

# Social assessment for protected areas

Better  
Evidence  
in Action

## In brief

Researchers use various methods to assess the social impacts of protected areas in Africa and worldwide. Analytical tools can range from simple qualitative methods to experimental designs, and there is often a trade-off between ease of use and scientific rigour of assessment. Some methods can demonstrate benefits for communities, others assess both benefits and costs. This makes comparison across studies and protected areas difficult. Relatively few disaggregate results by key social variables such as gender and wellbeing.

The social assessment for protected areas (SAPA) method aims to tackle these shortcomings. It is an accessible, step-by-step toolkit that managers of protected areas can use to make more informed and equitable decisions regarding their impact on surrounding communities.

SAPA uses scientifically rigorous data collection methods — such as randomised sampling, household surveys, focus groups and workshops — to identify the more significant impacts of a protected area in and across the community. It then creates spaces for multiple stakeholders — including community members and other local-level stakeholders — to share, discuss and validate the results and explore ideas for action. Managers can use the information from these discussions to inform any action for positive local change. SAPA's relatively rigorous analytical framework, methods and data analysis processes mean it can also produce credible results to inform national-level policymaking on protected areas.

**Monitoring, evaluation and learning; governance**

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### When can we use it?

As the name implies, we can use this methodology primarily to assess and learn about the specific positive and negative impacts a protected area and its related conservation and development activities have on surrounding communities. It can also tell us about its overall contribution to human wellbeing.

The method addresses some basic issues of protected area (PA) management and governance in terms of consultation and participation, information disclosure and relationships. It asks questions about how much the managers consult and share information with community members and how aware the community is of key information, such as representation on a community-PA committee. We can also use SAPA to explore the extent to which the communities participate in and influence decision making within a PA.

### Strengths for gathering better evidence

This methodology exemplifies how action-oriented research can create positive change on the ground. It strikes a good balance between ensuring its assessment is rigorous and its consultation process is credible and valid in the eyes of local stakeholders, and keeping it simple and inexpensive enough for grassroots organisations and PA managers to implement.

Generating evidence through randomised sampling, household surveys and focus groups ensures that SAPA is transparently based on data that comes from local and collective experiences. This produces well-triangulated evidence and facilitates strong local stakeholder ownership. With the help of external facilitators, SAPA encourages PA managers, community members and other local stakeholders to participate in the assessment process from the beginning to the end. By building trust between stakeholders, this can lead to gradual change.

Considering the resources and capacity available at site level, SAPA aims to burden these as little as possible. Its step-by-step methodology guide for facilitators is accessible and easy to implement. Its open data kit provides preconfigured survey templates, allowing for easy localisation of household surveys. The kit also reduces the need for manpower, by automatising data cleaning and analysis to a large extent.

As well as offering the potential to promote more equitable PA management practice at site level, aggregating SAPA results across sites within a particular country can, over time,



Community meeting discussing social impacts of Ruwenzori Mountains National Park, Uganda

Credit: Rob Small

generate evidence to promote a more enabling policy environment. The same potential exists at a global level, with international conservation policy and the German development bank KfW's proposed adoption of SAPA for 50 PA sites that it supports.

### Aspects to keep in mind

The key is to ensure that the people who make decisions related to PAs participate directly in this process. So we need to adapt the research method to better address local needs and support the local stakeholders to implement the research themselves. Where there is a good relationship between communities and the PA, and local PA managers have the capacity to facilitate the process, they can be the lead facilitator and convenor for this process.

Although SAPA is a low-cost method, it can be time-consuming and resource intensive. It also needs external financial support from sources beyond the PA site to cover data collection, meetings and other expenditure. While this type of support could come from national PA agencies in middle-income countries, this is unlikely in most of Africa. But given the rigorous evidence and the opportunities for positive change, SAPA yields very good return on investment for donors and those concerned with fairer PA management.

It is important to carry out a feasibility study before implementing the SAPA method in a PA. The method does not always work, particularly in high-conflict areas where it could fuel divisions between communities, and between the PA management and local communities. In those cases, a more conflict resolution-oriented approach may be necessary.

National policies will also determine how much change SAPA can bring about at local level. Where national policy is enabling for change at site level, SAPA can be an effective tool for change. But where national policies constrain what local PA management teams can do, SAPA recommendations may not be taken up effectively.

The current toolkit does not elaborate on how we can communicate results effectively and strategically. Looking forward, an accessible template to help community members and policymakers write up the SAPA results will help make them more accessible to all.

### Considering power, inequality and gender

The data collection method is well suited to illuminate intra-community inequality — it gives voices to marginalised groups through randomised household surveys, which are more likely than, for example, focus groups to reflect impacts on all individual households. The method also provides gender-disaggregated data.

Looking forward, the SAPA toolkit could bolster gender responsiveness by including guidelines on gender and social inclusion analysis. It could also place more emphasis on assessing governance-related constraints to achieving more equitable PA management.

*SAPA is transparently based on data that comes from local and collective experiences*



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## Toolkit

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## Social assessment for protected areas in action

IIED has supported our partners who have used the SAPA method across eight protected areas in Ethiopia, Uganda, Zambia, Kenya, Liberia and Gabon during 2014–2016. These were all stand-alone, site-specific assessments, which lasted between three and nine months.

At Uganda's government-managed Rwenzori Mountain National Park, the SAPA included community and stakeholder workshops and a survey with 241 households. The assessment took place between March and October 2015, facilitated by a team of staff from the Uganda Wildlife Authority, Kasese district government, and the nongovernmental organisation Fauna and Flora International.

The assessment found that the national park had several positive impacts on the surrounding communities, including improved security, access to the park for resources, tourism and cultural sites, and livelihood improvement projects. The most significant negative impact mentioned was human-wildlife conflict — mainly crop damage by monkeys, baboons and chimpanzees. More than 80 per cent of community members said that the park made a positive contribution to overall wellbeing and reported good or very good community relations with the park. But livelihood projects had a poor record of success and there was room for improvement when it came to sharing information with community members, especially women.

The SAPA process helps PA managers to understand the significance of specific impacts and related governance issues in their PA and surrounding communities. The SAPA in Rwenzori Mountain National Park has shown the park managers potential simple and practical pathways for fairer park management that will increase the PA's contribution to the wellbeing of local communities.

This document is part of the 'Better Evidence in Action' toolkit.

### Further reading

Franks, P and Small, R (2016) Social assessment for protected areas (SAPA) methodology manual for SAPA facilitators. IIED, London. <http://pubs.iied.org/14659IIED>

Franks, P and Small, R (2016) Understanding the social impacts of protected areas: a community perspective. IIED, London. <http://pubs.iied.org/14661IIED>

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