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Empowering Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities: A Pinnacle in African Conservation and Land Stewardship

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January 4, 2024

At a landmark assembly in Windhoek, Namibia, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) from 47 African nations convened for the first [Community-led Conservation Congress](#) from October 25-27, 2023. The congress marked a historic moment for people-centered conservation across the continent and represented a monumental stride toward collaboration and amplification Indigenous Peoples and Local Community (IPLC) voices. It culminated in the establishment of the Alliance for Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities for Conservation in Africa (AICA), which creates a unified front for championing a people-centered, rights-based conservation approach.

The congress was co-hosted by the Rights + Resources Initiative (RRI) and the newly established AICA, in collaboration with Southern Africa's Community Leaders Network, the Indigenous Movement for Peace Advancement and Conflict Transformation, and the Namibian Association of Community-Based Natural Resource Management Support Organizations.

Participants from diverse backgrounds came together to share first-hand experiences, lessons, and challenges related to community-led conservation. The gathering provided an unprecedented platform for dialogue and continued the priorities and strategies initiated at the African Protected Areas Congress (APAC) held in Rwanda in July 2022. There, a call to action demanded that the conservation community recognize past harm to and exclusion of IPLCs and define a more inclusive path forward.

Reflecting on the outcomes of APAC at the Namibia congress, former Prime Minister of Ethiopia and APAC Patron, H.E. Mr. Hailemariam Desalegn [said he was](#) "reminded of the immense power custodians of our land hold in leapfrogging us to the next level and redefining what sustainable development means for Africa."

"The rights of Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities must be protected, celebrated, and respected," [said](#) Hon. Royal Johan Kxao Iuiloloo, reminding the gathering that nothing should be decided for IPLCs without their participation and consent.

The emergent alliance faces formidable challenges. It hopes to implement legal and land-tenure reform to address past and present injustices on IPLC land resulting from land appropriation for protected areas and will grapple with the limited access to financial resources for IPLC conservation that persists despite more than 80 percent of Africa's wildlife residing in these lands.

A [recent report](#) from the Rights + Resources Initiative (RRI) brings hope to the effort. Published in June 2023, “Who Owns the World’s Land?” indicates that, in 2020, IPLCs in Sub-Saharan Africa owned 165.49 million hectares, representing 9.59 percent of the landscape. From 2015 to 2020, legislative developments in multiple countries helped these communities regain 35 million hectares, with particularly large swaths returned in Kenya and Liberia. The report highlights how legal reforms, such as the Community Land Act (2016) in Kenya and the Lands Rights Act 2018 in Liberia, have allowed millions of hectares of community customary land to gain recognition.

New funding mechanisms are also aiding the cause. Initiatives like the [International Land and Forest Tenure Facility](#) are funneling new grant funds toward IPLCs. In November 2021, the Conference of the Parties 26 for the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change pledged \$1.7 billion (USD) to support community tenure and the RRI and Campaign for Nature launched the Community Land Rights and Conservation Finance Initiative in 2022, aiming to raise \$10 billion (USD) by the end of the decade.

Despite these innovations, the AICA will need to fortify its institutional structure to effectively deploy its mandate and effectively support membership across Africa. The call to action resulting from the Windhoek congress is directed at cross-sector stakeholders, urging governments, bilateral and multilateral donors, and international organizations to support AICA.

If successful moving forward, the alliance will open dialogues with these diverse stakeholders, meticulously track progress supporting IPLCs, and grow in visibility, thus spreading its message and values widely.

In addition to the alliance, the conference resulted in a [final communique](#) signed by nine conservation leaders and reviewed preliminary findings of a forthcoming study on community conservation in Africa.

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