

PRACTICE AND POLICY

African voices and their role in improving north–south collaborations for biodiversity conservation

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Article impact statement: Parachute conservation models are persistent; thus, a transformative shift is needed.

Abstract

While the dominance of policies from the Global North has shaped conservation practices, holistic decision-making is urgently needed to incorporate more local voices, especially in Africa. Effective conservation strategies may be enhanced by incorporating the expertise and resources of the Global North alongside the knowledge, lived experiences, insights, and leadership of local communities, scientists, and civil society groups from the Global South. This approach fosters mutual respect, equitable partnerships, and shared accountability and moves away from parachute conservation models toward more inclusive and context-sensitive solutions for biodiversity conservation. We advocate for eliminating parachute conservation practices in Africa and emphasize the importance of more inclusive strategies prioritizing equitable north–south collaborations to address pressing biodiversity challenges. Key challenges in Africa include financial transparency issues, misaligned philanthropy, unbalanced representation of Indigenous perspectives, and the influence of international organizations. Possible mechanisms to move away from conservation practices driven by colonial legacies, legacies in which policies are often developed in the Global North and imposed on the Global South, sometimes without prior informed consent, include free, prior, and informed consent on projects and equitable benefit-sharing mechanisms. By prioritizing the voices of local communities, including local scientific expertise and Indigenous knowledge systems, we posit that a more just and sustainable global environmental policy framework can be realized that can contribute to the long-term well-being of the planet and its people.

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community-led conservation, parachute science, equitable partnerships, Indigenous knowledge systems

INTRODUCTION

African ecosystems vividly express the continent's abundant biodiversity and nature's contributions to people (NCP). However, the governance of these ecosystems—encompassing decision-making processes related to conservation policies, resource allocation, and stakeholder engagement—often fails to fully incorporate Africa's unique contextual realities and local perspectives (Smit et al., 2024). For instance, international agreements or donor-driven conservation initiatives sometimes impose external priorities that do not align with local needs (Enrici et al., 2023). Transparent and effective governance is emerging as a key factor in natural resource management because of the increasing complexity of natural resource conservation and increasing stakeholder conflicts over wildlife resources. Historically, conservation decision-making in Africa has been based on top-down approaches, parachute science, or colonial practices with limited local community participation (Collins et al., 2021; Miller et al., 2023). Researchers or institutions from the Global North are often detached from the realities of African settings; they do not recognize local communities as equal partners in conservation efforts. Instead, they have too frequently treated them as passive recipients of an agenda designed for the Global North (Mabele et al., 2023; Tilley & Kalina, 2021). This approach has occasionally generated conflicts between conservationists and local communities, thus negatively affecting not just social justice but also the effectiveness of conservation initiatives (Collins et al., 2021). Article 8(j) of the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity (UNCBD) and Target 22 of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) underscores the role of international institutions when engaging Indigenous peoples and local communities (IPs and LCs) in making decisions that directly affect their lives (Joly, 2023; Morgera & Tsoumani, 2010). As such, an emerging consensus about more inclusive conservation initiatives means its approaches must be decolonized and code-signed with the communities they affect, ensuring that these efforts are rooted in antioppressive practices to achieve greater justice and sustainability (Collins et al., 2021; Trisos et al., 2021).

Research and experience highlight the urgent need to move away from fortress conservation and parachute science (or colonial science) toward more convivial conservation—a more inclusive, community-led, rights-based, and participatory approach to conservation (Buscher & Fletcher, 2020; Collins et al., 2021; de Vos, 2020; de Vos & Schwartz, 2022). This transformation necessitates the full engagement of local communities, custodians, and guardians of local knowledge throughout every phase of conservation decision-making, including planning, execution, and continuous monitoring and assessment.

This engagement with local communities is indispensable for several reasons. First, these communities possess an intimate understanding of the ecosystems they inhabit and the unique challenges they face (Shaw, 2021). Their indigenous knowledge is invaluable for genuinely shaping effective conservation measures. For instance, the Sankuyo, Hwange, and Sobbe communities in Botswana, Zimbabwe, and Namibia, respectively, have long demonstrated the effectiveness of community-led conservation, particularly within a supportive policy framework that recognizes tenure and the right to self-determination (Dube, 2019; Lubilo & Hebinck, 2019; Masunga & Thebe, 2015). Second, IPs and LCs are typically the primary stakeholders in conservation endeavors and bear the consequences of these efforts (Asase et al., 2022a; Shaw, 2021). Local actors play an influential role in the decision-making process. Finally, authentic engagement with IPs and LCs fosters trust and collaboration between conservationists and these communities, creating a sense of ownership, an imperative facet of creating enduring and sustainable conservation solutions (Dahdouh-Guebas et al., 2003; de Vos & Schwartz, 2022; Smyth, 2015).

INTEGRATING LOCAL PERSPECTIVES FOR SUSTAINABLE CONSERVATION

Conservation efforts transcend merely safeguarding wildlife for their aesthetic and ecological value in tourism and research (Madzwamuse et al., 2020). Conservation must also prioritize the livelihoods of local communities around conservation areas. The challenges of human-wildlife conflicts across Africa, particularly those involving crop raiding by elephants and livestock depredation by some species, such as lions (*Panthera leo*) and leopards (*Panthera pardus*), highlight the need for strategies that are not driven by fortress models, but that incorporate and address the concerns of local communities (Bond & Mktutu, 2018; Milner-Gulland, 2021; Ruppert et al., 2022). Integrating the insights of communities is critical in shaping sustainable socioecological frameworks that guide conservation and planetary health (Mbaiwa & Hambira, 2023).

Dahdouh-Guebas et al. (2003) showed that research conducted in the least developed countries has been frequently published by institutions in the most industrialized nations, often with minimal involvement from local institutions. This trend remains prevalent two decades after their publication called attention to this problem. More recently, Miller et al. (2023) found that knowledge generation was still dominated by the Global North, highlighting the practice of parachute science. Smit et al. (2024) noted a higher prevalence of parachute science in research conducted in Kruger National Park in South Africa compared with Kakadu National Park in Australia. These studies highlight the need for international organizations and

institutions to transition from exclusionary approaches to more participatory conservation that emphasizes equitable engagement with IPs and LCs, particularly in Africa (Asase et al., 2022a; Mabele et al., 2023; Miller et al., 2023). This shift is vital for formulating and implementing equitable policies that resonate with local ecological, cultural, and socioeconomic contexts, thereby enhancing the effectiveness and sustainability of conservation initiatives on the continent. By embracing a reimagined approach to conservation that prioritizes inclusivity, equity, and context-specific strategies, African conservation efforts can transcend historical limitations and foster a future where ecosystems and communities coexist in a more harmonious manner.

AFRICAN PERSPECTIVES AND DYNAMICS OF SUSTAINABLE CONSERVATION

The current discourse on African biodiversity conservation is often overshadowed by globally dominant narratives, primarily from the Global North (Genda et al., 2022; Smit et al., 2024). These narratives usually emphasize preservationist ideologies (e.g., fortress conservation) that may not fully align with African cultural and socioeconomic contexts (Asase et al., 2022b). This dichotomy—between externally driven conservation priorities and locally relevant strategies—has historically resulted in misaligned conservation efforts that marginalize vital local stakeholders in decision-making processes. For example, policies promoting unrestricted wildlife movement might fail to account for human–wildlife conflict and its effects on community livelihoods (Bond & Mkutu, 2018). Such an approach has its roots in the philosophical and historical contexts of the Global North and frequently overlooks the unique cultural perspectives and lived experiences of African citizens in their interactions with wildlife, a gap noted in the literature (Bauer et al., 2021; Binka, 2005; Madzwamuse et al., 2020).

Another example illustrating the historical and philosophical context of conservation in Africa is hunting. Traditionally, hunting in Africa has been a vital sustenance activity, but it is also deeply woven into Africa's cultural tapestry. Traditional hunting practices demonstrate a nuanced balance between human needs and ecological stewardship, emblematic of a symbiotic relationship with the natural world (Agrawal et al., 2021; Kothari, 2021). This time-honored connection with hunting can be extended to contemporary practices, such as trophy hunting, which, although driven by demand from the Global North, when executed under stringent and culturally appropriate regulations, can yield significant social, economic, and conservation benefits (Lindsey et al., 2006; Tchakatumba et al., 2019). However, the ethical and animal welfare concerns surrounding trophy hunting necessitate a balanced view that recognizes its potential positive impacts on local communities and conservation. This balance is critical for maintaining the integrity of sustainable practices within African conservation strategies (Muposhi et al., 2016).

A notable example of the implications of external conservation decisions is the 2014 ban by the United States on elephant

trophy imports from Tanzania and Zimbabwe (Nyamayedenga et al., 2021). This ban, implemented with minimal consultation of the affected African communities, had far-reaching economic and social consequences. While empirical evidence is lacking, it is estimated that the ban affected over 3,000 individuals directly employed in Tanzania's trophy hunting industry and exacerbated human–wildlife conflicts in Zimbabwe (Dube, 2019; The-Citizen, 2014). The proposed, albeit later rejected, 2023 United Kingdom ban on importing legally obtained wildlife trophies underscores the potential risks of such sweeping regulations. While well intentioned, these actions can fail to acknowledge the critical role of practices like trophy hunting in some African countries' wildlife management strategies (Parker et al., 2020). The repercussions of such decisions disproportionately affect local communities at the forefront of wildlife conservation, often without receiving fair benefits. Therefore, it is imperative that any decision affecting local communities, especially regarding sustainable practices such as trophy hunting, should be made through inclusive, consultative processes that weigh both ethical considerations and the socioeconomic realities of these communities.

Pastoralism also has a millennial legacy in Africa and plays a crucial role in contemporary conservation in that it connects livelihoods and ecosystems (Osano et al., 2013). Pastoral communities have long managed wildlife habitats through traditional grazing systems that promote biodiversity while sustaining their livelihoods (Homewood et al., 2012; McGahey et al., 2008). These practices have been refined over generations, providing a nuanced understanding of the natural environment and its balance. In some regions, such as Kenya's Maasai Mara and Ethiopia's Somali area, pastoralism serves as a testament to the resilience and sustainability of these systems (McGahey et al., 2008; Notenbaert et al., 2012). In the Maasai Mara, for example, pastoral communities engage in transhumance and adaptive management to ensure livestock and wildlife health (Bedelian, 2014). This traditional land stewardship helps maintain migratory corridors for wildlife, which promotes ecological connectivity and reduces human–wildlife conflict (Oduor, 2020; Osano et al., 2013). These systems also provide valuable lessons for fostering coexistence between people and wildlife. By recognizing the intricate relationship between pastoral livelihoods and ecosystem health, conservation strategies can move beyond rigid, exclusionary approaches toward more inclusive models (Ruppert et al., 2022). This involves empowering pastoral communities to play a central role in shaping policies that respect ecological and sociocultural realities so that conservation efforts are sustainable and equitable.

MOVING FORWARD WITH GLOBAL NORTH AND GLOBAL SOUTH COLLABORATION IN BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION

Implementing the GBF's call for more inclusive and effective biodiversity conservation requires a fundamental shift in global north–south dynamics, particularly concerning Africa.

The GBF recognizes the rights of IPs and LCs, acknowledging their crucial role in biodiversity conservation and the sustainable use of natural resources (Kok et al., 2024). To achieve its goals, the GBF calls for the active involvement of governments, businesses, and civil society in a whole-of-society approach. It also promotes gender equality, with a specific target to ensure equal participation in the implementation of conservation efforts (Lucas et al., 2024). This comprehensive, inclusive, and accountable approach is essential for reversing biodiversity loss and promoting sustainable development. However, achieving this entails acknowledging historical colonial injustices and moving away from parachute conservation to empowering IPs and LCs for genuine collaboration. Namibia's Community-Based Natural Resource Management success highlights the potential of such partnerships when local voices are central (Genda et al., 2022; Schick et al., 2018). To achieve optimal and just conservation outcomes, conservationists from the Global North must engage in equitable partnerships with IPs and LCs from the initial planning phase, ensuring that conservation strategies are culturally sensitive, ecologically relevant, and socially equitable (Genda et al., 2022). This collaborative approach facilitates the integration of traditional ecological knowledge and local perspectives, thereby enhancing the sustainability and effectiveness of conservation efforts at local, regional, and global scales.

However, several challenges must be addressed to achieve true collaboration: lack of prioritization of wildlife, financial transparency issues, misaligned philanthropy, conflicting interests, unbalanced representation of Indigenous perspectives, and the influence of international organizations, which can sometimes complicate local decision-making. Wildlife is often prioritized over the needs of local communities. Sustainable biodiversity conservation depends on the well-being of local communities, and international conservation organizations (e.g., nongovernmental organizations) must engage with these communities to understand their challenges. Prioritizing wildlife over local communities' needs undermines the biodiversity and ecosystems conservation efforts aim to protect. Investing heavily in state-of-the-art wildlife centers while neglecting basic infrastructure and essential services in nearby villages risks alienating communities that coexist with wildlife. This has been observed, for example, in communities surrounding Kruger National Park, where basic amenities still need to be improved. Yet, wildlife has been prioritized, protected, and often valued more than the well-being of the local population (Reporters, 2024). This underscores the importance of integrating community priorities into conservation initiatives to ensure that conservation efforts achieve greater success and long-term sustainability.

The costs associated with donor conservation projects are seldom disclosed, complicating efforts to identify the most cost-effective interventions (White et al., 2022b; White et al., 2022a). Greater transparency in donor budgets and the accessibility of audited financial accounts can foster trust between local authorities, communities, and donors. In contrast, financial opacity not only undermines confidence in conservation initiatives but also impedes the potential for effective collaboration, ultimately

compromising the success and sustainability of conservation efforts.

While financial support is essential, the success of conservation initiatives depends on cultural sensitivity and a commitment to local communities' well-being. Conservation projects must consider ecological and social dynamics because undeclared conflicts of interest may further undermine trust and effectiveness. For instance, the allocation of financial resources to conservation efforts that prioritize charismatic species. For example, African elephant (*Loxodonta africana*) conservation may conflict with the immediate needs and priorities of local communities, such as human–wildlife conflict mitigation or livelihood support (Small, 2011). When philanthropic efforts prioritize such agendas without cultural awareness, they risk alienating the people they aim to support, ultimately reducing the effectiveness of conservation efforts.

The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) is critical in shaping conservation policies and resource management across African countries. However, the voices of IPs and LCs—who have deep cultural and historical ties to the land and its resources—can be marginalized within CITES decision-making processes (Kothari et al., 2008). When wildlife management decisions are made without genuine representation, they can lead to unintended consequences, such as ineffective policies and policies that harm local livelihoods or disrupt traditional practices. To address this gap, international organizations need to actively involve local stakeholders, including Indigenous knowledge holders, community leaders, and grassroots organizations, in shaping conservation policies. This approach ensures that initiatives are decolonized and respectful of the communities they impact.

Despite globalization and technological advancements, IPs and LCs retain invaluable grassroots knowledge of their environments. When Indigenous knowledge systems are respected and valued, communities become active stewards, taking ownership of conservation efforts. For example, the pastoral practices of the Masai Mara can help inform human–wildlife coexistence strategies in areas dominated by wildlife conflict (Bedelian, 2014). African conservation can benefit from integrating this Indigenous knowledge with scientific research.

Addressing these challenges can create a collaborative approach that integrates traditional ecological knowledge and local perspectives to broader conservation policies and instruments, enhancing the sustainability and effectiveness of efforts at both regional and global scales. This inclusive conservation paradigm ensures that actions are informed by diverse perspectives, which fosters sustainable and culturally sensitive solutions. By nurturing equitable Global North and Global South collaborations that value Global South perspectives, it is possible to forge a just, sustainable future where people and the planet flourish.

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