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ENABLING CONDITIONS FOR INCLUSIVE AND LOCALLY LED CONSERVATION

An analysis of the Voices for Just Climate Action programme

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WHY ENABLING CONDITIONS MATTER

Climate change affects societies unevenly, amplifying existing inequalities and exposing structural vulnerabilities rooted in unequal access to power, resources, and decision-making. For communities already facing marginalisation – particularly Indigenous Peoples, local communities, women, youth, people with disabilities and the urban poor – climate impacts are not only environmental and physical but profoundly social and political. It is in this sense that climate change is increasingly recognised as a justice issue, requiring responses that address not only environmental degradation, but also the underlying systems that perpetuate exclusion and inequity.

WWF's Roadmap 2030 (henceforth "Roadmap") responds to this challenge by articulating a clear strategic shift in how conservation outcomes are to be achieved. Rather than treating people as beneficiaries of conservation, the Roadmap foregrounds people as decision-makers and rights-holders, emphasising locally grounded leadership, strengthened rights, and enhanced resilience as central to biodiversity protection in a context of accelerating climate change. In particular, the Roadmap underscores the need to move beyond project-based delivery towards approaches that redistribute power, embed equity, and enable durable, locally anchored conservation and climate outcomes.

The Voices for Just Climate Action (VCA) programme, initiated in 2021 and concluded in 2025, was conceived as an innovative alliance to advance locally led climate and conservation action.

Supported through the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA)' Power of Voices Grant Instrument, VCA brought together a diverse coalition of civil society organisations, including WWF-NL, South–South–North (SSN), Akina Mama wa Afrika (AMwA), Slum Dwellers International (SDI), Fundación Avina, and Hivos, alongside an extensive network of 248 local partners in seven countries: Brazil, Bolivia, Paraguay, Tunisia, Zambia, Kenya, and Indonesia. From its inception, the programme made a deliberate structural commitment to shift resources closer to the local level: 50% of its total budget was committed to be allocated directly to local civil society organisations. Within the programme's budget, €3.5 million was channelled through the Next Level Grant Facility (NLGF), a small-grants mechanism delivering flexible, locally accessible funding to local organisations, activists and other rights-holder groups. It allowed coalition structures to operate meaningfully, supporting locally driven priorities, and made possible the wide range of outcomes documented in this report.

Across multiple countries and landscapes, working through WWF, alliance partners and local civil society organisations have played a central role in designing, implementing, and scaling locally led initiatives. Collectively, the Alliance sought to ensure that civil society, particularly historically marginalised groups, can act as empowered facilitators, innovators, and advocates for just climate solutions. The VCA experience demonstrates that locally grounded leadership and decision-making cannot be achieved through policy commitments alone.

It requires an explicit allocation of resources and the institutional flexibility to direct funding where it is most needed.

Across these seven diverse political and ecological contexts, VCA operated on the understanding that lasting conservation outcomes depend on the conditions within which local actors operate. Who gets to participate and is recognised as a legitimate voice? And who is recognised as a decision-maker?

Who can access finance? How are risks distributed? How do coalitions function? How do local priorities travel into national and global arenas? Through approaches such as coalition building, flexible and accessible financing mechanisms, narrative amplification, and cross-scale collaboration, and, importantly, forms of collective risk ownership embedded within alliance structures, VCA supported processes that in some contexts created or strengthened opportunities for Indigenous Peoples, women, youth, and local organisations to shape conservation and climate agendas on their own terms.

This report examines VCA through the lens of ***enabling conditions.*** **It analyses how the programme strengthened the structural and relational foundations necessary for inclusive conservation and climate justice to take root, endure, and scale.** Rather than focusing solely on discrete interventions, the analysis considers how VCA altered the operative environment in which those interventions occurred.

By documenting these shifts, the report positions VCA as a proof of concept for enabling locally led conservation within WWF. It demonstrates that when programmes are intentionally designed to reshape governance arrangements, financing modalities, partnership models, and internal systems, they can simultaneously advance biodiversity protection, climate resilience, and social equity. The report concludes by offering **concrete recommendations for how WWF can institutionalise these enabling conditions, moving from strong examples of practice toward a coherent, organisation-wide model aligned with the ambition of Roadmap 2030**.



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WHAT DO WE MEAN BY ENABLING CONDITIONS?

Locally Led Adaptation Principles:

Both the principles of Locally Led Adaptation (LLA) and Locally Led Conservation (LLC), developed by IIED and partners, provide an essential normative foundation for WWF's work toward equitable outcomes for people and nature. They articulate widely recognised principles: devolved decision-making, flexible and accessible finance, accountability, transparency, intersectionality, and long-term investment in local institutions. These principles have been critical in shifting global discourse and practice toward more equitable models of climate and conservation action.

Principles for Locally Led Adaptation:

Principle 1. Devolving decision making to the lowest appropriate level: Giving local institutions and communities more direct access to finance and power to decide how to define, prioritise, design and implement adaptation actions, monitor progress and evaluate success.

Principle 2. Addressing structural inequalities faced by women, youth, children, disabled and displaced people, Indigenous Peoples and marginalised ethnic groups: Integrating gender-based, economic and political inequalities that are root causes of vulnerability into the core of adaptation action and encouraging vulnerable and marginalised individuals to meaningfully participate in and lead adaptation decisions.

Principle 3. Providing patient and predictable funding that can be accessed more easily: Supporting long-term development of local governance processes, capacity and institutions through simpler access modalities and longer-term (seven years or more), more predictable funding horizons, to ensure that communities can effectively implement adaptation actions.

Principle 4. Investing in local capabilities to leave an institutional legacy: Improving local institutions' capabilities to ensure they can understand climate risks and uncertainties, generate solutions and facilitate and manage adaptation initiatives over the long term without depending on project-based donor funding.

Principle 5. Building a robust understanding of climate risk and uncertainty: Informing adaptation decisions through a combination of local, Indigenous and scientific knowledge to enable resilience under a range of future climate scenarios.

Principle 6. Flexible programming and learning: Enabling adaptive management to address the inherent uncertainty in adaptation, especially through robust monitoring and learning systems, flexible finance and flexible programming.

Principle 7. Ensuring meaningful transparency and accountability: Making programme financing, design and delivery more transparent and downwardly accountable to local stakeholders.

Principle 8. Collaborative action and investment: Enabling integrated subsidiarity by connecting governance layers and incentivising collaboration across sectors, initiatives and actors to support more coherent responses and ensure the most appropriate actors lead and the right type of finance is used for the right areas of action to avoid duplication and enhance efficiencies.

Source: https://www.iied.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/2025-11/22674iied.pdf

Emerging principles for supporting locally-led biodiversity action:

1. Recognise and respect the rights, knowledge and capabilities of Indigenous Peoples and local communities, especially women and youth.
It is essential to recognise, acknowledge and advance the rights, knowledge and capabilities of Indigenous Peoples and local communities – especially women and youth – as essential partners for reversing biodiversity loss, combating climate change and achieving sustainable development.

2. Devolve decision-making to, and build capacity at, the appropriate local level.
Give local institutions, including Indigenous Peoples and local communities, increased decision-making power over how biodiversity protection, restoration and sustainable use interventions are defined, prioritised, designed and implemented, and over how progress is monitored and success is evaluated.
Improve the capabilities, leadership and capacity of local institutions and organisations to facilitate and manage impactful biodiversity initiatives over the long term and reduce dependence on project-based funding.

3. Recognise and address structural and intersectional inequalities faced by women, youth, children, disabled people, displaced people, Indigenous Peoples and marginalised ethnic groups.
Recognise and address the inequalities that are often the root causes of social, economic and political vulnerability. This includes through creating mechanisms for full, equitable, inclusive, effective and gender-responsive participation, leadership and decision-making, and ensuring equitable access to resources and benefits arising from biodiversity action.

4. Encourage flexible, adaptive biodiversity programming through the provision of patient, flexible, predictable and accessible funding.
Make the processes of financing, designing and delivering gender-responsive, locally led programmes more streamlined, simple and transparent. This involves ensuring mutual accountability between local stakeholders and donors or intermediaries and ensuring that decision-making power is shared and transparent across all levels.

5. Utilise scientific, local and traditional knowledge to fully understand biodiversity risks and opportunities, and learn from experience.
Build a robust understanding of biodiversity risks, opportunities, uncertainties and definitions of success through a combination of different forms and sources of knowledge. Recognise, account for and report local actions and achievements as contributions to formal national and international targets and commitments and share experience to inspire others.

6. Promote collaborative and coherent action and investment.
Encourage inclusive collaboration between stakeholders across sectors, initiatives and levels (including across government policy areas) to ensure that different initiatives and different sources of funding support each other. Prioritise partnerships that amplify the leadership of local actors, particularly women and underrepresented groups, and ensure that their priorities and knowledge drive collective action to enhance efficiencies and good practice.

7. Actively prevent, or mitigate the risk of harm.
Rather than reacting to problems once they have arisen, take proactive actions to protect local stakeholders – including environmental human rights defenders – from harm (including gender-based violence and actions that undermine their agency or cause further marginalisation).

Source: https://www.iied.org/emerging-principles-for-supporting-locally-led-biodiversity-action

The VCA programme builds on this foundation. This report does not revisit or validate those principles in VCA. Instead, it asks a foundational and practical question: what needs to be in place for these principles to work in real-world political and institutional contexts?

Across diverse political and ecological contexts, VCA demonstrated that principles and practices such as "local leadership" or "inclusive decision-making" do not operate in isolation.

Their effectiveness depends on deeper features of the operating environment: who controls resources, how risks are distributed, how civic space is protected, how coalitions are structured, and how legitimacy is conferred within governance systems.

For this reason, the focus of this analysis shifts slightly from ***what*** **locally led approaches aim to achieve, to what enables these outcomes in the first place, as well as *how* the conditions that make those aims possible are built and sustained over time.** The intention is to understand how the LLA and LLC principles become embedded rather than rhetorical, durable rather than project-bound.

Enabling conditions matter because they determine whether locally led conservation is episodic or consistently supported; whether participation is consultative or meaningful; and whether equity and inclusion commitments translate into practice within governance, operations and finance systems.

Importantly, in the context of VCA, enabling conditions also refer to changes within WWF and the wider Alliance. When power shifts toward Indigenous Peoples, women, youth, and other historically marginalised groups, it necessarily shifts from somewhere. In VCA, these shifts were most visible at the country level, particularly in how WWF country offices and partners engaged with local civil society organisations. In practice, this has meant:

- Redistributing decision-making authority from international programme centres toward national coalitions and territorial platforms
- Expanding budgetary influence and agenda-setting power for local partners
- Redesigning financing modalities to reduce compliance barriers and increase accessibility
- Absorbing political and operational risk at alliance level rather than transferring it to frontline actors

In this sense, enabling conditions are relational. They reshape external governance systems, but they also require internal organisational roles to evolve from implementers to enablers, from primary agenda-setters to facilitators of distributed leadership. This perspective aligns closely with the ambition of WWF's Roadmap 2030. If conservation is to be inclusive, rights-based, and locally grounded, then organisational systems must be (re)designed to make that structurally possible.

It is through this lens that enabling conditions are defined and analysed in the sections that follow.



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WHAT IS AN ENABLING CONDITION?

In this analysis, enabling conditions refer to the structural and relational features of the VCA programme that made inclusive conservation and locally led adaptation possible across diverse contexts. They are not activities, outputs, or individual project results. Rather, they are the underlying arrangements that shape who can act, how they can act, and with what degree of influence, protection, and sustainability. This framing draws on longstanding contributions from civil society organisations, Indigenous Peoples, local communities and other rights-holder groups, whose work has highlighted the importance of agency, self-determination, rights, power and control over resources in shaping development and conservation outcomes.

It also resonates with scholarship on locally led development, political economy and systems change. Rather than treating enabling conditions as a set of technical prerequisites for effective programming, this analysis examines how they are produced, by whom, and with what implications for the distribution of power and resources.

Within such approaches, instruments like coalition governance, participatory planning, or flexible funding are understood as mechanisms that help build enabling conditions, rather than enabling conditions in themselves. This distinction is particularly relevant for the VCA programme, where the most significant contribution lay not in discrete activities, but in strengthening the structural and relational conditions that allowed locally led conservation and climate action to emerge and endure.

Importantly, this report focuses on enabling conditions that can be shaped through programme design and organisational practice, particularly by actors such as WWF and the VCA programme. It distinguishes between what sits within an organisation's sphere of control (e.g. funding modalities, partnership arrangements, governance processes) and what lies within its broader sphere of influence (e.g. national policy environments, civic space, or global decision-making systems). While enabling conditions ultimately manifest within these wider systems, the analysis centres on how interventions within the sphere of control can strategically influence and shift conditions beyond it.

Often, VCA's most significant contribution was not a single intervention, but the creation of conditions under which local leadership could be credible, protected, resourced, and institutionally recognised.

An enabling condition in this report has three defining characteristics:

1. It redistributes power, legitimacy, or access

An enabling condition changes who is recognised as a legitimate decision-maker, who can influence agendas, who controls resources, and how risks are distributed.

In practice, this often involves a dual shift: **externally,** toward Indigenous Peoples, local communities, women, youth, and grassroots organisations as institutional actors within governance systems; **internally,** within organisations and programmes (including WWF and VCA alliance), away from centralised agenda-setting and budget control toward distributed decision-making and locally anchored leadership.

Example: A local Indigenous platform is able to formally represent its constituency in a national climate planning process, rather than being consulted informally, because it has recognised status, organisational capacity, and access to decision-making spaces.

2. It generates cumulative and multi-actor effects

Unlike discrete activities, enabling conditions make a range of actions possible over time.

When civic space is strengthened, when finance becomes more accessible, when local planning mechanisms are institutionalised, or when coalitions are consolidated, multiple actors can use these structures in different ways. Their effects are cumulative and adaptive rather than linear.

Importantly, this applies both to local ecosystems and to organisational systems. When WWF and alliance partners redesign financing modalities, accountability mechanisms, or partnership models, these shifts create new institutional norms that extend beyond a single programme cycle.

Example: Once a municipal climate planning platform is institutionalised, different community groups - not just those initially supported - can continue to use it to influence future investment decisions.

3. It transforms systems rather than delivering activities

Enabling conditions may be strengthened through specific mechanisms: coalition governance, flexible finance, risk sharing mechanisms, participatory planning processes, or cross-scale advocacy. However, they are expressed as changes in how the broader operating environment functions.

They influence how decisions are made, how finance flows, how accountability is structured, how legitimacy is conferred, and how risk is absorbed. Systems determine whether solutions endure and scale. Enabling conditions operate at this systemic level.

Example: Rather than funding or implementing a predefined set of activities, a programme enables local organisations to directly access and manage funding streams, changing how resources flow within the system over time.



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Across the VCA programme, the following enabling conditions were strengthened (but are not limited to):

- Political legitimacy and recognition of local and Indigenous leadership (supported through coalition governance, strengthening of legal rights and recognition of customary territories);
- Safety, protection, and collective risk absorption (supported through finance design and alliance-level risk sharing);
- Cross-scale governance connectivity linking local agendas to national and global level mandates (supported through bridging structures and capacity);
- Flexible and inclusive access to finance (supported through joint budgeting and direct finance mechanisms);
- Institutionalised participatory planning mechanisms (embedded within devolved or municipal governance structures);
- Narrative power and cultural legitimacy (supported by expanding whose values, and ethical frameworks shape climate discourse);
- Implementation of collective learning systems (supported through bottom-up consolidation of knowledge and evidence infrastructures that connect grassroots experiences);
- Institutionalised accountability architecture enabling communities to move from consultation to sustained oversight and influence (supported through MEL (monitoring, evaluation and learning) tools and feedback loops);
- Relational infrastructure and long-term trust-building, including strengthening cooperation across civil society, government, and alliance partners (supported by locally rooted coalitions among civil society actors at country and community levels, as well as exchanges between rural and urban constituencies);
- Changes in organisational practice and decision making (supported through locally led agenda-setting, resource allocations, partnership arrangements and shared risk management among international organisations and local actors).



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COUNTRY SPOTLIGHTS:
Enabling Conditions in Practice

The enabling conditions outlined before did not emerge in abstraction. They were shaped, tested, and refined within highly specific political, ecological, and institutional contexts. While the core features of enabling conditions are consistent across the VCA programme, their expression differed depending on the operating environment – including levels of civic space, governance structures, fiscal constraints, and socio-political dynamics.

The country highlights that follow illustrate how enabling conditions were constructed and strengthened in practice. They do not aim to catalogue activities, but to show how shifts in power, legitimacy, finance, and institutional architecture created more durable space for locally grounded climate and conservation leadership.



BRAZIL



TUNISIA



BOLIVIA



KENYA



INDONESIA



PARAGUAY



ZAMBIA

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BRAZIL

The VCA programme in Brazil shows most clearly that locally led conservation and climate action is not only a question of participation—it is a question of power, protection, and political space. VCA operated in a context shaped by shrinking civic space, high levels of violence against environmental defenders, and intensifying pressure on Indigenous Peoples and their territories. In this setting, the programme's most important contributions were not discrete interventions, but the enabling conditions that made sustained local action possible.

First, VCA strengthened the political legitimacy of Indigenous Peoples, women, youth, and Amazonian civil society as climate and conservation decision-makers. This was made possible through coalition governance which were not only symbolic groupings but structured platforms influencing programme priorities and joint actions. The VCA programme design explicitly envisaged coalitions as a decisive mechanism for bottom-up decision-making on national programme priorities. To facilitate this, accountability structures such as the National Advisory Committee were formally established to hold the Alliance accountable for partner selection and proposals.

In practice, reporting from Brazil indicates that coalitions became the core implementation modality. They enabled advocacy to scale from local to global levels and facilitated structured "listening processes" to co-develop the COP30 strategy. Through coalition-building and narrative amplification, local actors shifted from being treated as individual consultees to acting as representatives of organised constituencies, thereby altering their status and influence within climate governance spaces.

Second, VCA embedded safeguarding and collective risk absorption into programme design and operations. The Next Level Grant Facility provided direct support to 22 threatened environmental and human rights defenders. Crucially, this was not an ad hoc activity but a deliberate choice that was part of the programme structure which enabled flexible funding, international visibility, and coalition-based protection to reduce individual exposure and enabled continued organising in a high-risk environment.

This also demonstrated a core lesson: locally led approaches require donors and intermediaries to absorb political risk, not transfer it to frontline actors.

Third, VCA's programme architecture deliberately linked territorial struggles in the Amazon to formal policy mandates. Through structured engagement, coalition-generated inputs were cited and incorporated into official adaptation planning documents by the Ministry of the Environment. At the municipal level, the institutionalisation of the Belém Climate Forum, alongside municipal recognition of institutional spaces for building and monitoring public policies, were also noted. These examples indicate a movement going beyond informal dialogue toward formalised participatory governance spaces. At the same time, VCA also strengthened access to global climate governance through procedural mechanisms. Support was provided for observer accreditation processes for Amazonian CSOs, and outcome reporting documents for the acquisition of observer credentials for four CSOs and expanded delegation participation. This represents more than attendance at events: accreditation confers formal standing within UNFCCC processes, altering long-term access pathways and reinforcing political legitimacy. Crucially, for the VCA these bridging mechanisms illustrate how governance, partnership, and advocacy functions interacted to embed local actors within institutional decision-making structures.

And finally, VCA's layered financing architecture (core funding combined with small grants) enabled participation by informal groups, emergent movements, and high-risk actors that are typically excluded from climate finance. This flexibility of the programme allowed for a rapid response to political windows and climate or security shocks, ensuring that finance is aligned with local realities rather than mere project compliance.

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BOLIVIA

Despite being faced with adverse conditions such as wildfires, water management issues, extractive pressure, and political volatility due to institutional instability, VCA's imprint in locally led conservation and climate action in Bolivia has been substantial in multiple ways. Strengthening certain enabling conditions reshaped how local actors engage with climate governance. Amongst the most significant ones were accessible and distributed climate financing; strengthening intergenerational and territorial platforms; strengthened legal and rights-based empowerment, and enhanced narrative and communication sovereignty of the communities that have systematically been marginalised. These enabling conditions show that inclusive conservation and locally led adaptation are not the after-effects of individual projects, but of deliberate transformative actions.

First, VCA has strived to build a financing architecture system with the purpose of confronting the problem that funding rarely reaches grassroots actors directly. This is due to the fact that these actors are usually faced with administrative burdens, formalisation requirements, political gatekeeping, and compliance constraints that result in exclusion from accessing funding needed to implement locally led solutions. To a limited degree, this was addressed by introducing the NLGF. Though this was a small-grants mechanism implemented across all VCA countries, its value in Bolivia lay less in the individual grants and more in how the mechanism was embedded within the national civil society ecosystem. It needs to be highlighted that the NLGF addressed only part of the structural barriers faced by grassroots actors, especially due to standard financial compliance requirements, such as invoices, and there were largely only one-off grants without the possibility of extension. Nevertheless, unlike a purely transactional small-grants scheme, the NLGF in Bolivia was anchored in the Bolivian Platform Against Climate Change (PBFCC), which meant the facility functioned as both a financing tool and a governance-strengthening mechanism.

Through this structure, 37 initiatives across seven departments were supported, addressing climate emergencies such as fires and droughts, while also enabling advocacy and institutional strengthening processes. Importantly, the mechanism was accompanied by administrative training to help grassroots actors navigate compliance requirements, which helped some organisations strengthen their institutional capacity even though barriers were not fully removed. What therefore distinguishes the NLGF functioning in Bolivia is that it was not only a delivery channel for locally led initiatives but a platform that reinforced the role of PBFCC and allied networks as legitimate intermediaries in climate finance governance, linking emergency response, local adaptation actions, and broader civil society advocacy around water, forest, and climate policies.

Second, VCA contributed to the strengthening of intergenerational and territorial platforms. In a fragmented civic space, the programme helped to further connect key spaces linking youth movements, Indigenous organisations, environmental NGOs, and policy actors. For example, the aforementioned PBFCC was promoted as a way to function as a national umbrella for civil society engagement on climate justice, bringing together 49 social organisations and institutions working on related agendas. At the same time, the PBACC has continued to perform its role as a youth-led space, with the participation of around 230 young people nationwide, supporting the emergence of new youth leadership in climate advocacy. Through activities that were sponsored by the VCA, these platforms increasingly interacted and collaborated, contributing to the gradual normalisation of intergenerational dialogue and coordination around climate governance. Their collaboration has also been reflected in initiatives such as the Bolivian Intergenerational Alliance for the Escazú Agreement (AIBAE), which links youth organisations, civil society actors and policy advocates working on environmental rights and civic participation.

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These platforms enabled coordinated advocacy on issues such as water governance, forest protection, environmental defenders, and climate legislation. By investing in leadership continuity, shared planning, and administrative capacity among partners and networks, VCA contributed to strengthening a more stable civic infrastructure for climate action and enabling collaboration among a growing number of civil society actors engaged in environmental governance.

Third, VCA strengthened legal and rights-based empowerment. This was crucial as Bolivia had faced a plethora of problems related to territorial conflicts, extractivism and threats to environmental defenders. Climate adaptation and inclusive conservation can only be achieved if communities command legal knowledge to navigate legal and institutional systems. Through collaboration with the Bolivian Society for Environmental Law (SBDA) and other partners, VCA supported community environmental justice training processes, equipping leaders with tools to document violations, engage juridical bodies, and participate in policy drafting. Linking community water monitoring systems to departmental observatories enabled evidence-based advocacy, contributing to governance shifts such as municipal water protection regulations and structured policy dialogues. These processes repositioned communities, from being treated as vulnerable beneficiaries to acting as legal and political agents actively shaping institutional responses.

Finally, VCA contributed to strengthening the narrative and communication sovereignty of the communities that have systematically been marginalised, which refers to the ability of Indigenous Peoples and local communities to produce, frame, and circulate their own stories, knowledge, and interpretations of environmental issues, rather than relying on external actors such as NGOs, government institutions, or national media to represent them. Climate governance is shaped not only by policies, but by discourse. In Bolivia, rural and Indigenous actors have often faced barriers related to technical language, centralised media structures, and urban-centric narratives. While other initiatives continue to contribute to addressing these challenges, VCA played an important role by supporting the consolidation of the Indigenous Journalism School (EPI), training over one hundred Indigenous communicators, and enabling the production of content in native languages, VCA expanded the communicative capacity of territorial actors.

These efforts contributed to expanding the communicative capacity of territorial actors and can be understood as an enabling condition, as participation in governance depends on the ability to articulate claims, document environmental issues, and make them visible in public and institutional spaces. As a result, communities have been better positioned to engage in climate debates with their own voices, territorial experiences, knowledge and evidence, contributing to broader participation in national and international arenas.



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PARAGUAY

In Paraguay, VCA operated in a politically and environmentally fragile context. The country had been dealing with prolonged and intensifying droughts in the Chaco region, shrinking rainy seasons, and recurrent wildfires that had deepened water insecurity and ecological degradation. At the same time, conflicts over Indigenous land rights, evictions, and a new legislation increasing oversight of civil society organisations signalled a tightening civic space. In such a landscape, locally led conservation could not advance through isolated projects alone. Instead, it required strengthening the conditions that determine whether Indigenous and grassroots actors can organise, influence, and endure. The project laid the foundations for several enabling conditions to become stronger which in turn facilitated durable shifts toward inclusive conservation and locally led adaptation. These include strengthening the civic and political space for environmental action, representative and inclusive governance structures, networked partnership ecosystems and the institutional administrative capacity of local actors.



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A first enabling condition concerns the protection and expansion of civic and political space. In a context where regulatory changes raised concerns about freedom of association and where Indigenous territorial rights remain contested, the ability of grassroots organisations to operate legally and visibly is an important factor that allows inclusive conservation and locally-led adaptation to flourish.

By supporting the formal recognition and institutional consolidation of Indigenous platforms such as MAOPI (Mesa de Articulación de Organizaciones de Pueblos Originarios de Boquerón), VCA contributed to shifting Indigenous organisations from informal advocacy actors to recognised institutional stakeholders. Legal identity in this context is not a procedural situation but rather a political one. It enables organisations to enter formal policy arenas, receive and manage funds, sign agreements, and represent communities in national planning processes. Without this structural foundation, participation would remain just a symbolic gesture.

Closely linked to this is a second enabling condition: the institutionalisation of representative and inclusive governance structures. VCA has set as one of its main priorities the promotion of the participation of local actors and especially women, youth and Indigenous Peoples not as beneficiaries, but as active decision-makers. For example, Indigenous leaders participated directly in the Intersectoral Water and Sanitation Roundtable (MIAS), a space previously inaccessible to many. Another example concerns the case of water governance in the Chaco, in which MAOPI supported the creation of an interinstitutional roundtable in the Senate. When grassroots actors enter policy arenas with recognised status and organisational backing, decision-making shifts from a top-down consultative model toward one where territorial actors exercise agency. Inclusion at the governance-level strengthens the durability of locally led adaptation because it embeds local perspectives within institutional processes rather than treating them as external inputs.

A third enabling condition that can be discerned in the Paraguayan case relates to participation density and coalition architecture. VCA's novelty compared to past programs is the fact that it promoted the distribution of leadership to an extensive network which includes partners such as WWF, Fundación Avina, Emancipa, PCI, OPADES, El Surtidor, Global Infancia, CODEHUPY along with many other Indigenous and grassroots groups.

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This means that VCA has been a program that has diverged from concentrating power in one central organisation to diffusing it across networks of organisations. Some examples of the coalitions that were created included the "Por los Bosques", which mobilised over 80 civil society actors to defend environmental rights. Similarly, the "Redes Chaco", a regional network that brings together civil society organisations and local governments working in the Gran Chaco region across Paraguay, Bolivia, and Argentina, was further strengthened through the help of VCA by linking it and other Paraguayan organisations with regional counterparts. It is important to note that this partnership density helps to distribute risk in politically sensitive contexts, reduces fragmentation, enables coordinated advocacy across scales, and strengthens collective bargaining power. In environments marked by volatility, such relational infrastructure is essential for sustaining environmental and rights-based action.

A fourth enabling condition concerns the institutional and administrative capacity as the foundation for autonomy. There have been multiple investments in strengthening the administrative capacity of several Paraguayan institutions. Through the VCA program and under the auspices of several VCA partners, several workshops have been organised on administrative strengthening, ethics, fraud prevention, and financial compliance. For example, in Paraguay, PCI (Pro Comunidades Indígenas) staff received technical training and internal Human Resources strengthening. If there were no compliance systems, grassroots organisations would have faced considerably greater difficulties in their attempts to acquire climate funding or in their attempts to come into formal contact with banks and ministries. Institutional capacity transforms local organisations from advocacy groups into implementers and fund managers. VCA's work on strengthening the institutional and administrative capacity of its partners reduces dependency on larger organisations, increases their access to climate finance, and enables local actors to operate on a more equal footing with ministries and donors.



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KENYA

The operating environment that the VCA program encountered in Kenya was challenging. During the programme's implementation period, the country experienced electoral tensions and transitions in political leadership, periods of shrinking civic space and increased scrutiny of civil society, along with prolonged droughts and flooding linked to climate change. In several counties across the country, VCA partners were faced with a context that was rife with insecurity, inter-communal conflict, and shifting political priorities. In this environment, advancing inclusive conservation required more than delivering projects. It specifically required embedding locally led climate action within governance systems that could withstand political volatility. VCA's contribution in Kenya lies in consolidating some mutually reinforcing enabling conditions: operationalised devolved climate governance, fiscal transparency and climate finance accountability, collective learning systems, and the development and reinforcement of locally rooted coalitions among civil society actors at county and community levels.

The first enabling condition concerns the operationalisation of devolved climate governance. Kenya's 2010 Constitution established a devolved system of 47 counties with authority over climate-related planning. However, constitutional devolution does not automatically translate into functional, participatory governance. VCA strengthened this enabling condition by reinforcing county-level institutional capacity to plan, legislate, and oversee climate action. By building the technical and legislative capacity of county departments and Members of County Assemblies, particularly in counties such as Kajiado, climate justice planning was embedded within formal governance processes rather than remaining donor-driven or externally managed. VCA's strategy focused on embedding civil society and community actors within formal county-level processes, particularly through Ward Climate Change Planning Committees (WCCPCs) and the Financing Locally Led Climate Action (FLLoCA) framework. The development and national rollout of the WCCPCs Facilitators Guide marked a pivotal step in standardising capacity within devolved climate finance structures.

The guide, co-developed with national and county actors and officially launched in April 2025, reached 36 counties, institutionalising community-level climate planning processes. This move transformed participatory planning from ad hoc consultation to institutionalised inclusive participation.

A second enabling condition that was strengthened by the VCA in Kenya relates to fiscal transparency and climate finance accountability. VCA recognised early that local participation must be coupled with visibility into public finance flows and that this would not be achieved without equitable access to resources. Tools such as the Mulika Tracking Tool and Ward Climate Finance Scorecards were positioned as accountability instruments that empowered communities to monitor FLLoCA allocations and county budget decisions. Their endorsement by county assemblies and civil society networks marked a shift from opaque disbursement systems toward participatory oversight, while the election of four VCA partners as FLLoCA CSO County Representatives further institutionalised civil society involvement in climate finance governance.

Within this emerging accountability architecture, WWF-Kenya played an enabling role in strengthening the institutional interface between communities and devolved climate finance systems. Through collaboration with the Adaptation Consortium and national government institutions, WWF contributed to the development and rollout of the WCCPC Facilitators Guide, a tool designed to standardise participatory planning processes within Kenya's devolved climate finance framework and strengthen community capacity to design locally led adaptation investments. The financial governance architecture was further reinforced through resource leverage. For instance, the Shurr Climate-Smart Farm in Marsabit secured a county commitment of KSh 5,000,000 through FLLoCA, while WCCPCs mobilised additional resources for community-led climate initiatives embedded within county planning structures.

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WWF also contributed to expanding the financing landscape by mobilising external resources, including funding through the WWF-CARE Alliance to support women's leadership in climate resilience, demonstrating how alliance partnerships could unlock additional capital for locally led adaptation. Climate finance accountability constitutes a critical enabling condition because it aligns incentives across governance levels: counties are more likely to adopt inclusive planning processes when fiscal transparency mechanisms exist, and communities are more likely to engage when they can trace financial commitments to locally determined priorities. VCA's approach, therefore, demonstrates that locally led adaptation requires not only participatory voice but also verifiable financial pathways and institutional mechanisms linking community priorities to public budgets.

Another enabling condition strengthened by the VCA in Kenya is the implementation of collective learning systems that connect grassroots experiences, policy engagement, and international advocacy. Rather than treating learning as an internal programme management activity, VCA attempted to institutionalise knowledge production and exchange as a core strategy for climate action outcomes. For example, VCA partners trained dozens of climate champions and local actors in strategic communication, storytelling, and advocacy, strengthening their ability to document local knowledge and locally led climate solutions, and elevate community perspectives within national climate discourse. The national #WeAreVCA campaign further illustrated how these learning investments translated into public engagement, generating over 1.6 million interactions and demonstrating enhanced partner capacity to communicate climate justice narratives and connect local realities to national debate. Moreover, in Kenya, the VCA also invested in methodological learning and institutional knowledge management to ensure that lessons from local implementation informed broader programme strategy.

WWF-Kenya, for instance, supported implementing partners through refresher trainings on Outcome Harvesting, strengthening their ability to systematically capture and analyse programme lessons and results, as well as institutional change processes. This emphasis on structured reflection enabled those affiliated with the program to document policy influence, community-led adaptation initiatives, and governance outcomes across counties, creating a shared evidence base for advocacy and programme learning. By institutionalising learning practices and strengthening partners' analytical capacities, the VCA in Kenya created a feedback loop through which community experiences informed advocacy strategies.



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A further key enabling condition strengthened by VCA in Kenya was the development and reinforcement of locally rooted coalitions among civil society actors at county and community levels. Through several partners, the programme supported networks of grassroots organisations such as informal settlement groups, waste picker associations in Kisumu, and community-based organisations in Baringo, Marsabit, and Nairobi.

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Their support focused on helping them move from fragmented initiatives toward more coordinated, collective action. For example, in Kisumu, waste picker groups were organised into structured associations managing Material Recovery Facilities and engaging directly with county authorities, while in Nairobi, the Kiamaiko network collectively advocated for and secured space for a community resilience hub. Similarly, participatory processes such as the Kisumu ward adaptation planning and the scaling of the Ramat model in Marsabit and Samburu brought communities together around shared climate priorities and action. These coalitions strengthened local actors' ability to articulate shared priorities, engage county governments, and influence planning, policy, and resource allocation processes.

This support enabled the emergence and consolidation of local coalitions, while also linking them to national and regional policy spaces. Through these connections, locally grounded priorities from Kenyan communities were amplified in broader climate governance arenas, reinforcing multi-level engagement while maintaining local leadership at the centre.



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TUNISIA

By the time VCA was launched in Tunisia, civic and political space was increasingly constrained since it coincided with a time when public institutions were undergoing changes, which had further strained the relationship between the state and civil society actors. During that time, Tunisia was also suffering from economic pressures and fiscal crisis, alongside intensifying environmental stresses, including prolonged drought, water scarcity, biodiversity degradation, and growing tensions around land and energy transitions. Despite these challenging conditions, VCA was able to generate durable impact by strengthening a set of enabling conditions that allowed inclusive conservation and locally led adaptation to take root, particularly, enabling civic and deliberate space for climate justice, institutional pathways for locally led climate planning, and the consolidation of knowledge infrastructures that connect grassroots experiences with evidence-based climate governance. These enabling conditions facilitated the reposting of local actors and especially women, Indigenous People, and younger people repositioning themselves from passive beneficiaries of climate action to active shapers of climate governance.

Regarding enabling civic and deliberative space for climate justice, which had been severely constrained owing to legal reforms that threatened to restrict the formation, funding, and operation of civil society organisations, VCA partners undertook structured advocacy around the draft Water Code and environmental legislation, collaborating with networks such as the Observatoire Tunisien de l'Eau to contest adoption of provisions that lacked inclusivity and a human-rights-based approach. This example goes beyond mere stakeholder engagement since it directly opposed the institutionalised technocratic environmental governance systems in place. Further, the program co-organised the first National Water Forum, which saw active participation of more than 100 representatives from diverse organisations and regions. After this forum, the National Advisory Water Committee was set up, which marked a shift from centralised administrative decision-making toward more pluralised governance arrangements.

These processes represent more than isolated events or advocacy moments; they signal the consolidation of deliberative infrastructure through which civil society can systematically influence environmental policy. In practical terms, deliberative infrastructure refers to the institutionalised spaces, networks, and practices that allow diverse actors (including civil society organisations, community representatives, researchers, and public authorities) to engage in structured dialogue around environmental decision-making. Before VCA, such spaces in Tunisia were limited and often mediated through centralised, expert-driven policy processes that left little room for grassroots participation. By supporting coalition-building, facilitating forums such as the National Water Forum, and strengthening the capacity of civil society networks to engage with legislative and policy debates, VCA helped transform climate governance into a more participatory arena. The creation and stabilisation of alternative deliberative spaces become an enabling condition that promotes inclusive conservation since without them, communities, women's groups, youth movements, and local organisations lack the mechanisms through which their knowledge, priorities, and rights claims can enter policy processes.

A second enabling condition relates to institutional pathways for locally led climate planning. This condition was seen in practice through the development and adoption of Local Climate Action Plans (PLACs) at the municipal level. By 2023, eleven PLACs were adopted by municipalities and became an important mechanism for sustaining participatory climate governance at the municipal level. Moreover, the Beni Khedeche municipality was selected by the VCA as one of the six Tunisian municipalities to be supported by the Local Climate Adaptive Living (LoCAL) Facility, designed and managed by the UN Capital Development Fund. The LoCAL is a financial mechanism which supports local municipalities in implementing their local climate action plans and enhancing local resilience. This alignment is critical: locally led adaptation becomes durable only when participatory planning processes are integrated into municipal governance and connected to predictable finance.

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In this sense, PLACs and LoCAL function not merely as instruments, but as systemic pathways through which local priorities gain institutional traction.

Another enabling condition strengthened through the VCA programme relates to the consolidation of knowledge infrastructures that connect grassroots experiences with evidence-based climate governance. In this country, environmental governance has historically been shaped by centralised expertise and technocratic policy processes, which often marginalise the lived experiences and knowledge of communities most affected by climate change. VCA contributed to addressing this gap by supporting civil society actors in generating, documenting, and circulating locally grounded knowledge on issues such as water scarcity, coastal degradation, food sovereignty, and climate justice. Through participatory learning initiatives, media engagement, policy dialogues, and community-based exchanges, local organisations were able to translate community experiences into narratives and evidence that could enter public debate and policy discussions.

These processes expanded the range of actors involved in knowledge production and strengthened the channels through which grassroots perspectives could inform climate governance.

Within this broader ecosystem, several initiatives helped connect local knowledge to national and international policy arenas. For example, representatives of fishing communities from the Kerkennah Archipelago and Gabès, together with the civil society organisation ACG and supported by WWF North Africa through the VCA programme, participated in the Small-Scale Fisheries Summit in Rome. There, they shared their experiences of climate impacts on coastal livelihoods and engaged with fishers, policymakers, and researchers from across the Mediterranean and Black Sea region in discussions on sustainable fisheries governance. Such engagements enabled grassroots knowledge and lived experiences to reach wider policy audiences while reinforcing the role of civil society networks as intermediaries that translate community perspectives into policy-relevant knowledge.



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INDONESIA

Indonesia, at the start of the VCA program, had been experiencing democratic backsliding, growing extractive economic pressures, and intensifying climate impacts. In addition, while Indonesia's decentralised governance system grants significant autonomy to districts and villages, it also creates uneven capacity and fragmented climate governance. Civic space has been under strain due to deregulatory reforms affecting environmental oversight, large-scale development schemes such as food estates and transmigration programmes, and increasing pressure on Indigenous territorial rights. West Papua, where WWF was active within VCA, was experiencing an administrative restructuring into new provinces, altered political alignments and bureaucratic interfaces, compelling civil society to maintain adaptable approaches in this kind of shifting landscape. This coupled with the fact that Indonesia faces increasing climate-related disasters, ranging from floods and droughts to even more extreme weather events, were affecting both urban informal settlements as well as rural agrarian communities. Within this environment, VCA focused not on isolated projects but on strengthening the enabling conditions that could sustain locally led adaptation and inclusive conservation, the most significant ones being knowledge and evidence systems rooted in lived realities, narrative power and cultural legitimacy, the capacity of local communities and community-based organisations to engage in climate governance and policy processes, and the support of sustainable community livelihoods.



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Regarding knowledge and evidence systems, VCA in Indonesia focused on the recognition of customary territories. Mapping these territories is the first step, and yet, this is expensive and subject to time-consuming bureaucratic procedures. VCA partners determined that they should facilitate the participatory mapping process in which communities work alongside technical experts to document their territories by combining local knowledge with scientific tools. In Papua in particular, these mapping efforts did not begin with VCA but built on previous work that WWF-Indonesia's Papua programme has supported for many years alongside local partners. Such processes require sustained facilitation, long-term trust-building with Indigenous communities, and a commitment to supporting Indigenous Peoples' self-determination in defining and documenting their territories. Within this longer trajectory, VCA provided additional resources and support that allowed partners to continue and expand these processes.

Through this support, partners worked alongside technical experts to document their territories by combining local knowledge with scientific tools. This process was approached as a political act of territorial assertion and not merely a cartographic exercise. By strengthening local facilitators' capacity to gather social and spatial data, mobilise clan-based participation, and document customary land boundaries, the program contributed to the production of maps covering tens of thousands of hectares of indigenous-managed territory. These maps functioned as instruments of recognition in administrative processes, particularly in the context of Papua's new provincial divisions and the increasing pressure of extractive and plantation-based economic models. Further, this shifted their position in land registration and development planning processes from claimants to recognised actors.

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Another enabling condition relates to the capacity of local communities and their organisations to engage in climate governance and policy processes. It is important to highlight that strengthening locally led climate action requires the ability of communities to influence the decisions that shape their territories, livelihoods, and ecosystems. In Indonesia, decisions related to land use, conservation, and development planning are often negotiated across village, district, and provincial levels. However, historically marginalised groups and particularly Indigenous communities and rural populations, frequently face barriers to participating meaningfully in these processes due to limited access to information, technical expertise, and institutional networks. Within the VCA programme, alliance members and local partners therefore worked together to create the conditions for more inclusive and equitable participation in governance processes. This work emphasised mutual capacity strengthening, peer learning, and collective advocacy, enabling community representatives, local organisations, and facilitators to better understand climate policy frameworks, articulate their priorities, and engage in dialogue with government institutions and other stakeholders.

Partnerships included organisations such as YASA (Yayasan Alfons Suwada Asmat), Pt. PPMA (Perkumpulan Terbatas untuk Pengkajian dan Pemberdayaan Masyarakat Adat Papua), PERDU Manokwari, PANAH Papua, PIONER Tanah Papua, the women-led community group Inger Wewal, and the national Indigenous territory registry BRWA (Badan Registrasi Wilayah Adat). Through these collaborations, WWF and its partners jointly facilitated community dialogues, storytelling and writing workshops, conflict mediation training, and studies on the economic value of natural resources. These activities were developed and implemented through a co-creation approach, drawing on the knowledge, priorities, and leadership of Indigenous communities and local organisations. By working through local partners and community leaders, the VCA programme helped strengthen the conditions for a gradual shift in power toward local actors in environmental decision-making.

Organisations such as Pt. PPMA, YASA, and other community partners, collaborated with Indigenous youth groups and local leaders to document local climate solutions, communicate environmental concerns, and engage with district and provincial authorities responsible for conservation and land management.

Another enabling condition was the work on community livelihoods. Strengthening livelihood systems that generate income while maintaining ecosystem integrity is an important enabling condition to achieve economic resilience without compromising the ecological systems on which communities' long-term well-being depends. Drawing on its conservation experience in Papua, WWF assisted several community-based business groups to diversify products derived from locally available resources such as sago, banana, taro, and non-timber forest products, helping them obtain business licenses and improve production and marketing practices. These initiatives encouraged communities to maintain and cultivate traditional food sources, specifically sago, as part of both livelihood diversification and ecosystem conservation strategies. Through this support, communities were able to strengthen local production systems while promoting sustainable management of natural resources. By reinforcing the economic viability of environmentally sustainable livelihood strategies, the program helped create conditions in which communities can maintain stewardship over their territories while also improving their socio-economic resilience in the face of climate and development pressures.

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ZAMBIA

During the operating period of the VCA program in Zambia, partners strived to go beyond initial mobilisation and relationship-building towards deeper institutional embedding, particularly in public finance systems, and territorial coordination. Rather than creating parallel structures, the programme focused on reorienting existing governance and fiscal systems toward locally led adaptation and inclusive conservation. In Zambia's context, the following enabling conditions stand out: decentralised climate finance pathways anchored in public systems, the expansion of civic and political space that allowed communities and civil society actors to meaningfully influence climate governance, community-centred monitoring and accountability practices, and rural–urban linkages and territorial integration.

In Zambia, climate action has been primarily dependent on external donors and projects. VCA, in response to this, decided to target domestic fiscal instruments, particularly the Constituency Development Fund (CDF). The CDF is a decentralised public financing mechanism in Zambia that allocates national government funds directly to parliamentary constituencies to support locally identified development priorities. It provides communities with an opportunity to propose and finance projects relating to infrastructure, livelihoods, and environmental initiatives, through district-level planning and decision-making processes. The Alliance commissioned studies on the CDF and particularly on how to make it more responsive to climate change and function as a local climate finance mechanism.



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This research process included stakeholder consultations with the Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development and the Ministry of Green Economy and Environment to explore how decentralised funds could support locally led climate adaptation. Moreover, they trained civil society organisations in budget analysis and proposal development and facilitated structured engagement between communities and district councils. In districts such as Kafue, Rufunsa, Chongwe, and Lusaka, community groups successfully developed and submitted climate-related proposals, covering water and sanitation infrastructure, climate-smart agriculture, forestry, and sustainable livelihoods, many of which were approved for funding. By integrating climate priorities within an established public finance mechanism, VCA created predictable and accessible pathways for locally defined adaptation priorities. Crucially, this did not establish parallel funding streams but instead strengthened and redirected existing ones.

A further enabling condition strengthened by the VCA in Zambia was the emergence of community-centred monitoring and accountability practices embedded within decentralised governance systems. While the programme attempted to emphasise MEL and capacity strengthening in all the countries, this ambition remained unevenly realised and was at times criticised for being insufficiently resourced or implemented in a more top-down, compliance-oriented manner. In Zambia, however, these limitations were addressed more effectively, as MEL and capacity strengthening were translated into practical, locally embedded processes that were actively taken up by both local partners and communities. Rather than remaining a largely technical or externally driven function, participatory MEL, outcome harvesting, and budget advocacy were operationalised through sustained investments in local partner capacity and community-level engagement. Civil society organisations and grassroots groups were not only trained in tools such as data collection, outcome tracking, and budget analysis, but were also supported to apply these skills directly within governance processes, including CDF structures and district planning forums.

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This practical application was critical in moving MEL from a reporting requirement to a tool for local agency.

A key factor that differentiated Zambia from other programme contexts was the way these capacities were embedded in iterative cycles of practice, mentorship, and peer learning, rather than delivered as one-off trainings. Local partners such as grassroots federations, women's groups, and media actors played a central role in facilitating these processes, ensuring that monitoring and accountability were grounded in lived experience and local priorities. Communities were supported to generate their own evidence, track progress on locally defined solutions, and use this evidence to engage decision-makers.

The significance of this enabling condition lies in how it addressed a structural limitation of decentralisation: while financial and decision-making powers may be devolved, they do not automatically translate into equitable access or influence. In Zambia, VCA's approach helped mitigate risks of elite capture and exclusion by equipping communities with the skills and platforms needed to interrogate budgets, monitor implementation, and advocate for their priorities. As a result, participation shifted from consultation towards more sustained and meaningful influence. Community-centred monitoring and accountability were now seen as governance practices, reinforcing locally led adaptation and inclusive conservation not as externally driven project activities, but as processes rooted within local systems and institutions.

Another enabling condition created and strengthened by the VCA was the expansion of civic and political space that enabled communities and civil society actors to meaningfully influence climate governance. Although Zambia's broader civic environment during the VCA implementation period was often described as constrained, specifically due to new legislation affecting civil society operations, the climate policy arena remained relatively open. The VCA alliance strategically worked within this opening to deepen participation in national and local climate governance processes.

Rather than positioning itself solely as an advocacy platform operating outside government processes, the alliance and its local partners engaged with a wide range of actors, including government ministries, parliamentarians, traditional leaders, district authorities, and civil society networks.

Through multi-stakeholder dialogues, joint advocacy initiatives, policy consultations, and evidence-based engagement, VCA partners contributed to shaping policy discussions around key national frameworks, such as the National Policy on Climate Change, the Climate Change Act, the development of the carbon market framework and the National Adaptation Plan. These engagements enabled civil society organisations and community representatives to move beyond reactive advocacy and participate more substantively in structured policy processes.

Within this broader collaborative effort, different members of the alliance contributed complementary strengths to the policy engagement process. WWF, for example, brought technical expertise on ecosystem conservation and nature-based solutions, drawing on its landscape-level work to demonstrate how community-managed ecosystems could contribute to both adaptation and mitigation objectives and how conservation practice could inform national climate policy discussions. At the same time, other VCA alliance partners and local civil society organisations played equally important roles in facilitating community mobilisation, strengthening grassroots networks, generating locally grounded evidence, and creating platforms through which community representatives could participate in policy dialogues. By 2024, VCA-supported advocacy contributed to the inclusion of Community Development Agreements within Zambia's Climate Change Act, a provision intended to ensure that communities can benefit from carbon market initiatives.

Finally, Zambia's vulnerabilities cut across geographies: during the programme timeline, rural districts faced severe drought, while urban informal settlements experienced recurrent flooding.

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Yet adaptation strategies were often treated as spatially separate. VCA encouraged exchanges between rural and urban constituencies where several partners supported ecosystem restoration and climate-resilient livelihoods. Some of these areas include the Lukanga wetlands and districts like Chonge and Kafue, as well as urban constituencies in Lusaka facing food, energy, and environmental pressures. Through training, peer-to-peer learning, and joint dialogue platforms, rural producer groups, community organisations, and local authorities came into contact with urban actors to share experiences on climate-smart agriculture, water management, and sustainable livelihoods. These exchanges also helped community groups to translate local solutions into fundable proposals under the CDF, including projects focused on water access, climate-smart agriculture, and sustainable livelihood diversification.

Community groups from areas such as Chongwe and Kafue were also able to participate in training on climate finance and project development, strengthening their ability to access public funding for locally defined adaptation initiatives.

This rural–urban linkage functioned as an enabling condition because climate resilience depends on coordinated action across interconnected systems: rural production underpins urban food security, while urban demand for charcoal and other resources shapes land-use pressures in surrounding landscapes. By enabling dialogue and learning across these constituencies, VCA strengthened resilience at a broader territorial scale rather than limiting adaptation to isolated sites. In addition, these exchanges helped build stronger relationships between community groups, civil society organisations and local authorities.



SCALING ENABLING CONDITIONS: RECOMMENDATIONS

As part of its Roadmap 2030, WWF articulates an ambition to advance inclusive conservation by strengthening local leadership, redistributing power, and delivering enduring biodiversity and climate resilience outcomes. The analysis of the VCA programme demonstrates that these ambitions can be realised in practice when the structural and relational foundations necessary for inclusive conservation and climate justice to take root, endure, and scale are in place.

The following recommendations translate these insights into practical guidance for how WWF and its donor organisations can institutionalise these enabling conditions, moving beyond discrete interventions and pockets of good practice – towards a coherent organisation-wide model for locally led conservation.

FOR WWF:

Create champions and teams for organisational change: Assign a senior lead and a team spanning programmes, finance, legal, and safeguarding to institutionalise these enabling conditions. It is essential that organisational leaders take the responsibility for creating the enabling conditions (e.g., resources and time) for staff to be successful in implementing organisational change. Review progress regularly, including feedback from partners and donors.

Promote local ownership and address decision-making authority: At programme inception, agree with partners who decides priorities, budgets and changes in direction. Give local partners a substantive role in programme-wide governance as well as country-level delivery, and fund the time and support they need to participate. Record these arrangements in partnership agreements and provide a clear route for resolving disagreements.

Ensure a fair distribution of budget and resources: Discuss budget allocations openly and agree how partners' delivery, coordination, and organisational costs will be covered. Explain differences in overhead allocations and address unfair disparities. Resource smaller partners' participation in steering groups, learning, and advocacy so that their influence does not depend on unpaid work.

Make procedures workable for smaller organisations: Review applications, contracts, and reporting with the partners who use them. Remove duplicate requests and scale requirements to grant size and risk, including appropriate arrangements for informal groups. Agree on monitoring indicators and metrics that are sensitive to local contexts and relevant to all partners and allow activities and budgets to change within clear limits. Give partners a safe way to raise concerns about WWF and report back on what changes as a result.

Ensure a shared distribution of risks and put risk management into programme plans and budgets: Assess risks and threats with partners, including those facing environmental defenders and groups working in restricted civic spaces. Agree which risks WWF will carry, who will respond when problems arise, and how emergency support can be accessed. Discuss whether public visibility helps or exposes partners and respect their decisions about it.

Invest time in partnerships that go beyond the lifecycle of projects: Support coalition coordination, peer learning and mentoring alongside individual projects. Help partners secure future funding and maintain relationships with public institutions where these support local priorities. Agree on a realistic continuity plan before programme closure, including who will sustain coordination and connections between local action and wider advocacy.



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FOR DONOR ORGANISATIONS:

Fund inception and continuity: Provide resources for partners to develop programmes together before delivery begins[1]. Where possible, offer multi-year funding, including organisational costs and partnership coordination. Discuss transition arrangements early so that essential local structures are not left without support when a grant ends.

Allow programmes to be responsive to changing conditions: Agree clear and flexible processes for adjusting budgets, activities, and timelines. Make reporting requirements proportionate and compatible with the resources and capacities of all partners. Explain changes in funding priorities early, with enough time for partners to adapt.

Share responsibilities and risks: Agree how the donor, intermediaries and local partners will handle unexpected costs, financial losses, and risks. Allow contingency resources and avoid leaving smaller organisations to absorb costs and risks they cannot reasonably manage.

Track progress with the actors on the ground: Agree on monitoring indicators and metrics that capture changes in local influence, institutional recognition, and access to resources, alongside delivery results. Let local and Indigenous partners shape the questions and the evidence used. Include a budget for interpretation and translation, and accept suitable reporting languages and formats, so that participation does not depend on English fluency.

[1] For example, the Generating Ambition for Locally Led Adaptation (GA-LLA) programme, supported by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands, used a 12-month inception phase to facilitate a co-design process and ensure the programme structures and management arrangements were fully aligned with the LLA principles and fit for purpose (Mitchell et al., 2025).

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COLOFON

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