

POLICY BRIEF //

ESSENTIAL ROLE OF COMMUNITY VOICES IN BIODIVERSITY POLICYMAKING: EXAMPLES FROM SOUTH AFRICA

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CONSERVATION
SOUTH AFRICA
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01/ KEY MESSAGES

This policy brief aims to make the case for the imperative of supporting and involving communities as a central strategy for countries to achieve the goals and targets of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) through their National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans (NBSAPs). The key messages are as follows:

- 1 NBSAP:** The NBSAP update emerges as a pivotal opportunity to ensure that community voices are heard and actively integrated into the policymaking process. To achieve this involves introducing communities to the significance of communication in shaping policy, empowering communication champions to create verified materials from community stories and facilitating opportunities for champions to share these stories with policymakers on behalf of their communities.
- 2 CAPACITY BUILDING:** To promote greater community involvement in policymaking, it is essential to invest in capacity building for communities and community communication champions, while also providing the necessary resources and support to overcome obstacles like poor understanding of biodiversity, climate change and global policy.
- 3 EFFECTIVE POLICIES:** Engaging communities in policymaking has significant benefits, including the emergence of diverse perspectives from multigenerational groups. Such participation can lead to the development of effective and efficient solutions, strategies, and policies.

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02/ INTRODUCTION

2.1. Background on the GBF

Urgent and transformative action is required to protect and conserve biodiversity [1], while enhancing the resilience of people. Countries around the world, including South Africa, are working towards living in harmony with nature by 2050. They adopted the GBF at the fifteenth meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), held in December 2022. The GBF sets the global direction of action and funding, with the aim of halting and reversing

biodiversity loss by 2030 and living in harmony with nature by 2050. It contains action-oriented targets for each country to reach that cover three main categories – (1) reducing threats to nature, (2) meeting people's needs while using nature sustainably and sharing its benefits, as well as (3) developing tools and solutions for doing so. One of the defining features of the GBF is its firm commitment to inclusive governance, recognizing the critical role that community participation plays in achieving its targets.

2.1. Background on NBSAPs

NBSAPs serve as the primary tool for countries to fulfil their obligations under the CBD. From now through to 2024, countries will update their NBSAPs to align with the GBF. These updated NBSAPs will be submitted for consideration at the sixteenth meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the CBD, scheduled for the second half of 2024. The NBSAP update emerges as a pivotal opportunity to ensure that community voices are heard and actively integrated into the policymaking process.

The aim of this policy brief is to make the case for the imperative of empowering and involving communities as a central strategy for countries to achieve the goals and targets of the GBF nationally through their NBSAPs.

BOX 1: How communities were involved in South Africa's current NBSAP

South Africa's current [NBSAP \(2015 – 2025\)](#) provides a roadmap for how the country can best manage and utilise its natural resources and conserve its unique biodiversity, while supporting the country's development goals. The NBSAP underwent extensive consultation with stakeholders including government and civil society organisations who have experience working in communities. However, the 2024 NBSAP revision can be improved by more actively involving community members during its development.

2.2. An overview of community participation in biodiversity policy making

Supporting the active engagement of communities in policymaking is a recognition of their rights and an avenue for them to make their voices heard. This is particularly important for the most vulnerable people in rural areas, whose livelihoods depend on ecosystems and who feel the impacts of biodiversity loss directly. Inclusivity in policymaking helps ensure that the global community is moving collectively and cohesively towards common goals – from halting and reversing biodiversity loss to combatting climate change and reducing poverty [2].

Active contributions from communities in policymaking allows for the consideration of insights into threats, hidden opportunities, and indigenous wisdom. When shared and included, these insights can transform policies into powerful tools for change. Local knowledge and community buy-in strengthen policy implementation, making it more impactful and sustainable [3].

However, the road to inclusivity can be challenging – from unwillingness to participate, deference to community leaders, inappropriate approaches, time demands, resource requirements and the need for capacity building and continuous commitment to participation. These challenges must be considered on the road towards a more inclusive, equitable and biodiverse future through the NBSAPs revision process [3].

DESIRED OUTCOMES OF COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION



Preserved natural resources



Community rights upheld



Collective efforts



Effective policy



Community buy-in

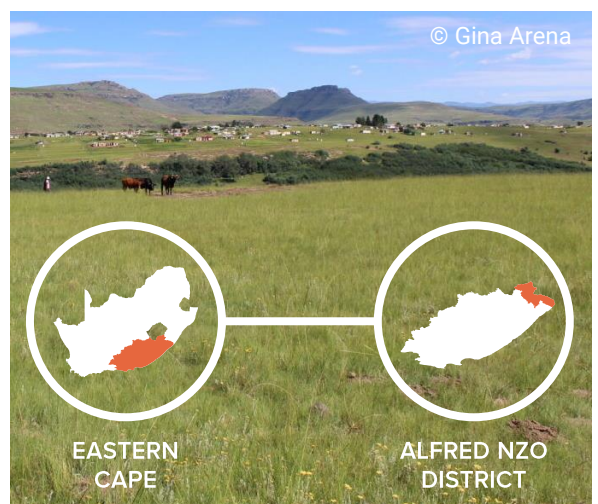
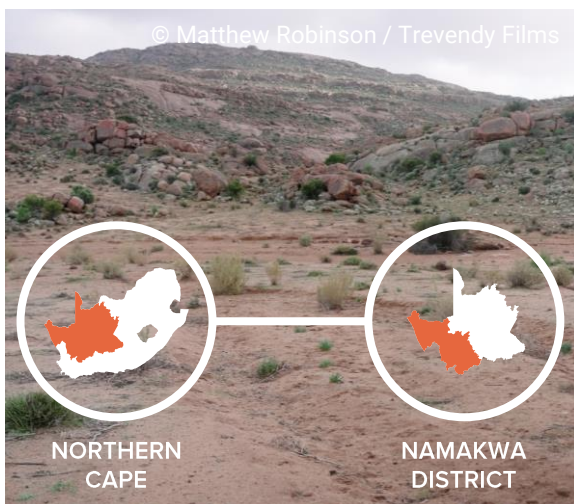
3.1. Background

Community champions in South Africa that have directly benefited from ecosystem-based adaptation¹ were given an opportunity to share their experiences with policymakers. The process, which was facilitated by Conservation South Africa (CSA) from September 2022 to September 2023, was financed by SwedBio. Community champions were identified from three villages in two different locations in South Africa - two villages, Leliefontein and Nourivier in the Namakwa District, Northern Cape Province and Mvenyane in the Alfred Nzo District, Eastern Cape Province.

Leliefontein and Nourivier // Leliefontein and Nourivier in the Namakwa District, Northern Cape Province are part of the most biologically diverse desert ecoregion in the world known as the Succulent Karoo. Home to about 6,400 plant species, this fragile ecosystem is recognised as one of two arid biodiversity hotspots. It is also home to farmers who have lived with their livestock in this harsh but beautiful environment for over 2,000 years. The area contains wetlands,

which have provided essential ecosystem services, such as drinking water, crops, and livestock grazing, sustaining its people and livelihoods for generations.

Mvenyane // Despite being in one of South Africa's most important strategic water source areas, Mvenyane faces several environmental challenges that have deeply impacted the local ecosystems and the livelihoods of its residents. The unchecked spread of invasive wattle trees has had severe consequences, leading to the degradation of the once-thriving grassland biome. Grazing for livestock has decreased, and biodiversity loss has overshadowed the community's ability to engage in socio-cultural activities, such as gathering medicinal plants. Mvenyane has a forest full of indigenous tree species, but with the increase of wattle, the forest is under threat. It has disrupted access to vital water resources, a significant concern for the community, as they heavily depend on these freshwater ecosystems. These challenges are further exacerbated by climate change, intensifying the complex and interconnected environmental and socio-economic issues faced by the community.



¹ Using nature to adapt to and mitigate climate change while benefiting people and nature is known as ecosystem-based adaptation and mitigation, which are under a broader category known as nature-based solutions.

3.2. The approach

It is important to acknowledge that different approaches worked differently in each village. Therefore, it is critical to tailor community participation in biodiversity policy making to the unique needs and characteristics of individual villages and community groups to ensure its effectiveness.

Selecting community communication champions // To identify community champions, a series of introductory workshops were conducted within the larger community groups, where the project's objectives were presented. During these workshops, community members were encouraged to identify individuals who could convey stories from their communities, aligning with the key messages they wished to convey to policymakers.

In Nourivier, workshop participants eagerly shared their stories, and five individuals expressed their interest in becoming community communication champions. Meanwhile, in Leliefontein, community members chose to engage with their cooperative² during a cooperative meeting, where seven community champions were identified.

In Mvenyane, the project reached out to a variety of established community structures, including youth, women and men, and elder community members. However, they encountered several challenges, such as low interest from the youth and scheduling conflicts among the men. Despite these obstacles, a dedicated group of ten women, which included two youth, expressed their enthusiasm to become community champions.

² Cooperatives, governed by the Cooperatives Act 14 of 2005, promote economically viable businesses, especially for historically disadvantaged groups like women, youth, and individuals with disabilities. They play a vital role in addressing poverty and reducing unemployment, driving economic development.

Their strong commitment stemmed from their desire to make meaningful contributions to their community and address the gender disparity in conservation efforts. These women were particularly concerned about the difficulties they faced engaging in community initiatives which predominantly involved male-dominated groups, often sidelining women in decision-making during the initial stages of projects and idea generation. Their motivation for participation was driven by a desire to share their unique perspectives and narratives, aiming to bring about a more inclusive and equitable approach to community involvement.

Number of community champions

5 in Nourivier (3 women)
7 in Leliefontein (3 women)
10 in Mvenyane (all women)

Capacity building // Multiple workshops were conducted to equip the community communication champions with the skills and knowledge required to create effective communication materials. These workshops covered a range of topics, including climate change, biodiversity, enhancing self-confidence, audio-visual skills, and presentation techniques. Capacity was also developed to create a narrative about the changes that communities have witnessed in their environment over the past 50 years, highlighting the differences between the past and present conditions.

Choice of communication medium // In Nourivier and Leliefontein, communities chose to convey their narratives through video presentations. The women's group in Mvenyane opted for a dual approach to share their stories, first individually (see [link](#)) and then as a group. Initially, they individually documented their stories in their local languages, which were later transcribed and translated into English. This approach allowed them to capture unique individual perspectives and enrich their contributions to the collective narrative. Subsequently, they collaborated on a video production that showcased the community's shared experiences and stories. See pages 7 and 8 for links to the videos.

3.3. Obstacles to meaningful participation

Poor engagement from youth // In all three villages, it was challenging to gain the interest of the youth, despite several attempts at encouraging their participation. As a result, the project involved elder members of the community, which proved to be a successful approach. This difficulty came from the limited understanding of biodiversity, climate change and conservation among the youth. The elder members, with their extensive experience, found it easier to grasp these concepts.

Poor understanding of biodiversity, climate change and global policy // Community members with limited knowledge of biodiversity and climate change faced difficulties participating in the project, especially when it came to introducing them to global policy for the first time. This is why the selection of community communication champions already familiar with biodiversity and climate change was crucial. These champions were able to effectively engage in the project and convey important messages on behalf of the community. Translating terms into local languages proved to be highly beneficial to help understand terms such as climate change and ecosystem-based adaptation. When community communication champions were introduced to the concept of ecosystem-based adaptation, they quickly recognised that they had already been practicing it, even if they hadn't used that specific term.

Expectations of job opportunities // In Leliefontein, around 100 people attended the introductory workshop with hopes of job opportunities stemming from the project. When it became evident that the workshop primarily aimed at engaging with policymakers rather than offering paid employment, a portion of the attendees decided to leave. To avoid such misunderstandings, it is advisable to clearly communicate the workshop's purpose to communities in advance, ensuring that the right audience attends.

Reluctance to share their own stories of adaptation // Initially, in Leliefontein and Nourivier, many participants turned away from sharing their own adaptation initiatives and personal experiences. Instead, the conversation shifted toward their expectations from government actions. To encourage a more in-depth exchange of stories, detailed storytelling in smaller groups led by community champions was encouraged. This was especially effective when champions had insights into past conditions, the changes that occurred, and how they adapted to climate change, which facilitated a more open sharing of stories. In Mvenyane, it was beneficial to provide community champions with examples of other stories and videos. This helped them better visualise and plan their own narratives.

3.4. Key successful community participation outcomes

A multigenerational perspective on environmental change // In Mvenyane, community champions examined the village's environmental conditions through the lenses of three different generations. Due to the varied age groups involved in all three villages, they could provide in-depth insights into the changes that have unfolded in the village over the past four decades. These changes included shifts in vegetation, changes in water availability, variations in species, and evolving challenges to socio-cultural activities experienced across different generations. This proved to be highly beneficial in helping the communities comprehend the natural resources that had existed but were now absent or diminished.

Strong community bonds and capacity for future engagement // In Mvenyane, the community champions developed strong relationships with one another, fostering a sense of community, and a willingness to engage in activities beyond the scope of this project. Their active involvement has also contributed to the development of their capacity and skills, enabling them to contribute effectively to other projects.

Community champions identified ways to effectively adapt to climate change. The key messages that emerged from their experiences that they wanted policymakers to be aware of are as follows:

LELIEFONTEIN

1 Restoration of water sources:

The restoration of water sources, including wells and wetlands, has enhanced water security within the community. To further improve water availability, communities have taken additional measures such as the installation of water troughs, tanks and boreholes, and erosion control measures were highlighted as crucial for water retention and maintaining water quality. It is important to note that water alone is not sufficient; it must be accompanied by the availability of grazing to effectively benefit the community.

2 Resting grazing areas:

Rangelands that are rested and well managed support grass growth. They are better able to provide fodder to livestock during droughts and improve infiltration of water which buffers against floods and holds fertile topsoil.

NOURIVIER

1 Soil restoration:

The use of gabions (containers filled with stones or other materials) for restoration and erosion prevention effectively minimises soil loss and mitigates the impacts of storms and floods, contributing to preserving and stabilising the soil.

2 Indigenous breeds:

Indigenous breeds, known for their broader grazing patterns and balanced land use, play a pivotal role in reducing land erosion. They are faster growing, more resilient, and bring multiple advantages, including decreased medication expenses, increased milk production, and improved meat yields.

VIDEO

Leliefontein: Capturing community stories of adaptation to climate change in the Kamiesberg



VIDEO

Nourivier: Capturing community stories of adaptation to climate change in the Kamiesberg



Community champions identified ways to effectively adapt to climate change. The key messages that emerged from their experiences that they wanted policymakers to be aware of are as follows:

1 Clearing wattle for employment opportunities and access to rangelands:

Removing wattle creates employment and reclaims valuable grasslands and spaces for the resurgence of indigenous species. Clearing wattle has transformed areas into safer zones for community members, especially women, expanded grazing lands, curbed soil erosion and land degradation, and enhanced access to groundwater. See case study.

2 Improved access to safe and healthy water due to spring protection, rehabilitation and awareness-raising:

Mvenyane faces challenges with built water infrastructure provided by local institutions. Consequently, the community relies only on natural freshwater sources for drinking, hygiene, and livestock, but they were concerned about water contamination and some women shared accounts of the extensive distances they used to travel to fetch water. The protection and rehabilitation of springs have positively changed the lives of women in Mvenyane. They now have access to protected water sources that offer safe and clean water. The increased availability of water has led to additional

activities, including irrigation, improved household and personal sanitation, and separate access points for people and livestock consumption.

3 Enhanced access to socio-cultural activities through rangeland restoration:

In Mvenyane, the natural environment holds immense significance for the community, as it is deeply intertwined with spirituality, religion, and medicinal practices. Biodiversity loss has a profound impact on the community's ability to engage in specific cultural activities, as certain species are integral to these rituals.

One prominent tradition in Mvenyane is initiation, a practice where each year the village's men venture into nature, relying on water and indigenous species. Clean water is associated with cleansing one's spirit and invoking pure spirits into one's life. These rituals emphasise the importance of both the accessibility and quality of water. Proper waste management in these areas is of utmost importance, as it can determine whether certain rituals can proceed or if the area may be deemed spiritually impure, making it unsuitable for future rituals. This principle also extends to religious practices, including baptism.



VIDEO

Mvenyane: A story of climate change impacts on different ecosystems as told by three generations of women from a small village in Matatiele, South Africa

INDIVIDUAL STORIES

Available at this [link](#)

04/ CONCLUSION

The active participation of community groups in villages such as Leliefontein, Nourivier, and Mvenyane exemplifies a commitment to having their voices heard in the policymaking process. These communities recognise the long-term advantages of engaging in policymaking and the potential future funding opportunities that such involvement could unlock.

It is critical to support the active engagement of communities to contribute to policies, strategies, projects, and initiatives that are designed for or impact them, all while aligning with their unique needs. As South Africa updates its NBSAP, policy makers can incorporate the following key lessons learned on how to effectively engage communities for stronger, more inclusive policy outcomes:

KEY LESSONS LEARNED

1 IDENTIFY COMMUNITY COMMUNICATION CHAMPIONS:

The selection of community champions who span generations and are well-versed in biodiversity and climate change is pivotal for successful engagement. They bridge the knowledge gap on biodiversity and climate change, providing a comprehensive view of long-term changes and effectively conveying vital messages on behalf of the community. When given the space to share their stories, community champions become valuable sources of information to shape policy.

2 TAILOR ENGAGEMENT TO LOCAL CONTEXTS:

Recognise that different communities may require unique approaches to community involvement. Customising participation to suit the individual needs and characteristics of each village enhances the effectiveness of community engagement in biodiversity policy.

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