

Rooting for Change

STRENGTHENING LOCAL - GLOBAL
PARTNERSHIPS IN AFRICAN CONSERVATION

2023


Maliasili
INVESTING IN PEOPLE FOR NATURE

“

“The local organization is pivotal.

It is there forever. It is not like the international organization that has a limited period of time.”

—Dominic Ngwesse, Nature Cameroon.

About **Maliasili**

Maliasili exists to help talented local conservation organizations overcome their challenges and constraints so that they can become more effective agents of change in their landscapes, communities, and nations. Through long-term support and partnership with a portfolio of over 30 leading community-based and national civil society organizations in eastern and southern Africa and Madagascar, Maliasili is working to increase the impact of a new generation of African conservation leaders.

Citation

Buzzard, B., J. Chick, and E. Sulle. Rooting for Change: Strengthening Local-Global Partnerships in African Conservation. Maliasili, August 2023. maliasili.org/

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all of the individuals who took time to provide their experiences and perspectives that inform this report.

Executive Summary

Partnerships that harness the resources and abilities of different types of organizations are essential to solving all manner of social and environmental problems. In African conservation, there is growing recognition of the critical role played by local civil society organizations (CSOs), including community-based and grassroots organizations. These groups are able to facilitate the community-level processes and outcomes necessary to addressing climate change and conservation challenges at a time of increasing urgency and increasing investment in environmental issues.

The work of local organizations is often elevated through partnerships with international non-governmental organizations, which are able to provide funding, networks, expertise, and technical resources that local organizations in Africa often struggle to access. At the same time, partnerships between international organizations and those working at the local or community level often face numerous challenges related to power relations, transparency and accountability, and alignment of interests. There is increasing debate and discussion across the international development and global environmental fields relating to these relationships between international organizations and local, grassroots, or Indigenous groups. Ultimately, the ways that partnerships are approached, structured, and maintained are tied up with issues of equity, agency, and rights, determining whether partnerships are enabling and supportive or exploitative and burdensome.

88%

Of local African organizations agree that partnerships with INGOs are very important for their work.

82%

Agree that partnerships with INGOs provide critical resources.

71%

Indicate that partnerships with INGOs are challenging and that there are significant barriers to address.

The purpose of this report is to document the experiences of African conservation and natural resource CSOs with these partnerships, and to harness their views and recommendations for maximizing the positive potential of such partnerships. Based on an online survey, complemented by key informant interviews, this report brings out the voices and perspectives of local organizational leaders on creating effective partnerships: what they consist of, current barriers they experience, and how they can be strengthened. **These perspectives emphasize the importance of shifting the approach to partnerships from one that's transactional and project-focused to one that develops deeper, more effective, and meaningful relationships that can catalyze true collective action and systemic change.**



We have clear roles for a reason

Principles of Effective Partnerships

According to local organizations, a meaningful partnership should be framed around the following key practices and principles:

- Trust and respect
- Good communication
- Clear roles
- Aligned values, strategies, and goals
- Complementary expertise
- Long-term relationships
- Shared credit
- Simple, supportive, and adaptive management practices

Barriers to Effective Partnerships

Local organizations identify a number of barriers to achieving these kinds of partnerships with international organizations, including the following:

- Unclear intentions
- External agendas that don't align with their own
- Lack of appreciation for local context, knowledge, and experience
- Confusion on the role of the INGO broadly and within specific partnerships
- Differing expectations
- Weak communication
- Lack of meaningfully sharing credit
- Exhausting and complicated administrative procedures
- Short-term approaches
- Lack of trust and respect
- Power imbalances

Opportunities for Change

To overcome these barriers, local African organizations suggest these changes:

- Shift from transactional to more meaningful partnerships based on shared purpose, trust, respect, equity, strategic alignment, and collaborative co-creation.
- Clarify the position and role of INGOs, both broadly within the African conservation space and in specific partnerships with local organizations.
- Recognize local capacity and expertise, trusting the knowledge and capability of local organizations.
- Move toward more intentional ways of working that are less administrative and bureaucratic and are more adaptive, contextual, and supportive.
- Place more value in local networks and support local organizations by influencing the conditions, policies, and governance processes that impact them and their work.



Stronger Together

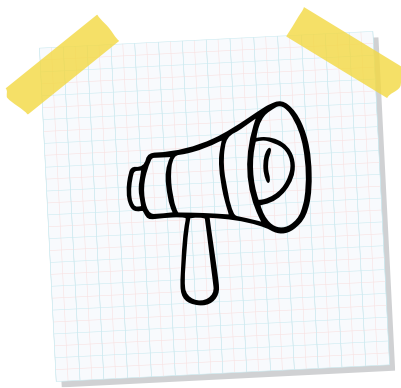
Contents

Executive Summary	3
Introduction	7
Background: Stronger local organizations for greater conservation impact	10
• Roles and relationships in African conservation partnerships	11
Methodology	17
Overview of the Partnership Landscape	16
• The Valued Roles of INGOs	16
Principles of Effective Partnerships	20
• African CSO Perspectives on Principles of Effective Partnerships	21
Barriers to Effective Partnerships	23
1. Selecting Partners	24
2. Structuring the Partnership	27
3. Maintaining and Nurturing the Relationship	33
Opportunities for Change	35
Becoming a Better Partner	40
• Recommendations for INGOs	40
• Recommendations for local African CSOs	41
Conclusion	43
Partnership Tool	44
Appendix: Interviewees	45
References	47

Introduction

Effective partnerships are critical to designing and achieving lasting solutions to increasingly complex conservation challenges. Addressing the multifaceted nature of issues like climate change and biodiversity loss depends not only on diverse knowledge, skills, and resources but also on aligned purpose across different scales ranging from the local to the global. This cannot be achieved by a single actor or organization. As global calls for more pluralism and diverse perspectives in finding conservation solutions continue to grow, the way that people and organizations collaborate and partner across networks and scales deeply influences who is involved, who is making decisions, and who has agency in the solutions we imagine and implement.

In Africa, significant barriers to effective conservation partnerships need to be addressed in order to promote more equitable and effective, and therefore more impactful, conservation practices. Community-led conservation—comprised of diverse practices intended to place the people who live with and steward biodiversity and ecosystems at the center of decision-making—is widely recognized as a key approach across the continent. The local African civil society organizations (CSOs) that represent and partner directly with local communities and Indigenous People are key to strengthening this arena of work, and these ground-level actors often collaborate with and are supported through partnerships by international non-governmental organizations (INGOs). These relationships, however, are tied up in the legacies of conservation’s colonial past, whereby global actors and influences were part of defining a conservation that alienated and dispossessed many local people from decision-making over lands and resources.¹ While community-led conservation is reclaiming this history in many ways, the relationships between the local and the global—specifically the way that INGOs and local CSOs partner and interact—has the potential to either support and grow a conservation movement that is diverse, inclusive, and equitable, or to entrench it in its own colonial legacies.



The partnerships between local organizations and INGOs are therefore a key area to reflect on and evolve, and the goal of this report is to explore how to strengthen these relationships. Specifically, we want to understand and gather the perspective of local African organizations, to document and bring to the fore their experiences, in order to pluralize the conversation about how relationships among actors are not only important for conservation outcomes but also deeply define who is leading and driving practices on the ground and leading the evolution of conservation in Africa. **Better and stronger partnerships can be important catalysts for change.**



Easy or better?

Defining “Conservation”

We use “**conservation**” to refer to the wide variety of efforts to sustain the diversity of Earth’s living systems. Our vision of conservation is just as much about people as it is about biodiversity, climate, and the environment. To us, conservation seeks to empower communities to secure the lands and resources that their lives depend on, providing them with greater ability to shape their own futures. We believe that these kinds of conservation practices can sustain and safeguard both human rights and natural systems in a synergistic and integrated way.

Defining “Local” Organizations

This report emphasizes the perspectives of African civil society organizations (CSOs) that are engaged in conservation, natural resources, and associated land and resource tenure and rights issues around the continent. We refer to these as **“local African conservation organizations,”** and often in the text as **“local organizations”** as a shorthand. We recognize that there is significant variation within this scope, in terms of the focus of these local organizations as well as the breadth and scale at which they operate. Some are rooted in a specific geography or landscape, allied directly with local communities and engaged in ground-level conservation and resource management work. Others work at national or regional scales, emphasizing policy and governance.

We also recognize that the concept of “local” can have different interpretations. Yet for purposes of this report, we use the term to refer to organizations that are rooted in their communities or countries’ civil society and that share a common experience when it comes to engaging and interacting with international actors and processes. Over time, this framing will gradually become more nuanced, recognizing the different spaces and scales that African conservation organizations operate in, some being inherently more local than others.

We also recognize that a **“local”** identity within the conservation space is an identity of immense power, and that this will continue to grow as community-led conservation becomes stronger and the role that local people play in the stewardship and custodianship of nature becomes more celebrated. In “local” is legitimacy, deep knowledge, and experience, and organizations at this scale will increasingly be looked on as key change agents and increasingly sought after as key partners in achieving broader conservation goals. We want to recognize, celebrate, and strengthen their role as partners and ensure that INGOs treat them with respect and appreciation.

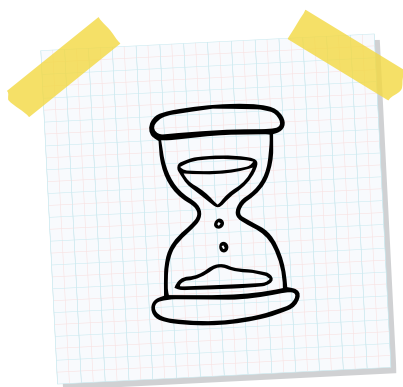
Defining “International organizations”

We use the term **“international organizations”** or **“international nongovernmental organizations”** (INGOs) to refer to the organizations that often work across multiple countries and collaborate and partner with local conservation organizations. Often, these large organizations are headquartered in the global north and have significant resources. This includes a wide variety of organizations with varied missions and goals across the African development and nature conservation field.

Background: Stronger Local Organizations for Greater Conservation Impact

Community-led approaches are a foundational component of global conservation efforts. Tackling urgent, large-scale crises such as climate change and biodiversity loss increasingly depends on local-level efforts around landscape conservation, restoration, and sustainable resource use, placing the people who live within and directly steward ecosystems at the heart of long-term solutions.

The role that local communities and Indigenous People play is increasingly being recognized² and has become integral to diverse global and national-level conservation agreements, such as the inclusion of their lands in the 30% global conservation target of the new Global Biodiversity Framework.³ Fundamentally, this recognition expands dialogue around the links between conservation, equity, and human rights.

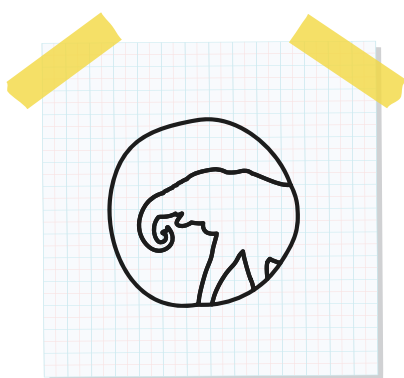


In Africa, where rapid development, population growth, and land degradation—compounded by climate change—are dramatically fragmenting habitats and altering ecosystems, local communities play an outsized role in sustaining the ecosystem services that societies depend on. Struggles over the past few decades for local communities to have their agency and role recognized has resulted in fundamental paradigm shifts in conservation thinking and practice.⁴ And while equity and rights issues continue to be a challenge in many regions,⁵ the local custodians of biodiversity and ecosystems are increasingly demanding decision-making authority and that their practices and worldviews be recognized and enabled by national and international governance processes.⁶

This surge in energy is dependent on the local civil society organizations that mobilize, advocate for, and often represent local people. Across the continent—and globally—they are central to driving the policy changes, governance conditions, and distribution of resources necessary to support and catalyze equitable conservation solutions.⁷ In many areas, they are leading the development and implementation of innovative local practices that are seen as examples for other countries and regions.⁸

These local organizations do not work in isolation, however. Linkages between actors across local, national, regional, and international scales are necessary to tackle challenges that transcend boundaries and geographies. And specific to the African conservation space, linkages directly influence local impacts. As Maliasili and Synchronicity Earth's Greening the Grassroots 2022 report highlights, local African conservation organizations generally source more than 80% of their financial resources from international actors, meaning that the scope of change they can effect is closely connected to the relationships they have with international partners. This raises questions about agency, autonomy, and the nature of allied action.¹⁰ If conservation thinking and practice truly embrace local people and intend to reconfigure power dynamics and foster equity, then it is similarly important to understand and intentionally engage with the relationships and dynamics that impact local African organizations.

Roles and Relationships in African Conservation Partnerships



The discussion regarding organizational partnerships and the agency and rights of local communities involved in conservation is not new. Indeed, a core challenge has been to shift power and decision-making away from global institutions, organizations, and networks and toward local authority and leadership. ***“It is only through alliances and partnerships,”*** Nelson Mandela said at the 2003 World Parks Congress, held in Durban, South Africa, that conservation “becomes relevant to the needs of society.” A year later, a widely read article critiquing the role of international conservation organizations emphasized that better partnerships between INGOs and Indigenous Peoples and their allies is ***“one of the most effective ways to save the increasingly threadbare ecosystems that still exist.”***¹¹

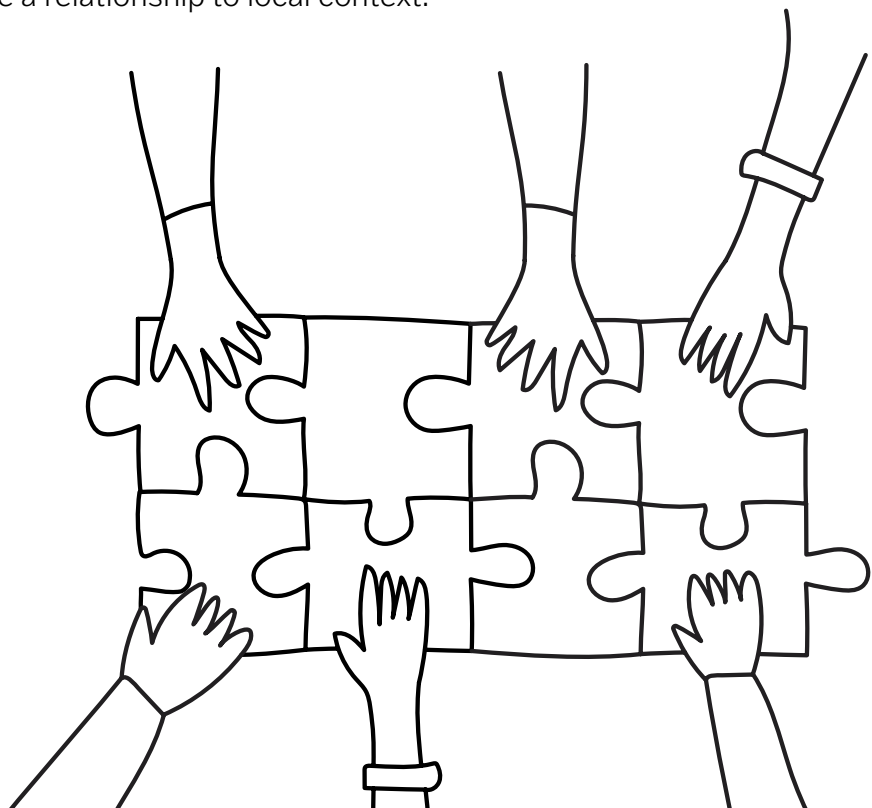
This challenge, which has been sustained over the past 20 years, is increasingly being addressed by local communities and Indigenous Peoples, along with the local organizations that work alongside them. The fundamental question is whether partnerships can be reconfigured to create new spaces for the collaborative imagination and change that can realize a locally-centered, rights-based approach to conservation.

Questioning Local to Global Partnerships

This question has come to the fore during a global reexamining of international organizations' position and role in relation to the agency of local actors.¹² This, too, goes beyond conservation and into a much larger and expansive discussion of decolonizing development. The trend, clearly, is toward INGOs becoming stronger enablers of locally led organizations and initiatives, and some large-scale actors are taking this on. USAID, for example, has committed at least a quarter of all its funding to go directly to local organizations and actors to help sustain their work long-term, and Oxfam's new strategy seeks to work ***“more in partnership with communities and organizations around the world who are driving change, supporting them with the resources they need.”***¹⁵

But to realize these developments and put them into practice will take some fundamental and holistic shifts in the way that relationships and partnerships are approached. What this looks like can be guided by deep and honest conversations between local and global partners, with a particular focus on elevating the voices of local people.

Numerous organizations and forums are creating platforms for dialogue and learning around this, expanding the conversation and deeply questioning models of partnership. Rights CoLab and West Africa Civil Society Institute, for example—as part of broader project called Reimagining INGO (RINGO)—collated the perspectives of civil society organizations across the global south on how local to global partnerships could be made more effective and meaningful. Key insights point toward the need for reflection on INGOs on their role, increased intention to collaboratively co-design processes, expanding trust in the capacity and ability of local organizations, and adapting the structures and processes that frame a relationship to local context.¹⁶



Insights from the RINGO Report on **fostering equitable north-south civil society partnerships**

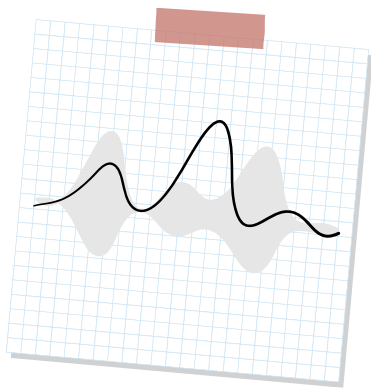
- ✓ “Global south civil society organizations believe in the need to re-look at the INGO and global south relationships.”
- ✓ “Global south civil society organizations do not want to be treated as sub-contractors. . . . They are expecting INGOs to engage with them as equal partners.”
- ✓ “To global south civil society organizations, the models and systems for project implementation by INGOs are based on western contexts and requirements.”
- ✓ “An effective, collaborative global civil society ecosystem should be one in which INGOs re-cast themselves as co-implementers and funders of projects. . . . Global south organizations expect INGOs to be facilitators.”

Reflection on Conservation Partnerships

Similar themes are very relevant to conservation partnerships,¹⁷ and this evolving global dialogue is encouraging introspection and reflection by international actors, and catalyzing new initiatives and conversations meant to strengthen partnerships between local and global organizations.

Major environmental INGOs are reflecting on their own position and relationships. The International Institute for Environment and Development, for example, seeks to enrich its own impact through reflection on its partnership models, a process that points toward themes that resonate across all relationships: fostering longer-term relationships based on shared values; being open to risk and expanding trust; articulating and defining what a partnership is and then nurturing it; increasing accountability around core principles of respect, transparency, and collaborative decision-making; and respecting local knowledge and practices.¹⁸

In a similar spirit, new collaborative initiatives such as the Global Environment Facility's Inclusive Conservation Initiative aim to position local people more equally alongside international actors.¹⁹ And platforms that strengthen the agency of Indigenous Peoples and local communities are mainstreaming dialogue around the need to redefine partnerships. At the 2022 United Nations Biodiversity Conference COP15, for example, the ICCA Consortium facilitated dialogue between Indigenous Peoples and local communities, local and Indigenous Peoples organizations, and INGOs, advising that ***“as more people and organizations seek to offer support to Indigenous Peoples and local communities, it is vitally important to reflect on the very nature of relationships and partnerships, including the core values that should guide them and the power imbalances that often pervade them.”***²⁰



This is particularly true in the African conservation space, where in parallel with this global dialogue and reflection, the theme of strengthening partnerships and local initiatives becoming widespread in strategies and organizational development goals across dominant INGOs. For example, the Wildlife Conservation Society ***“is committed to conserving Africa’s wildlife through powerful partnerships”***,²¹ a key objective of the African Wildlife Foundation is to ***“forge strategic partnerships and networks for conservation”***,²² Fauna and Flora International achieves impact through a ***“partnership-led model”***,²³ and a core value of The Nature Conservancy’s work in Africa is to partner with local communities, to honor ***“Indigenous and local people’s voices, choices, and actions.”***

These are noble initiatives and developments, encouraging a pathway toward a more equitable and impactful conservation based on partnerships and allied action. As this conversation evolves and momentum grows, however, it is critical to ensure that a partnership-centered approach in African conservation is informed directly by local African conservation leaders and organizations themselves. Their ideas and perspectives on what partnerships should look like, what makes them meaningful and effective, and where they need to grow and change are fundamental to building relationships that truly recognize, support, and enable their work.



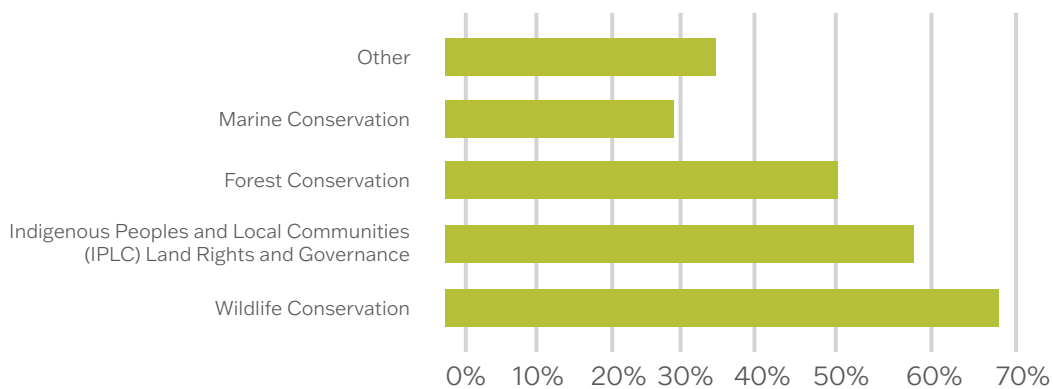
Methodology

This report collects and synthesizes the perspectives of individuals involved in and working at local African conservation organizations. It seeks to understand their partnership experiences with international organizations and to identify possible ways these can be strengthened and made more meaningful and effective. We conducted an online survey and carried out interviews, selecting and targeting local organizational leaders across the African conservation landscape. Our geographic focus included Central, East, Southern, and West Africa, and the research was carried out in English and French, depending on the region.

Our analysis is based on **49 responses** to the online survey, along with **23 key informant interviews**, with participation from **18 countries**. Almost half the participating organizations have been in existence for **20 years or more**, working across a range of focal areas and in some cases on multiple issues.



Fig 1: Organizational focal areas

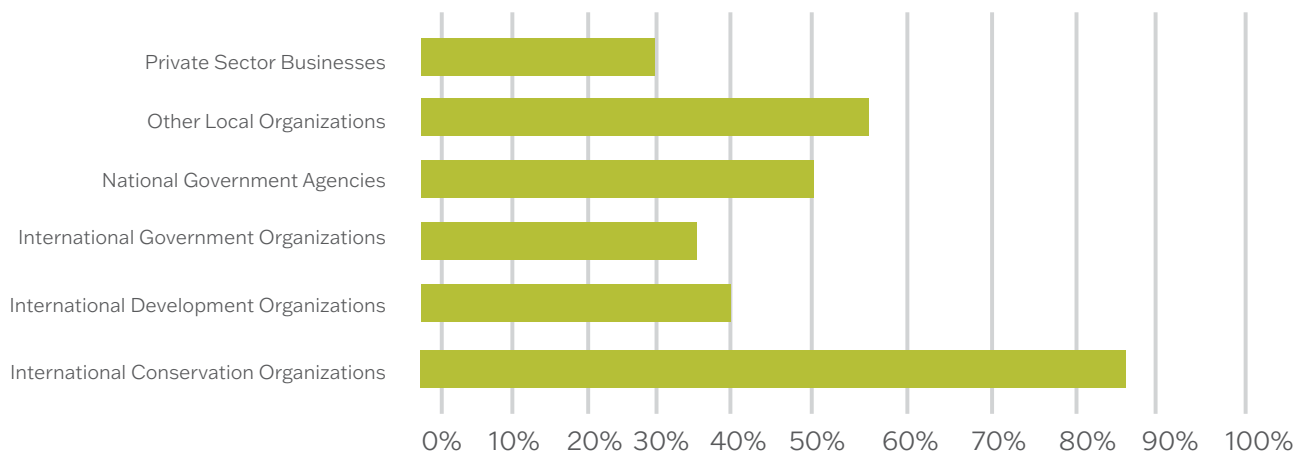


We then identified and analyzed the key themes that emerged from the survey and interviews regarding the existing barriers to successful partnerships and the opportunities to strengthen these relationships. The intention is to bring to the fore the perspectives of African conservationists and practitioners involved in local organizations that are driving community conservation across the continent. We focus on their perspectives and voices because we recognize that given existing power asymmetries, it can sometimes be harder for them to be heard in global discussions, and their views are critical to any evolution of partnership discussion. As part of this, we use quotes from the key informant interviews and the survey to contextualize particular themes and highlight certain ideas throughout the analysis. In some cases, these are presented anonymously at the request of the participants.

Overview of the Partnership Landscape

The survey and interviews provide an overview of what the partnership landscape looks like in the experience of local civil society organizations working on African conservation. Particularly, who local organizations tend to partner with, how important these partnerships are, and the role that these partnerships play in supporting their work. In sum, partnerships with INGOs are critical, and INGOs fill a number of important and varied roles.

Fig 2: Type of partners CSOs engage with



The Valued Roles of INGOs

Key perspectives and quotes on the importance of partnerships

88% agree that partnerships with INGOs are very important for local organizations.

82% agree that partnerships with INGOs provide critical resources.

“

These partnerships are like a blind man walking and who needs a stick to walk. A blind man cannot walk without a stick. A stick is like a direction. That is how these partnerships are to us.

—Research participant

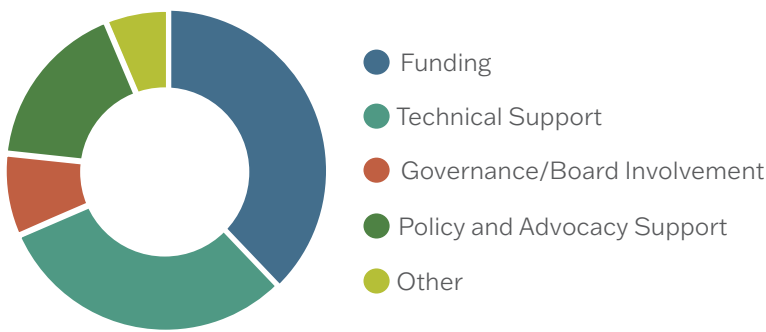
We believe that you cannot achieve all in life just by the coefficient of your singular effort. That is why we partner with like-minded organizations to achieve our objectives.

—Ponda Sah, Cameroon

Every organization should strive for more partnerships, because it elevates the organization, elevates the individuals within the organization, and it also can build the organization’s capacities to be able to broaden their scope and handle more sectors within their mission and their vision.

—Ewi Lamma, Cameroon

Fig 3: Roles INGOs play



Local organizations identify a number of roles that INGOs play across their partnership experiences, emphasizing the importance of those roles that support and further enable their work, as opposed to those that place INGOs in a more decision-making or implementing position.

Here are the **Key Supportive Roles** for INGOs:

1. Funding and resourcing



INGOs fill an important space when it comes to financial and resourcing support. Earlier research has identified that local conservation organizations receive the majority of their financial funding from international sources (both philanthropy and government). In one study, the majority of respondents and interview participants similarly indicated funding support as the most important role INGOs play.²⁵ In some cases, an INGO may be the source of funds, and in others it may act as an intermediary that sources and channels funds from donors. The impact of these resources is evident in the experience of many local organizations. As Ponda Sah, from the Rural Development and Environmental Restoration Guard in Cameroon, explains: ***“We wouldn’t be where we are today without the financial support of some INGOs. We have many activities in our plan of operations. As an organization, we have the human capacity for the execution of our activities, but without finances we are unable to fully move into action.”***

2. Technical support

A second important role is technical, whereby INGOs may have access to skills or technical knowledge that local organizations need to develop or that can support their work. This includes things like research, establishing impact-monitoring systems, strategic planning, organizational development, and communication support. These technical roles are emphasized as being particularly important for younger organizations and for local organizations that need to develop new skills to move into new activities. ***“This is a broad role that varies across different partnerships. As Aristide Kamla, of the African Marine Mammal Conservation Organization in Cameroon, explains, “What I mean by ‘technical’ is like providing advice, supporting our capacity building, helping connect us with people who can be of value to our conservation goals.”***

3. Advocacy and policy support



A third key role is around advocacy and policy support, whereby some INGOs may be able to support local organizations in influencing the policy and governance arenas that the local organizations operate within and that can deeply affect the outcomes of their work. Through the relationships, networks, and access that INGOs have—supported by their more considerable resources—they can influence policy and governance processes at a scale that is more difficult for local organizations to reach (such as the UN Biodiversity Conference and World Conservation Congress), or lend weight to local organizations around national-level advocacy activities. As Simplicie Kozo, of Réseau des Populations Autochtones et Locales pour la gestion durable des écosystèmes forestiers de Centrafrique (REPALCA) in the Central African Republic, explains: ***“A role of the partnership is also to strengthen and promote advocacy. For example, we are currently initiating the process of putting in place a national law on the promotion and protection of the rights of indigenous peoples, so if there is a reputable INGO supporting us, I think it will have more credibility in the process. It will strengthen the advocacy efforts geared towards improving the living conditions of indigenous people.”***

4. Other roles

In addition to the three key roles above, other INGO roles identified by local organizations include knowledge exchange, support in networking and expanding their reach, assistance with communications and visibility, and support for the professional development and exposure of individual staff members.

Experiences that illustrate the **Important roles INGOs play** in African conservation partnerships



Start-up funding and technical support:

“IUCN—PPI was the first organization who trusted us and gave us funding and put resources to help the organization structure itself. That was very important because we were actually coming from nowhere. We had the idea but didn’t have the know-how. We had a strong desire to start something to protect the marine wildlife and the African manatee but didn’t know where to start from, how to get the money, and even when we got the money, how to sustain the organization. So, this inception... they provided by giving seed funding and being there, guiding us, advising us, putting us in touch with organizations that can help us.”

—Aristide Kamla, Cameroon

Increasing reach and impact:

“We had a partnership with an INGO called Forest Peoples Programme (FPP). It was thanks to this partnership that many stakeholders got to know about our network. Through this partnership, we mobilized indigenous people, we supported them to put in place structures for their associations. Through this support we also approached administrative authorities for the official recognition of these associations.”

—Simplice Kozo, Central African Republic

Long-term investing and growing locally led advocacy networks:

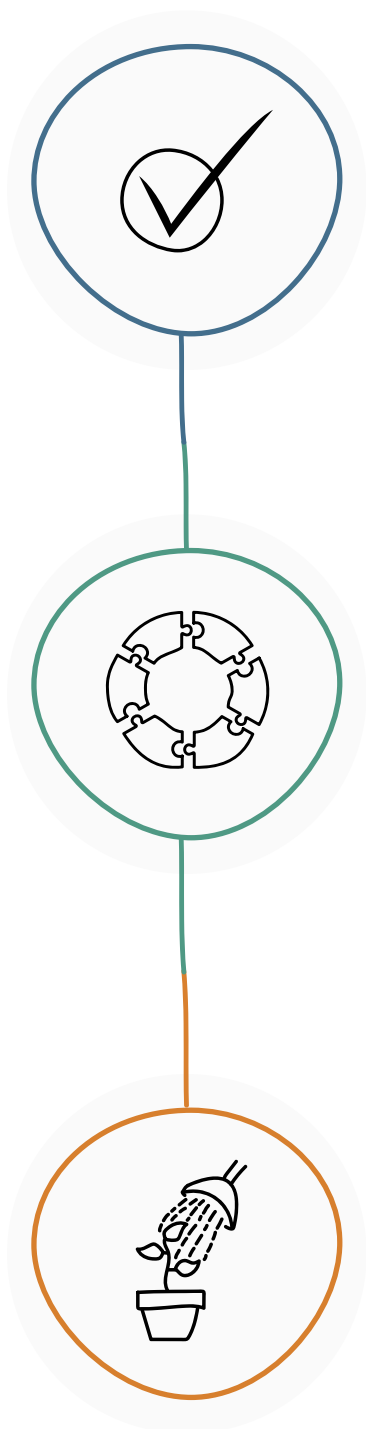
“Our work on land rights is one of those areas we have achieved a lot of success. Our traditional partner in that area has been Rights and Resources Initiative (RRI). They now have a partner which is Tenure Facility. These two have been strategic in supporting our work in communities to recognize their customary rights. In 2018... the considerable support that we received first from RRI and the Tenure Facility allowed us to continue to engage the government, and our support and expertise was highly needed because of our extensive work in the land arena. This led to us passing a law that recognized communities with or without their customary rights. That law was passed in November 2018. That was a milestone in efforts of championing the rights of local communities.”

“...The sustained support and long-term relationship with RRI is based on trust and alignment in priority areas of both organizations. The relationship grew through the demonstration of a high level of leadership by the partners, and as a result of fulfilling the commitments in terms of project and activity implementation. The relationship has been able to grow over the years because the partners are willing to exchange ideas, provide recommendations for stronger collaboration and cooperation. The interest by RRI to support local civil society-led advocacy initiatives on land and natural resource reforms at the national level is another important factor.”

—Jonathan Yiah, Liberia

Principles of Effective Partnerships

To guide the subsequent discussion on barriers to partnerships and ways to strengthen them, it is useful to first frame the underlying principles that shape effective partnerships. Previous work by Well Grounded and Maliasili points three overarching principles with 10 basic elements:²⁶



Select the Right Partners

- **Find alignment:** Take on partnerships in which there is alignment in purpose and with organizations that share a core vision, mission, goals, and values.
- **Be strategic:** Be selective and focus on a few meaningful partnerships that help achieve long-term goals.
- **Look for complementarity:** Identify strengths and weaknesses, and seek out partners that complement and add to existing skills and knowledge.

Structure the Partnership

- **Specify roles, rules, and expectations:** Be clear about who is going to do what, ways of working, and expectations.
- **Communicate openly and frequently:** Open and honest communication is critical to build collaboration and trust and to address conflict. Develop systems for ongoing communication.
- **Share credit:** Give due credit, ensure visibility, and agree on how to communicate about shared efforts.
- **Minimize costs:** Minimize transaction costs by simplifying administration and reporting processes and requirements.

Maintain and Nurture the Relationship

- **Invest in long-term relationships:** Good partnerships take time, and impact can take years to fully realize. Learn from each other and grow collaboratively.
- **Build trust:** Actively create space for the partnership to grow and personal relationships to develop.
- **Be adaptive:** Be innovative and willing to change, actively reflecting on what can be done to strengthen the partnership.

African CSO Perspectives on Principles of Effective Partnerships

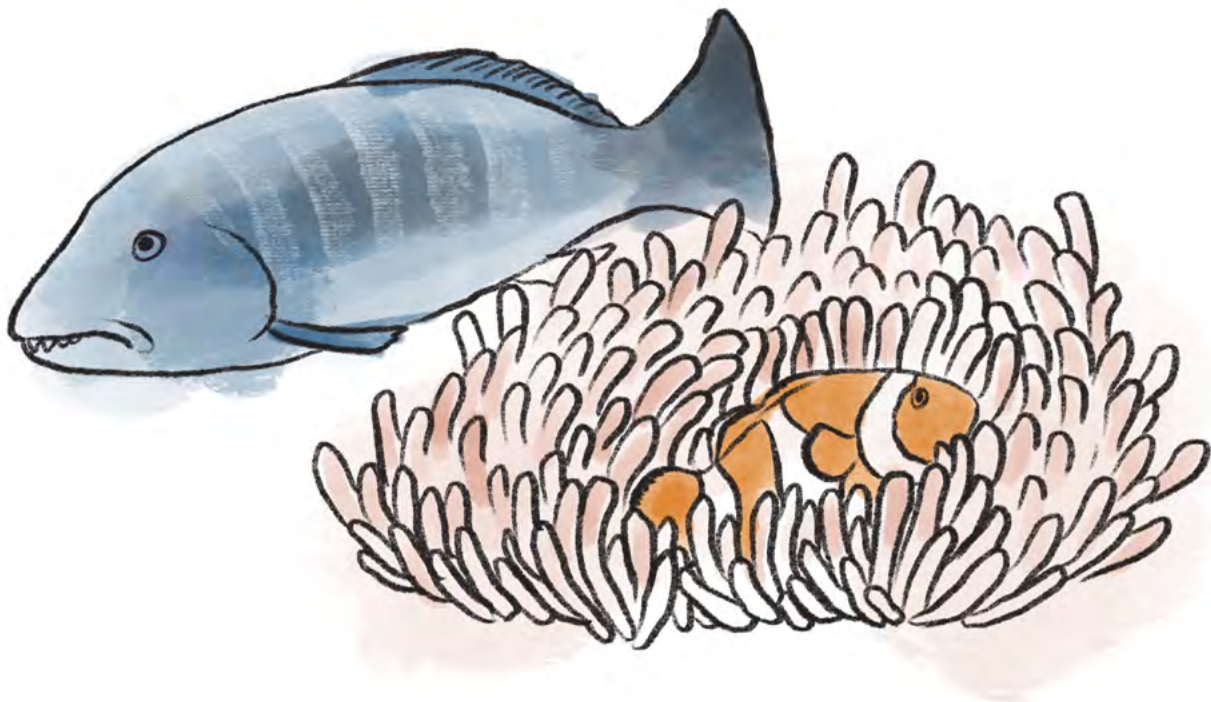
“

Consider the needs of my organization and try to build on what we have to achieve better results.

Create strategies to build trust and allow partners to identify their challenges and support them towards that course.

Respect, collaboration, recognition, support.

—Research participants

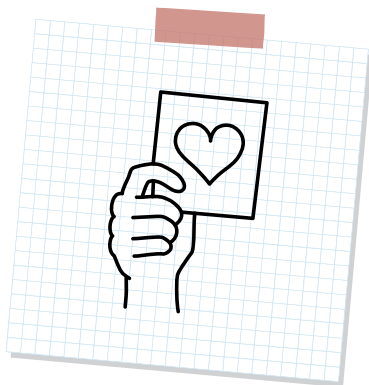
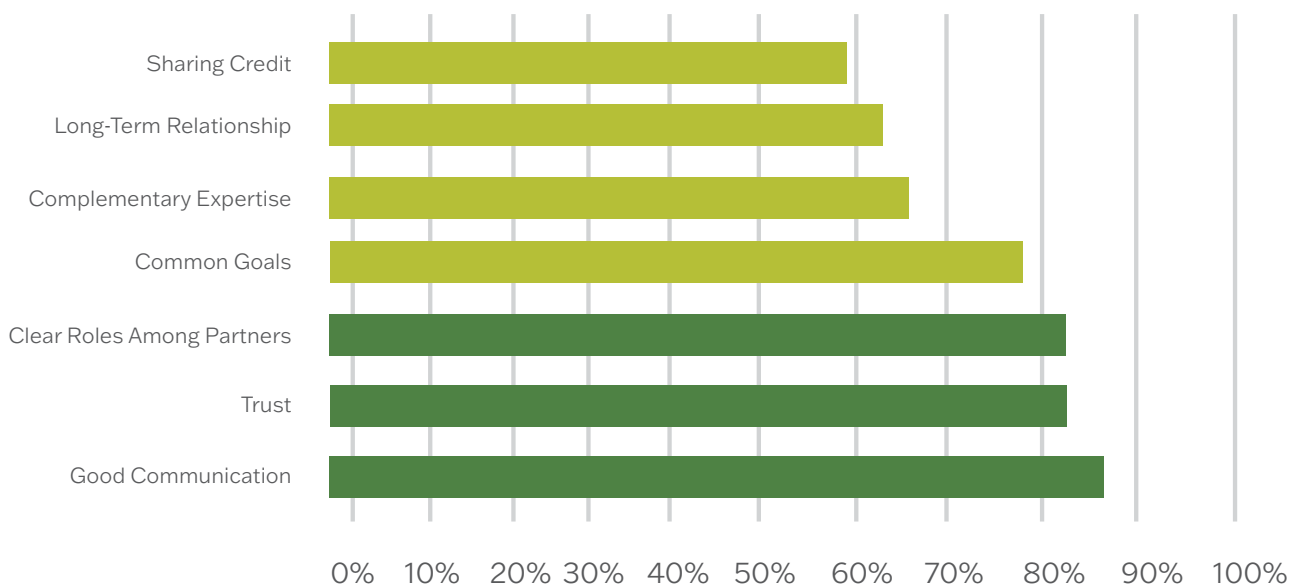


- ✓ **Complementary**
- ✓ **Supportive**
- ✓ **Reliable**
- ✓ **Built on trust**
- ✓ **Common goal - survive!**

Survey Responses on what is Important In Effective Partnerships

When participants in this study were asked to identify what an effective partnership would include, the responses point toward many of the principles of effective partnerships outlined below:

Fig 4: Survey responses on what is important in effective partnerships



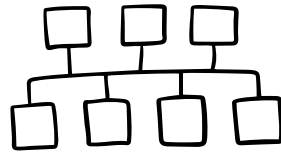
Communication and trust are key, and these are heavily influenced by the intention behind the partnership. Being clear about intentions from the outset is an important step. Building on that, alignment in purpose, values, and goals needs to be carefully thought through and articulated. Respondents indicated that a successful partnership is one in which their needs are listened to and there is intention to establish a relationship that is long-term and complementary and has clear roles. These conditions of success are dependent on a partnership approach framed around listening and around co-creating a space to understand the goals and needs of local organizations as a response to current context and challenges.

Barriers to Effective Partnerships



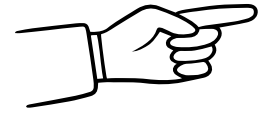
Selecting Partners

- Unclear and confusing intentions
- Bringing an agenda into local vision and strategy
- Lack of appreciation for context, rooted knowledge, and experience



Structuring the Partnership

- Lack of clarity on role of the INGO
- Differences in expectations
- Weak communication
- Failure to share credit
- Rigid administration and procedure



Maintaining and Nurturing Relationships

- Short-term versus long-term thinking and relationship approach
- Lack of trust and respect
- Power and inequity

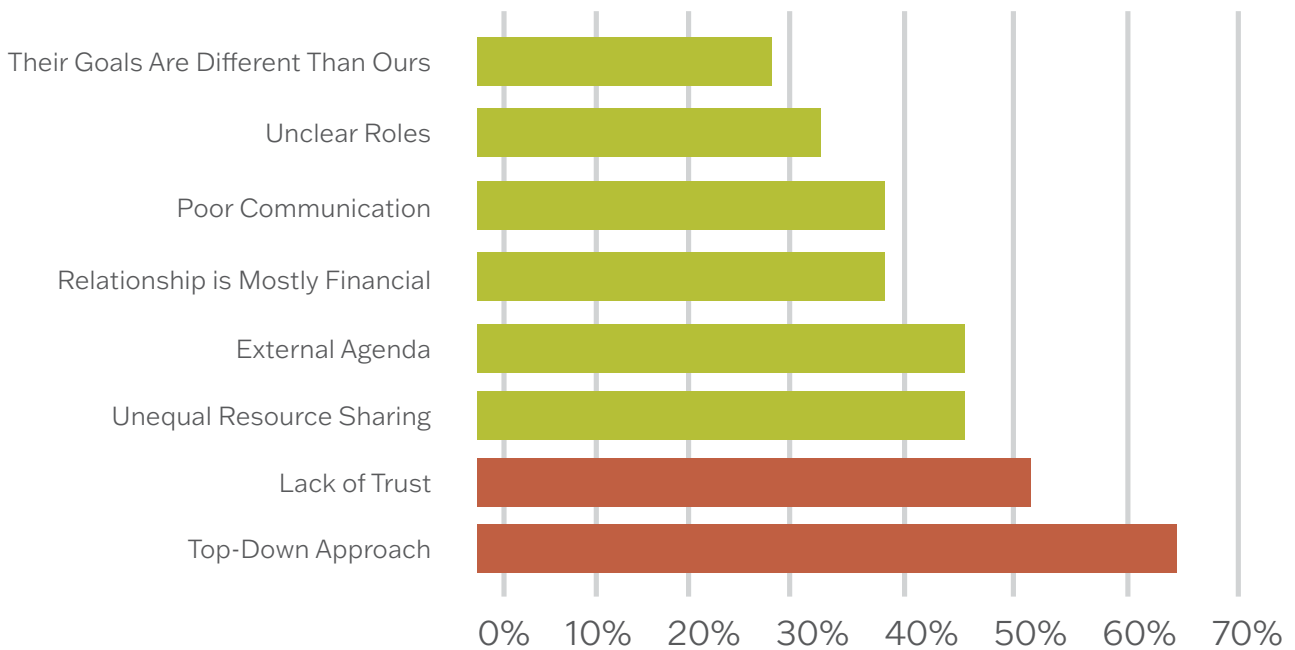


Most of the grants where we work with international partners are short-lived. They come with big expectations and they want to see results in such short time. So, the support is short-term and expectations are long-term. There is uncertainty. In the field, things change, but some INGOs' grant budgets are not flexible to emerging circumstances in the field. There is a mismatch between the actual needs of local organizations and what the grants offer.

—Research participant

While the partnerships with INGOs are important to elevating and expanding the impact of local organizations, **71% of survey respondents and the majority of interviewees indicated that these partnerships are also challenging to manage** and that numerous barriers need to be reflected on and addressed.

Fig 5: Key challenges to effective partnerships experienced by local organizations



In this following section, we use the 3 principles of effective partnerships described above to highlight the key barriers to effective and meaningful partnerships as experienced by local organizations.

Selecting Partners

Of the barriers that local organizations encounter in developing and sustaining meaningful partnerships with INGOs, three key foundational issues emerge related to selecting and establishing a relationship. The basic purpose of a partnership, as well as the level of alignment and common ground, is important, yet that is often obscured by transactional approaches to partnerships formed around a project or funding cycle, or partnerships that are forced in order to access grants or resources.



I think the process and procedure for engaging or beginning conversations around partnerships is a bit difficult. INGOs are seen as organizations 'up there' and local organizations 'down there,' and so it is two different worlds. Crossing that world is sometimes challenging for many organizations.

—Research participant

1. Unclear and confusing intentions

The potential to build long-term relationships that ultimately are based on trust and equity is deeply influenced by the underlying intention behind a partnership. This is at the heart of INGO engagement with local organizations, raising questions about whether INGOs often approach local organizations as implementers of the INGOs' own goals, whether they are trying to act as intermediaries to access resources or retain influence for themselves, or whether they actually want to support local visions and initiatives. This uncertainty can undermine relationships; Moreangels Mbizah, from Wildlife Conservation Action in Zimbabwe, describes the most challenging partnerships as **“those where you are not valued or supported and the partner only engages with you when they need you and when it suits their own agenda.”**

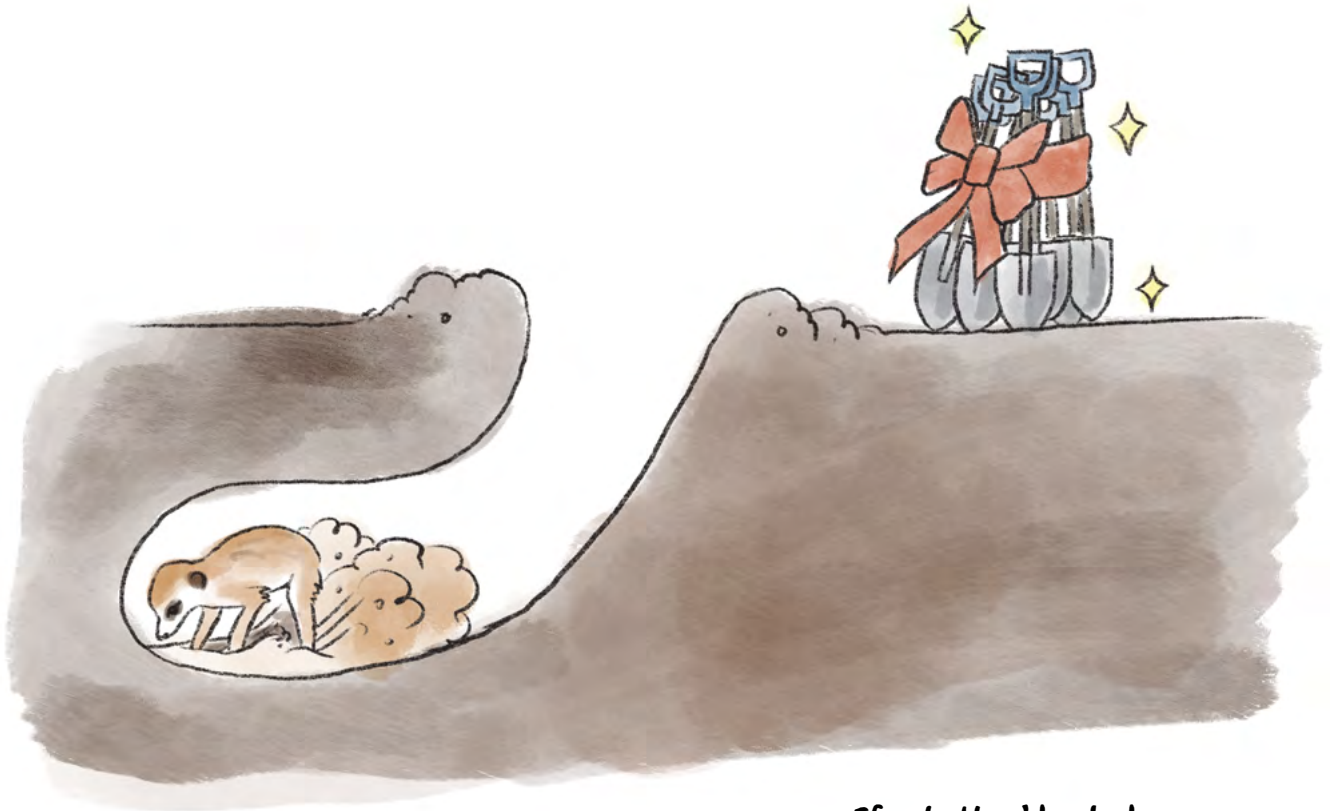


The lack of clarity around this and the inability to communicate it further reinforce mistrust over the long term. Creating a foundation for an effective partnership comes from, as John Kamanga, from the Southern Rift Association of Landowners (SORALO) in Kenya, explains, **“a willingness to co-design and build from our ideas. Come to SORALO and support our ideas. Ask and learn what we do. We want a supporting relationship rather than a dictatorial partner. Do not dictate to us.”**

2. Bringing an agenda into local vision and strategy

Many local organizations feel that they are constantly navigating the need for support from INGOs with the agenda and goals that INGOs bring. This “strings attached” approach can often pull local organizations away from their own strategies, borne out of the needs and context of place, and in some cases even make local organizations less effective as they are pushed toward goals and associated activities that do not align with their strategies and skill sets. As one research participant explains: **“The greatest difficulty we face in partnerships is when, as an organization, you are not consulted on a project or activity to be implemented. You are given a project which you must implement, and it becomes difficult to let the partner know that this is not a priority for the communities you work with. A good partnership is only possible when the organization with financial resources takes into account the opinion and actual needs of the organization or community it seeks to support.”**

This imposition of one partner's agenda makes it difficult to find true, meaningful alignment and can entrap the partnership into a transactional relationship, whereby the local organizations feel that they are being used to implement someone else's ideas. One participant adds that this **“prepackaged position does not work. We know INGOs from the west come here with their plans and how to implement them. But this does not work here, because we know how we do things. They also come with their brands, but for us what matters is community buy-in. For them, it is carrying their banners—imagine sitting with such banners under the tree.”**



If only they'd asked...

3. Lack of appreciation for context, rooted knowledge, and experience

Finding alignment in vision, values, and goals is deeply hindered by a lack of appreciation and respect for local organizations' knowledge and experience. Local knowledge and experience are essential assets in creating meaningful, contextual, and effective conservation solutions. And when this is not appreciated, learned from, and used as a basis in designing the goals and activities that shape the partnership, it immediately establishes a foundation of disrespect. Additionally, this can lead to a feeling of competition, whereby local organizations might feel that their knowledge and experience is being extracted, especially when an INGO attempts to use that knowledge to do similar work to what a local organization is already doing. This is captured well by one research participant who described situations in which ***“some INGOs request that you implement what they have done in other countries—sometimes the activities are not appropriate because of cultural issues and sensitivity.”***

Furthermore, a lack of appreciation for local knowledge and context is particularly relevant to local organizations that collaborate with Indigenous Peoples, where activities might be framed around their knowledge, experience, and worldviews. This can lead to a clash of approaches and ways of working. As Vital Bambanze, of Unissons-nous pour la Promotion des Batwa (UNIPROBA) in Burundi, outlines: ***“Most INGOs base their work on consultants sent from non-IP organizations and sometimes give a negative image of IP organizations. For them, capacity is to come from school with degrees and not the knowledge of IPs, specifically the traditional knowledge of IPs.”***

Funding opportunities and **selecting partners**

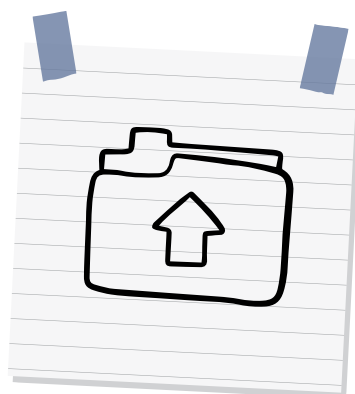
The selection of strategic and aligned partners is often obscured by the never-ending search for funding. Many funding opportunities, particularly those from large international development projects supported by major donors (e.g., USAID, European Union, etc.), often act as catalysts for INGOs or firms seeking to secure local **“partners”** that they can include in the bid or proposal for a grant or contract. Local organizations are not usually eligible to access this kind of support on their own, and conservation INGOs often take on an intermediary role.

These are not really partnerships; they are **“shotgun marriages”** designed only for securing money for a project. These tend to be more transactional, framed around and tied up in the procedures associated with the funding requirements. Partnerships based on funding opportunities tend to be short-lived and not built in alignment with the strategic goals of local organizations.

“

INGOs already have a model for partnerships and are not open to creative maneuvers of those forms of partnerships. . . The model is you write proposals, and they vet those proposals, approve and release funding. But this is not the only model of partnering. Many of these international partners are set in their ways, and it is not easy to get them to be flexible about how to partner with local organizations.

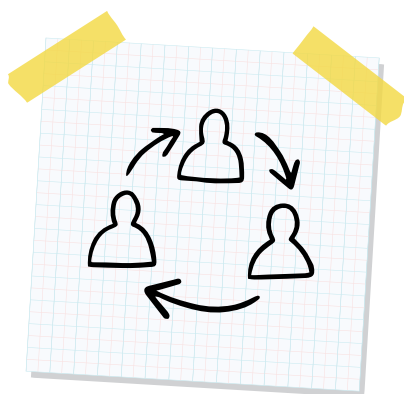
—Research participant



Structuring the Partnership

Building from the initial relationship foundation, the next barriers relate to the subsequent phase of a partnership that revolves around action. How work is designed and done, and how collaboration is articulated and executed, can significantly impact the effectiveness of a partnership, its ability to grow meaningfully over the long term, and the extent of its collective impact on the ground. These challenges include the following:

1. Lack of clarity on role of the INGO



Local organizations can and do struggle with their strategy and role at times, and working through this is an inherent part of organizational growth, discovery, and change. They are not confused, however, regarding the space that they fill; they are rooted in context and place, informed by issues on the ground. **The position and role of INGOs, however, causes significant confusion, particularly when they are engaged across multiple issues, geographies, and scales.**

Lack of clarity on the role of the INGO materializes in two ways:

- In the African conservation space more broadly; and
- Their role within a local partnership.

Despite a commitment to local partnerships by many INGOs as a way to effect change in African conservation, it can be unclear whether an INGO seeks to be a supporter, a funder, or an implementer. From the perspective of local organizations, these often seem to be happening simultaneously, so clarity is needed around INGO roles broadly and how their partnerships fit into their operational and long-term strategies in Africa. A lack of clarity creates confusion at the local partnership level, and often a feeling of competition. As expressed by one research participant: ***“We felt we were being used for them to go ahead. And they started doing what we have been doing in the area for many years. This has led to conflict and a lack of collaboration. We still coexist in the same area, but there is tension, and this has affected the “common goal” we at least thought we had. Overall, it seems we are competing.”***

Competition and duplication are common themes that result from unclear roles. Sharing their experience, one research participant explains: ***“We had an INGO come in and essentially propose to duplicate our work in the same area—better resourced and with the attitude that they would be doing it better. Not surprisingly this resulted in a lack of trust and controversy between partners.”*** Another local organizational leader had a similar experience in the landscape where they work and explains that the INGO supporting them was also ***“implementing activities in parallel with ours.”*** This confusion around roles can be the source for some of the most challenging relationships, deeply disrupting work and effectiveness at the local level.

Lack of clarity within INGOs on their role adds further confusion at the local level



Differences within INGOs themselves, particularly between international and country-level branches on what their role is and how it informs their approach to partnerships, can further compound confusion at the local level and disrupt partnerships. One local organization, for example, developed a supportive relationship and outlined collaborative work with the international branch of an INGO but then encountered a different experience when it came time for implementation, because the support and funds were channelled through the local INGO office, which did not have the same vision about its own role and the partnership.

This derailed work locally and made it difficult to sustain the partnership long-term. As one research participant involved in the local organization explains: “The INGO local offices usually create their own priorities. They use resources for other stuff and keep you waiting. They create competition arrangements. The local offices also want to implement the project activities, and they put us in an awkward position. They want to work in the same landscape. The problem with this is they do not care, and they do their little thing and mess up. Being both donor and implementer is very confusing.”

2. Differences in expectations

Differing expectations can hinder partnerships in several ways. First, conservation solutions take long-term effort and commitment, yet differing expectations about the pace and scale of change can hinder sustained work, especially when the partnership is defined by short-term agreements and projects. This orients the relationship toward activities instead of long-term change, and this approach fails to translate into the long-term support that local organizations need. As Andrew Giahquee, from Skills and Agricultural Development Services in Liberia, describes: ***“You don’t empower people within the period of six months or one year. If you say this is conservation agriculture and you are going to change the mentality of people who live in the forest sector, you cannot just have a program for six months and you call that an empowerment program. . . . But when you bring this to their notice, they tell you that this is the timeline of the project, and we cannot extend it. And when you get back to the drawing table, they expect you to tell them that these communities are now experts in conservation agriculture just within the period of six months or one year. It is not possible.”***

A second issue is the recognition by INGOs that local organizations are caught in between diverse expectations and ways of working—that they are accountable to the people they work with on the ground, to cultural and political realities, and to the INGO partner. They all come from different starting points and hold differing expectations, and when these are not discussed and aligned, it can cause significant friction within a partnership. This is particularly relevant when it impacts the flow of resources and support; and when there are delays among partners, it can further erode the partnership. As Ewi Lamma, of Forest Resources and People in Cameroon, describes, ***“Partnership challenges can extend to the communities we work in. This becomes not only challenging for us but also for our partners because we need to work at the pace of the community and not at our pace.”***

3. Weak communication

Communication emerges as a barrier to the ongoing process of relationship building and partnership in a number of ways. First, approaches to communication among partners are rarely collaboratively discussed and outlined, establishing processes for how and when communication might happen, how it relates to differences in norms, context, and expectations, and why it is important. Second, when communication does happen, it is often wrapped up in the formalized processes around agreements, project delivery, and reporting. This obscures the deeper communication that strengthens relationships. Finally, there is a lack of transparency around communication with third parties, such as when an INGO might communicate back to a donor. It is not clear to local organizations what is being communicated, or to whom, and how this may or may not reflect their own experiences.

Weak communication and the breakdown of partnerships

Partnerships can easily erode when there is not intentional and reciprocal communication between partners. In one example, the breakdown of communication between a local organization and an INGO not only created mistrust and a feeling of animosity, but also affected relationships and progress with communities on the ground. Here is one research participants' experience:

"We were not sure what the INGO was trying to achieve. There was this feeling that they wanted us to report to them, and they were not reporting to us. This made us very much divided. So, it all started by one partner thinking they were on the lead and others reporting to them.

...We tried to resolve this by having face-to-face meetings and then follow-up with emails, but we never had feedback. The problem is that they stopped communicating with us. It seems to be a paternal relationship. We wanted us to be equal partners, but they wanted us to be reporting to them. We were expected to share what we were doing, but they never shared with us. Because it was unequal, the relationship got rusty. It is no longer a crack but a big hole. They could have maintained our relationship if they communicated.

...It affected things on the ground because for a while the community landed between us and the INGO, since we were implementing the project together. At one point, we were giving funding and the INGO was also giving funding to the communities."



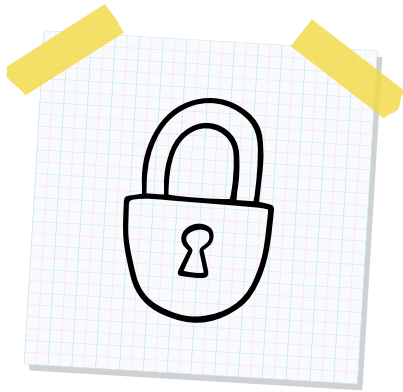
4. Failure to share credit

A disheartening issue for local organizations relates to how work, success, and achievements are claimed and communicated. A major barrier to meaningful partnership is, as one participant explains, ***“not acknowledging us for the results and impact of the work.”***

Recognizing hard work and giving credit is critical to sustaining and growing a partnership, particularly when local organizations feel that through their work, they are helping INGOs achieve their own objectives and that without them the outcomes would not be possible. Many local organizations feel that there is a mismatch between effort and recognition. As one research participant explains, ***“The big INGOs have extensive programs and support networks; if they sub-grant you, they claim ownership of what you do with their money.”***

Another describes an experience in which ***“the INGO gave us a small percentage of our annual operating costs and then took credit for our project and used our project to raise hundreds of thousands of dollars that went to them and not us.”***

Not clearly sharing credit—identifying who played what roles, who was a supporter and who delivered—is a significant barrier experienced by many local organizations. It creates a feeling of competition and makes it difficult to want to sustain a partnership or to collaborate in the future.



5. Rigid administration and procedure

Quite simply, local organizations are exhausted by the amount of administration and procedural hurdles involved in partnerships, particularly when those partnerships are embedded within the procedures of funding and project cycles. Things like project reporting, financial and procurement compliance, log frames, monitoring protocols, and fieldwork documentation can all vary among different partners, can be contradictory among partners, and often are required in parallel with an organization's own internal systems and processes. This can pull local organizations away from their own internal systems, instead of allowing them to build on and strengthen those systems. Furthermore, local organizations often experience these as rigid structures that accompany partnerships, instead of adapting procedure and administration to a unique organization, context, or partnership. As outlined by Tiana Andriamanana, from Fanamby in Madagascar, this makes partnerships ***“challenging in the sense of procedures. We learned from the fact that when procedures are too heavy, then results are less because efforts are directed toward procedure. Most of the entities have nightmare procedures.”***

The most challenging partnerships, according to one research participant, are those full of ***“bureaucracy that is irrelevant to local organizations and local communities. It makes work more complex and harder to achieve impact by creating infrastructure and regulations to abide to.”***

Administration and procedure can also reinforce a feeling of inequity and mistrust among partners, in which they become focused on the transactional aspects of the relationship, making it more of a bargaining negotiation to avoid a feeling of exploitation as opposed to collaboration. Ultimately, the focus on administration and procedure affects conservation outcomes. In the words of one survey respondent, it leads to ***“meaningless metrics of success that value burn rate more than meaningful impact on the ground.”***

Maintaining and Nurturing the Relationship



The local organization is pivotal. It is there forever. It is not like the international organization that has a limited period of time.

—Dominic Ngwesse, Nature Cameroon

The ongoing engagement and interaction between local organizations and INGOs can either strengthen or erode partnerships over time. Most often, the partnership is transactional and wrapped up in procedure and administration, instead of in the deeper continuous process of relationship building around trust and equity. Three main barriers emerge:

1. Short-term versus long-term thinking and relationship approach

A significant barrier to meaningful partnerships is when they are framed or developed around a particular project, grant, or activity. The partnership is bound up in the delivery, formality, and time frame of the project or activity, without a deeper foundation of trying to shape a long-term relationship. This highlights existential differences among INGOS and local organizations, which are tied to context and place and may have a long-term and sustained presence. A short-term, activity-based approach does not establish the kind of partnership needed to sustain local organizations or their impact over the long term. This is reflected by support often being driven to projects and activities instead of to an organization as a whole.

2. Lack of trust and respect

Over 50% of local organizations feel that a lack of trust is a key barrier to establishing and sustaining meaningful partnerships. Local organizations feel that there is often significant mistrust about their intentions and ability—that they can in fact carry a strategic vision and mission and have the energy, capacity, and purpose to achieve it. This immediately eliminates the opportunity for true allied action through long-term partnerships.



There has been a lot of talk that local organizations have low capacity, and I reject this. **The problem is they do not trust us.**

—Research participant

“

We want to be looked at as responsible partners, not just that we are looking up for support, and that we bring to the table genuine reasons and calls for change.

—Jonathan Yiah, Liberia

Some organizations see us as not having the capacity to handle projects of a certain scale, so they bring in intermediary organizations.

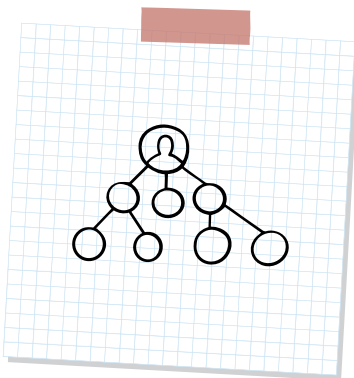
They see us as a ‘work in progress.

—Research participant

Start with respect and treat people the way you would like to be treated; take time to learn and recognize what has already been accomplished by the local CSOs and look to build on that.

—Research participant

3. Power and inequity



With mistrust comes tensions of control and inequity, and **64% of local organizations included in our survey feel that an INGO's top-down approach to partnerships is a significant barrier and makes it hard to sustain partnerships over time.** When partnerships are approached in this way, it makes it challenging for local organizations to truly thrive and become highly effective in those relationships. Power inequity is further entrenched when these relationships are formalized in project or funding agreements, in which local organizations become bound up in power differentials, and the partnership becomes framed around delivery, reporting, and accountability, instead of collaborative action and impact.

“

INGOs should not look at local organizations as beggars. We are not beggars. We have the capacity; we simply do not have the opportunity availed to us. So when we are being treated as lesser partners, it doesn't pay off. We should be respected as local organizations.

—Dominic Ngwesse, Nature Cameroon.

Opportunities for Change

Partnerships between local organizations and INGOs will continue to be important to conservation impact in Africa, including current efforts to scale up the level of support for community-led conservation across the region, in parallel with global trends. Despite the barriers outlined above, however, there are a number of opportunities to strengthen these relationships in line with the principles of effective partnerships. This section highlights the suggestions proposed by local African organizations.

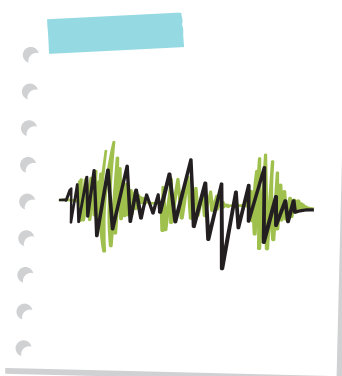
1. Shift from transactional to strategic and aligned partnerships

34%

While funding is identified by 71% of participants as the most important role for INGOs, only 34% expressed that it was important to creating a successful partnership. Therefore, partnerships should not primarily revolve around funding but rather be based on a shared vision of what organizations want to achieve by working together.

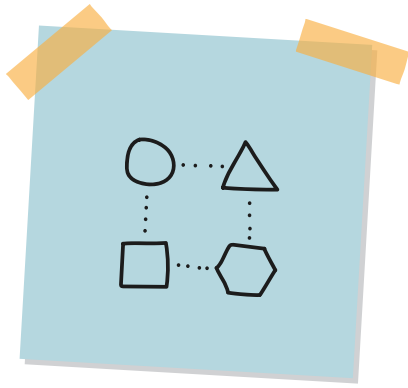
Many of the barriers to effective partnerships identified by local organizations stem from a transactional approach, in which the relationship by design is short-term—shaped around specific funding or project activities—and therefore often fails to develop the deeper foundations that can sustain it in the long term.

This necessitates a new approach to partnerships established on strategic alignment, common purpose, and shared values. Trust and equity are fundamental, and require an approach to forming and maintaining partnerships that is framed around listening, co-creating, dialogue, and being willing to adapt and be flexible across ways of working.



INGOs should, as Ewi Lamma, of Forest Resources and People in Cameroon, suggests, “clear the atmosphere of being domineering and work as partners, as teams, and not as a boss working with a subordinate.

Going forward, the focus needs to be, as John Kamanga, of the Southern Rift Association of Landowners in Kenya, points out, on **“partnerships in which we co-create. We are asking our donors to co-create the projects and then we implement them. We are moving away from client-implementing agency relationships.”**



2. Clarify the role of the INGO

82%

of local organizations indicate that clear roles are necessary to meaningful and effective partnerships.

Local African organizations point toward the need to clarify roles in two key ways.

1. On a broad, continent-wide level:

Revisit and clearly articulate the role that INGOs seek to play in African conservation broadly and how partnerships with local organizations fit into this, including finding alignment between global branches and the in-country branches that are more directly involved in partnerships.

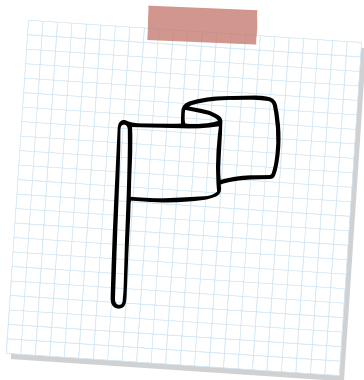
2. Within specific partnerships:

Clearly define roles within a specific partnership.

Local organizations emphasize the broad role for INGOs as one of supporter and facilitator, instead of as an implementer or a definer of the strategic direction. This supporting position should then translate into three key roles within specific partnerships:

- Supporting their work with funding and resourcing
- Providing technical support where relevant and as needed
- Using their influence and connections to support in policy and advocacy at both international and national levels

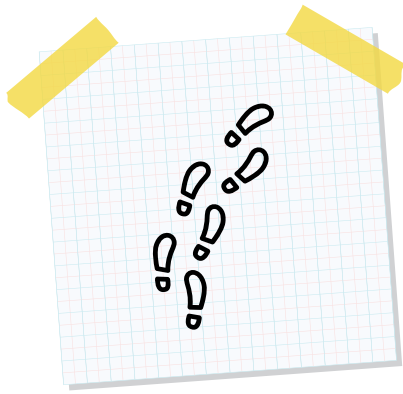
As a starting point, local organizations suggest the need for internal reflection and dialogue within INGOs, including alignment between an organization's international and local branches on their long-term role in African conservation and what their commitments to local partnerships mean. This necessitates a discussion around the level and willingness of buy-in to local organizational strategies, visions, and missions, and a clear articulation of how they can position themselves to get behind these. As Jonathan Yiah, from the Sustainable Development Institute in Liberia, points out, INGOs need to do **“less taking charge of the direction or the strategic approach, defining what is the end game or who is in control. As much as possible, they should enable the local civil society groups to be in the driving seat and they can be in the background supporting us.”**



Strategy and decision-making were identified as the least important role for INGOs, instead, they need to find ways to get behind the goals and strategies of local organizations that are a response to specific contexts and challenges. As one research participant advises, **“INGOs should not be implementing projects at the grassroots where they crisscross with small local organizations. They should focus on fundraising, and then partner with local organizations in implementation.”**

This repositioning of the INGO is growing more urgent as local organizations recognize their power, become more selective of what groups they partner with, and develop more direct relationships with potential funders. INGOs should, as Aristide Kamla, of the African Marine Mammal Conservation Organization in Cameroon, advises, **“avoid the same mistakes the colonizers have done in the past, like trying to be everywhere. They will have a greater impact if they support local organizations. My biggest recommendation is to empower the organizations at the local level.”**

Roles will vary from partnership to partnership, and the point is creating space to co-design these roles. Damian Bell, of Honeyguide in Tanzania, succinctly summarizes it as the need for **“clear roles—that we are achieving a common vision and these are the roles for each of us to achieve that vision.”**



3. Recognize local capacity

As the positionality of local organizations and INGOs evolves, the support roles that INGOs play similarly necessitate more nuance, which, in turn, can promote more equity and the repositioning of power. The perception of capacity building, and of local organizations as entities that need capacity to be built, creates and sustains a power imbalance within partnerships. A broad-scale recognition of the strengths and capabilities of local African conservation organizations is needed, which allows INGOs to approach the partnership more equitably

and explore ways to support capacity and organizational growth instead. As one research participant explains, there is need to ***“recognize the value of what local NGOs bring to the table, their networks, their knowledge and experience, their network of contacts, their reputation, their strategy and roadmap. Plan projects together, and try not to bring them in at the last minute.”***

Where and how this might happen within a partnership can emerge through intentional dialogue during partnership screening and design. This also depends on local organizations recognizing and clearly articulating their capacity, skills, and strengths, and where additional support might be valuable.

4. Reduce bureaucracy and find more intentional ways of working

There is need to simplify, adapt, and contextualize administration and procedures so that they strengthen the relationships and support local organizations, instead of hindering them and consuming their energy and time. As Tiana Andriamanana, of Fanamby in Madagascar, suggests, ***“Let us focus on actual work and not unnecessary procedures.”***

This is closely linked to articulating and discussing expectations and agreeing on approaches that resonate with local context and ways of working, as well as seeking to strengthen and utilize local organizational structures and procedures, instead of adding new ones in parallel. As one research participant advises, INGOs should ***“allow local organizations to use their institutional systems.”*** And in cases where more onerous administration is attached to funding or resourcing, an INGO can support their local organizational partner by taking on as much of this as possible through their own systems, or lending their power and weight to push back on donors for more contextualized and simple ways of working.

The goal should be to create space for flexible and adaptive ways of working and relating. As one participant advises: ***“Listen to local partners. Adaptive management approaches are critical, as the local context is not static.”*** This enables ongoing reflection and growth. As Aquilas Koko Ngomo, of Alliance Nationale d’Appui et de Promotion des Aires et territoires du patrimoine Autochtone et Communautaire (ANAPAC) in the Democratic Republic of Congo, advises: ***“Collaboration should be strengthened by looking at how things are going, what the obstacles are, and making plans to address those challenges. INGOs need to respond to our guidance on how to address the challenges identified.”***

Adaptive ways of working can be transformative



Simplifying administration and contextualizing ways of working can strengthen long-term relationships and build trust, as experienced by one local organization where a partnership grew in this direction:

“After more than a decade of informal support that came in annually but was never guaranteed, one of our international partners invited us to submit a three-year proposal in whatever format we wanted (joy at multiyear funding and no lengthy and prescriptive proposal template). They subsequently approved our application, and because of their deep knowledge of the landscape and frequently visiting team, we feel extremely well supported, both financially and technically, and they are not afraid of innovation, thus allowing us to be creative and adapt our learning as we go. However, the most transformative part of this revised partnership is the trust they have in us that we are experts at what we do, and the treatment of us as equals. They have created a safe space that allows for honesty and vulnerability, which is making the partnership thrive.”

5. Value local partnerships and influence the conditions and processes that impact local organizations

The broad reach and bird's-eye view that INGOs have, especially when they are involved across different scales and geographies and partner with diverse local organizations, provide unique opportunities to identify common patterns, themes, and crosscutting challenges. This opens the door to a unique opportunity to help shape the conditions in which local organizations operate, both in terms of international and national level advocacy. Again, a supportive role here is key, and an important suggestion is to support coalitions of local organizations and help create space for them to collaborate, learn from one another, and draw on one another's skills to address broader national or regional challenges they might not be able to tackle on their own. This approach builds on the recognition of local capacity, but also seeks to build connections and networks that can continue to strengthen the role of civil society in different countries. As part of this, INGOs can also help local organizations access international processes and dialogues they might not be able to access on their own, helping ensure that global conversations are inclusive and representative.

Become a Better Partner

To begin to address the themes outlined above, here are some specific recommendations for INGOs and local African CSOs.

Recommendations for INGOs



1. Reflect on your role

- Use partnership development with local organizations to define the INGO role further. This will be contextual and vary depending on the partnership. Seek to complement and support.
- Emphasize process and the way that partnerships are built with local organizations, instead of focusing solely on outcome and goals. Partnership is an ongoing experiment in relationship building, and roles may be constantly evolving.
- Be cautious regarding implementation, especially where local organizations are doing similar work and are better placed to achieve sustained impact over the long term. INGOs can achieve their higher-level goals through strong partnerships with local organizations that are rooted in context and place. Achieve impact by supporting local initiatives.
- Consider how to act as networkers and conveners, strengthening the reach and impact of local organizations.
- Align strategy through a collaborative process with local organizations, which is a good opportunity to reflect on and articulate roles in a partnership. This way, it is framed around adding value and a co-designed process.
- Clarify and align these considerations across the various geographies and scales of operation, particularly between international and country-level branches.

2. Bring intention to partnership selection and engagement

- Approach partnerships openly. Collaboratively explore high-level mission and values alignment and strategic opportunities. Emphasize the process and relationship before the results.
- Think of partnerships and funding as two different things. Funding can be a component of a partnership, but it should not be perceived as the same as a partnership. Partnership is the foundation, and funding may be one aspect of the relationship that develops.

3. Value local knowledge and capacity

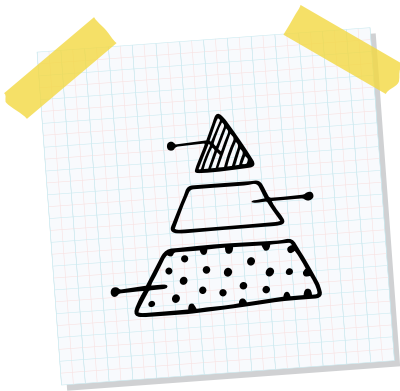
- Recognize that local capacity does exist and that there are very capable people and organizations with local knowledge that is deeply contextual.
- Recognize Indigenous and placed-based knowledge through support for the local organizations that strengthen and champion these practices.

4. Contextualize ways of working and simplify administration

- Co-design ways of working with each particular local organization, accounting for context, expectations, local practices, and existing organizational systems.
- Discuss and agree on how communication will happen, what it will look like, and what ongoing processes of reflection and feedback will be beneficial.
- Keep any funding or agreements simple and adaptive, and tailor the structures or processes to a particular partnership in ways that support and make work easier, instead of complicating and adding burden. Reduce administration to put more energy into impact.
- Find ways to develop and sustain the partnership beyond any funding or agreements. Those processes should not consume the partnership, but rather focus on a deeper, long-term approach.

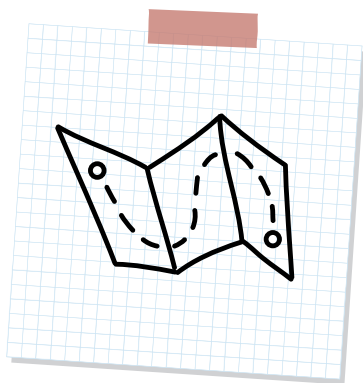
Recommendations for Local African CSOs

1. Build autonomy and recognize power



- Recognize the power of the local organization when approaching potential partnerships. Share expectations and lead. Own the agenda, but stay open to collaboration. As one research participant suggests, local organizations should “tell their partners: this is what we want to achieve in the next year or two and in our interactions, this is what we envisage for the collaboration, and this is what we want for the collaboration to achieve. Such an agenda will enable local African organizations to be more of a force that proposes, and not only entities that solely receive funds.”
- Avoid becoming dependent on international or other partners. Identify how to have autonomy and what that means, and concentrate efforts into this. Then be selective in partnerships around achieving certain goals and strategies.
- Outline and clearly articulate what you need and want in a partnership, including its core principles and how it needs to work to be successful (such as ways of working, communication, expectations, roles, etc.). Be willing to share this with potential partners.

2. Be clear about strategies and needs



- Identify long-term goals and strategies; be clear on these and what the intended outcome is. Then look for partners to support these, being selective. This relates to having a clear, well-articulated strategy and identifying where support may be needed or wanted to achieve goals, which will make it easier to communicate these to a partner.
- Outline the strategy in financial terms whenever possible—what it will cost to achieve the goals and desired outcomes. Identify what is needed to sustain the organization itself and what is more project- and activity-oriented. If a funding discussion does come up as part of a partnership, then there are specifics to outline and communicate.



3. Become an attractive partner

- Be responsible, be professional, do good work to build trust, and showcase that local organizations are in the driving seat. Develop responsible systems and structures. Be accountable to work and partner obligations. Aristide Kamla, of Cameroon's African Marine Mammal Conservation Organization, advises: ***“Local organizations need to be responsible. We should not give the tools or opportunity for INGOs to settle in. If we are not efficient or responsible, it will be a good excuse for others to say they will do the job themselves.”***
- Foster good and ongoing communication with partners. Have honest and transparent information sharing around what is working, what is not, and challenges that are emerging. Do not sugarcoat or pretend everything is okay when it may not be. This will help build trust going forward.

4. Create meaningful partnerships

- Prioritize long-term commitments and consider the energy versus the return of investing in partnerships.
- Require support beyond just projects. Emphasize buy-in to the local organization and its mission and vision as a whole.
- Demand attention be paid to the way things are done, in addition to what is done.
- Think about funding and partnerships as two different things. A partnership may include funding, but it needs to be about a relationship instead of a transaction. Don't chase money as a basis for partnerships.

5. Imagine new partnership models

Focus on local partnerships and the possibility of creating consortiums of local institutions that bring together expertise and skills and ways of collaborating and learning. This also elevates the group power of local organizations, combining energy for interaction with international actors and processes.



Conclusion

In this report we have sought to document and share the perspectives and ideas of local African conservation organizational leaders on how partnerships can be strengthened with international organizations. Local organizations are key to the innovative conservation solutions emerging in Africa, and by sharing their perspectives on the barriers to meaningful partnerships along with the opportunities to strengthen and grow them, our intention is to expand the conversation on how to build partnerships and allied relations in a spirit of equity, listening, and trust.

International organizations will continue to have an important role, and a key suggestion from this report is the need for an ongoing imagining of what that role and position is and to create a space for continued growth and evolution. As we've learned throughout our survey and interviews, this will not happen in isolation, but rather through dialogue and co-creation with the local organizations driving African conservation. Recognizing this is the first step. And it can be followed by a much deeper attention to processes and a reflection on how relationships are established, structured, maintained, nurtured, and grown.

To aid in this, we conclude with a tool to help initiate the thought process on approaching and sustaining meaningful and effective partnerships.

Partnership Tool

Select Partners

Goal: To seek out strategic partnerships with strong alignment in values and goals

Considerations

- What is our intention in approaching this partnership? What do we seek?
- How can we create space for listening and dialogue to learn about each other's values and goals?
- What are the local solutions and goals that we can support?
- Are we willing to discuss and adapt our ideas and ways of doing things to fit local context and practices?



Structure the Partnership

Goal: To move the partnership toward action and develop ways of working

Considerations

- What is needed? What role can we fill that is most useful and supportive?
- What are our expectations?
- What does success look like? How does this relate to our expectations of outcomes? How will we document this?
- What is the pace of change we want to see? Is it realistic given the local context?
- How will we sustain ongoing communication? What should this look like and what do we want to communicate about?
- How will we share and communicate credit?
- As we develop ways of working, how can we adapt procedures and administration to local contexts? How can we keep it simple? What local practices might we incorporate or use?



Maintain & Nurture the Relationship

Goal: To build a long-term relationship based on trust and equity for sustained impact

Considerations

- Can we commit to the long-term process of change?
- How do we sustain the relationship beyond specific activities or projects? What kind of space do we create for this and what does it look like?
- When we do achieve a partnership, what do we hope for in the partnership going forward? What can we change or adapt to promote more equity and trust?

Appendix: Interviewees

Name	Title	Organization	Country
James Agbor Ayamba	Program Manager	Ajemalebu Self Help (AJESH)	Cameroon
Peter Akanimoh	Executive Director	Global Relief and Development Mission (GRDM)	Nigeria
Tiana Andriamanana	Executive Director	Fanamby	Madagascar
Vital Bambanze	Executive Director	Unissons-nous pour la Promotion des Batwa (UNIPROBA)	Burundi
Damian Bell	Executive Director	Honeyguide	Tanzania
Kaamu Bukenya	Finance Manager	Conservation through Public Health	Uganda
Andrew Giahquee	Executive Director	Skills and Agricultural Development Services	Liberia
John Kamanga	Executive Director	South Rift Association of Landowners (SORALO)	Kenya
Aristide Kamla	CEO	African Marine Mammal Conservation Organization (AMMCO)	Cameroon
Patrick Kimani	Director	Coastal and Marine Resource Development (COMRED)	Kenya
Aquilas Koko Ngomo	Policy Officer	Alliance Nationale d'Appui et de Promotion des Aires et territoires du patrimoine Autochtone et Communautaire (ANAPAC)	Democratic Republic of Congo

Appendix: Interviewees

Name	Title	Organization	Country
Simplice Kozo	Advisor	Le Réseau des Populations Autochtones et Locales en Afrique Centrale (REPALCA)	Central African Republic
Ewi Lamma	Advocate	Forest Resources and People (FOREP)	Cameroon
Tresor Losale	Program Manager	Securisation des Terroires de Communautés	Democratic Republic of Congo
Jasper Makala	CEO	Mpingo Conservation and Development Initiative (MCDI)	Tanzania
Paine Makko	Executive Director	Ujamaa Community Resource Team (UCRT)	Tanzania
Moreangels Mbizah	Executive Director	Wildlife Conservation Action	Zimbabwe
Dominic Ngwesse	Executive Director	Nature Cameroon	Cameroon
Felicity Njokou	Executive Director	Association des Acteurs de Développement (ADEV)	Cameroon
Ponda Sah	Founding President	Rural Development and Environmental Restoration Guard (RUDERG)	Cameroon
Isaac Saylay	Facilitator	National Union of Community Forest Management Bodies (NUCFMB)	Liberia
Lorna Slade	Technical Advisor	Mwambao	Tanzania
Jonathan Yiah	Programs Manager	Sustainable Development Institute (SDI)	Liberia

References

- ¹ For an overview of this history, see Adams, William M. 2004. *Against Extinction: The Story of Conservation*. London and Sterling, VA: Earthscan.
- ² For examples, see Dawson, Neil M., Brendan Coolsaet, Eleanor J. Sterling, Robin Loveridge, Nicole D. Gross-Camp, Supin Wongbusarakum, Kamaljit K. Sangha, et al. 2021. "The Role of Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities in Effective and Equitable Conservation." *Ecology and Society* 26 (3): 19. <https://doi.org/10.5751/ES-12625-260319>; and Artelle, Kyle A., Melanie Zurba, Jonaki Bhattacharyya, Diana E. Chan, Kelly Brown, Jess Housty, and Faisal Moola. 2019. "Supporting Resurgent Indigenous-Led Governance: A Nascent Mechanism for Just and Effective Conservation." *Biological Conservation* 240: 108284. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.biocon.2019.108284>
- ³ See the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, <https://www.cbd.int/gbfi/>, along with an overview, Abulu, Latoya, and Sahana Ghosh. 2022. "Nations Adopt Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework." *Mongabay*. <https://news.mongabay.com/2022/12/nations-adopt-kunming-montreal-global-biodiversity-framework/>
- ⁴ Roe, Dilys, Fred Nelson, and Chris Sandbrook, eds. 2009. *Community Management of Natural Resources in Africa: Impacts, Experiences, and Future Directions*. *Natural Resource Issues* 18. International Institute for Environment and Development.
- ⁵ For an overview, see Bollig, Michael. 2021. "Twenty-First Century Conservation in Africa: Contemporary Dilemmas, Future Challenges." In *African Futures*, edited by Clemens Greiner, Steven van Wolputte, and Michael Bollig, 27: 111–24. Africa-Europe Group for Interdisciplinary Studies. Leiden: Brill.
- ⁶ For an analysis of local conservation solutions overcoming constraints, see Nelson, Fred, Patricia Muyamwa-Mupeta, Shylock Muyengwa, Emmanuel Sulle, and Dickson Kaelo. 2021. "Progress or Regression? Institutional Evolutions of Community-Based Conservation in Eastern and Southern Africa." *Conservation Science and Practice* 3 (1): e302. <https://doi.org/10.1111/csp2.302>
- ⁷ For an analysis of the role of civil society, see Maliasili Initiatives and Well Grounded. 2015. *Strengthening African Civil Society Organizations for Improved Natural Resource Governance and Conservation*. Maliasili Initiatives and Well Grounded: Underhill, VT, and London.
- ⁸ The links between strong local organizations and innovative local conservation solutions are evident in the example of the Kenyan conservancy movement. See the case study, *Stronger Organizations: Greater Impact; Case Study: The Kenya Conservancy Movement*. Maliasili Initiatives: Underhill, VT. https://www.maliasili.org/s/KWCA_CS_July2020_8x8_Web.pdf.
- ⁹ Berkes, Fikret. 2007. "Community-Based Conservation in a Globalized World." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 104 (39): 15188–93. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.0702098104>
- ¹⁰ Paul, R., J. Chick, E. Sulle, and F. Nelson. *Greening the Grassroots: Rethinking African Conservation Funding*. Maliasili and Synchronicity Earth, July 2022. maliasili.org/greeningthegrassroots.
- ¹¹ Chapin, M. 2004. "A Challenge to Conservationists." *World Watch Magazine* 17 (6): 17–32.
- ¹² See, for example, "The RINGO Project: Re-Imagining the INGO and the Role of Global Civil Society." Rights CoLab. <https://rightscolab.org/ringo/>
- ¹³ For an overview of some notable efforts, see Aly, Heba. 2022. "Ten Efforts to Decolonise Aid. The New Humanitarian." <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/feature/2022/08/12/10-efforts-to-decolonise-aid>
- ¹⁴ See the November 2021 speech by Samantha Power, "Administrator Samantha Power on a New Vision for Global Development." USAID. <https://www.usaid.gov/news-information/speeches/nov-04-2021-administrator-samantha-power-new-vision-global-development>
- ¹⁵ For Oxfam's new strategy, see "How Oxfam Is Changing." <https://www.oxfam.org.uk/about-us/how-oxfam-changing/>
- ¹⁶ See Rights CoLab's 2021 report *Fostering Equitable North-South Civil Society Partnerships: Voices from the South*. <https://rightscolab.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/RINGO-RESEARCH-REPORT-FINAL-V-compressed.pdf>
- ¹⁷ White, Rehema M., Birgit Schmook, Sophie Calmé, Anthony J. Giordano, Yves Hausser, Lynn Kimmel, Lou Lecuyer, Mauro Lucherini, Crisol Méndez-Medina, and Juan L. Peña-Mondragón. 2023. "Facilitating Biodiversity Conservation through Partnerships to Achieve Transformative Outcomes." *Conservation Biology* 37 (3): e14057. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cobi.14057>
- ¹⁸ For a summary of IIED's research and learning, see Kajumba, Tracy. 2023. "Addressing Power Dynamics and Inequity in Institutional Partnership Models." International Institute for Environment and Development. <https://www.iiied.org/addressing-power-dynamics-inequity-institutional-partnership-models>
- ¹⁹ An example of international organizations pursuing new approaches includes the Inclusive Conservation Initiative, <https://www.inclusiveconservationinitiative.org/>
- ²⁰ For a discussion on this, see Compese, Jessica, and Holly Jonas. "All Our Relations: Exploring the Role of Relationships, Partnerships, and Networks in Supporting Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities." ICCA Consortium. <https://www.iccaconsortium.org/2023/02/07/cop15-event-explored-relationships-partnerships-networks-indigenous-peoples-local-communities/>
- ²¹ For an overview of WCS's Africa work, see "Places: Africa." *Wildlife Conservation Society*. <https://www.wcs.org/our-work/places/africa>
- ²² For an overview of AWF's strategy, see "Global Leadership." *Africa Wildlife Foundation*. <https://www.awf.org/global-leadership>
- ²³ For a summary, see "About Us." *Flora & Fauna*. <https://www.fauna-flora.org/about/>
- ²⁴ See "Stories in Africa: 2021 Year in Review." *The Nature Conservancy*. <https://www.nature.org/en-us/about-us/where-we-work/africa/stories-in-africa/2021-year-in-review/>
- ²⁵ Paul, R., J. Chick, E. Sulle, and F. Nelson. *Greening the Grassroots: Rethinking African Conservation Funding*.
- ²⁶ Well Grounded and Maliasili Initiatives. 2017. *Building Strong Partnerships*. Well Grounded and Maliasili Initiatives: London and Underhill, VT.



maliasili.org

[/impact](#)

[/portfolio](#)

[/reader](#)

[/sign-up](#)

[/rootingforchange](#)

 info@maliasili.org

 [@maliasili_org](https://twitter.com/maliasili_org)

 [/maliasili](https://www.linkedin.com/company/maliasili)