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EXPLORING MICRO- AND SECTORAL-LEVEL COLLABORATION WITHIN A TRANSFRONTIER CONSERVATION NETWORK IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

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Abstract: Collaborations and partnerships are widely recognised as essential for effective tourism operations, destination efficiency and resilience, and the effective implementation of SDGs, through coordinated action among government, private sector, and community stakeholders. However, despite their importance, research shows that power imbalances, weak policies, and marginalisation, especially in wildlife destinations, often limit the effectiveness of these partnerships. This study draws attention to Transfrontier Conservation Areas (TFCAs), as multi-country agreements to address pressing environmental and socioeconomic concerns. Focusing on the latter, this study explores the micro and sectoral level stakeholder collaborations and partnerships existing in and between the three prominent wildlife destinations in the Kavango Zambezi Transfrontier Conservation Area, being Kasane (Botswana), Livingstone (Zambia), and Hwange (Zimbabwe), to reveal how these partnerships are able to filter to higher governance levels to achieve shared objectives. Interviews were conducted with relevant stakeholders including businesses, non-governmental organisations, and governing authorities. This data was supplemented by focus groups with community representatives in the three study areas. Sectoral collaborative networks were found to be geared towards improving destination efficiency and visitor experiences, with concerns related to service quality and regulations staggering the formation and continuance of some of these relationships. Micro-level (community) partnerships differed in the three study sites owing to the traditional leadership structure, level of agency, and power held by communities as their position in the tourism network. Overall, this exploratory study provides some insights into the nature of formal and informal relationships amongst tourism stakeholders in the Transfrontier Conservation Area and provides practical and policy-related recommendations, including the training and upskilling of local tourism businesses and community organisations to ensure their deliberate inclusion in TFCA networks, as well as supporting the re-emphasising of the importance of harmonising policies and strategies, along with localised implementation. The study further provides directions for future research to interrogate the role of these partnerships in implementing sustainability and resilience outcomes in the region.

Keywords: networks, collaboration, partnerships, wildlife tourism, Transfrontier conservation areas, stakeholders

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INTRODUCTION

Collaborations and partnerships have been heralded as key for sustainable tourism development and destination resilience (Zada et al., 2025; Novelli, 2023). Certainly, from an operational point of view, collaboration enables the seamless coordination of actors in the destination's value chain to provide memorable experiences (Zach & Racherla, 2011), while many scholars underscore the leveraging of collaborative networks and multi-level partnerships for the attainment of socioeconomic and environmental goals (see Movono & Hughes, 2022; Dolezal & Novelli, 2022; Ferrer-Rocca et al., 2022). These scholars specifically reference SDG 17, underlining the role of partnerships between private, public, and community stakeholders for the implementation of SDGs (Zada et al., 2025; Mugarura et al., 2025; Ferrer-Rocca et al., 2022; Papp-Vary et al., 2025). Largely, existing research on tourism partnerships, particularly within the scope of tourism destination governance, has found government to be a centralised stakeholder influencing the efficiency, longevity, and even establishment of these collaborative structures (Scheyvens & Cheer, 2022; Lekgau et al., 2025; Graci, 2020). Other studies, in wildlife destination contexts, have found community dynamics, more especially the works of community-based organisations (CBOs), as struggling to ensure community involvement and benefit from the tourism sector, owing to the existing systemic marginalisation and power imbalances embedded within the tourism networks in wildlife destinations (Priatmoko et al., 2025; Lenao, 2017; Mkono et al., 2023).

In their study, Litheko (2022) stresses the need for government to have a concrete policy and practical strategy for private-public partnerships in ecotourism sites in South Africa, thereby highlighting the need for a more concerted and integrated focus on tourism partnerships and collaborations in wildlife destinations.

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Evidently, tourism partnerships and collaborations are an important field of study in examining how to leverage resources, capabilities, and structures to achieve desired goals, representing an emerging field (see Mugarura et al., 2025; Ruggieri et al., 2022; Papp-Vary et al., 2025; Ferrer-Roca et al., 2022; Lekgau et al., 2024a, 2024b, 2025). This study seeks to draw attention to Transfrontier Conservation Areas (TFCAs), which are protected areas spanning over two or more countries grounded on an agreement between those countries (Mpofu et al., 2023; Bourgeois et al., 2023).

By their very essence, these TFCAs are built on a foundation of multi-scalar collaboration and partnership across several countries for the broader aims of nature conservation, socioeconomic development, and regional peace (Kohler & Bollig, 2025). Wildlife tourism is a major function of TFCAs, owing to the potential of the sector to assist in attaining these broad goals. Dolezal & Novelli (2022) and Berdenov et al. (2025), amongst others, emphasise the capacity of tourism to create and strengthen existing partnerships, empower communities, and provide inclusive spaces where these partnerships could be leveraged for broader societal and sustainability goals. Similarly, while the establishment of TFCAs is reliant on government and other political actors, the operations of these protected areas are dependent on the nature of local engagement (Stoldt et al., 2020; Usman et al., 2025). This background presents a novel opportunity to understand the role of micro and sectoral collaborative networks and partnerships and how these can fit into the broader collaborative network of TFCAs to more effectively attain their goals and support resilience-building efforts.

Existing research often focuses on institutional frameworks and arrangements in TFCA systems (Mpofu et al., 2025; Lekgau & Tichaawa, 2019; Bhatasara et al., 2013; Andersson et al., 2013; Ferrer-Roca et al., 2022), or the extent of community involvement and the role of CBNRM programmes (Zanamwe et al., 2018; Lekgau & Tichaawa, 2021; Garine-Wichatitsky et al., 2013). This exploratory study seeks to elucidate the existing partnerships and collaborations among stakeholders at both sectoral and micro levels, serving as a foundation for a more in-depth examination of these networks within complex TFCA systems and how such partnerships can be leveraged to advance TFCA objectives, particularly in relation to socioeconomic upliftment and community inclusion, areas in which progress has been widely critiqued (see, for example, Chiutsi & Saarinen, 2017; Zanamwe et al., 2018; Bourgeois et al., 2023).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Transfrontier Conservation Areas (TFCAs) in Southern Africa emerged from the recognition that environmental challenges transcend national boundaries and therefore require international cooperation (Bhatasara et al., 2013; Büscher, 2013; Kupika et al., 2025). Often referred to as "peace parks," TFCAs have been promoted as global instruments for conservation and regional integration, receiving substantial support from the international conservation community (Büscher, 2013). The concept gained prominence in the early 1990s, founded on the premise that biodiversity protection and ecological processes should not be constrained by political borders (Bhatasara et al., 2013; Chiutsi & Saarinen, 2017; Ramutsindela, 2007). This thinking led to the establishment of cross-border protected areas through regional cooperation (Zanamwe et al., 2018). TFCAs have since attracted extensive attention from scholars, policymakers, and practitioners, largely because they are positioned as mechanisms for biodiversity conservation, regional peacebuilding, and socio-economic development (Büscher, 2013; Chiutsi & Saarinen, 2017; Bourgeois et al., 2023). Büscher (2013) further associates their establishment with efforts to redress colonial-era border divisions, while Garine-Wichatitsky et al. (2013) emphasise their significant tourism potential. Southern Africa is the leading region for TFCA development, hosting 14 such initiatives, including the Kgalagadi, Great Limpopo, Ais-Ais/Richtersveld, Limpopo–Shashe, Lubombo, Maloti–Drakensberg, Malawi–Zambia, and the expansive Kavango–Zambezi TFCA (Steyn & Spencer, 2011; ZimParks, 2025).

The emergence of TFCAs as exemplary conservation models coincided with the broader democratic transitions occurring across the Southern African region—most notably Namibia's independence in 1990 and South Africa's in 1994 (Bhatasara et al., 2013; Kupika et al., 2025). Steyn & Spencer (2011) attribute the proliferation of these conservation landscapes to Dr. Anton Rupert, then president of the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), who championed the notion of linking conservation and regional peace. His early dialogue with Mozambique's President Joaquim Chissano in 1990 laid the groundwork for formal cross-border conservation initiatives. However, Ramutsindela (2007) cautions against viewing TFCAs as entirely novel constructs, arguing instead that their establishment was preceded by a range of regional conservation activities and cooperative arrangements in managing shared natural resources. Hence, the roots of transfrontier conservation in Southern Africa can be traced to pre-existing traditions of cross-border resource governance and environmental stewardship (Ramutsindela, 2007; Kupika, 2025). TFCAs are inherently multi-stakeholder endeavours involving national governments, local communities, international donors—such as SIDA, GIZ, USAID, and the World Bank—and prominent non-governmental organisations including WWF and Conservation International (Bhatasara et al., 2013; Lekgau & Tichaawa, 2025). Although they are promoted as collaborative ventures, concerns persist regarding the marginalisation of local communities in governance and decision-making processes (Chiutsi & Saarinen, 2017; Zanamwe et al., 2018; Bourgeois et al., 2023). Their transboundary and political nature introduces considerable governance complexity, requiring power to be shared among states, NGOs, multinational companies, and local actors (Bhatasara et al., 2013;). This complexity not only complicates coordination but also risks alienating communities residing adjacent to protected areas, thereby reflecting the broader socio-political dynamics that shape conservation in postcolonial contexts (Ramutsindela, 2007; Kupika et al., 2025). Indeed, Hughes (2005) questioned whether TFCAs represent genuine conservation efforts or rather new forms of supranational governance disguised as ecological cooperation.

A further critique relates to the distribution of benefits. While TFCAs are envisioned to generate both conservation gains and socio-economic upliftment, evidence suggests that progress on poverty alleviation has been limited. Chiutsi & Saarinen (2017) note that despite the spatial expansion of TFCAs, poverty remains prevalent, and in some cases has

intensified, among communities bordering these protected areas. Such findings were seen in a few other studies in TFCAs and host communities (see Lekgau & Tichaawa, 2019; Mpofu et al., 2025; Bourgeois et al., 2023).

This disparity underscores the persistent gap between anticipated and realised development outcomes. Ultimately, TFCAs encapsulate a mix of ecological, political, and economic goals. Their governance is shaped not only by conservation imperatives but also by international donor priorities, state interests, and localised power relations.

These interdependencies and tensions raise critical questions about whether TFCAs genuinely foster local empowerment and inclusion, or whether they inadvertently reproduce existing inequalities under the guise of transboundary environmental cooperation. While there is wide agreement on the importance of local institutions being empowered to be involved in transboundary conservation management, it is a major gap in TFCA practice.

As such, this study approaches this research field by drawing focus to TFCA sectoral networks and the positioning and collaborations of various sectors in these networks to provide insight into how they can be leveraged to attain developmental goals. The KAZA TFCA is the largest TFCA globally, covering an area of 520,000 km², comprising five countries: Angola, Botswana, Namibia, Zambia, and Zimbabwe (Verschueren et al., 2024; Usman et al., 2025).

The TFCA was first initiated in 2006, with the governments of the five countries signing a memorandum of understanding (MoU) to work together in formally establishing the TFCA (Stoldt et al., 2020). In 2011, a TFCA treaty was signed, with the overarching purpose being to 'establish a world-class Transfrontier conservation area and tourism destination' (Köhler & Bollig, 2025). The KAZA TFCA holds 103 wildlife management areas, 85 forest reserves, 20 national parks, and 11 sanctuaries, housing a human population of over 3 million sharing land with a diverse wildlife population (Verschueren et al., 2024). This transboundary protected area houses several iconic protected areas, including the UNESCO World Heritage sites Victoria Falls and Okavango Delta, as well as Chobe National Park, Bwabwata National Park, Hwange National Park, and Kafue National Park. This study considered three prominent wildlife attractions that have spurred the development of wildlife tourism in the surrounding communities: Chobe National Park in Botswana, Victoria Falls in Zambia, and Hwange National Park in Zimbabwe.

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

This research adopted an exploratory research design owing to its intention to provide some preliminary insights into collaborative networks and partnerships amongst tourism stakeholders in the KAZA TFCA. Researchers such as Halie (2023) affirm the value of exploratory research in cases where the phenomenon has not been fully understood, and lay the groundwork for future investigation. Certainly, while there have been studies done on tourism in the KAZA TFCA, many of these studies used a single country analysis, with the present study stressing the need for multiple country analysis to understand the formal and informal connections between tourism stakeholders, which could have significant implications for how to leverage such networks to attain sustainability goals.

A qualitative approach was taken, comprising interviews to identify the existing business networks amongst tourism businesses, tourism and conservation authorities, and community organisations. Most formal tourism establishments related to accommodations and tour operators, whereas informal tourism enterprises largely comprise food and beverage establishments, tour operators, and craft vendors (Tichaawa & Lekgau, 2024). Both Botswana & Zimbabwe have CBNRM programmes that have resulted in community organisations such as community trusts and CAMPFIRE programmes, respectively, which represent the community agency within the wildlife conservation and tourism structures within protected area networks and ensure community livelihood outcomes. As such, interviews were held with representatives of such organisations to understand their role in the TFCA system and their relationships with broader stakeholders.

The fieldwork was conducted in two phases, comprising ten days each. The first phase involved travel to Kasane and Livingstone to conduct the interviews with the stakeholders. The interviews were conducted mostly in English, and in a few cases, in the local languages of Setswana for Botswana participants, and Bemba for Zambian participants. The second phase constituted the collection of data in Zimbabwe, which took eight days. Unlike the Botswana and Zambia study sites where there were clusters of businesses in the two towns, Hwange was slightly more dispersed, especially the accommodations. Similarly, English was the primary language used to conduct the interviews, with the option of Shona and Ndebele available for the participants who preferred a local language. The fieldwork occurred in June to July 2024, and a total of 58 interviews were conducted with tourism and conservation stakeholders in the three study sites (Table 1).

Table 1. Participant profiles

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

The questions explored the types of relationships participants had with other stakeholders in the region, the purpose of these relationships, and how they fit into their individual organisational behaviours or outcomes. The interview duration varied from 30 minutes to 2 hours. The ethical considerations were acknowledged, with the study having received ethical clearance from the researchers' institution. Further, the participants were informed of the purpose of the study, assured of their confidentiality and anonymity, and that they voluntarily participated in the research.

The interviews were recorded, with the researchers having received prior permission, and fieldwork notes were kept consistently. The interviews were transcribed verbatim. Using Atlas.ti, thematic analysis was used, which involved the line-by-line coding of the data, with the researchers grouping the codes related to partnerships and collaboration into three themes based on the three networks considered: tourism, conservation, and community.

The participant codes are followed by a BW for the Botswana participants, ZM for Zambian participants, and ZW for participants from Zimbabwe. The following section of the paper presents and discusses these key themes.

RESULTS

Tourism sectoral network

A key type of partnership among tourism stakeholders in this study site is concerned with expanding business opportunities. Largely, many participants viewed collaboration in relation to formal and informal partnerships related to supply chain opportunities, such as business overflows where clients are directed to nearby accommodations in cases of full capacity, as well as complementing business activities, such as attractions, activities, and accommodations, as partly discussed in a previous study (see Tichaawa & Lekgau, 2024).

So at least, the restaurant sent us a menu and they will do deliveries at no charge because they've got a motorbike. So trying to see maybe Debonairs can do that as well. And there's another bar and restaurant. So if we can have the menus in the apartments, it can be easier for the guests with this loadshedding. Because some guests will just call a taxi to go all the way to town to buy food and then come back again. So they can save that time when they deliver [P25ZM].

In this regard, firm size was notably mentioned, with several participants indicating that these opportunities largely centred on bigger establishments and their support of SMMEs.

This is how I do it. I have been got bigger players in the industry, that my suppliers were some of them, they don't have the service that I do. And I do personalised tour services. So whenever they have good clientele in their organization I know I will be operating. As much as they are fully booked, I will also be operating. There are a lot of activities for bigger organisations, so I'll get that piece of cake as well [P15BW].

Interestingly, some participants mentioned partnerships among local entrepreneurs to be geared towards the lack of resources. Indeed, small local entrepreneurs struggle with obtaining the necessary resources, such as financial resources to purchase vehicles for transport and game viewing or boats, and therefore some entrepreneurs work together to supplement their resources. This was aptly explained by one participant, stating:

So you then realise that with tourism, you cannot work on your own. But directly and indirectly we do work as partnerships. You realise that our small-scale agents maybe they partner on their own. Maybe, for instance, I have got a vehicle and maybe an agent has got customers, so they come to us and hire the car and use it; hence, they benefit and we benefit. So partnerships are there [P17BW].

In addition to the partnerships that enhance the visitor experience in the destinations, another major form of collaboration mentioned in the interviews with accommodation facilities is through their international networks, facilitated through their attendance at trade shows or their relationships with international agencies that assist in co-marketing activities. Some responses in this regard include:

But it's different with us. This company has got a very big footprint, because as we speak, we've got agents based in Germany. We've got agents based in the UK [United Kingdom]; we've got agents based in Slovakia, and you know, we've got agents based in SA [South Africa] and here, I'm here as well as a regional sales manager looking at the regional market [P3BW].

Furthermore, a few participants in Botswana and Zambia pointed out some partnerships within their operations to be geared towards marketing the destination. In Zambia, this was mostly related to working with other tourism establishments to improve visitor experiences for garnering positive reviews from the existing tourists to their own networks. In Botswana and Zimbabwe, partnerships that had destination marketing outcomes were amongst community trusts and (hunting) safari companies which can market the country within their hunting networks. See, for example, responses below:

Well, there is that connection with them. But in terms of like an official partnership, then no, there is no partnership. We would be referring people there. It's also part of marketing the destination, the country [P18ZM].

Well, to begin with opportunities, there are widespread, or rather networking, opportunities with other stakeholders within the region or the safari industry. It's different from the hospitality industry per se, although hospitality is part and parcel of the safari operations industry. Rather, when we talk about the opportunities, we refer to the networking opportunities and interactions that can boost businesses in relation to clientele and an expanded market. We have what you call subsidiaries within the market. So these are the opportunities that we have within wildlife tourism in our area [P40ZW].

We have safari operators. Safaris are the ones dealing with marketing, selling, and all that. What they do is give what they have agreed upon with the community, and they bring it to the community for a living. That is how we do it. This benefits us because the money we are getting is exceptional, more than 3 million to 5 million per quote [P5BW].

In addition to working collaboratively to improve guest experience within the destination, some of the participants mentioned the importance of maintaining consistency amongst tourism establishments, particularly in the era of social media shaping visitor expectations and experiences. On this matter, one participant from Botswana had the following to say:

More bookings are trying to get it more known through social media, or as tour operators, turning to reach out and spread the word of the launch. And then, of course, we've got to keep our standards because word of mouth is a big, big, big thing in the industry. And then, of course, social media can be a very good thing, but we're very bad at downfall. So your standards have got to be kept up constantly, and you've got to be honest. One bad negativity can go on social media and spread like wildfire. That's the downfall for me with social media. It's going to make or break you [P10BW].

Another notable form of collaboration amongst tourism organisations was amongst tourism authorities and registered tourism businesses. Largely, some of the responses from tourism authorities in Zimbabwe and Botswana were geared towards community organisations, such as trusts and CAMPFIRE, as mandated by CBNRM policy.

I'd say we do have, we do have, which is BTO [Botswana Tourism Organisation], which is one organisation that is more into the development of tourism in Botswana because there are some areas that are never promoted. But with that organisation, they are the ones that spearhead that. So, as stakeholders, we also will have involvement. Yeah, which is not direct involvement, but through BTO [P15BW].

The final major form of business collaboration is the industry associations found in Botswana and Zambia. In Botswana, some of the participants mentioned the tour guide association, which represents the tour operators in the town as well. Further, participants also highlighted the town WhatsApp group amongst businesses (both tourism and non-tourism) to share important information as well as assist in the coordination of the destination. In Zambia, this association arose from the need to have a strong collective voice and comprises local vendors selling arts and crafts to tourists. Notably, very few participants alluded to there being a tour operator association. It is important to note that there were a few participants in both study sites who mentioned that they were not part of these networks, with some reasons ranging from lack of awareness to lack of perceived value.

Notably, some participants, though mentioning relationships with tour operators in neighbouring countries, mostly centred on the key attractions, being Victoria Falls and Chobe National Park, underlined the importance of formalising and extending partnerships within the broader region to maximise the potential of the KAZA TFCA. See quote below:

You know, they need to link us with other business committees in this KAZA region. You know, that's one of the reasons it was established, but we don't see it happening with them [P3BW].

Protected area management and conservation network

The next major theme emanating from the results relates to existing collaboration and partnerships amongst tourism stakeholders and the protected areas in their home country, as well as the broader KAZA TFCA.

Mixed responses were received in this matter, where some participants confirmed some collaboration with conservation NGOs in their locale, as shown by a participant in Zimbabwe:

So we have a good relationship with one Conservation Centre, where we send our guests to learn about how to conserve. We also help each other with the anti-poaching unit, because we've got our own anti-poaching unit that patrols our area, and then we coordinate that with the anti-poaching unit for the Conservation Centre. They do come onto our property to look for some of the wild animals, because they are endangered, and look after them. And yes, it's quite a lot that we do with businesses around [P38ZW].

Certainly, there was a general understanding of the importance of cooperation between tourism businesses, communities, and conservation NGOs and authorities due to the recognised importance of wildlife as key livelihood resources leveraged. This cooperation involved communities and businesses assisting in curbing poaching or anti-environmental behaviours through anti-poaching units, reporting incidents to the relevant authorities, and assisting in conservation efforts, with one representative from Botswana stating, '*Normally on fighting veld fires, to avoid that. Drilling boreholes so that the wild animals can find where they can drink water'* [P4BW].

However, in Zambia, two participants representing conservation NGOs revealed underlying concerns regarding the relationships between tourism establishments and black-owned and managed NGOs, suggesting that these interactions may be influenced by racial undertones, as seen in the following quote:

I think relationships are one of them. It's one of its kind. So if you check around, you'll see. It's one of its kind because it's run by black people. So it's difficult to have relationships with most white organisations because they don't want us. We cannot relate very well with them, or they cannot relate very well with us, because they see us as underdogs. [P19ZM]

Furthermore, some participants in Zambia, representing tourism businesses, mentioned that although invited to assist in conservation work, they have not yet done so, representing a gap in their corporate social responsibility work. Similarly, some participants in Zambia, when mentioning the nature of collaboration in wildlife tourism and conservation in their town related to the TFCA, underscored that these relationships were based on already existing relationships. This makes it difficult for emerging entrepreneurs and local organisations to tap into these relationships.

The whole system was corrupt. This time for you to make is who you know, the kind of connection that you have—that's what helped. The papers don't even mean anything [P23ZM].

In terms of the broader TFCA, the participants involved in conservation activities underlined the need for closer working relationships with TFCA management in the countries. For instance, a conservation NGO in Botswana stated,

'*Our relationship should get closer. I think my first month here, we invited, yeah, Kaza management over to our facility, to inform them of what it is that we are doing*' [P2BW]. In the same line, a conservation NGO in Zambia alluded to some efforts being taken to integrate national and local conservation stakeholders in the TFCA engagements but called for the need to be more inclusionary in how this is done, noting:

So those are just like agreements that KAZA made. So it's all that programme and just a cross-pollination of knowledge between Zimbabwe and Zambia, and that's why we see workshops being done in Zambia, workshops being done in Maun. Yes. Yes. Like they had a very big workshop somewhere here in Lusaka, but we were asked to pay a [large] amount to join [P20ZM].

Generally, the sentiments in Zimbabwe were more positive, with participants noting the positive relationships and partnerships with the TFCA management, particularly their support for tourism and community livelihoods. Some representatives of CAMPFIRE stated:

I think it's a very good relationship, whereby both parties [communities and the TFCA] are benefiting from the transparency of the relationship. It is a positive one, whereby both parties are benefiting and exchanging their products. The tourism [sector] benefits by getting employees and customers as well. And the community gains a market where they can distribute their products, as previously mentioned, the food, the souvenirs, the art. [P30ZW].

Besides, some of the projects that the park tourism and conservation department and the TFCA have taken to empower the community include apprenticeships offered for career courses like hunting and animal tracking [P30ZW].

It is important to note that these views above were held by conservation NGOs and are not reflective of the broader collaborative works between the TFCA and the local tourism sector and communities.

Community-related networks

Finally, the last theme of this study considers the local networks amongst the communities. In exploring this theme, local institutional structures were considered. In all study sites, participants identified the traditional leaders, along with their involvement in the wildlife tourism network, as they are an important node connecting the community together. In Botswana, this relates to the kgotla, which as a community leadership structure is leveraged by conservation and tourism authorities as one of the primary means of accessing the broader community, spreading information, and, in some cases, making decisions on the developments in their locale. Similarly, traditional leadership in Zimbabwe comprises a system of chiefs, headmen, and village heads, though their role is complex, owing to the fact that while their authority is formally recognised by the Constitution, it is often constrained and politicised. Additionally, this Hwange community is also represented by the CAMPFIRE programme in wildlife conservation and tourism affairs. While some participants mention the Mukuni Chief in Zambia, who resides and leads in the Mukuni Village near Victoria Falls, he doesn't represent or lead the broader Livingstone community, which has no similar figure. Similarly, while there is no established CNBRM programme in Zambia, the policy outcomes relate to raising awareness of conservation matters, appropriate behaviours, and educational training sessions. Largely, many participants in both Botswana and Zambia assert the importance of these institutions in ensuring community roles in the wildlife tourism and conservation network. For instance:

"*Then, the increased the revenue sharing and benefits; the government or conservation authorities in the private sector are now seeing the need to, uh, equally benefit in the tourism industry. So there's a need for equitable benefit sharing. Instead of fighting, they can actually come together and have something tangible coming out of their engagement, which also works best for the community. Because if you have the government, the local communities, and the private sectors fighting, it won't end well. But if they come together, it means better empowerment, better improvement of the sector, and expansion of the community based on ecotourism demand for authentic ecotourism experiences*." [P27ZM]

Similarly, some tourism business representatives in Zambia alluded to connections with Mukuni village, mostly in terms of working with this smaller community for tours, as well as engaging members of this community as entertainers, as seen in the other two study sites. However, a notable number of participants lamented the lack of community involvement, collaboration, or networks with the broader tourism networks, citing acts of corporate social responsibility as being insufficient. See the quote below:

"*I'm sure you've been in these hotels and lodges, and they have lied to you that they are involved with the community, which is not true. I can confirm that with numbers. I have a lot of reports; we write a lot of reports because funders require you to report on progress. So, from the hospitality aspect, there's no closer movement within the community. They will lie to you that they provide social corporate responsibility. They will lie to you that they do this, but nothing like that. So that's why you see we have a distorted community*. P19ZM

Furthermore, some of the participants in Botswana and Zimbabwe highlight the existence of community cooperatives that absorb local community members and enable their participation in the wildlife tourism economy. These cooperatives have been said to be supported, to a certain extent, by some surrounding businesses and conservation NGOs in the case of Botswana, and the CAMPFIRE project in Zimbabwe. See the responses below:

We have seen cooperatives opening through small projects we have, like the weaving of baskets by the women. We have what you call this, the curio. What you call them, they act, they add sculptures, the sculptures which are being made by the men in the form of animals. You have different wild animals being made from wood. P34ZW

We have a huge relationship with the community. So if you drive in at the entrance, there are Chobe women, the basket ladies. They are part of the community, our community outreach project. So women in Chobe get to use that facility to weave baskets, and they sell them for their own profit. We only offer them a place to stay. We don't get anything from them. They sell their baskets and keep their revenues. P2BW

DISCUSSION

This study sought to unpack the micro and sectoral linkages in three destinations within a TFCA network. Overall, the variation in the networks differed according to the prominence of wildlife tourism and conservation, local institutions, and governance structures. For the most part, stakeholder collaborations were geared towards destination efficiency, improving visitor experiences, and destination marketing, a motivator frequently confirmed in literature (Ruggieri et al., 2022; Presenza & Cipollina, 2010; Ferrer-Roca et al., 2022). In this regard, 'co-petition' and 'cooperation' are seen among stakeholders in all study settings, geared towards tourist service and experience delivery.

Notably, in tourism business networks, many of these networks existed between accommodation, tour operators, transportation services, and, to a lesser extent, food and beverage businesses, which has been framed as supporting local enterprises and, therefore, supporting local communities. The linkages to these SMMEs are quite important, considering their inability to work with international partners as bigger organisations are able to, as well as their ability to obtain spillover effects (for accommodations) and increasingly market (to other travel service providers).

Beyond addressing visitor experience, the partnerships among these local stakeholders were, in some parts, geared towards supplementing resource constraints, which is especially important in these settings as funding and access to funding for small enterprise growth and development are notable challenges (Trupp et al., 2024). In strengthening these networks to enhance destination experience, the issue of service quality is crucial and one that requires attention, particularly considering that one of the goals of the KAZA TFCA is to become a world-class tourist destination (KAZA TFCA, 2020), and in doing so, necessitates involvement from all tourism stakeholders in which such networks can be leveraged to encourage buy-in and support for such initiatives. Also, the results do show distinct differences between the study settings, which can be explained by the nature of tourism development as well as conservation. For instance, Kasane had more visible and stronger networks among stakeholders owing to the dominance of wildlife tourism in this small town, whereas these networks were more geared towards conservation. In Zimbabwe and Zambia, there was a lot of apprehension over the existence and authenticity of these networks owing to the manner in which tourism is structured (Tichaawa & Lekgau, 2024). Despite this, there are some outliers in these networks, particularly those directed to planning and development, which could call into question the manner of inclusivity and transparency.

Accordingly, as grounded by the established TFCA, there is an opportunity to open up these networks across the destinations, which could potentially assist in ensuring consistent involvement and inclusion of local stakeholders.

Partnerships with non-state stakeholders are essential for the implementation of plans and policies (Mugarura et al., 2025; Movono & Hughes, 2022; Papp-Vary et al., 2025). In this study context, these policies and plans are developed for individual states as well as to support the TFCA system. For instance, while tourism operates within each individual country, there is a greater movement to open up and connect each country's tourism industries, which is underpinned by the KAZA uni-visa approach. The plans and strategies for wildlife conservation take a broader systems approach, where there are many more efforts to link these wilderness spaces together to support wildlife movements and their population growth (Köhler & Bollig, 2025). Therefore, partnerships and collaboration among local stakeholders become crucial considering that these destinations and businesses are operating in wildlife management areas where there is no demarcation between societies and wildlife, and therefore issues such as compliance with conservation rules, adopting conservation behaviour, and supporting such initiatives arise. As such, the importance of local institutions and governance was especially evident when considering micro, or community networks, which ensured (to a certain extent) the representation, involvement, and support of local community interests in wildlife conservation and tourism, as these institutions are able to spread consistent messaging and information to the community as they would have a broader reach.

This study also has implications for resilience building in the different TFCA areas. While the impact of environmental (and non-environmental) crises may differ between study sites, these partnerships and collaborations across these networks can be instrumental in effective adaptive measures across the TFCA sites to ensure broad-scale resilience. Collaboration is instrumental to resilience building, owing to its role in disseminating pertinent information, resource mobilisation of adaptive measures, and garnering collective efforts to adapt, innovate, and ensure that all stakeholders, especially those often on the periphery of tourism planning and development, are included (Trupp et al., 2024; Priatmoko et al., 2025; Mugarura et al., 2025). Accordingly, strengthening and harnessing these networks is arguably crucial for the local implementation of broad TFCA directives.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the nature and functioning of micro and sectoral collaborative networks within selected destinations forming part of a Transfrontier Conservation Area (TFCA) system. The findings demonstrate that while collaboration remains central to sustainable tourism development and destination resilience, its manifestation varies significantly depending on the local context, institutional frameworks, and its implementation.

This study highlights the existing partnerships and collaborations at the tourism and conservation sectoral level as well as the micro community level, and found that strengthening such sectoral and micro-level partnerships can create a multiplier effect that aligns local interests with the broader objectives of transboundary conservation and sustainable tourism. From a policy perspective, the findings emphasise the need for harmonised strategies that link national tourism and conservation frameworks with local-level implementation mechanisms.

Practically, supporting the capacity development of local tourism enterprises and community institutions is equally vital to ensure their meaningful participation in the broader TFCA partnership network. Ultimately, this study contributes to the growing body of work on tourism partnerships (Ferrer-Roca et al., 2022; Scheyvens & Cheer, 2022;

Ruggieri et al., 2022; Stoddart et al., 2020) and transboundary governance by revealing the nuanced ways in which micro and sectoral collaborations can support or constrain sustainable development and resilience within TFCAs. This study was qualitative in nature and meant to provide a foundation for future research; therefore, one limitation is that the views were obtained by a selective group of stakeholders. To obtain more comprehensive views on collaboration and partnerships, a quantitative approach involving more stakeholders is required. Furthermore, future research could explore the longitudinal evolution of these networks, their resilience to shocks, and the mechanisms through which local partnerships can more effectively align with regional conservation and development goals.

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