitalize Africa's investment in rights-based and community-led conservation. The KMGBF includes the strongest recognition of human rights-based approaches in a Convention on Biological Diversity decision to date and gives particular attention to the rights and contributions of IPs and LCs. Notably, Target 3—which calls on Parties to effectively conserve and manage at least 30 percent of terrestrial, inland water, and coastal and marine areas by 2030³⁰ (known as “30x30”)—includes a commitment to recognizing and respecting the rights of IPs and LCs in all implementation actions, responding to concerns about potential rights infringements from exclusionary protected areas. Target 3 also includes both “Other Effective area-based Conservation Measures” (OECMs) and Indigenous and Traditional Territories (ITTs), along with protected areas,³¹ as pathways to achieve this target, opening new opportunities for Indigenous and community-led governance.

Other Effective area-based Conservation Measures (OECMs) and Indigenous and Traditional Territories (ITTs)

OECMs are areas that are not necessarily established for conservation objectives but produce conservation outcomes,³² such as community forests, pastoral landscapes, and community fisheries.

ITTs are included as a Target 3 pathway in recognition of the significant conservation contributions of areas under Indigenous governance and to enable recognition of these contributions through concepts and approaches determined by Indigenous Peoples.³³

It is estimated that Indigenous and Traditional Territories could add approximately 13.61 percent to the global terrestrial area under conservation.³⁴ With formal CBD guidelines for ITT identification and registration currently in development, the International Indigenous Forum on Biodiversity (IIFB) recommends that guidelines promote the identification, recognition, protection, promotion, and respect of Indigenous and Traditional Territories (ITTs) as distinct systems that support implementation of Target 3.³⁵

Rights-based and community-led conservation is further supported through Targets 22 and 23, and the cross-cutting considerations in Section C. Target 22 calls for the full, effective, and equitable participation in decision-making for IPs and LCs, rights over lands, territories, resources, and traditional knowledge, and access to justice and protection for environmental defenders. Target 23 calls for gender equality in all implementation actions. In addition, Section C calls for all implementation to follow a human rights-based approach and ensure respect for IPs' and LCs' rights, traditional knowledge, values, and practices, with FPIC and full and effective participation in decision-making. These provisions build on Articles 8j and 10c of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), which obligate Parties to respect, preserve, and maintain traditional knowledge and protect and encourage customary sustainable use of biological resources by IPs and LCs.³⁶ In addition, the Intergovernmental Panel for Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services also advises investment in Indigenous and community-led conservation as a key strategy to achieve the 2050 vision for biodiversity.³⁷

Governments are attentive to implementing their commitments under the KMGBF. Since its adoption in 2022, 96 percent of African states have submitted updated national targets in line with the KMGBF targets: 51 percent have submitted updated NBSAPs and 72 percent have submitted national reports on their progress in implementation.³⁸ However, **a June 2026 draft global review of progress in KMGBF implementation highlights the imperative for greatly increased action on community-led conservation. Globally, it notes that both the ambition of Target 3 and the pace of implementation are insufficient.**

Moreover, only 33 percent of Parties address the dimension of the target on ensuring that protected and conserved areas recognize and respect the rights of IPs and LCs, including over their traditional territories. One barrier to reaching 30x30 highlighted in the report is the lack of national legal frameworks to recognize OECMs, which prevents many effectively conserved community areas from being formally included in national conservation targets.³⁹ As further guidance on ITTs is developed and adopted by the CBD, national frameworks on ITTs will also need to be developed with the full and effective participation of communities.⁴⁰

Africa's experience with community conservation offers tremendous potential to overcome these obstacles to KMGBF implementation, if it can be effectively strengthened and expanded.

33%

of Parties address the dimension of the target on ensuring that protected and conserved areas recognize and respect the rights of IPs and LCs, including over their traditional territories.

04

Overview of Community Experiences with Conservation in Africa

Community experiences with conservation in Africa span a wide spectrum of approaches. These range from self-directed customary management practices of IPs and LCs in their traditional lands to conservation approaches that have become formalized through national government policies, programs, and support. While a comprehensive review of community experiences with conservation in Africa is outside the scope of this study, this section provides a brief overview of key approaches and prominent examples of community conservation as a basis for the analysis in the next section.

Formal and Informal Community Conservation

This analysis uses the following definitions to distinguish between formal and informal conservation actions:

“Formal” Community Conservation: Initiatives that are recognized and supported through national legal and policy frameworks for conservation and sustainable use of natural resources, such as community conservancies, community forestry, and locally-managed marine areas.

“Informal” Community Conservation: Initiatives that communities undertake outside of these national frameworks.

4.1 Informal Community Conservation: Local Governance, Knowledge, and Practices

Despite massive disruption and displacement, the rich systems of Indigenous and local community governance, knowledge, and practice that communities have developed over time to manage and protect their natural environments remain highly active today across the estimated 78 percent of African lands still held under customary tenure.⁴¹ Their continued power and effectiveness are grounded in their deep connections to local culture, spirituality, and livelihoods.

Perhaps the most widespread examples of traditional ecological knowledge and practice are systems for the sustainable use of natural resources on which communities depend. These systems span resource-based livelihoods and depend upon intimate knowledge of ecosystems and species within them. For example:

✚ **Traditional agricultural practices, such as intercropping, shifting cultivation, and fire management, conserve biodiversity in agricultural areas.** The Chagga people in the Mount Kilimanjaro region in **Tanzania** grow bananas, coffee, and vegetables under a canopy of native forest trees. This multi-layered system maximizes space, preserves soil moisture, and maintains endemic plant biodiversity in agricultural plots.⁴² Shifting cultivation practiced in **Mount Cameroon** helps the soil to regain its fertility; when clearing new areas, farmers avoid cutting important trees.⁴³ Controlled, low-intensity fires set by communities early in the dry season in parts of **Namibia** and **Zambia** clear out excess fuel, preventing catastrophic wildfires later in the season and protecting the forest canopy.⁴⁴

✚ **Pastoralist communities lead sophisticated management systems to maintain the health and abundance of vital resources.** For example, the Maasai of **Kenya** and **Tanzania** set aside enclosed areas called alalilis where forage is left to grow untouched during the rainy season.⁴⁵ These areas become grazing reserves for weak or young livestock during the dry season.

✚ **Many fishing communities in coastal regions of East, Southern, Central and West Africa practice traditional resource management**, such as prohibiting fishing in specific areas during the spawning seasons of economically important fish species, effectively acting as traditional temporary “no-take” zones.⁴⁶

Customary laws and regulations implemented through community governance institutions help maintain such practices and conserve natural resources.⁴⁷ While often neglected in discussions of area-based conservation, these agricultural and agroforestry landscapes, pastoral rangelands, and land use mosaics are important repositories of biodiversity, reflecting the longstanding role that IP and LC customary practices have played in conserving ecosystems and species.⁴⁸

Wildlife totems and taboos are another widespread traditional practice that has served to protect specific wildlife species. In many African societies, clans or families are connected by kinship and common descent to an animal that serves as their ancestral totem, and members of these clans or families will not eat, kill, or trap these totemic animals.⁴⁹

Communities may observe taboos against hunting or killing certain animals for other cultural reasons.

For example, communities in the Mai-Ndombe area of the **Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)** have a taboo against killing the bonobo, or pygmy chimpanzee, which has long served to protect a rare bonobo population in their nearby forest.⁵⁰ Similarly, the Boabeng-Fiema Monkey Sanctuary in **Ghana** supports two species of sacred Black and White Colobus monkeys, which cannot be touched as they are considered to be sacred.⁵¹ While communities do not necessarily view these taboos as tools for nature conservation, this has often been their practical effect.⁵²

The designation of **sacred natural sites**, a type of traditional conservation area, is also found widely across sub-Saharan Africa. Sacred sites are areas of forest, mountains, or water sources believed to be the resting places of ancestors or spirits. For example, in coastal regions of **Kenya**, the Mijikenda people protect kayas, which are highly biodiverse, residual patches of coastal forest. Cutting trees, clearing land for agriculture, or hunting within a kaya is strictly forbidden.

Because of this spiritual protection, the kayas now stand as vital ecological islands of rare flora and fauna surrounded by heavily developed agricultural land.⁵³ Similarly, in countries of West Africa, such as Ghana, Benin, and Nigeria, communities have maintained sacred groves that preserve old-growth forests, critical watersheds, and medicinal plants that no longer exist outside these areas.

Case Study 1: Sacred Natural Sites abound in Senegal, including in water-edge mangroves and local waters.⁵⁶

In Bliss-Kassa and Kawawana, 51 Sacred Natural Sites have been identified with origins possibly dating back to the settlement of the Diola people in the first century AD. Most of the sites are along the Casamance River and its interconnected tributaries and provide water-edge havens for ritual and totem fauna such as sharks, whales, crocodiles, hippos, and manatee.

The family of the founding ancestor of the settlement or its religious leader maintains rules that exclude fishing. Only one of the 51 sites permits shellfish harvesting. As the Diola are the majority tribe in the area, mystical beacons are understood and feared, deterring misuse. However, this is not necessarily so for non-Diola, and their use of motorized pirogues has been known to scare away species and damage marine biodiversity.



Three African cocoa farmers hold cocoa seeds in their hands as they emerge from the pod in Cameroon. Photo by Shutterstock.

In Benin, there are an estimated 3,000 sacred forests totaling 18,360 hectares, or 0.16 percent of the national territory,⁵⁴ while Ghana is home to at least 2,000 sacred groves (1.5 percent of its land).⁵⁵

Since the early 2000s, community stewards of some informal conservation areas have been documenting and promoting their recognition as Indigenous and Community Conserved Areas (ICCAs), part of a global movement for their recognition and support.⁵⁷ In the **DRC**, for example, ANAPAC has supported the identification of 27 ICCAs (also known as APACs in French: **Aires du patrimoine autochtone et Communautaire**), of which eight have been documented and 12 have been mapped, representing approximately 678,000 hectares of land managed by IPs and LCs.⁵⁸ An international ICCA Registry also provides a platform where communities themselves can provide data on their conserved areas.⁵⁹

Many informal community conservation efforts take place in community lands and waters where community tenure rights are not recognized under national law. As such, these lands are vulnerable to government land acquisitions for large-scale developments and encroachment by outside actors.

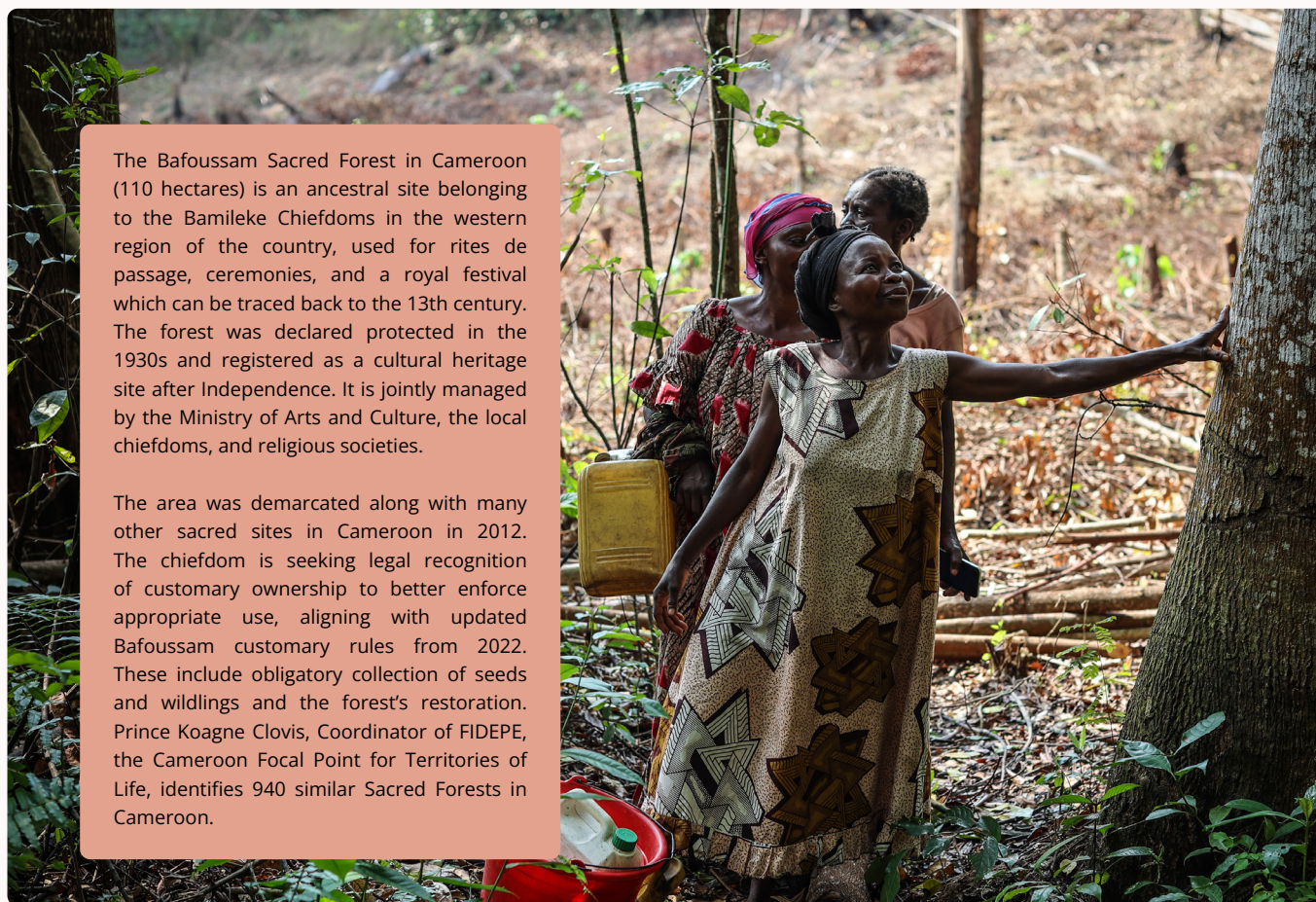
In some countries, traditional community conservation areas have eventually received legal backing as cultural sites, such as the *kaya* forests in **Kenya**.⁶⁰ In others, risks to community lands have prompted communities to seek formal recognition or support for their customary management using the opportunities afforded through the formal community conservation frameworks described in the next section.⁶¹

Yet increasingly, as national tenure reforms expand the area of community-owned land in Africa, **communities are also implementing self-directed conservation activities in legally owned community lands, without necessarily participating in formal national conservation initiatives such as conservancies or community forestry**. For example, in northern **Tanzania**, the Ujamaa Community Resource Team has supported communities—pastoralists as well as Hadza-be and Akie hunter-gatherers—to secure 2 million hectares of communal lands through Certificates of Customary Rights of Occupancy (CCROs) and develop land use plans to ensure that their lands are well managed and protected.⁶² These kinds of locally-led efforts across secured community landscapes demonstrate the potential of ITT and OECM pathways to contribute to national biodiversity goals, where communities may wish to pursue such recognition.⁶³

Case Study 2: Bafoussam Sacred Forest, Cameroon⁶⁴

The Bafoussam Sacred Forest in Cameroon (110 hectares) is an ancestral site belonging to the Bamileke Chiefdoms in the western region of the country, used for rites de passage, ceremonies, and a royal festival which can be traced back to the 13th century. The forest was declared protected in the 1930s and registered as a cultural heritage site after Independence. It is jointly managed by the Ministry of Arts and Culture, the local chiefdoms, and religious societies.

The area was demarcated along with many other sacred sites in Cameroon in 2012. The chiefdom is seeking legal recognition of customary ownership to better enforce appropriate use, aligning with updated Bafoussam customary rules from 2022. These include obligatory collection of seeds and wildlings and the forest's restoration. Prince Koagne Clovis, Coordinator of FIDEPE, the Cameroon Focal Point for Territories of Life, identifies 940 similar Sacred Forests in Cameroon.





Women's land rights are very important because they are the ones who feed the family. Women produce the food, they care for the children, they farm. Land is their main factor of production, and everything depends on it.

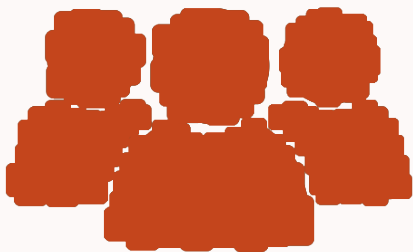
Cécile Ndjebet, founder and director of REFACOF, Cameroon

4.2 Formal Community Conservation

Complementing these widespread informal conservation efforts, governments have increasingly begun to recognize and support formal community conservation approaches. These have tended to follow specific sectors, such as wildlife, forestry, and fisheries, via national frameworks for community conservancies and protected areas, community forestry, and locally managed marine areas. Formal conservation initiatives, in effect, have partially restored community rights to natural resources that were alienated during the colonial and post-colonial eras and enabled communities to generate income from natural resource-based economic activities. At the same time, formal initiatives have had varying degrees of alignment with the priorities and governance practices of IPs and LCs and often impose requirements that limit or constrain community-led governance.⁶⁵

Community Wildlife Conservancies and Conserved Areas

Community wildlife conservancies are community-managed areas established under legal reforms that devolve rights to manage and benefit from wildlife to IPs and LCs. In general, they aim to enhance protection of wildlife and natural resources while also supporting community livelihoods, often by combining traditional land uses with ecotourism, sustainable hunting, or conservation-related businesses.⁶⁶



Community wildlife conservancies provide Indigenous and local communities with legal rights to manage wildlife



Zimbabwe is widely credited with pioneering the community conservancy approach through Communal Areas Management Programme for Indigenous Resources (CAMPFIRE), initiated in 1989. CAMPFIRE marked a sharp departure from exclusionary state ownership and management of wildlife by devolving rights to manage and use wildlife to the local level. While local communities were ultimately intended to benefit, the government was only prepared to devolve wildlife rights to the lowest level of government—rural district councils—which then sold access to safari operators and shared the revenues this generated with community constituencies.⁶⁷ Despite governance challenges associated with this limited devolution, CAMPFIRE was remarkably successful in achieving conservation and community development results in its early years, inspiring the development of similar approaches across southern and eastern Africa and persisting despite years of political and economic turmoil.⁶⁸



Namibia is arguably the country that has developed the community conservancy approach to its fullest extent. The country's national Community Based Natural Resources Management (CBNRM) program is grounded in the landmark 1996 Nature Conservation Amendment Act, which recognized the rights of residents of communal areas to manage wildlife and other natural resources through conservancies, extending rights formerly limited to private lands. Duly established conservancies are granted the right to manage huntable game for their own use, to negotiate contracts with tourism and trophy hunting companies, and to directly receive and manage funds from these activities.⁶⁹ In contrast to CAMPFIRE, where revenues were shared between local governments and communities, conservancies receive 100 percent of the income from these activities. CBNRM has also benefitted from a stable legal framework and organized networks of support organizations.⁷⁰

 **Kenya** also has a well-developed network of community conservancies. While initiated by local landowner groups in the late 1990s, establishment of the category of community conservancies in Kenya's 2013 wildlife law catalyzed their widespread formation.⁷¹ Conservancies are formed by communities on communal or pooled individual lands who register their lands as a conservancy dedicated to conservation; they are managed by a board with community representatives who determine management arrangements and benefit sharing. Many conservancies have developed joint venture partnerships with private sector tour operators who manage tourism operations and pay to lease the land, provide bed-night fees, and agree to prioritize local hiring.⁷²

 **Tanzania's** Wildlife Management Areas (WMAs) are another prominent example of community conservancies in Africa. WMAs are established on village lands for the purpose of wildlife conservation; participating villages set up an Authorized Association that is legally granted rights to manage and benefit from wildlife.⁷³ While intended to conserve interconnected areas of wildlife habitat and generate income for village communities, challenges to WMA implementation have included the relatively large proportion of tourism revenues retained by the central government as well as issues with the distribution of revenues among member villages of a WMA. Still, studies in northern Tanzania have documented substantial conservation results within some WMAs, as well as substantial benefits flowing to communities, especially in areas with large wildlife populations and tourism opportunities.⁷⁴

A recent review of experience with community conservancies across eastern and southern Africa noted the divergence of experience between Namibia and Kenya—where conservancies have expanded—and Tanzania and Zambia—where genuine devolution of rights has not occurred. It identifies as key factors for success: supportive national wildlife legislation; effective coalitions of government, civil society, and private sector actors; and considerable external funding support to drive implementation.⁷⁵

While distinct from the large-scale, private sector partnership approach of eastern and southern African conservancies, some countries in West Africa have also formalized devolved community conservation frameworks. For example, in **Liberia**, the legal framework explicitly recognizes customary land rights and allows communities to establish conservation areas to protect their lands from commercial exploitation.⁷⁶ In **Ghana**, Community Resource Management Areas enable contiguous villages to form governing bodies, draft local bylaws, and sustainably manage wildlife and forest landscapes for ecotourism and sustainable agriculture, although livelihoods outcomes have often fallen short of expectations.⁷⁷ In **The Gambia**, community protected areas grant villages long-term tenure and management authority to safeguard wildlife habitats, wetlands, and avian biodiversity.

Community Forestry

Community forestry is another community conservation approach that has been widely implemented across Africa over the last three decades. While customary and communal management of forests have existed for centuries, formal community forestry programs enable communities to gain legal recognition for their rights to manage forests and benefit from direct use and forest enterprises.

 In **East Africa, Tanzania** is widely recognized as a community forestry pioneer. The 2002 Forest Act officially established community forestry for the purpose of conserving forests, providing benefits to LCs, and strengthening village institutions for natural resource management.⁷⁸ Community forestry (known as community-based forest management in Tanzania) occurs when communities designate “village land forest reserves” on community-owned village lands.⁷⁹ Community forestry frameworks have also been adopted in **Kenya** and **Zambia**. The relative success of community forestry in Tanzania is attributed to national legal frameworks that secure forest tenure, effectively devolve management authority to community institutions, and enable communities to retain financial benefits from forest enterprises.⁸⁰ Ongoing challenges include limited local capacity and government technical support as well as variations in the size and availability of marketable timber across community forests.⁸¹

In **Central Africa's Congo Basin**—the largest forest area in Africa—community forestry has become a critical tool for protecting biodiversity while devolving rights to IPs and LCs. Countries adopting community forestry frameworks include Cameroon, Gabon, the DRC, the Republic of Congo, and the Central African Republic.⁸² While **Cameroon** was the first country to adopt and implement community forestry, its national program has been criticized for the small size of allowable areas (up to 5,000 hectares) and heavily bureaucratic registration processes.⁸³ In the **DRC**, by contrast, Decree No. 14/018 on the attribution procedures for local community forest concessions signed in 2014 (followed by an implementing ministerial decree in 2016) allows IPs and LCs to secure perpetual rights to up to 50,000 hectares of their traditional lands. It also lets them submit simple plans for managing their forests for conservation, sustainable production, and/or environmental services.⁸⁴ These measures have contributed to the rapid spread of community forestry, despite ongoing challenges of complex administrative requirements, offering an alternative to ecologically destructive development or the negative social impacts of fortress conservation.⁸⁵

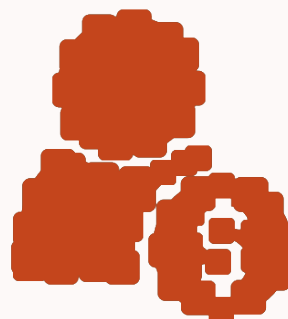
Countries in **West Africa** have also increasingly integrated community forestry into their decentralization and poverty-alleviation policies. **The Gambia** was one of the first African nations to introduce a nation-wide community forestry program that legally transfers forest and tree tenure from the state back to rural communities. In **Senegal**, community forestry has been implemented as part of regional decentralization, enabling rural communities (collectivités territoriales) to manage local forest reserves and combat desertification by implementing community-led agroforestry, woodlots, and regulated charcoal production.

A 2025 FAO regional review found that while most countries in Africa have advanced the formulation of national policies and regulations for community forest governance, implementation on the ground has been slower, with key enabling factors of tenure security, institutional support, and economic benefits often lacking.⁸⁶

Locally Managed Marine Areas

Locally Managed Marine Areas (LMMAs), coastal/marine areas that are largely or wholly managed at the local level by coastal communities, have been widely and successfully implemented in Africa in recent years, especially in the Western Indian Ocean.⁸⁷ Unlike traditional, state Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) that often exclude human activity, LMMAs focus on sustainable use. Drawing on traditional knowledge and practices, they adapt strategies such as:

- Temporary Closures:** Closing specific zones or fisheries for an allotted time to allow populations to multiply, increasing the eventual harvest.
- Gear Restrictions:** Collectively banning destructive practices like mosquito-net fishing, beach seining, or poison fishing.
- No-Take Zones:** Setting aside core areas where fishing is banned to protect spawning grounds that replenish surrounding fishing areas.



Formal community forestry programs provide legal recognition and economic benefits to traditional, centuries-old forest management practices.

Examples of Locally Managed Marine Areas in Africa

In **Kenya**, local community organizations called Beach Management Units are legally empowered to co-manage nearshore fisheries, using tools such as traditional *tenge-fu* (locally designated no-take zones) to curb illegal fishing and restore degraded coral reef ecosystems.⁸⁸

Communities in **Tanzania's** RUMAKI seascape have formalized local co-management rights and implemented similar periodic closures to regenerate highly productive marine habitats.

In **Madagascar**, the MIHARI Network connects over 200 LMMAs where community-enforced customary laws (*dina*) govern resources, and temporary closures of octopus fisheries have dramatically boosted local yields.⁸⁹

Senegal has integrated traditional governance into coastal and marine conservation through APACs, such as the Kawawana ICCA where local fishermen restored depleted fish stocks by establishing strictly enforced zoning and no-take areas.

Despite their high social legitimacy and conservation performance, LMMAs often remain underfunded, constrained by limited local capacity and support, and hampered by policy barriers—especially to collective rights to territorial waters and marine resources.⁹⁰

In some cases, formal community conservation areas are included by countries in their global reporting on protected areas.⁹¹ Across Africa, 438 protected areas (out of a total of 8,928) are reported to the global Protected Planet database as governed by IPs and/or LCs.⁹²

✚ **Namibia** generally reports community conservancies as protected areas; the 143 areas under community governance comprise over 80 percent of the country's total number of protected areas reported.

✚ **The Gambia** is another country reporting a large proportion of its protected areas as community governed; it classifies 14 of the country's 25 protected areas as community governed and another 10 under joint governance.

✚ In **Tanzania**, 67 sites are reported as protected areas governed by local communities, including Village Forest Reserves and WMAs.

✚ In **Kenya**, 11 out of 374 protected areas are reported as community governed, including Community Forest Reserves and some community conservancies.

With most countries having not yet established national frameworks for OECMs, only **Eswatini** has reported community-managed OECMs to the World Conservation Monitoring Centre.

As discussed further in Section 5, national frameworks on OECMs and ITTs are needed to offer more flexible pathways for communities seeking to have their conservation areas recognized as contributing to national biodiversity targets.



The landscape where I come from spans 45,000 kilometers and it is the backbone of economies and a lifeline for communities as well as conservation. Indigenous Peoples carry a mindset of abundance as opposed to a scarcity mindset propagated by capitalist principles. To destroy the forest is to destroy ourselves.

Stanley Kimaren Ole Riamit, Maasai leader and Executive Director of ILEPA, Kenya

05

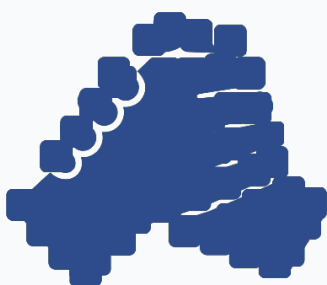
Key Community Conservation Results

The rich and diverse experience with both formal and informal community conservation across Sub-Saharan Africa has generated significant results as well as lessons that are critical for strengthening and expanding rights-based and community-led approaches to realize national biodiversity goals. This section considers results in terms of the scale and benefits of community conservation to date while Section 6 discusses key factors for successful community conservation that have been learned from regional experiences.

The Scale of Community Conservation

Community conservation is already demonstrating conservation outcomes at scale and has the potential to contribute a large proportion of African states' new KMGBF-aligned targets for area-based conservation, in ways that recognize and protect the rights and well-being of IPs and LCs. Considering that almost 80 percent of land in Africa is managed under customary tenure, the extent of informal community conservation is likely already very large. However, since much of this is unrecorded, most of the documented information on the current scale of community conservation is from initiatives formally recognized by states.

The documented area in formally recognized community conservancies, for example, includes:⁹³



Africa's experiences provide vital lessons for achieving national biodiversity targets through community-led and rights-based approaches.



In **Namibia**, 86 community conservancies established under the national CBNRM program cover 20 percent of Namibia's land area,⁹⁴ a larger expanse than the 17.6 percent in government protected areas.



In **Kenya**, community and private conservancies cover 16 percent of the country,⁹⁵ securing more land for conservation than the roughly 12 percent in state protected areas.



In **Tanzania**, there are 21 gazetted MAs covering 7 percent of the country's land area, with 16 more proposed.



In **Uganda**, the number of conservancies has increased from three in 2015 to 18 in 2023, collectively conserving 600,000 hectares of key wildlife habitats around national parks.



In **Zimbabwe**, community conservancies established under the CAMPFIRE program cover 12 percent of the country.



In the **DRC**, as of October 2025, 227 community forests have secured 4.5 million hectares of critical Congo Basin rainforest, with potential for tens of millions more.⁹⁶



Across the **West Africa** subregion, community forests cover 5 percent of the total land and the area is expected to grow as implementation of national policies progresses.⁹⁷ In Ghana, for example, over 80 Community Resource Management Areas contribute to buffering and sustaining state protected areas.⁹⁸



In **Tanzania**, community-based forest management areas cover approximately 1.9 million hectares across 734 villages.⁹⁹



In **Zambia**, 80 community forests protect over 1.5 million hectares of forests important for wildlife and the connectivity between protected areas.¹⁰⁰

LMMA in the Western Indian Ocean also help protect over 1.1 million hectares and cover a far larger area than government MPAs in some countries. For example, in Tanzania, LMMA cover 3.5 times the area of MPAs while, in Madagascar, LMMA cover 2.6 times the area of MPAs.¹⁰¹

While already significant, these figures only begin to demonstrate the potential scale of community conservation in Africa. Even focusing on the potential area of current formal community conservation initiatives shows enormous scope for their expansion. For example, the potential area eligible to be recognized as community forests in DRC is estimated to be tens of millions of hectares, based on the eligible area of community land.¹⁰² In the area between Kahuzi-Biega National Park and the Itombwe Nature Reserve in DRC, efforts are underway to create a continuous one million hectare corridor of community forestry concessions, expanding on the 600,000 hectares already secured in 23 community concessions within that area.¹⁰³ Organizations supporting LMMA in the Western Indian Ocean have established a regional learning network to strengthen and scale up LMMA implementation along the coast, including by identifying pathways for LMMA to be formally recognized as OECMs contributing to KMGBF implementation.¹⁰⁴

Beyond these existing formal initiatives, there is enormous scope for communities to expand informal community conservation initiatives, especially where greater recognition of collective land rights increases the security of local resource governance.

Benefits of Community Conservation

As the scale of formally recognized community conservation has grown, it has also generated significant biodiversity, social and economic benefits.¹⁰⁵

Noted impacts include:



Environmental benefits

Connecting larger landscapes that sustain species habitats and ecosystem services

Recovering and increasing the populations of key wildlife species within those landscapes, including by reducing human-wildlife conflict

Mitigating climate change and enhancing adaptation through effective management of Africa's forests, grasslands, and coastal ecosystems



Economic and social benefits

Conserving the natural resources on which communities depend for their livelihoods and ways of life

Generating revenue from new conservation-related income streams, such as tourism, sustainable forestry and fisheries, and commercial hunting

Supporting community-level social services, such as education, healthcare, and community development funds



Strengthening community governance and tenure rights security



Contributing to national economic income and growth

Box 5 provides indicative data on key conservation, economic, and social benefits from formal community conservation initiatives. While less documented, informal community conservation stewardship is likely generating similar results, especially related to connecting landscapes, sustaining ecosystem services (including for climate resilience), maintaining wildlife populations, and conserving the natural resources central to community livelihoods and ways of life.

Documented benefits of community conservation are even more striking when considering that recorded evidence remains only patchy to date, and – as discussed further below – many of the key factors for effective community conservation are not yet fully realized.

Formal community conservation generates powerful conservation and economic results

For wildlife populations and habitat:

In Namibia, communal conservancies have contributed to tripling the elephant population over the last 20 years, increasing it to over 24,000.

In Kenya, conservancies in the Maasai Mara sustain about 25 percent of the ecosystem that contains 83 percent of the region's wildlife, also contributing to the recovery of key species such as lions.

In Tanzania, wildlife populations are increasing around community WMAs, with some attaining similar wildlife densities to national parks.

In Madagascar, some LMMAs contain up to 186 percent more fish biomass than non-protected areas.

In southern Africa, community lands make up 75 percent of the Kavango Zambezi Transfrontier Conservation Area—the world's largest land-based transboundary conservation area—which supports the world's largest contiguous elephant population.

For community livelihoods and well-being:

In Kenya, conservancies in the Maasai Mara earn \$7.5 million annually from ecotourism lease payments, directly contributing to the monthly incomes of over 16,000 landowners. Nationally, conservancies collectively host 142 ecotourism facilities with the revenue generated impacting over 700,000 households. In northern Kenya, communities developed a livelihoods fund that provided \$4.2 million to support 162 projects between 2015 and 2020.

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.

In Zimbabwe, communities involved in the CAMPFIRE program earned \$16.8 million from hunting revenue between 2010 and 2015, with 200,000 households as direct beneficiaries. Income from wildlife resources generated through CAMPFIRE has reduced the number of community members living below the poverty line by over 50 percent in some areas.

For some communities involved in LMMAs in Madagascar, small-scale fishing provides 99 percent 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 percent and doubling village-level income.

Conservancies have contributed to restoring the grasslands that pastoralist communities depend on for livestock grazing. Conservancies in the Maasai Mara have kept lands at risk of subdivision and conversion to agriculture intact for both livestock and wildlife. In northern Kenya, grasslands have 11 percent more vegetation cover and improved rangeland health inside conservancies compared to outside.

For national economies:

Community conservation areas are important pillars of the wildlife-based tourism economy, which contributes 7 percent of African GDP, generates \$29 billion annually, and employs 3.6 million people. In Namibia, for example, the conservancies contribute \$60 million in net national income.

Recreational hunting is also a well-established industry in some African countries. In Tanzania, between 2004 and 2014, hunting generated an annual average revenue of \$31.7 million, much of it dependent on community lands.

Source: Maliasili. 2024. Seeding Solutions. Why Community-led Conservation is Critical for People, Biodiversity, and Climate Change in Africa. Nairobi: Maliasili.



06

Elements of Successful Community Conservation

Lessons from Experience

Experiences from across Sub-Saharan Africa and related research highlight the following key elements of successful community conservation:¹⁰⁶

- ✚ Secure collective rights to lands, territories, and resources
- ✚ Empowered and inclusive community-led governance
- ✚ Sustainable livelihoods, economies, and financing

This section discusses each of these key elements and the extent to which they are currently being supported and realized in practice.

6.1 Secure Collective Rights to Lands, Territories, and Resources

Secure tenure rights to community lands and resources are an essential foundation for effective and equitable community conservation in Africa. Lessons from the community conservation experiences reviewed in the previous section consistently point to tenure security as a critical enabling condition. When customary, collective tenure is legally recognized and secured, it prevents the fragmentation of ancestral lands and enables communities to maintain and revitalize the governance practices and traditional ecological knowledge that conserve nature. Secure tenure enables sustained community investment in conservation, including by mitigating the threat of displacement and empowering communities to prevent encroachment and exclude ecologically-destructive land uses.¹⁰⁷

Legal security also ensures that communities have the long term time horizon needed to develop sustainable livelihoods that support community well-being as well as ongoing resource management,¹⁰⁸ and enables them to negotiate or enter into partnerships with private sector and other actors from a position of rights.

Tenure rights become especially important in shifting from community-based to community-led conservation, as rights to lands and resources enable communities to exercise decision-making authority in relation to other actors.

However, tenure rights reform remains substantially incomplete in Africa. As of 2020, governments hold nearly 81% of the total land area under national law. In contrast, the area legally recognized as “owned”¹⁰⁹ by IPs and LCs is only 9.59%, while the area “designated for” IPs’ and LCs’ management and use is only 9.43%.¹¹⁰

Even in countries with stronger tenure security, these rights may not equally extend to all. Women in particular face additional threats and barriers to their tenure security. Between 2016 and 2024, protections for IP and LC women’s forest tenure rights decreased across many African countries, and gender-blind legislation regulating community forest tenure in Africa remains widespread.¹¹¹

Additionally, despite evidence that pastoralists and Mobile Peoples strengthen biodiversity and ecosystem resilience, they continue to experience forced sedentarization and lack of adequate recognition of their mobility, transhumance, and access and use rights.¹¹² The establishment of state conservation areas has led to the forced evictions and criminalization of pastoralists and Mobile Peoples in Africa, including in Uganda, Kenya, the DRC, and Tanzania.¹¹³

81%

the percent of land in Africa held by government under national laws as of 2020.

The area “owned by” IPs and LCs is mostly located in only five countries. These are:

Country	Area Owned in Mha	% of Land Area	Tenure Regime
Kenya	38.12	66.98	Registered and Unregistered Community Land under the Community Rights Act of 2016
Liberia	7.00	72.67	Community Forests and Customary Lands under the 2018 Land Rights Act
Mozambique	52.20	66.37	Uncertified and Certified Community Right of Use and Benefit of Land (DUATs)
Tanzania	59.73	67.43	Village Lands, Wildlife Management Areas, and Village Land Forest Reserve (VLFR)
Uganda	8.40	41.89	Communities' Customary Lands are recognized by the Ugandan Constitution and the Land Act of 1998, which do not require communities to register community lands

In addition, the following seven countries have notable areas of land “designated for” IPs and LCs:

Country	Area Owned in Mha	% of Land Area	Tenure Regime
Botswana	30.29	53.44	Wildlife Management Areas and Communal Lands
Cameroon	3.60	7.62	Community Forests (Forêts Communautaires) and Community Managed Hunting Zones (Zones d'Intérêt Cynégétique à Gestion Communautaire)
Ghana	18.20	80.00	Allodial Interests in Customary Lands
Madagascar	2.98	5.12	Communautés de base agréées avec contrats de gestion
Namibia	30.64	37.22	Communal Lands
Zambia	53.80	72.37	Customary Lands outside of Forest Reserves and Joint Forest Management
Zimbabwe	16.40	42.39	Communal Lands

Source for tables: Rights and Resources Initiative. 2023. *Who Owns the Land? Global State of Indigenous, Afro-descendant, and Local Community Land Rights Recognition from 2015–2020*. Washington: RRI.

Significant increases in the area of community owned land in Kenya and Liberia between 2015 and 2020 - with the passage of the 2016 Community Rights Act in Kenya and 2018 Land Rights Act in Liberia - demonstrate the ongoing opportunities and momentum for positive change. These have continued in some countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, with the first Community Forest Concessions issued registered in 2017 and new laws on Indigenous Peoples and on Land Use Planning passed in 2022 and 2025, respectively.¹¹⁴

However, the approximately 80 percent of land that remains legally held and controlled by governments—in contrast to the 78 percent of land estimated to be held by communities under customary tenure—is a major impediment to the spread and long-term sustainability of community conservation efforts. It reflects the ongoing legacy of colonial expropriation of community lands, as well as the reluctance of post-colonial governments to relinquish control over valuable natural resources. The resulting discrepancy between de facto customary tenure and de jure statutory tenure generates widespread tenure insecurity for communities.¹¹⁵

Dimensions of tenure security essential for community conservation include:

a) Strong legal frameworks for community land and resource tenure

Effective community conservation depends on strong legal frameworks that enable IPs and LCs to exercise management authority over their common lands, exclude destructive land uses, and securely plan for the long term.¹¹⁶ In general, the forms of community tenure recognized through laws focused on the collective land rights of IPs and LCs are stronger than those recognized through laws focused on conservation or sustainable use, highlighting their priority as a foundation for community conservation.¹¹⁷ At the same time, legal frameworks for conservation and sustainable use can provide opportunities for IPs and LCs who choose to pursue them to secure additional protections for their lands and access further livelihoods opportunities.

In countries such as Kenya and Tanzania, formal community conservation areas (such as conservancies or WMAs) are established on lands already owned by communities under laws for community land rights (such as Community Lands in Kenya or Village Lands in Tanzania).

Legal frameworks must also recognize and protect the distinct customary land uses and rights of pastoralists and Mobile Peoples, such as mobility and access to livestock and lands, to enable the exercise of their traditional knowledge and adaptive management practices.¹²³

Protection of the rights of women within customary systems is also essential to support their distinct knowledge and roles in natural resource management, and their effective participation in community conservation governance.¹²⁴

However, in other countries like **Namibia**, conservancies establish rights to wildlife but communities do not have ownership of the underlying land, leaving them vulnerable to encroachment or government reallocation for other land uses.¹¹⁸ In **Tanzania**, conversely, the fact that the state retains rights to wildlife on community-owned land opens the door to the imposition of central government decision-making in WMAs and control of revenues, prompting conflicts that have undermined WMA management and benefits.¹¹⁹ **These issues point to the need for recognition of integrated land and resource rights as a strong underpinning for community conservation.**¹²⁰

Case Study 3: The Massaha Community in Gabon

Legal frameworks for conservation and sustainable use can also help protect community lands and traditions from immediate threats where more comprehensive community tenure reforms have not yet been enacted.

Gabon lacks a legal framework for recognizing collective, community rights to land, or for recognizing community conserved areas.¹²¹ In northeast Gabon, the Massaha community is proposing to create and manage a new 11,300-hectare conserved area in their customary lands, based on their traditional knowledge, including to protect their territory from the logging and mining operations expanding across the country. As part of this work, the Massaha community and national allies are promoting policies to recognize two new categories of protected areas: community conserved areas and community hunting zones. If passed, these laws could enable the recognition of millions of hectares of community conserved areas in Gabon.¹²²

A man from the Massaha local community in Gabon monitors tree growth and health. Photo by If Not Us Then Who? for RRI, 2024.



Setting up a research laboratory specializing in scientific research around community-conserved areas in Massaha is the way forward.

Modeste Ndongoabendje, a community leader in the Massaha community, Gabon

b) Effective implementation of community tenure and community conservation frameworks

In many countries, legal frameworks exist for community tenure rights (whether land ownership or more specific resource rights), but their limited implementation impedes results for people and nature. For example, while the community forestry framework in the **DRC** opens huge opportunities, complex national regulations and the very high cost of setting up a community forest have meant slow implementation and dependence on outside funding.¹²⁵ Weak implementation of existing policies, linked to limited state capacity and financing, has also been a major impediment to the spread of community forestry in West Africa.¹²⁶

Even where legal frameworks recognize customary community rights as existing prior to land registration—for example, in **Kenya**—the slow progress of registration carries serious risks. Until lands are demarcated and registered, they are held in trust for communities by county governments, opening the door to reallocation of land for public or private sector development such as for agriculture or infrastructure.¹²⁷ In this context, community members may opt for faster individual titling options seen as offering greater security.¹²⁸ The resulting fragmentation and subdivision of communal lands negatively impacts both pastoral systems and wildlife conservation in these areas.¹²⁹

Lessons on ways to overcome the risks of slow implementation include:

- ✚ Simplifying registration procedures and ensuring they are highly accessible
- ✚ Ensuring agencies responsible for land administration have sufficient capacity, resources, and oversight
- ✚ Mobilizing civil society technical support and additional financing
- ✚ Raising communities' awareness and capacity regarding their rights and required procedures
- ✚ Mobilizing advocacy and oversight, where needed, to overcome government recalcitrance¹³⁰

c) Resolution of conflicts with state protected areas in law and practice

Many protected areas in Africa have been established on the unrecognized customary lands of IPs and LCs. In addition to infringements on community land rights, protected areas have resulted in displacement and severe negative impacts on the human rights of affected communities. These conflicts also undermine conservation action, both within protected areas and in places where community efforts to conserve their lands are undermined by government restrictions.¹³¹ **The risk that countries will create new state protected areas infringing on community rights to meet their 30x30 targets has been a major source of concern for this target and highlights the imperative in investing in community conservation alternatives.**¹³²

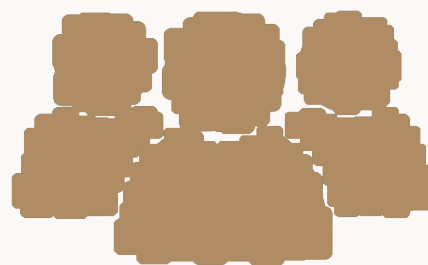
While legal frameworks in many countries allow for community engagement in the management of state protected areas, these tend to enable only weak forms of participation without recognition of underlying tenure rights, and often require communities to renounce some of their existing use, management, and exclusion rights.¹³³ Globally, many countries also lack clear and enforceable rights to FPIC for IPs and LCs potentially affected by state protected areas.¹³⁴

Recognition of community land rights is fundamental to resolving these conflicts and vulnerabilities. However, even in countries where community rights to land are otherwise secured, recognition of community rights to lands within existing state protected areas has proved challenging. For example, in Makuleke, **South Africa**, part of Kruger National Park that overlapped with restituted community lands was also restituted to the community on the condition that it be leased back to the protected area under a joint management arrangement.¹³⁵ However, provisions for recognizing community rights within existing protected areas, including land and resource rights as well as access to sacred sites, remain rare in law and practice. In **Kenya**, for example, the Sengwer, Mont Elgon Ogiek, and Mau Ogiek have struggled in domestic courts to secure restitution of lands that were gazetted as state forest reserves, despite a decision by the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights obliging the Kenyan government to issue community land titles to Ogiek communities in the Mau Forest.¹³⁶

At the 2023 Community Conservation Congress in Windhoek, Namibia, Indigenous and local community organizations called for legislative and policy reforms to prevent and resolve these conflicts between protected areas and the rights of IPs and LCs. They called for:

Lessons on ways to overcome the risks of slow implementation include:

- Transparent assessments
- Dialogue between communities and protected area authorities to develop practical solutions
- Grievance mechanisms
- Learning platforms and umbrella bodies to inform and advocate for policy change, ensuring that customary, community tenure rights are secured in protected areas and full access to natural resources is provided for by protected area authorities
- Mechanisms to directly channel funds to communities, including compensation for wildlife damage
- Reform policies and practices that hinder participation, FPIC, and benefit-sharing¹³⁷



Recognition of community land rights is fundamental to resolving these conflicts and vulnerabilities.



Women leaders from the Ogiek, Maasai, Batwa, Aweer, Benet, Sengwer, and Yaaku Indigenous communities meet in Mt. Elgon, Kenya for the 2022 East Africa Assembly. Photo by TonyWild Photography for RRI.

6.2 Empowered and Inclusive Community-led Governance

Experience demonstrates that empowered and inclusive community-led governance is a key requirement for community conservation. Institutions for community governance must be empowered in relation to governments and other outside actors to set locally determined priorities and undertake land and resource management activities without burdensome interference. These conditions allow for management in accordance with culturally rooted governance structures, customary laws, and traditional knowledge, enable adaptive management responsive to local ecological and social changes, and promote conservation practices that are locally beneficial (and therefore sustainable). At the same time, governance must be inclusive internally—avoiding elite capture and fully engaging women and youth—to ensure that management decisions take account of diverse interests within communities and benefits are broadly and equitably shared.

Experience to date also reveals that both external and internal dimensions of governance are unevenly realized in policy and practice. Key dimensions of empowered and inclusive governance include:

a) Genuine devolution of decision-making authority to community institutions

In some cases, governments have largely devolved management authority to community institutions. In others, they have hampered community conservation by ceding insufficient authority, enacting contradictory measures (such as conflicting land allocations), and/or failing to provide protection against external threats. For example, as noted in Section 3, once a conservancy is established in **Namibia**, communities have full authority to establish management plans (in keeping with national policy) and select private sector partners for tourism or hunting concessions, and they receive 100 percent of conservancy revenues.¹³⁸

Zimbabwe's CAMPFIRE program, by contrast, vests authority (and a share of revenues) in local governments. In WMAs in **Tanzania**, government agencies retain control over key decisions as well as revenue shares.¹³⁹

Genuine devolution of authority results in conservation that is community-led (not just “community-based”) and allows the strengths of adaptive and culturally rooted community governance to operate. Wider adoption of more fully devolved conservation approaches, including learning from the places where governments have successfully accomplished this, is needed to facilitate the expansion of community conservation and increase its effectiveness in delivering on biodiversity and community development goals.

b) Community leadership in partnerships with external actors

Civil society organizations and networks have often served as critical enablers of community conservation in Africa. In **Namibia**, for example, coordinated support from the Namibian Association of CBNRM Support Organizations has been foundational to the growth and success of the conservancy movement,¹⁴⁰ while the **Kenya** Wildlife Conservancies Association (KWCA) has similarly helped build the sector by informing policy and supporting its member conservancies. However, the involvement of outside organizations also carries risks that the community voices and priorities that should be leading and determining conservation governance are instead overshadowed by the agendas of more powerful groups. In one recent example, a 2025 court ruling in **Kenya** declared two member conservancies¹⁴¹ of the Northern Rangelands Trust illegal due to inadequate community consultation in their formation.¹⁴²

To prevent these risks, progressive non-governmental actors are increasingly mindful that their support is responsive to the priorities of community organizations and is coupled with institutional strengthening for self-reliance. For example, the Honeyguide Foundation in **Tanzania** works to build the governance, management, and business capacity of WMAs over a defined timeframe, enabling them to stand on their own as social enterprises.¹⁴³

Indigenous and local community leaders have pointed to peer learning across community organizations as another effective approach,¹⁴⁴ and highlight the need for donors to allocate sufficient resources to systematic institutional governance and operational capacity building of community organizations, not just their establishment.¹⁴⁵

c) Ensuring the vitality of local institutions, especially guarding against elite capture¹⁴⁶

One positive dimension of formal community conservation is that national initiatives often include mandates for the creation of democratically accountable governance institutions; however, pervasive challenges of elite capture have hampered conservation outcomes and equitable sharing of benefits.

To combat the destructive effects of elite capture on community conservation, it is essential to put in place rigorous rules on financial accountability before problems arise. Regular meetings of governance structures and robust periodic monitoring of finances and other aspects of governance should be built into the rules of community organizations to address the tendency over time for decision-making to be left to appointed leaders, with less and less reporting back to community members. Communities also deserve support from government in upholding local rules and ensuring that offences are dealt with, extending investigations and sanctions to colluding officials or politicians. Government roles in supporting community conservation should be included in regular monitoring reviews undertaken by community members, with mechanisms for adapting those roles to improve their performance over time.

d) Inclusion of women and youth in conservation governance

Lessons from experiences with community conservation also highlight the need to devote special efforts to ensure that women and youth participate fully in community conservation governance.

Women possess detailed knowledge of biodiversity and often have roles in and priorities for natural resource management that differ from those of men;¹⁴⁷ however, cultural and legal constraints—including barriers to women's land rights in communal systems—often hamper the participation of women in decision-making.¹⁴⁸ For example, women have often been excluded from effective participation in community forestry governance in **West and Central Africa**,¹⁴⁹ prompting advocacy for gender-equitable reforms from organizations such as the African Women's Network For Community Forest Management (REFACOF).¹⁵⁰ Engagement of youth is critical to sustaining future generations and requires taking account of the specific priorities and concerns of young women and men within the community, including for educational and employment opportunities and new types of economic activities.

While formal community conservation programs often mandate community assemblies or other democratic structures to promote inclusive decision-making, policies and practices may not be sufficient to ensure the genuine participation of women and youth. Lessons from recent research and the 2023 Community Conservation Congress highlight the need to:

- ✚ Ensure that relevant national laws and policies guarantee women's equal rights to participation in conservation decision-making
- ✚ The leadership of women and youth is prioritized in biodiversity initiatives
- ✚ Community groups and support organizations promote the active inclusion of women and youth in conservation activities and governance structures
- ✚ Women's and youth organizations have access to funding for their own priorities and initiatives¹⁵¹

6.3 Sustainable Livelihoods, Economies, and Financing

For effective community conservation, communities must be able to sustain themselves and benefit economically from their lands and resources. Benefits must be sufficient to support the stewardship activities required for conservation of community lands and resources, enable people—including youth—to remain prosperously on their lands, and reflect the self-determined cultural aspirations of communities. Across different situations, benefits may be generated from various combinations of direct sustainable use of natural resources, conservation-related enterprises, payments for ecosystem services, and grant funding for biodiversity conservation or climate mitigation. Benefits must also outweigh the costs communities incur for conservation: not only management costs but also the costs of living in proximity to wildlife and the opportunity costs of forgoing extractive uses in favor of conservation.

As highlighted above, community conservation can generate significant benefits for communities. Documented livelihoods benefits from community conservation initiatives include those from direct use, tourism, hunting, forestry and fisheries, and employment, with benefits flowing both to individual households and to wider community projects. Despite substantial income in some cases, experience shows that these benefits are often not yet sufficient to alleviate poverty in rural communities, enable robust conservation management, or sustain community well-being. One issue is that community lands vary in their natural assets, with some areas offering much greater economic opportunities—such as for wildlife tourism or sustainable forestry—than others.

Key enabling conditions to support sustainable livelihoods, economies, and financing include:

a) Improved governance to ensure communities equitably benefit from conservation initiatives

Many of the governance issues described in the previous section also impact the revenue shares that communities and households receive.

For example, governments may claim a large share of revenues before they even reach communities, benefits divided among villages or households may result in relatively small shares to the final recipients, and elite capture and other power dynamics affect how benefits are distributed within communities. Where the business model for community conservation relies on outside investors, power asymmetries between investors and communities and limitations in contract negotiating skills can disadvantage communities and undervalue community equity.¹⁵² Governance challenges can also affect the relative costs and benefits of community conservation and sustainable use activities, such as when community forestry schemes demand burdensome registration and/or monitoring requirements.

Tackling this issue requires putting the governance solutions highlighted in the previous section in place, especially as they relate to revenue sharing. In particular, **the design of formal community conservation programs should ensure that communities receive the “lion’s share” of conservancy, forestry, or other revenues, rather than governments.** In **Namibia**, for example, where communities receive 100 percent of revenues from the management and use of wildlife in conservancies, incentives for communities to establish conservation areas have been much more robust than in **Tanzania**, where 35 percent of revenues are retained by governments. Devolution of resource management authority to community institutions must also provide sufficient autonomy to avoid costly administrative and compliance measures.

b) Minimization of harms caused by human-wildlife conflict

For many rural Africans, living near a successful conservation area means living near dangerous animals. Elephants frequently destroy crops, which can wipe out a year’s food supply, while lions kill livestock, the primary financial asset for many pastoralists. Mechanisms currently in place for financial payouts or compensation rarely match the actual economic losses suffered by farmers.¹⁵³

Community conservation can help reduce the costs to communities associated with wildlife and promote coexistence, as greater management authority enables communities to establish locally effective strategies.

In Zimbabwe, for example, a community guardians program together with improved livestock enclosures reduced conflicts by almost 60 percent between 2021 and 2023.¹⁵⁴ The fact that communities can benefit from wildlife rather than only suffering depredations has also dramatically reduced retaliatory killings of wildlife.¹⁵⁵

However, existing measures have not gone far enough to mitigate negative impacts on communities and enable co-existence. Solutions advocated by participants in the Namibia Community Conservation Congress to further minimize human-wildlife conflict include to:

- ✚ Mainstream human-wildlife conflict prevention and mitigation strategies in national conservation policies and their implementation, including robust grievance/redress mechanisms and sustainable financing for compensation for damages
- ✚ Support alternative community-based approaches to data collection on human-wildlife conflicts
- ✚ Facilitate peer learning across communities on effective tools to reduce human-wildlife conflicts
- ✚ Elevate the visibility of human-wildlife conflict by recasting it as a development issue¹⁵⁶

c) Promote and support diverse and adequate sources of income and financing

As with all protected and conserved areas, community conservation areas require sustained sources of income to cover the costs of biodiversity protection and management. While community-led approaches are relatively cost effective,¹⁵⁷ income must also sustain community livelihoods and well-being while maintaining low enough levels of extraction to conserve the resource base. Yet community conservation often requires trade-offs that limit the extent to which benefits can be generated from multiple sources. In general, a focus on conservation tends to imply not exploiting natural resources for their maximum financial benefit.

Other trade-offs, for example, may include limiting livestock grazing in areas reserved for wildlife tourism or forgoing traditional subsistence hunting in favor of commercial hunting.

Balancing these needs often requires a diverse set of income streams. **Sustainable direct use of natural resources by communities, such as for agriculture, pastoralism, forest products, fishing, traditional hunting and gathering, and other customary uses can support food security needs while maintaining local cultures, knowledge, and ways of life.** The income streams that formal community conservation generates through effectively devolved rights to benefit from wildlife (such as through tourism and commercial hunting), forestry, and fisheries can be a substantial addition. While complex and posing risks for communities if not carefully designed and grounded in FPIC,¹⁵⁸ some communities in Sub-Saharan Africa are starting to benefit from participation in payments for ecosystems services initiative such as carbon payments, as in the example of Makame WMA in **Tanzania**.¹⁵⁹ Diversification is also needed to address the vulnerability of some community conservation revenues to external shocks, particularly tourism which can quickly dry up in the face of economic recessions, pandemics, or political instability.

Community-based organizations must also be supported and positioned to receive larger shares of direct international financing for biodiversity conservation and climate mitigation and adaptation, in light of the substantial contributions they are making to these global goals through conservation of their lands.¹⁶⁰

Increasing these financing flows will depend on donor reforms to increase accessibility for Indigenous and local community organizations, support to strengthening the relevant capacities of local organizations that want to receive direct financing, and reforms in the roles and capacities of intermediary organizations that can serve to buffer and mediate between community organization and donor needs.¹⁶¹

As countries pursue their KMGBF commitments, implementation of 30x30 targets must strengthen and not undermine these key elements of community conservation.

A critical priority is to ensure rigorous adherence to KMGBF safeguards obligating states to respect the rights of IPs and LCs, including rights to their lands and resources, to prevent further negative impacts from the expansion of state protected areas and drive investment toward community conservation alternatives. In addition, countries should establish national frameworks for identifying protected areas, OECMs, and ITTs that provide flexible options for IPs and LCs to pursue recognition of their conservation areas through the KMGBF pathway most appropriate to their situation. Historically, only protected areas were recognized under the CBD as counting toward national targets and eligible for international reporting.¹⁶²

While this may continue to be the pathway preferred by communities in some areas, in others, alignment with national protected area requirements has (or would) constrain community conservation into rigid frameworks that undermine the devolution of authority, empowered self-governance, and sustainable livelihoods essential for successful implementation.

The KMGBF's inclusion of OECM and ITT pathways, in contrast, offers more flexible options for recognition of conservation areas led by IPs and LCs if the relevant national legal frameworks are developed through proper consultation. As with protected areas, it is crucial that OECMs be established within clear legal frameworks and through rights-based, community-led approaches. **Without full recognition of collective tenure rights and robust FPIC processes, OECMs risk reproducing the rights violations that have accompanied the establishment of protected areas.**

Even when community tenure is recognized and FPIC is secured, OECMs may introduce new obligations or restrictions that affect communities' governance and their ability to manage and use their lands and resources according to their own priorities.¹⁶³

RRI research on existing legal frameworks in 10 African countries finds that all 10 provide potential pathways for OECMs and ITTs (as well as protected areas), such as through frameworks for community forestry and community land rights.¹⁶⁴ While guidelines on OECMs were adopted by the CBD in 2018,¹⁶⁵ few countries globally have adopted frameworks for identifying, recognizing, and reporting OECMs or ITTs to date.¹⁶⁶ Relevant processes are actively underway in several African countries, including development of a National Policy on Conservation Outside Protected Areas in the **DRC**¹⁶⁷ and dialogues and technical guidelines on OECMs in **Kenya**¹⁶⁸ and **Tanzania**.¹⁶⁹ Full and effective participation of IPs and LCs in these processes is essential to ensure that they fulfil the aspirations of the KMGBF, as is integration of rights-based and community-led conservation in NBSAPs and Biodiversity Finance Plans, to ensure that community conservation areas receive concrete policy, technical, and financial support.



We have scientific proof that communities at the local level conserve biodiversity better than governments and NGOs combined. Why? Because conservation for communities is not a separate activity. For communities, conservation is life.

Patrick Kipalu, Director, Africa Program, Rights and Resources Initiative

07

Conclusion and Recommendations

To achieve the KMGBF's ambitious 30x30 targets, African nations must prioritize rights-based, community-led initiatives as the most effective and equitable mechanism for scaling area-based conservation in line with international and national commitments. As highlighted by this review, there are substantial foundations of community conservation policy, practice, social mobilization, and local institutions in Africa that are already generating significant outcomes for people and nature. These outcomes remain limited, however, by insufficient investment, political will, and support for the key enabling conditions necessary for successful community conservation. More concerted effort and investment is needed to strengthen these substantial foundations and advance conservation approaches that are genuinely rights-based and community-led:

Secure collective tenure rights to lands, territories, and resources

Enact and strengthen legal frameworks for community tenure while also enacting or strengthening policies that enable communities to establish community-led conservation areas in their lands.

Accelerate the implementation of existing community tenure and conservation frameworks, ensuring that opportunities provided in national legislation are realized on the ground.

Resolve conflicts with state protected areas in law and practice, including by recognizing the customary rights of IPs and LCs overlapping with protected areas, strengthening policies for FPIC and their implementation, and establishing dialogue and grievance mechanisms to resolve conflicts.

Empowered and inclusive community-led governance

Devolve genuine decision-making authority to community institutions to enable them to set locally determined priorities and undertake land and resource management activities without burdensome state interference.

Ensure community organizations take the lead in external partnerships, with civil society partners providing support that is responsive to the priorities of community organizations and includes institutional strengthening, where requested.

Promote and support the vitality of local institutions, especially guarding against elite capture, through robust governance mechanisms for regular community oversight and accountability of government and community leaders.

Ensure robust inclusion of women and youth in community governance by integrating their distinct knowledge, roles, and priorities in community decision-making about conservation.

Sustainable livelihoods, economies, and financing

Ensure that revenues from community conservation primarily and equitably benefit IPs and LCs while reforming systems that enable governments to retain a high proportion of benefits and addressing power asymmetries between communities and private investors.

Minimize the harms caused by human-wildlife conflict, drawing on community knowledge to establish locally effective strategies to reduce conflict, strengthening grievance and compensation mechanisms, and elevating attention to human-wildlife conflict as a rural development issue.

Promote and support diversified sources of income and financing for community prosperity and effective resource governance through diversified income streams.

Redirect larger shares of direct international financing for biodiversity conservation to IP and LC organizations, including women- and youth-led organizations.

As countries across Africa consider how to recognize community conserved areas more fully as part of their national conservation targets under the KMGBF, it is essential to ensure that this recognition is supporting, and not undermining, the key elements of rights-based and community-led conservation.

Recommendations for governments

- Ensure that NBSAPs are developed with the full and effective participation of IPs and LCs, collaboratively identifying pathways for recognition of community-led conservation as part of national targets (whether through protected areas, OECMs, or ITTs).
- Collaboratively develop and put in place frameworks for identifying and recognizing OECMs and ITTs in consultation with IPs and LCs, ensuring that these provide flexible options for rights-based and community-led conservation.
- Integrate concrete support for community-led conservation in Biodiversity Financing Plans, including financing and support for IPs and LCs to obtain recognition for their conservation areas under Target 3 pathways, where they choose to pursue this.
- Ensure that NBSAPs and their implementation through national laws and policies consistently uphold countries' obligations under the KMGBF to adopt a human rights-based approach and ensure respect for IPs' and LCs' rights, traditional knowledge, values, and practices, while respecting FPIC and prioritizing their full and effective participation in decision-making in all conservation actions.





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