

A pragmatic, evidence-based, participatory approach to community engagement, towards sustainable solutions for both livelihoods and conservation in Malawi.

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The 'holy grail' of sustainable development conjures up an image of an informed community, not just managing their own natural resources well but also proactively engaged in driving a conservation agenda, which yields benefits for both the people and wildlife supported by that environment.

While there have been some notable successes (e.g. community-based natural resource management in Namibia), these invariably come with a host of complexities to manage, including: competition for scarce resources, increased instances of human-wildlife conflict, the desire for 'progress' and local socio-political issues. Even when there are gains, they certainly do not come easily and often progress is subject to walking a fine line of ensuring that the scales are always tipped in the favour of community benefits. The flaw with such an approach is that it does not take much to upset that balance, and in doing so risk the potential long-term gains to meet short-term needs.

The linkages between ecosystem conservation and human wellbeing are well understood, but there is a risk that the two issues become conflated, missing some of the subtleties and nuances of each. In any human-wildlife project there is a need to take hard programmatic decisions that often have conflicting or negative outcomes for some groups, in the name of a greater good. In a human development discourse any negative outcomes, especially when impacting the poor, are seen as extremely problematic, even when the action is worthwhile in the long run. This makes a standard 'Theory of Change' discussion a battleground rather than a tidy summary of good outcomes, which can often reflect more the wishful thinking on the part of a donor or implementer rather than reality.

An alternative to conventional development approaches is to take a more pragmatic tack, one which acknowledges the competing priorities and focuses on an evidence-based approach to understand these issues in more detail. Based on this deeper understanding, project implementations can be designed in a participatory manner that promotes discussing possible conflicts from the outset, rather than sweeping them under the carpet only to cause challenges down the line. Two short case studies below highlight some of the learning from taking such an approach in practice. Both projects are collaborative work as part of a long-term partnership between Imani Development and IFAW (International Fund for Animal Welfare).

Chikolongo is a community located in the southern region of Malawi, on the western boundary of Liwonde National Park. The rural community has an estimated population of over 90,000. As with over 80% of Malawians, most people are small-holder subsistence farmers, mainly growing maize as a food crop. The Chikolongo Community Project started in 2013, with a primary objective to reduce human-wildlife conflict whilst at the same time improving food security and sustainable livelihoods. As part of the project design, extensive community surveys (targeted interviews, focus group discussions) were carried out to understand the context and environment from different perspectives.

From these data we were able to ascertain that the majority of human-wildlife conflicts were caused by people entering the park and being attacked and/or killed (mainly by crocodiles).

Concurrently, a damaged fence provided opportunity for wild animals to roam outside the park and cause further issues, e.g. crop destruction from elephants. Repairing the fence was an obvious intervention, but another challenge was how to discourage people from breaking it again? From the surveys the main reason for entering the park was access to water from the closest river (the Shire), located inside the park boundary. To address this issue, the project established a community-developed boundary fence (6 km) and provided access to water to the community outside the boundary fence, via a solar pump at the river and a pipeline which takes water under the fence, therefore removing the main reason for entering the park.

This initial intervention was successful in that it had immediate visible impact (no wildlife related deaths, reduction in poaching) which was a win-win and went a long way towards gaining a social licence to operate from the community and move on to developing interventions focused on food security (e.g. irrigated family plots) and livelihoods (e.g. aquaculture, honey production).



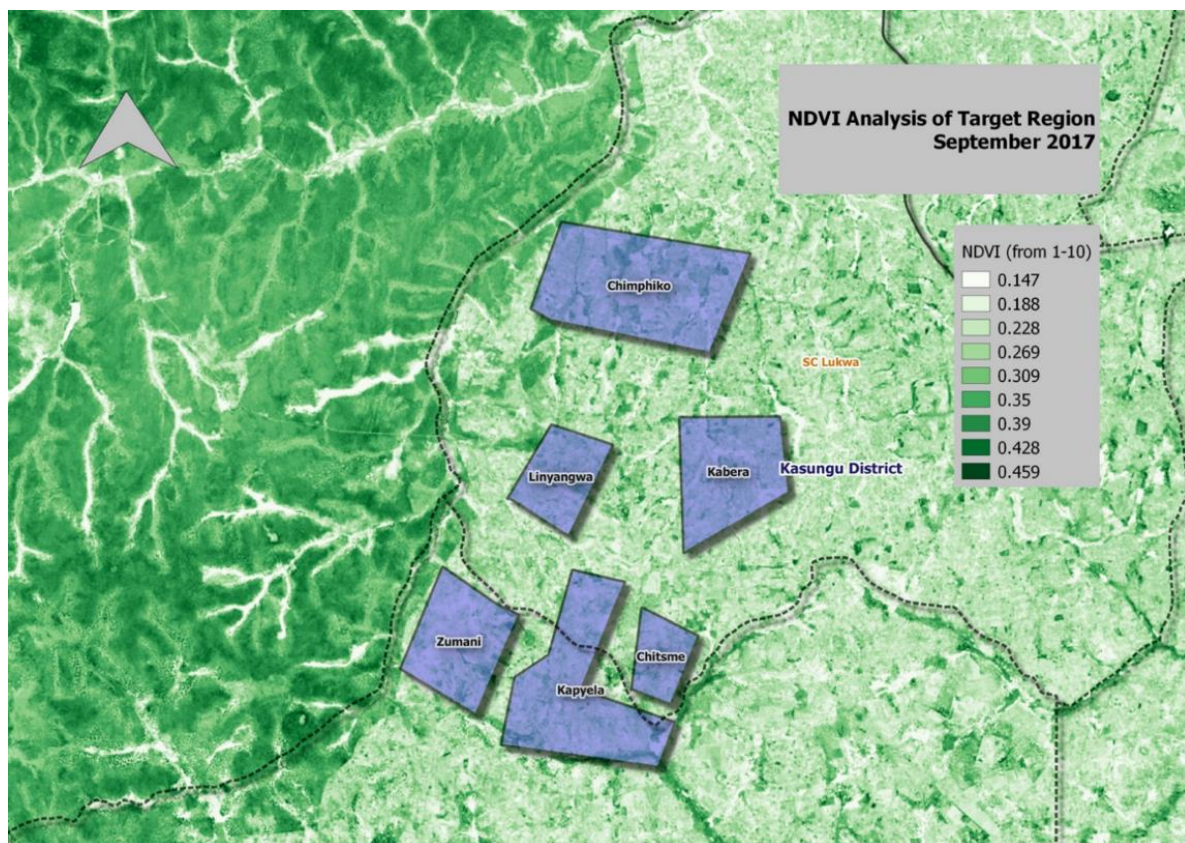
Photos from Chikolongo © Imani Development & IFAW

(top left) meeting with local communities at Chikolongo, (top right) community members collecting water from the Shire River, (bottom right) a Nile crocodile in Liwonde National Park, (bottom left) solar panel and pump station at Chikolongo

Kasungu National Park is located in the Central Region of Malawi and is part of the Malawi-Zambia Transfrontier Conservation Area. The park suffers from high levels of poaching and there is an active anti-poaching enforcement unit in the park to address this. To complement this the project is looking to generate opportunities for livelihoods in an area of high unemployment, especially for youth.

As part of our ongoing work on this project, data from a baseline/needs assessment report revealed hotspots of six potential communities with positive attitudes to wildlife. This was used to inform a community engagement strategy of working with communities that are generally more receptive to conservation related interventions, when buy-in, engagement and ownership are more likely to be obtained. We followed this work with some targeted surveys in these areas to identify key challenges, and possible solutions, from a community perspective.

Unsurprisingly, issues such as access to agricultural inputs came high on the agenda with all communities, as did access to fresh water and markets. Some trends were also noted, for example in communities close to the park boundary tsetse fly was an issue. While we expected access to wood (mainly for fuel) to be an issue, only 2% of the 411 people interviewed said this was the case. By cross checking with other data sources on vegetation cover in the area (see map below), it is clear that availability of wood in the six communities is an issue. Therefore, if people say it is not a problem the only source for their wood must be inside the park, causing a potential conflict which must be considered in any intervention design (e.g. sustainable charcoal, woodlots).



Levels of vegetation on the eastern boundary of Kasungu National Park, Malawi (Source: NDVI)

In both case studies, we see a clear need to base programme decision on robust data, which requires a detailed understanding of the complexities of the environment and community needs. As with Chikolongo, the solution that can deliver for both community and conservation is often the simplest one, which is focused on addressing the very basic needs as a priority before development of complex interventions. The issue of wood availability at Kasungu highlights the importance of interrogating data from different perspectives rather than taking it at face value. This identifies potential conflicts from the outset, which can be openly discussed.

Going forward, while it is practical to accept that there is no panacea out there for community conservation initiatives, there are definitely some gains to be had if people are willing to take a pragmatic, 'warts and all' approach to understanding the issues and then working in an open and participatory way to addressing them.

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Both case studies above are taken from Imani's work in partnership with the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW) as part of their landscapes programme. The Kasungu work is funded as part of the 'Combatting Wildlife Crime' (CWC) project, funded by USAID.

For more information on Imani's work in this area please contact keithb@imanidevelopment.com or visit www.malawi.imanidevelopment.com