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# Donor perspectives on strengthening capacity development for conservation

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**Abstract** Global perspectives on the pathways for developing capacity for conservation remain limited. Hindering the robustness of solutions is a dearth of opportunities to foster discussion and dialogue among capacity development practitioners, academics, partners, beneficiaries and donors. Additionally, little is known about donor perspectives on capacity development, and about pathways to developing a more sustainable investment in capacity development for conservation. The 2019 Capacity Building for Conservation Conference in London, UK, provided a unique opportunity to convene more than 150 capacity development practitioners from the global conservation community. The Conference included structured opportunities to hear donor perspectives on strengthening capacity development. Session leaders took detailed notes to document donor perspectives and the discussions around them. A thematic analysis of this empirical evidence resulted in the identification of four key themes with corresponding recommendations, consisting of (1) collaborative design of capacity development initiatives, (2) monitoring and evaluation, (3) long-term and flexible investments, and (4) building strong relationships between donors and grantees. Given the Convention on Biological Diversity is currently drafting the long-term strategic framework for capacity development post-2020, and global calls to protect significant portions of

our land- and seascapes, our recommendations are timely and may inform a way forward.

**Keywords** Capacity building, capacity development, co-design, collaboration, donors, evaluation, funding, learning

There is wide acknowledgement of the growing number, extent and complexity of conservation challenges globally. The conservation community's ability to deliver effective conservation outcomes will depend on the capacity of individuals, organizations and systems to create change. Global perspectives on the pathways for developing capacity for conservation remain limited. Hindering the robustness of solutions is a dearth of opportunities to foster discussion and dialogue among capacity development practitioners, academics, partners, beneficiaries and donors. Additionally, a major information gap exists around the understanding of donor perspectives on capacity development, and about pathways to developing a more robust and sustainable investment in capacity development for conservation.

Donor perspectives on investment in capacity development for conservation are underrepresented in the conservation literature. Empirical evidence in which donors are mentioned is currently limited to the views of conservation professionals and institutional ethnographies of how individual organizations perform. These studies highlight specific aspects such as how funding processes (e.g. grantee selection, reporting) were perceived to constrain conservation success in South Africa and Kenya (Sanders et al., 2019), and how organizational pressure to report conservation success was perceived to be greater than donor pressure in Papua New Guinea (Benson-Wahlén, 2014). Others focus on the history of conservation funding (e.g. Cobb et al., 2007) or mainly give an account of how much was invested in a certain area (e.g. Waldron et al., 2013). Despite these valuable findings, these studies do not include the perspectives of donors who invest in capacity development for conservation. Donor reports can be found on their respective websites, but these are often limited to a certain geographical area (e.g. UK; Miller et al., 2019) or theme (e.g. women and the environment; Dobson & Lawrence, 2018).

To begin gathering these perspectives, we (authors AS, TL, SP, MAK, JC and colleague L. K. Curran), all conservation capacity development practitioners, designed a full day of programming and discussions during the 2019

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Received 25 January 2022. Revision requested 31 March 2022.

Accepted 17 May 2022. First published online 25 July 2022.

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Oryx, 2022, 56(5), 740–743 © The Author(s), 2022. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of Fauna & Flora International doi:10.1017/S0030605322000746

<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0030605322000746> Published online by Cambridge University Press

Capacity Building for Conservation Conference (henceforth the Conference). In preparation for the Conference, we identified donors that had a demonstrated commitment to and track record in funding conservation capacity development. We invited 11 donor representatives from private and charitable foundations, government agencies and international financial institutions in the USA, UK and mainland Europe to participate in the Conference. Eight donor representatives (henceforth called donors) accepted the invitation. Although this is a limited sample size, it offers an opportunity to amplify the literature by providing donor perspectives on conservation capacity development. Five of these donors (MB, HR, ER, SB, KS) are co-authors here.

During the course of the Conference, donors participated in moderated panel discussions and small working group activities that sought to improve understanding between practitioners and donors. This provided a unique opportunity for donors to share their perspectives on the pathways to more robust and sustainable investment in capacity development for conservation. Notetakers (AS, TL, SP, MAKM) recorded minutes during all sessions dedicated to donor perspectives. We completed an analysis of minutes and notes, and identified key themes, from donor presentations and discussions collected during the Conference. Authors (AS, TL) followed Braun & Clarke's (2006) Thematic Analysis to identify key themes from minutes taken during panel discussions. The analyses were triangulated and confirmed with the other co-authors. Four key themes were identified from donors' commentaries about investing in conservation capacity development. Collectively, these perspectives seek to strengthen our collective understanding of sustainable pathways for capacity development. The four key themes that emerged from the discussions are detailed below.

#### Key Theme 1: Collaborative design of capacity development initiatives

Well-meaning organizations and donors may design capacity development interventions without sufficient input from their grantees. This top-down approach leads to ad-hoc, isolated efforts that do not necessarily serve long-term needs. Reciprocal learning between donors and grantees was emphasized as an improved approach. The analysis found terms such as 'co-design' and 'adaptive management' increasingly used to recognize the importance of shared ownership over initiatives and to contextualize evolving donor and grantee relationships. In one example, a donor indicated that the co-design process included identifying strategic and geographical priorities in partnership with grantees to ensure the approach to funding is responsive to individual and organizational capacity needs. Another donor noted that learning from grantees early in the

capacity development process creates awareness around cultural sensitivities and opportunities for including marginalized voices (Dobson & Lawrence, 2018). Engaging in mutual learning between donors and grantees throughout a project was found to enhance iterative reflection on project goals and modalities, thereby increasing the likelihood of behavioural change and overall programme success.

#### Key Theme 2: Monitoring and evaluation

A lack of shared learning on the effectiveness of capacity development approaches within the conservation sector limits the sustainability of efforts. The importance of collaborating and co-creating suitable metrics and indicators of success was identified as a way forward. In doing so, donors and grantees can work together to develop adequate timelines to measure short-, medium- and long-term impacts and allow sufficient time to convene and learn from what worked and what did not. One donor highlighted the benefits of implementing a uniform approach to monitoring and evaluation across grantees, thereby embedding a continuous learning cycle of planning–monitoring–evaluation (Simister, 2015). Donors also reported engaging grantees in a reflective process around what went well and less well, and what the donor could have done differently to support them. One donor applied what they learnt to reflect on their own performance and consider their internal management processes. To close the learning cycle, the donor shared their findings with relevant stakeholders and included their learnings in an online insight report. Notably, donors uniformly expressed interest in using knowledge management to close the gap between project learning outcomes and improved sectoral knowledge on capacity development findings.

#### Key Theme 3: Longer-term and flexible investments

Long-term investments (5–10 years), along with core or flexible funding, were identified as pathways to help achieve co-design approaches, and lead to support for monitoring and evaluation and the sharing of learning outcomes. This appreciation aligns with findings in the international development sector (Aring, 2011). Of the eight donors, some indicated they provide core funding to allow grantees to invest in their institutional development and adapt to changing conditions. Even with core funding, a recent learning report from a donor found that 1-year grants created organizational risk for grantees and led to challenges in recruiting and maintaining staff. This short-term funding hindered the ability to initiate and maintain learning cultures within organizations. It also resulted in shorter-term relationships that impeded the building of confidence and understanding on an intra-organizational level (e.g. within and between teams; Nielsen, 2012) and on an inter-organizational level

(e.g. donor–grantee and grantee–stakeholders; Sanders et al., 2019). Several donors suggested that investments over multiple years allow time for building true partnerships and opens the opportunity for honesty and sharing successes and failures in organizational and individual capacity development. Clarity in a grantee's mission and vision, leadership team and strategic plan were cited as key elements for increasing the likelihood a donor will commit to long-term funding.

#### Key Theme 4: Building strong relationships between donors and grant recipients

All donors viewed open and honest exchanges as fundamental to achieving key themes 1–3. Dialogues demonstrated both a willingness for and understanding of the importance of developing strong relationships and the need for free and frank exchanges. The competitive nature of funding can result in a desire to impress donors, and may potentially create barriers to more honest relationships, and inhibit discussions around challenges. Time spent forging relationships between donors and practitioners builds donor confidence, supports dialogue around realistic expectations, and provides valuable space for sharing failures as well as lessons learnt. This investment in relationships may also help ensure that, as donor priorities evolve, practitioners are able to understand, explore and inform options for capacity development consistent with those priorities. An important lesson learnt was that building stronger relationships is reciprocal in nature, and not only the responsibility of grantees. In line with previous research (Catalano et al., 2019), donors reported a need to create spaces that encourage learning and sharing, and can foster stronger relationships between grantees and donors.

In conclusion, these four key themes provide insights for capacity development professionals and donors. They highlight the importance of open dialogue and reciprocal learning between donors and grantees in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of capacity development projects. A central tenet throughout the thematic analysis was the value of cultivating the donor–grantee relationship to secure future funding, and to improve the overall capacity of an organization, thereby enhancing the quality of work and potential for a positive conservation outcome. To achieve this, our analysis revealed that relationships must be based on collaboration, honesty and a desire to seek reciprocal improvement and impact. Shared understanding by all funders of the complex nature of capacity building work and the lengthy timelines needed for effective impact evaluation (i.e. longer than the duration of a typical 3-year grant cycle) might therefore justify requests for longer-term funding.

To encourage the continued exploration of these issues, we make four recommendations:

- (1) Donors and practitioners would benefit from including each other during the development of strategies, programmes and strategy development processes. Communication that takes place early and often may facilitate improved understanding, co-design of projects and programmes, and sharing of goal setting and impact metrics between donors and practitioners.
- (2) Greater investment is needed for evaluations of capacity development that provide evidence of contribution versus attribution, such as research that uses control groups for a quasi-experimental design. A greater understanding of the evidence would facilitate more informed decision-making around the need for short-, medium- and long-term funding for capacity development.
- (3) Conservation capacity development would benefit from standardized metrics and indicators of success. Porzecanski et al. (2022) have developed a conceptual framework to guide capacity development planning and evaluation that provides important recommendations for the way forward.
- (4) A regular meeting, conference, or online convening space for the capacity development community and stakeholders (including beneficiaries, fellows, practitioners, donors and academics) is needed to foster stronger relationships and encourage shared learning around conservation capacity development. The Capacity Building for Conservation Conference series (in 2013, 2015, 2017 and 2019) has been an important first step in this process. This conference series has resulted in numerous outcomes, such as new collaborations, new funding relationships, improved communication, as well as the articles comprising this special theme in *Oryx* focused on conservation capacity development (Appleton et al., 2021; Sandbrook et al., 2021; Sterling et al., 2021; Abu-Bakarr et al., 2022; Bruyere et al., 2022; Campagnaro et al., 2022; Chao et al., 2022; Gerrie et al., 2022; Loffeld et al., 2022a,b; O'Connell et al., 2022; Porzecanski et al., 2022).

Donors are often not included in practitioners' conversations, especially in relation to investing in and creating sustainable capacity for conservation. By sharing our findings, we hope to encourage increased engagement between donors and practitioners, highlight the importance of capacity development within the conservation sector, and contribute to the limited literature on this topic.

**Acknowledgements** We thank Leo K. Curran, whose leadership was crucial to all aspects of the conference planning, sessions and subsequent content synthesis, the participants of the 2019 Capacity Building for Conservation Conference, and the donors who offered their time and expertise.

**Author contributions** Conceptualization, design: AS, TL, SP, JC, MAK; data analysis and interpretation: AS, TL; writing, revision: all authors.

**Conflicts of interest** None.

**Ethical standards** The preparation of this article abided by the *Oryx* guidelines on ethical standards. A draft was sent to donors for comments to ensure the quality and representativeness of our writing and to confirm continued consent in the sharing of the results.

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