

Bridging the dichotomy

Reimagining conservation and development in Africa

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Foreword, by Nolita Mvunelo, Principal for Cultural Transformations at the Club of Rome

When crises and tensions erupt, they open a space for new responses to emerge; this is one of the core theories of The Fifth Element initiative. These responses can shift the paradigms from which we act and from which we shape global transitions.

Across the African continent, land-use questions remain entangled with injustices set in motion during the colonial era, and they have proved stubbornly difficult to overcome. Many conservation areas were demarcated from land that had already been stolen, their boundaries enforced through forced removals of the people living there and, to this day, through the armed protection of territory. When access is criminalised and met with violence, the long-term prospects for biodiversity are not secured but eroded, as communities resist, withdraw their stewardship or move to reclaim what was theirs.

The deeper failure is one of recognition. Today, the most common approaches to biodiversity protection still fail to adequately account for the systemic dispossession on which many of these efforts rest. Nor do they recognise the sacrifices in livelihoods and living standards that local communities bear as the rights of nature are advanced and protected. When these twisted and often adversarial relationships go unaddressed, conservation zones risk becoming sacrificial “human vs nature” zones. The dispossession simply continues under a greener name. In this paper, Simangele M. Msweli and Edwin Tambara argue that ecological integrity and human dignity are not competing claims but a single, indivisible one.

What gives me hope is that we are, at last, seeing new approaches emerge. This is the systemic wisdom [Dancing with Paradigms](#) (discussion paper #1) anticipated: not a tidy solution imposed from above, but a fresh possibility surfacing from the very tensions that once seemed intractable. Holding that possibility open is, above all, the work of African youth; the generation who will inherit these landscapes and that is best placed to reframe the question at the heart of this paper:

What is a good life, and how do we protect our shared future while addressing the dispossession of the past and present?

In the spirit of the series, this paper stays with a difficult question long enough for something new to grow.

I invite you to dance with it.

Introduction

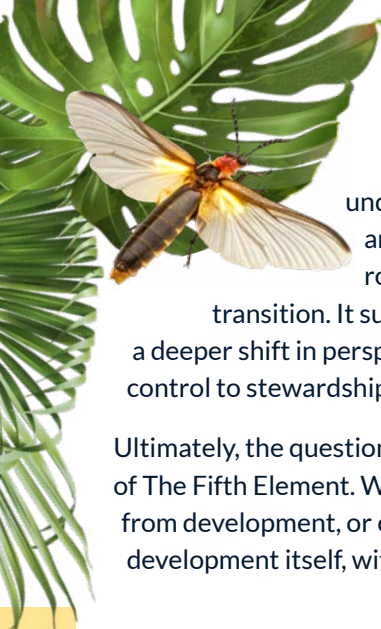
At a moment when the organising logic of the global political system is being fundamentally reconfigured, power and influence are diffusing, ecological limits are asserting themselves and the material foundations of the global economy are being renegotiated, Africa is emerging not as a peripheral space, but as a central arena in which the tensions and possibilities of a world in transition are most visible. Its economies are expanding, its regional institutions are evolving and its youthful population is reshaping social, cultural and technological landscapes. Yet these signals of dynamism coexist with deep structural vulnerabilities, including conflict, displacement, climate shocks and governance strains, which together expose the fragility of prevailing development pathways and the limits of inherited frameworks.

This complexity is inseparable from Africa’s extraordinary ecological and material endowment. The continent holds a significant share of the planet’s biodiversity, carbon sinks, freshwater systems, arable land and critical mineral reserves, assets that are increasingly indispensable to global food systems, energy transitions and technological transformations. At the same time, these systems are under mounting pressure. Biodiversity loss is accelerating, climate impacts are intensifying and the governance of natural resources remains uneven. These dynamics do not operate in isolation. They interact with political and economic fragilities, often reinforcing cycles of instability, displacement and exclusion. They also point to a deeper systemic question that sits at the intersection of ecology, development and power: are prevailing conservation and development paradigms, grounded in separation, extraction and linear growth, capable of carrying Africa’s living systems through an era of planetary turbulence, or of enabling those systems to actively shape that transition without being diminished in the process?

It is within this context that this paper aligns with the spirit and intent of The Fifth Element discussion paper series, which seeks to move beyond fragmented and mechanistic understandings of the world towards more integrated, relational and life-affirming perspectives. The Fifth Element invites a re-examination of the underlying assumptions that shape how we perceive, organise and act within complex systems. It challenges the dominant worldview that separates human systems from ecological systems, and instead calls for an “enlivened” perspective, one that recognises interdependence, reciprocity and the embeddedness of human activity within the broader web of life. In this sense, the questions raised in this paper are not only about Africa. They are part of a wider enquiry into how humanity understands its place within a rapidly changing planetary system.

Despite Africa’s centrality to global climate and biodiversity agendas, the conceptual frameworks guiding international engagement remain constrained by a persistent binary that treats conservation and development as siloed or as competing imperatives. This dichotomy is neither inevitable nor universal. It reflects a historical rupture. For centuries, African societies governed landscapes through systems of reciprocity, belonging and adaptive stewardship, in which ecological integrity and human wellbeing were co-produced. Colonial dispossession and extractive governance disrupted these relationships, institutionalising models that continue to shape policy, financing and practice.¹ The endurance of this framing limits not only Africa’s development pathways, but also the global capacity to respond effectively to interconnected ecological and social crises.

This paper is offered as an invitation into that wider conversation. In the spirit of The Fifth Element series, it does not seek to provide definitive answers, but to expand the space of enquiry. It interrogates the assumptions



underpinning current conservation and development models, surfaces the histories and knowledge systems that have been marginalised, and explores what an African-rooted regenerative paradigm might contribute to a world in both chaotic and systemic transition. It suggests that what is required is not simply better policies or increased investment, but a deeper shift in perspective, from separation to interdependence, from extraction to reciprocity and from control to stewardship.

Ultimately, the question at the heart of this paper echoes both the African experience and the broader inquiry of The Fifth Element. Will Africa's ecosystems continue to be governed as static assets to be protected from development, or can they be understood and sustained as dynamic, living systems capable of shaping development itself, without being diminished in the process?

Why does the dichotomy exist?

The real history of “conservation in Africa”

The real history of Africa — its civilisation, development and conservation — is not a story that begins with colonialism, as is often portrayed. The real history is far richer: it is an ancient and intricate narrative stretching back centuries, shaped by communities who lived as part of their ecosystems rather than apart from them. Africa was home to thriving chiefdoms and kingdoms on land and sea, communities that lived, traded and sometimes fought, all while sustaining deep, sophisticated connections with the ecosystems around them.² Across the continent, people developed complex systems of stewardship, knowledge and exchange models that sustained both nature and society long before “conservation” or “development” became formal disciplines.

“
Until the lion tells his story, the tale of the
hunt will always glorify the hunter.”

(African proverb)

The living heritage of stewardship

In the landscapes of present-day north-eastern South Africa, the 18th century witnessed the reign of Shaka of Senzangakhona; a visionary ruler whose leadership united the Zulu clans through a blend of strategy, diplomacy and war. The lands Shaka walked, now bordered by fences and labelled “protected areas,” were once living and connected ecosystems where elephants, lions, leopards and humans shared space in a fragile but enduring balance. Forests and rivers were more than resources; they were lifelines interwoven with spiritual meaning and inseparable from everyday survival. Centuries later, nearly 60% of South Africans continue to depend on traditional medicine drawn from these ecosystems, a living testament to this lineage of ecological intimacy and knowledge passed through countless generations.³



The living heritage: Indigenous roots of conservation

Sasabonsam, Akan

Forest patches left untouched as sanctuaries under the guardianship of the forest spirit Sasabonsam, hunters bound by ritual.

Rangelands, Maasai

Pastoral life paced by the rangelands; rites and taboos restrict overgrazing, protect sacred groves and set migration cycles.

Lands of Shaka, Zulu

Shaka's lands, where elephants, lions, leopards and people shared one connected ecosystem; nearly 60% of South Africans still rely on traditional medicine drawn from it.

Hungwe totem, Shona

Clan totems (mutupo) forbade harming your lineage's species; the Hungwe (African Fish Eagle) “knows when to take and when to let be”, a social contract for biodiversity.

Totems and ecological identity

Moving north to Zimbabwe, many Shona people express their relationship with the natural world through *Mutupo*, or totems that link clans to specific species or natural elements. One such totem, the *Hungwe* (African fish eagle), is revered, representing wisdom and restraint. Oral traditions describe it as a guardian spirit that “*knows when to take and when to let be*” embodying a moral compass for sustainable coexistence. To bear the *Hungwe* totem was to inherit a sacred duty: one could not harm or eat the creature that represented one's lineage. By forbidding the exploitation of totem species, the system functioned as a social contract for ecological stewardship, seamlessly embedding biodiversity conservation into cultural identity.

Such customs nurtured both pride and protection. They anchored human life in reciprocal respect for the environment, ensuring that even while people hunted, farmed or built kingdoms, their actions seldom exceeded what ecosystems could renew. Conservation, in this sense, was a lived ethic, rooted not in law but in belonging.



Coexistence across borders

The same ethos echoes across the continent. Among the Maasai people of East Africa, pastoral life remains guided by the rhythm of the rangelands. Cattle, sacred symbols of wealth and continuity, tie human prosperity to the health of grasslands and rains. Traditional rites and taboos restrict overgrazing, safeguard sacred groves and dictate migration cycles, ensuring the regeneration of land and the wellbeing of herds. To the west, Ghana's Akan people honoured *Sasabonsam*, the forest spirit believed to guard sacred groves and wildlife. Hunters followed precise rituals, and entire forest patches were left untouched as sanctuaries of spiritual power and biodiversity. These were not isolated customs but reflections of continental philosophy: that nature thrives when humans act as stewards rather than conquerors.

Africa's indigenous development ideals

The foundations of civilisation and development are deeply anchored in Africa's own histories, innovations and worldviews. The continent's architectural and intellectual achievements reveal communities that had mastered the art of aligning human advancement with environmental flourishing. The Great Pyramid of Giza (c. 2589–2566 BCE) stands as a symbol of organised resource use and engineering brilliance. Far west in Morocco, the al-Qarawiyyin Library (founded in 859 CE by Fatima al-Fihri) remains the oldest continually operating library in the world, an early beacon of human enlightenment and innovation. Both these structures which have survived centuries, were originally made mainly of local materials, blending into the environment around them and served a communal purpose, forming an extension of the societies that developed them, with the pyramids acting as royal tombs and the library being part of a mosque complex.

In Southern Africa, the majestic Great Zimbabwe ruins, heart of the Monomotapa Empire, testify to a sophisticated civilisation built entirely from locally sourced granite without mortar, demonstrating remarkable engineering precision, social organisation and long-distance trade networks. Its Great Enclosure (Africa's largest ancient stone structure south of the Sahara) reflects not only architectural mastery but also a cultural worldview in which political authority, spiritual life and ecological knowledge were deeply intertwined. Across diverse ecological zones, African societies constructed irrigation systems, trading networks and knowledge institutions tuned to the logic of their environments, proving that "development" was never an import, it was indigenous and evolving.

Disruption and dispossession: fracturing Africa's social-ecological fabric

The fracture lines running through African societies trace their origins to the transatlantic and trans-Saharan slave trades, industries that not only commodified human life but also exploited longstanding rivalries among chiefdoms and kingdoms, amplifying divisions and sowing mistrust.⁴ This era of dehumanisation laid Africa bare to further incursion: successive waves of foreign actors (traders, missionaries, explorers) arrived under promises of partnership yet often acted as precursors for colonial domination.^{5,6}

Colonial rule delivered the decisive blow to Africa's intricate social and ecological tapestry. Imported European models of land tenure, resource governance and "progress" recast verdant landscapes as unclaimed wilderness and indigenous peoples as unwelcome trespassers in their own homelands.⁶

Systematic dispossession followed: ancestral lands were expropriated to establish "protected" reserves or agro-industrial schemes, severing millennia-old relationships of reciprocity, stewardship and adaptive management.

The colonial history of conservation in Africa

A deeply entrenched and damaging misconception holds that colonial powers introduced conservation in Africa out of altruistic concern for wildlife, frequently casting local African communities' resource use as the primary driver of ecological decline.⁷ In fact, this narrative is historically inaccurate and omits the massive scale of foreign-led extraction of African wildlife that took place from the late 1700s into the late 1800s, immediately following centuries of the transatlantic and Indian Ocean slave trades.⁸

During this era, hunters and traders from Europe, North America, the Middle East and Asia descended upon Africa, driven by a voracious demand for ivory, rhino horn, animal skins and live specimens for use in luxury markets, medicine and status displays abroad.⁹ It is estimated that up to 95% of Africa's elephant population in some regions was lost during the height of the ivory trade. The US Fish and Wildlife Service notes that, by one estimate, a century ago elephant populations numbered around 12 million and, by 2016, had declined to around 415,000 individuals across the continent. Much of this extraction was carried out with the forced labour of enslaved Africans; though direct archival evidence for this claim is limited, the broader historical context of slave labour, colonial extraction regimes and forced labour underpins this destructive period.¹⁰

When colonial conservation policies began to be introduced in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, they did not arise primarily out of benevolence or ecological foresight, or as responses to a failure of African stewardship or communal responsibility.^{11,12} Rather, they were responses to environmental crises that were themselves a result of foreign pillage and utilitarian exploitation. Colonial conservation and "development" models served as instruments for territorial expansion, resource control and colonial interests. They gave rise to sweeping land appropriations, in which colonial authorities seized the most fertile and resource-rich areas to establish ranches, game-controlled zones, national parks, private parks and game reserves. These areas were then modelled on Western conservation approaches with the primary goals of regulating hunting and extracting revenue, systematically displacing local communities.^{7,13,14}



In Zimbabwe, for instance, entire populations of people were often forcibly relocated into “reserves,” known today as *ruzeva*, a term derived from the experience of being moved into marginal, poorly resourced lands with poor soil and erratic rainfall. Instruments such as the Land Apportionment Act of 1930, which barred African landownership outside the reserves, except in a special freehold purchase area set aside for what were referred to as progressive farmers.^{15,16} Once-thriving local socio-ecological systems were wiped out.

Parks like Hwange and Gonarezhou were created on the ancestral lands of displaced communities — the stewardship of these parks was erased, and their access was restricted to colonial elites.¹⁷ This pattern was repeated across southern, central and East Africa, as well as in the Horn and West Africa.

Colonial conservation weaponised exclusion, transforming practices once based on communal responsibility and spiritual obligation into systems of marginalisation and criminalisation.^{18,19} Local people, Africa’s original biodiversity custodians, had their traditions disrupted, and activities once essential for sustaining society and nature were outlawed.²⁰ Parallel colonial development channels prioritised extraction, monoculture and export, funnelling Africa’s natural wealth towards foreign powers and further eroding local prosperity. This imposed dichotomy of people versus nature not only fractured harmonious systems of coexistence and reciprocity but also entrenched crises of alienation, exclusion and dispossession that haunt conservation policy and practice into the present.²⁰

In the wake of colonial land dispossession and protected area creation, African communities experienced deep and multifaceted losses beyond just the fields and grazing lands that underpinned daily subsistence. In many regions, the establishment of national parks, game reserves and ranches, without consultation or compensation, cut off entire communities from their ancestral spiritual landscapes. Sacred forests, burial grounds and ritual sites became inaccessible, as they now fell within the boundaries of areas guarded by strict regulations and patrols. In Botswana and South Africa, San communities found their ancient art sites and graveyards engulfed by park boundaries, with entry punishable by heavy fines or imprisonment.

These losses went beyond material deprivation; they eroded cultural continuity, disrupted rites of passage and ancestor veneration, and undermined the social fabric that bound communities together through nature.²⁰ Access to the land was and remains woven into the deepest structures of African life: spiritual, nutritional, economic and communal. Colonial conservation, in seizing land and criminalising traditional use, severed these connections and institutionalised exclusion, laying the groundwork for protracted struggles over rights, recognition and justice in conservation that persist across Africa today.

At the onset of independence, many African governments did not undertake the necessary bold steps to reverse these injustices. Instead, they often adopted and perpetuated colonial-era laws, policies and governance practices. Today, managing the aftershocks of this legacy is more complicated than ever. Across Africa, the costs of conservation are increasing, and budgets prioritise security expenditures: guns, tracker dogs, helicopters and reinforced vehicles to combat sophisticated poaching syndicates.²¹ A simple online search for “African wildlife ranger” paints the picture vividly, as the results show armed men and women standing guard, a stark contrast to the more peaceful rangers elsewhere in the world. On World Ranger Day 2024, the International Ranger Federation published a Roll of Honour recognising the deaths of 42 African rangers who died in the line of duty fighting poachers, traffickers or militants in regions facing conflict. This number is significant compared to one ranger in North America who died from a fire truck accident, or six rangers in Europe, all in Ukraine and hit by Russian artillery on patrol.²² The danger is not merely that increasingly rangers must carry arms, but



that, without transformative change, more will be forced to sacrifice their lives in the line of duty. Some African countries have resorted to deploying military troops to curb poaching and trafficking, a trend that is driving further militarisation of conservation. Reversing this legacy demands confronting its historical roots; it requires reimagining and rekindling the frameworks of coexistence, reciprocity and resilience that once defined Africa’s relationship with its land and biodiversity.

Ending the dichotomy: reclaiming an African vision for the future

Africa stands at a defining crossroads. The accelerating loss of biodiversity, worsening pollution and deepening climate impacts have converged into a planetary crisis that threatens lives, livelihoods and national stability. While many African economies continue to record steady growth, this growth remains insufficient to address structural unemployment, mounting debt and the erosion of critical infrastructure.^{23,24,25} The challenge before the continent is therefore not only ecological or economic; it is existential. Would recognising the central role of people in the conservation of nature unlock the potential of this sector as a vital contributor to societal wellbeing and a pillar of sustainable development?

On one hand, the models through which conservation and development have been pursued in Africa have often cast these two pursuits as opposing forces. For many local communities, frequently excluded from decision-making and denied tangible benefits, protected areas are perceived not as shared assets but as idle lands, spaces that constrain livelihoods, limit access to resources and stand in the way of immediate development needs. At the same time, some governments, under pressure to deliver economic growth, increasingly view these same landscapes as untapped frontiers for extraction, whether minerals, timber or agricultural expansion, thereby framing conservation as a constraint rather than a catalyst for prosperity.

On the other hand, the fields of both conservation and development have been shaped by patterns of exclusion that concentrate benefits among a narrow elite. Conservation efforts, historically rooted in protectionist paradigms, have often displaced or marginalised local communities in the name of safeguarding biodiversity. Similarly, development trajectories have frequently prioritised aggregate growth over equity, sidelining the very communities whose lands and resources underpin that growth. The result is a shared legacy of dispossession, where the costs of both conservation and development are borne by the many, while the rewards of these efforts are accrued by the few. Together, these dynamics reveal that the perceived tension between conservation and development is not inevitable but is rather a product of how both have been conceptualised and implemented.

These realities have created a false narrative of nature vs people. This false dichotomy has constrained Africa’s potential and obscured a deeper truth: that ecological integrity and human prosperity are mutually reinforcing. Africa’s greatest opportunity lies not in choosing between them, but in reuniting them. The ancient wisdom that sustained the *Hungwe’s* flight, the Maasai rangelands and the forest groves of Ghana reveals a philosophy where human wellbeing and environmental stewardship are inseparable. Restoring this balance calls for policy frameworks that embed conservation of nature in the core of national development strategies; investments that translate natural capital into inclusive wealth; and governance systems that empower local communities as stewards and beneficiaries of the landscapes they inhabit.



“

When the roots are deep, there is no reason to fear the wind.”

(African proverb)



Let this be our lodestar: to reimagine and re-anchor the relationship between people, place and economy. The tensions outlined above do not arise from any inherent incompatibility between people, nature and development, but from approaches that have severed these relationships, excluding communities while concentrating benefits elsewhere. When those roots are restored and consciously tended, when local communities are no longer peripheral but central to both conservation and development, the dynamic begins to shift. Development ceases to act as an external pressure on nature and instead becomes a force that sustains and regenerates it.

By cultivating these shared roots, and by confronting the patterns of exclusion that have defined both conservation and development, we can move beyond the false dichotomy that has long shaped policy and practice.

In doing so, conservation and development will no longer be set against each other, but aligned along a single, more just and enduring pathway.

Reimagining Africa’s development: drawing from the wisdom of its own roots

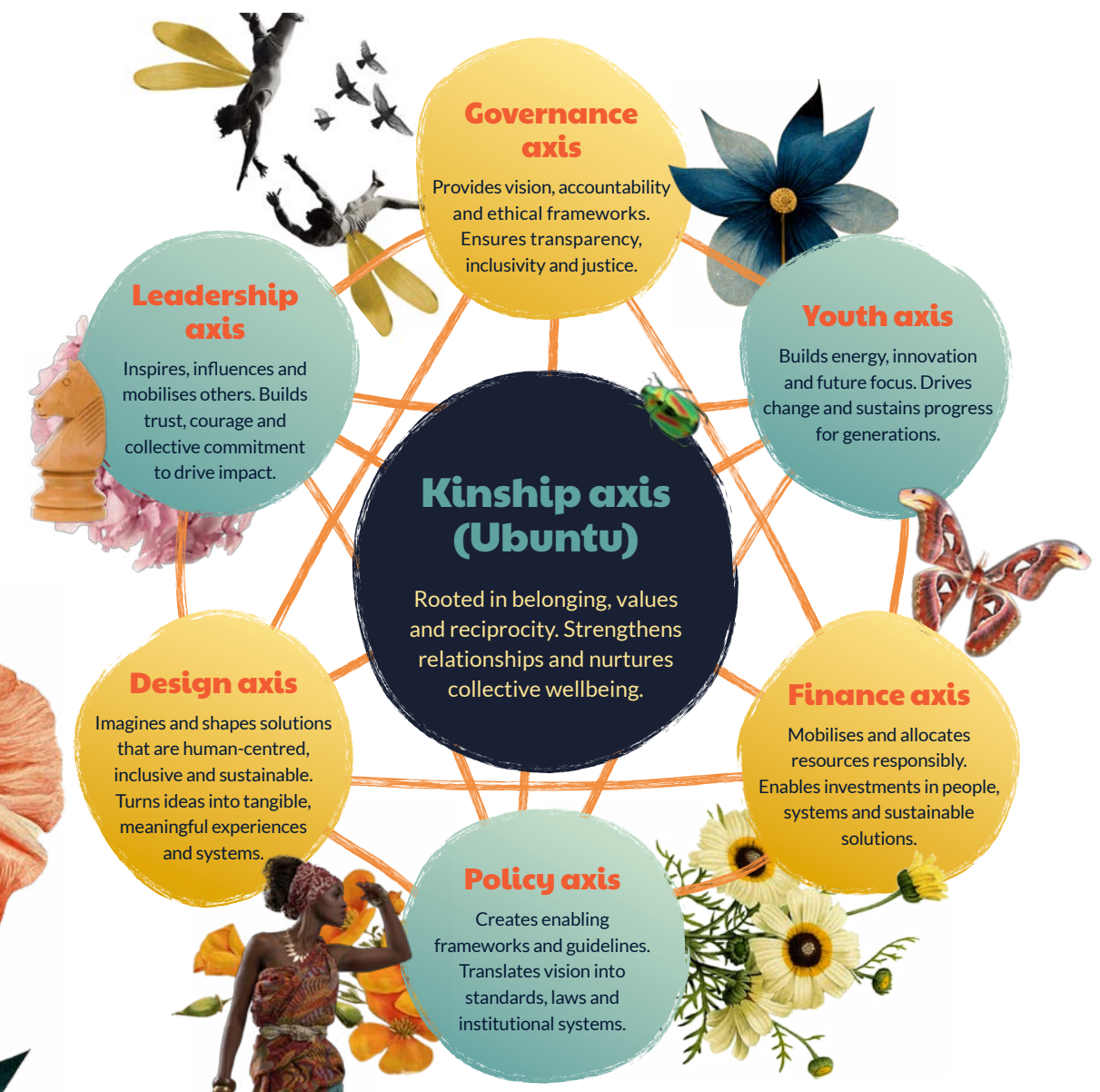
What will it take to end the false dichotomy between conservation and development and set both on a path of mutual recovery? The answer lies not only in policy or technology, but in imagination paired with a deliberate commitment to inclusion. For it is exclusion, more than any inherent contradiction, that has created the divide between protecting nature and advancing human wellbeing.

When the movie *Black Panther* was released, audiences around the world were captivated by Wakanda; not because of its indestructible fictional metal vibranium, but because it dared to imagine an Africa that was both modern and deeply rooted in its heritage. The film portrayed a nation where tradition and innovation coexisted in harmony: cities blending modern and traditional architecture, the natural landscape seamlessly integrated into urban design, and wildlife depicted as part of the living tapestry of society. Language, fashion and ritual stood proudly alongside science and technology. One moment, we see Shuri in a state-of-the-art

laboratory; the next, T’Challa is undergoing the sacred rites of kingship. The result was a powerful depiction of an Africa confident in its identity, fluent in both ancestral wisdom and modern science.

While Wakanda may be fictional, its spirit offers a lesson that is profoundly real. Africa’s future will not be built by rejecting global progress, nor by uncritically importing models from elsewhere. It will be shaped by imagination, by a reawakening of Africa’s own ways of knowing, building and living in balance with nature. For centuries, African societies thrived on systems that valued reciprocity, community and coexistence with the environment. These values must form the foundation of a new development paradigm: one that draws inspiration from the rest of the world, yet remains grounded in the continent’s own history, culture and heritage.

From *Sankofa*, *Tu*, and *Shosholoza* to *Ubuntu* and *Umoja*, Africa’s social philosophies capture the heartbeat of a civilisation that has always known that individual and collective destinies are intertwined. Each embodies an aspect of what it means to belong to both people and place: *Sankofa* calls us to retrieve the wisdom of the past; *Tu* and *Shosholoza* echo perseverance through shared effort; *Umoja* reminds us that unity is strength; and *Ubuntu* articulates the fundamental truth of human interdependence.²⁶ These ancient philosophies can provide key tenets we can harness to bridge the gap between conservation and development, reflected in seven axes: kinship, leadership, design, policy, finance, youth and governance.





The kinship axis: Ubuntu and the ecology of belonging

Among these, *Ubuntu* stands out, not as a slogan, but as a lived philosophy that holds powerful relevance for how we reimagine conservation and development in Africa. *Ubuntu* is an Nguni Bantu word that translates to “humanity.” It is expressed through the maxim “*I am because we are*,” which highlights the interconnectedness of all people.^{26,27} The concept of *Ubuntu* is deeply embedded in African culture and promotes values such as empathy and communal responsibility, and the understanding that individual wellbeing is intertwined with the collective wellbeing of others.^{27,28} It underscores the belief that our humanity is defined through our relationships and the contributions we make to society as a whole.²⁹

Ubuntu embodies and articulates a holistic ethic that extends beyond governing human relationships to shaping how people relate with the natural world.¹⁴ As an ethic, it understands community as a triad composed of the living, the living dead (ancestors), and the yet-to-be born, portraying life as an interconnected wholeness encompassing the environment as well as past and future generations.³⁰ In this view, *Ubuntu* situates the environment not as an external commodity to be exploited, but as an integral part of the social and moral fabric that sustains life, belonging and identity. Within this worldview, human wellbeing is inseparable from the health of ecosystems, and stewardship of land, water and biodiversity becomes both a collective responsibility and a moral obligation.³¹

Conservation grounded in *Ubuntu* restores harmony between people and the natural world by discouraging individualistic and excessive exploitation of nature, while promoting relationships with the non-human environment that are rooted in respect, solidarity and cooperation.¹⁴ Such an understanding aligns closely with emerging global discourses on relational values in conservation, which emphasise the cultural, spiritual and communal ties between people and nature rather than purely instrumental benefits.^{32,33,34} Consider the practices of the Loita Maasai people in Kenya, who manage their sacred forests through community elders who are guided by customary norms rather than formal state decrees. Their conservation ethic does not emerge from external enforcement but from deeply held values of stewardship, reciprocity and respect, principles of *Ubuntu* at work. Similarly, in the glory days of Zimbabwe’s Communal Areas Management Programme for Indigenous Resources, popularly referred to by the acronym CAMPFIRE,³⁵ Tanzania’s Wildlife Management Areas and Zambia’s Game Management Areas generated not only revenue but a sense of shared ownership and accountability through communal management of wildlife. Where *Ubuntu* thrives, sustainability is not an aspiration, it is a way of life.

Scholars such as Mabele et al.¹⁴ have conceptualised and advocated the idea of promoting nature for, to and by humans rather than protecting it from humans, following *Ubuntu* ethic. The challenge, however, lies in translating this ethos into the structures that shape modern policy and planning. Too often, indigenous knowledge and community values are acknowledged only rhetorically, inserted as a perfunctory paragraph in a proposal or policy document. True transformation demands intentionality: integrating indigenous knowledge systems as core components in how we design, plan and execute conservation and development. This means moving beyond tokenism to co-creation, where traditional ecological knowledge informs climate adaptation, agricultural systems, spatial planning and biodiversity conservation.



The leadership axis: communal leadership and the future of stewardship

Building on *Ubuntu*, communal leadership emerges as a foundational pillar for stewarding Africa’s natural ecosystems and shaping development priorities. In societies guided by this ethos, leadership is not a privilege, but a responsibility exercised collectively, grounded in service and oriented towards the common good. This model ensures that development decisions, resource management and conservation efforts are carried out with attention to their impact on all members of society, human and non-human alike.

Across Africa’s rural landscapes, communal leadership and indigenous knowledge remain deeply intertwined.³⁶ In northern Ghana, community chiefs oversee sacred groves that have persisted for centuries as biodiversity refuges, precisely because cultural and spiritual governance complemented ecological function.³⁷ Traditionally, many settlements in Ghana were founded on a reliance on ancestral spirits for the protection of the settlement. Dorm-Adzobu et al.³⁸ note that a sacred grove in Malshegu community is one of the largest in northern Ghana, preserved by the community for nearly 300 years by enforcing land use rules and practices designed to safeguard the abode of the Malshegu guardian fetish.³⁸ In southern Ethiopia, the Borana pastoralists manage water wells through a rotational system rooted in social norms that prevent overuse and ensure equity — an intricate form of local governance that embodies environmental democracy long before the term existed.³⁹

Far from being relics of the past, these systems demonstrate Africa’s enduring genius for adaptive management and resilience. The task before us is not to replace or romanticise these philosophies and practices, but to recognise their legitimacy and scale their insights within modern frameworks. Infrastructure, economic opportunity and technology must be designed to reinforce, not erode, these social and ecological foundations.

Recognising the importance of communal leadership and indigenous knowledge requires more than consultation; it requires co-ownership. Policies, investments and innovations must be shaped by or at least with, not merely for, communities that depend on and understand their landscapes best. When community agencies drive progress, conservation becomes development and development becomes regenerative and inclusive.

True African stewardship also demands that conservation in Africa be African-owned and led by Africans. For too long, external prescriptions (however well-intentioned) have treated African landscapes as problems to be solved rather than living systems with their own governance logic, histories and custodians. As one saying cautions, “*You cannot walk into another person’s kraal and milk their cow while claiming it is a kindness*.” When decisions, priorities and benefits are defined elsewhere, even benevolence becomes extraction, and past failures repeat themselves in new forms.

When Africans define the purpose, design the systems and lead the partnerships that shape conservation, will we break the cycle of externally driven models that overlook local realities? African ownership is not a political plea; it is an operational necessity because the people closest to the land carry the deepest knowledge of how it breathes, adapts and survives. Empowering that leadership is the surest path to a future where conservation and development not only coexist, but reinforce each other through legitimacy, pride and long-term stewardship.



The design axis: nature as foundational fabric for a resilient future

Nature is Africa's original and most indispensable life support system, its bedrock, safety net and engine of prosperity. As the *Nature Stress Testing: Exposure to Nature-Related Risks Across Africa*⁴³ report reveals, 62% of Africa's GDP depends on the services that nature provides, and 70% of communities in sub-Saharan Africa rely on forests and woodlands for their livelihoods. Every major economic sector, from agriculture and energy to mining and urban development, rests on healthy ecosystems. Forests regulate water, wetlands buffer floods, grasslands sustain livestock and coasts protect fisheries. Ignoring this living foundation is like building on shifting sand — superficially strong, but fundamentally unstable.

As Africa charts its development trajectory, nature must be moved from the periphery of planning to its core. This means more than environmental safeguards; it means designing production systems, economies, infrastructure and cities that work with ecological systems rather than against them. Natural infrastructure (soils that store carbon, mangroves that dissipate storm impacts, grasslands that support pollinators) should guide decisions about land use, energy systems, transportation corridors and industrial growth. A future-ready Africa must recognise that nature is not an optional amenity; it is the scaffolding that supports every form of prosperity.

Yet, across African cities from Harare, Nairobi, Dar es Salaam, Accra, to Lagos, wetlands once recognised as natural filtration systems, flood buffers and urban biodiversity refuges are being systematically degraded through pollution or destroyed to make way for roads, housing and commercial development. This transformation often proceeds with little regard for the socioecological consequences or implementation of adequate mitigation measures, undermining both environmental integrity and urban resilience.⁴⁰ The result is predictable: water crises, biodiversity collapse and cities less resilient to climate shocks. These losses are not merely environmental; they are economic and social failures because nature's services are the hidden backbone of urban life.

All is not lost, as we can count on the ability of nature to rebound. There are promising examples that demonstrate the possibilities. As climate change and urbanisation intensify flooding risks in Rwanda, the country's capital, Kigali, has embraced nature-based solutions. The city is restoring and rehabilitating 18,000 acres of degraded wetlands, planting native species to filter and slow run-off, and enhancing biodiversity.⁴¹

Africa's development must embed nature at its core. Economic planning should account for ecosystem goods and services as tangible assets. Infrastructure must work with ecological systems and architecture, and design should draw inspiration and practical solutions from the continent's own climatic wisdom. Traditional practices, such as thatch roofing, illustrate this brilliantly. Thatch rooves are locally sourced, biodegradable, naturally temperature-regulating and now (with modern innovations) treatable for fire, pests and decay. Yet colonial-era perceptions dismiss these designs as outdated, favouring concrete and steel structures that are expensive, carbon-intensive and ill-suited to local climates.

Even the modest act of harvesting thatch grass reflects ecological governance; seasonal, measured and regenerative, sustaining both community livelihoods and wildlife habitats. These practices demonstrate that conservation and cultural identity are inseparable; that landscapes thrive when communities thrive in reciprocal relationships with them.

The policy axis: reimagining global and national frameworks

Africa's future hinges on recognising nature not as a constraint, but as a design principle.

Whatever we are building, wherever we are building it, we are not starting from a clean slate; instead, we are entering the tapestry of a living system. This system has evolved over millennia and, if respected and understood, can enhance what we seek to create, lending resilience, efficiency and harmony to our cities, infrastructure and economies. When the foundational fabric that nature provides is integrated into planning, innovation and investment, cities breathe, economies regenerate and communities flourish. Marginalising nature guarantees failure; centring it ensures resilience, prosperity and a truly African model of sustainable development.

Perhaps Africa's *Ubuntu* philosophy should not only guide how the continent moves forward, it should also permeate the very foundations of global policy frameworks if humanity is to come anywhere close to achieving the ambitious goals and targets it continually sets for itself. *Ubuntu* reminds us that our survival is interdependent; that justice, prosperity and sustainability are not zero-sum outcomes but shared conditions. If woven into the fabric of international policy, this ethos could help reorient global systems away from extractive competition and towards mutual care and responsibility.

The fields of development and conservation have long evolved in opposite directions, though the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) marked a pivotal turning point by introducing the concept of sustainable development as an early attempt to reconcile human progress with planetary limits. Yet three decades on, it is worth asking whether global policy frameworks have truly embraced this ideal or simply rebranded business-as-usual under a greener banner. While multilateralism has yielded important gains, it remains riddled with deepening inequities. At its core, beyond the noble rhetoric of sustainability and cooperation, the global order too often mirrors George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, where all are equal, but some decidedly more so. Power continues to rest with those who wield financial and military might, shifting and shaping geopolitical dynamics.

In this era of shifting geopolitics, marked by intensifying competition for natural resources, Africa once again stands as a global frontier. From rare earth minerals and precious timber to wildlife products and arable land for large-scale food production, the continent's natural wealth has drawn renewed external interest. Yet beneath the language of partnership and opportunity lies a familiar danger: that Africa's landscapes will again serve as extraction zones for external gain. To navigate this new *scramble* responsibly, Africa must craft robust, future-oriented policies that enable trade and production, but strictly on its own terms. These policies must ensure that resource exploitation does not replicate historical patterns of ecological pillage and social displacement. Africa must guard its ecosystems jealously, not only for the sake of biodiversity, but for the sake of its people; millions whose livelihoods, food security and cultural identities remain inseparable from the integrity of the land and nature itself.

The finance axis: financing transformation

Reimagining Africa's future demands a bold shift in how conservation and economic growth intersect, and nowhere is this more urgent than on the question of conservation finance. For too long, Africa's extraordinary natural wealth has served as the stage for global climate and biodiversity ambitions, while the true cost borne by its nations, communities and individuals has remained invisible. Those who have set aside their land, livelihoods and labour to steward ecosystems for the common good have rarely been recognised as co-investors in the global environmental enterprise.

These landscapes are not local amenities; they are planetary assets. They regulate climate systems, sustain biodiversity and buffer humanity against environmental collapse. If Africa's ecological assets deliver global public goods, why does so little of the global financing architecture reflect this reality? While Africa is indeed rich in natural resources, the system currently siphons off these resources from African soil to benefit foreign economies. **How can systems be transformed so that Africans and local communities become the guardians and stewards of their own wealth, and how would that affect Africa's conservation and development?**

Recognising that reforming global governance will take time, Africa cannot wait for permission to lead. The continent has both the moral and practical responsibility to reimagine its own policy frameworks from the local to the transboundary, regional and continental levels. The stage has already been set. The Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services has acknowledged the "diverse values and valuation of nature," while African institutions such as the African Leadership University and the African Wildlife Foundation have advanced evidence demonstrating biodiversity's tangible contribution to Africa's economy. Countries that have not yet done so^{42,43} should use these insights as a blueprint to institutionalise policies that recognise the human-nature-economy relationship as inseparable.

Key African platforms such as the Africa Ministerial Conference on the Environment, the Africa Climate Summit, the Africa Biodiversity Summit and the African Continental Free Trade Area must be strengthened, not merely as venues for continental coordination, but as engines for global influence. They exemplify what bold African leadership can look like when it is driven by vision rather than validation. Yet, to be truly transformative, these platforms must be unapologetically African, in agenda, governance and financing. Too many of Africa's premier policy platforms remain heavily supported by external actors. This dependence raises uncomfortable but necessary questions, such as can institutions funded from outside truly advance African priorities?

If Ubuntu teaches that "I am because we are," then the next evolution of global and African policy must ask: who is "we"? Who defines the "we" of multilateralism and whose values does it serve? Until those questions are confronted (honestly and collectively) the dream of a just, sustainable future will remain a deferred aspiration.



The hidden economics of stewardship

The starting point for transformation must be honesty. Africa is not a passive recipient of conservation aid — it is an active investor. From national budgets funding protected area management to community labour and opportunity costs, Africans already underwrite the world's natural capital. Yet these contributions are neither systematically measured nor valued. What would change if we quantified the true African investment in conservation — financial, social and ecological? How might this recalibration shift global negotiations on biodiversity and climate finance?

This is about redefining the rules of engagement. Conservation finance that fails to acknowledge African agency risks perpetuating dependency rather than building sovereignty. The challenge, then, is not only to increase funding but to reconfigure how it flows. Too often, resources are filtered through layers of intermediaries and external NGOs, spawning an industry of aid administration rather than impact. What if this architecture were reversed so that resources, jobs and innovation were anchored in local institutions and enterprises rather than international overheads? **What if every conservation dollar worked twice, first to secure ecosystems and second to stimulate entrepreneurship and livelihoods within those very landscapes?**

Beyond charity: building genuine partnership and shared value

For decades, conservation in Africa has been framed through the lens of charity, with projects designed elsewhere and implemented on African soil, often with limited consultation with Africans themselves. But a partnership cannot thrive on paternalism. Real transformation will come only when conservation is treated as a domain of shared value, not moral obligation. What would a partnership of equals look like? It would start by recognising Africa's ecological assets (its land, wildlife and culture) not as recipients of goodwill, but as indispensable to the planet's future prosperity. It would involve co-designing policies, co-managing resources and co-owning the economic benefits derived from conservation. It would mean financing models where returns are not just measured in biodiversity outcomes, but in community resilience, youth employment and restored dignity.

Unlocking Africa's biodiversity economies

Central to this reimagining is the untapped potential of biodiversity economies, the next frontier for sustainable growth and domestic resource mobilisation.⁴⁴ Across Africa, livelihoods are already intertwined with ecosystems: from community conservancies in Namibia generating tourism and carbon revenues, to sustainable forestry and wildlife-based enterprises in Tanzania and Zimbabwe.⁴⁵ Yet these sectors remain undervalued and underfinanced.⁴⁶ Why are biodiversity-based industries still treated as peripheral to national development strategies when they hold the key to green industrialisation? And how do we ensure these industries do not follow the same script of inequality, where they benefit a few elites and are owned and led from outside the continent?

By intentionally building enabling environments for biodiversity economies and their governance, governments can turn conservation into an engine for inclusive growth. This means formal recognition in national accounts, fiscal incentives for nature-positive enterprises and financial tools that attract both public and private investment while respecting local ownership. But such transformation also requires moral clarity: Africa deserves equitable compensation for the historical and ongoing exploitation of its ecosystems, a global debt yet to be settled. Can a truly just global economy exist while Africa continues to subsidise the world's environmental stability without fair recompense?

The youth axis: why young conservationists must lead political transformation

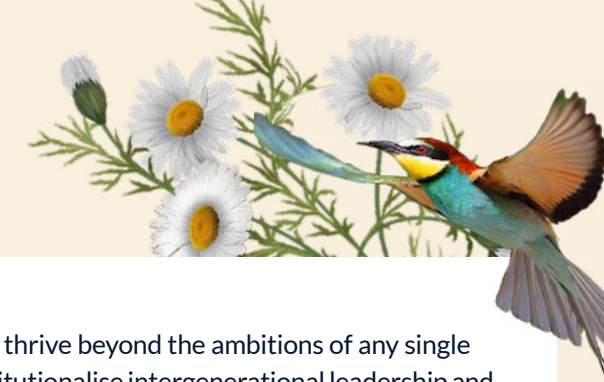
From 1950 to the present, Africa's population has grown steadily, now exceeding 1.5 billion people. This statistic reveals a generational force. With a median age of just 19.7 years and roughly 70% of its people under 35, Africa is home to the youngest population on Earth. The younger generations are the most educated in the continent's history, the most digitally connected across borders and arguably the most globally aware. From Tunisia's Arab Spring to Kenya's "Occupy Parliament," from Nigeria's #EndSARS to youth climate marches across cities, Africa's young people have shown again and again that they are not passive beneficiaries of change, they are its catalysts. As a Zulu proverb reminds us, "*Umuthi ugotshwa usemanzi*" — a tree must be shaped while it is still young. The choices we make now will determine whether this demographic wave becomes Africa's greatest dividend or its deepest despair.

But the youth question cannot be separated from the conservation question. What does it mean for Africa's future that the majority of its people, those who will inherit both the land and its challenges, are often disconnected from the very ecosystems that sustain them? In many countries, it is easier for a young European or American visitor to experience Africa's wildlife than it is for an African child living within 100 kilometres of a national park.

Should it not be a source of collective shame that millions of young Africans have never seen a lion, elephant or rhino in the wild, have never had a chance to observe the animals that symbolise not just Africa's biodiversity, but its soul?

If Africa is to secure its future, conservation must be made tangibly relevant to its youth. This requires transforming conservation from a field perceived as external or elitist into one that young people can see themselves in, scientifically, economically and emotionally. Conservation must speak to their aspirations for jobs, innovation, identity and justice. It must be part of how they imagine progress, not an obstacle to it. **What if conservation was taught not as an offshoot of biology, but as a pillar of civic education and entrepreneurship? What if every national park were also a classroom, a laboratory, a start-up incubator and a cultural symbol?**

Bridging the false dichotomy between conservation and development may, in fact, be the key to unlocking the potential of Africa's youth bulge. The same natural capital that fuels global tourism, agriculture and carbon markets could also fuel green enterprise, technology innovation and creative industries led by young Africans. Imagine a generation of youth designing AI tools for anti-poaching, building ecotourism ventures rooted in community equity, or exporting biodiversity-based products that carry a "Made in Africa, Sustaining Africa" mark. But for this to happen, Africa's decision-makers must integrate conservation into the core of their economic and educational policies — not as charity, but as opportunity.



This vision requires institutional architecture. If Africa is to thrive beyond the ambitions of any single generation, it must build cross-disciplinary systems that institutionalise intergenerational leadership and embed youth participation into the governance of natural resources, conservation finance and development planning. This cannot depend on the goodwill of one administration or the charisma of one leader. It must be structural, with budgets, mandates and accountability mechanisms that outlast electoral cycles.

South Africa's National Youth Development Agency, though imperfect, offers a glimpse of what such institutionalisation of youth development could look like. What if every African country established a National Youth and Nature Council, an institution empowered to shape policy, oversee environmental education and drive green innovation? What if young Africans were not only beneficiaries of conservation but policymakers, scientists, financiers and custodians of the continent's biodiversity economies?

Ultimately, the question is not whether Africa's youth will inherit the continent's natural wealth, but in what condition they will receive it, and whether they will have been prepared, inspired and empowered to protect and regenerate it.

For conservation to endure, it must cease to be seen as the work of a few and become the shared mission of a generation with intergenerational collaborations.

The governance axis: fixing the foundation on which conservation and development stand

Africa is not short of ideas, nor of capable experts to implement them. Decades of African migration, innovation and leadership in global institutions demonstrate that capacity is not the continent's weakness. The common denominator undermining progress in post-colonial Africa is governance; weak systems, inconsistent leadership, corruption and institutions unable or unwilling to make long-term decisions in the public interest.^{47,48} If Africa is to address the persistent dichotomy between conservation and development, it must strengthen governance at all levels: political, economic, environmental and community.

Published since 2007, the Ibrahim Index of African Governance assesses the political, social, economic and environmental services that a state should provide to its citizens. According to the 2024 report, covering 2014–2023, governance is improving in 33 African countries but deteriorating in 21 others that collectively host nearly half (47.9%) of the continent's population⁴⁹. Overall governance scores remain at an average of 49.3 out of 100, highlighting the urgency of institutional renewal. To create an enabling environment for any kind of progress, including in conservation and development, Africa's governance systems must improve, and its leadership must be bold, principled and future-facing.



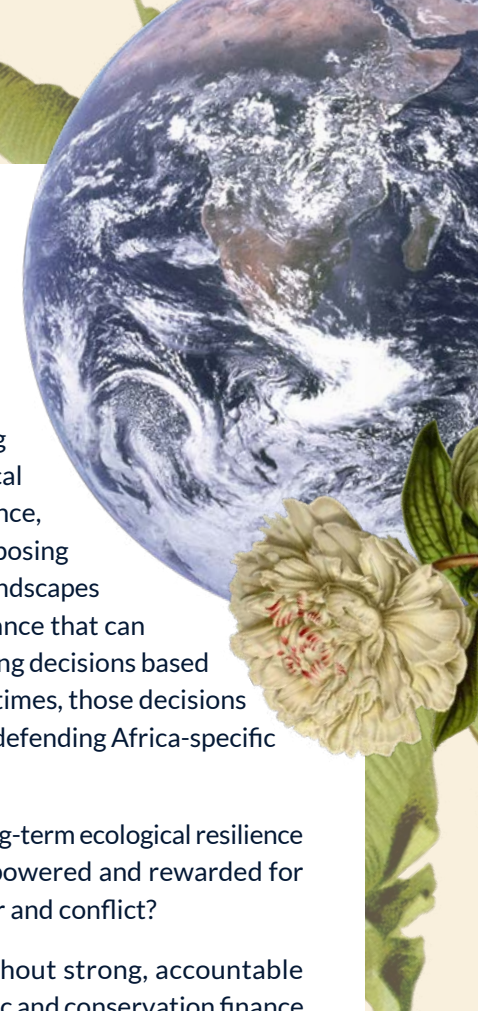


Bold leadership is especially vital in an era when governments must often choose between short-term economic and political gains and long-term decisions that safeguard nature and therefore the very foundation of human wellbeing. Effective governance requires institutions strong enough to resist political pressure, global narratives or short-lived economic opportunities that threaten ecological integrity. Sipondo⁴⁸ examines the integration of *Ubuntu* philosophy into Africa's public sector leadership, highlighting character development, efficiency, collectivism, participatory leadership and the resolution of moral crises as central pillars to borrow from *Ubuntu*-based ethical leadership.⁴⁸

A recent illustration is the global outcry that erupted when a few African countries explored the use of wildlife biomass to provide protein and food to communities devastated by persistent droughts. These proposals emerged in areas facing overpopulation of elephants, severe ecological destruction, collapsing vegetation and rising human-wildlife conflict. Opponents, mostly external actors, framed the debate around ethical concerns such as whether any culling, distribution or compensation mechanisms would be corruption-proof and equitably managed. However, many ignored the lived reality of rural African communities and were comfortable with those same communities continuing to rely on imported food aid that benefits foreign farmers. Ironically, much of this imported food is grown through industrial practices far more environmentally harmful than the natural protein systems within African ecosystems. It was, however, fair for the critics to question whether and how anti-corruption and equality measures would be implemented. This underlines yet again that strong governance is the fundamental requirement for such proposals to move forward. After all, the same governments whose legitimacy citizens often question, are the ones entrusted with leading bold visions. Without robust, transparent systems, even necessary decisions cannot be trusted or implemented effectively.

Beyond addressing failures and external pressures, Africa must also confront the governance challenges that come with conservation success itself. In several regions, wildlife populations are rebounding thanks to decades of investment and community stewardship. Yet rising numbers also expand wildlife ranges, increasing interactions with people, livestock and key infrastructure. In Southern Africa, growing elephant populations are causing habitat damage and intensifying human-wildlife conflict. In the Albertine Rift, the successful recovery of mountain gorillas, one of Africa's greatest conservation stories, now presents new pressures on land, tourism management, community wellbeing and zoonotic disease prevention. These realities demand strong, science-based governance systems that can manage the human-wildlife-livestock interface, make difficult choices and sustain coexistence. Without institutions capable of making and enforcing tough decisions, whether on wildlife numbers, land-use restrictions or community protections, conservation success can become a source of instability rather than resilience.

The recent developments in Amboseli National Park exemplify the kind of bold, forward-looking decisions Africa must embrace. Following a presidential decree, in 2025, Kenya's cabinet ratified the decision to transfer Amboseli to the Kajiado County government, fulfilling a decades-old promise to devolve the park to local control. This landmark move does more than right historical injustices against the Maasai communities; it repositions conservation as a shared responsibility, vesting ownership, governance and management directly with the people whose lives and livelihoods are intertwined with the land. By aligning conservation governance with local social structures and economic aspirations, the decision demonstrates that protecting wildlife and promoting community development are not mutually exclusive but mutually reinforcing.



Equally striking is the muted response to Kenya's decision across the global conservation sector, a tacit reminder that calls for community-led conservation often remain rhetorical rather than actionable. Kenya's decisive step challenges entrenched paradigms: real progress demands courage to devolve authority, embrace local knowledge and accept that long-term ecological and social resilience depend on communities having genuine control over the resources they steward. Amboseli is not just a local story; it is a blueprint for how Africa can transform conservation governance, demonstrating that the most daring and effective solutions may lie not in imposing external models, but in trusting and empowering the people who call these landscapes home. These examples expose a deeper truth: Africa needs robust governance that can stand firm against both domestic vested interests and global pressure, making decisions based on ecological science, social equity and long-term national interests. Sometimes, those decisions will require foregoing short-term profits, challenging donor assumptions or defending Africa-specific conservation models that outsiders find uncomfortable.

What would Africa's development look like if its leaders consistently chose long-term ecological resilience over short-term expedience? If communities living with wildlife were empowered and rewarded for stewardship, rather than criticised for seeking practical solutions to hunger and conflict?

Governance is the axis on which all other transformations depend. Without strong, accountable institutions, *Ubuntu* remains aspirational, youth leadership remains symbolic and conservation finance remains inefficient. But with courageous governance willing to prioritise ecosystems, communities and sovereignty, Africa can finally unlock the integrated future it has long been denied.

“
Dreamers plant the seeds that
tomorrow harvests.”

(African proverb)

Conclusion: towards a regenerative African future

As the proverb says, “*Dreamers plant the seeds that tomorrow harvests.*” Africa needs such dreamers now, visionaries who can help reimagine a continent where development and conservation are not in conflict but in conversation. These dreamers are not constrained by the dictates of what has been done elsewhere; they are inspired by Africa’s foundations, history, traditions and the living tapestry of its landscapes that have defined the continent for millennia and will continue to shape it for millennia to come.

To imagine a truly African development model, one that transcends extractive growth, ecological loss and the inertia of inequitable systems, we must first confront the myths and distortions that have framed conservation and development as opposing forces. The false dichotomy that has dominated policy and practice is no longer tenable. Africa’s future demands a regenerative approach, one that places nature at the core of planning, empowers communities as custodians of their landscapes and designs economies, infrastructure and cities that work in harmony with living systems. The path forward lies not in choosing between modernity and tradition, but in weaving them together. By intentionally embedding indigenous knowledge, communal leadership and youth-led innovation into economic and policy architectures, Africa can pioneer a regenerative model of progress, one that honours its people, safeguards its natural heritage and offers lessons to a world desperate for balance.

Africa is a continent of immense potential, but the conservation and development nexus cannot be disentangled from its historical and geopolitical realities. Hope exists, but hope alone is insufficient. *Ubuntu* economics, communal leadership, policy reform, equitable financial flows and youth empowerment must converge to create systemic change. And herein lies the paradox: there is broad consensus on what must change, yet fierce resistance remains from those who benefit from the status quo. How can Africa dismantle entrenched power structures that profit from ecological and social extraction? Who will challenge the interests that profit from maintaining inequality, and what mechanisms can break these cycles of dependency and inertia?

The path forward demands a new compact between Africa and the world, one grounded in justice, partnership and imagination. Conservation finance must evolve from fragmented charity into systemic investment, from global benevolence into shared accountability. It must be recalibrated to measure not only what is preserved, but who benefits, and how equitably. Can Africa insist on fair global compensation for the stewardship it provides? Can it claim ownership over its own biodiversity economies and demand that global markets pay for what has long been treated as an international public good?

Ultimately, the defining question is not only whether Africa can build a regenerative economy that restores both nature and human dignity, but whether it will find the courage to challenge the global and local structures that perpetuate inequity. Will the world finally recognise that Africa’s ecosystems are not just assets for export or philanthropy, but central to the survival of the planet? And perhaps most provocatively: if Africa fails to take this bold step, who will bear the cost — its people, its wildlife or the world at large?

The answer lies in Africa’s hands, but the responsibility is collective. The future of conservation and development will not be written by how much we extract from nature, but by how deeply, intentionally and ethically we learn to belong to it. Will Africa rise to this challenge or will it allow short-term interests and global inertia to dictate the terms of its destiny? The time to decide is now.

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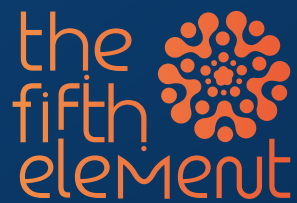
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The Fifth Element is a platform for systems transformation. It creates the conditions for people, initiatives and institutions to converge, learn and act together toward global equity on a healthy planet. Rather than leading with a fixed agenda, it nurtures collaboration, supports shared sensemaking and helps connect diverse efforts into a larger, more coherent field of change.

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