

Eight ways to unleash the potential of local organisations

Policy pointers

- **Local organisations have** great potential to drive positive change, but their political, legal and funding environment can either empower or undermine them.
- **State policies can make** local organisations more effective by including them in decision making, recognising and respecting traditional access and resource rights, and giving local communities real responsibility for resource management — along with a share of the benefits.
- **Support from international** and national development agencies and NGOs, especially early on, is important in helping local organisations reach a 'critical mass' of size, capacity and influence.
- **Donor funding models need** to recognise the specific needs of local organisations, for example in terms of the scale of funding, time frames and continuity.

Local organisations can be powerful engines driving conservation and development — but only if the policy environment lets them. Global agendas depend on local action, and under the right conditions community-based NGOs will mobilise local knowledge and resources to improve environmental management. Unfavourable policies, however, will stifle these groups and allow the loss of natural heritage and economic opportunities. From land rights to grant deadlines, many variables make a difference. This briefing describes eight key factors that governments, development agencies and donors should get right if we want local organisations to thrive.

Leveraging local power

All poverty reduction is local: conditions have to improve on the ground for those living in a particular neighbourhood, village, mountainside or river valley. Likewise, almost all aspects of good environmental management depend on local knowledge of natural systems and local action to protect them. National and international agencies increasingly recognise that local organisations — that is, grassroots institutions, independent of the state, whose members and beneficiaries have strong links to a specific geographical place and community — underpin the success and sustainability of most environment and development initiatives. The role of local organisations has been emphasised, for example, in the practical and policy guidance on reaching the international targets set by the Millennium Development Goals and the UN Convention on Biological Diversity.

Yet there is still not enough attention to supporting local organisations and creating conditions that bring out the best from local-level processes. Policymakers know that local groups can drive change by taking action, mobilising resources, bringing local knowledge, and providing accountability to their constituencies (see *The local advantage*, overleaf). Local organisations have great potential — but what's been less clear is that this potential can be realised only in a favourable environment.

If we want to leverage local power to deliver ambitious agendas, then national and international institutions have to create that enabling environment. This briefing draws on the experiences of five local organisations to explore the common factors that either unleash the potential of local groups or limit their effectiveness. These organisations are all working to link biodiversity conservation and local development in and around protected areas in East Africa, but many of their lessons are broad enough to apply to groups in other regions and with different goals, such as organisations of the urban poor.

Eight factors in local success

The five East African groups — the Kijabe Environment Volunteers and the Muliru Farmers Conservation Group in Kenya, Uplift the Rural Poor and the Kibale Association for Rural and Environmental Development in Uganda, and the Forest of Hope Association in Rwanda — presented their work on conservation and development at a 2012 workshop hosted by IIED in London. Their profiles pointed to many external variables that affect local organisations. We identify eight factors that seem particularly critical to success.

1. Local rights to land and resources

Rural communities need rights to access and use local natural resources. This is one of the most basic

The potential of local organisations can only be realised in a favourable environment

elements of efficacy: without a legal or policy framework that provides for these rights, people have difficulty taking action.

For communities bordering protected areas, clearly defined user rights allow local people to cooperate in conserving the area's resources — and reap tangible benefits when they succeed. In some cases we studied, local groups were granted rights to use protected areas for community-based ecotourism or non-timber forest harvesting. On the other hand, where forest resources are leased for commercial purposes at the expense of local communities, support for conservation efforts can diminish.

2. Devolution of resource management

Many developing countries have adopted 'decentralisation' policies that aim to devolve control over local resources to local actors. Although devolution efforts have gone some way towards getting local groups involved in natural resource management and conservation, examples from East Africa suggest there are still problems to address. Sometimes devolution has meant that states abdicate their own management responsibilities without recognising limitations on local resources and capacity — and without adequately passing on the rights to any benefits. In Kenya, the Forestry Act of 2005 led to the creation of Community

Forest Associations to collaborate with the national forest service — a positive step towards devolution. But the Muliru Farmers' Conservation Group found that the power balance in such arrangements is often skewed towards state authorities (see The Muliru case: participation without power).

3. Support for local participation in decision making

Organisations can do more to benefit the communities they serve when they have greater influence in local decision-making processes. This often hinges on a productive relationship with government authorities, who have the power to either facilitate or impede input from local stakeholders on important plans such as investments in infrastructure.

Uplift the Rural Poor (URP), a Ugandan organisation, undertook a community-based planning and monitoring exercise and found provision of safe water was a priority for communities around the protected forests of Bwindi, Mhaninga and Echuya. This led to tourism revenues being invested in local water infrastructure. The project helped increase community participation in the local government's planning cycle, which in turn feeds information on development priorities into upper planning levels. In the process, URP strengthened its reputation as a champion of local rights and improved the relationship between communities bordering protected areas and their management authorities.

4. Empowering partnerships with national and international organisations

Among the East African organisations, a range of enabling partnerships have strengthened local organisations and scaled up their work. In particular, national and international partners can add value to local processes in three ways: initial training exercises in key skills; profile raising, for example through international awards such as the Equator Prize; and documenting evidence that demonstrates the value of local action.

For example, the Forest of Hope Association (FHA) in Rwanda partnered with research institutes to measure the impacts of the group's conservation efforts in the Gishwati Forest. This protected area harbours relatively few endangered species and has often been passed over in funding decisions based on biodiversity priorities. But the research partnership showed that FHA's work increased the value of ecosystem services in Gishwati by US\$3 million per year — a powerful alternative argument for forest conservation.¹

5. Locally accessible and relevant forms of financing

Different local organisations will have different funding models depending on their strategies and objectives. Some, like the Muliru Farmers Conservation Group and the Kibale Association for Rural and Environmental

The local advantage

The full and active participation of local stakeholders helps to make conservation and development efforts more equitable, more relevant to rural communities, and more sustainable. Local organisations can do this because of their unique position: they work on the frontlines of poverty and environmental threats, and at the intersections between local, national and international stakeholders.

As representatives of the communities they serve, local organisations can effectively extend the reach of state democracies and service delivery agencies to marginalised and disenfranchised constituencies. As conduits for development funding, and as on-the-ground partners of national and international NGOs, they can enhance the impact of projects.

The local organisations we analysed in East Africa play four key roles in integrating conservation and development:

- Partners of the state who act as intermediaries between state authorities and local stakeholders;
- Champions of local rights, advocating to address basic human rights and rights to land and resources;
- Surrogates for state institutions, substituting for state efforts that are inadequate or absent; and
- Market actors who add economic value to conservation and development processes.

Development, sell goods and services from the protected area they manage — medicinal plants or tourism packages, for example — to generate most of the funds they use for local development. But even where an organisation's activities produce revenue, those activities are typically supported by external funding. In all cases, funding delivered at the right time, in the right way, and on the right scale can enhance a group's capacity and impact.

"Because most conservation projects are long-term while most funding is short-term, some of KENVO's initiatives are left incomplete when the (financial) support runs out," says David Kuria of Kijabe Environment Volunteers (KENVO).

Financial support does more to empower local organisations when it comes with clear and realistic expectations for both donor and grantee. Open channels of communication — not limited to formal proposals and acceptance or rejection letters — help in setting these expectations. It also helps when donors have offices or decision committees based near their local development partners, and when funding is decentralised — that is, grants are paid directly to local communities to fund their own proposals. The GEF Small Grants Programme administered by the UN Development Programme is a good example of decentralised funding.

In addition, local organisations need accessible application procedures. The application process needs to fit local contexts — in terms of language and technology, for example — and not demand intense effort for low levels of funding. And the grant sizes themselves should range from small to large, ensuring that recipients are not overwhelmed by overly ambitious funding.

6. Opportunities to join national civil society networks

Active participation in national networks of civil society actors is often a factor in the growth and influence of local organisations. Exchanges of knowledge, ideas and experience between like-minded initiatives within a country, or occasionally within a region, can inspire new ventures and collaborations, or open up new sources of funding. As well as supporting the work of local organisations through collaborative learning, networks also increase the collective bargaining power of their members. Collating shared community interests under an umbrella network also allows for streamlined messaging on key issues, which can attract national media coverage.

But networks need support to get started, and this is when national and international agencies can play a part. For example, a conservation workshop organised by the US Agency for International Development (USAID) catalysed the formation of the Uganda Community Tourism Association (UCOTA) in 1998.

The Muliru case: participation without power

Despite the piloting of collaborative forest management, the central authority in decision making is the Forest Service. They still determine who can benefit from forest use and in what way. Local community organisations are significant in so far as their labour and organisation is useful for assisting the policing of the resource and in so far as their efforts serve to decrease pressure and reliance on forest products. But their interests and capabilities are not yet central to forest management and they are still subject to the overall authority of the forest department, with few if [any] alternatives for conflict resolution and redress of grievance.

James Ligare, Muliru Farmers' Conservation Group

Founded by local organisations including the Kibale Association for Rural and Environmental Development, UCOTA now has influence country-wide. The association has been represented on planning committees for drafting national tourism legislation and has successfully advocated on behalf of community-based tourism projects at the national level.

7. Underpinning of local priorities in international policy

In addition to the national legal and policy frameworks within which local organisations function, they also work against a backdrop of international targets and guidelines, multilateral policy processes and various articles of international soft law. Agreements such as the Convention on Biological Diversity, including the Nagoya Protocol on Access and Benefit Sharing (ABS) and the Programme of Work on Protected Areas (PoWPA), mandate greater involvement of local communities in natural resources management and more equitable sharing of benefits. Local organisations advocating for fairer governance at the grassroots level can point to policy provisions like these.

8. Value placed on local knowledge

Local communities have first-hand knowledge of ecosystems and social structures — often the key to better stewardship of natural resources. Where officials undervalue local knowledge, they are missing opportunities to improve the efficiency, equity, and sustainability of conservation programmes. This also leads local and national governments to undermine the work of local organisations and erect barriers to grassroots participation in conservation and development processes.

In the case of Kibale Forest National Park in Uganda, the national wildlife authority has often brought in wildlife rangers from other regions of Uganda who lack expertise in local species and take jobs that could have gone to local people — thus eroding support for conservation. Along with the loss of goodwill, hard-earned traditional knowledge is thrown away. "Today, most park managers tend to neglect the significance of

culture and its linkage with conservation,” says Tinka John Amooti of the Kibale Association for Rural and Environmental Development. “This is what they call reinventing the wheel.”

Action needed

The eight variables described above are aspects of political, legal and normative frameworks at the local, national and international levels. Together, they create the institutional environment for local organisations working toward conservation and development goals.

At best, this environment can advance a demand-driven model of rural development that gives local stakeholders an active role in the sustainable management of natural resources. At worst, conditions will stifle and constrict local action, undermining relationships between local communities and government authorities, and allowing the loss of natural heritage and local livelihood opportunities. The reality, at least for the organisations examined here, falls somewhere between these two poles.

Conservation and development are fundamentally local processes; local voices and perspectives must be heard, and local successes and innovations must be recognised and supported. Governments, development agencies and donors can each take specific actions to improve conditions for local organisations:

National governments

- Ensure laws and policies governing resource access and use are equitable and consistent. Widely disseminate information about policies.
- Use local input to define these regulations so that benefit-sharing mechanisms are not skewed towards local and national government authorities.
- Encourage relevant line ministries and agencies, such as wildlife and forest authorities, to work directly with local organisations. This collaboration should be routine and ongoing, not occasional.
- Recognise and reward community-based organisations that are currently delivering on the ground. Don't take their impact for granted.

National and international conservation and development agencies

- Offer support in the early stages when a local organisation is forming. Targeted training in skills

such as proposal writing and computer literacy can greatly improve the chances of local actors being recognised by donors and local government authorities.

- Help to fill capacity gaps related to physical infrastructure, including office space, computers, and transport.
- Actively facilitate relationships between civil society organisations and local government.

Donor organisations

- When funding local organisations, provide grants at various scales appropriate to each organisation's activities and scope. As an organisation grows in experience and capacity, and is able to demonstrate its competence and legitimacy, funding can grow accordingly.
- Choose deadlines carefully — they are critical to matching expectations between donors and local beneficiaries. There is a strong case for longer timeframes, which give local groups a more realistic chance of fully adopting projects, winning community support and sustaining results beyond the funding cycle.
- Consider funding community-driven projects directly through decentralised models. This can improve communication between donors and recipients, as well as the management of expectations.

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EQUATOR INITIATIVE

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Notes

- ¹ Courard-Hauri, D. et al. Unpublished. *Carbon content of standing biomass in Gishwati Forest Reserve, Rwanda*. Drake University, Des Moines.