

# NAVIGATING AND ADAPTING TO POLITICAL RISK AND UNCERTAINTY IN AN AGE OF CORONAVIRUS

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The intertwined nature of the Coronavirus-related crises is extending the definition of political risk because so many risks and kinds of uncertainties have become co-mingled, and together they are stretching institutions, leaders, and societies to their limits. This has posed both unique challenges as well as some opportunities for conservation practitioners, leaders, and organizations. In the process, it has drawn attention to everything from operational basics to facing a rapidly changing environment and the need to revisit strategies for effectively making change. Among the most important trends and takeaways are:

**Drastically Changing Political & Institutional Landscape:** One of the greatest challenges many countries are facing with coronavirus is a broader challenge to democracy and more widely to trust in institutions and governments to respond adequately to the public's needs for services and functioning systems.

**Tailoring to Context:** The impacts of coronavirus have been uneven, reflecting underlying economic and social factors and institutional models, strengths and weaknesses across countries. This means that responses must be tailored to specific contexts more than ever, though learning can be shared from country to country.

**Equality:** The Coronavirus has also begun to bring to light multiple and deep layers of inequality that affect women, Indigenous People, and people of color in particular. Conservation alone will not solve these larger social and political problems. Yet, it's important to reflect on how conservation is fostering equality internally as well as externally in terms of political risk and representation in decision-making.

**Cognitive Framing & Survival:** Many individuals as well as entire organizations are in survival mode, narrowing their cognitive framing. This makes it difficult to focus on more strategic, long-term discussions such as political risk and strategy more broadly until their safety and basic foundations are secured.

**Ways of Working:** A rapidly changing landscape with limited possibilities for mobility has meant quickly looking at assumptions about basic means of operating and learning to work in new ways, often facilitated by quick adoption of technology such as software that helps teams coordinate and communicate remotely. Large bodies of work have continued as a result.

**Fieldwork & Consultation:** Some of the greatest challenges have been disruptions to fieldwork as well as the inability to collaborate with and consult with local partners such as Indigenous Communities due to health and safety concerns.

**Financial Resources & Adapting:** Increasingly limited financial resources and shifting priorities have made funding a significant concern for many organizations. While the future of the sector hangs in the balance, one of the greatest challenges for conservation organizations has been navigating the need for funding flexibility in the face of significant disruptions to their operations and programs—the link to political risk being that many communities and even some governments have asked conservation organizations to

play humanitarian roles which they don't normally play, creating new dynamics to navigate.

**Strategic Review:** The “game changing” nature of the coronavirus and its broad sweeping effects turns attention to the theories of change, assumptions, and strategies underlying many conservation organizations' policies and programs. While most organizations appear to hope things will soon “return to normal” and are primarily shifting timelines of their work, the larger framing should be revisited and adapted.

**Relationships:** Relationships remain one of the greatest tools for navigating political risk and uncertainty and delivering effective conservation work. With changes in the world come a need to change those relationships, adapting roles to meet needs, developing appropriate and timely partnerships, being mindful about changes to one's ability to undertake consultations, and keeping the wellbeing of Indigenous communities in mind.

**Revisiting Conservation Models:** Across countries and organizations Covid is bringing growing awareness of the need for a more “inclusive conservation” that has human wellbeing integrated alongside longstanding conservation goals. It has also called into question a number of the economic models proposed such as eco-tourism. With it has come political risk as well as challenges to relationships with government and communities and the need to meet immediate needs in the face of immense disruption.

**Opportunities:** Despite a number of challenges, the coronavirus has also highlighted a need for leaders and organizations to find the opportunities presented due to disruptions in the status quo whether in policy, programs, or relationship building.

**Need to Evolve:** With so many considerations in play from meeting basic human and organizational needs to revisiting how to deliver results in an increasingly complex environment, moments of profound disruption like these present us with a need to evolve. This includes drawing on basic tools and reflections to help us assess and adapt.

**Putting Tools in Action:** Most organizations appear to have relied on their existing planning processes and ad hoc responses during turbulent times. However, there are simple tools that when put in action can help provide deeper insight for appropriate action, including adaptive management tools, scenarios planning, pause and reflect sessions, and systems mapping. ([See Tools in Action](#))

**Critical Questions & Assessment:** Additionally, a series of critical questions across the spectrum of concerns for conservation organizations and leaders as well as their government, civil society, and community partners can help assess critical areas of needed adaptation (see Table of Key Questions on following page).

**Table of Key Questions**

TOPIC	LINK TO POLITICAL RISK	KEY QUESTIONS	RESOURCES/TOOLS
<b>Cognitive Framing/ Mindset</b>	<i>Meeting basic human &amp; organizational needs are the foundation for addressing higher order functions like strategy &amp; assessing political risk</i>	Have you attended to basic needs for safety & security?	<a href="#">Cognitive Framing</a>
		Are staff stress levels being attended to in order to allow high level strategic thinking?	<a href="#">Adaptive Management</a>
		Have you taken into account the extent to which partners may be in survival mode?	
<b>The Future of Work</b>	<i>To maintain a basic level of effectiveness &amp; protect their reputation organizations have to find new tools &amp; modes of communication that will allow them to stay connected to political partners, form influential alliances &amp; deliver on their goals.</i>	What assumptions about basic means of operating have you made?	<a href="#">Future of Work</a>
		How might you need to find other ways to connect those in your organization as well as connecting with partners?	<a href="#">Adaptive Management</a>
		What new tools & ways of working can you use to adapt to the changing circumstances & political context?	<a href="#">Scenarios Planning</a>
<b>Sources of Funding &amp; Flexibility</b>	<i>Government sources of funding &amp; priorities are shifting, creating political &amp; financial changes for conservation. Equally navigating emerging resource questions &amp; the ability to adapt to current needs with funders is key for having the foundations &amp; flexibility to adapt to many factors that could pose political &amp; reputational risks</i>	How might your financial support change?	<a href="#">Funding &amp; Flexibility</a>
		Do you have diverse funding sources to help offset risk?	<a href="#">Adaptive Management</a>
		Are you working with funders to adapt deliverables, timelines & goals to fit current realities?	<a href="#">Scenarios Planning</a>
<b>Theories of Change, Strategies &amp; Timelines</b>	<i>Theories of change &amp; the strategies to deliver them often target government as partners, power-holders &amp; funders. During periods of disruption &amp; uncertainty it's critical to make sure that assumptions about these theories still hold true &amp; that</i>	Are you adapting to growing needs & changing funding priorities around pressing issues like health while also staying true to your organization's mission? What political risks & opportunities may come with this?	
		Do existing theories of change still apply in the current context?	<a href="#">Theories of Change</a>
		Can current strategies be sustained & will they still be effective?	<a href="#">Adaptive Management</a>
		Do timelines for plans need to be shifted?	<a href="#">Systems Mapping</a>
			<a href="#">Scenarios Planning</a>

TOPIC	LINK TO POLITICAL RISK	KEY QUESTIONS	RESOURCES/TOOLS
	<i>strategies &amp; timelines are appropriate for the context.</i>		
<b>Relationships:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Adapting to Needs</b></li> </ul>	<i>Relationships form the backbone of engagement with government as well as forming alliances that influence government &amp; represent the needs of different groups to ensure effective &amp; inclusive conservation. In many cases they offer resilience in the face of political risk. These relationships take care &amp; adapting as new challenges &amp; risks arise.</i>	How will adapting to needs that fall outside of the scope of your normal work affect your relationships with communities & government? What would the cost of inaction be in terms of relationships & political risk?	<a href="#">Relationships</a> <a href="#">Systems Mapping</a> <a href="#">Adaptive Management</a> <a href="#">Scenarios Planning</a>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Partnerships</b></li> </ul>		Are we best placed to address the issue or situation at hand & whom can we collaborate with to either co-learn or share operational delivery?	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Consultation</b></li> </ul>		Are there alternative ways of doing consultation in the future without the direct involvement of international staff that still allows for effective co-design? Are we taking into account the digital divide & ability for stakeholders to participate?	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Indigenous communities</b></li> </ul>		How can your organization lend support, maintaining social distance to protect them, while amplifying their voices & concerns?	
		How might these communities be impacted by political agendas for natural resource driven economic recovery?	
<b>Reframing Risk to Identify Opportunities</b>	<i>Shifts in the status quo can create disruption &amp; political risks like shifting government priorities. But equally it can create space for new dialogues, relationships &amp; ways of influencing as government adapts to changing circumstances</i>	For every risk that you identify, is there a positive side?	<a href="#">Risk &amp; Opportunity</a>
		Is there an opportunity to shift existing framing of conservation issues?	<a href="#">Adaptive Management</a>
		Is there any new common ground or opportunity for collaboration with government, NGOs, or other stakeholders?	<a href="#">Scenarios Planning</a>

TOPIC	LINK TO POLITICAL RISK	KEY QUESTIONS	RESOURCES/TOOLS
<b>Adapting Roles &amp; Economic Models</b>	<i>Many of the alternative economic models that have been undertaken have required partnerships with the government. Ensuring robustness of these models &amp; the ability to adapt &amp; consider basic needs of communities is critical to relationships with governments, effective program delivery, reputation &amp; community wellbeing. If models don't function well they can endanger relationships with government &amp; communities.</i>	<p>Are the economic models that we are recommending dependent upon a single sector (e.g. tourism)?</p> <p>How can we make our models more diverse so that if one source of revenue is lost there are still others?</p> <p>Have we ensured that models have an element of self-sufficiency &amp; food security?</p>	<p><a href="#">Adapting Roles &amp; Models</a></p> <p><a href="#">Pause &amp; Reflect</a></p> <p><a href="#">Scenarios Planning</a></p> <p><a href="#">Systems Mapping</a></p>
<b>Localization</b>	<i>As partners &amp; funders of conservation &amp; a range of economic &amp; social programs that create enabling environments, governments also face challenges during disruption, which raises questions about how localization can create more effective, resilient programs &amp; policies.</i>	<p>To what extent is your organization built around locally led implementation?</p> <p>To what extent can greater localization take place?</p> <p>What are the risks &amp; benefits of localization &amp; how can you balance those?</p>	<p><a href="#">Localization</a></p> <p><a href="#">Adaptive Management</a></p> <p><a href="#">Pause &amp; Reflect</a></p>
<b>Gender, Equity &amp; Diversity</b>	<i>Gender, equity &amp; diversity are a matter of reflecting human rights &amp; good practice. Changes in the political &amp; external landscape pose greater risk to different groups of people than others. Having diverse input, stakeholders &amp; leadership influences effectiveness of policies &amp; projects &amp; whether they are exposed to critique by government or partners.</i>	<p>How are women, men, people of color, Indigenous communities &amp; people with less economic status experiencing this crisis in different ways?</p> <p>How does it exacerbate existing inequities in natural resource access &amp; management?</p> <p>Are there equal opportunities for men, women, &amp; people of color to influence policy &amp; projects &amp; participate in decision-making?</p>	<p><a href="#">Gender, Equity Diversity</a></p> <p><a href="#">Relationships</a></p> <p><a href="#">Systems Mapping</a></p> <p><a href="#">Scenarios Planning</a></p>

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# I. INTRODUCTION

Political risk and uncertainty are nothing new. And yet they are becoming more ubiquitous and more pronounced with the onset of the Coronavirus. A significant part of political risk rests upon the space afforded to civil society as a whole and the context within which conservation organizations operate. As described by one member of the [Conservation Measures Partnership \(CMP\)](#) this includes three contexts that the government creates for civil society: 1) *control over and conflict with* 2) *benign neglect of* and 3) *good relations with and a desire for co-design*. This lays many of the foundations for navigating political risk and uncertainty in general even prior to extreme events like the unfolding global Covid crisis and the intertwined health, environmental, economic, and social crises.

That said, specifically the intertwined nature of the Coronavirus-related crises is stretching the definition of political risk because so many risks and kinds of uncertainties have become co-mingled and together are stretching institutions, leaders, and societies to their limits.

While the first six months of the Coronavirus have caused economies around the world to grind to a halt, we are still very much in the midst of a global crisis. Some countries are struggling to bring the first wave of the virus under control and other nations are seeing a second wave of the virus already beginning to emerge. This means that while we can begin to draw initial lessons we are still very much in the process of dealing with crisis. We have therefore, not seen all the short-term, let alone long-term, impacts unfold nor have we had the distance from these events to fully reflect.

And still the changes taking place along with the associated trends couldn't be of more urgent concern, making this work particularly timely. The coronavirus has been a "game changer" stretching conservation practitioners, leaders, and organizations as well as their government and civil society partners in new ways.

As the crisis continues to unfold it is critical for those in conservation to secure their foundations so they can move away from working in crisis management mode. This will allow them, as well as those working in parallel fields, to begin to look at the theories underpinning their models of change, the strategies for delivering impact, and the partnerships, relationships, and tools that will help them navigate political risk, momentous disruption, and uncertainty.



## II. HOW POLITICAL RISK IS CHANGING AND WHY IT MATTERS

Covid has shifted people's sense of security in terms of health and economic wellbeing in ways that are altering their thinking drastically about many related issues, placing significant pressure on political systems and sectors like conservation. This wasn't the case in the same way for SARS or Ebola. With this comes risk as well as some new opportunities.

Governments in different countries have had vastly different responses to Coronavirus. While many governments have swiftly responded and often to the best of their ability, there are a number of scenarios of inadequate response. This includes *1) Inadequate resources for response 2) Using special Covid measures as a means to further agendas such as undermining civil liberties 3) Corruption- misdirecting Covid resources or using the crisis for activities like overpricing and misappropriation of resources, etc. and 4) Ignoring the crisis or trying to dispel it as a myth.*

That said, one of the greatest challenges many countries are facing with coronavirus is a broader challenge to democracy and more broadly trust in institutions and governments to respond adequately to the public's needs for services and functioning social and economic systems.

### A. Democracy and Authoritarianism

Authoritarian leaders in particular have downplayed the virus if not undermining science and public health advice. They have either taken no action or have suppressed others' ability to effectively respond. This has been seen both in parts of the developed and developing world.

Covid has also brought to light governments' gaps and failings on issues like public health. This is further contributing to dwindling support for democracy, which world-wide is reaching a low point. Since the onset of the pandemic, measures of democracy and human rights have worsened in at least 80 countries out of 192 nations surveyed.<sup>1</sup>

This poses challenges to the integrity of political systems as well as the social fabric and institutions of nations within which conservation organizations and other charities operate, introducing political risk and uncertainty. With this come challenges for partnering with governments, as well as general issues with respect to the stability of countries within which these organizations operate.

### B. Science and Misinformation

Another overarching political and social test has been the challenge posed to the belief

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<sup>1</sup> Repucci, Sarah and Slipowitz, Amy. "Democracy under Lockdown" Freedom House. October, 2020

in, and reliability of, science and information. Misinformation has flourished about scientific uncertainty regarding the virus and its treatments. Governments in many cases have had to rely on experts and scientists in a world where populism has already posed threats to the notion of “truth”. But some have themselves spurred distrust of expert advice or the spread of misinformation and a questioning of science more broadly.<sup>2</sup>

### C. Shifting Government Priorities

With the multiple crises that have unfolded from coronavirus public health ministries, infrastructure, and budgets have been placed under significant stress and demands for funds have increased. Additionally, unfolding financial crises related to the shutdown of economies have placed significant emphasis on how to restart and grow those economies, make up for losses, and address rising unemployment among other challenges.

This has led to shifting priorities within government with a number of political risks including 1) *shifting of resources away from other sectors such as environment* 2) *making politicians unwilling to discuss critical issues outside of those priorities* and 3) *leading to deregulation and roll backs of environmental and other protective legislation in the name of public health or economic growth even if these acts reflect special interest agendas that may have already existed.*

This has a significant impact for those working in conservation. In the words of one leader in the sector, “*unless we understand how budgeting and appropriations and priorities are happening in each country we will be continuing on a path of work that is irrelevant or not seen favorably.*”

### D. Same Storm, Different Boats

The entire world has been shaken by the coronavirus, making it unique when compared to most other recent crises except for the 2008 financial crisis and its ripple effects. And while we are all in the same storm, we are in different boats.

The impacts of coronavirus have been uneven, reflecting underlying economic and social factors and institutional models, strengths and weaknesses across countries, as well as varied responses from government and the public itself. This makes it important to acknowledge and adapt to given contexts while recognizing that within a given country coronavirus has had unequal impacts, particularly affecting people of color, indigenous communities, workers without safety nets or the ability to work from home, and communities reliant on tourism and international travel for income. Additionally, men and women have borne significantly different effects of coronavirus from health to economic and social impacts.

*“There’s a lot of disruption. Everybody tries to adjust to it but it isn’t equally possible for everybody,”* points out one expert working in conservation in East Africa. Looking at conservation he points out that local communities and custodians of resources have

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<sup>2</sup> Belin, Célia and De Maio, Giovanna. “Democracy after Coronavirus: Five Challenges for the 2020s.” Brookings Institute. August, 2020

faced different challenges from those in government agencies as well as financiers of systems.

The effects differ greatly from region to region and country to country not just in terms of the virus itself but also its impacts on conservation and the political risks associated with those impacts. African colleagues talk more about problems like reliance on ecotourism and loss of income and livelihoods. De-urbanization and a return of large numbers of people from cities to urban areas pose new pressures on rural communities and natural resources from Kenya to India. Amidst coronavirus the vacuum created by a lack of government officials and conservationists in the field has contributed to an increase in illegal hunting, logging, and mining. And, violence against environmental defenders and indigenous communities is worsening in some countries in Latin America in particular with the void left by a lack of civil society and government monitors in conservation areas.

But practices and cultural norms related to coronavirus and zoonotic diseases in different regions have also presented challenges for organizations that work across contexts and have brought to light the need to be cautious about “one size fits all” solutions especially without broad consultation. ([\*See regulation of wild animal markets in Asia vs. Africa in the Pause and Reflect Session section\*](#))

## **E. Chronic Risk vs. Acute Risk**

One of the challenges for coronavirus is understanding whether what has been a severe and immediate risk (or an acute risk) will lead to or will exacerbate chronic risks like corruption, turnover in government, or political flip flopping on conservation as political will and resources are potentially channeled elsewhere.

Coronavirus has been an acute risk until now, requiring immediate action to safeguard staff and partners in conservation organizations as well as making temporary adaptations to ways of working, adjusting timelines, etc. However, as it stretches on without effective policy interventions, or in some regions of the world as second waves of the pandemic emerge, will it become a chronic risk requiring more fundamental changes? This is particularly important in terms of the mindsets and framing for analyzing and adapting to risk, political and otherwise.

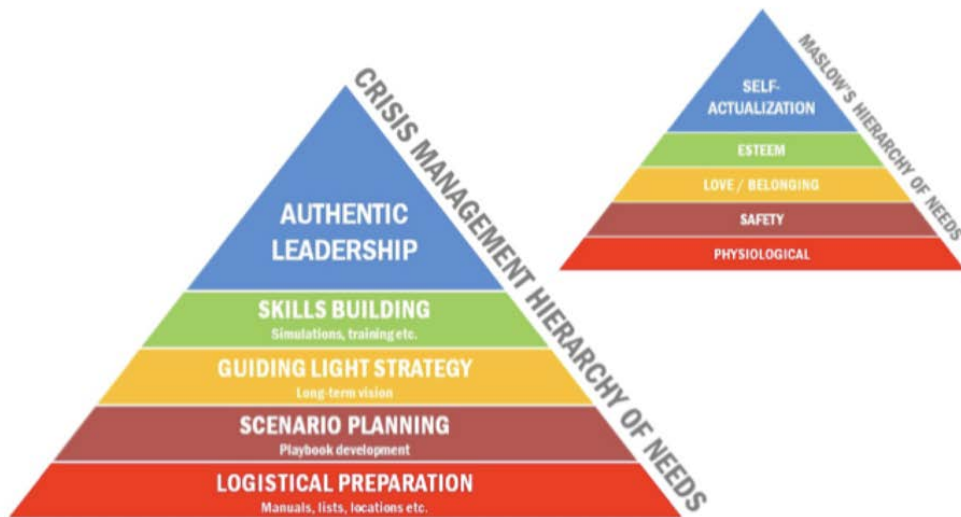
### III. KEY TRENDS AND CONSIDERATIONS FOR WAYS OF WORKING

#### A. Cognitive Framing and Mindsets

In crisis our cognitive abilities can be significantly narrowed if we are preoccupied with survival or meeting our basic needs. This can be true for individuals and communities as pointed out by conservation colleagues in Africa. *“Speaking with colleagues and local communities the impact is so bad that it is making them focus on short-termism and survival. Talking about the long-term and sustainability comes across as being someone who doesn’t understand what they are going through,”* says one conservation expert.

It can however also apply to organizations that may be struggling to meet their basic financial needs or that are under significant political pressure. Until one has stabilized those basic needs it can be difficult to think about higher ideals, strategy, and the longer-term view with respect to political risks and how to navigate and adapt to them.

Experts have turned the pyramid of human needs into a pyramid of organizational needs in crisis. This starts with ensuring safety, survival and logistical needs. It then moves on to scenarios planning before undertaking larger vision and undertaking strategy development, and skills building, etc.



Crisis Management Hierarchy Compared to the Hierarchy of Human Needs<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> “The Crisis Management Hierarchy of Needs: If Maslow Turned to Crisis Management” Fleishman Hillard. November 21, 2016. <https://fleishmanhillard.com/2016/11/crisis-management/crisis-management-hierarchy-needs-maslow-turned-crisis-management/>

Experts also point out that we have to be aware of the extent to which individual staff and entire organizations are and will continue to be challenged on multiple fronts, stretching cognitive and operational capacity to its maximum. Simply because we are facing coronavirus doesn't mean that there won't be political upheavals in addition or disasters like fires and tornadoes that create additional strains on governments, civil society organizations, and communities.

That said, an organization's principles, values, and mindsets are what most help navigate a crisis as well as political risk and disruption to multiple leaders in the conservation, development, and humanitarian fields. *"It is less about tools and more about the mental mindset. It's less about having access to a tool or being trained on how to use it and more about building people's confidence that they can understand some of these key points and start to integrate it themselves into their work,"* points out one expert who works across disasters and conservation.

**Takeaways:**

It is critical to meet human and organizational basic needs such as safety before being able to turn to higher goals and activities such as assessments of political risk and uncertainty and reassessing goals and strategies. Stress levels within an organization must be attended to in a way that allows the organization to shift towards more strategic mental frameworks. And leaders and teams must take into account the extent to which partners may be operating in survival mode and the ways in which this may shift their priorities.

## **B. The Future of Work**

The coronavirus has presented a number of logistical as well as emotional challenges for those working in conservation organizations and is forcing organizations to adapt as quickly as possible to the rapidly changing circumstances. This in and of itself is not a matter of political risk. However, an organization and its staff will be unable to address political risk unless they are able to function at the basic level.

*"A lot of groups like ours are in the process of thinking about the future of work. What do we learn from this experience and what do we want the future of our office and our operations to look like as a result? What are the good things we can take out of this crisis?"* asks one conservation leader.

Other leaders have been quick to note the logistical and emotional impacts on staff and have tried to adapt. One CMP member hired an external organization to assess the wellbeing of staff, to offer counseling given the immense amount of loss of life as well as disruptions. And they have emphasized individual wellbeing and mindfulness as a basis for delivering effective social change and conservation work. This is unique among the CMP members and even among the country offices of this large international NGO. Yet, it seems to have had particularly positive results and has helped the staff members adapt and be able to function especially well, allowing them to successfully focus on larger things such as how to tailor their strategies to the quickly changing current context.

Unable to work from their offices, most organizations have adapted quickly to the use of online technology and platforms enabling them to work from home and continue

activities to the extent possible. Coronavirus has accelerated transitions to using a number of online tools such as software that helps teams coordinate and communicate remotely. This appears to be facilitating the continuation of a significant amount of work and some organizations have noted that they have accomplished even more or that they have been able to be more inclusive by having workshops and strategy meetings online that don't require travel.

One of the greatest impacts of remote work however has been the inability to carry on significant amounts of field research as well as consultations and collaborations with local partners and Indigenous communities. ([See \*partnerships section\*](#)). However, some organizations have begun experimenting to see if some of the field research and monitoring can be carried out with the use of technology such as mobile phone surveying and the use of drones.

**Takeaways:**

A rapidly changing landscape means quickly learning to adapt and work in new ways. This requires revisiting the assumptions you have made about basic means of operating while finding other ways to connect those in your organization as well as connecting with partners. It may also impact key relationships with government partners, particularly those that relied upon the more candid nature of in-person off record meetings. And yet there are new tools and ways of working to help adapt to the changing circumstances.

## **C. Sources of Funding and Flexibility**

One of the greatest shocks of the coronavirus has been financial, across sectors and organizations. This has however been particularly true of the social sector with specific implications for the future of conservation.

For instance, in line with shifting priorities, there are significant concerns that governments and donor countries that are further financially strapped will divert resources to public health and will take money away from conservation.

At the same time, in the face of the crisis, philanthropy is stepping up, staying the course and not cutting funding. In some cases, philanthropic organizations have even increased funding and have set up special funds to meet immediate needs related to the crisis. European Union donor nations are also injecting new Covid resources.

That said, many experts believe that there will not be sufficient resources for the demand that is going to be required, placing strain on the conservation sector and in time potentially creating a shrinking of the sector. But there are broader concerns for NGOs in general.

*“There is fear that the NGO sector may collapse and become overly health focused and change the mission of NGOs in order for them to survive,”* says one NGO leader in South Asia.

While the future of the sector hangs in the balance, one of the greatest challenges for conservation organizations has been navigating needed funding flexibility in the face of such significant disruptions to their operations and programs—the link to political risk

being that many communities and even some governments have asked conservation organizations to play humanitarian roles which they don't normally play, creating new dynamics to navigate on multiple fronts.

Funders have largely tried to offer flexibility to grantees and work with them and the many new pressures they face. Some foundations have focused on shifting timelines of deliverables while others have allowed for flexibility in the activities carried out. ([See Adapting to Meet Needs Section](#)) Others have debated moving to a model where grantees are encouraged to do whatever is necessary to keep their organization functioning in the immediate term. They have yet to do so, but this may re-emerge as an option as the crisis is extended over a longer period of time.

*"Despite plans and contracts I'm not sure that [we] won't decide organizations don't need to report on their projects anymore and instead tell them there are no strings attached as long as they survive as an organization so they don't lose their operational units,"* says one funder.

**Takeaways:**

Funding creates the basic foundations upon which all organizations operate though the sources of funding may differ. A global crisis has posed significant challenges to funding as well as to funders aiming to offer support. It is critical to think about projections for how your funding sources may change in the next 3-6 months let alone the next year or two to assess the stability of your organization and ongoing ability to carry out programs and navigate other kinds of risks. Working with funders to adapt to the changing realities of these times and your ability to deliver on certain goals is particularly important, as is navigating and adapting to growing needs around pressing issues like health while also staying true to your organization's mission. There are political risks and opportunities that may come with this.

## D. Revisiting Theories of Change and Strategies

Amidst the immense disruption of the coronavirus, most organizations appear to be making largely operational changes and shifting timelines of existing plans. Many seem to be shifting timelines in part because many don't yet feel they know how long Covid will go on for so there is still hope that some normalcy will return and that underlying theories of change and related assumptions will hold true.

*"There's been more of a change at the activity and deliverable [level]. There hasn't been as much change in terms of strategies. Maybe it's part optimism. Maybe it's part not wanting to admit the reality,"* says one leader in the sector.

Many say that the big picture goals remain the same amidst disruption and that if initial problem analysis was undertaken properly it won't have changed. *"If you do a very good conceptual model and problem analysis and you do it with the right people around the table that know about the social and political contexts and risks within it, then you would have what you need and you would build in your alarm lights for things to change,"* says one management expert.

Yet some of those same leaders acknowledge that Coronavirus was not foreseen by most people and that it has been a “game changer” turning political systems and the whole world on its head.

In the face of such immense changes even good conceptual models will need to be revisited. Conservation organizations need to undertake collective and individual analysis of game-changing and emerging risks that affect politics and economics and assess how this impacts the assumptions upon which theories of change and accompanying strategies are built.

That said many organizations have already had to change the implementation of their strategies particularly as it relates to partnerships with communities, in large part because they haven't wanted to bring Covid from the cities to more remote areas. There is yet to be a lasting solution for many of these organizations. For the time being they have put activities on hold and have only continued activities where they can rely upon rangers already placed in wildlife parks or locals working on behalf of conservation organizations in their own communities.

***Takeaways:***

On one hand it's important not to overhaul and reinvent the wheel without need. And at the same time adapting to changing circumstances, especially as they become more disruptive and/or more lasting, may mean that in just another few months' time there will be a wave of revisiting theories of change and strategies across a number of organizations. Given that the Coronavirus is likely to stretch on in many parts of the world and bring with it numerous political and economic shifts, it is critical to look ahead and begin to ask if current strategies can be sustained or if they will still prove effective. This may be a critical moment for using simple tools like scenarios planning as organizations begin to look ahead.

## **E. Relationships**

Relationships are the foundation of most successful conservation work according to those in the sector, and are increasingly recognized as the source of significant resilience and ability to adapt in times of risk and uncertainty such as during the coronavirus. And yet, with changes in the world come a need to change those relationships, adapting roles to meet needs at a given time, developing appropriate and timely partnerships, being mindful about changes to one's ability to undertake consultations and keeping the wellbeing of indigenous communities in mind.

### ***E1. Adapting to Meet Needs***

In the face of crisis many organizations and individual staff members have felt an urgent need to adapt their work to what is needed whether proactively or in response to requests from governments and communities themselves. This has come with both opportunity as well as risks as many organizations have been asked to veer outside of their immediate area of work. At the same time many have felt it's the right thing to do to support partners in their time of need. And they have seen it as a political risk or have in some cases been criticized by governments if they haven't met the broader needs of their long standing partners.



*“We have to adapt because we concluded that if we could not attend the immediate very basic needs of these groups our credibility could be eroded,”* says one conservation leader.

For instance, one international NGO is being asked by an Asian government to provide rice to communities that gave up agriculture as part of conservation efforts and a shift to ecotourism. On one hand the NGO feels honor bound to take care of the community and not doing so poses a political risk for them. At the same time, they are having to navigate the parameters of an appropriate role for themselves while also negotiating with their donors and trying to find flexibility to respond to immediate community needs.

In some cases, NGO leaders in South East Asia merely took it upon themselves to help a government partner in the health ministry with an animated public service announcement that would help them get out urgent public safety messages. Though this wasn't directly in the domain of the work of the charity, the Minister was grateful and it has opened up opportunities to get other critical issues on the agenda.

Conservationists are also seeing that some of their past efforts to meet needs have solidified relationships and opened opportunities to influence during the Coronavirus. For instance, one leading conservationist worked on disaster recovery training in South America and a “green recovery”. A number of years later government officials reached out to this leader and her organization to ask for input on a Covid stimulus package and green recovery. *“There was a door open, based on a past intervention, which was not knowable at that time,”* she says.

But, there are still important roles for conservation to play that are coming to light in important ways due to coronavirus, which have not yet been taken up. For instance, the Coronavirus and virus related deaths have brought to light many land rights issues, especially for women who are widowed and may not have their own rights. But in general conservation can help communities do formal demarcation and help governments adjust regulatory frameworks for multiple uses of land in sensitive areas, according to development and land rights experts. This is particularly true during a time of large economic shifts and proposals for economic recovery to the crisis.

### ***Takeaways:***

This is a critical time to revisit the role that relationships play in the effective delivery of conservation work as well as in building resilience in the face of political risk, uncertainty and unprecedented disruptions. Given the immense change it may be particularly important to revisit things like maps of your key relationships and your engagement strategies. Taking this into account, try to adapt the roles you play to support the needs of your partners. For instance, in the case of meeting basic needs which fall outside of the scope of your normal work, how will adapting to meet those needs affect your relationships with communities and government? How will they impact your budget and overall strategic goals?

### ***E2. Partnerships***

In light of the health crisis and its economic impacts many organizations are seeing the need to work across sectors for more well-rounded analysis and context mapping as well as responding to multi-dimensional realities that communities face. This includes partnerships between conservation and development or humanitarian organizations to deliver “inclusive conservation”.

As conservation organizations' roles have been adapted and have turned towards immediate need, partnerships in some cases have helped with effective adaptation. For instance, in South America one CMP member said, *"[Humanitarian partners] help us identify the needs. They help us channel the funds [and] they deliver some of the response that we're generating."*

Many organizations have also been quick to see partnerships as a means to have a greater impact and find appropriate responses to the crisis. But some also see crisis as a time when collaboration is more promising and organizational egos can be put aside.

One charity that works across conservation and livelihoods in Asia seized on the opportunity presented by the virus to create multiple partnerships. In the first week of lockdown they started a new consortium of 62 organizations that work on livelihoods. The coalition's joint efforts enabled them to get policymakers to do rapid surveys of the situation on the ground, which they couldn't have done on their own. It also brought a lot of attention to the voices of people in villages.

That said partnerships require care. Relationships with other civil society organizations are critical as is taking care to create horizontal relationships and ones in which you co-create ideas. For larger organizations this means ensuring that they don't dominate space and that they are careful to strengthen the local NGOs as well. Otherwise, they can perceive you as unfair competition and can make these concerns known to the government creating challenges and political risks, according to a Latin American leader.

***Takeaways:***

Partnerships continue to be one of the strongest foundations for providing stability and resilience through political risk, uncertainty, and upheaval. Periods of disruption like the current one present opportunities as well as highlighting the need for greater partnerships across sectors. In some cases, your organization may not be best placed to address the issue or situation at hand and may require teaming up with others who have complementary expertise, or working as a coalition may provide more opportunity to influence or deliver results. Regardless, partnerships require care, reflecting on what is needed to sustain them.

***E3. Consultation***

Because of limitations of not being able to travel and get communities together, certain kinds of training and consultations have suffered enormously. Many people working in conservation say that consultations and co-designing with local communities are no longer possible at this time. Even implementing ongoing programs is a challenge let alone co-designing with local people and building around local knowledge.

While technology is being used to link people and to try and still carry out some workshops and training, bio-diverse areas with communities that should be most consulted are also areas that do not have good infrastructure. This is where the digital divide is most seen.

At the international level with global frameworks on critical issues like biodiversity, members of communities are no longer able to participate and represent their communities. For instance, biodiversity convention consultations are now online. *"It raises questions about who can meaningfully input and engage especially given the*

*digital divide in places like Africa and the developing world. Yet they're trying to design a 2030 strategy that everybody should buy into globally."*

**Takeaways:**

Consultation remains a particularly critical element of conservation and development projects. It is also one of the areas of work that has been most impacted by the Coronavirus. Travel restrictions have limited contact with indigenous and local communities and a digital divide limits online access. Some projects can be sustained given existing relationships and projects that have already been co-designed with communities. However, there remains a significant need for finding alternative ways of doing consultation in the future without the direct involvement of international staff that still allows for effective co-design.

**E4. Indigenous Communities**

Indigenous communities have been some of the hardest hit around the world. These impacts are manifold and include everything from high Covid and mortality rates to economic challenges and food insecurity. With an absence of significant government funding for Indigenous communities in many areas, they are turning to local solutions to pull through the crisis such as self-isolating, using traditional medicine to treat Covid symptoms, and using traditional means of sustainable production.<sup>4</sup>

Given their vulnerabilities, with the onset of the virus conservation organizations have almost entirely halted their activities with Indigenous communities as a means of protecting them and honoring the wishes of many of them.

*"If we go to communities deep in the Amazon [and] they get sick it's like colonialism coming in all over again and wiping out the indigenous communities,"* says one expert. At the same time, many organizations have had to try and find a balance so that local partners don't feel abandoned at a difficult time and one of particular need.

Many organizations have drafted guidelines with respect to contact and activities in local and indigenous communities while trying to strike this balance of safeguarding them without abandoning them.

One large conservation organization has done a survey with their Indigenous community partners around the world, gathering information on the greatest challenges that they face so as to be able to integrate those concerns into their programs and responses to Covid.

The organization is writing up guidance for use with donors, governments and partners so that anything they're doing is informed by the needs of indigenous communities. It will also serve to inform their own work in areas like programs, policy, government relations and corporate engagement that allows them to understand the issues and take them into their work and anchor it in community concerns.

Regardless, pressures are mounting for Indigenous communities and may increase significantly in the future. As many governments look for ways to rebuild their

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<sup>4</sup> Edralin, Francesca. "Coronavirus caused by 'unbalancing' of nature: Q&A with Indigenous leader Levi Sucre Romero" Mongabay. September 2, 2020

economies, particularly those that are largely dependent on natural resources, they may look to land and resources in less exploited areas that are held by indigenous people. *“[When] government is looking at how to address shattered economies we are seeing a lot of looking at Indigenous lands as a source of revenue from minerals, timber, and fishing,”* explains one expert.

With this in mind some Indigenous leaders are calling for greater participation in government policymaking with respect to natural resource management and indigenous knowledge. And they are calling for greater solidarity between Indigenous communities globally.<sup>5</sup>

**Takeaways:**

Indigenous communities are facing disproportionate immediate impacts of coronavirus leading them to self-isolate. While withdrawing from contact with them in the short-term these communities will require continued support and partnerships to navigate emerging realities and increasing economic, social, and political risks. Indigenous communities may be particularly impacted by political agendas for natural resource driven economic recovery requiring that your organization lend support, while maintaining social distance to protect them and amplifying their voices.

## **F. Reframing to Identify Opportunities**

With every major shift and period of uncertainty comes risk as well as opportunity. Disruption can pose major challenges to existing relationships with governments and partners as well as more generally within political, economic, and social systems. The space afforded by changes to the status quo can leave room for operating in new ways, undertaking new partnerships, and proposing new goals.

For instance, this moment of crisis has provided an opportunity for some conservation organizations to cast new light on an urgent need for systemic change drawing attention to the environmental drivers of pandemics and a need to overhaul our relationship with nature.<sup>6</sup> With this come new advocacy and policy opportunities and a sense of urgency for action.

Additionally, a number of experts point to the government and economic disruptions of coronavirus and the urgent need for economic recovery packages. With this “rethink” comes an opportunity to overhaul models of the past that have led to unsustainable development, opening a significant space for proposals for a “green recovery”.

One CMP member in particular has been looking at the ways in which the crisis has opened up renegotiations of government debt. As the price of debt is going down and many countries are now in renegotiations due to Covid there’s an opportunity to work with countries around “debt for nature swaps”. You can renegotiate debt at a better price and can use some of the savings to endow conservation trust funds. There are already

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> “COVID 19: urgent call to protect people and nature.” WWF. June 2020

some initial examples of this being done in places like the Seychelles prior to Covid, which can now be built upon further with the opportunity presented by the pandemic.<sup>7</sup>

The onset of the virus has also been a time when nonprofits have taken the opportunity to create new coalitions in order to influence local and national government. For instance, in South Asia 35 organizations came together to appeal to the government to get finances to flow to local communities in the face of the economic crisis, reducing possible pressures on natural resources that may be used to compensate for a lack of funds. The coalition grew to 150 organizations that together were able to make shifts in a critical government labor scheme in order to meet immediate local community needs.

Still others have seen the Coronavirus and the number of issues it has brought to light as a way to further engage companies. Increasingly they understand that environmental and social issues and Covid provide an important opening to have conversations with companies dealing with disruption in supply chains and disrupted social dynamics in places where they rely on some of their supplies. Companies appear to be more open to these conversations than ever before, providing new opportunities.

However, the Coronavirus and all of its disruption raise more fundamental questions that may help identify new opportunities. According to one expert this includes asking, *“How do we partner with others? How do we ourselves also bring together a more integrated lens? How does that help us influence others in ways that are more robust, impactful and sustained?”*

**Takeaways:**

With every disruption, uncertainty and political risk come risks as well as a window of opportunity to introduce new ways of working as the status quo is disrupted. For every risk that you identify, there may be a positive side to it or an opportunity. This includes opportunities to shift existing framing of conservation issues among disruptions in the status quo as well as finding new common ground with government or NGOs that could lead to potential partnerships.

## **G. Adapting Roles and Economic Models**

Coronavirus has brought home the importance of “shared wins” between nature and people as well as how critical long-term sustainable financing is. One of the important lessons of Coronavirus emphasized by multiple organizations is an ongoing need to shift away from a more traditional conservation approach that didn’t emphasize human needs. Covid is bringing growing awareness across countries and organizations of a more “inclusive conservation” that has human wellbeing integrated alongside long standing conservation goals.

With the vast changes and economic pressures brought about by Coronavirus there has also been growing awareness of assumptions made in the theories of change behind some conservation models. For instance, there have been widespread reports of

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<sup>7</sup> Kennedy, Merrit. “Seychelles Finds A Novel Way To Swap Its Debt For Marine Protections” National Public Radio. February 23, 2018

communities that shifted away from agriculture or hunting to preserve nature and rely on eco-tourism being hard hit with the halt of tourism and travel. Not only does this present huge uncertainty for the success and sustainability of these conservation models, it presents political risks for conservation organizations that worked extensively with the government and communities to set up these models.

Game parks are not the only examples of needing to adapt theories of change and economic models. For instance, a number of fishing communities and local fishery projects that rely on selling to one narrow set of customers, such as restaurants or universities, have also been thrown into crisis with the closure of these institutions.

*“Conservation has tended to focus on the mechanisms [like tourism] in the past rather than a holistic approach and what really makes a sustainable financing ability for community led projects,”* says one seasoned conservationist. This has led numerous experts to believe there is a need for new and more diverse models, particularly for worst-case scenarios where entire sectors are closed or fail to ensure food security and self-reliance.

Where conservation organizations have worked on livelihood programs with local communities they are seeing greater resilience during Covid. For instance, in Latin America communities that worked with one NGO there on agroforestry have not reported food security issues. In comparison neighboring communities that have relied on mono cropping are having food security issues and have approached that NGO asking for humanitarian assistance.

Additionally, in some cases fisheries are piloting direct to consumer approaches to make up for losses in supply chains and overreliance on customers like restaurants. These initiatives are relatively new and it is still to be seen if they will be successful.

***Takeaways:***

The Coronavirus has been a major stress test for organizations, systems, and economic models. As we have seen, what worked previously may not work now drawing attention to the fragility of alternative economic models that we are recommending that are dependent upon a single sector. This requires further development and collaboration on how to make conservation models more diverse so that if one source of revenue is lost there are still others. And, it is becoming increasingly clear that they must include an element of self-sufficiency and food security.

## **H. Localization**

Previous discussions have emphasized how organizational models can both reveal strengths and opportunities as well as revealing where organizations are subject to disruption, uncertainty, and political risk.

One of the strongest themes to come out of conversations with organizations around the world is the extent to which having a strong local staff presence has allowed them to be more resilient and carry on some of their activities that they might not be able to otherwise.

Covid has validated that having local staff is a strategy that works well and helps with organizational resilience especially in the context of lockdowns. Because of lack of movement of international staff, projects that have been most effective are those that have local partners where those partners can continue the work and are in their own community so they are trusted (e.g. it is not feared that they will bring Coronavirus in from outside).

*“In the countries where our team is almost entirely local the work can continue quite well even without Western experts coming in to advise with them. This is where we are seeing the benefits of having national staff in our country programs.”*

Those organizations with a federated international model that do not have as strong of local representation in their organization are now finding that they have to defer large portions of their work to local partners to be able to carry it out without the risks of travel.

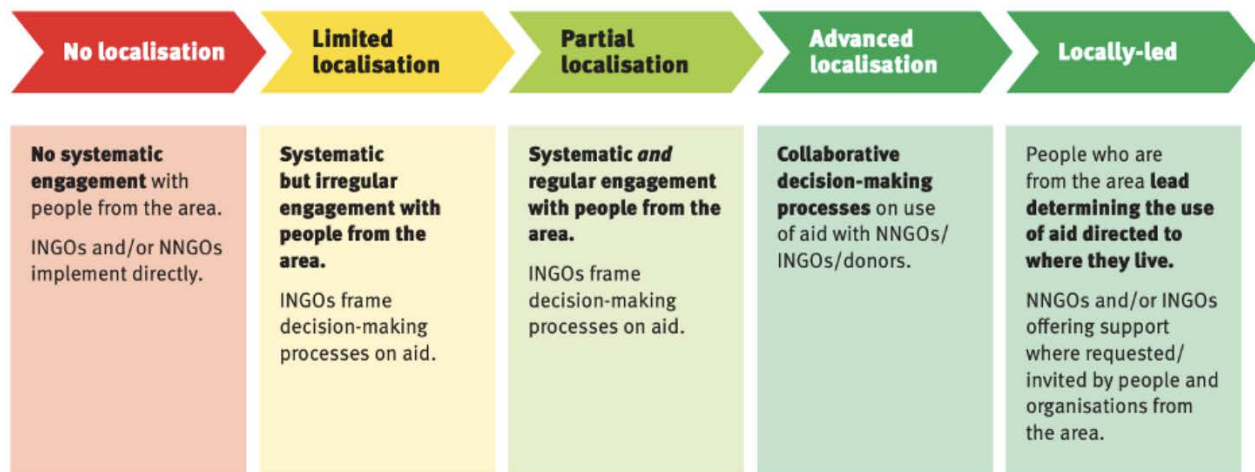
Additionally, even some organizations that are made up entirely of nationals like one operating out of one of Asia’s capital cities are now most reliant on field staff. This has shifted power dynamics within the organization in terms of the value placed on different parts of the organization. At the same time, it has raised some issues about the quality of some of those community engagements and the data collected.

The theme of localization is one that is being explored in depth by the international humanitarian sector with a number of lessons being drawn from it. Among the most critical lessons is the extent to which partnerships between INGOs and local NGOs must be built on a history of trust as well as an acknowledgement of the risks that local partners often carry in those relationships.<sup>8</sup>

As organizations continue to experiment with a process of localization that was occurring even prior to Covid it’s important to acknowledge the spectrum of these relationships and reflect on which approach is most appropriate ranging from limited localization to locally led initiatives.

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<sup>8</sup> “Where is the Aid Biz making progress on Localization?” From Poverty to Power Blog. June 30, 2020



Saferworld's Localization Spectrum

### The Spectrum of Localization<sup>9</sup>

#### Takeaways:

There is a longstanding debate taking place and a shift towards localization in sectors like international development that conservation can learn from. That said there is already strong evidence that relying on local staff for much of in-country conservation work has significant advantages, such as local buy-in and deep knowledge of political, economic, and cultural landscapes. In the face of coronavirus and other viruses that may emerge in coming years, having staff that are a part of or are embedded in local communities allows for getting a good read on the ground. It also provides greater adaptability during upheaval and crisis.

## I. Gender, Equity, and Inclusion

The Coronavirus and its economic and social impacts have highlighted a number of inequities related to underlying racial and gender disparities, among other forms of inequality. For instance, deaths from Coronavirus have led to challenges against the land rights of female widows. And, lockdowns have led to increased violence against women in the home. This comes atop gendered dimensions of conservation such as the resources and agency women and girls have or gendered challenges that individuals face accessing resources and elevating voices in conservation projects. This may be exacerbated for those who face multiple inequities such as being female and a person of color. These gender inequalities apply from the micro-level with respect to livelihoods, access to resources, tenured rights, and dependency on common resources to the macro level such as leadership and the ability to shape global processes like forums for climate change.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid



Among some of the greatest concerns are restrictions, challenges, and opportunities to diversify the voices of those consulted to make sure that conservation is inclusive, diverse, and is not replicating neocolonial approaches we have seen in early conservation projects and in the development world, according to one expert.

As larger equity conversations are being brought to light by the inequitable impacts of the virus, it is bringing these issues home to those working in conservation. The equity conversation is becoming more and more important for conservation organizations, according to one funder.

There is recognition of a need for broader voices to be included in policy and management decisions. While some foundations have not previously invested significant energy in intentionally seeking out diverse and underrepresented voices they are beginning to do so now. Equally conservation organizations themselves are beginning to create processes and programs of work to create greater equality in inclusion in their own internal workings as well as in their external facing policies and programs.

***Takeaways:***

The Coronavirus has begun to bring to light multiple and deep layers of inequality that affect women, Indigenous People, and people of color in particular. Conservation alone will not solve these larger social and political problems. Yet, it's important to reflect on how conservation is addressing inequality internally and externally particularly in the midst of rapid change and crisis. People are experiencing this crisis in different ways and it is important to reflect on how it is exacerbating existing inequities in natural resource management and access. Equally, it's critical to take into account whether there are equal opportunities for men, women, and people of color to influence policy and projects and what political risks are there from not having inclusive policies. A key factor in addressing these issues throughout organizations, policy and program processes is looking at whether women, Indigenous people, and people of color are represented at decision-making tables to advocate for their interests.

## IV. TOOLS IN ACTION

### A. Adaptive Management

On an organizational level the Coronavirus has been a reminder of the rigidity of long-term strategic plans in times of rapid change, uncertainty, and crisis, making some think about how they can be more flexible and responsive.

One development organization in particular did robust scenarios planning 2 years ago. In the last year as they've looked at those scenarios, they have also decided to shift away from 5 year strategic plans. They now are using a set of filters that help make decisions in real time in order to allow them to be more adaptive to emerging realities. They hope it will make them nimbler. The framework used looks less at crises and more at things like comparative advantage and funding, among other things. Yet the framework could be adapted to include a set of filters that apply to risk decision-making and adaptation using a strategy screen that defines the criteria that your organization will use to choose a particular strategy or course of action.<sup>10</sup>

One of the keys to adapting amidst volatility and uncertainty is maintaining a strategic direction while ensuring that your responses are tailored to the changing context. Adaptive management also requires having a team that does not think in linear, "compliance"-oriented ways and instead is able to think in flexible ways and draw on soft skills to facilitate, influence, motivate and manage relationships with stakeholders.<sup>11</sup>

Those who have begun applying adaptive management approaches in international development have already begun to draw critical lessons from it that can help guide conservation. Among them is not to be overly intent on encapsulating adaptive management in specific tools. Instead it's a matter of teaching a mindset or approach that is flexible to work within different contexts and that asks the right questions, creating feedback loops, piloting, testing, learning, and adapting.<sup>12</sup> This approach is guided by a handful of critical factors and questions stemming from them.

- **Context:** What is the context and how do we need to adjust to the landscape that it creates for us?
- **Appropriate practices:** What are the practices that are best suited to local institutions, cultures and current political climates?
- **What is required:** What about our original design needs to change based on what we continue to learn about the context, needs, and what works?
- **Feedback loops:** How are we regularly gathering information to create feedback loops so that we continually adapt instead of doing so at the end of a project or process?
- **Commitment:** Have we committed enough time to "learn by doing" and adapt?

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<sup>10</sup> La Piana Consulting. Real Time Strategic Planning.

<sup>11</sup> Christie, Angela and Green, Duncan. "The Case for an Adaptive Approach to Empowerment and Accountability Programming in Fragile Settings" ITAD, Oxfam, IDS. 21 June 2019

<sup>12</sup> Ibid

While there is a significant element of changing mindsets and cultivating critical thinking in adaptive management, drawing on existing tools while also being flexible can also be critical.

For instance, adaptive management tools have been developed and refined to create more effective planning, including the Conservation Standards<sup>13</sup>. While many of these tools factor in a need for continual updating and adapting, as the name suggests, the degree to which we may need to adapt and revisit may become greater with the onset of a broad sweeping crisis like the Coronavirus. Along with this there may also be a greater need to revisit theories of change, strategies and results frameworks more frequently with the amount of external uncertainty and the rapid pace of change. While tools such as the Conservation Standards emphasize the opportunity to reflect and revise, there may be greater need to explicitly incorporate tools like “pause and reflect sessions” as well as reflecting and making adaptations at multiple stages of projects and programs rather than at the end. ([See Pause and Reflect](#))

This is similar to the “try, learn, adapt” method used in business management. Specific actions are tried, lessons are quickly gathered to inform what happened and why, and a next action step is designed and built upon what was learned in prior steps.

## B. Scenarios Planning

Scenarios planning can be a simple and useful tool used to explore a range of futures. They test the robustness of current assumptions, theories of change, and strategies. And they help identify potential challenges as well as opportunities.

With the onset of Coronavirus more organizations have been using scenarios planning particularly in operations forecasts and to a lesser extent in policy and program work. And still, given the immense amount of disruption and the relative accessibility and simplicity of scenarios planning not as many organizations are applying this as a tool as could be.

One of the large federated conservation organizations decided that they should undertake scenarios planning related to domestic income in each of the regions where they operate. Normally they had undertaken income projections once a year. However, with the uncertainty presented by Coronavirus they began projecting and looking at different scenarios and doing so more frequently. For instance, in April shortly after the virus became widespread they made projections of two different scenarios showing moderate impacts of the virus on their income as opposed to severe impacts and constraints on their income. They projected the figures for what each of those scenarios might look like in different regions.

The organization then undertook another round of projections in August. By looking at their earlier scenarios against reality and making further projections the organization has been able to target which regional offices may struggle the most and need support from the larger organization. It has also allowed them to gauge whether they need to take fire-fighting measures immediately. In this case the projections are giving the organization

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<sup>13</sup> Open Standards for the Practice of Conservation. Version 4.0. February 2020.

the sense that they have a little time to consider income, costs and staffing issues. It will also allow them to liaise with donors about the ways in which they spend money and the rate at which they are able to do so given the constraints that Coronavirus has placed on most organizations' program and policy work.

## **C. Pause and Reflect Sessions**

Pause and reflect sessions can create important space for teams and organizations to draw out critical lessons, identify what is working and what is not, and ultimately identify ways in which they may want or need to adapt.

Many organizations instinctually take time out to reflect and brainstorm. And yet formalizing the process can be particularly helpful and is proving its merit during the Coronavirus.

For instance, one CMP member found it particularly useful when they discovered that their team had adopted a policy in response to Coronavirus that may benefit one region while causing problems in another. In Asia, markets that sell wild animals pose a threat because of virus shedding of live animals. These markets provide medicinal and luxury goods. However, in Africa markets that sell wild animals provide basic food staples and don't pose the same risks because the animals sold are not alive and/ or meat is dried or smoked significantly reducing risks.

This conservation organization made the error of oversimplifying solutions by having a policy statement drafted by the Asia region which said that due to zoonotic disease spread between wild animals, livestock and humans Asia's wild animals markets should be shut down. However, millions of people in Central Africa depend on these kinds of markets for daily food supply without posing the same risks.

As a result, the organization gathered its senior leadership and for the first time in the organization's history held a senior level pause and reflect session. At first there was resistance to it. However, the team reportedly began to see the benefit as they talked about what could be done better or differently in the future.

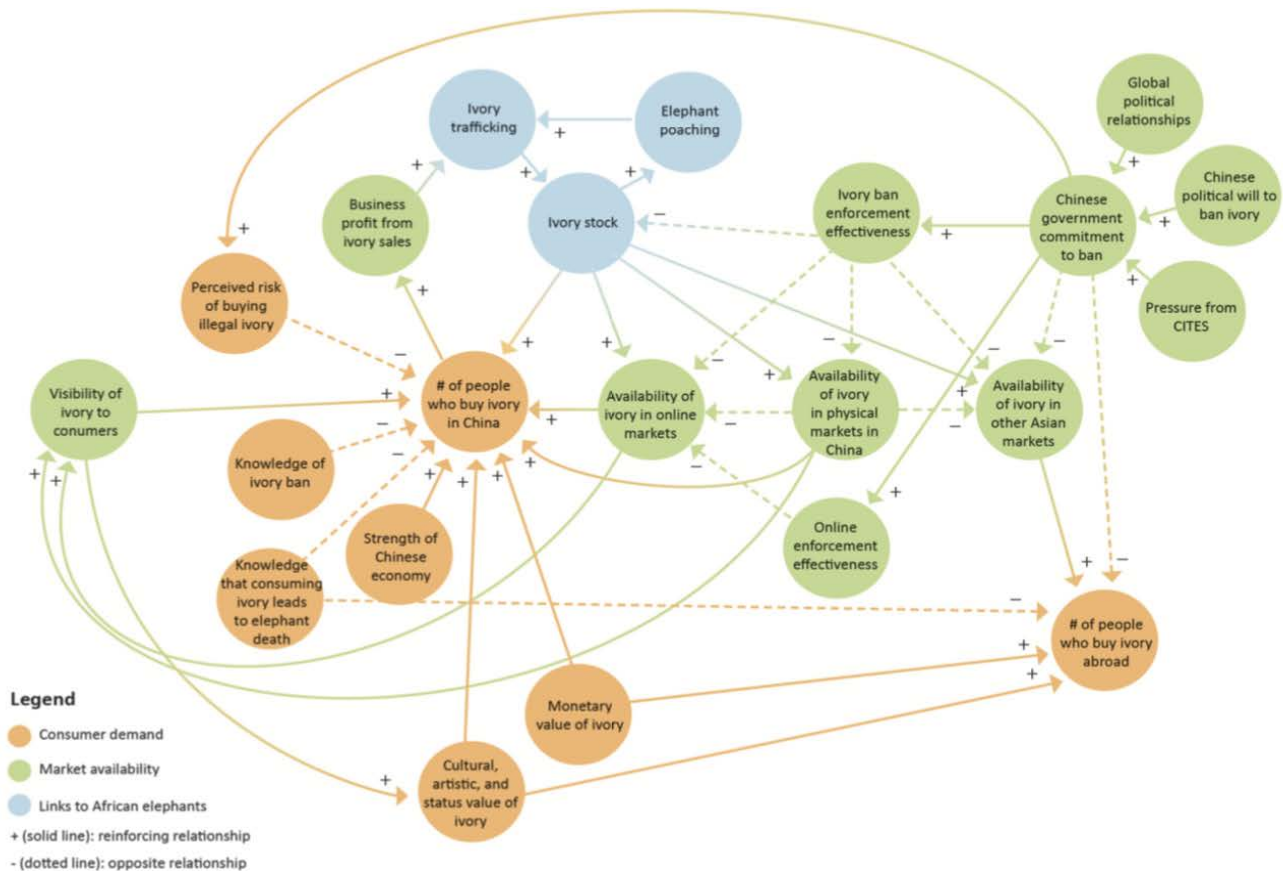
As a result, the organization has come to realize that their policies must be shaped and vetted by multiple regions and have the input of regional leaders. With the adoption of new technology to facilitate remote working they are finding that it is also allowing them to work across continents and time zones to collaborate and comment on documents to avoid mistakes of the past.

## **D. Systems Mapping**

Coronavirus has raised the challenge of how we can effectively understand increasingly complex systems in the average planning process without being an expert in every dimension of economic, social and environmental issues.

Systems mapping is one tool that can help disentangle complexity, map links between different parts of the system, and identify key variables in systems. In an ideal situation it

is also a way to integrate diverse views and bodies of knowledge to give a rounded view. It also encourages collaborative planning across areas of an organization.<sup>14</sup>



### Systems Map to Inform Strategic Planning for Wildlife Conservation<sup>15</sup>

At the same time, those who have been most engaged with applying systems mapping to conservation have found that it is a non-linear process that can introduce ambiguity, which not everyone is comfortable with. They have found that the key to success is often having a skilled facilitator and leader who knows how to keep the process moving forward, helping organize vast amounts of information and ensuring continued buy-in by the team through the process.

One group of conservationists at a large international NGO underwent a month-long systems mapping process in relation to the issue of zoonotic diseases and conservation. They had group discussions and also did expert interviews to input into the process. Different working groups went away and talked to different specialists and then they put that into the model and kept iterating. They also talked to colleagues in various regions of the world. In total 50-60 people provided input to a “big messy map”. Throughout the

<sup>14</sup> Mahajan, Shauna L. et al. “Systems thinking for planning and evaluating conservation interventions.” *Conservation Science and Practice*. April 2, 2019.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid

group had a highly skilled facilitator that ushered through the process. The team concluded that it was the process itself that was most valuable since the final map was particularly complex. However, they were able to draw out key messages and an underlying story that reflected the complex underlying factors yet that had been simplified, which they wouldn't have gotten to without the deeper understanding.

You could do a systems map that is very narrowly focused and is a very linear depiction of the world if you only have a few people who think in similar ways doing it together. To be effective it has to be coupled with a process that facilitates integration of different ideas.

Systems mapping can also be an important aspect of looking forward. Futurists often use them to describe key relationships and identify where change could occur and direct further scanning for signals of future change. They often couple this with scenarios planning to begin to map out ways of reacting to multiple possible eventualities.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> <https://horizons.gc.ca/en/our-work/learning-materials/foresight-training-manual-module-4-system-mapping/2/>

## V. CONCLUSIONS

The coronavirus has been a “game changer” stretching conservation practitioners, leaders, and organizations as well as their government and civil society partners in new ways. It has also brought to light the extent to which political risk is uniquely intertwined with other risks and basic operational concerns in the face of a crisis that has touched all sectors and all countries, each in their own way.

As the crisis continues to unfold, and along with it the medium to long-term impacts, it is critical for those in conservation to secure their basic foundations so they can move from working in crisis management mode. This will allow them to begin to look at the theories underpinning their models of change, the strategies for delivering impact, and the partnerships, relationships, and tools that will help them do so.

On one hand organizations must be mindful of the shifts in the political environments in which they operate, factoring into their landscape mapping considerations such as shifts away from democracy, the state of agencies and institutions, as well as any changes in attitudes towards civil society.

Additionally, more than ever they must work collaboratively with others in the sector as well as partners in sectors like health and economics to get a rounded view and more nuanced understanding of the changes taking place around them and the risks and opportunities they present.

Political risk in the purest sense, meaning direct relationship with government and changes within government, is an area where conservation will need to continue to develop an understanding at this critical juncture. However, a more nuanced understanding appears more useful in light of reflections from the coronavirus. This means taking into account the complexity of how political, economic, and social risks have converged as well as reflecting the realities of what organizations are dealing with in the day to day.

That said, there are a number of tools and processes for deeper reflection that may aid conservation organizations in thinking more strategically and more long-term in response to not only the coronavirus but also future large scale and transnational disruptions of which we are likely to see more.

To aid this reflection and concrete planning, the following series of questions can help guide and locate organizations so that they may continue to be resilient and effective.

## **VI. METHODOLOGY**

This report was compiled based upon a literature review and two-dozen interviews with experts working across conservation, international development, philanthropy, and risk assessment. Those interviewed represent a diverse group of people working in Europe, North America, Latin America, Asia and Africa. This includes experts in organizations of differing sizes as well as those that work as federated international NGOs and those that work more locally. Due to the nature of the impacts of Covid-19 and the significant pressures that it has placed on smaller and more local organizations we were not able to speak directly with as many of these experts as intended. We however spoke with those that work most closely with them internationally. Additionally, given the wide-ranging impacts of the Coronavirus across the political, economic, and social spheres this research process was undertaken in a relatively short period of time while the medium to long-term impacts are still unfolding or are yet to be seen. As a result, this continues to be early stages of an iterative learning process. And, future work should reflect an even greater diversity of views and perspectives.