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Conservation at what price? Bridging the gap between wildlife protection and human rights in Sub-Saharan Africa

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Sub-Saharan Africa is a region of high biodiversity significance in which nature protection constitutes a main leverage for local economic development through wildlife-tourism. Further, it contributes to meeting the 2030 targets of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). In this context, international donors and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are largely financing and implementing wildlife conservation measures. However, as protected areas are expanding and being increasingly secured, the risk of land use conflicts and human rights violations against Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities (IPLCs) increases. In this briefing paper, we assess some of the current conservation strategies and propose recommendations for international development actors.

Keywords: Protected Area, Wildlife Conservation, Green Militarization, Ownership, Human Rights, Sub-Saharan Africa

Normative and historical background

Under the Convention on Biological Diversity, 196 nations agreed to end and reverse nature loss within the next years, setting 23 targets to be achieved by 2030 in the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework. These include the conservation of "at least 30 percent of terrestrial and inland water areas, and of marine and coastal areas, especially areas of particular importance for biodiversity and ecosystem functions and services" (Convention on Biological Diversity 2022, p.9; Target 3) as well as to "Ensure urgent management actions to halt human induced extinction of known threatened species and for the recovery and conservation of species" (ibid.; Target 4).

Sub-Saharan Africa encompasses irreplaceable biodiversity regions, such as the Serengeti or Tarangire, which makes it a **top priority in global conservation efforts** (Brooks et al. 2006; Di Marco et al. 2016). At the same time, Sub-Saharan Africa is also one of the poorest regions in the world, with 33 countries being classified as "least developed countries" by the United Nations (UN) in 2023 (UN trade & development [UNCTAD], 2023). These are two factors why Sub-Saharan Africa received more Official Development Assistance (ODA) for biodiversity conservation than any other region in the world (Leisher et al. 2022). Besides, conservation measures have a positive impact on wildlife tourism, which is seen as a strong economic leverage in the region (UNWTO 2015; Space for Giants 2019).

The largest direct threats to the conservation of biodiversity in Sub-Saharan Africa are agriculture, fishing, logging, and wood harvesting in natural forests as well as illegal hunting (Leisher et al. 2022). These are closely linked to population growth and urbanization. The environmental degradation is expected to increase as concentrated demand for food and charcoal is leading to deforestation and agricultural extension. With the expansion of global markets, the negative environmental impacts on the African continent, historically caused by smallholder agriculture, are increasingly being surpassed by those from large-scale commercial development (ibid.; OECD/FAO 2016). Hunting and bushmeat harvesting cause severe reductions in wildlife populations in African national parks that were designed to be safe havens for wildlife (Laurance et al. 2012; Chapman et al. 2022). However, here it is important to distinguish between wildlife hunting for food, which is a critical part of indigenous people's diets, hunting for increased household income, trophy hunting and human-wildlife conflicts (Leisher et al. 2022). In addition, climate change will further exacerbate threats to biodiversity (Chapman et al. 2022; Abrams et al. 2023; Newsom et al. 2023).

Germany stands out as one of the **largest public donors** supporting **protected areas**[1] in countries of the Global South as well as emerging economies, and accounts for almost 10 percent of the six billion US dollars that are made available from International Cooperation worldwide to sup-

[1]Protected Area: clearly defined geographical space, recognized, dedicated and managed through legal or other effective means, to achieve the long-term conservation of nature with associated ecosystem services and cultural values (Dudley 2008).

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port biodiversity. In Germany, the largest share of spending on biodiversity comes from the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) which increased the budget from 400 million to 600 million euros in 2021. Germany is providing support to over 500 protected areas globally, encompassing a combined area exceeding four times the size of Germany itself (BMZ 2020). Between 2007 and 2017, the German budget for development cooperation on the African continent doubled while the share that is spent explicitly on biodiversity conservation increased sevenfold. As climate change and biodiversity loss gain more attention, countries in the Global North are increasingly recognizing their implications on matters of migration, security, and the economy, and partially their responsibility for these crises, which is boosting their willingness to invest in solutions. The intention to act most effectively draws attention to the biodiversity hotspots and "lungs of the planet", including the Congo Basin, and motivates Germany to make transfer payments for environmental protection measures in African countries (Schlindwein 2020). From 2025 onwards, fewer budget funds will be available for international climate and environmental protection than in previous years. The funds for global environmental and climate protection in the BMZ budget and the International Climate Initiative (IKI) in the budget of the Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Climate Action will decrease by around 100 million euros, or about 12 percent (VENRO 2024). This raises the risk that Germany may not fulfil its commitment to provide 6 billion euros per year for international climate financing.

Historically, the creation of natural parks and protected areas has often been shaped by colonial and Eurocentric perspectives on nature which has implications until today. The establishment of natural parks and protected areas was influenced by the European view of **nature as untouched wilderness,** leading to the displacement of local populations and denial of their access to ancestral lands (Neumann 2002; Murombedzi 2003; Jones 2006). In the late 19th century, colonial governments enacted hunting restrictions and created game reserves, driven by European aristocrats aiming to preserve game for elite sports hunting, excluding Indigenous **Peoples and Local Communities (IPLCs)**[2]. From the 1920s, Africa's first national parks were established, continuing into the postcolonial era (Munro 2021). Restrictive hunting laws allowed trophy hunting for high fees while restricting IPLCs from hunting under the threat of punishment (Schlindwein 2020). Post-World War II, these efforts intensified, displacing African populations to create national parks (Munro 2021). Today, many protected areas like Timbavati (South Africa), Selous (Tanzania) or Rungwa (Tanzania) are financed with big game hunting license fees (Hariohay et al., 2018; Mremi et al., 2023; Schlindwein 2020; Timbavati, 2022).

Challenges and consequences

In the early 2000s, a so-called **"fortress" model** based on intensively protected areas was developed (Hutton et al. 2005). In this context, wildlife protection in Sub-Saharan Africa is nowadays criticized for **exacerbating land use conflicts** between IPLCs and conservation staff in and around the parks. The former need land for farming or for grazing and experience abuses ranging from the interdiction to access natural resources to forced evictions from certain areas (Weldemichel 2020). **Human rights abuses** against local communities linked to conservation issues are reported in and around many protected areas around Sub-Saharan Africa, e.g. in Lobéké National Park in Cameroon (Cosmas et al. 2020), in Bwindi Impenetrable National Park in Uganda (Kokunda et al. 2023) or in Serengeti National Park in Tanzania (Weldemichel 2020). The main causes of the **conflicting relations** between park authorities and local communities can be described as follows:

First, scholars describe as **green militarization** the repressive and coercive policies that emerged from the 2000s to tackle poaching in protected areas (Lunstrum 2014). This approach entails the increasing weaponization and military formation of rangers and the use of para-military personnel. It has been developed as a response to the increasing violence and armament of larger-scale criminal poaching groups, ultimately leading to a vicious circle on both sides (IUCN 2014). More broadly, green militarization establishes nature conservation as a security issue (Duffy 2022). A concrete example of the militarization trend is the "shoot-to-kill" policy targeting suspected poachers that has been implemented in Botswana since 2013 (Mogomotsi 2017).

Second, populations living in and / or around the protected areas often **profit little** from wildlife tourism despite its high potential as economic leverage (Space for Giants 2019; Zhou 2023). Local communities are pushed to the periphery of wildlife conservation and the tourism value chain (Massé et al. 2017). For instance, tenants of official hunting zones often do not provide the agreed services to IPLCs, e.g. the construction of schools or health centres (Kulla et al. 2024). Also on the political level, they are **barely included in decision-making processes** in many protected areas. This undermines the effectiveness of wildlife conservation in the long term by reducing its social acceptance from local stakeholders (Wicander 2015). Eventually, this economic and political exclusion builds up on existing discrimination and marginalization of indigenous groups, including pastoralist communities (Schilling & Wetland 2023).

Third, direct **human-wildlife conflicts** like crop-raiding or livestock predation are increasing in and around protected areas (Mogomotsi 2020). This leads to retaliations from pastoralists and farmers and often to the killing of the animals, fuelling tensions with conservation authorities in turn

[2] Small Indigenous People and Local Communities: Although Indigenous Peoples (IP) have unique characteristics and different internationally accepted rights when compared to Local Communities (LC), both groups often have an intimate connection to their communally held lands and waters. […] In many cases, it results in systems of practices, knowledge, innovations and values that support the conservation of biodiversity, with associated spiritual, social and cultural values (WWF et al., 2021).

(Bulte & Rondeau 2005). Compensation measures from conservation institutions for damage through wildlife either exist only on paper or are non-accessible for IPLCs (Kulla et al. 2024). Human-wildlife interactions are more likely to happen because of agricultural expansion and growing settlements (Stoldt et al. 2020). This is exacerbated by the changing practices of some pastoralist groups turning to farming (Makumbe et al. 2022). Finally, climate change amplifies human-wildlife conflicts, for instance by sharpening the competition over freshwater and grasslands (Abrahms et al. 2023).

Against this background, some international donors and development and conservation organizations have been blamed for supporting wildlife protection projects where human rights violations have been reported (Marijnen 2017). Particularly, a study of the NGO Survival International highlighted the persecution faced by the Baka ethnic group by a project financed by European and German taxpayer money in the forests of Messok Dja of the Congo Basin (Survival International 2017). These accusations have raised consciousness by international cooperation actors to focus more on safeguarding human rights in their conservation actions. This is shown by the publication of special guidelines to address that issue (GIZ 2020; WWF 2023). Their recommendations include, among others, the better integration of indigenous perspectives or the development of complaints channels for IPLCs. Also, German donors like BMZ and KfW have set up **new** s**afeguards**. For instance, they provide technical cooperation along with financial cooperation in case implementing partners lack the former. But the question remains if these commitments to protect IPLCs' rights translate into reality on the ground.

As a matter of fact, problematic nature conservation practices are still making headlines nowadays, like the violent attempt of the Tanzanian government to displace the Maasai from their traditional lands in order to create a private hunting reserve (The Guardian 2023).

Discussions points

This raises the question of the ongoing popularity of the **fortress model**, which can be attributed to its **effectiveness** attested by another recent example: In Botswana, the elephant population has rapidly increased due to the militarization of conservation and violent anti-poachers' policy. Upset by the rising damages caused by elephant herds and the German ban on trophy hunting, the president Mokgweetsi Masisi threatened in April 2024 to send 20,000 elephants to Germany (BBC 2024). But beyond that example green militarization has been found to have inherited pitfalls. The normalization of the loss of human life in the pursuit of wildlife conservation incites the debate about whether wildlife is more important than human lives. These divisions and the hardening of positions under the fortress model question its sustainability and productiveness as it leaves minimal space for the engagement of the local population. Some initiatives try to enhance local communities' engagement, for example with inclusive **anti-poaching community scout programs**. The scouts come from neighboring IPLCs and act as a link between park authorities and their own communities. However, these initiatives often fail to create ownership and accountability, providing scout jobs to few community members instead of pushing for bottom-up approaches by developing a **wildlife-based economy** inclusive of locals as active stakeholders (Massé et al, 2017).

Indeed, ecotourism, based on watching wildlife in their natural environment and trophy hunting, can be a catalysator for regional development and a source of revenues for IPLCs. They should ideally be involved at all levels of the **tourism value chain**, so that economic spinoffs do not just benefit an elite, namely the tourism infrastructure proprietors (Zhou 2023). Rwanda has for instance invested considerably in nature-based tourism in the last two decades and has become a forerunner country in that matter. Now 1 in 20 working-age Rwandans works in the tourism sector and 15% of tourism revenues are spent on infrastructure around the protected areas (Space for Giants, 2019). Furthermore, **community-led tourism** initiatives can be driven to encourage local communities to preserve natural resources. However, local governments and donors often neglect the **unintentional negative effects** of ecotourism. This includes the degradation of nature by tourism infrastructure, e.g. the construction of hotels and roads or the poor waste management. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic and terrorist attacks can be mentioned as destabilizing factors driving tourists away. In that sense, the approach of moving local communities from subsistence and autonomous agriculture to tourism, which depends on external visitors, may not prove to be sustainable in the long run.

Eventually, the **participatory approach,** involving IPLCs in conservation efforts, is presented as an alternative to the fortress model. It is alleged to be well representative, equitable, and most importantly legitimate (López-Bao et al. 2017). In practice, the participatory approach entails for example awareness campaigns to educate IPLCs about their rights and responsibilities with regard to wildlife management. The establishment of compensation schemes as compensation for wildlife-related damages can also be an incentive for IPLCs to engage in conservation (Nkansah-Dwamena 2023). Still, participatory conservation itself may not be the panacea of conservation, especially if it lacks resources and capacity building for participants. Notably, community-based conservation projects receive on average less financial support, and when financed are rarely developed within communities, and are rather a result of a top-down approach (Baldus 2009).

Recommendations for international conservation actors:

First, conservation organizations should systematically implement a **Do Not Harm assessment** through all stages of their conservation projects. In line with the good practices of WWF and GIZ, this entails a risk analysis of the impacts of conservation measures on local populations and their interactions with the habitat. The creation of complaints

channels for IPLCs and the monitoring during and after project implementation are also critical. Overall, a **participatory approach** should be encouraged in early project phases, so that the interests and perspectives of IPLCs are considered in conservation efforts. The consideration of the Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) rights of IPLCs in selected conservation areas before funding should become systematic in that regard.

Second, the development and training of community rangers in protected areas should be encouraged. In contrast to governmental employees, these rangers come from the surrounding communities. On the one hand, they know the area and its wildlife. On the other hand, they have a closer link to the people, know the local customs and can thus better mediate land use conflicts. The International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW) is **supporting the training** and capacity building of community rangers. In addition to that, IFAW takes action to empower Maasai female rangers in a traditionally male-dominated work. The organization also trains rangers to acquire technical skills for the investigation of environmental crimes. In Kenya, more wildlife crime cases have been prosecuted after these training sessions have been done (IFAW 2024). NGOs and (German) development organizations could focus more on such projects, aiming at supporting and expanding rangers' activities beyond the only repression of poaching . It is also important to ensure decent salaries for (community) rangers, to reduce corruption risks by the local population or criminal gangs.

Third, biodiversity and wildlife conservation plans should be integrated into a **holistic development strategy** for a region. It must be ensured that wildlife has enough space to roam freely, ideally through connected habitats. This reduces the risk of habitat degradation and overuse of protected areas by certain species (e.g., overgrazing by elephants) while allowing for migration routes, genetic exchange and the escape of natural threats (Boone & Hobbs 2004; Mbaiwa & Mbaiwa 2006; Kowalczyk et al. 2012). This can also lead to reduced pressure on local communities as solely relying on fencing limited areas merely leads to shifting human-wildlife conflicts to other places (Osipova et al. 2018). In order to achieve a systemic, synergistic and solidarity based form of land stewardship that addresses the land use trilemma of climate protection, food security and biodiversity conservation, **integrated landscape approaches** are needed (WBGU 2021). These approaches aim for integration of policy and practice for various land uses to ensure sustainable and equitable land management while addressing climate change. The aim is to balance the competing land demands through adaptive management, considering both the physical landscape and socio-economic and political factors affecting land use. Thus, multiple stakeholders have to be included in governance strategies to balance societal and environmental goals at the landscape level, aiming to identify trade-offs and potential synergies for more sustainable and equitable land management (Birhanu et al. 2024; Reed et al. 2022).

Lastly, as climate change exacerbates existing problems, adaptation measures are needed, including climate resilient agroecological practices to decrease pressure on the environment as well as on the local communities. Timely conservation practices should go hand in hand with the creation of livelihood opportunities for IPLCs that do not rely on the exploitation of wildlife or the degradation of natural resources. Furthermore, countries and societies of the Global North urgently need to increase efforts to mitigate climate change to do the very least to not exacerbate the pressure on communities, wildlife and landscapes.

In conclusion, tackling the interconnected challenges of conservation, climate change, and local community welfare requires integrating social, environmental and economic considerations. A combination of the proposed approaches is vital to effectively address these issues on local, regional and global scales to promote resilience for both ecosystems and the communities that depend on them.

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