

Ocean Country Partnership Programme

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Empowering Community Voices in Marine Conservation - Special Session Report

13th WIOMSA Scientific Symposium

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1. Session Aims

Marine conservation in the Western Indian Ocean (WIO) has historically prioritized biodiversity protection through top-down approaches such as Marine Protected Areas (MPAs), often overlooking the rights, needs, and knowledge of local communities. As a result, conservation is frequently perceived not as a partnership, but as an imposition—marked by increasing restrictions and limited alternatives for livelihoods. This has led to community alienation and reduced compliance with conservation goals. This session explored pathways to shift from enforcement-driven conservation to community-led stewardship models that deliver both ecological and social outcomes. The session presented new research conducted by MUVA in Mozambique, focusing on gender dynamics and women’s roles in MPAs. It also provided a platform for sharing experiences across WIO countries on community-led conservation, including Locally Managed Marine Areas (LMMAs) and Other Effective Area-Based Conservation Measures (OECMs) to feed back into their management.



2. Evidence

The session presented the findings from MUVA's research report (completed in May 2025) on gender and the blue economy in Mozambique, focusing specifically on women's roles within MPAs. The study explored the challenges and opportunities women face in these areas, where environmental, socio-economic, and governance factors intersect. Through a gender lens, the findings investigate how gender, geographic and social hierarchies shape women's access to economic opportunities, agency and participation in marine conservation efforts.

2.1. Research Findings presented

The key findings from MUVA's report were:

- **Gendered barriers to economic participation exist in coastal communities in close to MPAs Mozambique** - Women face significant gender-based barriers that limit their ability to engage in more lucrative, formal sectors of the blue economy as they are typically confined to small-scale, informal sectors such as fish processing and trade as well as lower level opportunities in the MPAs.
- **Limited Agency and Social Norms impact women in these communities** - Women reported limited decision-making power, especially in male-headed households. Women who attempt to assert economic independence or leadership often face backlash in the form of jealousy, social exclusion, and even violence.
- **Governance gaps and gender exclusion exist in involved organisations** - Local governance structures (including in MPA management) are often not inclusive, with power remaining concentrated in the hands of local elites and men and fail to include marginalized groups, particularly women.
- **There is a lack of data and gender-sensitive programming in MPAs** - The lack of reliable data on women's roles in MPAs hinders the development of gender-sensitive programming. Without this data, it is difficult to design effective interventions that address women's unique challenges and contributions to the marine economy.
- Despite the challenges and difficulties, and maybe because of those, **there is an immense opportunity for positive change**. The lack of previous interventions and the low baseline for community projects provide a unique chance for impactful development. The communities in these MPAs are resilient, and with the right support, even small-scale interventions can lead to significant improvements in women's economic empowerment and conservation outcomes.

2.2. Case Study Insights

Action for Ocean also presented during the session, demonstrating a case study on the ways in which community voices can be effectively empowered in marine conservation. Their work in the Kilwa Seascape in Tanzania in partnership with OCEAN and the UK International Development fund and focused on an approach linking community engagement, conservation and improved



livelihoods within an MPA. The process to initiate projects involved community engagement at all stages:

- Alignment: Review Collaborative Fisheries Management Area (CFMA) management plans to check community priorities.
- Consultations: Meet with Community-Based Organisations (CBOs) and CFMA leaders to gather perspectives.
- Co-Creation Meetings: Each Beach Management Unit (BMU) presents how project links to their plan & desired outcomes.
- Assessments: Management Effectiveness Tracking Tool (METT), BMU performance reviews, on-site verification with community reps.
- Feedback & Joint Prioritization: Present findings, share scientific implications, agree on priorities together.

This collaborative co-creation of projects has led to a wide range of successful impacts with gender and inclusion at its core. Building trust first to ensure that the enforcement and buy-in from the communities is long-lasting while also engaging early with the government to prevent delays. The outcomes which this case study has produced have potential to be scaled across the region and address some of the issues raised in the MUVA report:

- Youth-led conservation groups formed and community leaders trained in key eco-tourism skills
- Workshops arranged to discuss key compliance issues such as reef or octopus closures which are co-designed with the local community
- Village savings and loans associations (VSLAs) established as platforms for decision-making and opportunities for female independence
- Sexual Exploitation and Abuse and Sexual Harassment (SEAH) safeguards within activities by providing safe spaces for conversation and grievance channels for those impacted
- Providing opportunities for involvement directly in the MPA by establishing a local PADI-certified dive centre and training community divers

2.3. Knowledge Gaps and Uncertainties

The key uncertainty with the solutions raised in the case study and through wider discussions was the sustainable funding of such mechanisms across the region and whether cultural and socio-economic differences may mean that different approaches are required in different regions.

There is also a critical data gap around women's roles in MPAs and the impact of conservation measures on marginalised communities.

3. Recommendations

Through discussion of the findings and case studies presented in the session, groups determined actionable recommendations which can be implemented by a range of stakeholders. Both top-down and bottom-up approaches for involvement of community voices in MPA management were



suggested with a key focus on maximising the involvement of local communities as frequently as possible in decision making and planning.

3.1. Technical Recommendations

These recommendations focused on bottom-up approaches to include in MPA community engagement programmes such as the Action for Ocean work.

- Initiate connection with communities as early as possible in the programme planning stage to allow incorporation of direct suggestions linked to the **history and culture within the community**.
- From initial discussions **establish the standard social networks** within the community and integrate these networks within the planning for community involvement.
- In addition to creating opportunities for community-wide discussion, also ensure there are **safe spaces designated for all community members** to have their voice heard in a comfortable environment for them.
- **Establish additional groups beyond those linked to the MPA**, which may include Village savings and loans associations (VSLAs), grievance channels or groups specific to challenges beyond financial concerns increase trust and overall engagement in a programme.

3.2. Policy recommendations

These recommendations focused on top-down approaches to include in MPA establishment policies to ensure positive community engagement.

- Ensuring **alternative livelihoods** are a key consideration in MPA establishment and institutions are in place to spread land use beyond reliance on the MPA through market access expansion, links to eco-tourism and skills programmes within the communities.
- Making **re-investment in the local communities** an integrated part of the sustainable financing within MPA planning, exploring options such as carbon credits, establishing VSLAs and incorporation of long-term funding options for community development.
- In MPA development programming, ensure that the technical recommendations made above regarding **community involvement and support are key criteria in the process of programme selection**.



4. Linkages to COP 12 and Global Agendas

4.1. Technical Recommendations

- a. Integration of existing social networks, history and culture within the community at the planning stages of MPA development and support programmes to allow for increased engagement and trust from the local communities.
- b. Establishing non-financial support groups within the community, such as VSLAs or grievance channels to allow all community members the opportunity to have a voice in the MPA-community relationship while taking into account GESI and SEAH requirements
- c. Provide opportunities for community members to contribute to the design of alternative livelihoods programmes which are initiated by programmes supporting MPA development to allow for specifically required market access expansion and necessary skills programmes to be established

4.2. Policy Recommendations

- a. Ensuring alternative livelihoods are a key consideration in MPA establishment and institutions are in place to spread land use beyond reliance on the MPA through different sectors such as eco-tourism or market expansion
- b. Making re-investment in the local communities an integrated part of the sustainable financing within MPA planning, exploring options such as carbon credits, establishing VSLAs and incorporation of long-term funding options for community development
- c. In MPA development programming, ensure that the technical recommendations made above regarding community involvement and support are key criteria in the process of programme selection

5. Outputs and Follow-up

The published research report is accessible online in English and Portuguese:

- [MUVA's Gender in Marine Protected Areas in Mozambique research report](#)
- [MUVA's Relatório de Pesquisa – Género nas Áreas de Protecção Marinha em Moçambique](#)

JNCC would like to propose this research paper as a relevant entry to the WIO Journal of Marine Science, particularly the upcoming gender-focused issue, and will be in touch to arrange this.



JNCC will provide recommendations summarised in this session to collaborators and potential future funders in the MPA space to ensure the recommendations are integrated into future programming.

Ocean Country Partnership Programme

The Ocean Country Partnership Programme (OCP) is a bilateral technical assistance and capacity building programme that provides tailored support to countries to manage the marine environment more sustainably, including by strengthening marine science expertise, developing science-based policy and management tools and creating educational resources for coastal communities. The OCP delivers work under three thematic areas: biodiversity, marine pollution, and sustainable seafood. Funding is provided through the overarching Blue Planet Fund (BPF) by the UK Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra).

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