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Status of Africa Civil Societies in the Wildlife and Wildlands Conservation Space

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The COVID-19 pandemic seems to maintain a ruthless relentlessness in 2021 similar to the height of the outbreak in 2020. In Africa, there has been a delayed peak of infections compared to the other continents representing 2.5% confirmed cases globally by January 2021.

As reports of COVID-19 emerged from Wuhan, China, in December 2019, African governments started to prepare for the introduction of the first cases that would eventually arise from its close connections to China, a primary trade partner and host to more than 80,000 African students. Statistical models based on air-travel data from China identified Egypt, Algeria and South Africa as the countries at highest risk of initial introductions and spread in Africa.

Drawing experience from the 2014 Ebola virus disease crisis in West Africa, African leaders were keenly aware that failure to contain COVID-19 would threaten health, prosperity and security. African Union (AU) Member States rapidly focused on preventing COVID-19 importation and containing onward transmission within countries. As early as 2 January 2020, Ivory Coast, soon followed by other African countries, started implementing enhanced surveillance at airports, screening all passengers with a recent history of travel to China. In turn, most African airlines suspended direct flights to and from China.

This approach initially seemed to pay off: the first COVID-19 case on the continent, with notification by Egypt on 14 February 2020, was a contact of a person with a history of travel to China. By the end of the first week of March, nine African countries (Algeria, Cameroon, Egypt, Morocco, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, Togo and Tunisia) were reporting over 40 cases. Most index cases originated in Europe, where the epicentre had shifted by 13 March, and these drove early spread of the pandemic on the African continent.

Subsequent actions saw governments take drastic steps to stem the disease spread including international travel restrictions and lockdowns of hundreds of millions of people for 3 to six months. These measures have proved effective to slow the spread of the disease but have had a devastating effect on the socioeconomic impacts as businesses and industries had to stop or drastically scale back operations. The effects of lockdowns restrictions and economic turmoil are compromising gains made on conservation of Africa's immensely valuable wildlife and wildlands and the people whose livelihoods depend on them.

Africa's conservation efforts are mainly concentrated on the 7,800 terrestrial Protected Areas (PA) covering 5.3 million km² c.17% of the landmass. Most PAs are government owned and managed by state wildlife institutions, often with substantial support from tourism and hunting operators. Increasingly, conservation NGOs and private sector organisations and individuals cooperate to manage state-owned PAs through collaborative management partnerships (CMPs). Increasingly conservation efforts on private

and community lands have expanded in last 20 years. This has expanded wildlife habitat buffering PAs reducing the edge-effect, improving ecosystems representations, securing seasonal migration areas and meaningfully engaging and benefitting rural communities that live amongst wildlife.

These wildlands support some of the world's most diverse and abundant large mammal populations. Financially, the most apparent value of wildlife and wildlands is wildlife-based tourism which, generates over US \$29 billion annually and employs about 3.6 million people. However, Africa's conservation of these wildlife and wildlands was already in crisis before COVID-19 hit. The state-owned Savannah PAs with lions' have a recurrent budget deficit of US\$1.2 billion per annum, rendering wildlife vulnerable to threats like habitat loss, degradation, fragmentation, encroachment, poaching and climate change. The drop of tourism revenues due to travel restriction continue to cause significant decline of income for state and private PAs. International and domestic tourism accounts for about 50% percent of annual revenues which, supports operations. Many people in the tourism and informal sector have lost their main sources of income. This lost income creates a lot of pressure on society and people might begin to hunt for bushmeat for personal consumptions or look towards poaching high-value wildlife that until recently has been reasonably protected especially on the CMPs and community lands.

Looking to future, studies have indicated some positive environmental gains from the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. For example, reduced industrial activity and mechanised transport have lowered emissions and air pollution worldwide. Some Asian countries notably China and Vietnam have taken steps to restrict trade that threatened wildlife. Such regulations if enforced over the long-term could reduce poaching in Africa for illegally sourced products that supply Asian markets. Transport restrictions due to lockdowns may curb trade in wildlife products and provide respite to PAs that suffer negative impacts of tourist congestions.

These, positive gains are likely to be temporary and prone for reversal when global travel restrictions ease and countries return to business as usual. Scholars argue the net environmental impacts of the COVID-19 crisis in Africa will be strongly negative. This is because the crisis creates the perfect storm of reduced funding, lower conservation capacity and increased threats to wildlife and ecosystems.

Long term sustainable solutions to fund conservation of wildlife and wildlands in Africa must be sought since tourism is not the most stable source of income. Some organisations like The Nature Conservancy in Africa among others are rethinking the fragility of the current funding models to ensure better diversity of income sources. For example, carbon financing projects that could pay communities their carbon-storing forests and grasslands. In the recognition that no one model can be sufficient, a mixture of different approaches should strengthen resilience of civil societies and private organisations involved in wildlife and wildlands conservation. Other models can include direct payment by wealthy countries to African nations to set aside wilderness, land leases, whereby land is leased from owners and set aside for conservation to prevent conversion to less biodiversity friendly land use, biodiversity stewardships programmes that pay or incentivize landowners to practice conservation friendly land management, performance payment schemes that reward local people for conserving wildlife, debt restructuring for nations to reallocate resources to conservation, wildlife reserve insurance plans, resilience bonds, traditional endowment, investor houses where shares in wildlife reserves are sold in exchange of annual operating expenses cash flows. Another example is TNC Africa has set-up the Africa Wildlife Conservation Crisis Fund to support at least 17 conservation properties in Kenya, Namibia, Tanzania and Zambia that

rely on tourism revenues to cover essential activities such as wildlife security, habitat management, community outreach and more bridging the gap of an anticipated US\$3 million budget shortfall in 2020.

These are very creative approaches beyond the usual tourism revenue and philanthropic giving. More creative ideas can be studied and there nothing better than a crisis to focus the minds and get out of the comfort zones to spend time thinking through these kinds of ideas.

Civil societies and private land conservation organisations in Africa can also benefit from studies that provide excellent guidance compiled by [Oak Foundation](#) on remote working; handling employee wellness; child safeguarding; health, safety and security; funding and financial management; leadership and management; and communication.

In conclusion, if civil societies and private land conservation organisations are to endure the COVID-19 pandemic impacts beyond financial resilience, it will serve them better to organise and connect with other stakeholders to advocate for inclusion in national governments response to COVID-19 and emergency funding mechanisms. Maximise online presence and crowdfunding platforms to create awareness about their work, solicit donations and recruit volunteers. Communicate with funders about funding situations and requirements. Reflect on the future of the organisations and start reimagining the organisational strategies for the post-COVID-19 period.

To create an enabling environment, governments should support civil societies and private land organisations operations and COVID-19 activities through national emergency funding mechanisms. Leverage the organisations experience and expertise in planning, coordinating and implementing national responses to COVID-19.

To strengthen sustainability these organisations, donors can provide additional and unrestricted funding through internal mechanisms and work with others in creating pooled mechanisms for civil societies and private organisations. Support the digital transformation of these organisations through strategic investments in their technology infrastructure, from paying for laptops, connectivity and cloud services to staff training. Use the donors influence to advocate for the inclusion of the civil societies and private organisations in governments' national emergency funding mechanisms, similar to the support provided to the private sector. Fund African civil societies directly. In absence of International NGOs that frequently dominate disaster relief on the continent, direct more Africa-designated resources to local organisations involved with land conservation.