



NRGF Policy Paper

Improving Community Benefits from the Great Limpopo Transfrontier Conservation Area:

Recommendations for Practitioners and Policy Makers

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Cover image: *Loxodonta africana* in Djuma Game Reserve; Photograph by David Berkowitz

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Introduction

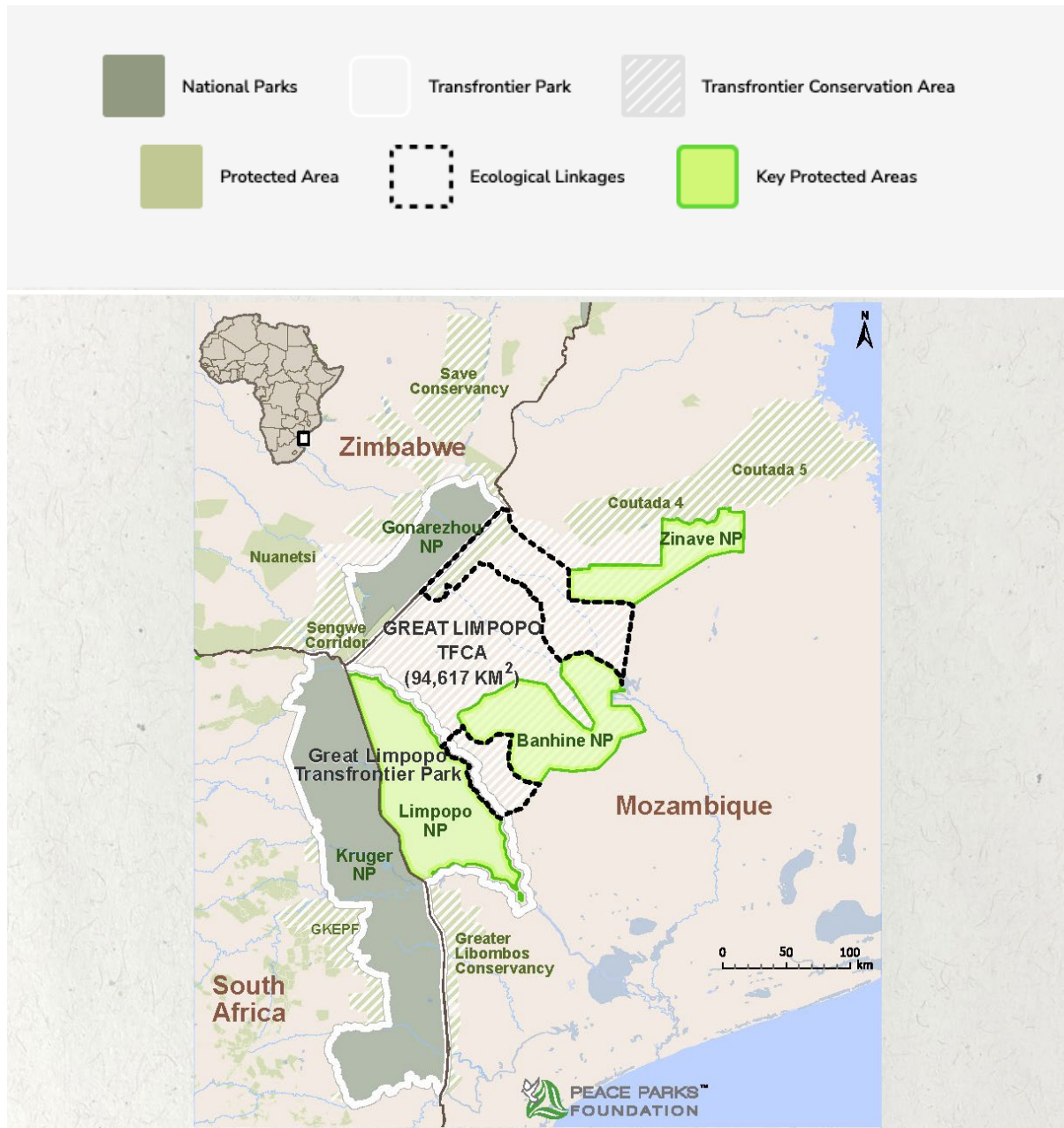
Over the past two and a half decades, there has been a significant proliferation of transfrontier conservation areas (TFCAs) in southern Africa, with the establishment of the Great Limpopo Transfrontier Conservation Area (GLTFCA) in 2002 as the second TFCa in the region. TFCAs are defined as “a large ecological region that straddles the boundaries of two or more countries, encompassing one or more protected areas, as well as multiple resources use areas” (SADC, 1999, p. 107). The GLTFCA’s objectives extend beyond improving transboundary biodiversity conservation, it seeks to enhance socio-economic development in rural areas and contribute to the alleviation of poverty in local communities (see SADC FANR, 2023). However, a number of research studies in the GLTFCA reveal that the local communities are not happy with the performance of the GLTFCA with regards to the benefits it is delivering to these communities (see Chiutsi, 2014; Nkomo, 2021; Mpofu et al., 2025). This policy paper provides recommendations for practitioners and decision-makers in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) on actions they can take to improve community benefits from the GLTFCA. It is informed by research carried out by Nkomo (2021) and by the rights-based IUCN CEESP natural resource governance framework (the NRGF) for good governance in natural resources management worldwide.

The Nature of Benefits to Local Communities in the GLTFCA

What is the nature of the benefits accruing to the local communities around the GLTFCA? The study by Nkomo (2021) examined this question with a focus on local communities living within and near the Gonarezhou National Park in Zimbabwe and the Kruger National Park in South Africa (see map below). The study was based on an analysis of published and grey literature on the GLTFCA, including SADC protocols and the GLTFCA Treaty to guide the analysis. Key findings from the study are as follows:

1. *Benefits from tourism:* Tourism has been a major driver of economic income and livelihood sustenance for local communities, particularly in the Kruger National Park. It has led to partnerships between communities and private sector companies that have generated revenue. Tourism has also created a market for arts and crafts.
2. *Benefits from the enhancement of livelihoods:* Through these tourism partnerships and other initiatives, local communities have benefited through employment, training, and income generation. For example, the Makuleke community CPA receives 8% of revenue from the lodges on their land. The Gonarezhou Conservation Trust also hires most of its employees from local communities.
3. *Benefits from access to resources in the parks:* Local communities are allowed access to resources like medicinal plants, grass for livestock, and the ability to perform cultural rituals within the national parks. SANParks has developed sustainable resource use programmes to facilitate this access.

4. *Benefits from cross-border access and trade:* Cross-border activities like the annual Shangaan festival and wilderness trails have generated some income and facilitated cultural connections between communities across borders.



Map 1: The GLTFCA (Source: PPF, 2005)

However, the study also found the following challenges in local communities:

1. *Income-generating projects:* These have not had a tangible effect on alleviating poverty. The unfulfilled promises of the GLTFCA have resulted in increased vulnerability and migration for better livelihoods among communities in Zimbabwe.

2. *Human-wildlife conflict*: The lack of compensation for losses has eroded trust in park management. This is a major issue, especially in the Sengwe area of the Gonarezhou Park, where 86% of households depend on agro-pastoral activities.
3. *Lack of clear guidelines and transparency*: local communities complain about limited inclusion and participation in tourism enterprises, as well as limited access to land, financial support, and efficient institutions, especially the communities in Zimbabwe attempting to benefit from tourism.
4. *Cross-border access and trade*: This has been hindered by the need for national identification documents, customs regulations, and border restrictions, which exclude most local people.
5. *Involvement of local communities in decision-making*: This has not been consistent across the two countries. SANParks in South Africa has more functional structures like park forums and cooperative agreements that facilitate some community participation, whereas Zimbabwean communities perceive the engagement structures as dysfunctional and non-transparent.

Limitations of the Study

The paucity of data, especially from the Zimbabwean conservation agency, is highlighted as a limitation in the study informing this policy paper. Nonetheless, the study reveals that communities in South Africa adjacent to the Kruger Park have benefited more from the GLTFCA than those in the Gonarezhou Park in Zimbabwe. This is likely due to the more responsive political climate and the wealthier economic conditions in South Africa. Future research could also examine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on tourism, livelihoods, and benefits sharing in the GLTFCA.

Recommendations to Improve Community Benefits

Effective natural resource management is built on good governance of natural resources (see Kelleher et al., 2024). Good governance refers to governance processes and actions that are fully responsive to the needs and well-being of all-affected actors in a conservation landscape, including people, plants, and wildlife. The IUCN CEESP NRGF is a rights-based values-principles-action framework designed to help practitioners, decision-makers, and local communities adopt good governance processes and actions in relation to their biological and mineral natural resources (see figure 1 below). The rights-based approach of the NRGF is appropriate as a guide for the GLTFCA to meet its commitments to the well-being of local communities and a guide for SADC countries to meet their commitments to the human-rights-centred Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF). As shown in Figure 1, the NRGF proposes ten principles for good governance of natural resources; these principles and their associated criteria to inform governance actions are detailed in the NRGF values-principles-criteria guidance report (see Springer et. al. 2021).

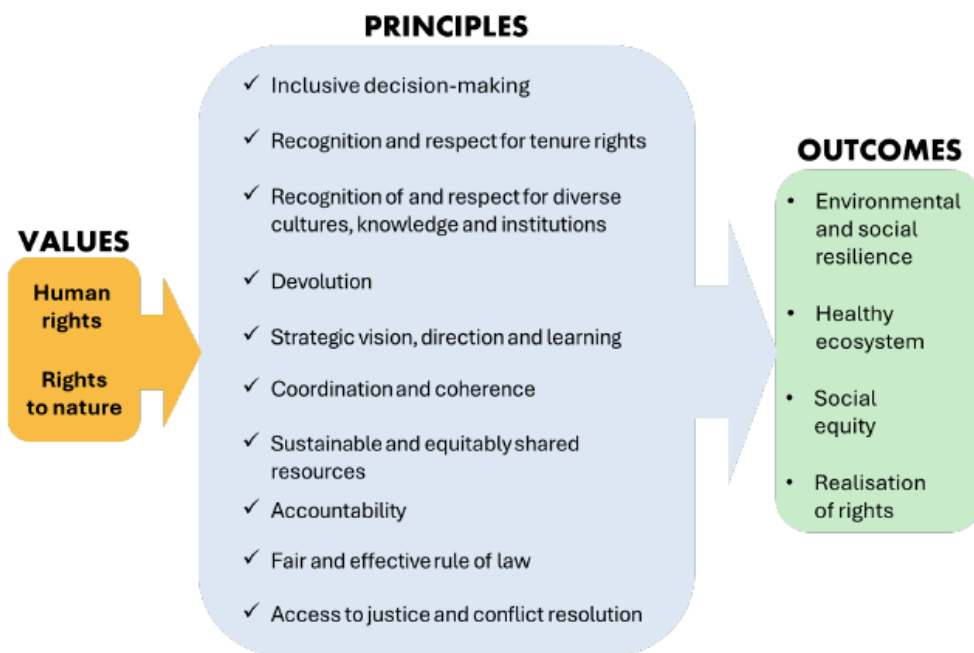


Figure 1: The IUCN CEESP rights-based natural resource governance framework
Source: Nuesiri 2024

Principles of immediate relevance for improving community benefits in the GLTFCA are:

- Inclusive decision making
- Devolution
- Strategic vision, direction and learning
- Coordination and coherence
- Accountability

Principle 1: Inclusive decision making - this calls for effective participation of all relevant actors, with attention to the voice and inclusion of rights-holders and groups at risk of marginalisation. Therefore, in the GLTFA context, it would be beneficial to:

- Create a SADC TFCA ‘manual’ or guiding document that clearly states how communities living in and around TFCAs should be involved. This will create uniformity across borders and communities, but ultimately create a standard of inclusive decision-making principles for the TFCAs.
- Establish a learning exchange between different communities, so they can learn and witness from one another the different models of participation at the TFCA level. This also aids in communities learning from one another.
- The TFCA coordinator of the park should, in their duties, report back on how inclusive decision-making is being espoused within their park.

Principle 4: Devolution – this promotes decision making at the lowest level appropriate, with particular attention to empowering the roles and authority of indigenous peoples and local communities. Local communities have some level of community association or local authority, thus:

- Communities should be empowered to make decisions. Devolution, without a strong commitment to capacity building of local people, results in uninformed decision-making. Thus, establishing ways to capacitate the local people, including women and minority groups within these communities (equitable representation), will improve deliberations and actions toward a more just and improved benefit-sharing scheme for local communities.

Principle 5: Strategic vision, direction and learning – natural resource governance should be guided by an overall vision of desired environmental and social outcomes, allowing for adaptation in response to learning and changing outcomes.

The vision for the GLTFCA is contained in the GLTFCA treaty of 2002, the GLTFCA livelihoods strategy of 2016, and the SADC TFCA Programme of 2023. To share this vision with local communities, it would help to produce communication materials specifically for local communities, supported by an effective dissemination strategy. This should be accompanied by a periodic and regular participatory consultative forum with local communities to obtain their feedback on the vision and performance of the GLTFCA; results from the consultative forums will provide helpful data for periodic review and updating of the vision documents. Reviewing and updating the vision of the GLTFCA is a rather urgent task, given the disruption of COVID-19.

Principle 6: Coordination and coherence – for the GLTFCA to fulfil principle 6, all-affected parties [should] coordinate around a coherent set of strategies and management practices. Therefore, the following would be recommended to all the actors involved in the governance of the GLTFCA:

- Creation of an onsite secretariat to enhance efficiency in park management and foster stronger relationships between the different state conservation agencies.
- Frequent roundtables between the SADC TFCA Network coordinator and the individual TFCA coordinators to facilitate strong collaboration.
- For border movement, establishing policies including the necessary procedures to ease the movement of local people across the borders within the GLTFCA.

Principle 8: Accountability – there is a need for vertical, horizontal, and diagonal accountability (see Nuesiri, 2016) in the GLTFCA; this can be done through:

- Yearly update from the coordinator about the work in the park.
- A management policy from the SADC TFCA Network that showcases the roles and responsibilities of the GLTFCA coordinator.

- A clear indication of who holds the TFCA Coordinator accountable, communicated to all actors, to allow for grievances to be shared and addressed.
- Institute vertical, horizontal, and diagonal accountability measures for all actors, to improve trust between the park and local communities.


Principle 10: Access to justice and conflict resolution – this calls for local people to be able to seek and obtain remedies for grievances and resolve conflicts regarding land and natural resources. For the GLTFCA, in addition to accountability, access to justice and conflict resolution would involve:

- Formulating a mechanism for how justice or conflict resolution can be attained.
- Clarity on the laws governing a TFCA - do national laws take precedence, or is there a need for alternatives for such a dynamic place and its circumstances?
- Accessibility to the TFCA coordinator for local people, as this will enable faster resolution of conflicts, especially pertaining to human-wildlife conflict.

Adopting these recommendations would result in a more successful GLTFCA, and this could serve as a model for all the other TFCAs in the SADC to ensure sustained coexistence between people, plants, and wildlife for generations to come.

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