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INCLUSIVE CONSERVATION AND CRITICAL LOCALISM

Adam Moe Fejerskov & Alma Tjalve

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores inclusive conservation through the lens of critical localism, examining the complex power dynamics between conservation efforts and Indigenous Peoples and local communities (IPLCs). It addresses how conservation has evolved from exclusionary ‘fortress conservation’ approaches toward more inclusive models and analyses how conservation frameworks highlight tensions around power devolution, rights recognition and knowledge integration. It emphasises that conservation is fundamentally an exercise of multidimensional power. The report concludes with principles for effective inclusive conservation: meaningful governance and decision-making, secure land tenure, equitable benefit-sharing, integration of diverse knowledge systems, multi-scale linkages, adaptive management approaches and integration of conservation with development goals. These principles aim to balance community autonomy with appropriate support while honouring community rights, knowledge and agency.

INTRODUCTION

Biodiversity and functioning ecosystems are crucial for human wellbeing. Yet the interconnected effects of land degradation, climate change, excessive human consumption, as well as anthropogenic pressures persistently drive a loss of species, ecosystems and genetic diversity (Cebrián-Piqueras et al., 2023; Geldmann et al., 2019). Biodiversity conservation, as the main means of remedying these developments, is a moving target as our perceptions of relationships between people, nature and conservation continues to evolve over time across notions of dependence, independence, interdependence and opposition (Petriello et al., 2022). A key difficulty lies in understanding and managing the plurality of perspectives, values and approaches that characterise the multifaceted nature of conservation – including the interrelations between place-based and global drivers of change – and that are not always compatible. These complexities necessitate meaningful engagement with inclusion, empowerment and related concepts and approaches.

Local communities, groups and Indigenous Peoples (or IPLCs as commonly referred to in policy debates) are critical to solving the global biodiversity crisis. Their involvement, support and leadership form both core short-term effectiveness and long-term persistence advantages (Benett et al., 2019; Lee and Abdullah, 2019). Even so, research has consistently shown that local communities' involvement is often confined to 'participation invitations' during implementation phases, whilst their role is marginalised during project design and evaluation (Busck-Lumholt et al., 2025). Part of this concerns traditional problems of donor-driven or top-heavy aid management (including by NGOs), but other parts concern the tensions between the traditional area-based conservation of protected areas (PA) and other effective area-based conservation measures (OECMs) that has at its centre the question of Indigenous People and local communities (Sibanda et al., 2024).

Politically, conservation is central to obtaining Sustainable Development Goals 14 and 15 that compel a fundamental shift in humanity's relationship with nature, countering climate changes, protecting biodiversity and supporting Indigenous Peoples' rights. In its efforts to halt global deforestation and counter the sixth mass extinction currently driven by anthropogenic effects, conservation of terrestrial ecosystems is guided by a number of political and policy frameworks, including the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework towards 2050. Its plethora of donors intervening – bilaterals, multilaterals, private foundations (the Bezos Earth Fund recently committed \$2 billion for conservation alone), impact investors and more – as well as the multifaceted aims and outcomes sought through conservation, makes for a deeply political field.

In February 2025, a fragile political accord was reached at the COP16 Global Biodiversity Conference in Rome. The 'first global plan to finance the conservation of life on earth', COP16 president Susana Muhamad called the eleventh-hour agreement, whilst other negotiation parties voiced concern that the text's 'diluted commitments' could send the debate on who will finance conservation into an indefinite discussion (Weston, 2025). At the same time, there remains a worry that delivering on the '30x30' initiative may unintentionally reproduce historical inequalities, if not done in an inclusive and people-centred way (Sibanda et al., 2024).

This report explores questions of power in conservation through the lens of its bifocal title. *Inclusive conservation* is commonly seen as integrating different elements, including co-management and multicentred conservation by or with local and/or Indigenous communities; mosaic governance with a multitude of public and private actors and groups; and convivial conservation that transcends nature-culture dichotomies to promote social and ecological transformation and justice (Raymond et al., 2022). *Critical localism*, in conjunction with inclusive conservation, suggests a reflexive engagement with conceptualisations of what it means to be ‘local’ and how to work at and with the ‘local’ including not seeing it as a binary only to the ‘international’ because of the ways global concerns are manifested locally and vice versa. The local is both a material reality and a construction, and as such perpetually politicised and not always a helpful concept, whether in research or in policymaking, concerning as it does, spatial territory, but also much more: relationships, networks, activities.

Concerns over power imbalances between conservation(ists) and local communities remain historically nested in colonial works to evict and separate Indigenous Peoples from land and nature (see Dawson et al., 2024), enabled by processes such as the doctrine of discovery’s expansion of European empires or the 1872 Yellowstone National Park’s establishment through forced removal of Indigenous Peoples (see Brockington, 2004). Building on these imbalances, critique of 20th century conservationism’s separation of people from nature (see Cooke and Kothari, 2001; Western and Wright, 1994) led to widespread calls for a focus on empowerment and inclusion of local communities (Dressler et al., 2010), with paths to these seen as including ‘poverty alleviation, alternative livelihoods, cultural recognition (e.g. local and traditional knowledge systems), collective action, resource use and land rights, and inclusive decision-making in protected area (PA) planning and implementation’ (Petriello et al., 2022). Inspiration came from the Ecologist’s ‘Blueprint for survival’ (1972), Schumacher’s ‘Small is beautiful’ (1973) and later the Brundtland Commission, but also Community Development calls in aid programming during the 1950s and 1960s (Holdcroft, 1984).

As such, these concerns are far from new: ‘[T]here is an emerging global consensus that the implementation of what has come to be known as ‘sustainable development’ should be based on local-level solutions derived from community initiatives’, Melissa Leach and colleagues wrote almost 30 years ago in the IDS Bulletin (Leach et al., 1997). Even so, these ideas have gained speed over the past years with efforts to conceptualise and better understand the core power dynamics at play in inclusive conservation. These tensions are taken to include a host of forms (Raymond et al., 2022):

- *Support to area-based conservation versus cross-boundary landscape management* emerges between focusing strictly on protected areas with defined boundaries versus managing conservation across broader landscapes that include multiple land uses and stakeholders. Protected areas are influenced by and influence neighbouring land uses, which extends the definition of who is a stakeholder. With limited resources for management, there is a challenge in balancing clear conservation boundaries with the reality of cross-boundary ecological and social relationships affected by activities like grazing, tourism and resource use that span inside and outside protected areas. In other words, how are protected areas (PAs) balanced with flexible other effective area-based conservation measures (OECMs).

- *Recognising versus reducing plurality in the visions for and values of nature* concerns whether to prioritise certain values (like intrinsic biodiversity values) or embrace plurality to bring equity to all legitimate stakeholders. Legal frameworks and resource distribution often favour certain values over others, making it difficult to incorporate relational values of equity and justice. The tension becomes especially complex when trying to balance diverse visions like cultural heritage, economic development, rural lifestyle and wilderness conservation, particularly when these visions translate into conflicting management options.
- *Incorporating local and experiential knowledge into the dominant Western knowledge system* arises from two opposing trajectories – increased power shifting toward local stakeholders and communities in protected area decisions versus the growing global conservation framework tied to professional expertise and scientific forums. While mechanisms exist for integrating multiple knowledge systems, tensions emerge around what counts as evidence and how power, agency, trust and partnership are considered.
- *Acknowledging power relations in conservation – seeking consensual outcomes versus embracing dissent* reflects different approaches to managing diverse voices in conservation governance, including building consensual solutions, allowing conflicts to surface dissenting visions, or using dissent to open up transformative action. Political ecologists argue that engaging dissent rather than always seeking consensus avoids suppressing marginal visions. This approach allows for divergent understandings of nature while seeking collective action in conservation governance but requires acknowledging and managing the power asymmetries embedded in conservation processes.

Participation seemingly offers a space to minimise environmental injustices and conflicts (Gustavsson and Schilling-Vacaflor, 2022), benefitting the livelihoods of local communities and the viability of conservation efforts (Huber et al., 2023). However, unambiguously successful cases of reconciling biodiversity conservation with providing economic and social benefits to local communities are rare (Huber et al., 2023), and participatory schemes also come with burdens and risks for local communities. Inclusive conservation has itself seen criticism from political ecology perspectives for the ways in which its consensus seeking approaches may jeopardise values, rights and knowledges of marginalised groups and peoples (Matulis and Moyer, 2017). This represents a specification of wider critiques that correlate the ‘twin spheres’ of conservation science and interventionism and argue for their inherent systemic racism (Rudd et al., 2021). Both exclusive and non-participatory government approaches, but also top-down NGO efforts (Calfucura, 2018), seemingly continue to challenge conservation effectiveness.

Important herein is a crisis of ‘representational rhetorics’ (see West, 2016) because of the proliferation and multiple meanings of concepts such as people-centred, empowerment, co-management (Berkes, 1995), community-based, knowledge co-production (Zurba et al., 2022), compassionate conservation (Ferraro et al., 2023), decolonial conservation (see Domínguez et al., 2020; Urzedo et al., 2021), new conservation science (Petriello and Wallen, 2015), connected conservation (Carmenta et al., 2023) and many other concepts, some more strongly related to practice than others. These exist alongside the historical development of approaches such as community-

based conservation (CBC), community-based natural resource management (CBNRM), integrated conservation and development projects (ICDP) and many more.

Central to most of these, and thus at the heart of efforts to resituate local peoples as environmental stewards, is power. Conservation is an exercise and expression of multidimensional and multi-scalar power (Petriello et al., 2022), and it seems that conflict, rather than consensus, needs to be taken as a core assumption of conservation, foregrounding power as a key defining feature and form the basis for decisions on whether, how, when, where to act. To stress the complexity of participation and inclusive conservation, a recent systematic review of 'successful' protected area conservation found 133 factors mentioned across the literature (Huber et al., 2023).

The purpose of this report is to cast a wide net of understandings of inclusive conservation and critical localism to better comprehend ways and principles of working effectively with localised forms of conservation. As a meta-study, it surveys and documents current areas of discussion across academic, grey literature and white papers on conservation, forestry and biodiversity – including work within these avenues on programmatically integrating climate and development efforts – with a focus on localisation, localism, inclusion and participation of local actors and peoples. In the current context of deforestation and biodiversity loss, Denmark has decided to intensify its political engagement with and financial support to conservation. The initiative is part of Danish efforts to better integrate climate and development, working at the intersections of adaptation, poverty reduction and protection of biodiversity and nature. This report informs continued Danish efforts on conservation and biodiversity, with a focus on inclusive conservation and the involvement of local communities.

CRITICAL LOCALISM AND INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

Indigenous Peoples and local forest or other natural resource-dependent communities are often grouped together under the acronym IPLC when discussing their role in conservation. Owning or governing at least 32% of global land, 65% of this has zero to 10% of human modification, leaving 42% of global land in ecological good condition in the hands of these communities (Van der Esch et al., 2022). Thus, local communities and Indigenous Peoples are essential when considering ecosystem conservation, yet, overemphasising their role as ecosystemic stewards that now garner land rights because of their conservation abilities has been argued to mirror the colonial legacy too often entrenched in the history of these groups (Dominguez and Luoma, 2020). Rather than regarding IPLCs as a monolithic or essentialised category, it is important to recognise that these communities are varied and context dependent, working with or against much larger processes of politics and economy that shape their land, their tenure rights, their lifestyles and their worldviews. Understanding these groups, their role in conservation and ecosystem biodiversity and degradation is key in efforts of inclusive conservation, and this section briefly discusses the IPLC term and its different components, including the diversity of local communities and Indigenous Peoples.

Differentiating between local communities and Indigenous Peoples

Since 2007, Indigenous Peoples have been recognised as a specific group of peoples with specific human rights issues in the UN's Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UN, 2007). Rather than a strict definition, the UN has chosen to identify Indigenous Peoples on a set of criteria that may pertain to this group:

- Self-identification as Indigenous Peoples at the individual level and accepted by the community as their member.
- Historical continuity with pre-colonial and/or pre-settler societies.
- Strong link to territories and surrounding natural resources.
- Distinct social, economic or political systems.
- Distinct language, culture and beliefs.
- Form non-dominant groups of society.
- Resolve to maintain and reproduce their ancestral environments and systems as distinctive peoples and communities (UN, 2007).

These criteria outline three important identification points that both international organisations and civil society organisations often follow (IPBES, 2019). First, that of self-identification; second, that these communities must form a continuity with pre-colonial or pre-settler society with a distinct culture and link to territories; and finally, that they must belong to a minority group to be protected under this declaration (ibid.).

Local communities, on the other hand, are less clearly defined. According to the definition by the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES, 2019) these are self-identified human groups not necessarily ethnically homogenous that collectively relate to an environment, defining a shared territory and culture, which can be relatively new or long-established (Kimura, 2024). They are groups dependent on local ecologies and forest adaptation and conservation methods may affect them profoundly.

While Indigenous Peoples can belong to local communities (Kimura, 2024), Indigenous Peoples have also been vocal against bundling Indigenous Peoples and local communities together as one under the acronym of IPLC as this risks undermining the rights of Indigenous People to specific lands where local communities may also feel claim, devaluing the hard-won rights of the 2007 declaration (Hofschneider, 2024). Indigenous groups cite historical colonisation and settler-driven disenfranchisement and dispossession and point out that a key difference is how well-established their connection is to pre-colonial societies and thus also as victims of colonial systematic atrocities and marginalisation (Hofschneider, 2024). Scholars have thus argued, that while local communities may be marginal, they at times partake in further marginalisation of Indigenous People through for example state-sanctioned poverty alleviating land tenure schemes, that dispossess Indigenous groups' traditional territories and redistribute it among landless populations.

However, the IPBES argues, the use of the acronym IPLC is seemingly not used to ignore the differences or potential conflicts among Indigenous groups and between local communities but rather used in international fora to underscore that their position

shares commonalities and specific challenges that are important to be voiced in these fora as well as in analysis of ecosystem deterioration and measures of conservation (IPBES, 2019). A position wherein these groups are specifically, if diversely, affected due to their dependence and connection to the land they inhabit (ibid.). Being aware of these potential conflicts should therefore guide the use of IPLC acronyms and awareness of context and Indigenous specificity should never be foregone in situations where it can be harmful to either group.

Indigenous Peoples and local communities' land tenure

While garnering more recognition and rights over the past 20 years, Indigenous groups are still in a process of formal recognition, where only few countries have started land redistribution and recognition schemes (e.g. Larson et al., 2022). Thus, just 10% of global land is formally recognised as IPLCs' (Rights and Resources Initiative, 2015), while more than 70% of land in the Global South is unregistered (McDermott et al., 2015), cementing the ongoing contention around IPLCs' land rights (IPBES).

This is partly because the rights pertaining to IPLCs regarding land are not the same everywhere (Rodriguez and Inturias, 2018; FAO, 2016). Thus, IPLC land tenure can be both communal tenure and smallholder private tenure, as well as arranged informally through customs or formally through rules and regulations recognised by the government (FAO, 2016). As the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) has argued, tenure is not just about 'land rights' but should be understood as bundles of rights operating across multiple forms of communal and legal frameworks such as the right to exclude, access, manage, govern, withdraw, while the duration of these rights, and whether these rights confer the right to compensation or not are also important factors in assessing the type of tenure. These rights should further be understood on a spectrum of weak to strong, depending on whether they are constitutional, federal, local government or 'customary', leaving populations more or less secure from political changes, extractive industries and government interests (ibid.).

The argument to complicate tenure is important as it nuances who can be understood to be local, how their locality is expressed in belonging to a community with certain shared rights and if the devolution of rights varies across the community. Thus, in some cases Indigenous Peoples can be part of local communities' tenure schemes, while also having additional rights alongside the community that affect their tenure (Kimura, 2024).

While a look at rights distribution can give a sense of locality, notions of territory and territorial practices among communities can likewise indicate and delimit local boundaries and governance (Rosales, 2022; Dawson et al., 2021). For example, Rosales (2022) argues that the use of swidden practices among Indigenous Peoples in the Philippines is a strategy of governance to counter government schemes trying to control their land. Worldwide, Indigenous Peoples and local communities struggle with recognition and often experience physical and legal transgressions against them by extractive industries such as mining companies, agribusiness, forest companies and oil companies, government regimes or even conservation programmes (Rodriguez and Inturias, 2018; Rosales, 2022; Dawson et al., 2021). It is also important to understand, then, that a view on tenure as a bundle of cross-cutting *communally shared* rights as well as communal place-based practices helps delimiting actors who should not be considered local despite land rights – for example national governments and extractive

industries (FAO, 2012). A necessary perspective as conservation programmes relying too much on 'local actors' rather than local communities has created a gateway for industries to be recognised as local stakeholders in conservation programmes, thereby disadvantaging local communities and further exacerbating ongoing processes of dispossession (FAO, 2012; Vega-Leinert, 2020).

Local knowledge systems in forest conservation

Indigenous Peoples and local communities may have differing worldviews or knowledge systems that value, understand and view the interrelational aspect of humans and ecosystems differently from Western scientific traditions (IPBES, 2019). IPBES and other researchers recommend including these perspectives in forest conservation and ecosystem evaluations (ibid.). Firstly, the lack of inclusion and therefore continued marginalization may have detrimental effects on already marginalized populations that historically have been colonized or oppressed by systems of government and scientific knowledge (Escobar 2018; Rodriguez and Inturias 2018; Rosales 2022). Lack of inclusion can also eventually lead to further ecosystem deterioration, as Indigenous Peoples and local communities are key stakeholders in forest conservation (IPBES, 2019; Rosales, 2022). Second, as these knowledge systems often have a rooted connection to the ecosystem they inhabit, they can help grasp tacit changes and connections within the ecosystem that would otherwise be missed by Western scientific evaluations or when developing conservational efforts (IPBES, 2019). Thirdly, understanding the diverse ways forests and ecosystems may be valued by different people can lead to better conservation efforts, avoiding conflicts between differing value systems (e.g. Sangha, 2020). This means viewing value beyond economic flows and production, recognising that systems of valuation are intrinsically linked to worldviews and knowledge systems. An important concern is the cost-benefit of certain schemes of both deforestation drivers as well as conservation efforts may vary depending on the groups and thus have different effects (Dawson et al., 2024). Hence, moving beyond only valuing either economic development or intrinsically valuing species and nature is paramount to understand and deter often unforeseen consequences of any development project – including conservation projects.

POWER AND EMPOWERMENT: THE CONCEPTUAL AND PRACTICAL COMPLEXITY OF INCLUSIVE CONSERVATION

The fundamental insight that '[a]ll conservation actions are bound up with the exercise of power' (Schakleton et al., 2023) serves as a crucial starting point for understanding the complex dynamics that shape conservation efforts globally. The intersection of power with conservation practice is not merely an academic concern but a practical reality that influences outcomes for both ecosystems and communities. Recognition of power dynamics has become increasingly central to conservation discourse, reflecting a broader shift toward more inclusive and equitable approaches, and placing discussions of power (im)balances between local communities and intervening actors at the centre.

Contemporary conservation discourse seems to be characterised by what West (2016) describes as a crisis of 'representational rhetorics', stemming from the proliferation and

multiple meanings of concepts such as people-centred approaches, empowerment, co-management (Berkes, 1995), community-based initiatives, knowledge co-production (Zurba et al., 2022), compassionate conservation (Ferraro et al., 2023), decolonial conservation, new conservation science (Petriello and Wallen, 2015) and connected conservation (Carmenta et al., 2023). This conceptual plurality has developed alongside the historical evolution of approaches such as Community-Based Conservation (CBC), Community-Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM), Indigenous and Community Conserved Areas (ICCAs), and Integrated Conservation and Development Projects (ICDP). Hereto can be added more specific approaches for different conservation areas, such as forestry, where Community-Based Forestry (CBF) and Social Forestry (SF) are tangible examples of approaches to inclusive conservation (FAO, 2016). Similar conceptual discussions extend to other fields, including localisation in humanitarian interventions and locally-led adaptation, suggesting broader recognition of power dynamics across development sectors.

The proliferation of these concepts reflects attempts to address power imbalances in conservation but also creates challenges for practitioners and communities alike. As Cebrián-Piqueras et al. (2023) observe, inclusive conservation carries with it various tensions and challenges, including ‘whether and how to combine values across different scales; how to surface and manage issues of consensus and dissensus; and how to build trust and partnerships between people’. These tensions directly relate to power dynamics that operate at multiple levels within conservation initiatives. Such a multidimensional conceptualisation helps illuminate how power operates through individual agency, systemic structures, governance mechanisms and knowledge frameworks simultaneously.

Importantly, the various categories and approaches to inclusive conservation cannot be understood as operating under a single logic. They are greatly nuanced, with differences that have marked implications for how practitioners work with local communities. For example, while co-management approaches emphasise sharing rights and responsibilities between state actors and local communities, other forms of community-based forestry and conservation stress the need for local communities to maintain full control over resource-management decision-making and implementation processes (Khurram et al., 2024).

Despite these complexities, evidence increasingly supports the value of participatory approaches in conservation, as widely documented. A recent systematic review of protected area conservation (Huber et al., 2023) clearly linked participation to improved social and ecological outcomes, increased local support, compliance with rules, conservation awareness, conflict resolution, increased co-operation and transparency, and better communication. This suggests that addressing power imbalances through inclusive approaches can yield tangible benefits for conservation efforts.

The emerging attention to questions of power and empowerment within conservation represents an important evolution in the field, one that acknowledges the inseparability of social justice and environmental protection. Here, we discuss some of the established (historical and more recent) ways of conceiving and planning according to inclusive conservation logics, paying attention to the question of power in order to discern their key elements and inform the report’s last part: an attempt to identify and cluster central components of an approach to inclusive conservation that works with critical localism.

Community-Based Conservation, Integrated Conservation and Development Projects and Community-Based Natural Resource Management

The evolution of conservation paradigms over the past several decades has seen a significant shift from fortress conservation approaches toward more inclusive models that recognise the crucial role of local communities. Three community-oriented conservation frameworks are among those most firmly tested and tried but also scrutinised because of their growing evidence base: Community-Based Conservation, Community-Based Natural Resource Management and Integrated Conservation and Development Projects. While sharing common philosophical underpinnings, these approaches differ in their emphasis, implementation strategies and historical development trajectories.

The fortress conservation model, which dominated much of the 20th century, operated on the premise that ecological preservation required the exclusion of human communities and activities (Brockington, 2015). By the 1980s, mounting evidence of this approach's limitations – including social injustices, displacement of Indigenous Peoples and limited conservation success – catalysed a paradigm shift toward more inclusive frameworks (Siurua, 2006).

Community-Based Conservation emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s as a direct response to the detrimental effect of fortress conservation's premise that ecological preservation required the exclusion of human communities and activities. It represented a fundamental reconceptualisation, positioning local communities not as threats to biodiversity but as potential stewards of natural resources. CBNRM developed somewhat in parallel, though with stronger roots in natural resource management and sustainable development. Its emergence was particularly prominent in southern African countries, notably Zimbabwe's CAMPFIRE programme and Namibia's communal conservancies in the 1980s (Koot et al., 2023). These initiatives sought to devolve wildlife management authority to local communities while creating economic incentives for conservation. ICDPs represent the most formalised and structured of these approaches, gaining prominence in the 1990s through significant investments from international development agencies and multilateral organisations like the World Bank (Hughes and Flintan, 2001).

Community-Based Conservation (as covered by extensively by our colleagues, see Funder and Gravesen, 2021) has historical roots in Indigenous practices, where land, water and wildlife management systems are pursued from approaches that preserve biodiversity and ecosystem services. Until the 1970s, conservation approaches largely excluded communities, following the Yellowstone National Park model (Calfucura, 2018). The late 1970s and 1980s saw gradual recognition of communities in conservation debates, beginning with the 1975 IUCN Kinshasa resolution. During this period, CBC projects focused on awareness-raising and developing 'alternative livelihoods', with limited community participation primarily serving government conservation goals (Funder and Gravesen, 2021).

The 1990s brought greater integration of conservation and development, with IUCN expanding protected area categories to include sustainable resource use. CBC efforts emphasised community participation and created economic linkages through tourism and trophy hunting revenues, particularly in southern African countries (Salerno et al.,

2021). The 2000s introduced a paradigm recognising Indigenous Peoples' rights and knowledge, viewing communities as 'stewards' of biodiversity rather than threats. This led to co-management partnerships, though implementation faced constraints from conservation traditionalists and political elites maintaining resource control (Goldman, 2003).

Community-Based Conservation has now evolved into several distinct approaches, that reflect different priorities and philosophies (Funder and Gravesen, 2021), some more tangible than others. The 'Half Earth' approach (including the Half Earth Project, Nature Needs Half and Global Deal for Nature) emphasises nature's intrinsic value and advocates expanding protected areas to cover 50% of Earth's surface, with agricultural intensification in remaining areas (Ellis and Mehrabi, 2019). 'New Conservation Science', adopted by some international NGOs like The Nature Conservancy, takes a more utilitarian approach focused on species and ecosystems with economic value, emphasising market-based incentives, sustainable production with industry stakeholders and Payment for Ecosystem Services schemes (Soulé, 2013; Marvier, 2014).

The 'Conservation from Within' approach centres on communities' traditional resource management systems as primary conservation drivers, letting biodiversity conservation follow indirectly from supporting sustainable production systems and livelihood strategies (Western et al., 2020). Building on this foundation, 'Convivial Conservation' addresses political ecology concerns by seeking to de-link conservation from market economies, advocating for historical reparations to communities, 'conservation basic income', redistributive financing and democratised decision-making (Büscher and Fletcher, 2019). Some African conservationists similarly call for de-linking African conservation from international influence, instead drawing on local philosophies like Ubuntu. Finally, 'Bio-cultural Conservation' takes a pluralistic perspective that embraces diverse conservation values and practices as strengths, tailoring interventions to specific contexts while developing nested governance institutions across scales, fostering shared knowledge systems, and creating mechanisms for negotiation and conflict resolution (Funder and Gravesen, 2021; Chemhuru, 2019). This approach situates local resource management within broader multi-layered governance processes to address the complex challenges of biodiversity.

Integrated Conservation and Development Projects (ICDPs) also emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s as an innovative approach to conservation that explicitly recognised the interconnections between environmental protection and human development needs (Alpert, 1996). ICDPs represented a shift in conservation thinking by acknowledging that long-term environmental sustainability could only be achieved by addressing the socioeconomic needs of communities living in and around ecologically valuable areas. The conceptual foundation of ICDPs thus rests on the premise that poverty and environmental degradation are intricately linked in a mutually reinforcing cycle. That is, impoverished communities may engage in unsustainable resource extraction due to immediate subsistence needs, while environmental degradation further undermines the natural resource base upon which these communities depend. By simultaneously addressing both conservation and development objectives, ICDPs aimed to break this cycle and create improved livelihoods that reduce pressure on natural resources and support sustainable economic activities.

Unlike more localised Community-Based Conservation initiatives, ICDPs are typically characterised by their, at least in theory, more multi-sectoral approach (Hübner, 2023). They often incorporate diverse components including protected area management, sustainable livelihood development, community infrastructure improvement, agricultural intensification and institutional capacity building. In practice, ICDPs are often implemented through formal project structures with substantial external funding and technical assistance. These projects typically operate within defined timeframes and geographical boundaries, often centred around protected areas and their buffer zones (ibid.).

The mechanisms through which ICDPs seek to achieve their dual objectives include creating economic incentives for conservation, developing alternative livelihoods to reduce pressure on protected resources, strengthening local governance institutions, and building community awareness and capacity for sustainable resource management. Economic incentives may take various forms, from direct revenue sharing from tourism or sustainable resource harvesting to payments for ecosystem services. Alternative livelihood components commonly include ecotourism development, agroforestry initiatives, sustainable fisheries and non-timber forest product enterprises that aim to provide income while maintaining ecosystem integrity.

Despite their conceptual appeal, early ICDPs were seemingly based on overly simplistic assumptions about the relationships between poverty and environmental degradation, failing to account for the complex social, economic and political factors that influence resource use decisions (Milupi et al., 2017). The assumed causal linkages between development interventions and conservation outcomes have often proven tenuous in practice, with economic benefits not necessarily translating into reduced pressure on protected resources. Comprehensive reviews suggest that many ICDPs have struggled to achieve their ambitious dual objectives at scale or to demonstrate clear causal relationships between development interventions and conservation outcomes (Hübner, 2023). As such, the experiences with ICDPs over the past three decades have generated important lessons for inclusive conservation.

As the third category, *Community-Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM)* also emerged in the 1980s as a response to the widespread failures of top-down, state-controlled management regimes that often excluded local communities from decision-making processes and access to resources upon which their livelihoods depended (Dressler et al., 2010). CBNRM represents a similar shift to the previous two frameworks in that it acknowledges the importance of local communities as key stakeholders and potential stewards in sustainable resource management. This approach is built on the premise that when local communities have ownership rights, decision-making authority and receive tangible benefits from their natural resources, they are more likely to utilise these resources sustainably (Milupi et al., 2017; Rampheri and Dube, 2021).

CBNRM is built upon several key theoretical foundations that encompass aspects of institutional governance, common pool resource management and sustainable development. Central to these foundations is Ostrom's (1990) design principles for governing common pool resources, which have significantly influenced CBNRM implementation globally (Milupi et al., 2017). Ostrom's eight design principles provide a framework for analysing the institutional arrangements that enable sustainable management of common pool resources. These include: clear boundaries defining who has rights to access and use resources; congruence with local conditions through rules

that are well-adapted to local contexts; collective choice arrangements supporting participatory decision-making processes; monitoring for effective oversight of resource conditions and use; graduated sanctions providing appropriate penalties for rule violations; conflict-resolution mechanisms offering accessible means to resolve disputes; recognition of rights to organise through external acknowledgment of community authority; and nested governance creating multi-layered organisational structures for resource management. These principles emphasise the importance of local institutions, participatory governance and adaptive management approaches that align with specific socio-ecological contexts.

Beyond Ostrom's principles, CBNRM is characterised by several pillars (Milupi et al., 2017): i) community empowerment and devolution of authority involve transferring decision-making power from central authorities to local institutions and communities; ii) equity and benefit-sharing ensure fair distribution of resource benefits among community members; iii) integration of traditional ecological knowledge recognises and incorporates Indigenous and local knowledge systems; and iv) balancing conservation and development objectives addresses both ecological sustainability and socioeconomic needs. These pillars reflect CBNRM's dual focus on conservation effectiveness and social justice, distinguishing it from purely protectionist approaches to natural resource management.

Evidence from multiple case studies reveals variable outcomes of CBNRM initiatives. Milupi et al. (2017) analysed 21 case studies from different countries using Ostrom's design principles and found that 11 initiatives were successful, five were partially successful and five were unsuccessful. The study identified several factors that influenced these outcomes. Successful CBNRM initiatives typically demonstrate genuine empowerment, with communities exercising substantial decision-making authority and secure resource rights. This seems to be evident in examples such as Namibia's conservancy programme (Jones et al., 2012) and Mexico's community forestry initiatives (see Hajjar et al., 2013).

Altogether, the three approaches differ markedly in how they work with power – i.e. how they conceptualise and structure relationships between communities and other conservation stakeholders. CBC has tended to emphasise collaborative partnerships between communities, conservation agencies and NGOs in ways that ideally recognise complementarity between the different stakeholders but often sees power imbalances persist (Young et al., 2021). CBNRM more explicitly seeks to shift community authority over resources, placing greater emphasis on legal and policy frameworks that secure community rights and create space for local self-determination in resource management. Finally, ICDPs typically maintain more conventional stakeholder relationships, with external agencies retaining primary control over project design and implementation while seeking community buy-in.

These differences extend to their approach to economic concerns. CBC initiatives may include economic components but often place equal or greater emphasis on non-economic benefits such as cultural preservation, strengthened social capital and political empowerment. CBNRM places stronger emphasis on economic valuation of natural resources and the development of sustainable enterprises based on those resources, and ICDPs take a broader approach to economic development that often incorporates interventions with limited direct connection to conservation, such as

agricultural intensification, small enterprise development or infrastructure improvements.

Indigenous-lead conservation

Like the three historically nested approaches just covered, Indigenous-led conservation sees itself as representing a paradigm shift in environmental stewardship that recognises and prioritises the knowledge, practices and governance systems of Indigenous Peoples in managing lands and waters (Artelle, 2019). The foundation of Indigenous-led conservation rests on the understanding that Indigenous Peoples have fostered sophisticated systems of knowledge about local ecosystems, developed through centuries of observation, adaptation and sustainable use, with much research consistently demonstrating that areas under Indigenous management show higher levels of biodiversity and ecological integrity than conventional protected areas (e.g. Vogel et al., 2022). Indigenous-led conservation typically embrace a holistic worldview that sees humans as integral parts of natural systems with responsibilities to maintain balance and reciprocity. This perspective does not separate conservation from cultural practices, economic activities or governance systems but instead views them as interconnected dimensions of sustainable stewardship (Benyei et al., 2020).

The implementation of Indigenous-led conservation takes various forms across different contexts. Internationally, programmes like Canada's Indigenous Guardians initiative and Australia's Aboriginal Ranger Grant Program provide structured frameworks for Indigenous-led conservation. These programmes support Indigenous communities in monitoring, managing and stewarding their traditional territories, combining traditional knowledge with contemporary conservation tools. The Canadian Indigenous Guardians programme, for instance, funds Indigenous stewardship projects across the country, where local 'watchmen' monitor wildlife, climate conditions and human impacts while integrating traditional practices into land management decisions. These programmes have demonstrated significant ecological benefits while also creating jobs, strengthening community health outcomes and facilitating cultural transmission to younger generations.

The growing interest in Indigenous-led conservation emerges at a critical juncture in global conservation policy. Initiatives like '30x30,' increasingly recognise the essential role of Indigenous Peoples in achieving conservation targets. This shift acknowledges that conservation goals cannot be met without the full participation and leadership of Indigenous communities who have been effective stewards of their territories.

At the same time, Indigenous-led conservation faces significant challenges (e.g. Atalay, 2020). Land dispossession and fragmentation resulting from colonisation have created complex jurisdictional issues that complicate Indigenous land management. In the United States, the General Allotment Act of 1887 (Dawes Act) and subsequent policies resulted in the loss of approximately 90 million acres of Indigenous lands, creating a patchwork of land tenure that continues to obstruct cohesive Indigenous stewardship. Additionally, Indigenous communities often face structural barriers to accessing funding and resources needed to implement conservation initiatives. Despite managing significant portions of global biodiversity, Indigenous-led conservation receives only a fraction of conservation funding, with financing directed to Indigenous efforts representing just 0.4% of total philanthropic giving (Terramar, 2020).

Power imbalances also persist in many conservation partnerships. Even when Indigenous communities are included in conservation planning, they may lack decision-making authority or face pressures to conform to Western conservation frameworks that do not align with their worldviews and practices. Indigenous knowledge systems, despite their demonstrated effectiveness, continue to be marginalised in many conservation contexts, with Indigenous data and expertise often not recognised in their own right vis-à-vis Western scientific approaches.

Proponents argue that the advancement of Indigenous-led conservation requires a deeper rethinking of conservation itself (e.g. Goolmeier et al., 2020). Rather than attempting to fit Indigenous approaches into existing Western conservation frameworks, there is growing recognition of the need to 'indigenise' conservation – to transform its underlying assumptions, values and practices to better align with Indigenous worldviews. This process involves challenging colonial power dynamics that have shaped conservation historically and creating space for Indigenous knowledge systems, governance models and cultural practices to lead the way forward.

Power and empowerment in conservation

Building on the different traditions covered, more specific attention to power and empowerment, including the need to engage with conceptions of power from different scientific traditions, is growing in conservation discussions. Shackleton and colleagues (2023) outline a number of ways power dimensions are exercised and may be navigated in conservation, with a focus on local engagement and dynamics:

- *Clarify underlying values and assumptions:* Conservation is shaped by diverse worldviews that often remain unexamined. When dominant discourses go unquestioned, they can have direct consequences for people and species, influence conservation actions (like militarised conservation), and affect how research is framed. Recognising that statements about nature are inherently political, some organisations are increasingly developing approaches to better incorporate diverse values and knowledge systems, including Indigenous perspectives on power.
- *Considering power across scales and spaces:* Power dynamics affect people, species and ecosystems across multiple scales, a concern often overlooked. International conservation policies frequently lack consideration of local needs, or an understanding of how these are connected to other levels. Actions like mapping protected areas can privilege certain species, spaces and actors over others, just as maintaining awareness of cross-scale dynamics can help practitioners recognise unintended effects of decisions that lead to conflicts and inequities.
- *Recognising and understanding conservation conflicts:* Consensus sometimes mask power relations. Conservation conflicts arise from interest differences, ideologies, access inequalities and historical legacies, manifesting as resistance, sabotage, violence or legal proceedings, and most often, power structures are a root cause that is exceedingly difficult to change. Suppressing conflict can itself be an exercise of power, and identifying and assessing conflicts serves as a useful diagnostic tool for highlighting power relations, which, while challenging to

address, can ultimately benefit certain actors and improve scientific understanding.

- *Understanding who wins and who loses:* Power relations in conservation evidently create patterns where some groups, discourses or initiatives are empowered while others are disempowered. Conservation interventions have sometimes led to problematic outcomes including biodiversity loss, land rights restrictions or reinforced social inequalities, and there are growing calls for conservationists to analyse historical, legal and institutional processes, ensuring all actors (including non-human species) are considered. Understanding who benefits and who bears costs helps identify processes creating systematic uneven outcomes and properly contextualises empowerment activities for marginalised groups.
- *Considering power in engagement and participation:* Participation processes in conservation are inherently shaped by power dynamics, with involvement typically ranging from ‘shallow’ participation (where certain stakeholders drive the process) to ‘deep’ participation (where different actors have equal control). We know that tools like co-management and stakeholder mapping can help address power issues but may reinforce existing dynamics if poorly applied. Participation schemes can likewise sometimes be manipulated by powerful actors or instrumentalised to gain consent for projects not in local communities’ interest.
- *Assessing the right to intervene:* The right to intervene in socio-ecological contexts should not be taken for granted. Conservation interventions need clarification of values and assumptions, legitimised by those affected, and transparency around positionality and goals is important, allowing others to assess legitimacy.

With power obviously comes the central question of empowerment, currently functioning as simultaneously a guiding principle, a strategic goal and a rhetorical device (Petriello et al., 2025). Yet below its widespread usage lies an ambiguity – empowerment means different things to different people in different contexts, creating both opportunities and challenges for conservation practice. At its foundation, empowerment is generally understood as processes that address disempowerment – the exclusion from power, resources and decision-making capacity due to marginalisation or structural constraints, but there is marked complexity to empowerment in the conservation literature, as recently found (Petriello et al., 2021).

Some conservation practitioners and researchers seem to use empowerment as a generic, undefined term, assuming shared understanding. When definitions are offered, they vary dramatically – some focus on power redistribution, others on capacity building, control over resources, decision-making authority, self-determination or autonomy. This conceptual looseness creates what might be called a ‘discursive blur’ (Petriello et al., 2025) around conservation initiatives, allowing empowerment to function simultaneously as a buzzword that shifts meaning depending on who uses it.

Petriello and colleagues (2025) find that research on empowerment in conservation concentrates overwhelmingly in the Global South, particularly in biodiversity hotspots and areas with established protected area networks. This pattern reveals a tension at

the heart of conservation empowerment work: are these regions prioritised because disempowerment is most acute there and requires addressing, or because communities in these regions are perceived as lacking capacity and needing external intervention? The latter perception risks reinforcing colonial power dynamics, with outside experts positioning themselves as empowering actors and local communities as passive recipients of empowerment.

This theoretical imprecision means that practitioners often invoke empowerment without considering its complex dimensions of power, whether that's power as individual agency (actor-centred), power as governance rules and norms (institutional), power as systemic inequality (structural) or power as control over knowledge and narratives (discursive) (Petriello et al., 2025). These ambiguities create significant challenges for conservation practice. Most obvious is how empowerment can function as what some scholars term a 'representational rhetoric' (Petriello, 2021) – language that constructs and reinforces particular narratives regardless of actual practices. Conservation professionals may reflexively invoke empowerment to project positive narratives about their work without addressing the complex realities of power redistribution. A notable absence in conservation empowerment discourse is engagement with postcolonial understandings of power. These ambiguities surrounding empowerment reflect broader tensions in conservation between different visions of human-nature relationships, conservation objectives and approaches to justice (Petriello, 2025), necessitating a deeper engagement with empowerment's multifaceted nature, including its contradictions and complexities.

PRINCIPLES FOR INCLUSIVE CONSERVATION

The political imaginary that constitutes 'local' has important consequences for how we approach conservation. As global biodiversity continues to decline and climate change accelerates, conservation paradigms are trying to shift from exclusionary toward more inclusive models that recognise the crucial role of Indigenous Peoples and local communities (IPLCs). This transition reflects mounting evidence that ecological preservation approaches requiring the exclusion of human communities have often resulted in social injustices, displacement of Indigenous Peoples and limited conservation success (Funder and Gravesen, 2021).

Despite growing consensus on the importance of community involvement, there remain substantial risks in how we conceptualise and implement inclusive conservation. These include neglect of community complexity, inadequate community institutional capacities, potential for benefit capture by local elites and misprioritisations in the balance between socioeconomic and biodiversity goals (Khurram et al., 2024). As argued, contextual awareness and a holistic focus on the telecoupling of drivers as well as the communities that live there are important to counter biodiversity loss and human rights abuses. Addressing these challenges requires careful consideration of key elements that shape effective inclusive conservation approaches.

Inclusive conservation places emphasis on procedural and distributive justice, recognition of diverse knowledge systems and values, and meaningful representation in decision-making processes. It seeks to transcend the sometimes-instrumental view of participation in earlier approaches toward more transformative engagement that

addresses underlying power imbalances. *Critical localism* similarly emphasises the importance of place-based conservation that acknowledges local socio-ecological contexts while remaining cognisant of multi-scale influences and power dynamics. It retains the community focus of earlier approaches while adopting a more nuanced understanding of community heterogeneity and the influences of broader political, economic and ecological systems. Having surveyed both scientific and practical literatures around these concepts and their practical application, we summarise findings below on potential principles for working on inclusive conservation.

Governance and decision-making beyond tokenistic participation

Effective governance represents a foundational element of successful inclusive conservation initiatives. Cebrian-Piqueras et al. (2023) advocate for implementing governance models that decentralise power dynamics, moving away from purely hierarchical situations where primary decision-making competencies remain at headquarter level. This requires creating distinct project team structures that account for power distribution, despite the operational and contractual complexity characterising many conservation projects. The quality of governance significantly impacts both social and ecological outcomes. Bennett et al. (2019) emphasise the importance of understanding local communities' perceptions regarding transparency, conflict management, recognition, trust, knowledge and education to ensure their support and meaningful involvement. Similarly, research consistently shows the importance of attentiveness to governance quality, social impacts and ecological effectiveness in conservation initiatives.

Meaningful participation extends beyond allowing IPLCs to simply express their views. As Busck-Lumholt et al. (2025) observe, many development partners and NGOs tend to see participation as consultation and information sharing rather than an exercise in priority setting among equals. Genuine devolution of power and rights requires involvement of diverse actors and perspectives, allocation of substantial decision-making power and resources to local representatives and availability of long-term external support (Huber et al., 2023). Accountability structures often remain vague and blurry in conservation governance (Kim et al., 2020), and participation standards – such as those adhered to by International Development Banks in the form of Environmental and Social Frameworks or Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) measures – cannot be reduced to processes that merely allow IPLCs to express views without influence over outcomes. Moving beyond risk management and standards compliance, meaningful participation recognises local communities as necessary partners rather than merely vulnerable groups meriting risk mitigation efforts.

Milner-Gulland (2024) identifies several prerequisites for more socially just conservation governance, including ensuring human rights form the fundamental foundation underpinning any conservation intervention, including recognitional and procedural equity in planning and evaluation, not just distributive equity; supporting and empowering communities to speak for themselves rather than speaking on their behalf; being available to facilitate residents of biodiverse places to conserve their own nature, rather than imposing external agendas; and listening to community priorities even when they may not align with external conservation objectives. Huber et al. (2023) likewise finds that co-management arrangements increase the likelihood of positive social

outcomes compared to purely community-governed interventions, while ecological success seems more likely in community-based efforts. This tension highlights the challenging task of simultaneously achieving social and ecological objectives, calling for non-local actors to play committed but primarily supportive roles that leave decision-making power with local communities. As an add-on, information and communication efforts seem to be detrimental insofar as they did not include or lead to actual decision-making influence or action (Newig et al., 2019), stressing the importance of genuine devolution.

Rights recognition and secure tenure

Successful inclusive conservation fundamentally depends on recognising and securing the rights of local communities to their lands and resources. Funder and Gravesen (2021) emphasise the need to strengthen support for community-based conservation outside traditional protected areas while advancing legal recognition and enforceable safeguards for the land and governance rights of communities and Indigenous Peoples. Indigenous-led conservation presents one of several shifts that acknowledges Indigenous communities have been effective stewards of biodiversity for millennia, working with knowledge systems developed through observation, adaptation and sustainable use (Sibanda et al., 2024). Rights-based approaches identified by Huber et al. (2023) as characterising successful conservation initiatives include local resource use entitlements, local access rights and statutory local management rights. Without secure tenure, communities lack the authority and incentive to invest in long-term stewardship, leaving them vulnerable to land appropriation and resource extraction by more powerful actors.

Historical context matters significantly in rights recognition. Ashton et al. (2021) note the importance of recognising the effects of colonial rule on land use and ownership patterns and the continued struggle for communities to become central actors in conservation projects affecting them. Community-based forestry approaches focus on re-establishing rights and responsibilities between local communities and the forests they live with, working toward goals including helping community members gain knowledge, skills and confidence to successfully manage their land; ensuring communities have access to natural resources of sufficient volume and quality; establishing effective governance and participation mechanisms; securing clear rights to develop partnerships for forest-based enterprises; and addressing community needs through effective participation. Rahman et al. (2023) echo these principles in calls for locally-led adaptation, emphasising recognition of each group's specific ties and knowledge relating to the ecosystems they inhabit. However, as McElwee (2015) notes in a critique of Payment for Ecosystem Services approaches, conservation initiatives often demonstrate poor understanding of significant drivers of land use change, focusing on proximate causes while neglecting deeper structural issues such as corruption, excessive state logging and industrial cash crop expansion. The success of rights-based approaches depends on addressing these broader structural constraints while ensuring secure tenure as a foundation for sustainable stewardship.

Equitable benefit-sharing and distribution

Distributive equity represents a critical dimension of inclusive conservation (Milner-Gulland, 2024). For conservation initiatives to succeed, communities must receive tangible benefits that outweigh opportunity costs associated with restricted resource use. Huber et al. (2023) identify the provision of local benefits alongside participation as key success factors in conservation projects. However, benefit-sharing mechanisms frequently fall short in practice. FAO (2016) notes that while collaborative forms of community-based forestry have sometimes contributed significantly to improving rural livelihoods and livelihood security, they have not always targeted the poorest community members, with benefits often captured by local elites. This reflects broader patterns of inequality that can undermine conservation effectiveness and legitimacy.

Effective approaches to equitable benefit-sharing have been found to include direct financial support to local communities to empower them to manage and preserve natural resources effectively, development of sustainable enterprises or other compatible activities, benefit-sharing mechanisms that ensure broad community participation rather than elite capture, and long-term, stable funding arrangements rather than short-term project-based approaches. Funder and Gravesen (2021) emphasise that approaches need to focus on revenues and benefits of conservation to outweigh alternatives for households. However, they caution against over-reliance on international leisure markets like tourism/hunting or recurrent donor funding, particularly given government reluctance to share income from these sources with local communities. The challenge of ensuring equitable benefit distribution requires attention to both the mechanisms through which benefits flow and the broader political economy context that shapes access to resources and opportunities.

Knowledge integration and capacity development

Successful inclusive conservation requires integrating multiple knowledge systems – traditional ecological knowledge, local experiential knowledge and scientific research – in ways that respect the validity and value of each. Ashton et al. (2021) highlight adaptive management and learning as essential components, with all stakeholders needing to develop knowledge and skills to successfully manage land and understand available resources – including donors. Locally-led adaptation approaches emphasise recognising each group's specific ties and knowledge relating to the ecosystems they inhabit (Rahman et al., 2023), and technological innovations seem to potentially be expanding possibilities for knowledge integration. Curtis et al. (2018), Buřilová et al. (2023) and Hasan et al. (2024) all highlight the development of remote-sensing and monitoring tools for assessing forest health.

While national monitoring systems differ in quality, remote sensing has facilitated identification of forest loss, its drivers and permanency, enabling more contextualised understanding. This contextual knowledge may increase as artificial intelligence couples with remote sensing, providing broader overviews and real-time data on global forest health (Hasan et al., 2024), but it is important to understand that information and communication prove most valuable when they include or lead to actual decision-making influence or action. Newig et al. (2019) found that information sharing without accompanying decision-making authority often produce limited benefits. Effective knowledge integration requires mechanisms that value diverse knowledge sources and

create pathways for meaningful application in conservation planning and implementation.

Multi-scale linkages and external support

Conservation initiatives require attention to both horizontal linkages (between communities and other actors) and vertical linkages (between communities and decision-making bodies at regional or national levels). These connections help address complex drivers of environmental degradation that transcend local boundaries. As Skutsch and Turnhout (2020) argue, anti-deforestation policies often overemphasise direct drivers like swidden practices while ignoring indirect and enabling drivers that are typically more complex to address. Addressing deforestation requires a comprehensive approach that balances environmental, social and economic priorities within policy efforts.

In the same vein, the way solutions are framed tends to create particular conceptions of the problem, potentially overlooking critical dimensions (Stone, 1989). Huber et al. (2023) identify external support – administrative, financial, logistical or technical – as a defining success factor for conservation initiatives, particularly during initial phases of participatory schemes. However, their research does not establish which specific external actors (national government, regional authorities, researchers, NGOs, private actors) prove most effective or necessary. As said, evidence still suggests non-local stakeholders should play committed but primarily supportive roles that leave decision-making power with local communities.

Rights-based approaches in particular acknowledge that sustainable resource management requires secure tenure and clear authority over decision-making. Legal reforms in various countries are strengthening community resource rights, though implementation gaps often persist between legal recognition and effective empowerment. The use of intermediaries is a practical reality, as donors typically cannot directly engage with local communities and expect immediate co-operation. Building relationships takes years, creating the need for intermediaries. However, this introduces a need to continuously explore and understand the relationship between these intermediary partners and local communities. Ensuring effective feedback loops that do not decouple local communities or reduce their options for input to certain situations defined by donors or project managers remains an ongoing challenge in conservation practice.

Adaptive management and tailored approaches

The diversity of conservation and community contexts means that standardised approaches rarely succeed. Funder and Gravesen (2021) caution against scaling up singular approaches, noting that the diversity of conservation and local community dynamics means approaches cannot simply be tested and then organically scaled from a place of universality. Adaptive co-management approaches combining collaborative governance with systematic learning may show promise for addressing this complexity. These frameworks emphasise flexible governance arrangements, regular reflection on outcomes and knowledge integration across multiple scales. Adaptive management

recognises the inherent uncertainties in resource management and seeks to build adaptive capacity through deliberate learning processes incorporating both traditional and scientific knowledge. Contextual awareness is essential for developing appropriate, place-based conservation strategies rather than one-size-fits-all approaches.

Beyond protected areas: integration of conservation and development

The need to transcend conventional separations between human production and conservation by moving biodiversity conservation out of 'isolated islands' of designated areas to wider landscapes including crop farming areas, rangelands, forests and wetlands, is an important finding in the literature (see Funder and Gravesen, 2021). This integration, rather than separation of land use forms, requires working more holistically with broader production systems, allowing local communities to sustain livelihoods while contributing to conservation objectives. Community-Based Conservation can be effectively integrated with nature-based solutions. For example, ecosystem-based adaptation is seen to offer good scope for protecting conditions supporting both conservation and development goals. These integrated approaches recognise that biodiversity protection cannot be separated from broader sustainable development challenges related to poverty, health, education and governance.

Successful integrated approaches often share characteristics identified by Huber et al. (2023) in their review of protected area conservation cases. These include high levels of co-operation with strong networks, collective action, close collaboration, high levels of communication and building common social capital, values and norms; high degrees of local impact through empowerment, local authority and control over resources, local leadership, local stewardship and integration of local knowledge and systems in decisions; breadth of involvement through institutional mix in decision-making organs, integration of diverse actors and rules, and integration of local needs and multiple views; fair processes with democratic decision-making and equal participation opportunities; rights-based approaches ensuring local resource use entitlements, access rights and statutory management rights; additional local involvement at management level through local enforcement, biological monitoring and restoration activities; and external support providing administrative, financial, logistical or technical assistance.

Balancing devolution with appropriate support remains a fundamental challenge in integrated approaches. While genuine transfer of authority to communities is essential for success, communities often require ongoing technical, financial and institutional support to exercise this authority effectively. Finding the right balance between community autonomy and external support requires context-specific approaches that respond to local capacities and needs while maintaining clear community leadership in decision-making processes. The evidence increasingly suggests that integrated approaches that honour community rights, knowledge and agency offer promising pathways for addressing the interlinked challenges of biodiversity loss and sustainable development in a rapidly changing world.

KEY QUESTIONS FOR INCLUSIVE CONSERVATION PROGRAMMING

Governance and decision-making

- How will the project genuinely devolve power and decision-making authority to local communities rather than limiting their participation to consultation or information sharing?
- What structures are being created to ensure transparency, accountability and conflict resolution in conservation governance?
- Have the different stakeholders within the 'local community' been identified, and are their internal power dynamics understood?
- Are power imbalances acknowledged in the conservation approach, and how are these being addressed at multiple levels (actor-oriented, structural, institutional and discursive power)?
- How do the participation standards go beyond risk management and compliance toward meaningful engagement that recognises local communities as necessary partners?

Rights recognition and tenure

- Has a thorough assessment been conducted of existing land tenure systems (both formal and customary) and how the intervention might affect them?
- How does the project recognise and secure Indigenous Peoples' and local communities' rights to their lands and resources beyond the project timeframe?
- Are deeper structural issues driving environmental degradation (like corruption, industrial expansion or land speculation) being addressed vis-à-vis a focus solely on proximate causes?
- Has the project design clearly differentiated between Indigenous Peoples and local communities, recognising their distinct rights, histories and relationships to the land?
- How does the approach recognise the 'bundle of rights' that constitute tenure (access, use, management, exclusion, etc.)?

Knowledge integration and capacity

- How are diverse knowledge systems – traditional ecological knowledge, local experiential knowledge and scientific research – being integrated in ways that respect the validity and value of each?
- Are mechanisms in place for meaningful two-way learning?
- How is capacity development being supported for all stakeholders (including donors and implementing agencies) to effectively participate in conservation governance?

- Have the different ways communities may value ecosystems beyond economic and intrinsic value frameworks been considered, and how does the project accommodate these diverse valuation systems?
- Does information sharing lead to actual decision-making influence rather than merely informing communities of predetermined plans?

Equitable benefits and distribution

- How will the project ensure that benefits reach the most marginalised members of communities?
- Have benefit-sharing mechanisms been designed to provide sustainable, long-term support?
- Do the economic benefits of conservation outweigh opportunity costs for local communities, particularly compared to alternative land uses?
- How is the focus on protected areas balanced with the need for integrated landscape approaches that recognise cross-boundary ecological and social relationships?
- Is there over-reliance on international leisure markets (tourism/hunting) or recurrent donor funding for sustaining conservation benefits to communities?

Multi-scale linkages and adaptive management

- How does the project address both local drivers of environmental degradation and the broader political, economic and social systems that influence them?
- What mechanisms have been established for regular reflection, learning and adaptation throughout the project lifecycle?
- Has the project been designed with context-specific approaches rather than applying standardised models, recognising the diversity of conservation and community contexts?
- How are telecouplings – the connections between spatially distant phenomena like global market demands and local land use changes – being addressed in the conservation strategy?
- Is conflict acknowledged as a core assumption of conservation rather than consensus, and have appropriate mechanisms been created to navigate dissent and divergent visions?

Beyond protected areas: integration of conservation and development

- How does the project transcend the conventional separation between human production areas and conservation zones to work across broader landscapes?

- Are conservation objectives integrated with broader sustainable development goals related to poverty, health, education and governance?
- How does the approach balance community autonomy with appropriate technical, financial and institutional support?
- Have pathways been identified for conservation to contribute to sustainable livelihoods without creating dependence on external funding?
- Are nature-based solutions like ecosystem-based adaptation being leveraged to simultaneously support conservation and development goals?

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