

Uneven governance in a shared conservation landscape: wildlife tourism and community resilience in a Transfrontier Conservation Area

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Abstract. This study investigates the resilience of communities located near prominent wildlife tourism destinations within the Kavango Zambezi Transfrontier Conservation Area. The study is grounded on social capital and emphasizes its importance, coupled with that of information flows, in shaping community engagement in wildlife tourism and conservation planning and decision-making processes. Drawing on interviews with stakeholders from the tourism, conservation and community sectors in Botswana, Zambia and Zimbabwe, the findings highlight the critical role of social networks in determining the frequency, channels and accessibility of communication related to environmental planning. Additionally, the study reveals significant localized disparities in state-level governance arrangements, particularly concerning which voices are recognized and integrated into decision-making processes. It stresses the need to acknowledge and incorporate indigenous and traditional knowledge systems and governance structures in both information dissemination and participatory decision-making. This contribution illustrates that the resilience of destinations in wildlife tourism contexts not only depends on ecological conservation interventions or tourism development strategies but is also significantly influenced by the quality, inclusiveness and legitimacy of governance relationships among stakeholders.

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1. Introduction

Wildlife-tourism-dependent communities are in a precarious position, owing to the increasingly volatile tourism landscape shaped by political instability, widening social inequalities, economic downturns and climate-change impacts, which affect the natural environment and wildlife these communities both depend on and reside with (Holland et al., 2022; Ghadban et al., 2026). In light of the myriad challenges and crises, both past and looming, resilience has been a central focus in tourism and community planning and development, underpinned as an essential way to manage and overcome the increasingly complex sociopolitical, economic and natural systems at intersecting local and global scales (Yang et al., 2021; Kimaro & Saarinen, 2025). Certainly, one of the main criticisms of the term “resilience”, at community and destination scales, lies in the lack of measurable constructs, which has resulted in several scholars offering various theoretical lenses and frameworks to account for resilience, including the sustainable livelihood approach, vulnerability, community capital frameworks, capitals co-management, political ecology, and socioecological resiliency theory (Cafer et al., 2019; Rahman et al., 2022; Camacho et al., 2023; Defe et al., 2025). Notably, these studies underline the significance of stakeholder engagement and social capital in foregrounding community resilience (see for example: Farsari, 2023; Defe et al., 2025 Idajati & Damanik, 2025), largely due to their influence in supporting the adaptive capacity of communities in response to disturbances and change. For instance, in their study, Holland et al. (2022) found that non-inclusive governance structures undermine community resilience and support for tourism and conservation efforts, supporting several other studies that centralize governance as an enabler or constraint to resilience-building efforts in tourism destinations (Saarinen & Gill, 2018; Nemaakonde, 2026), owing to its influence on coordinating responses, resources and support, and adherence to collective adaptive measures taken.

In this study, we focus on tourism governance, community resilience and the emergent tourism and environmental crises affecting wildlife destinations. By doing so, we broaden the scope of resilience by unpacking local and national governance dynamics within Transfrontier Conservation Areas (TFCAs) and argue that the nature of local community integration in normative governance structures and arrangements may not be entirely effective in the current socio-ecological environment in which wildlife tourism and conservation occur. Accordingly, the study focuses on the governance processes in

prominent wildlife destinations in TFCAs and their implications for destination and community resilience. Regarding the latter, we focus on the ability of communities and destinations to anticipate, cope with and adapt to crises and disturbances in their wildlife tourism and conservation landscapes.

TFCAs comprise complex and multiscale governance arrangements and are idealized solutions for regional environmental protection, poverty alleviation, tourism development, and peace and cooperation (Noe, 2020). The Kavango Zambezi (KAZA) is perhaps the most complex of all TFCAs owing to the number of countries involved, the scale of the area designated, and its wildlife and human population dynamics. The multilayered governance structure comprises member states and five committees responsible for the management and administration of the KAZA TFCA, including a joint management committee that ensures community participation in the KAZA management structure and involves a community working group (Lekgau & Tichaawa, 2025a; KAZA, 2012). The inclusiveness of governance structures in TFCAs is heavily contested (see Lekgau & Tichaawa, 2019, 2021; Linell et al., 2019; Noe, 2020) and is often dependent on the national and local interplay of policy, its implementation, social capital, resources, and community support in wildlife tourism and conservation contexts. This study examines local governance arrangements in TFCA contexts in order to determine the nature of information-sharing, which is critical to adaptive strategies against short-term crises as well as longer-term resilience planning. Accordingly, the study is guided by two objectives: (I) to determine the nature of communication in wildlife destinations and (II) to explore the factors shaping decision-making processes in TFCAs.

2. Literature review

Governance has been increasingly utilized to examine conservation and sustainable tourism outcomes (Shackleton et al., 2023; Maphosa et al., 2025). Though difficult to define, governance broadly refers to the systems, processes, relationships and institutions through which stakeholders articulate interests, exercise rights and resolve differences (Siakwah et al., 2019). In the past couple of decades, collaborative and participatory governance structures have been widely called for to address the inadequacies of existing governance structures, particularly in the era of accelerating environmental and socio-economic crises facing many nature-based tourism destina-

tions, including biodiversity loss, climate change (Mushawemhuka et al., 2018), resource degradation, human–wildlife conflict and persistent community marginalization (Stoldt et al., 2020; Imbwaie et al., 2023; Sun et al., 2025). Certainly, collaborative governance, often perceived as “good governance”, is critical for ensuring the effectiveness of conservation measures, as it creates the conditions favorable for stakeholders to achieve desired goals.

Several scholars have found it important to understand institutions, as the nature of the institutional arrangement can represent enablers or barriers to participatory governance (Saarinen & Gill, 2018; Lekgau & Tichaawa, 2019; Shackleton et al., 2023). In this matter, Pittman (2019) explains that the change from traditional exclusionary institutional arrangements can improve the connection between nature and society, which is crucial not only for community support for conservation efforts but also for ownership of environmental stewardship. Accordingly, several studies have underlined the tenets of good governance and inclusive institutional arrangements,

emphasizing the importance of stakeholder inclusivity, institutional diversity, accountability, trust and transparency (Manfredo et al., 2017; Saarinen & Gill, 2018; Cassidy, 2021; Shackleton et al., 2023; Ayambire et al., 2025; Lekgau & Tichaawa, 2025b). Through a review of the literature, Ayambire et al. (2025) proposed a set of principles for good governance, as shown in the Table 1.

This proposed list of principles encompasses those commonly found in the relevant literature and ground the understanding of governance relationships amongst stakeholders considered in this research. Notably, these principles are instrumental in fostering positive adaptive capacity and resilience as, if harnessed effectively, they can shed light on how to utilize networks, relationships, reciprocity and trust to collectively cope, adapt and evolve. Such approaches arguably enhance socio-ecological resilience, promote context-specific environmental management, and avoid uniform conservation strategies that may not be suitable across different protected areas.

Table 1. Proposed set of principles for good governance

Principle	Description
Fit	The intervention's design recognizes the scale of environmental threat, aligns governance activities between formal and informal institutions, and within the specific local socioeconomic and cultural context, and considers the elements of human well-being as a long-term goal of addressing the threat.
Legitimacy	The intervention possesses legal authority to make decisions and implement actions that are respected by stakeholders, including provision of secure land and natural resource tenure or both and adherence to legal obligations to rights holders.
Inclusivity	The intervention empowers equitable representation of and respect for the interests and priorities of stakeholders and rights holders most affected by the intervention, especially those from vulnerable and marginalized groups, and recognizes human and cultural rights.
Fairness	The intervention avoids bias in decision-making and conflict resolution and distributes costs and benefits fairly.
Transparency	The intervention clearly and openly communicates rationale for decision-making and makes information freely available and accessible.
Accountability	The intervention clearly articulates and assigns roles and responsibilities of all stakeholders to appropriate levels and holds all stakeholders to account; accountability is inclusive of horizontal (i.e., among stakeholders at the same governance level [e.g., within a local community]) and vertical accountability (i.e., upward and downward governance accountability across different levels [e.g., between the state, nonstate partners, and local community stakeholders]).
Support networks	The intervention possesses multilevel networks and relationships to promote coordination and collaboration within the engagement processes.
Capability	The intervention builds capacity and institutional leadership to promote compliance with, and enforcement of rules, and the ability to resolve conflict.
Knowledge coproduction	The intervention recognizes the contributions of both scientific and local and Indigenous knowledge, and stakeholders coproduce knowledge.
Resilience	The intervention possesses adaptive capacity to social, environmental, and climatic changes.

Source: Ayambire et al. (2024: 3)

The significance of community involvement, inclusion, and stewardship in wildlife tourism and conservation has been recognized in several policy documents in Southern Africa, with Community-Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM) representing a practical application of collaborative governance. Originating in Zimbabwe through the CAMPFIRE program (Communal Areas Management Programme for Indigenous Resources), CBNRM integrates conservation and rural development by enabling communities to derive economic benefits from natural resources, particularly through wildlife tourism (Cassidy, 2021). As a decentralized strategy, it promotes community participation, supports the incorporation of traditional practices and contributes to sustainable resource use (Tantoh et al., 2026). However, its success depends on inclusive decision-making processes, as the marginalization of communities from land-use and conservation discussions can undermine its effectiveness. Despite its potential, collaborative governance faces several challenges. While community participation is widely recognized as essential for conservation and tourism success, practical implementation is often hindered by institutional and political constraints (Cassidy, 2021). Additionally, internal community dynamics, including power imbalances, conflicts and difficulties in achieving consensus, can further limit effective collaboration (Mutanga et al., 2020). Much of the research on CBNRM programs has been limited to one site, but as there is a growing movement towards regionalism, with TFCA being vehicles, there is a need to examine this phenomenon on a broader scale. This wider scale is particularly needed because TFCA networks and resources are postulated to drive development and conservation more powerfully than a single country can.

3. Social capital

Governance is posited to be a facilitator for sustainable development through the coordination of local and (in the context of TFCA) international stakeholders in its implementation (Prayitno et al., 2025). Within this context, social capital provides a useful lens for understanding how communities and the tourism industry mobilize resources and coordinate action. The term “social capital” was originally introduced over a century ago by Lyda Hannifan, and the researchers Bourdieu (1986), Coleman (1988) and Putnam (1993) were influential in advancing the understanding of the concept. Broadly, social capital encompasses trust, networks, shared norms

and collective action (Putnam, 1993). These elements enable communities to access opportunities, utilize resources effectively and work towards shared developmental goals (Stone & Nyaupane, 2018). In this regard, it is seen as an important resource within communities that contributes to their development and resilience (Rahman et al., 2022). Social capital is understood as a multidimensional construct comprising two perspectives, the first being networks, which focus on the formal and informal relationships and are categorized into three types: bonding (within homogeneous groups), bridging (across diverse groups) and linking (connections with those in positions of power) (Morsut et al., 2022; Panahi & Moayerian, 2025). Each plays a distinct role in facilitating information flow, access to external resources, and engagement with broader governance structures (Wang et al., 2025). From a structural perspective, social capital comprises structural (rules and roles), cognitive (shared values and meanings) and relational (quality of relationships) dimensions, all of which influence collective action and cooperation within communities (Morsut et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2025).

Several studies have affirmed the determining role of social capital in destination and community resilience, as its presence and strength effectively facilitate timely information-sharing and resource mobilization to respond to changes in their environments, as well as structural elements such as shared values, beliefs and norms that influence behaviors and attitudes in adaptation processes (Idajati & Damanik, 2025; Panahi & Moayerian, 2025). Furthermore, trust influences collectiveness in problem-solving and adaptability (Morsut et al., 2022) and, in the case of wildlife conservation, support and compliance with rules and regulations geared towards environmental protection (Lekgau & Tichaawa, 2025b). Despite critiques regarding its conceptual ambiguity and measurement challenges, social capital provides a valuable theoretical lens to explore community resilience through the examination of governance arrangements in resilience planning and the nature of community involvement in these structures. Wildlife destinations, as socio-ecological systems, are built on social networks and relationships that are essential to their functioning, thereby situating social capital as a necessary means to evaluate inclusive governance and resilience. Accordingly, social capital shapes the nature and extent of stakeholder involvement in TFCA governance by influencing access to information, training and capacity-building opportunities and, ultimately, participation in decision-making processes. Effective TFCA governance depends on networks of trust, reciprocity and collabor-

oration among governments, conservation agencies, local communities, NGOs and private sector actors, particularly within the complex cross-border institutional arrangements that characterize TFCAs. The KAZA TFCA website illustrates a range of projects – at different stages of planning, implementation and development – that are designed to address interconnected ecological and community priorities. While individual member states also implement initiatives that respond to their own national priorities, the extent to which stakeholders are able to access, contribute to and benefit from these governance processes is influenced by existing social capital. Consequently, social capital could facilitate information-exchange, strengthen trust and cooperation, and promote inclusive participation in collaborative governance across the TFCA.

4. Study sites

The KAZA TFCA is recognized as the world's largest transboundary conservation area, encompassing ~520,000 km² across five Southern African nations: Angola, Botswana, Namibia, Zambia and Zimbabwe (Linell et al., 2019)(Fig.1). The primary objectives of KAZA include the promotion of biodiversity conservation through the establishment of interconnected

protected areas and wildlife corridors, the support of local livelihoods and socio-economic development, and the enhancement of regional tourism development within and among the participating countries (KAZA, 2012). The conservation area comprises an extensive network of protected landscapes, including nearly 20 national parks, 85 forest reserves and over 100 wildlife management areas. Notable wildlife tourism and conservation assets within KAZA include Victoria Falls, Chobe National Park, the Makgadikgadi Pans, the Okavango Delta, Kafue National Park, and Hwange National Park (Imbwae et al., 2023). Given the concentration of wildlife and other natural attractions in the region, wildlife tourism has increasingly been positioned as a strategy for promoting sustainable livelihoods and fostering conservation-oriented attitudes among neighboring communities.

The TFCA framework aims to facilitate regional coordination and harmonization in conservation management; however, research has identified significant challenges, including human–wildlife conflict, the escalating climate-change impacts, policy inconsistencies among member states, and disparities in institutional capacities and conservation resources across the participating countries (Stoldt et al., 2020; Lekgau & Tichaawa, 2024; 2025a, 2025b). Consequently, there is a pressing need to investigate the inclusiveness of local governance structures due

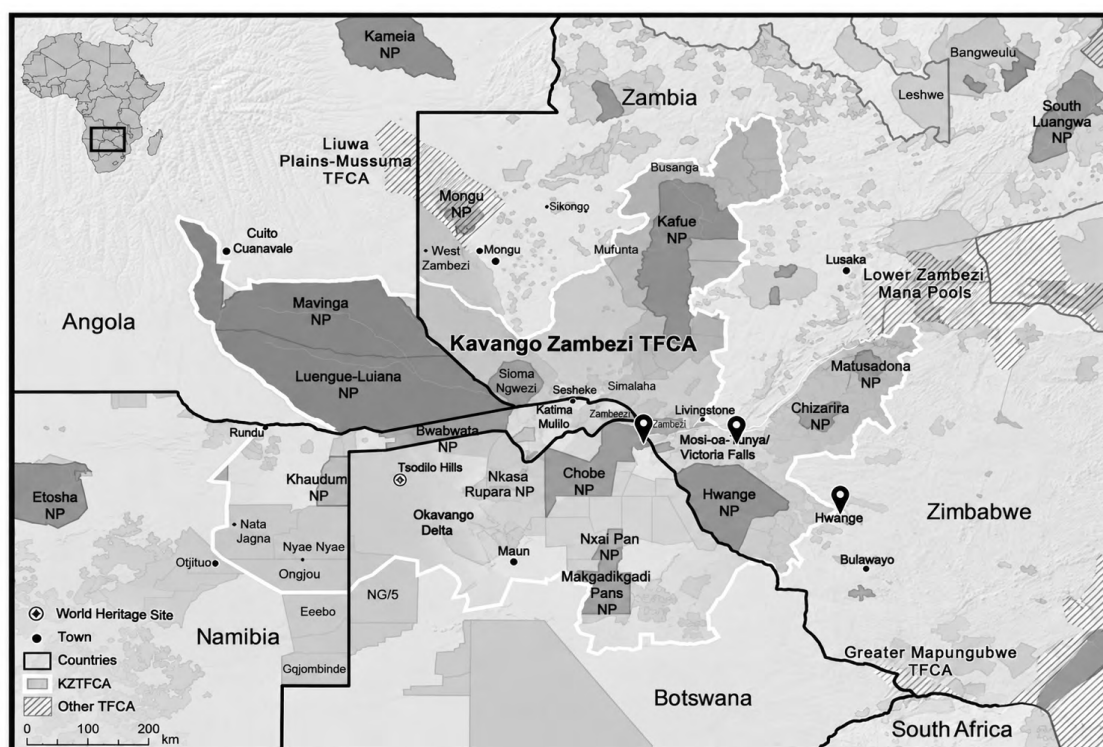


Fig. 1. KAZA TFCA, showing Kasane, Livingstone and Hwange
Source: own study

to their potential to guide the local implementation of national and regional plans to achieve TFCA objectives. This study focuses on three destinations within the KAZA TFCA: Livingstone (Zambia), Kasane (Botswana) and Hwange (Zimbabwe), which were selected for their proximity to key attractions – namely, Victoria Falls, Chobe National Park and Hwange National Park, respectively. These study areas were chosen due to the concentration of wildlife tourism, highlighting the interplay between socio-economic development, environmental protection, and community inclusion within collaborative governance processes.

5. Research approach

Using a purely qualitative research approach, this research involved engaging with wildlife tourism and conservation stakeholders to explore their perceptions, experiences and perspectives on the governance processes in the TFCA arena, particularly related to information-sharing, decision-making styles and governance processes. Certainly, qualitative research enables meaning and the factors underlying those meanings to be uncovered, as well as understanding of how individuals interpret their environments (Tisdell et al., 2025). This approach allows for the broad exploration of inclusion in governance processes that shape community and destination resilience. A purposive sampling strategy was selected to involve individuals who were directly engaged in the operation, management and development of wildlife tourism and conservation in

the three study sites. Overall, 58 participants were interviewed in this research, including those who owned or managed tourism businesses, conservation NGOs, wildlife conservation and tourism governing authorities, CBNRM program representatives, and community representatives employed in the sector. For key institutions (including CBNRM programs and tourism and conservation authorities), at least one representative was purposively selected to provide institutional and operational perspectives. For tourism businesses and community representatives, sampling continued until data saturation was reached. Table 2 showcases the number of participants in the categories across the three study sites.

The interviews were conducted in person at the designated study sites. Ethical clearance was obtained from the authors' institution, and the researchers adhered to appropriate ethical principles throughout the study. Prior to the commencement of the interviews, the research objectives were explained to all participants, who were informed that their participation was voluntary and that their identities would remain confidential. The primary language of the interviews was English, although Bemba and Setswana were employed intermittently in Livingstone and Kasane, respectively, as necessary. Generally, the duration of the interviews ranged between 1 and 2 hours, with the discussions centering on exploring participants' perceptions regarding communication and information-sharing mechanisms, governance styles in wildlife tourism and conservation planning, as well as decision-making processes. Upon the completion of the data collection phase, all interviews were transcribed verbatim by the researchers, with the assistance of fieldwork-

Table 2. Study sites

Study sites	Key stakeholder	Participant codes
Kasane (Chobe National Park)	Tourism governing authority representatives	P1
	Tourism businesses (informal and formal)	P2–P13
	Community representatives	P14–P20
	Community trusts representatives	P21–P23
	Conservation agency representatives	P24–P25
Livingstone (Victoria Falls)	Tourism businesses (informal and formal)	P26–P35
	Community representatives	P36–P39
	Conservation agency representatives	P40–P41
	Conservation governing authority representatives	P42– P43
Hwange (Hwange National Park)	Tourism businesses (informal and formal)	P44–P49
	Community representatives	P50–P54
	Community CAMPFIRE representatives	P55–P57
	Tourism governing authority representatives	P58
Total		58

Source: own elaboration

ers and transcription software. The transcripts were reviewed multiple times to ensure that the meaning and local context were accurately captured, and they were supplemented by field notes to enhance this process. Data analysis was conducted using Atlas.ti, with the transcripts coded inductively. Following the generation of the codes, similar codes were aggregated to form the key themes of the study. These themes are presented in the subsequent section and are supported by direct quotations to illustrate participants' views and perspectives. To maintain confidentiality, each participant was assigned a unique participant number.

6. Findings

Information-sharing context

There are several key initiatives related to wildlife tourism and conservation being planned and implemented in the KAZA region. Some of these include conservation efforts such as changing wildlife migratory routes, KAZA meetings, and the implementation of artificial boreholes to mitigate against reduced rainfall, as well as localized changes in the communities (Lekgau & Tichaawa, 2025a). As information-sharing is widely accepted as a resilience indicator, this research sought to establish the methods and means by which pertinent information regarding wildlife tourism and conservation is shared among destination stakeholders, with a special focus on communities. Notably, in Botswana, many participants alluded to leveraging their social networks in distributing information through various means. To start with, participants in Kasane underscored the prevalence of meetings in which information is shared and deliberated upon, with these meetings occurring in varied forums depending on the nature of the information being shared and the stakeholders involved. For instance, issues regarding developments in the community occur through the KAZA-community-involved forums, the Village Development Committee (VDC) ("Through the KAZA, which is a meeting between the counselors and the community. So that meeting occurs about four times a year. The district developer committee meets three times a year also." – P11BW), and the Kgotla meetings, which are traditional community meetings led by the Customary Chief and his advisors ("Usually it's done by the Kgotla, so that's how information is passed to the people. Sometimes there will be some meetings where the Kgotla addresses some issues" – P17BW). For industry-related mat-

ters, participants mostly pointed to the Hospitality & Tourism Association of Botswana (HTAB) as a platform that meets quarterly to discuss tourism and hospitality concerns to then lobby forward if needed.

It is collaborative. I mentioned Hatab – Hatab is a hotel sector representative, a hotel union type of thing. So, we meet quarterly; any issues that we have, we put through them, and then they would go to the Parliament or to wherever they need to get to be resolved (P12BW).

Moreover, a few participants recognized the roles of the VDC and the District Development Committee (DDC) in making decisions regarding developments in the town, as well as the role of the Kgotla in reaching community consensus on decisions. These participants mentioned that these strategic arms of government often consult with various stakeholders in their locales when making decisions, with one community leader stating:

We have the District Development Committee (DDC); that involves several government departments coming together and sharing duties. The government and private sector meet there to discuss the future (P11BW).

Further, some participants noted that the establishment of industry associations and WhatsApp groups is central to ensuring that relevant stakeholders are informed about emerging matters affecting wildlife tourism, conservation, and/or the community. Certainly, participants mentioned a rise in unplanned incidents such as poaching and theft, with a tourism business owner mentioning, "So that's how we also know when something that's not supposed to happen happens. And there has been theft around the area, and those people would use a way out through the National Park" (P12BW). Additionally, participants pointed to opportunities such as property development, funding and business support offered by various organizations, which are communicated through official and unofficial WhatsApp groups:

There are some platforms that [we] have joined when we're given feedback, like our tour operators' WhatsApp group. We do have the Local Business and Local Enterprise Authority (LEA) WhatsApp platform, where they keep us updated regarding the developments that are taking place in Kasane, and they keep on sharing some of those opportunities and some of the requests for proposals (P13BW).

In Livingstone, many local community representatives, including tourism employees, leaders, and tourism owners and managers, suggested a prevalence of one-way communication styles between tourism and conservation authorities and

local stakeholders, which have created some tension and mistrust. In many cases, participants in this study site hold the view that information is shared among a select few, particularly information that results in business opportunities, with one informal entrepreneur stating, "The very same way I told you when there's an exhibition, they'll pick their people, and this is how we are kept in the dark about some things." P23ZM. When asked how they learn about wildlife conservation matters, particularly relating to wildlife corridors and the activities of the conservation governing department and KAZA, the common means of sharing information that were frequently highlighted included both traditional means (such as radio and TV advertisements and posters) and social media:

[Information is shared] though television and we also put out that [information] on radio programs. On radio stations, certain information is disseminated. I think anything comes at an expense, and radio is affordable. So, a radio station is only a medium where certain information can be disseminated to the consumer (P20ZM). And [some modes of communication] even go around where people are settled. Cars with speakers move around town, repeating the same things, so that everyone can hear (P25ZM).

However, it is important to note that there was a lack of awareness of KAZA and, subsequently, that wildlife protection initiatives were part of broader efforts for large-scale nature conservation. To a large extent, discussions with community representatives involved in various facets of wildlife tourism and hospitality revealed that more information-sharing mechanisms needed to be in place, with some participants stating that tour operators working in the sector need to be proactive in sharing the information they receive. Notably, some employees mentioned informal conversations with other employees as useful means of gaining insights into the development of the two sectors.

In Hwange, the CAMPFIRE program and its representatives were mentioned as the common and formalized means of sharing information among the community. The representatives of this program highlighted the various stages in which decisions are made, contending that many of the decisions start with the community, and the program representatives carry the views of the community forward to the various stages and stakeholders involved in decision-making. Therefore, their involvement in this process enables them to stay aware of emerging and new developments in the two sectors and allows them to pass-on pertinent information to the community.

We've got CAMPFIRE committees around. They are the ones who are coordinating at the ward level, and then there is a councilor at the ward level. So, the advice [on wildlife tourism and conservation] comes from grassroots community levels, through those CAMPFIRE committees; they coordinate to the CAMPFIRE organization that takes it further; so we are well informed on that; it's coordinated (P33ZW).

Similarly, these participants mentioned that the community has its own local council, which coordinates the flow of information, with one community leader stating, "When we have a team here, we have our own local council, so everything is coordinated, and it becomes easier. What happens here is already coordinated to the office" (P31ZW). Notably, the affirmation from the community stakeholders demonstrates that there are local mechanisms in place to share information; however, more transparency and two-way communication are needed among tourism, community and government stakeholders. These participants explained that, while the community is well-informed on certain subjects, it is largely general information, and an increase in meeting platforms and updates would enable better-informed community involvement in decision-making. In this regard, a community representative stated:

We also have a lack of transparency. To improve information-sharing, communities would like to be informed through regular meetings and updates from wildlife tourism stakeholders, clear communication, such as banners and posters, and inclusive decision-making processes that involve the community. Additionally, access to information about tourism should not be hard to obtain (P31ZW).

Similarly, these participants underscored the limited and restrictive modes of the current communication channels: "I think they are quite well-informed, but the channels of communication are limited. It's mainly through verbal communication, and maybe a few posters and signs" (P30ZW). Accordingly, some participants emphasized the need to introduce new ways of communicating with communities to ensure widespread information-sharing, such as one community representative stating, "Our community is small; you can join the community through roadshows around the community. That way, every member can be informed" (P29ZW).

Decision-making processes

Perceptions regarding the nature of governance and decision-making processes varied across and within study areas. Centralized approaches to governance

and decision-making were commonly mentioned in interviews with participants. Many participants alluded to decisions and planning for wildlife tourism and conservation being conducted by local and, in some cases, national government, as well as local conservation authorities. Some participants further explained that this was due to the authority held by government bodies for approving permits, operations, and enforcing compliance with regulations. For example:

I will say it always comes from the top. Yeah. Because, you know, we have to understand that we are also run by a government. So, when the government says, "Do this, do that," all we need to do is support and not do anything that might jeopardize our relationship with the government. Remember, us operating here is the government issuing licenses; it's the government doing that. But what we appreciate with the government is they always consult and say, "Guys, this is how we want this to be." Of course, some of the decisions become harsh sometimes. But at the end of the day, we have to accept and see how we can work together and achieve what the government is also trying to achieve (P2BW).

In line with the above, participants acknowledged that there are some efforts to consult with communities and local tourism and conservation stakeholders in the three regions. However, several concerns were raised about the "shallowness" of such consultation initiatives, with many participants, especially in Livingstone, of the view that these endeavors lacked follow-through and were, in part, political posturing. Notably, this was also a common view in Kasane and Hwange; however, the local structures that are legally recognized lessened the discontent expressed. In terms of who makes decisions regarding wildlife tourism in the study sites, commonly mentioned in Kasane and Hwange were local government in various departments, NGOs and CBNRM program representatives. These stakeholders were said to coordinate actions and plans to address the immediate and long-term needs of the study areas, in coordination with the national government and KAZA committees for the implementation of broader goals at the local level.

Decisions regarding wildlife conservation tourism are made through the contribution of three factors: the communities in which these establishments operate, the government (specifically the Ministry of Tourism), and the international organizations that assist not only with regulation but also with industry rules to establish a sustainable tourism mechanism, shown below:

They coordinate; we've got the Wildlife Trust, and you have the council at hand, primarily coordinated by

the council and the Wildlife Trust. If we can coordinate with these partners—let's say national parks and forestry, even for advisory purposes—it helps address issues. People come together to see how they can manage these matters and make recommendations before they refer them, so they can be adequately advised based on their thoughts and what they have, simplifying the process in that way (P33ZW).

Notably, the involvement of community representatives in the decision-making process has led a number of interviewees in both study areas to believe that wildlife tourism and conservation governance is leaning towards being more decentralized. While this inclusion has been a positive move forward for inclusive and collaborative governance, which is a strong enabler for community resilience, focus-group discussions revealed some uncertainties regarding community trust operations, outcomes and involvement, with some informal enterprise owners in Kasane being entirely unaware of the trust.

Generally, an overwhelmingly common view among most study participants is that there is a need for more community-government engagements that yield results based on the views of the community. In Livingstone, a few participants mentioned several attempts to reach out to local and national government to arrange meetings with the tourism community in order to resolve concerns affecting their involvement and growth in the industry. In this regard, the lack of visibility of government representatives was a major concern.

In terms of that, I may say we need to meet with the government, like the tourism minister, and discuss the tourism agencies with which we can talk directly. Maybe they can hear our cries, as you are the one at the grass-roots who can communicate more about us and what is happening in the tourism industry. Our challenges, some of which they don't even know, are the problems we face with the government. That's the issue. We also need to engage with the government through tourism so that they can hear our cries and understand the problems. [But] we don't see them [i.e., government] (P22ZM).

Enablers of inclusive and collaborative governance

Despite the varied levels of inclusiveness in the decision-making and planning of wildlife tourism and conservation, discussions reveal several factors that contribute to such inclusion. To begin with, several participants point to the existence of policies and practices such as CBNRM and the recognition of

communities as legal custodians of wildlife resources, which strengthen the communities' position in these two sectors. For example, "for enablers, I'd say we have clear policies and laws that support community participation and benefit-sharing" (P31ZW). Similarly, in Botswana, a few participants pointed to the CBNRM policy, which enabled the establishment of the trust to act as the representative of community interests in wildlife tourism and conservation governance and operations. Comparatively, there was limited to zero awareness of the presence of CBNRM projects in Livingstone; rather, the researchers found an association representing the needs of informal traders in the tourism city. Representatives of this association lamented the lack of national policy support and recognition, as opposed to the international assistance received from the World Bank. Similarly, continuous educational programs were mentioned to facilitate collaborative governance, owing to the lack of awareness and knowledge being one of the key concerns facing community adaptation to the changing ecological environment in Zambia. These programs were explained as seeking to address or balance the growing population dynamics with the changing conditions of the natural environment and wildlife, in a manner that fosters effective protection of these resources.

Interestingly, in consideration of factors that could enhance the inclusiveness of collaborative wildlife tourism and conservation governance, a few participants underscored the separation of governance structures from traditional structures. In the context of Hwange and Livingstone, participants mentioned that formalized governance systems exclude indigenous perspectives on conservation, which may limit the effectiveness of wildlife conservation due to the lack of a substantial knowledge base. For example:

And then community participation is critical for the success and sustainability of wildlife tourism. We talk of consultations and decision-making, and having the local community involved in the use of traditional knowledge, which means we have people in the area who know that area far better than those coming in to build up a tourism sector there or start up a tourism sector there (P34ZW).

In the context of Kasane, some participants drew attention to the essence of tradition itself, which is grounded in consultation and gathering widespread perspectives on a subject matter. To a small extent, some participants in Kasane espoused their willingness to work with members of the community beyond a corporate social responsibility (CSR) scope, with one stating:

Okay, so businesses that we operate, we believe in engaging the communities in which we operate in every decision

that we make, you know, whether we want to expand our business, or whether we want to, you know, do any form of perimeter fencing with the communities? Remember, the communities have been here since the '80s? Yeah, they understand adaptation more than we do (P16BW).

Barriers to inclusive collaborative governance

Despite the progress made in community inclusion in decision-making and planning, there remained barriers that exclude the broader community from these forums, including a lack of transparency, local and national politics, lack of knowledge and awareness, as well as the deliberate exclusion of certain population groups. The lack of transparency was one of the concerns commonly lamented by community representatives, with several participants affirming the lack of information-sharing with community stakeholders in wildlife tourism and conservation governance matters. For instance, "And transparency, we are dealing with the government, and sometimes they hide information from the community because of maybe these top leaders who are running these contracts" (P5BW). A few participants in Hwange pointed to the one-way and infrequent communication styles, which, coupled with historical exclusion, have created tension between the community and the tourism industry, with a community leader stating, "When there is limited transparency, poor communication, and a history of exploitation from the management authorities, it hinders effective collaboration, meaning there's now a war between the community and the industry" (P40ZW). These participants went further to explain that this situation has resulted in parallel and disconnected approaches to collaboration and governance in wildlife tourism and conservation.

The lack of transparency was coupled with mistrust in local and (in rare instances) KAZA governance. In Kasane, some local trust representatives elaborated that local political dynamics encompass substantial barriers to their execution of their duties and fulfillment of their mandate. Certainly, participants explained that their positionality in the divisive political parties filters into individuals' progression and support in the tourism industry. For instance, one participant noted, "If I'm in opposition, and there is a ruling party, obviously if that person sees my life being improved by tourism, they try to sabotage" (P5BW). Another commented that:

They [local government] delay operations. If we want to operate, then you are forced to go and inform the DC, the person who is jealous again. They were forced to go inform the chiefs – [the] same people who are jealous. That is why you see some of the trusts are not improving; it's because of this government (P4BW).

Additionally, both local business owners operating in the formal and informal sectors of Kasane and Livingstone expressed that local government offers preferential treatment to larger, multinational, and/or white-owned companies. In Kasane, a few participants explained this to be owed to the perceived greater knowledge and expertise of such companies over locals and their businesses in the tourism sector, while in Livingstone, this was attributed to the dominance of external tourism companies in the sector:

Our leaders, again, are involved in these issues. Yes, they are involved in such a way that they run the companies; those companies that are operating, they're the ones running them. Yes, they come with a white guy and claim it's him, whereas they know what they're doing. So, if I am a Motswana who's trying to make that thing or be given a small portion, he will get a larger one. You know, and that thing to us is a bit disappointing to our people (P4BW).

In the case of Livingstone, several participants mentioned a mistrust in government, owing to the perceived failure to deliver on the promises made to the community during the election campaigning period. Speaking more on this, informal vendors interviewed revealed one of the promises relating to their support in the tourism sector in order to expand their business operations:

The minister came here several times when he was doing the campaigns, but before he got into office. He said, "No, when I'm settling into office, I'll make sure they [international hotel groups and establishments] will treat you right and [only] focus on the hospitality part," because that's what their licenses say. But then, after he got into power ... [he] forgot about it. Those became best friends [the minister and hotel establishments]; it's all about where the money is (P23ZM).

Similarly, participants in Livingstone and Kasane were apprehensive about the change in national government. In this matter, Botswana stakeholders noted that the recent change in leadership brought forth some uncertainty regarding their operations, with Zambian stakeholders more focused on the limited meaningful change due to the changing of leading government parties, which affected the overall progress of the tourism sector. Each leading party and, subsequently, local representatives held different priorities and approaches to (collaborative) governance. For example:

It depends on the leader that has come; you know, leaders are recycled. Every time you have different leaders in office. There are some leaders that have come from time back who used to call meetings with us, talk, and discuss

the limitation/implementation of some of the policies that can drive us. That has been there, though, when you have a different one, they've come up with a different way of handling things (P21ZM).

To a lesser extent, some participants drew attention to the deliberate exclusion of local community stakeholders in certain planning and decision-making platforms, which reinforced the limited inclusion of community stakeholders in tourism and conservation planning and development. Some participants in Kasane mentioned the proposed development that was eventually discontinued owing to pressure from NGOs, and they highlighted that the initial proposal for this development was not passed through the Kgotla and therefore missed a crucial step in respecting the customary law of the country.

But the community, we were not told about anything; we only saw that advertisement. We are going to the site visit, and for those who want to apply to have their business on the lodge, they can come and submit. But that has never consulted the community because, you know, we have leaders from the Kgotla ... they consulted with other stakeholders, NGOs (P15BW).

Similarly, in Livingstone, some stakeholders mentioned that planning and consultative meetings among tourism and conservation stakeholders often excluded certain members of the local representatives by not extending invitations to such events or placing barriers to local representatives' participation. One incident that was commonly mentioned was that of a tourism sector meeting that mostly involved larger tourism enterprises, excluding the voices of the informal sector as well as local tourism entrepreneurs and tour operators, with one participant stating:

There is a point in time where the tourism boards or the tourism sector itself gets to have some training meetings. Yeah, they host some of those things at Avani Falls. The tourism agents chosen are big companies, and then they went off (P27ZM).

7. Discussion

The inherent volatility of the global tourism industry necessitates the integration of resilience into both tourism and community planning and development (Kimaro & Saarinen, 2025). While resilience in tourism has been explored through diverse theoretical lenses, this study specifically investigated its manifestation through the dynamics of local governance, with a particular focus on communication and information-sharing, decision-making processes, and

the facilitators of and impediments to collaborative governance that incorporates varied community perspectives. From a social capital perspective, these governance processes are underpinned by the quality of social relationships, networks, trust, and norms of reciprocity that enable collective action and cooperation among stakeholders. The findings suggest significant deficiencies in communication networks within the study sites. They include the observation of a perceived predominance of one-way communication channels for disseminating information on critical conservation issues, contributions, and developments by relevant tourism and conservation authorities. Conversely, platforms for dialogue between these authorities and community stakeholders were found to be comparatively scarce. This, compounded by a perceived lack of transparency, engenders mistrust and tension, thereby impeding destination resilience. These findings suggest weak social capital, particularly linking social capital, as opportunities for meaningful interactions are constrained between communities and governing authorities. This is particularly salient given the centrality of social networks in wildlife destinations (Stone & Nyaupane, 2018; Mutanga et al., 2020; Defe et al., 2025) and the imperative of trust in fostering support for environmental and conservation regulations (Manfredo et al., 2017; Holland et al., 2022; Lekgau & Tichaawa, 2025b). Indeed, numerous studies underscore the critical role of communication (especially during crises) in maintaining confidence, coordinating responses and actions, and disseminating information among stakeholders (Stone & Nyaupane, 2018; Morsut et al., 2022; Panahi & Moayerian, 2025). Such communication could support and strengthen social capital, thereby enabling the collaborative relationships necessary for adaptive behaviors and adaptive and responsive governance. Although these destinations are not currently experiencing an active crisis, the fragmented nature of communication could arguably constrain their effective adaptability and resilience. It is important to note that the observed differences in communication structures may reflect broader national governance contexts, including variations in political stability, political norms and levels of political trust. Collectively, these factors influence how governance processes are perceived and how information is communicated and received by local stakeholders.

Similarly, local governance structures and networks significantly influence how information is disseminated, interpreted and acted upon (Stone & Nyaupane, 2018; Morsut et al., 2022). All study areas possess a Community-Based Natural Resource

Management (CBNRM) policy or strategy and have enshrined collaborative governance in national protection, conservation and tourism development policies. These facts, alongside the presence and visibility of local legal and traditional institutions and CBNRM projects (such as CAMPFIRE and Community Trusts), have mitigated perceptions of complete exclusion. A substantial proportion of participants in these study areas generally believed that these policies transformed the historically exclusionary nature of wildlife tourism and conservation by legitimizing community involvement in both sectors. Crucially, these institutions foster a sense of ownership, appreciation and protection over wildlife resources and tourism development. In doing so, they cultivate trust and reinforce local network and fostering norms for collective responsibility that supports both natural resource conservation and its governance. This fundamentally demonstrates the pivotal role of local and traditional governance structures in conservation governance, notwithstanding their sometimes-limited integration into formal state structures. However, the absence or marginalization in informal governance arrangements could weaken the relationships – and outcomes of such relationships – between community, tourism and conservation stakeholders at various scales.

The observed centralized approach to governance and decision-making aligns with findings from numerous contexts in Sub-Saharan Africa. The present findings, corroborated by existing literature, indicate commendable progress in policy formulation and implementation regarding wildlife tourism development, conservation and community inclusion in governance (Mutanga et al., 2020; Nemakonde, 2026; Tantoh et al., 2026). Nevertheless, the findings suggest a disparity between the national policy context and local destination realities, where questions concerning whose voices are prioritized in conservation and development remain prominent across all three study areas, albeit at varying intensities. Underlying a significant portion of these concerns is a pervasive lack of trust between communities and tourism sector/conservation government authorities, as evidenced by perceived lack of transparency, political interference, inadequate communication channels and historical exclusion. The perceived deliberate exclusion of local traditional structures exacerbates these conditions. As such, this deficit of trust undermines the capacity for coordinated behaviors, values, and norms essential for effective wildlife protection, tourism sustainability and destination resilience. Consequently, this can compromise governance legitimacy and willingness to be involved in

key collaborative efforts, thereby constraining the region's adaptive capacity.

Finally, the study reveals an unevenness in governance structures within the KAZA TFCA. One major objective of the KAZA TFCA, and an ongoing challenge, is policy harmonization (KAZA, 2012). This study highlights the diverse governance approaches and structures across the three study areas, which have influenced trust in the broader goals of conservation, regionalism and development. Certainly, the visible differences in land and wildlife uses across various nations, particularly Namibian and Botswana communities (though also Zimbabwean and Zambian communities), under a shared landscape, raise concerns amongst communities, particularly given that such uses have a direct impact on various livelihood strategies. This appears to further call into question the overall effectiveness of the TFCA's objectives, as varying governance structures impact conservation implementation and acceptance mechanisms at the local scale. Where governance arrangements differ substantially across borders, opportunities to establish trust and shared conservation norms among stakeholders are diminished, thereby limiting the ability to leverage social capital across the TFCA region to address overarching goals. Consequently, this arguably affects the resilience of individual communities, thereby impacting the resilience of the TFCA in its entirety. Indubitably, issues of communication and information-sharing hinder communities' ability not only to react promptly to changes but also to respond appropriately to crisis planning and intervention. This, combined with varied levels of inclusion in decision-making, ultimately compromises the destination's capacity for collaborative management and governance of shared resources (Rahman et al., 2022), which is particularly critical in wildlife destinations confronting a multitude of environmental changes.

8. Conclusions

This study critically examined the role of local governance in fostering resilience within wildlife tourism destinations in the KAZA TFCA. Particular emphasis was placed on analyzing information-sharing and communication systems, decision-making processes, and the enablers of and barriers to collaborative governance. The findings reveal significant local-governance impediments to building long-term resilience against emergent and evolving crises, such as climate-change impacts, human-wildlife conflict, and geopolitical tensions affecting tourist mobility.

These challenges are primarily attributed to closely networked information-sharing, decision-making, and compromised collaborative management of tourism development and natural resource conservation within these wildlife destinations.

Furthermore, the comparative nature of this study illuminates considerable heterogeneity in governance structures and collaborative practices across the KAZA TFCA. While all three study areas operate within an overarching regional conservation framework, the findings demonstrate divergent levels of trust, participation, institutional visibility and governance effectiveness at the local scale. This raises pertinent questions regarding the harmonization of governance approaches within Transfrontier Conservation Areas (TFCAs) and suggests that regional conservation objectives may be attenuated where local governance systems remain fragmented or inconsistently implemented. Accordingly, this study posits that the success of transfrontier conservation initiatives is contingent not only on regional policy coordination but also on the localization of collaborative governance practices that meaningfully integrate community perspectives, indigenous knowledge systems and local institutional structures. Overall, this research contributes to the expanding scholarly discourse on tourism resilience and collaborative conservation governance by foregrounding the critical role of governance relationships, social capital and institutional trust in shaping destination resilience within wildlife tourism contexts.

This study is not without limitations. The research included only participants directly involved in the tourism and conservation sectors and therefore excluded the perspectives of broader community members residing in wildlife destinations who are not directly engaged in these sectors. As a result, future research could incorporate a wider cross-section of community members to provide a more comprehensive understanding of local governance, social capital, and resilience within wildlife destinations. Additionally, although this research generated comparative insights across three study sites, there remains scope for more in-depth, place-based investigations that examine the contextual dynamics influencing information-sharing, decision-making, local agency, adaptive capacity, and resilience within individual destinations. Such studies would provide a richer understanding of how governance processes are shaped by local social, political and institutional conditions. Finally, this research focused on three prominent wildlife destinations across three KAZA TFCA member states. Future studies incorporating stakeholder perspectives from Angola and Namibia would provide a more comprehensive understanding

of transboundary governance, the role of social capital across national boundaries, and the implications for destination and community resilience throughout the KAZA TFCA. Importantly, the study shed light on governance differences in shared resource spaces cutting across two different countries. While this study focused on Kasane and the perceptions of local communities regarding their Namibian counterparts, the findings raise important questions about how national identities, governance contexts and lived experiences intersect within neighboring transboundary communities. Future research could explore these cross-border social and institutional dynamics in greater depth to better understand their implications for collaborative governance and resilience within TFCAs.

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