



WORLD WETLANDS 2026

*African Wetlands and Traditional Knowledge: Protecting
Heritage for Resilience*

| Pan African Climate
Justice Alliance (PACJA)

Every February 2, the world celebrates International Wetlands Day. This year, the Pan-African Climate Justice Alliance (PACJA) convened the webinar under the theme "African Wetlands and Traditional Knowledge: Protecting Heritage for Resilience. Attended by hundreds of partners from across the continent, the discussion reiterated the critical importance of wetlands for Africa's resilience, the alarming rate of their degradation, and the necessity of integrating indigenous knowledge, rights-based governance, and sustainable financing for their protection.

The event was intended to elevate African wetlands and Indigenous and traditional knowledge as foundational pillars of holistic resilience, and catalyse stronger policy recognition, coordinated action, and sustained investment in wetland protection and restoration across the continent.

Importance and Threats to African Wetlands

The African wetlands are critical natural infrastructures that support food systems, ensure water security, facilitate trade, sustain human settlements, and preserve cultural identities. They also play a vital role in flood absorption, store water during droughts, and provide essential habitats for biodiversity.

However, the alarming decline of African wetlands urgently needs attention. For example, Africa has lost more than half of certain wetland types in recent decades, and the remaining wetlands are largely degraded. In the case of Lake Chad, it has lost 90% of its area, which has resulted in significant losses in livelihoods and stability. Here are key points raised from the webinar.

IDENTIFIED KEY THREATS DRIVING WETLANDS DEGRADATION

Extractive Development Models: Large-scale infrastructure, commercial agriculture, mining, oil extraction, pollution-intensive industrial growth, unplanned urbanisation.

Land Grabs: Appropriation of wetlands for agribusiness, speculative real estate, or conservation schemes that exclude communities.

Debt-Driven Mega-projects: Governments under fiscal pressure prioritise projects (dams, highways, ports) financed through unsustainable debt, often overriding environmental safeguards and bypassing Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC).

Pollution: Agro-chemicals, untreated sewage, and industrial waste are turning wetlands into "toxic sinks."

Climate Change: Changing rainfall patterns, increased droughts and floods, rising sea levels, multiplying existing pressures and exposing weak governance.

CORE MESSAGE

Wetlands are not "wastelands" but are life-support systems, essential buffers against climate change, and central to Africa's resilience, dignity, and future. Protecting them is essential, not optional.

What is the take of Governance and policy Frameworks?

There are existing global frameworks that govern wetlands, such as **Ramsar**, which is the only global treaty exclusively focused on wetlands, adopted in 1971. The convention promotes "wise use" and international cooperation.

So far, Africa has 400 Ramsar sites, a good start, but many lack adequate financing, effective management, and community participation.

Additionally, the **Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework** (GBF) in which Wetlands are explicitly mentioned and are critical for achieving targets related to spatial planning, restoration (Target 2), the "30 by 30" agenda (Target 3), climate change (Target 12), and finance (Targets 15 and 19). However, challenges are still facing the governance of wetlands in Africa.

CHALLENGES IN GOVERNANCE

Fragmented Mandates: Multiple agencies with competing agendas lead to policy paralysis.

Weak Enforcement: Policies and regulations governing wetlands are poorly enforced.

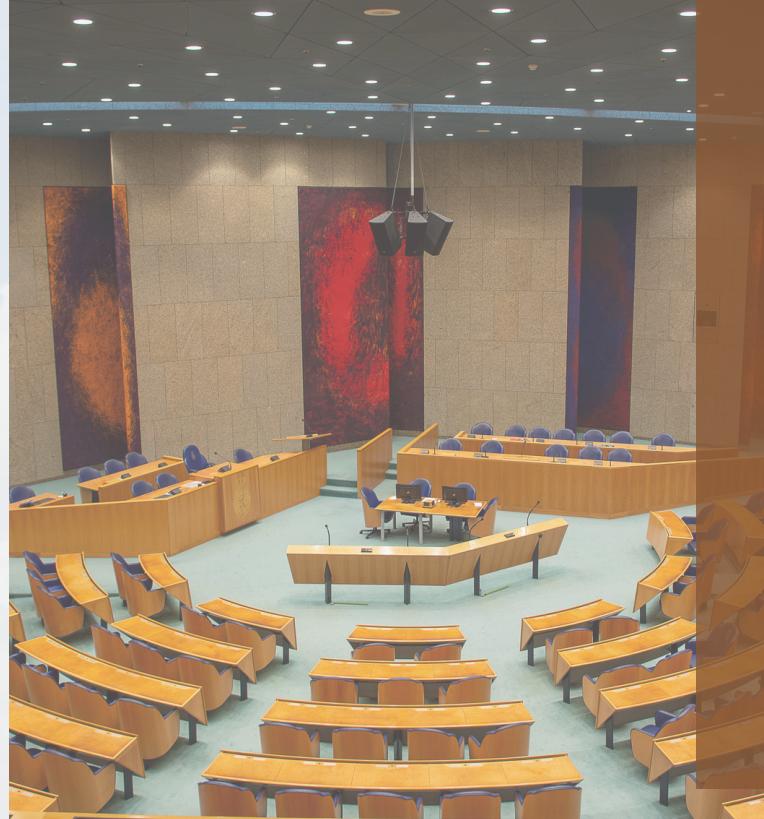
Top-down Planning: Policies are often developed without adequate community input, viewing communities as subjects rather than partners.

Economic Valuation Bias: Overemphasis on market services (e.g., carbon credits) neglects non-market services, cultural value, and regulating services.



Recommendations for Governance

- **Integrate wetlands into climate, biodiversity, and development planning** (NDCs, NBSAPs, infrastructure planning).
- **Champion a nature-positive approach** that secures customary rights and generates equitable benefits, avoiding "fortress conservation."
- **Operationalise equity** by making FPIC, accountability, and gender responsiveness core metrics of success.
- Integrate FPIC into legal frameworks as a statutory requirement and ensure it is a continuous process.
- **Create clear accountability and grievance mechanisms**, and multi-stakeholder governance platforms.



UNDENIABLE ROLE OF TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE AND COMMUNITIES

Africa's indigenous peoples and local communities have protected wetlands for generations through customary laws, sacred sites, seasonal mobility, and traditional practices. These are sophisticated, place-based, and ecosystem-based adaptation strategies.



"Indigenous knowledge, women's leadership, and customary norms have long sustained the Bangweulu Wetlands, yet these systems remain largely invisible in formal policy." **Nsama Musonda Kearns, Executive Director, Care for Nature Zambia**

Sacred Sites and Taboos

Many wetlands are treated as sacred (e.g., Obi pond in Nigeria, Corrupt National Park in Cameroon, River Chalua in Kenya, Oshun Grove in Nigeria), with taboos prohibiting destructive activities like fishing, hunting, or logging, ensuring biodiversity conservation.

Traditional Recession Agriculture

Traditional flood recession agriculture (*fadama* in West Africa), wetlands agroforestry (Fulani in Sahel), seasonal flood forecasting (Lulu in Kenya, Tunga in Zambia), traditional fishery management (Okavango Delta, Botswana), papyrus harvesting (Uganda's Lake Victoria), traditional water storage (Niger River Basin), native grass replanting (Sudan's Sudd area).

THREATS TO INDIGNOUS KNOWLEDGE

- **Incursion of Foreign Religions:** Conflicts with traditional belief systems.
- **Lack of Documentation:** Many Indigenous Knowledge (IK) systems are not documented, hindering intergenerational transmission.
- **Science and Technology Advances:** IK often sidelined by modern scientific and technological approaches.
- **Lack of Political Support & Awareness:** Limited recognition by political leaders and decreasing awareness among youth.
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RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IK

- Deepen research into indigenous practices for wetland conservation.
- Incorporate cultural heritage preservation into development planning.
- Document and write about IK systems for intergenerational transfer.
- Political leaders must recognise and respect culture and tradition, incorporating them into policy.
- Integrate the teaching of indigenous knowledge into educational curricula at all levels.

ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS IN PROTECTING WETLANDS



"Civil society organisations are critical bridges between policy, finance, and communities, ensuring accountability and safeguarding rights in wetland governance. Without strong civil society engagement, wetland commitments risk remaining on paper." **Dr. Venter Mwongera, African Biodiversity Alliance**

In this webinar, CSOs were described as a critical constituency where their role was described as Critical not "optional extras" but fundamental foundations of resilience, as they operate as a bridge between communities, governments, and international processes.

CSOS FUNCTIONS

- Carry community voices into policy spaces and translate policy for grassroots understanding.
- Defend civic space, challenge exclusion, and expose greenwashing.
- Empower communities as custodians of wetlands, not just beneficiaries.
- Help communities understand their rights and facilitate inclusive dialogue (FPIC).
- Monitor safeguard implementation and link people to governance mechanisms.
- Translate local realities into policy evidence to ensure commitments reflect lived experiences.

REQUIRED SHIFTS:

Structural changes to institutionalise FPIC, recognize wetlands as biocultural heritage, involve communities in stewardship programs, formally include CSOs in governance, and protect land/water rights. A worldview shift from extraction to reciprocity, control to custodianship, token participation to self-determination, and short-term projects to living systems.

Towards Financing Wetlands: What are the current global and Regional Instruments in place?



"Wetlands remain among the least financed ecosystems, despite delivering some of the highest adaptation and resilience returns."

"Fragmented climate, biodiversity, and development finance continues to undermine long-term wetland stewardship." **Nicholas Abuya, Global Advocacy Lead, Christian Aid**

There are existing global financing instruments in place including Bilateral development assistance, multilateral climate funds (GEF, GCF, Adaptation Fund), regional/national funds (African Adaptation Acceleration Program, national climate funds like Kenya's County Climate Change Funds). The purpose is to support conservation, sustainable use, policy reform, community benefits, and integrated blue/green economy approaches. Though these channels exist, there are still barriers accessing funds. Particularly the barriers are in reconciling socio-economic development with conservation, which creates trade-offs and challenges.

WAY FORWARD

- Identify approaches that explore trade-offs and synergies between development and conservation.
- Adopt Ecosystem-based Adaptation (EbA) and Nature-based Solutions (NbS) to unlock climate finance.
- Policymakers must create an enabling environment for private investment.
- EbA aligns with Locally Led Adaptation (LLA) principles, considering local concerns and integrating community participation.
- Ensure alignment with the Global Goal on Adaptation (GGA) and AU Agenda 2063.

ACCOUNTABILITY & EQUITY IN FINANCE:

- Climate finance must be anchored in Rio Convention and Paris Agreement frameworks.
- Developed countries must be held accountable for finance provision and mobilization.
- Governance of climate finance at all levels must be guided by accountability, transparency, and integrity.
- Increasing local control over climate finance strengthens civil society and redresses power imbalances

CASE STUDIES IN BLENDED FINANCE

- **Nairobi Water Fund (Kenya):** Payment for Ecosystem Services (PES) + blended finance. Downstream water users finance upstream stewardship, leading to improved water reliability and reduced sedimentation.
- **Greater Cape Town Water Fund (South Africa):** Public-private fund (city budgets, corporates, philanthropy) for headwater wetlands and aquifer recharge zones, restoring thousands of hectares and creating green jobs.
- **Okavango-Kubango Headwaters (Angola):** Philanthropic funding for early investment to avoid costly restoration, focusing on transboundary coordination and community stewardship.
- **Mangrove and Blue Carbon Finance (Eastern/Southern Africa):** Reserve-based finance blended with grants, where carbon revenues complement public/philanthropic capital, with safeguards for tenure and benefit-sharing.
- **Next Steps for Financing:** Map priority wetlands for risk and investability, standardise project preparation, convene diverse funders for blended facilities, adopt robust Monitoring, Reporting, and Verification (MRV) and open data policies, and co-design deals with communities.

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“Financing wetlands requires aligning climate, biodiversity, and development finance around long-term ecosystem integrity and community stewardship. Blended and private finance must be governed by strong safeguards to ensure it does not undermine rights, ecological integrity, or local control.” Mr. Nathaniel Ntunji- The Nature Conservancy (TNC)



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WHAT THE SAY



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“Wetlands loss and degradation is not just an environmental issue – it is a governance failure, a development failure, and ultimately a justice failure.” **Dr Mithika Mwenda, Executive Director, PACJA**



“Protecting wetlands is fundamental to water security, livelihoods, and biodiversity, and the Ramsar Convention provides a critical framework for this protection.” **Dr. Julie Mulonga- Director East Africa, Wetlands International**



“Indigenous and traditional knowledge systems are living governance systems – rooted in culture, spirituality, and customary law – that have protected Africa’s wetlands and forests for generations.” **Prof. Popoola Labode- Executive Director, Africa Forest Forum**



“Free, Prior and Informed Consent should be continuous – informing adaptive management strategies and ensuring communities remain active decision-makers throughout the life of wetland interventions.” **Ms. Catherine Mungai- Senior Programme Officer, Climate and Biodiversity Engagement, IUCN**



“Excluding communities from wetland governance threatens not only ecosystems, but the transmission of intergenerational knowledge.” **Ms Nsama Musonda Kearns- Care for Nature Zambia**



“The degradation of the Niger Delta’s wetlands is an environmental injustice with direct consequences for livelihoods, health, and dignity. Restoring wetlands in the Niger Delta requires accountability, remediation, and genuine community participation – not token engagement.” **Mr. Godwin Ugah, South-South Zonal Coordinator, Nigeria**



“Wetland protection works best when communities are trusted as custodians rather than treated as stakeholders at the margins.” **Ms. Tracy Sonny, Coordinator, Botswana Climate Change Network**

