

*Keywords:*

Wildlife, community-based natural resource management, Africa, good governance

## Policy pointers

**Donors, NGOs and governments** should redouble their efforts to reform wildlife governance to ensure communities have a greater stake in conservation initiatives.

**Donors and international NGOs** should make it a priority to provide appropriate support to civil society organisations working to improve wildlife policy and governance, and implementing effective models on the ground.

**Conservation practitioners, scientists and analysts** should recognise and highlight the central role of civil society organisations as change agents in the African conservation arena, and integrate them into their strategies.

**Donors and NGOs must** work to counter the growing range of restrictions on civil society in many African countries to ensure they do not undermine conservation efforts.

# Saving Africa's vanishing wildlife: how civil society can help turn the tide

Conservation in Africa is failing. An upsurge in poaching and wildlife trafficking has made headlines, but comparatively little attention has been paid to the wider, systematic decline of many large mammal populations across large areas.<sup>1</sup> There are many underlying drivers of this decline, but poor wildlife governance is a common, critical factor.<sup>2</sup> Strong local and national civil society organisations can drive much-needed reform, but their critical role has yet to be widely recognised or effectively supported. A growing number of local organisations are proving increasingly influential in a number of African countries, often through their role in leading community conservation initiatives and reform movements. Finding ways to better support the growth and development of these organisations will be key to improving existing conservation strategies and restoring wildlife populations over the longer term.

In recent years, Africa has suffered a conservation crisis, signalled most notably by the accelerating decline of its large mammals — from once common ungulates to iconic species such as lion, elephant and rhino. This decline is a result of increased mortality due to commercial poaching and/or competition with people for land and resources. Public, political and media attention has focused largely on the poaching and trafficking aspects of the crisis. But this overlooks the wider, systematic decline of many large mammal populations across large areas of the continent, particularly western and eastern Africa.<sup>1</sup>

There are many underlying factors driving this loss of wildlife in African countries and landscapes. These include human population growth and increased consumption, global

economic forces and markets for products such as ivory and rhino horn, and growing demand for agricultural land in Africa from local, national and international buyers.

A critical factor, though, is the quality and nature of wildlife governance institutions in many African states.<sup>2</sup> In many respects, both the current poaching crisis and the decline in the population of large mammals are tied to chronic and long-standing challenges related to wildlife governance institutions. Two aspects of wildlife governance that are particularly important are law enforcement and wildlife user rights.

To date, efforts to improve law enforcement have focused on direct investments in anti-poaching initiatives. However, poaching is often symptomatic not only of a lack of law enforcement, but also the active collusion of

## *CSOs have emerged as key change agents for bringing about policy and legal reforms*

government agencies (from wildlife authorities to customs officials) or affiliated national elites.<sup>3,4</sup> Tackling this kind of corruption will be a critical element of the response to the illegal

wildlife trade across much of Africa.<sup>5,6</sup>

An equally important factor behind current poaching and the broader decline in wildlife is a disconnect between conservation initiatives and local peoples' livelihoods.<sup>7</sup> As the recently released European Union strategy on African wildlife conservation aptly notes:

“African people living in wildlife-rich areas need to have tangible benefits in the preservation of Africa's wildlife if they are (a) to accept the costs of living with it and (b) be able to continue using it sustainably... In many African countries, rural populations do not have clearly defined user rights over wildlife and other natural resources so have no stake in ensuring sustainable use of it.”<sup>8</sup>

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### **Community-based wildlife management: successes and failures**

The capacity of local communities to claim and exercise legal rights over wildlife — and to capture its economic value through tourism, trophy hunting and other activities — is an important factor in conservation outcomes on communal lands. This is particularly the case in eastern and southern Africa, where most wildlife is found in savannah ecosystems and large mammals still range widely across state, private and community lands. In Kenya, for example, roughly 70 per cent of wildlife is found outside protected areas on community and private lands.<sup>9</sup>

Namibia's communal conservancies, which cover roughly 20 per cent of the country (some 16.5 million hectares), provide a legal basis for communities to exercise clear rights to manage wildlife and benefit from the value that tourists and trophy hunters place on species such as lion, rhino and elephant. In 2014, communities that had established conservancies earned more than US\$6 million from such initiatives — 100 per cent of which is retained locally rather than being diverted to local or national government.<sup>10</sup> As a result, local people have a significant incentive to invest in conservation. These incentives have contributed to the recovery of lion populations on communal land since the 1990s, and an increase in the country's elephant population from 7,500 in 1995 to over 20,000 today.<sup>10</sup>

Kenya also provides important evidence of the ways in which local conservation areas — where communities have full control over wildlife tourism revenues — can drive improved conservation outcomes. In community conservancies in northern Kenya, elephant poaching is significantly lower than in comparable communal lands with no conservancy status.<sup>11</sup> In community conservancies around the Maasai Mara National Reserve, researchers have found that lion densities have increased over the past decade due to the establishment of joint venture conservancies between local landholders and private tourism operators.<sup>12</sup>

By contrast, Zambia shows how wildlife populations tend to collapse when wildlife governance institutions generate fewer incentives for communities to support conservation. In Game Management Areas (a designation for wildlife areas that coincide with communal land), communities are allocated only 20 per cent of trophy hunting concession fees and 50 per cent of licence fees, with the national wildlife authority retaining the remainder.<sup>13</sup> Wildlife numbers have been greatly depleted across nearly all of Zambia's wildlife areas. To address this, a recent review has highlighted the need for ‘changes that empower communities and enable them to participate in and benefit from wildlife-based land uses’.<sup>13</sup>

The degree to which national wildlife laws grant communities rights to wildlife revenues varies hugely (see Figure 1). Recent legislative reforms have also varied in their effectiveness in creating stronger local incentives to support conservation. Kenya's revised Wildlife Act of 2014, for example, formally recognised community conservancies for the first time. Zambia's 2015 Wildlife Act, however, does not significantly improve the ability of communities to capture benefits from wildlife. In Tanzania, debates around new regulations governing benefit-sharing within community-managed Wildlife Management Areas (WMAs) have yet to be resolved by the government.

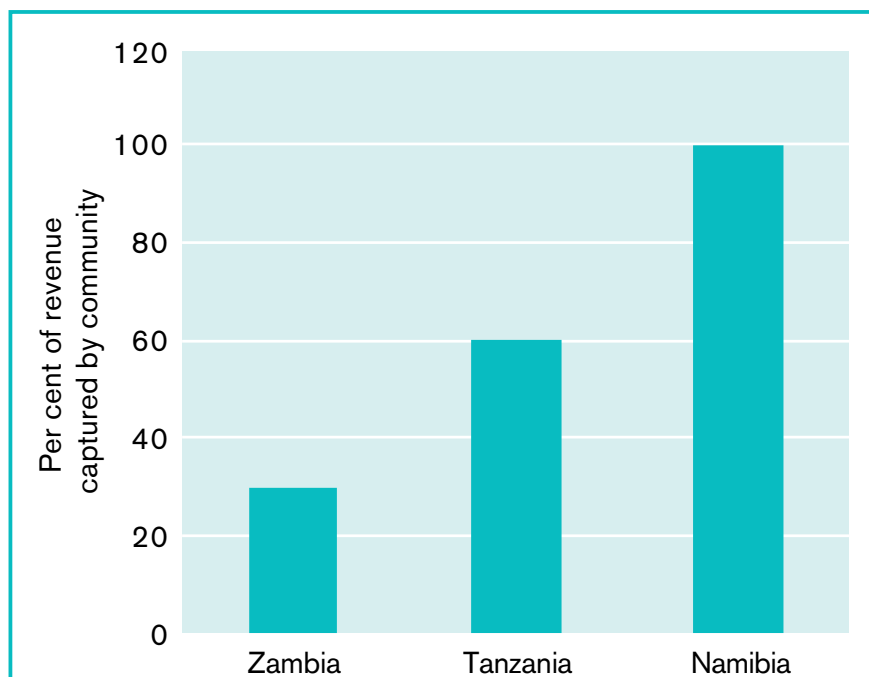
### **The role of civil society in wildlife governance reform**

The correlation between effective community institutions and good conservation outcomes suggests that strengthening wildlife governance through devolved local wildlife user rights and benefits should be a key priority for addressing the current poaching crisis and fostering the long-term survival of wildlife outside protected areas. However, any moves to implement governance reforms that would grant local communities a greater level of control over wildlife revenues are likely to run into vested

interests that will need to be confronted through skilfully facilitated consultative and advocacy processes involving reform-minded coalitions.<sup>14</sup> Local and national African civil society organisations (CSOs) have emerged as key change agents for bringing about such policy and legal reforms, and already a range of new and emerging CSOs in a number of African countries are starting to play greater leadership roles in this arena.

Again, Namibia's experience is instructive. An important factor behind the country's remarkable achievements in conservation since the 1990s is that it has had exceptionally strong civil society leadership and technical capacity, which has been effectively supported by long-term donor funding and international organisations such as WWF.<sup>15</sup> The original wildlife policy and legal reforms that established communal conservancies were strongly influenced by pilot initiatives developed by Integrated Rural Development and Nature Conservation (IRDNC), a Namibian NGO that has played a key role in the innovations within the country's conservation sector since the 1980s. A number of other Namibian CSOs have also established themselves as a collaborative alliance — the Namibian Association of CBNRM Support Organisations (NACSO) — in order to coordinate support for conservancies and to engage with and influence government policy.

In Kenya and Tanzania, a number of relatively new networks and other CSOs are playing key roles in influencing wildlife governance reform and community conservation initiatives. The Northern Rangelands Trust was established in 2000 as an umbrella body to support and champion Kenya's emerging community conservancies in Laikipia and Samburu District. Local networks or associations have since been established in key wildlife areas such as Amboseli (Amboseli Ecosystem Trust) and the Maasai Mara (Maasai Mara Wildlife Conservancies Association). A new national umbrella body, the Kenya Wildlife Conservancies Association, established in 2013, now plays an important role in engaging with national policy and legal processes, including development of regulations for conservancies under the 2014 Wildlife Act. Meanwhile, at the national level, Wildlife Direct has emerged as an influential advocacy group for conservation, playing an important role in a range of decisions and dynamics that have helped Kenya reduce elephant poaching since 2013. Paula Kahumbu, head of Wildlife Direct, emphasised the importance of African civil society voices and constituencies in implementing the measures that have strengthened wildlife protection across Kenya in recent years:



**Figure 1: Proportion of revenue from trophy hunting captured by local communities.**

Applies only to trophy hunting carried out on community land or in community wildlife management areas. Figures are approximate and indicative as revenue sharing depends on multiple types of fees, and may vary somewhat across different types of community lands or management areas.

“Our African-led initiative to save elephants and wildlife is driven by a wider vision of an inclusive, prosperous African future; an Africa with effective governance and a vibrant civil society, and proud of its rich natural and cultural heritage.”<sup>16</sup>

In Tanzania, the Community Wildlife Management Areas Consortium (CWMAC) has recently established itself as a key actor in engaging with government around proposed policy reforms that would grant communities greater rights and revenue in WMAs. Other growing Tanzanian organisations, such as Honeyguide Foundation, are providing technical support to WMAs and innovating in areas such as human-wildlife conflict. Other more established organisations — such as the Ujamaa Community Resource Team, whose work was recognised with a Goldman Environmental Prize in 2016 — help pastoralist communities influence policy, secure land rights and connect to national networks.

The local knowledge of these African CSOs and their ability to organise public and community constituencies have enabled them to play important roles in influencing wildlife governance reforms and community-level implementation in their national and local contexts. This growing

influence of African CSOs in conservation is an important emerging dynamic in a sector that has historically tended to be dominated by foreign organisations and worldviews.<sup>17</sup>

In this context, the growing tendency of governments around the world<sup>18</sup> — including many in Africa — to adopt laws or administrative measures to restrict the activities of civil society poses a major strategic risk to conservation efforts. In Kenya, for example, activists have expressed concern over new government measures and proposals to curb the activities and funding of local CSOs, in a context of the growing restriction of civil society activities during the past five years.<sup>19</sup> In Tanzania, a Cybercrimes Act passed last year imposes strict controls on the publication of information without government approval, which could include wildlife statistics or other conservation-related data.<sup>20</sup>

A broader issue is the nature of current funding and technical support models designed to develop the long-term capacity and performance of African conservation organisations. African CSOs are frequently constrained by short-term or highly restricted project funding, high administrative costs associated with reporting and accounting, and restrictions on overheads that limit their capacity to invest in staff and infrastructure. Many capacity-building investments, such as one-off training courses or short-term consultancies, are not tailored to local organisations' needs and priorities.<sup>21</sup> Donors also tend to withdraw support in countries experiencing chronic political crises — even though this is where CSOs might need their help the most.<sup>22</sup>

## Conclusion

Improving wildlife governance will be central to efforts to address the current African wildlife crisis, including the illegal use of and trade in species such as elephant and rhino. Governance reforms that strengthen local conservation incentives through more securely devolved user rights and control over wildlife revenues must be a top priority, including in key elephant range states such as Tanzania, Zambia and Mozambique. Bringing about such reforms, which tend to be politically contentious and subject to a range of conflicting interests, requires strong local and national civil society groups that can mobilise politically salient constituencies.

One of the most important current trends — and a key to success — in African conservation is the emergence of a growing network of African CSOs that are able to support rural communities and work towards policy reforms within the political arena. Finding ways to support the growth and development of these organisations, including addressing current legislative trends towards restricting civil society across much of Africa, will be an important strategic step towards reversing current wildlife declines and laying the foundations for a more effective conservation sector in African countries today.

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## Knowledge Products

The International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) promotes sustainable development, linking local priorities to global challenges.

Maliasili Initiatives supports the growth, development and performance of leading civil society organisations and social enterprises working to advance sustainable natural resource management and conservation in Africa.

The Institute for Poverty, Land and Agrarian Studies (PLAAS) undertakes research, policy engagement, teaching and training about the dynamics of chronic poverty and structural inequality in Southern Africa.

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This research was funded by UK aid from the UK Government, however the views expressed do not necessarily reflect the views of the UK Government.



## Notes

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