

MBZ Project - 242535112_Byron Project Updates 2024

Title of the Project: *Mitigating Poaching of African Golden Cat in Ongo Community Forest through livestock Seed Banks and Savings and Credit Cooperative Organizations.*

Activity 1: Community Focus Group Discussions (November 2024)

In November 2024, the project team conducted a series of Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) involving community members from three villages surrounding the Ongo Community Private Forest; Abangi, Ogadra, and Onieni, located in Kasenene Parish, Masindi District, Uganda. These discussions, organized as part of a broader conservation initiative, aimed to gather local knowledge to inform strategies for protecting the African Golden Cats (AGCs). Specific objectives included identifying suitable areas for AGC habitats, determining locations for setting up transects and camera traps for future monitoring, and discussing the allocation of seed funds within the SACCO. Additionally, the FGDs explored the selection of livestock species for seed banks to support ex-hunters and other community members as alternative livelihood options.

Each discussion, facilitated by the project coordinator and documented by a note-taker, involved 10 participants from each village, for a total of 30 participants. The FGDs were kept concise, with a maximum duration of one hour per session. Participants were selected in collaboration with the respective village Chairpersons, who identified individuals with a high likelihood of possessing relevant knowledge about the forest and its wildlife, particularly the AGCs. These included farmers, ex-hunters, village hunters, and seed gatherers who live or work close to the forest edge and are more likely to encounter wildlife.

Participation in the FGDs was voluntary and guided by the principles of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC). The project team, with assistance from the Chairpersons, extended invitations to potential participants. Upon meeting them, the team explained the project's objectives and obtained their consent to participate. No personal data was used beyond the scope of this project, and only individuals who agreed to participate were involved. To ensure diverse perspectives, participants were grouped based on shared characteristics such as gender, age, occupation, and proximity to the forest.

During the sessions, participants were assured that the themes discussed were not of a sensitive nature. Questions about illegal activities, such as the use of snare wires or identifying others engaged in such practices, were explicitly avoided. Potential sensitivities around wildlife-related topics were addressed in advance with the village Chairpersons to ensure a respectful and inclusive approach.

The discussions commenced with the project team warmly welcoming the participants and expressing gratitude for their involvement. The facilitator outlined the objectives of the FGD, emphasizing its role in a broader conservation initiative funded by the Mohammed Bin Zayed Species Conservation Fund (MBZSCF) and implemented in partnership with Embaka-CBO. The project seeks to mitigate poaching of African Golden Cats in the Ongo Community Forest by

introducing alternative livelihoods, such as livestock seed banks and Savings and Credit Cooperative Organizations (SACCOs).

Participants were encouraged to share their knowledge and experiences openly, without fear of judgment. The facilitator guided the conversation, exploring participants' observations of AGCs, including areas where they are more or less likely to be found and any sightings or encounters with snares in the past or present. The group also discussed the general level of awareness about AGCs among villagers, including beliefs, values, or traditional practices associated with the species. Additionally, participants shared their perspectives on how SACCOs and livestock seed banks could best be structured to improve community livelihoods.

Throughout the discussions, participants were reassured that their privacy and confidentiality would be respected. None of their responses would be linked to them personally, and contact details provided for the purpose of participation were not shared beyond the project team. They were reminded of their right to withdraw from the discussions at any point without providing a reason.

These FGDs served as a critical step in gathering community input, ensuring that the project's interventions align with local knowledge, practices, and needs, ultimately supporting the conservation of the African Golden Cat and improving community livelihoods.



Photo 1: Participants from Abangi, Ogadra, and Onieni villages engage in a Focus Group Discussion facilitated by the project team, sharing insights on African Golden Cat habitats and sustainable livelihood initiatives. © Byron Ssemambo.

Outcome of the FGD Activity

The Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) conducted in November 2024 with community members from Abangi, Ogadra, and Onieni villages provided valuable insights for the African Golden Cat (AGC) conservation project. Participants identified specific areas within the Ongo Community Private Forest where AGCs are more likely to be found, based on past sightings, encounters, and local knowledge. These areas were noted as suitable for setting up transects and camera traps for future monitoring efforts.

Community members shared that AGCs are occasionally seen or trapped in snares, though such instances have decreased over time. They also highlighted the general level of awareness about the species among villagers, with some cultural beliefs and values tied to their presence. However, there was little evidence of direct use or traditional practices involving AGCs.

Regarding livelihood initiatives, participants expressed strong support for the introduction of livestock seed banks and the establishment of SACCOs. They provided recommendations on the types of livestock that would be most beneficial, emphasizing species suited to the local environment and accessible for community members. The discussions also led to a consensus on how SACCO funds should be used, with participants proposing clear criteria, terms, and conditions to ensure equitable access and maximize impact.

Overall, the FGDs revealed a willingness among community members to collaborate in conservation efforts while improving their livelihoods. Their input will inform the placement of monitoring equipment and the development of sustainable initiatives to reduce poaching pressures and foster coexistence with wildlife.

Activity 2: Establishing Livestock Seed Banks to Support Sustainable Livelihoods

In December 2024, building on the insights gathered during the November Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), the project team initiated the establishment of livestock seed banks by distributing 30 female goats to community members from Abangi, Ogadra, and Onieni villages. This initiative was carefully designed to provide an alternative, sustainable source of protein and income for families, aiming to reduce reliance on bushmeat hunting, particularly among former poachers and other community members living near the Ongo Community Private Forest.

The goats, selected for their adaptability to the local environment, were distributed equitably among identified beneficiaries. Recipients included ex-hunters, farmers, and other community members who demonstrated a commitment to conservation and a willingness to adopt alternative livelihoods. Each beneficiary received training in animal husbandry practices, ensuring they possessed the skills needed for proper care, successful breeding, and sustainable livestock management. The training sessions covered essential topics such as feeding, disease prevention, and shelter construction, providing participants with the knowledge to maximize the goats' health and productivity.

A key feature of the initiative was the adoption of a "pass-on-the-gift" model to promote sustainability and shared responsibility. Under this model, each recipient committed to passing on the first offspring a “kid” to a neighboring household. This approach ensured that the benefits of the program would extend beyond the initial group of beneficiaries, gradually creating a ripple effect throughout the community. The model also fostered a spirit of cooperation, mutual benefit, and accountability among community members, reinforcing the program's long-term impact.

In addition to improving access to animal protein for household consumption, the goats provided a potential source of supplementary income. Beneficiaries were encouraged to breed their livestock to expand their herds, creating opportunities for additional income through the sale of offspring or dairy products. This dual-purpose nutrition and income generation was central to the program’s design, ensuring both immediate and long-term benefits for participating households.

The activity was marked by a strong sense of community engagement and hope for a future less dependent on unsustainable practices like bushmeat hunting. As the project progresses, the livestock seed bank initiative is expected to serve as a cornerstone for both conservation and livelihood improvement, reducing human pressure on the Ongo Community Private Forest and fostering coexistence with wildlife.



Photo 2: Empowering Communities Through Livestock: Beneficiaries from Abangi, Ogadra, and Onieni villages receive female goats as part of the livestock seed bank initiative, fostering sustainable livelihoods and reducing reliance on bushmeat hunting. © Byron Ssemambo.

Activity 3: Establishing Savings and Credit Cooperatives (SACCOs) for Sustainable Community Development

In December 2024, the project team has taken a significant step toward fostering financial empowerment and addressing poverty within the communities of Abangi, Ogadra, and Onieni villages by establishing and handing over a seed fund to a newly formed Savings and Credit Cooperative (SACCO) group. This initiative was designed to diversify household income streams and provide community members with access to financial resources that can improve their economic resilience and well-being.

The SACCO initiative will serve as a cornerstone for enabling families to save, access affordable credit, and invest in income-generating activities. Members of the SACCO group were drawn from individuals who participated in earlier project activities, including the livestock seed bank program, ensuring alignment between conservation and livelihood goals. The seed fund was allocated to the group through the SACCO Board chairperson to act as capital for issuing small loans, which community members could use to start or expand businesses, invest in agriculture, or address pressing family needs such as education and healthcare.



Photo 3: *Empowering Communities Through Financial Support: The Project Coordinator hands over the SACCO seed fund to the Chairperson, marking a pivotal step toward diversifying family incomes and addressing poverty in Abangi, Ogadra, and Onieni villages. © Byron Ssemambo.*

To promote transparency and accountability, the SACCO group underwent training in financial literacy, record-keeping, and fund management before receiving the seed fund. This preparation will ensure that members understand how to manage the funds effectively and fairly, with clear rules on loan disbursement, repayment schedules, and interest rates. The cooperative's operations were guided by a participatory approach, with members collectively deciding on policies and priorities for the fund's use.



Photo 4: *Members of the SACCO executive committee participate in a training session on financial literacy and bookkeeping, equipping them with essential skills to manage funds effectively and ensure transparency. © Byron Ssemambo.*

The establishment of the SACCO will begin to create a ripple effect of positive change. By providing a platform for regular savings, members will cultivate a habit of financial planning and security. The availability of credit will enable members to explore new economic opportunities, such as starting small businesses or improving existing agricultural ventures. This diversification of income sources is reducing financial dependency on unsustainable practices, such as poaching, and promoting long-term community development.

The SACCO initiative will also strengthen a social cohesion, as members work together to achieve common financial goals. The collaborative nature of the cooperative will reinforce the community's shared commitment to both economic growth and conservation efforts. By addressing poverty through diversified family income, the SACCO program will empower the community to take ownership of their development while contributing to the broader objectives of the project.

As the SACCO grows, its benefits are expected to reach a wider circle of community members, creating a sustainable financial ecosystem that supports both livelihoods and conservation. With continued guidance and support, this initiative has the potential to serve as a model for similar communities seeking to balance economic needs with environmental stewardship.

Activity 4: Supporting Community Wildlife Protection Committees: Snare Removal and Wildlife Conservation

As part of the ongoing efforts to safeguard wildlife in the Ongo Community Private Forest, the project team took a critical step in November 2024 during the FDG session by selecting four community monitors (both men and women) to carry out regular snare removal operations. This initiative was designed to directly reduce the number of active traps within the forest, thereby decreasing the threat posed to local wildlife, including the African Golden Cat, and promoting a safer, more sustainable environment for biodiversity.

The community monitors were chosen based on their local knowledge, proximity to the forest, and commitment to conservation efforts. These individuals are familiar with the terrain, the patterns of wildlife movement, and the locations where snares are most commonly found, making them ideal candidates for the task. Their role involves conducting regular patrols, identifying areas where snares may have been set, and safely removing these traps to prevent harm to wildlife in Ongo Forest.

To ensure the safety of the monitors and enhance their effectiveness in the field, each of the selected individuals was provided with essential protective gear. This gear included items such as gloves, boots, clothing for rough terrain, and tools for safely dismantling and removing snares. The inclusion of proper protective equipment not only ensured the safety and well-being of the community monitors but also reinforced the project's commitment to responsible, sustainable, and ethical wildlife monitoring practices.



Photo 5: Shows Community monitors wearing protective gear to ensure their safety as they embark on regular patrols, provided by © Byron Ssemambo

By equipping community members with both the skills and the tools needed for snare removal, the project has strengthened local capacity to protect wildlife while also fostering a sense of ownership and responsibility within the community. The monitors are now better prepared to navigate the forest safely, even in challenging conditions, and their efforts will contribute significantly to the reduction of snares, thus helping to mitigate the threat of poaching and human-wildlife conflict.

The snare removal activities are also a critical part of broader conservation goals. By regularly monitoring and clearing traps, the community wildlife protection committee directly supports the long-term preservation of wildlife habitats, including those of vulnerable species like the African Golden Cat. Moreover, the project fosters deeper community engagement in wildlife conservation, ensuring that local people play an active role in protecting their natural resources and contributing to sustainable forest management practices.

Through this initiative, the project team has not only reinforced wildlife protection efforts but also built local capacity and enhanced community ownership of conservation work. Regular snare removal is expected to have a lasting positive impact on forest ecosystems, wildlife populations, and the overall sustainability of conservation efforts in the region.

.

Upcoming activities

1. *Monitor the effectiveness of our community-based conservation activities implemented in Ongo through community focus group discussions intending to gather information on AGC and measuring the success.*
2. *Data collection on threats to the AGC and their habitats*