



Luc Hoffmann
Institute



**EXPLORING POSSIBLE FUTURES
FOR CONSERVATION NGOS**

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FOREWORD



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Imagine for a moment that no conservation institution is today fit for purpose. How would you go about designing a whole new system that is better able to address the challenges facing the world? It's a bold question but an important one. It's one thing to ask such a question, but another to actually take the time to consider the possible answers. And if we do find the time, we also need space: somewhere we can collectively articulate the desire for a better world and picture a life beyond the one we are so familiar with; and to have the confidence to act upon these reflections.

What about our own backyard? We collaborate with an extended network of talented and dedicated people, the majority working in non-governmental organisations around the world. With energy and passion, these people have moved mountains for better conservation outcomes, inspiring others to follow similar career paths. But how is it that, despite all these well-intentioned efforts, we continue to fall short on knowing how best to mobilise these resources to meet our targets? That, despite the many successes (however you judge success from your own perspective), we have not managed to significantly slow the ever-worsening biodiversity crisis that has affected our planet for decades now, not to mention halt or reverse it? And isn't the conservation sector tired of this criticism, of hearing these questions over and over?!

Yet we must continue to ask these questions, since we find ourselves repeating variations of the same strategies to tackle this crisis. Some will rightly say that there are bigger forces at play – the dominant capitalist economy, the need to feed the planet, social expectations, inequality and global power asymmetry – that are outweighing the efforts of conservation NGOs. Some say that an underfunded and overworked sector is already doing its best. But is this truly the best way we can collectively deploy our energy? Could we push ourselves to imagine new, better ways that open opportunities for conservation models that don't subject us to living in and responding

to a perpetual conservation crisis? Have we relied too much on conservation NGOs as the main architecture for addressing these issues? Are we able to imagine and construct a new architecture that will enable conservation to be integrated into everything else and become a way of conducting our lives?

Questions like these led the Luc Hoffmann Institute to launch “The Future of Conservation NGOs” initiative. We have heard from hundreds of voices, working inside and outside conservation, that there is an appetite to reimagine the future of successful conservation work. There is a desire to challenge the status quo, to challenge ourselves as individuals to co-create more equitable and future-relevant pathways for conservation NGOs that can meaningfully benefit people and nature in a rapidly changing world. This report aims to feed that appetite and build on that desire.

There are people who are already reimagining this space. Not all NGOs are created equal and we acknowledge that the relevance of this discussion varies depending on the form and origin of any given NGO around the world. Indeed, there is a pressing need for conservation NGOs to confront some uncomfortable questions around power, legitimacy, diversity and inclusivity. The findings of this report address these main challenges and propose an initial set of lenses to help consider possible alternatives. They serve as a starting point to

investigate patterns, cohere ideas, transform our worldviews and imagine something different.

Next is to go beyond talking and imagining, and begin to support and enact the next set of new models, networks and structures that represent stepping stones towards a transformed sector.

At the Luc Hoffmann Institute we acknowledge that we, too, are part of the status quo and that we need to embrace this change ourselves. We have been asking ourselves challenging questions: are we the right organisation to catalyse this initiative? Are there other organisations or voices that are more entitled to take us all on this journey? It is most important to find ways to work together, to be co-agitators, and not become forces of polarisation. Ultimately, this is everyone’s crisis and we stand a better chance if we use all the resources we have available.

For years the world has talked about uncertain futures and how we might adapt. This is no longer speculation. In 2022, with what we see happening in the world, we live in uncertain presents. Yes, multiple. Places and people all around the world face various forms of uncertainty in daily life. Conservation NGOs must recognise this shift and move with compassion, self-reflection, learning and openness to change, as foundations for making a contribution.

We hope you find this report to be thought-provoking and you are inspired to join us.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The roles played by nature conservation NGOs and the organisational forms that have underpinned those roles until today need to change radically. As the climate crisis intensifies and biodiversity loss accelerates with the sixth mass extinction, the work of nature conservation organisations is becoming increasingly urgent. However, the context in which they operate is changing rapidly. A range of external trends, from the growing role of the private sector and the spread of nationalism to urbanisation, social shifts and increases in transnational crime linked to natural resources, are affecting the mission and work of conservation NGOs. There are also internal factors putting pressure on the sector, related to power structures, accountability, generational differences and the constant struggle for funding.

To ensure their continued relevance, effectiveness and legitimacy, conservation NGOs must seek new roles and organisational forms, as well as transition structures and pathways to reach those futures. This report aims to help kickstart a journey of reimagining, designing and testing (new) models that are better equipped for the 21st century. It is based on the first phase of the Luc Hoffmann Institute's "The Future of Conservation NGOs" initiative, which seeks to explore possible futures for conservation NGOs as well as innovative pathways to those futures.

Potential futures

After describing the external and internal trends that are affecting their work today, the

report presents 15 potential future roles for nature conservation NGOs, each one based on a possible future state of the world. In each case, potential pathways towards the role are described, along with the mindset and culture required and the organisational forms best adapted to that role. Examples of organisations that already embody aspects of each role are also given.

The potential future roles described include NGOs becoming primarily trusted sources of evidence and research; being the formal arm of citizen-based movements; focusing on campaign delivery in their own home country; or being primarily request-led support providers for networks of actors based in the global South. Propositions that move even further from the status quo include shifting towards conservation based on more spiritually centred approaches; reorienting finance and investment towards conservation aims; more effectively embracing digital technology and data-driven methods; and a focus on influencing newly ascendant geopolitical powers and/or the international security agenda.

Neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive, the proposed future roles are intended as just one starting point for new thinking and discussion. They have in common the need to change mindsets within conservation NGOs, to collaborate with new actors, to rebalance relationships with partners, and to evolve into or create entities with a narrower focus. The most prominent stakeholders must also change, with a greater role for indigenous peoples' communities, citizen activists, faith-based groups, private sector actors and the intelligence and defence sectors.

1. WHAT IS THIS REPORT ABOUT AND WHY?

The urgency and scale of the challenge for conservation are accelerating as natural resource consumption increases exponentially and the climate emergency intensifies. The landscape of actors who have a positive or negative impact for nature has changed out of all recognition since the founding of most of the largest international conservation organisations. The organisational forms, and indeed types of organisation, that served to protect nature in the past need to change in response.

Conservation NGOs and the wider movement of conservation-focused citizen action groups have had a long history of success in relation to specific ecosystems and species. They have also fundamentally shifted thinking about humanity's relationship with nature in many parts of the world. However, even with this positive record, it is necessary to question the continued effectiveness of the current models for achieving the mission.

The purpose of this report

This report is intended as a contribution to the nature conservation sector's wider thinking on the future role of conservation non-governmental organisations (NGOs)¹. As a situation analysis, it is meant to be the springboard for a journey of reimagining, designing and testing (new) models for conservation NGOs that are better equipped for the 21st century.

It forms part of the Luc Hoffmann Institute's "The Future of Conservation NGOs" initiative, which kicked off in December 2020. The initiative seeks to engage a diverse set of voices to explore innovative pathways for conservation NGOs that can meaningfully benefit people and nature in a rapidly changing world. The three phases of the initiative are to:

1. **Discover and Reimagine** – The Luc Hoffmann Institute conducted interviews and a two-day convening to start uncovering what and how to transform within conservation NGOs.
2. **Develop** – define and select prototypes and create an implementation strategy.
3. **Deliver** – test and implement prototypes.

The conservation agenda, traditionally determined by environmental drivers, is now confronted by the human and social rights agenda and drivers such as inclusion, race and equity.

The combination of new actors and the need to change relationships with existing actors means that conservation NGOs are facing significant challenges. These include declines in funding and supporters in traditional markets, as well as an erosion of trust, legitimacy and relevance in the eyes of civil society and governments in the global South², and the need to decolonise³ Northern NGO approaches.

1. In this report, the term conservation NGO encompasses non-governmental organisations, not-for-profit organisations and civil society organisations, including international ones, whose primary aim is the achievement of a conservation mission.

2. The term 'global North' refers to the countries of Europe, along with the United States, Australia and New Zealand. The term 'global South' is used to refer to all other countries. These terms are also sometimes used in the context of where conservation NGOs were founded: global South or global North. It should be noted, though, that the relevance of this distinction is rapidly losing salience, given the growing influence of China and the growth of many middle-income countries, as well as the rapid ascendancy and prominence of many environmental NGOs founded outside the global North countries.

3. The term 'decolonise' here refers to shifting power and funding from the elements of the global environmental and social justice movement currently led in the global North direct to NGOs or civil society organisations founded in the global South, and passing leadership in global spaces and fora to global South NGOs. It also refers to an underpinning move away from "white saviour" mindsets to "ally and solidarity" thinking. This is a deep and general need, true for the sector as a whole. Some organisations would claim to already be decolonised in how they were founded or have already changed, but the critical mass of the sector is in need of change in all the above dimensions.



To ensure continued utility, relevance, effectiveness and legitimacy requires NGOs to seek new roles and organisational forms and, on the journey towards those futures, transition structures and pathways. This situation analysis aims to help identify promising and inspiring new roles and organisational forms along with pathways towards them.

Phase 1: Discover and Reimagine – methodology

As of September 2021, the Luc Hoffmann Institute had conducted 43 interviews to gather information, stories and insights from the field and identify systemic patterns and their impacts on conservation effectiveness. Interviewees, based in Europe, Africa, Asia and the Americas, included conservation practitioners, academics, researchers, philanthropists, activists, women's

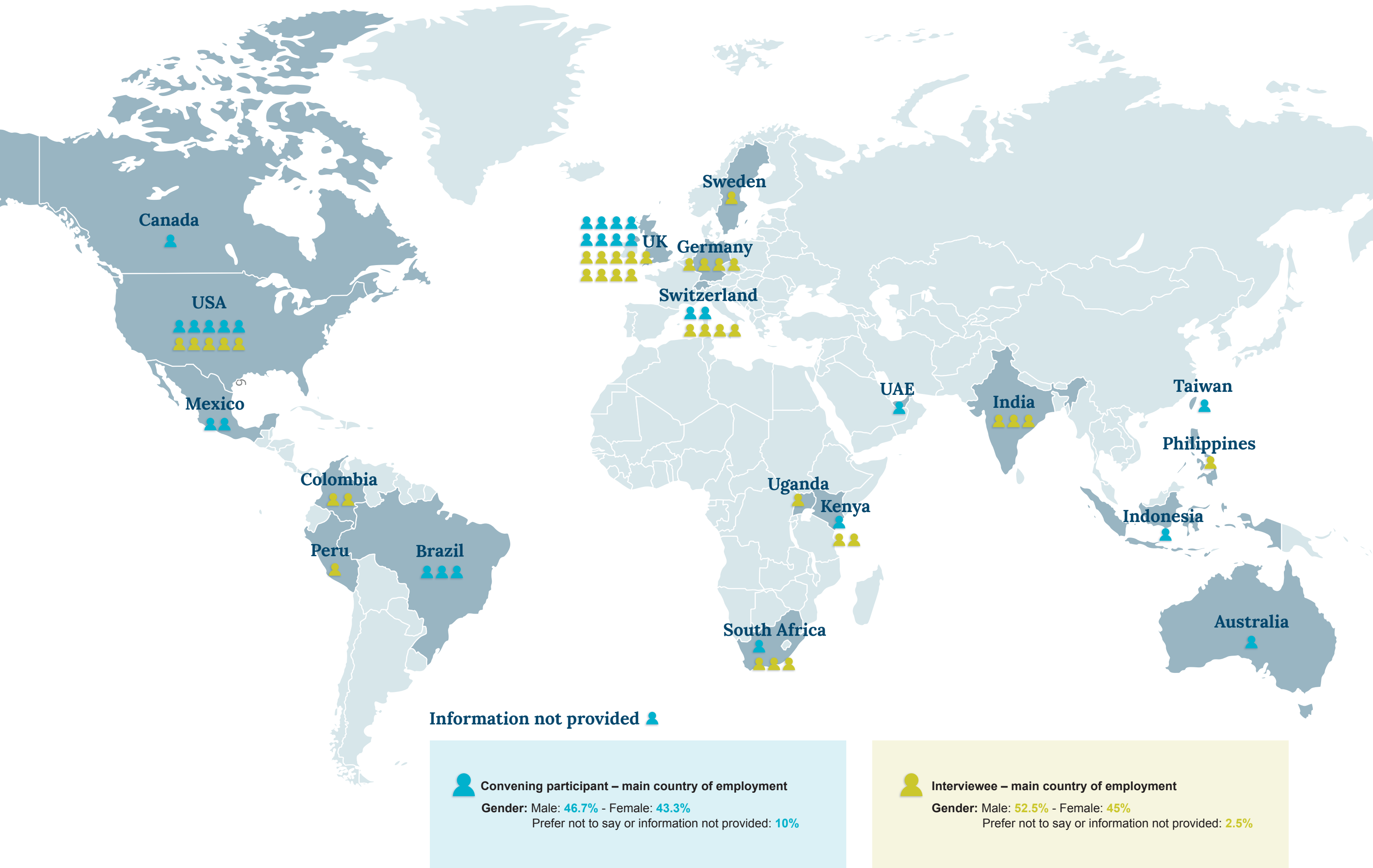
leadership advocates, impact investors, fund managers, consultants in strategy transformation and science communicators.

In addition to these interviews, in September 2021, the institute convened a diverse group of thinkers to reflect on the future of conservation NGOs over two virtual sessions. The sessions, for which the Three Horizons framework was used (see Annex 1), were facilitated by the International Futures Forum. Together, the interviews and the convening form the Discover and Reimagine phase of the initiative.

A total of 59 people, aged 26 to 60+, were either interviewed by the institute, took part in the two-day convening, or both.⁴ The geographic spread of the participants is shown in Figures 1. The institute always strives to ensure that its initiatives are inclusive, that barriers to engagement are addressed and that marginalised groups are reached.

4. At the time this report was published, more than 150 consultations had been completed under the first phase of "The Future of Conservation NGOs" initiative.

Figure 1. The geographic and gender composition of the Luc Hoffmann Institute's Future of Conservation NGOs convening participants and interviewees (up to September 2021)



2. TRENDS AFFECTING AND SHAPING CONSERVATION NGOS

Before considering the possible futures for conservation NGOs, it is important to examine their current status. This chapter sets out both external and internal trends that are having an impact on the sector. It also highlights some new approaches that have already been adopted by some parts of the sector and that could play an important role as transitional pathways to possible future NGO roles.

External trends affecting conservation NGOs

Several external megatrends affect the mission and work of conservation NGOs (and other NGOs). The two that have received the most attention are climate change and biodiversity decline (also known as the 'sixth mass extinction'). These are linked to many other trends that also have an impact on the conservation NGO sector.

Role of the private sector

In most countries, there has been an expansion of the private sector and the power it has, especially versus state actors. Multinational corporations are a particular concern, as they cannot easily be held to account by nation states. Private sector companies and contractors are playing a greater role in social development and more hybrid social-private organisations are appearing.

Related to the expansion of the private sector is the trend towards elite capture of wealth, media and governments, which may make it harder to advocate for and achieve positive outcomes for environmental and conservation purposes, as well as for the human rights of indigenous peoples and local communities. An example of this is the expansion, between 2010 and 2012, of Hancock Prospecting, a mining and agricultural business, from coal

mining to ownership of Australian media outlets with the aim of influencing Australia's national policy on climate change (Rourke, 2012).

Growth models

The continued use of growth models focused on gross domestic product (GDP), the free market and financial capital (instead of human, social or natural capital) drives high depletion of natural resources and human well-being. These GDP-focused models are *intrinsically linked to* continued increases in natural-resource consumption per capita in high-income countries, along with rapid economic growth in middle-income countries *and* rapid growth of the middle classes in those countries, but with lower-income countries suffering much of the degradation of habitats and natural resources.

Agroecology approaches

There is a greater emphasis on agroecology, which applies ecological concepts and principles to the design and management of agricultural systems. This is evident among policy makers, corporates, citizens and communities and is driven by conservation *and* sustainable food supply aims.

Crime and security

Crime and security factors also have an impact. Transnational crime groups (gangs, cartels), which tend to be highly networked, have detected opportunities to rob localities of conservation-rich resources that have a high market value – such as high-quality wood, minerals and wild animals – where those localities have a weak statehood presence. States have insufficient legislation or enforcement capacity to deal with this crime and also suffer from lack of coordination among state agencies. Water scarcity affects most habitats and is leading to inter-country conflict, for example in the Nile Basin countries. And there is increased migration, due to the fragility of life and incomes in low- and middle-income countries,

as well as rising inequality in its multiple forms, both within and between countries and regions.

Demographics

Demographic changes are making it even more important to eliminate the shortfall in people's "social foundations", their fundamental rights such as food, education, housing, etc., while addressing the overshoot of the planet's boundaries with regard to such things as biodiversity, land use or freshwater.

Urbanisation is leading to megacities and increased peri-urban footprints with new conservation challenges, from land to energy use. Alongside these challenges are opportunities for better resource efficiency and new potential for positive collective action.

The 'youth bulge' across the global South (for example in Africa, where 40% of the population is under 16 (Statista, 2021)) means there are many more young people with rights and legitimate expectations for a better quality of life. Combining this with increased natural-resource use in the global North creates further pressure on the ecological ceiling. The global North, which funds much of the conservation movement, still uses by far the greatest share of the world's

natural resources per capita (Global Footprint Network). Future conservation NGOs could drive dramatic change by focusing entirely on resource usage in the global North and the consequent contribution to the global ecological deficit.

National politics and geopolitics

The accelerating shift of geopolitical power to the global South is at odds with most of the largest conservation NGOs being headquartered in the global North where most of their influencing work is still done. Some have increased their regional presence in the global South and have rebalanced their staff and leadership profiles. However, this has happened slowly and is not always considered by other parts of civil society as genuine or seen as conferring greater legitimacy, thus reducing its effective impact.

There is a rise in ultra-nationalism and nativism – policies intended to protect the interests of a country's native population over those of global society and the environment – in many countries across all continents. These trends tend to lead to non-implementation of globally agreed rules on climate change as well as to habitat degradation and species loss across borders. An example is Brazil's approach to the Amazon under President Jair Bolsonaro.



Increased ultra-nationalism is reducing attention and public support for addressing complex interconnected global environmental and conservation issues but also reducing support for international civil society organisations. In conjunction with this, states have increasingly shown stances of ‘assertive sovereignty’: governments resist well-intentioned external intervention and insist on determining whether external assistance is required at all and by whom. In sum, external assistance will be driven less by supply and more by demand.

As some governments around the world restrict civic space⁵, it becomes harder for conservation and other civil society organisations to operate, especially when they engage in advocacy and campaigning – and particularly when they are international, as, for example, in the case of Greenpeace in India. In 2015, the Indian Ministry of Home Affairs suspended Greenpeace India’s foreign funding, claiming that the NGO’s activities were having a negative impact on the economic interests of the country.

There has been an increase in the spread of misinformation coupled with falling levels of respect for or belief in science. At the same time, citizens have more access to information than ever, and radical transparency – a complete openness with respect to organisational processes and data – is becoming something public and private sector organisations need to accept.

Internal trends that affect conservation NGOs

While the external trends described above are not unique to the conservation sector, several internal contextual factors and trends are also evident. Some of them are discussed here.

On the one hand, there is increasing recognition of the need for leaders and staff to take account of the interconnectedness of environment and conservation issues with other sectors and global goods; on the other hand, the combination of

constant crises and the complexity of accounting for intersectional and intersectoral links leads to mental and bureaucratic burnout. Human beings have limits to how readily they can embrace recurring organisational change (Bridges, 2020).

Changing narratives

Recent movements are calling for the decolonisation of conservation efforts that are mostly led by northern NGOs, for power shifts and local conservation. However, actual change to organisational forms and power structures is lagging because:

- Boards are still made up of mostly northern, mostly white, mostly middle-class citizens, socialised in the same systems of thinking and western organisational forms.
- The power of funding is still frequently used to override bottom-up, community-led programme approaches (and consequent organisational structures).
- Most of the larger institutional donors still prefer to work with NGOs founded in the global North, because they share similar mindsets about what conservation is, because regulatory compliance is easier, and because the capabilities of civil society organisations and staff in the global South are still inadequately recognised.

Accountability and ownership

Mechanisms for downward accountability to primary stakeholders, for example indigenous peoples or programme participants, are weak or entirely absent. For conservation NGOs, the power to decide on the roles and mandates, strategic direction setting, theories of change, programme approaches, resource mobilisation strategies, and the use of voices (whose and how) is still largely held by boards and leadership teams dominated by the global North.

There is also a shift in who ‘owns’ conservation: although the historical patronage by royal families or small circles of elites for “reserves” has declined dramatically, habitats, landscapes and green spaces are still not universally or

5. The term ‘civic space’ refers to the political, legal and normative space for civil society organisations to operate. In many countries across the globe (and by no means only in the global South) this space has diminished significantly since the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States.



consistently seen as public goods. This is even less the case when it comes to legal recognition of the ownership, tenure or customary usage of lands by indigenous peoples. Some conservation organisations – especially those combining a conservation mandate with a human-rights-defender approach – have moved away from organisational forms and norms that reflect the historical focus on patrons or philanthropists. However, this legacy model is still prevalent in other conservation NGOs.

The role and contribution of indigenous communities and local peoples' ecological knowledge, through the leadership of indigenous peoples' community organisations, are more recognised and influential than in the past. Further work by NGOs is needed to meaningfully bring this knowledge and science together for a more holistic approach. It could be observed that indigenous community leaders were made far more welcome by protesters *outside* COP26, the 2021 United Nations Climate Change Conference, than by policy makers and academics *inside*.

Activism and generational differences

There has been a rise in digital citizen activism and fundraising practices. Millennials and those in Generation Z have different expectations of NGOs, believing that they can take action on their own terms, through

their own social networks (for example by crowdfunding direct conservation action), rather than this being mediated by legacy NGOs.

NGOs are more challenged today to show that they engender broader public ownership and support in societies where they operate and in those where they were founded. They need to listen more to citizen activists rather than only broadcast information. Millennial and Generation-Z citizens have a more instinctive grasp of the need for NGOs to embrace both digital and 'bricks and mortar' types of organising than previous generations, not least because they have grown up with new forms of organising, supporting causes via social media and novel business models offered by new tech companies.

For many Generation-Z individuals, it matters less how an entity organises, positions and describes itself than the values it demonstrates and the ends that it serves; and allegiance to specific organisations is weak. As a result, NGOs need to muster a better capability and willingness to engage with social movements and informal citizen-led initiatives as well. This means recognising that such citizen groups can drive large-scale change in impact and in normative thinking and that NGOs need to become better at offering complementary roles and support to non-formal actors, their goals and movements.

Funding changes

Northern conservation NGOs are competing – with other international NGOs and other charities – for funding in often saturated domestic markets. New local public fundraising and philanthropy markets in middle-income countries take considerable time and effort to become established before they yield significant results.

New approaches already adopted

Some conservation NGOs have already adopted changes in their programmatic approaches, and thus their organisational form, as steps towards retaining relevance as well as legitimacy.

Community-led conservation

Some NGOs have taken steps to deepen inclusive conservation in practice. If communities are to be able to truly realise socio-economic benefits from conservation efforts, they must be deeply involved in and have ownership of the conservation approach. An example of this is the radical listening approach practised by the international non-profit organisation, Health in Harmony. It involves asking communities what they need to protect their environment and investing in the solutions they propose. Communities also need to have equitable access to financing and investment models already in use by other actors for conservation purposes.

Rights-based approaches

A rights-based approach to planetary and human health – balancing individual, collective and nature rights – can also be helpful. A new framing of a rights-based approach that aims at sharing our finite resources equally is highlighted by some indigenous groups. Some have succeeded in establishing the legally enshrined rights of nature, for example, for rivers in Colombia (Townsend, 2019). However,

a human-rights-based framework comes with both strengths and limitations, as illustrated in the following quotes from participants in the convening that fed into this report:

“A rights-based framework to conservation is the most powerful catalyst for transformative change that we have ever had.”

“Any framework, however strong, can only be as significant as the capability of individuals and communities to claim those rights, bringing issues of representation and agency once more to the fore.”

Nature-based Solutions and carbon markets

There is increased NGO involvement in two coexisting transactional approaches: one is the adoption of Nature-based Solutions (NbS)⁶ and the other is the trend towards carbon markets/trading, which shows signs of moving to an international (voluntary and/or regulated) level. The number of funds and finance products related to these two approaches has skyrocketed and many NGOs have become a host or an intermediary in these transactions. Conservation NGOs should consider which directions they promote, and whether they are offering sufficient coordinated advocacy towards state and intergovernmental organisations to also move further in the direction of NbS. The challenge for the conservation groups is to define *how* to work on markets and *what* the best approach would be to connect nature to that work.

Private sector involvement

Newer generation private-sector-driven business approaches – through impact investment, development finance and guarantee instruments – have the potential to create much-needed space for community-led impact. However, it is questionable whether private investment, with its inevitable emphasis on some sort of returns, will ever be truly accessible or beneficial to the poor, as well as focused on longer-term transformative change.

6. Nature-based Solutions (NbS) are defined by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) as “actions to protect, sustainably manage, and restore natural or modified ecosystems, that address societal challenges effectively and adaptively, simultaneously providing human well-being and biodiversity benefits”.

3. IMAGINING POSSIBLE FUTURES OF CONSERVATION NGOS

Building on the ideas of many individuals, and as a means of sparking new thinking, the following propositions are examples of potential roles and forms for future conservation NGOs. They are neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive but are *one* starting point.

The tables in this section each begin with a 'lens', a description of a possible future

state of the world. Based on this lens, a role for a future conservation NGO is proposed, along with potential pathways to that role. The mindset and culture that would underpin such a role is described, along with the organisational form such an NGO might take. Examples of organisations that already embody aspects of this role are also given.

1: Convenor of other actors and stakeholders

Lens		
Conservation NGOs have influenced other actors (e.g. corporates, faith movements, agribusiness and military/security apparatus) to integrate conservation values into their core purposes based on self-interest.		
Role		
To act as a broker or convenor, enabling the co-creation of pro-conservation systems-change solutions delivered by multiple actors.		
Potential pathways	Mindset and culture	Existing examples
<p>Initiate joint solutions, irrespective of incentive systems and drivers of other actors.</p> <p>Create measurability tools, e.g. blockchain systems.</p> <p>Create units or NGOs with the sole focus of working with dominant global natural-resource-focused corporates.</p> <p>Hire more people from adjacent sectors; also use job exchanges, and embed staff in corporates as a way of influencing.</p>	<p>NGOs express humility vis-à-vis other actors with different mixes of motives and incentives.</p> <p>Staff can 'speak the language' of other actors, and understand their culture, worldview, dynamics and drivers or incentive systems, to identify mutual interests.</p>	<p>Blockchain & Climate Institute</p> <p>Certification bodies (Forest Stewardship Council, Fairtrade International)</p> <p>Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil</p> <p>Aliança da Terra</p> <p>Poverty footprinters (e.g. UN Global Compact and Oxfam)</p>
	Organisational structure	
	<p>A unitary or single organisation, with geographically distributed staff and authoritative, credible tools for multi-stakeholder processes, solutions and measurability of outcomes.</p>	

2: Trusted source of evidence

Lens		
Advocacy or think-tank conservation organisations aim to influence policy makers, mainstream public opinion and corporate leaders. Policy makers need data, analysis and research relating to causes and impacts on nature and people as well as help with monitoring implementation of policy commitments and consequent outcomes.		
Role		
To be a neutral source of trusted information, based on high-quality research and analysis, providing evidence and shaping issues for conservation and environmental movements.		
Potential pathways	Mindset and culture	Existing examples
Create and disseminate research (or spin out entities to do this), funded by institutions, foundations and high wealth individuals.	NGOs are knowledge collectors, facilitators and diffusers.	Institute of Climate Change and Sustainable Development, Tsinghua University
	Organisational structure A collective of data scientists and policy researchers with high levels of research integrity and a central team responsible for diffusion of data and information.	Our World in Data Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems (journal)

3: Supporter of more spiritually-led conservation

Lens		
Every human being's personal and unique relationship with local nature, often defined by spiritual or place- and identity-based factors (e.g. indigenous peoples and local communities, spiritually-led conservation and agroecological approaches), is acknowledged.		
Role		
To (re)frame the narratives on conservation with regard to both "why" and "how"; the role and narratives acknowledge, respect and support spiritually-centred groups or sacred approaches that undertake conservation action.		
Potential pathways	Mindset and culture	Existing examples
Have outreach units focused on faith-based actors. Include in governance mechanisms spiritual leaders, theologians and indigenous peoples' community members. Integrate spiritually-motivated people, with 'pride of (sacred) place' motivations, into the organisation. Co-found new thought-leadership conservation organisations with spiritual and indigenous peoples' community partner(s).	Strengthened humility in secular, science-based NGOs. Openness and capability to listen and understand spiritual perspectives (while not being instrumentalist). Cautionary attitude towards approaches that stress the scientific, economic and financial value of nature.	Faith Alliance for Climate Change Instituto de Estudos da Religião Natural Justice: Lawyers for Communities and the Environment UN Environment Programme "Faith for Earth" Initiative Islamic Relief's work with imams on climate change
	Organisational structure Boards or advisory panels that include individuals with spiritual or sacred mindsets, for example, by recruiting theologians or spiritual leaders in leadership roles; staff recruited from faith movements; Muslim scholar panels; indigenous peoples' consultation mechanisms.	



4: The formal arm of citizen-based movements

Lens		
Younger generations seek to mobilise through very loosely organised movements (Extinction Rebellion, Sunrise Movement, Black Lives Matter, #MeToo).		
Role		
To be a complementary force/actor, to follow up with organising work and offer formal, professional advocacy and influencing input (fast-follower role); to be a provider of tools for individuals energised by movements to build on their activism.		
Potential pathways	Mindset and culture	Existing examples
<p>Recruit from single-issue movements (while not replacing them) rather than mainly from professionalised cadres.</p> <p>Establish an entity providing degree-level knowledge that gives members of conservation movements an opportunity to equip themselves with tools to upskill movements.</p> <p>Invite movement leaders to join boards or advisory panels.</p> <p>Provide long-term, flexible and core funding for needs identified by movements.</p>	<p>Respect for complementary strengths of movements, their need for autonomy, their own ways of working and their political agency.</p> <p>A switch from staff as 'heroes', funded by supporters, to staff equipping supporters to be heroes or agents of change.</p>	<p>350.org</p> <p>Greenpeace approach to provision of tools to supporters to enable individual agency</p> <p>International Trade Union Confederation's Global Organising Academy: university level courses for trade union officials and emerging leaders in international union movement</p>
	Organisational structure	
	<p>Formal campaigning units with capacity to synthesise policy 'asks'.</p> <p>An entity within NGOs that equips movement members with tools and connections.</p>	

5: Request-led support provider

Lens		
NGOs decolonise to achieve their mission and the scale of impact needed is much bigger than before.		
Role		
To be providers of support, upon request, to networks of global South actors; offering consulting services in thematic and technical niches; discontinuing capacity building as a means of moulding civil society organisations in the global South to NGO models of the global North.		
Potential pathways	Mindset and culture	Existing examples
<p>Reconfigure boards and executive leadership levels to be diverse, globally balanced and including people with lived experience (e.g. indigenous peoples).</p> <p>Hand over programmes, capabilities and assets in the global South to local actors in dignified and responsible exit; transfer partners, programme approaches and donors.</p> <p>Reconfigure the remaining organisational entity around technical and thematic conservation expertise.</p> <p>Replace two-tier categorisation and pay and reward systems of expatriate international staff and national staff, with all staff being employed as nationals of the country where they live.</p>	<p>Globally balanced organisation, smaller in size, and moulded to professional services delivery.</p> <p>Thinking that does not equate financial or organisational growth with impact; avoids pushing a supply-led approach.</p>	<p>Winrock International transition to the Bangladesh Forest Department, Bangladesh</p> <p>Planning and Development Collaborative International transition to Ikibiri Coalition, Burundi</p> <p>Mercy Corps transition to Partner Microcredit Foundation, Bosnia</p>
	Organisational structure	
	<p>Formalised and systematised technical expertise, knowledge-management processes and facilitation tools that enable a consultancy-based or advisory approach.</p>	

6: Campaign delivery specialists in their home country

Lens		
NGOs in northern countries contribute more effectively to the wider global conservation movement by focusing solely on changing policy, practice, ideas and beliefs in the countries where they are based or were founded.		
Role		
To fulfil the local delivery of globally created, large conservation campaigns in their home country only, encompassing public education, mobilisation and organisation; influencing government or private sector actors at home.		
Potential pathways	Mindset and culture	Existing examples
<p>As for proposition 5: ensure global input on Boards, responsible exit and transfer of assets to global South-based civil society organisations, no 'expat staff', etc.</p> <p>Redirect funding to home market campaigning.</p> <p>Change from project-based grant approach or capacity building to that of granting unrestricted, core funding directly to partners.</p>	<p>Organisational assets primarily related to one's own country/market are offered.</p> <p>The intention to influence developments outside own country is discouraged.</p>	<p>CIVICUS global alliance of civil society organisations</p> <p>Habitat for Humanity, Catholic Relief Services, World Vision, CARE and Oxfam have taken some first steps (Renoir and Boone, 2020)</p> <p>Transition of EveryChild to Family for Every Child</p>
	Organisational structure	
	<p>Smaller organisational size.</p> <p>Specialised in campaigning capabilities for global North contexts.</p> <p>No programme delivery function in the global South.</p>	

7: Underlying platform and service provider

Lens		
The vast majority of practical conservation work is locally focused and locally led (e.g. a community of a few streets in a Berlin district, a group of coastal villages in the Philippines).		
Role		
To serve as a connector, building shared solidarity of action by providing a platform for horizontal connectivity between micro conservation groups locally, regionally, nationally and globally to share learning, tools and tactics; convening and providing a backbone function.		
Potential pathways	Mindset and culture	Existing examples
Develop non-judgemental partnerships with alliances of local, community-led conservation associations.	Respect for and agnosticism about varied political backgrounds, mindsets, motives and methods of conversation among supporters of locally-focused conservation work; use of inclusive language and symbols (tradition, pride of place, cultural heritage, outdoor recreation).	ICCA Consortium of territories and areas conserved by indigenous peoples and local communities The Conservation Volunteers
	Organisational structure	
	An apolitical staff body, flat in hierarchy, with uniform roles across geographies, operationally skilled with strong knowledge-management processes and infrastructure.	



8: Unifying pro-conservation lobbying

Lens		
Even the largest conservation NGOs, with significant financial resources, are dwarfed by state-led investment flows and the power of states to regulate agribusiness, oil and gas, etc., with impacts that positively or negatively affect conservation.		
Role		
To serve as international collectives or connectors of think tanks and influencer NGOs, and as lobby groups that act as proponents of pro-conservation methods and approaches.		
Potential pathways	Mindset and culture	Existing examples
<p>Recruit more staff who formerly worked in relevant state agencies (while refraining from making moral judgements about their past career choices).</p> <p>Strengthen elite-level influencing techniques while increasing understanding of what motivates and incentivises senior civil servants and politicians, as well as the constraints they typically have to work within.</p>	Organisational structure	<p>Institute for Climate Change and Sustainable Development, Tsinghua University</p> <p>Overseas Development Institute</p> <p>New Economics Foundation</p>
	<p>Strong professional advocacy and influencing skills.</p> <p>Small network of think tanks, with observatory capabilities, very clear niches or highly focused thematic scopes.</p>	

9: Putting environmental crime on the security agenda

Lens		
People's desire for stability and security means the military and security sectors are very powerful actors (whether democratic or autocratic).		
Role		
To influence security and law enforcement organisations to treat environmental crimes with higher priority, since these have a significant negative impact on human safety and security and are sometimes perpetrated by transnational organised crime groups.		
Potential pathways	Mindset and culture	Existing examples
<p>Collaborate with NGOs that develop or already have a background in working with law enforcement on environmental crime or human rights violations, broadening their scope and reach to military and intelligence services.</p>	Organisational structure	<p>Igarapé Institute, Brazil (focused on public, military and digital security)</p> <p>WeProtect Global Alliance and other child exploitation NGOs</p> <p>Mines Advisory Group, working with military organisations in the global South on clearance and arms controls</p>
	<p>An understanding of the particular culture and ways of working of military and law enforcement.</p> <p>An embodied understanding that environmental crimes cannot be addressed through regulation or law enforcement alone and that NGOs must support efforts to address root causes.</p> <p>Boards that include representatives from crime/justice agencies.</p> <p>Teams that have a background in military or policing services.</p>	

10: Reorienting finance and investment towards conservation aims

Lens		
The organisations that operate financial systems and finance flows are larger and more powerful even than state actors.		
Role		
To prepare investable propositions for impact investors; building market infrastructure and facilitating global capital flows to investments with conservation aims; shaping bankable projects and providing investment-ready projects and markets; encouraging companies to use strong biodiversity conservation practices and policies.		
Potential pathways	Mindset and culture	Existing examples
<p>Build impact-investing arms, either internal or adjacent to the organisation, so that new practices as well as culture and mindsets are created.</p> <p>Instigate job rotation, fellowship or exchange programmes with private capital impact investors.</p>	Organisational structure	<p>Swiss-NGO partnerships on Sahel agricultural microinsurance</p> <p>Finance 4 Biodiversity</p> <p>Global Commons Alliance</p>
	<p>Staff who understand the mindsets and drivers for actors in private-capital investment and can communicate authoritatively on topics related to this field.</p> <p>Located where the money is, in both the global North and other middle-income and high-income countries.</p> <p>Small, lean and agile, hybrid organisations that provide the infrastructure and advisory roles described above.</p>	





11: Conservation approaches recognise geopolitical power shifts

Lens		
The predominant approach to economic development globally is state-interventionist and investment-led, with China pre-eminent in terms of global leadership and the driver of new norms about the relationship between people and nature and how natural resources are valued, used and conserved.		
Role		
To influence approaches to the use of finite natural resources and the speed with which various parts of the economy need to be radically altered to address climate change; to build on China's leadership in normative thinking and action on natural-resource usage, conservation of habitats and species, and approaches to conservation.		
Potential pathways	Mindset and culture	Existing examples
<p>Vastly improve knowledge of China as a global actor; recruit China-focused staff, volunteers and board members as well as partners with corresponding networks, knowledge and language abilities.</p> <p>Ally with environmental or conservation-focused organisations (not necessarily NGOs) that are governed and managed within the new hegemony.⁷</p>	Organisational structure	<p>China Biodiversity Conservation & Green Development Foundation</p> <p>World Resources Institute</p>
	<p>Ways of thinking that aren't based in binary attitudes that, for example, the West is more conservation-minded than China.</p> <p>Collaborate with/evolve into think tanks with missions to influence policies adopted by the Chinese Politburo, Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, Asian Development Bank, professional associations, finance and planning ministries.</p> <p>Specialist support provided for conservation in areas where China implements its Belt and Road Initiative or imports natural resources.</p>	

7. The International Civil Society Centre provided a multi-faceted analysis of how international NGOs can respond to the rise of China (Lang, 2019).

12: Embracing digital technology and data-driven approaches

Lens		
NGOs can become radically more effective through digital innovation and data-driven strategies and tactics for programming, fundraising, communications and campaigning, but tech corporations exert significant influence on public discourses on the environment, climate change and conservation.		
Role		
To collaborate with tech companies on conservation programming; embracing digitally-enabled supporter-driven communications, campaigning and fundraising approaches; developing prototypes of data-driven cultures and decision-making modes.		
Potential pathways	Mindset and culture	Existing examples
<p>Partner with digital campaigning agencies, rather than trying to build from scratch inside legacy NGOs.</p> <p>Create an externally-focused digital strategy, centred on programming and partnering.</p> <p>Extend shared-value strategies of collaboration with the private sector to technology companies.</p> <p>Recruit individuals from the tech sector or consulting agencies who can create digital and data-driven cultures.</p>	Boards and leaders who are true digital natives; willingness to partner with B Corp technology companies as service providers in programming and public mobilisation for conservation.	<p>Peek Vision Ltd.</p> <p>NetHope</p> <p>B Lab</p>
	Organisational structure	
	<p>Digital conservationists (and campaigners, fundraisers and chief technology officers) integrated into senior leadership decision making.</p> <p>Strategic Partnerships for delivery rather than own delivery teams.</p>	

13: Nurturing a widespread shift to conservation-minded thinking

Lens		
Volatility and moments of disjuncture (for example, the COVID-19 pandemic) mean sudden shifts in priorities, and realigned relationships between institutions, sectors, political decision makers and informal groupings, creating sudden opportunity windows for step changes for the achievement of conservation aims.		
Role		
To nurture conservation-minded people to help create new narratives and step changes in normative thinking in their respective institutions and sectors.		
Potential pathways	Mindset and culture	Existing examples
<p>Sponsor potential or actual leaders and conservation intrapreneurs and entrepreneurs.</p> <p>Research success factors of other influencing networks that are focused on norm diffusion; examples include certain epistemic (or knowledge-based) communities that have changed decision-maker narratives and world views on certain issues; also social movements such as the LGBTIS movement that changed the broad public narrative on marriage: how they built and embedded a cadre of like-minded people in a broad array of public institutions.</p>	Agile thinking, being adaptive and flexible rather than trying to originate every solution.	<p>Forum of Young Global Leaders, from the World Economic Forum</p> <p>Various youth leader scholarship/fellowship programmes</p> <p>Informal networking in the United States of influencers working on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex rights who are staffers within media, the legal profession, the military, and religious and other institutions</p> <p>Society of Jesus (the Jesuits)</p> <p>Alumni of global management consulting firms</p>
	Organisational structure	
	A cadre of conservationists with the same purpose who operate within other sectors. These are trained and equipped with tools and can draw on an alumni network, loosely connected but distributed throughout all key sectors and institutions.	

14: Prioritising conservation in an increasingly urban world

Lens		
The majority of the global population live in (peri-)urban areas that are often more populous than nation states and thus work that is city-focused rather than country-focused makes more sense; people's daily interaction with and direct link to nature, habitats and species has significantly changed; a world uninhabitable for an increasing number of species, yet where some are thriving – even overpopulating – in the fast growing (peri-)urban areas.		
Role		
To educate (peri-)urban populations in how nature is integrated in their living situation, how interdependency with nature continues to exist, and how urban nature links to larger conservation issues; linking cross-class urban constituencies to rural and protected space issues, thus lessening the white, upper-middle-class bias within conservation; convening and education of urban government agencies and private infrastructure companies; influencing policy and practice.		
Potential pathways	Mindset and culture	Existing examples
<p>Convene urban landscape and animal protection agencies for common campaigning and supporter mobilisation.</p> <p>Close small country-level branches and replace them with megacity-level branches.</p>	<p>A welcoming attitude to urban naturalists, gardeners, foragers and bird lovers, small animal/pet-loving people, etc.</p> <p>Mindset shifted from the perception of nature as unspoiled vastness to focus on cities, for both their own natural resources and as prime consumers of natural resources.</p>	<p>American Urban Gardening Association</p> <p>Humane Society</p> <p>Parks and People Foundation</p> <p>Baltimore's commitment to meeting the Paris agreement goals, with support from Baltimore Green Map</p>
	Organisational structure	
	Joint ventures/partnerships/mergers and acquisitions with associations representing the aforementioned constituencies.	



15: A bridge between the blockchain and local community conservation

Lens		
Radically new decision-making structures and business models emerge based on blockchain and crypto-currencies, potentially giving local communities greater control over who owns and benefits from nature assets and enabling entire new economies to be built on conservation activities.		
Role		
To take the form of decentralised and transparent local or global digital communities that ensure the smooth functioning of core teams; could also play a role in verifying that the information put on the blockchain is accurate; regulating a system in which money can flow more readily to communities and acting as a bridge between those communities and sources of funding, certifying in-real-life conservation that also exists on the blockchain.		
Potential pathways	Mindset and culture	Existing examples
Support emerging developers who have an interest in conservation; hire such developers in-house and give them the necessary leeway and resourcing to foster truly disruptive innovation.	Radical risk-taking. Willingness to embrace a system that could eventually replace them, with the incentive based on the conservation of biodiversity rather than on ego.	Adoption by El Salvador of bitcoin as an official currency
	Highly tech-savvy, capable of thinking across the board, including in economic and financial terms.	Nature Seychelles offering the Seychelles magpie-robin as a non-fungible token
	Organisational structure	Open Earth Foundation raising millions in funds from non-fungible tokens
	Community-led and funded in a completely transparent manner, open to scrutiny.	Social Alpha Foundation empowering “blockchain for good”

Common aspects

Looking across all of these propositions for potential future NGO roles, some commonalities that apply to all or most of them emerge.

Changing mindsets

NGOs (especially but not only those that focus on campaigning) can be quite ‘tribal’. While there is a spectrum of mindsets, there is a tendency to fall back on definitions rooted in opposing sides: the distinction between the ingroup – the group of people and organisations considered worthy of being in the sector – and the outgroup – those who are outside the circle and are looked at with at least reservedness, and frequently a sense of superiority – is quite strong. A report by an International Civil Society Centre task force on how to instil cultures of change (ICSC, 2015) supported this criticism of the NGO sector. For the potential new roles of conservation NGOs to have a chance, and to secure future relevance

and impact, the organisations must become more inclusive and less normative or judgemental.

Conservation organisations are in general addressing people that are already, to a degree, engaged. The new and needed work is how to engage people who are not included in the conversation and/or may not even fully agree on the role of nature stewardship as a solution to the climate crisis. It is also necessary to bring in perspectives that are diverse in terms of paradigms, mental models and ways of thinking, such as those oriented around spirituality and other alternatives to Western academic approaches.

Collaboration with new actors

The scale of the challenge – encompassing climate change, the sixth mass extinction, etc. – means that solutions require political, financial, operational and systemic power many, many magnitudes higher than can be applied by NGOs, even when they act collectively as a sector.

The actors with which future NGOs must collaborate are often not those that have been seen as most relevant until now, with examples including the military, faith groups and China. Conservation is not at the top of their list of imperatives, priorities and incentive systems, but it should not be assumed that it isn't on their list at all. For example, China installs more solar panels than any other country.

Demanding change from any actor is less effective when it comes to achieving scale than co-creating solutions around *mutual* interests – even if that mutual interest arises from different rationales or logics.

One example of a non-typical partner with mutual interests could be evangelical groups that include a large percentage of creationists. Should conservation NGOs work with such groups? They believe equally strongly in a stewardship duty to preserve species and habitats and to stop climate change and will act accordingly both independently and in combination with other groups.

Rebalancing the relationships

Many NGOs – especially those that have grown as professional delivery mechanisms for large institutional grants – have had a tendency towards sub-contracting and working through partners rather than in solidarity and equality with other civil society organisations (CSOs). This has led to suboptimal outcomes because programmes, campaigns and other conservation activities have not been informed by the context, reality and what works for those CSOs, usually based in the global South.

Given, also, the ways in which money is channelled, this has led to those CSOs changing

their organisational function and form to meet the compliance requirements and modes of thinking and operations that donors expect. Knowledge is extracted to a greater degree than it is shared. The use, by some NGOs, of extracted knowledge to demonstrate to donors how they have added value, is not always equal to the effort put into the creation of common public goods that credit Southern perspectives and are shared on an equal basis.

There must be more alignment of strategic approaches and resource allocation, direct to Southern CSOs. This needs to happen with greater transparency and accountability on all sides. An example is the (slow) implementation of the Grand Bargain agreement between some of the largest donors and humanitarian organisations. This agreement sets out their commitment to get more means into the hands of people in need and to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of humanitarian action.

New entities with a narrow focus

Some of the possible future roles for conservation NGOs require the creation of new NGOs or other organisational forms. Where these pathways start within long-established NGO forms, the chance of success will increase if they are built and protected as new entities within the larger organisation.

These new organisations will require a more disciplined focus on a narrower set of competencies but with deeper specialisation. Frequently, this implies entities with a smaller size and footprint, with a more tightly defined role and mandate, and with different competencies and cultures.



4. ACCELERATING THE TRANSFORMATION

There is an urgent need for conservation NGOs to transform, whether towards the roles and organisational forms proposed in the previous chapter or others that may emerge as the thinking evolves. Whatever futures are targeted, the scale of the challenges facing the planet, most notably those of the climate crisis and biodiversity loss, means that change must come quickly.

This chapter considers factors that can play a role in accelerating the transformation of conservation NGOs. It covers enablers for and barriers to transformation, the stakeholders who must come to the fore, the practical

implications for existing NGOs, and the likely desired attributes of future NGOs.

Enablers and barriers

As with any transformation, there are aspects of the current status of the conservation sector that can have either a positive or negative impact on efforts to transform. Figure 2 summarises factors that can serve either to enable or hinder NGO transformations and positive conservation outcomes. These factors can also apply to setting up new conservation NGOs and other international environmental, humanitarian or social-justice-driven entities.

Figure 2. Enablers and barriers for the transformation of conservation NGOs



Different stakeholders to foreground

Which stakeholder groups should be among the leading voices in reimagining the future of NGOs and why? Traditionally, the following stakeholders have been foregrounded:

- Volunteers and supporters from global North countries, often with an urbanised, middle class, and educated profile and with progressive social and political values;
- Board members with a similar background and profile, sometimes wealthy individuals;
- Professionalised NGO staff;
- Donors, whether individual, small donors, high net worth individuals or institutional donors.

Examples of stakeholders that must come to the fore in the future include the following:

- **Indigenous peoples and local communities and their legitimate representatives** – to ensure that mutuality of respect is accorded (including for different knowledge systems), that the sovereignty of indigenous peoples is recognised, and their agency is secured.
- **Stakeholders that can provide a stronger gender equality perspective to conservation** – giving a voice and a role in decision making to women, who are often closest to the land, responsible for keeping communities thriving, and the most impacted by poverty. Eco-feminism can also come to the fore this way.
- **Citizen activists** – conservation activists, rather than just or primarily professionalised staff, need to be supported, enabled and empowered by NGOs to take action on their own terms, through their own social networks, and in ways that allow them to identify more deeply with conservation issues.

- **Professionalised NGO staff** – still needed (though possibly in lesser numbers) to provide continuity of presence and follow through; to provide access to elites and elite level forms for decision makers and formal influencers; to provide access to elite media (although citizen journalism can be just as influential); to offer policy research; to facilitate capacity-building resources through which the most committed activists can deepen their engagement (see Change.org's approach, for instance⁸); to move from short-term, episodic mobilisation to long-term organising.

Also relevant are stakeholders who are currently *not* convinced of the importance of conservation in the ways NGOs may promote it but who may care about nature from the perspective of pride of place for their own localities, recreational hobbies, patriotism and other motives.

- **Citizens in local communities** – those involved in community-based conservation, including or especially those who primarily look at natural resources as an opportunity for income (which therefore needs to be sustained).
- **Private sector actors and potential partners** – so that NGOs further strengthen their understanding of these stakeholders' context, motives, drivers, constraints and needs.
- **Intelligence and defence sectors** – how best to adapt to climate change and prepare for new security vulnerabilities such as the sustainability of critical infrastructure or civic conflict among natural resource user groups. Should natural public goods, such as the Amazon biome, be treated as critical natural infrastructure?⁹ Should sovereignty be considered from a nature-related perspective, often referred to as 'green sovereignty'? Does this mean changing the geopolitical importance of countries and regions that are carbon sinks?

8. Change.org started as an early-generation digital citizen-campaigning platform on which individuals could instigate (primarily short-term) online petitions. It eventually added a staff-supported capacity-building toolbox and support structure for its most engaged citizens, to upscale their actions to formal decision makers as well as media, and helping them to organise into collective, more long-term sustained action.

9. A September 2021 webinar from Brazil's Institute for Reform of State-Company Relations (IREE) examined this question. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=auReRrvCDZ0>

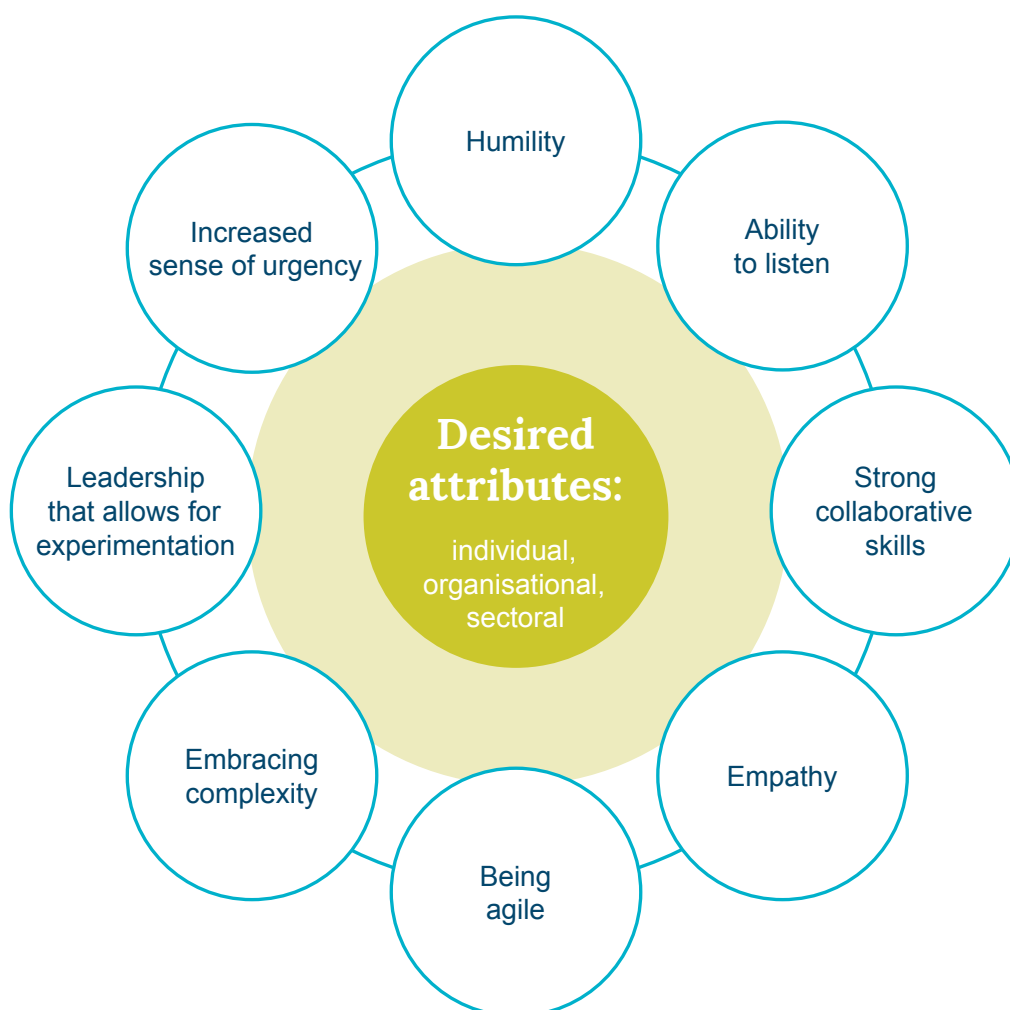
Desired attributes

When participants at the convening that provided input for this report used the Three Horizons framework (see Annex 1) to further examine the practical implications for conservation NGOs transitioning to new futures, they identified a set of attributes that would need to apply at the individual, organisational and sectoral levels. These are illustrated in Figure 3.

Practical implications for organisations that aim to implement change

What are the practical implications for existing organisations that aim to address the issues impacting the conservation NGO sector as highlighted above? What are the implications in terms of capacities and competencies needed, organisational and leadership models, geographies, skills and resources required? While a detailed treatment of these far-ranging questions is outside the scope of this situation analysis, Figure 4 provides a high-level overview of some areas for attention.

Figure 3. Desired attributes for future conservation NGOs at an individual, organisational and sectoral level



Source: authors' own analysis based on Future of Conservation NGOs Initiative convening

Figure 4. Summary of practical implications for existing NGOs targeting transformation



Boards and governance

Strengthening diversity and balance of boards and governance, more transparency



Decision-making authority

Transferring decision-making authority from global to local structures



Geographic presence

Shifting from integrated global entities to networked partnerships



Mindsets and skills

Bringing in new people and innovative organisations



Creating new organisations...

Spinning out new entities, internally or stand-alone



...and funding them

Funding multi-year initiatives, including scale-up



Space for innovation

Encouraging experimentation, allowing for failure and learning



Beliefs and identity

Improving self-awareness of need for meaning and purpose



Conflict resolution

Valuing and boosting skills in negotiation and facilitation



Equality in staffing

Strengthening national terms and conditions for all – no expatriate staff



Knowledge management

Fostering an internal culture that encourages knowledge-sharing behaviours



Transfers to South

Increased transfer of funds directly to civil society organisations in the global South

Source: authors' own analysis

5. CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS

Organisations working to achieve conservation outcomes are needed more than ever. The scale of the challenge, and degree to which we have exceeded planetary boundaries, is increasing exponentially. The urgency arising from the increasingly near-term climate crisis and its existential impact on humans and nature is accelerating. The multiplication of the two creates a challenge that large conservation NGOs cannot keep up with.

The current organisational forms of these NGOs – were they even to double, triple or quadruple in size – are insufficient to meet the challenge. Consequently, the achievement of conservation aims at scale and at speed requires the transformation of large NGOs and/or new forms of conservation-focused entities.

Both these solutions need to be radical in their approach.

Collaboration challenge

Conservation NGOs need to collaborate with a greater range of other actors. This range needs to include the usual, the unusual and the extremely unusual: from public institutions to the private sector, to security forces, evangelical groupings and other faith-based actors. Conservation NGOs need to work out what their role and relationship is vis-à-vis unbounded, informal issue-led movements as well – and that should not involve co-opting them.

The areas and types of collaboration need to move much further beyond the paradigm of relationships with ‘good’ and ‘bad’ actors. The climate crisis, natural resource depletion, and their consequences mean that a growing number of actors recognise that conservation is not just an increasingly important matter for their institutional future; it also feeds into the externally communicated strategic priorities for their sector, institution, community, country. That conservation NGOs would disagree with some of these actors on non-conservation issues must not prevent them from stretching their ability to collaborate with them

(and in the process potentially influence them). Every individual has a unique and personal relationship with nature; every individual has an existential reason to contribute to conservation aims; conservation is not only the domain of conservationists. Conservation concerns everyone.

Mindsets and motivations

Additionally, mindsets that have come out of global North approaches to species and habitat protection, land ownership and economic models are useful but can also be constraining. These mindsets must move from being exclusive or dominant to being part of a mix with other ways of thinking.

The role of spiritual motivations for and responses to conservation is under-acknowledged, which opens up the possibility of working differently with spiritual thinkers, on an emotional all the way through to practical basis. To do so requires a greater understanding of the multiplicity of perspectives and more interfaces with other mindsets.

Communities exercising their human rights and organisations embracing diversity and inclusion are indivisible from conservation aims and are thus inseparable for the stewardship of nature.

Possible futures

Chapter 3 of this report proposes 15 possible futures for conservation NGOs, each based on an external lens through which to consider how best to achieve conservation aims. They are not mutually exclusive but considering them makes it possible to determine which of the potential new or improved roles for conservation NGOs could be most effective. Only by making choices about the role can one move to determining the organisational form, made up of culture, organisational mindsets and structures.

The propositions for revised roles and functions will not necessarily be new to those working



in this space, as evidenced by the examples given alongside the propositions. Many of these examples, though, are currently quite small, nascent or early-stage entities. As in other NGO sectors, however, the influencing power of these pre-existing examples can be massively increased with contributions from the biggest players, such as WWF, BirdLife International, Fauna and Flora International, Nature Conservancy, Conservation International, Environmental Defense Fund or the Sierra Club.

Success factors

This report does not offer a definitive position on whether building new smaller, self-standing organisations or transforming existing larger ones is the best route forward. Each is possible and each brings its own opportunities and challenges. Experience from other NGOs suggests that the more radical innovations typically require new entities to be set up either entirely externally or as stand-alone entities, in a protected space within the larger organisation. Additionally, being focused on the unique role that each entity plays – and the competencies and capabilities needed for that – is essential for success. Ambiguous mandates, amorphous approaches and asymmetric capabilities do not make for great impact. Neither can size

be a proxy for impact. Conservation needs highly proficient NGOs or other entities that each play a complementary role that is valued by all other actors who share mutual interests. Only then can size be a force multiplier.

The greatest internal potential to enable the change will be found with boards and executive leadership teams that have vision, an appetite for risk and rely on evidence-based strategic decision making. One major caveat to this is that these leaders must embody diverse backgrounds, lived experiences, mindsets and stakeholder groups – with a place for rights holders at the core.

The world is a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous place, and megatrends – most notably the climate crisis and accelerated biodiversity loss – are affecting all aspects of nature, individuals, sectors and parts of society. In this context, the perceived safety and certainty of old roles and old structures are comforting but are likely to lead to continued erosion of effectiveness, relevance and legitimacy.

Changing organisational forms is risky but the trajectory the world is on means new and transformed conservation organisations are essential to address the urgency and scale of the existential threat to people and nature.

ANNEX 1: THREE HORIZONS APPROACH

The two-day convening that took place in September 2021 was one of the key inputs for this report. Facilitated by the International Futures Forum, it used the Three Horizons approach, a simple and intuitive framework for thinking about the future (Sharpe et al., 2016).

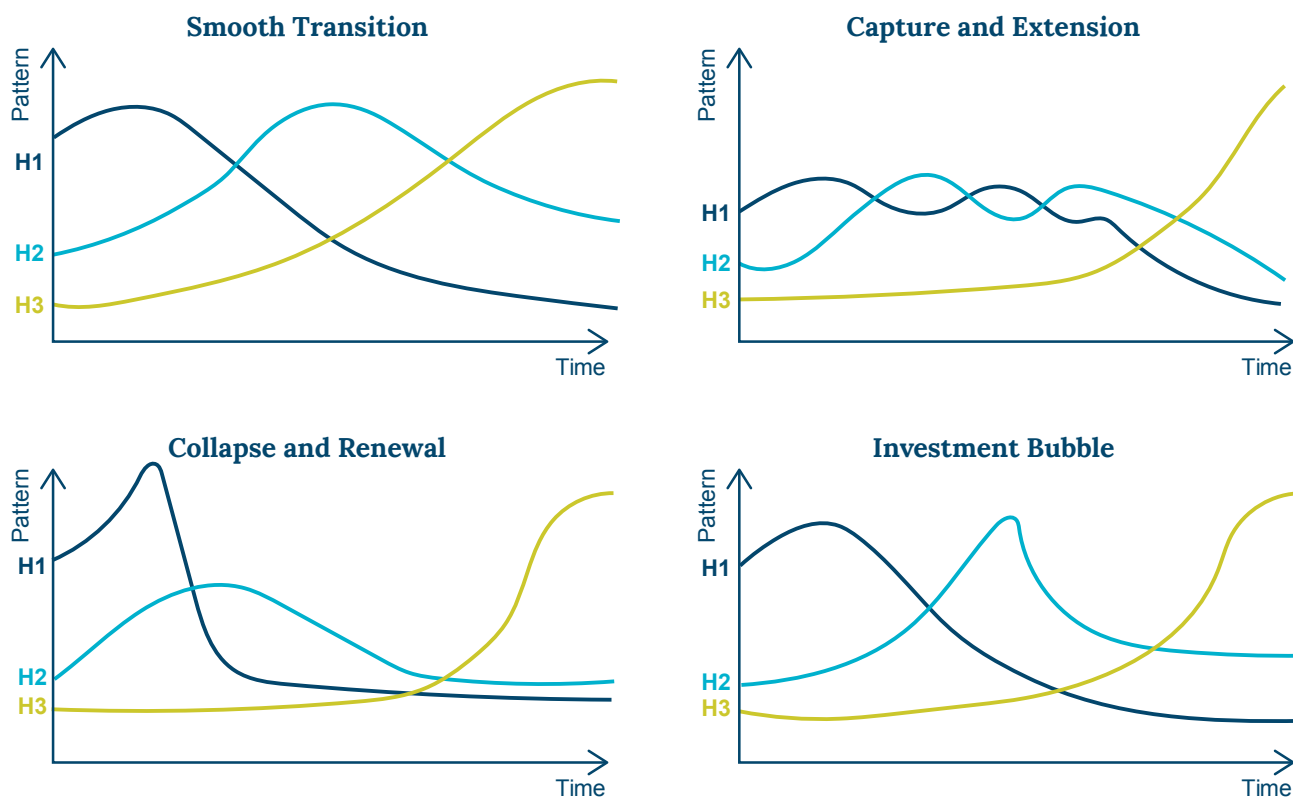
The three “horizons” for system transition that it refers to are the current dominant pattern (H1), the future pattern (H3) and the pattern that enables the transition between the two (H2). In addition to being used in the workshop that informed this report, the approach is also applied here to examine the most likely patterns of organisational transition for conservation NGOs.

Among the most important factors that will influence which pattern of organisational change conservation NGOs will need to follow are:

- the volatility, complexity, uncertainty and ambiguity of the external context;
- how radically different the new roles of conservation organisations (not necessarily NGOs) could and should be;
- how other actors with a stake in conservation should be enabled in their roles, with willing conservation organisations to work alongside them where needed; and
- the difficulties of implementing transformation in large NGOs successfully and with the necessary urgency.

Three Horizons: Patterns of System Transition

Typical patterns of system transition in which a dominant H1 pattern gives way over time to an aspirational H3 pattern



Source: International Futures Forum

This leads to the following assessment and four potential patterns of transition:

- 1. Smooth transition:** while a desirable pattern, based on other NGO transformation processes this is almost certainly ruled out by the complexities that make it difficult for large NGOs to transform their roles and forms at a speed that keeps pace with the changing external context.
- 2. Collapse and renewal:** the least desirable pattern, involving significant loss of capabilities and effectiveness, and loss of citizen activism. It is nevertheless a highly plausible scenario because the relevance of traditional conservation NGOs is diminishing in the eyes of other actors, such as China, the private sector, the new generation of philanthropic actors, impact investors, etc.
- 3. Investment bubble:** a possible, and positive, pattern of system transition. However, given the limited resources for NGOs, and their starting points, this scenario might not achieve impact at the necessary scale.

4. Capture and extension: can also be a positive and desirable pattern of system transition because it builds on proofs of concept from existing successes and prototypes new ones, while allowing more targeted investment to achieve scale. At the same time, stretching H1 – the current dominant pattern – in this way may slow down or prevent the more significant change that is needed from happening.

In reflecting on the positives and negatives of the above patterns of transition, some NGO practitioners ask whether there is an alternative to incurring the direct and indirect costs of transforming a large NGO, with its multiple mandates, programme approaches and geographies. The focus could instead be on investing in spinning out or creating new innovative, agile organisations or completely different sorts of entity that move in broadly the same direction, while leveraging each other's capabilities.



ANNEX 2: WHAT CAN BE LEARNED FROM SUCCESSFUL TRANSFORMATIONS?

Design-thinking approaches, cases of successful transformation, innovative NGO functions and programmatic approaches, and types of organisational forms have been tested – but with what success? What can be learned from these? This annex reviews other examples of innovation in organisational form or in how NGO offerings, programming and campaigning are designed to embody a greater user focus.

Some conservation NGOs have sought help with innovation and design-thinking-related coaching and have introduced innovation labs, teams and sprints (Kelly, 2015; Sahni et al., 2017; Schmitt, 2019). This has resulted in worthwhile innovations, but the mindset that needs to accompany design thinking can prove to be challenging to achieve, based on the experience of NGOs in other sectors, such as poverty and development.

Organisational cultures that are quite hierarchical and not amenable to flat, lean and agile decision making are problematic, as are leaders who do not feel they can trust their innovation teams to do their work uninterrupted until it is time to make a pitch. Rather than engaging in micromanaging, leaders should set strategic criteria for what innovations must offer. They need to articulate boundaries within which innovations have to play out but otherwise stick to portfolio reviews and not get involved in the details. When failures still result in punitive action, and when leaders are not comfortable with the fact that a good majority of the innovation prototypes and tests will turn out to fail, this is also problematic.

It should be possible for resources to be made available, in a flexible and agile way, when new opportunities abound or when an initial validation of a prototype proves promising. Rather than having a focus on process, the aim should be to empower innovators to do their thing and shield them from the regular bureaucratic encumbrances. It is clear that the organisational culture and

leaders that are hired into these cultures have some blind spots to address.

The organisational form of some global NGOs has changed in the last 10 years or so: a movement from corporate-hierarchical forms of organisation (with one headquarters that line manages country offices and programmes), to a (con)federated or otherwise networked set of national members or affiliates. At the same time, NGOs have sought to invite in or acquire global South members (with their own national boards and semi-autonomous operations), and diversified their cohort of leaders and managers to represent more non-white, non-global-North leaders. Not only was this meant to make the NGO more globally representative and legitimate, but also to strengthen and diversify its programming, campaigning and fundraising approaches. While significant investments have been made in this shift and while this has yielded some results – though the benefits took longer to take hold than was anticipated – this shift did not reduce vocal calls from a part of global-South-founded civil society that these global families still crowd out local civil society, and do not represent a true global South organisational identity. At the same time, internal transaction costs of coordination and alignment are higher than ever, leading to an even greater inward orientation. This stands in the way of being more externally oriented, with an ability to scan the horizon, spot the need for innovation, and in an agile fashion respond to this.

Observers from outside the sector can sometimes be heard to say that the NGO sector is underscaled and overfragmented. In other words, that despite often being adequately funded, its interventions rarely achieve the necessary scale to effectively tackle the issue being targeted; and that fragmentation in the sector contributes to this problem. Strategic partnerships on programme design and delivery, the sharing of back-office functions and services, and – especially – mergers and

acquisitions came late to the NGO sector but have now started to become more common¹⁰. At one level, more movement in this direction could address scope and scale of impact, reduce cost models (which are under pressure as it is) and lead to more consistent programme quality standards. At the same time, the civil society ethos of encouraging new ideas will always prompt citizens to set up new organisations because this is perceived as the only way to innovate, or because of (frequently incorrect) perceptions about the uniqueness of a seemingly new focus, mission or programme model – even if the scale of impact and cost-benefit analysis of these new entities should prompt them to stop and think further.

Examples of where NGOs are innovating

Conservation NGOs that need to be more agile and innovate more effectively can learn from other types of organisation, either in the broader civil society sector or outside it. This section describes several examples of such innovation and of testing of alternatives to the traditional NGO organisational form.

Some NGOs in the development sector have evolved into hybrids that combine non-profit and for-profit forms, by integrating social enterprises (e.g. CARE) or impact-investment

10. The scope of this situation analysis does not provide room to go into the reasons for this late embrace, or what are good practices to look out for. See the chapters on governance and leadership and the concluding chapter in the book *Between Power and Irrelevance: the Future of Transnational NGOs* (Mitchell et al., 2020) for an overview of explanatory factors for this, as well as for some good practices.



units (e.g. Habitat for Humanity, Heifer) into their organisation, or setting them up adjacent to their organisation. Others have integrated fee-based consulting services or data technology and platform service delivery as revenue-generating activities (e.g. Humentum, Cadasta, Techsoup), to diversify their income strategies and become more financially resilient and less donor-dependent.

Some organisations are more intentionally attempting to work with, and in complementarity to, social movements. Examples here are the Association for Women in Development and ActionAid International.

Some NGOs are aiming to shift their paradigm of campaigning from a more staff-centric form to being centred on and driven by supporters. An example here is Greenpeace, with its people-powered campaigning approach, initially supported by MobLab. In this paradigm shift, the role of NGO staff is to empower citizen supporters to do most of the campaigning, in self-directed ways, and the NGO's role is primarily to support and build capacity to move from mobilising (the initiation of short-term, broad public 'peaks' of activism) to organising (the building of long-term, sustainable forms of citizen organising that can bridge into elite-based campaigning among formal power holders).

Some organisations are attempting to make their organisational boundaries more 'porous', by enabling organisations other than fellow NGOs into their (con)federated families. CARE is an example of this. Similarly, some are trying to move to more networked forms of organisation, although the use of the term networked – and its implications – is not necessarily clearly understood or shared yet.

Some civil society organisations are shifting from strategies to increase the global representativeness of affiliates and organisational members to working more in partnership with other independent actors in the global South, especially given the increasingly vocal critiques that global NGOs are 'crowding out' local actors.

Many NGOs aim to introduce design thinking into their programming. PACT is a good example.

There are NGOs that have shifted from having a physical presence into being permanently virtual entities, with lean, small and globally distributed staff. These are modelled on, among others, the new generation of digital campaigning platforms such as Avaaz.org, Change.org, Jhatkaa (India), CAMPACT (Germany), etc. The global COVID-19 pandemic has had the impact of furthering this trend.

Some NGOs are shifting their role and organisational form to that of having solely a digital platform function, instead of continuing to perform programmatic deliverables themselves. Examples are World Vision Brazil and Paso Pacifico. In this manifestation and role, the organisation is meant to primarily function as a catalyst or platform for other civil society actors and citizens to operate.

Some NGOs have successfully moved into being the trusted source and provider of mission- or theme-specific data for use by civil society organisations and other actors. For example, Equal Measures 2030 scrapes data from public sources, analyses and packages it, so that it can be used by small to large organisations to monitor implementation by all countries of the SDGs¹¹ relating to girls – and advocate accordingly.

11. Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations

ANNEX 3: REFERENCES

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