



# Confronting Complex Accountability in Conservation With Communities

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Increasingly, conservation organizations are conducting conservation activities with local communities. Many conservation organizations now position their work as contributing to sustainable development initiatives, and local involvement in conservation is understood to increase conservation and sustainability success. Aside from communities, however, conservation organizations are accountable to funders and partners, and values and priorities vary across actor type. Mismatched goals combine with power imbalances between conservation actors, and create decision-making conflict throughout conservation processes, from objective setting through implementation and evaluation. As a result, communities may lose local decision-making power or face new negative consequences, trust in organizational/community partnerships may be undermined, and conservation organizations' reputations (and the reputation of the sector as whole) may suffer. In this commentary we point out processes and conditions that can lead conservation organizations to privilege accountability to funders and others over accountability to communities, thereby undermining community-level success. We follow with suggestions for how funders, conservation organizations and others may improve community engagement and community-level outcomes, and improve their reputations in general and in their work with communities, by actively leveraging accountability to the community and involving local community members in decision-making.

**Keywords:** NGOs, accountability, local communities, sustainable development, community based conservation

## INTRODUCTION

Conservation organizations – from large, international household-name non-profits to smaller, local ones – are ubiquitous educators, catalysts, facilitators, funders/funding conduits, and evaluators in community-based conservation schemes (see, for example, Austin and Eder, 2007; Aswani et al., 2012; Benson, 2012; Brooks et al., 2013; Cohen et al., 2015). Such organizations frame this work as led by, co-created with, or responsive to local communities. Scholars of marine conservation and management also see conservation organizations as advocates for and champions of local communities (see, for example, Agardy, 2011). However, both empirical evidence (Cinner et al., 2009; Aswani et al., 2012; Benson, 2012) and theories of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) raise questions about whether – in the face of the other forces at play

in these processes – community needs and preferences are indeed addressed when conservation organizations engage locally.

In addition to the normative motivations reflected in their mission and vision statements, conservation organizations act in response to externally driven strategic and instrumental concerns (Yanacopulos, 2016), including needs to secure and maintain organizational funding and legitimacy (Prakash and Gugerty, 2010; Steffek and Hahn, 2010; Lang, 2013; Edwards, 2014). The larger institutional contexts within which NGOs operate, including funding structures, external governance, and interactions with peer organizations, thus influence conservation organizations' goals, strategies, and activities. Most saliently, those institutional contexts create complex and competing accountabilities (Balboa, 2018) which may hinder conservation success, defined as both benefits to target communities and successful protection of species and natural habitats. Specifically, conservation organizations face clearly defined, predictably structured upward accountabilities to funders and host governments. These accountabilities are laid out in contracts, legislation, and project objectives, and meeting them is necessary to immediate NGO survival. Downward accountabilities to local communities, in contrast, are more diffuse and changeable, less binding, riddled with uncertainties about the roles of different players and groups, and not tied to funding. As a result, NGOs prioritize upward accountability to funders over downward accountability to communities (Balboa, 2018). In Papua New Guinea, for example, funder-driven pressures to report successful coastal management led a conservation organization to downplay non-compliance and other challenges in both their upward reporting and as foci of project implementation, while dismissing clearly articulated community needs as unmanageable (Benson, 2012).

The literature dealing specifically with conservation organizations' involvement in conservation with communities is sparse and fragmented; indeed, Brooks et al.'s (2013) systematic review of outcomes across 136 community-based conservation projects omitted NGOs as an explanatory variable, despite the authors' initial interest, as the data were too sparse to support analysis. More generally, the increased attention given to the practice of "parachute science" – higher-income country researchers conducting field research in lower-income settings, with little to minimal engagement with host communities (Stefanoudis et al., 2021) – is salient here. Even conservation organizations that are deeply embedded in local contexts may still rely on Western scientific experts to identify and plan interventions. Work on parachute science shows that such reliance can (1) delegitimize expert local knowledge by supplanting it with scientific "discovery" (West, 2016), and (2) create dependency on international expertise when institutions are primed to look to external researchers rather than locals, thus further limiting local capacity development (Stefanoudis et al., 2021).

This perspective contributes by synthesizing well-developed contemporary theories of NGOs and case studies of conservation with communities, in order to illuminate the structures of, and issues that arise from, the conflicting accountabilities operating in this field.

## CONSERVATION ORGANIZATIONS AND COMPLEX ACCOUNTABILITY

Conservation organizations operate within networks of actors that span levels and scales, including, but not limited to, funders (e.g., private foundations, international aid agencies), government agencies and decision-makers (national, regional and local), other non-profits (conservation-oriented as well as those with other central concerns, operating at scales from international to local), and resource users (communities of place, cooperatives, etc.). Alcorn (2005) paints interactions within these networks as a masquerade ball at which Big Conservation (conservation organizations, first and foremost large international conservation NGOs) and Little Conservation (local users and communities) share a dance. In this scenario, while Little Conservation wonders what to make of the intent and promises of their new partner, Big Conservation is already beholden to others in the room – notably, government and funders (Alcorn, 2005).

Until now, we have been using NGO as a blanket term that captures all non-governmental, non-private sector bodies. However, in general, and in agreement with theoretical work on NGOs that recognizes the same division (Castells, 2008), the literature on conservation with communities commonly treats large, international conservation NGOs as distinct from local NGOs. To some extent, this differential treatment seems grounded in normative stances on the appropriate role for civil society in conservation and development, particularly issues arising from large, Global Northern NGOs' intervention in developing-world contexts and resulting questions of equity, representativeness, and power (e.g., Chapin, 2004). Below we highlight this distinction as needed.

### Large Funders' Role in Furthering Short-Term Outputs Versus Long-Term Outcomes

Conservation organizations require funding to survive. NGOs rely on limited funds from donors and must compete with other NGOs for that funding (Prakash and Gugerty, 2010; Schmitz et al., 2010), making donor goodwill – and especially the goodwill of large funders, including intergovernmental organizations such as the World Bank, national development agencies such as USAID, and private foundations – necessary for organizational survival. Perhaps unsurprisingly, conservation NGOs have been shown to bound and focus work in conservation and development in response to large donors' preferences (e.g., Bebbington, 2005; Benson, 2012; Aldashev and Vallino, 2019). The need to maintain funder goodwill, combined with funder preferences and reinforced by funders' administrative requirements (including those designed to enhance accountability), pressure conservation organizations to prioritize upward accountability to donors (Steffek and Hahn, 2010). In particular, donor preferences for narratives of success and projects that follow pre-defined forms are a significant driver of NGO activity, and the proliferation of project-based approaches (Krause, 2014) to conservation with communities.

Projects are limited-term, well-defined interventions with set inputs and specific, predefined outputs (Krause, 2014). Scholars of conservation with communities have observed the project focus in practice (e.g., Blaikie, 2006), including a preference for measuring and reporting short-term outputs (such as number of marine protected areas created) rather than long-term outcomes of conservation and management (MPA implementation; socioeconomic and ecological impact) (Benson, 2012). The focus on donor-approved outputs rather than context-specific outcomes can lead organizations to game metrics, maximizing the former while underdelivering the latter (often understood as Goodhart's law: when a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure) (Strathern, 1997). Furthermore, a project focus restricts NGO engagement time frames, limiting full dissemination of the organization's technical expertise and potentially undermining conservation where ongoing expertise is required (Cinner et al., 2009). Short time frames, combined with a preference for easily tracked and reported metrics, also create challenges for full engagement with the complex and often conflicting needs and preferences of local communities. Indeed, a focus on projects may contribute to proliferation of formulaic approaches not sensitive to local context, as well as devotion to donor-defined metrics of success that are at best of little interest to local communities and at worst conflict with community understandings of success (Benson, 2012).

Pre-defined approaches to "community engagement" are one example of how prioritizing easy metrics and outputs can lead to negative consequences. In the interest of creating accountability, donors increasingly require specific approaches to or demonstrations of "community engagement" or "participation." However, where donors define working with existing local power structures as community engagement, or where NGOs themselves engage this way for utilitarian reasons, NGOs will be engaging primarily with traditional elites or local leaders. If those leaders are themselves unaccountable to the larger community, or if they are able to capture the benefits of NGO engagement or conservation and development for themselves (Christie, 2004), they may be less interested in supporting NGO delivery of an "inclusive" or "democratic" process. Thus elite mediation of downward accountability creates additional challenges for even well-intentioned NGOs. At the same time, however, undefined requirements for "participation" may result in little more than box-ticking by funded organizations. Where "participation" is left undefined, it may be construed in ways that give local communities little to no power: for example, as participation in implementing pre-defined projects, or as non-binding "consultation" during decision-making processes.

National- or local-level NGOs that rely on transnational NGOs for funding are subject to similar funding-related pressures, as transnational NGOs transmit the funding-related pressures they experience to the organizations they themselves fund. However, national or local NGOs that source funding from more proximate sources may be better placed to respond to community-level preferences and concerns. Austin and Eder (2007), for instance, attribute marine management project success in the Philippines in part to the involvement of local NGOs that are not overly beholden to funding from transnational NGOs or large international funders.

## NGO Accountability and Government-Related Tensions

Conservation organizations are accountable to the governments, laws, and regulations of the states in which they work. Over the past two decades, states concerned about NGO accountability have tightened their laws in order to reduce potential influence of foreign interests (i.e., NGOs as "foreign agents"). These states are in some cases responding to unwelcome domestic politicization of environmental conservation, and the possibility that NGOs may create unaccountable parallel governance structures to administer and manage conservation projects. This is especially the case in so-called "weak states," which face gaps in their capacity to govern as well as in the legitimacy and security of their governance efforts (Brechtin and Salas, 2011). Weak governments lead to decreased accountability of NGOs to the state, which may complicate accountability to local communities by obscuring and complicating both the objects and the subjects of accountability. Related issues vary from a state's inability to deliver services (Markham and Fonjong, 2016), and local community expectations that NGOs will fill the gap (Benson, 2012; Aldashev and Vallino, 2019), to a lack of transparency in which power structures the NGO should be accountable to (e.g., tribal rulers set the terms of engagement in addition to the formal government) (Markham and Fonjong, 2016). Accountability tensions in conservation projects might also arise from conflicting priorities between national and or local-level policy goals and needs. This may be the case, for example, where adherence to specific bureaucratic structures underpins formal, national-level recognition of community conservation, but associated requirements run counter to local community preferences. In Madagascar, where NGOs helped coastal community conservation initiatives to organize according to state mandated bureaucratic forms, some Malagasy communities who preferred temporary/rotating area closures to the permanent closures required by formal processes opted out of the project (Cinner et al., 2009).

## Organizational Fields Transmit and Replicate Accountability Pressures

Organizational theory (e.g., DiMaggio and Powell, 1983) understands NGOs as operating within fields of similar organizations, all of which face uncertainty in navigating their environments and seek legitimacy in the eyes of their peers. Legitimacy-seeking creates isomorphic pressures that move organizations toward standard forms (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). In the non-profit world, this process has been termed NGOization: NGOs evolve away from loose, voluntary confederacies and toward professional, hierarchically structured organizations (Lang, 2013). NGOization results in increased legitimacy within the organizational field, hence an improved ability to interact with donors and government (and receive the benefits of those interactions), but may also result in challenges to NGOs' ability to inclusively engage with or represent constituent voices (Lang, 2013). National or local conservation organizations that receive financial or personnel resources from large NGOs take on the organizational forms of their funding conduits, adopting similar hierarchical structures, rhetoric, and practices.

In turn, those national- or local-level NGOs are better able to demonstrate their legitimacy in international conservation-with-communities conversations; they become more attractive to funders and are better able to meet donor requirements that accompany funding. Such transformation may be accompanied by the creation of new elites within an organization, the simplification and repackaging of complex issues, and the marginalization of community interests that do not fit neatly within new structures and practices (e.g., Saruchera, 2004).

Moreover, NGOs and others that seek to engage with a community may preferentially seek cooperation with organizational forms that are familiar and perceived as legitimate. This may result in a proliferation of local NGOs or community-based organizations that act as the local point of contact but disempower actual communities. In the Philippines, for example: “Community participation is formalized by the establishment of a [formal] association...which serves as a proxy for ‘community’ interests. Through establishing a legal and financial ‘identity,’ these organizations participate by being conduits for international resources nominally targeted at increasing community participation in natural resource management, but, in practice, avenues for community participation are quite limited” (Selfa and Endter-Wada, 2008, p. 958).

Hierarchical organizational forms may also hinder downward accountability by diminishing the voices of the field staff who work most closely with communities. Central office staff sometimes hold less nuanced or sympathetic views of the communities they serve than the field staff who more regularly engage with those communities (Crosman, 2019). Where internal decision making and programmatic priorities are subject to internal hierarchies, central office staff hold responsibility for setting agendas, prioritizing approaches, and determining metrics of success. In such cases, field staff who are deeply invested in downward accountability may find their reflection of community voices diluted as it is passed upward. Indeed, relying on existing hierarchies, both those within funded organizations and those within local communities, to accurately transmit and accomplish the work, and report success, may diminish the voices of those with the most specialized expertise and the most salient lived experience.

### Furthering Perceptions of Communities’ Powerlessness and Dependency

Non-governmental organization rhetoric constructs target communities as dependents in need of aid (environmental education, capacity building, ecosystem restoration projects, technical support), reinforcing belief in communities’ relative powerlessness on both sides (see Ingram et al., 2007). Conversely, NGOs are framed as powerful actors with largesse to distribute. To some extent, this dynamic is an accurate reflection of power realities: maintaining positive NGO relations can connect communities with resources that they would otherwise lack (Murtaza, 2012), from information to development aid (*via* NGOs themselves or NGO-mediated connections to funders and other organizations) (Crosman, 2019). However, NGOs also often depend on local knowledge and problem-solving capacity to accomplish their work.

Rhetorical claims that benefits from NGO engagement accrue primarily to local communities further reinforce the belief that communities should be grateful recipients rather than full partners in conservation. Such rhetoric obscures the benefits conservation organizations themselves derive from their work with communities, including claims of success that are necessary to maintain funding and legitimacy. That rhetoric also reinforces community dependence and undermines downward accountability. Unscrupulous organizations may thus encourage community dependence – or at least propagate narratives thereof – in order to advocate for continued funding while maintaining power hierarchies that meet organizational needs yet ignore community needs.

### DISCUSSION: PATHWAYS FORWARD

Altering the dynamics outlined above will be challenging and require concerted effort from all groups of actors, not just conservation organizations. As the accountability issues outlined above are pressing, we here provide recommendations for each actor group. In light of the relative dearth of contemporary applied study of these issues, however, our recommendations should be coupled with the development and implementation of monitoring and evaluation schemes that focus specifically on conservation organizations’ complex accountabilities and their effects. Funders and NGOs that embrace the frame of complex accountability, and commission independent, reflective evaluation of their own work, will be better placed to both implement and improve upon the recommendations offered below; academic researchers also have much to offer in this space. Analysis that focuses on both the issues outlined above and the strategies proposed below will lay the foundations for a better grounded understanding of existing accountability issues as well as contextually appropriate and effective correctives.

Given that funding structures create many of the organizational incentives facing NGOs, we begin with recommendations for funders.

#### *Recommendations for funders:*

- Create funding solicitation and reporting structures that circumvent existing hierarchies both between and within organizations and communities. Directly engage with proposed target communities during the funding proposal stage, and create reporting structures that are not mediated by NGOs, allowing community members to hold conservation organizations to account directly with funders. This will necessitate hiring program officers who are trained in conservation and community engagement.
- Make public accountability – broader public perceptions of legitimacy and salience of NGO activities – the strongest indicator of funding success and project implementation.
- Select additional measures of success that reflect outcomes and impacts (such as wellbeing metrics) rather than outputs (number of community consultation sessions). Such measures should be explicitly funded through grant line items.



- Reconsider project timelines, providing funding that targets ongoing activities such as provision of technical expertise, compliance monitoring, and ecological and socioeconomic data collection. Combine these with requirements for clear exit signals and strategies, to avoid long-term local dependence on NGOs.
- Enable learning and adaptive management within a single funding cycle. Longer-term funding should be fungible rather than rigidly tied to specific activities or outputs so that longer-term needs may be addressed as they arise.
- Move away from over- and under-defined requirements for preferred approaches (e.g., “participation”) or programmatic priorities (e.g., “capacity building”). Accept a range of approaches, requiring that they are demonstrably appropriate to the local context and meet the salient intention.

*Recommendations for international or national NGOs:*

- Diversify funding sources. Seek funding from multiple types of funders as well as from a variety of large funders.
- Bring communities in early (i.e., at the proposal formulation phase) and give them meaningful voice and decision-making power throughout conservation processes. Treat communities as respected equal partners in both actions and rhetoric.
- Pay attention to community non-homogeneity and seek the full range of local input when engaging in consultative and participatory processes.
- Create operational structures that allow field staff influence over programmatic priorities and approaches, including grant proposals. Enable field staff to take an active role in ensuring downward accountability.
- Intentionally partner with and fund local organizations that do not conform to standard, hierarchical organizational forms. Enable these local organizations to take an active role in ensuring downward accountability.
- Be transparent with funders about the full suite of organizational and local needs, the insights, observations and specialist knowledge of organizational staff, and the constraints faced in working with local communities.
- Create voluntary federations of peer NGOs or use existing fora to develop standardized approaches for ensuring downward accountability, and to advocate for widespread acceptance of the importance of downward accountability among funders and government (Murtaza, 2012). Mechanisms might include, for example, enabling anonymous reports of accountability concerns at the peer-body level.

*Recommendations for local NGOs:*

- Be intentional about organizational form, and aware of its relationship to mission and vision. Resist inappropriate pressure to professionalize and/or reconstitute according to “standard” hierarchical structures, as these may undermine organizational mission or lead to local loss of legitimacy and relevance.

- Approach potential funding or partnership offers from larger organizations as a negotiation between equals rather than disbursement of conditional largesse.
- Advocate for downward accountability with funders, large NGOs, peers organizations, and local communities. Identify strategies to strengthen downward accountability (reporting structures, advisory boards, etc.) that are appropriate, workable and enforceable in the local context.

*Recommendations for governments:*

- Separate oversight of NGO community engagement from government/NGO partnerships.
- Create administrative requirements that enforce downward as well as upward accountability between all partners.
- Institutionalize accountability to larger publics beyond the directly involved and affected communities – for example, by way of regular and organized public discussion on conservation policy goals.

*Recommendations for communities:*

- Approach working with conservation organizations as a negotiation between equal partners rather than the receipt of conditional largesse. Advocate clearly and consistently for local needs and preferences.
- Insist on broad inclusion in conservation processes from initial planning to decision-making, and aim for consensus among heterogenous community members.
- Organize and share information with other communities who work with the same conservation organization and insist on downward accountability as a group (Murtaza, 2012).

As conservation organizations increasingly position the work they do as contributing to sustainable development, they will need to actively confront the charge laid out by Mac Chapin in 2004: that conservation groups and their funders face conflicts of interest that lead to negative outcomes for local people. Funders and NGOs should especially respond to the increased recent attention to equity issues in ocean development (Bennett et al., 2019), and just and sustainable transitions for oceans (Brodie Rudolph et al., 2020), in their work with coastal communities. As they continue to benefit from local community cooperation, NGOs have the ongoing potential to contribute useful resources, skills, and support for local communities. But true partnership will require restructuring relationships based on upward, downward, and public accountability. For conservation to contribute to sustainable development it must do more than protect nature without concomitant concern for local people.

**DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT**

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author/s.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

KMC wrote the first draft of the manuscript. GGS and SL wrote sections of the manuscript. All authors contributed to the conceptualization of the manuscript and revision, read, and approved the submitted version.

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