

MBZ Project - 242535112_Byron Project Updates 2025

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 (April 2025)

In April 2025, the project team conducted a second 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 to evaluate the interventions including the key successes and challenges. 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 evaluation of the interventions which include (livestock seed bank and Savings and Credit Cooperative Organizations), Additionally also discussed some other alternative livelihood options to attract more Ex-poachers and current poachers.

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 second 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 insights freely in a safe and respectful environment. The facilitator underscored the importance of confidentiality stressing that individual responses would remain anonymous, and participation was entirely voluntary. The right to withdraw from the discussions at any time was reiterated.

The second round of FGDs commenced with a warm welcome from the project team, who expressed appreciation for the participants' ongoing involvement in the conservation initiative. The facilitator clearly outlined the objectives of the session, emphasizing its critical role in evaluating the community's perceptions and experiences regarding African Golden Cat (AGC) conservation and assessing the effectiveness of alternative livelihood interventions.

Participants were reminded that the discussions were part of a larger conservation strategy aimed at protecting the AGC, a rare and elusive carnivore, by addressing one of the key threats poaching through community-driven solutions. These include the introduction of livestock seed banks, Savings and Credit Cooperative Organizations (SACCOs), and now exploratory discussions on beekeeping.



Photo 1: Community members from Abangi, Ogadra, and Onieni villages take part in the second Focus Group Discussion, facilitated by the project team to evaluate conservation interventions for the African Golden Cat (AGC) © Byron Ssemambo.

Outcome of the FGD Activity

Participants demonstrated a growing awareness of the African Golden Cat, with several acknowledging its presence in and around Ongo Community Forest. A notable anecdote shared by community members indicated increased sightings of AGCs, particularly incidents where they were observed preying on domestic chickens. This was interpreted as a possible sign that AGC numbers may be recovering, potentially due to reduced hunting pressure.

The discussions delved into the spatial distribution of the species, with participants identifying specific areas where AGCs are more or less likely to be found. These inputs are invaluable for future transect and camera trap placement to monitor population trends.

However, the discussions also revealed low general awareness about the AGC among the wider community. While a few cultural beliefs and superstitions were loosely associated with the animal, there was no substantial evidence of traditional uses or rituals involving AGCs. This lack of cultural exploitation presents an opportunity to build stronger conservation messaging without significant resistance from traditional practices.

The FGDs confirmed a growing sense of ownership among villagers over the conservation process. There is a strong willingness to collaborate with the project team, not only to protect the AGC but also to improve their standard of living. Participants were particularly pleased that their views were being considered in decision-making, such as in the placement of monitoring equipment and selection of livelihood activities.

They recommended:

- Expanding awareness campaigns to reach more villagers, including youth and elders.
- Strengthening support for anti-poaching patrols through provision of gear and transportation.
- Piloting additional income-generating activities, like beekeeping and agroforestry, tailored to local capacities and ecological needs.

The second FGD session was a critical milestone in the AGC conservation initiative. It provided both qualitative and actionable data to guide implementation and monitoring. Importantly, it demonstrated that community-driven conservation, when linked with tangible livelihood support, can be a powerful strategy for protecting endangered species like the African Golden Cat.

The insights gathered will inform the adaptive management of project activities, ensuring that conservation goals align with community aspirations and realities.

Activity 2: Livestock Seed Banks and the “Pass-on-the-Gift” Model

Building on the findings and recommendations from the November Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), the project team successfully launched a livestock seed bank initiative aimed at curbing bushmeat hunting in the Ongo Community Private Forest. In collaboration with local leaders and community monitors, a total of 30 female goats were distributed to carefully selected households from Abangi, Ogadra, and Onieni villages. These recipients included reformed poachers and other vulnerable families living adjacent to the forest groups often at the frontline of human-wildlife conflict and unsustainable forest resource use.

The initiative was strategically designed to offer a sustainable, alternative source of animal protein and income, directly addressing one of the root causes of poaching: household food insecurity and lack of livelihood options. Each beneficiary underwent training in animal husbandry, equipping them with practical knowledge on feeding, shelter, disease management, and breeding practices to ensure the long-term success of the livestock enterprise.

A standout feature of the intervention was the adoption of the “pass-on-the-gift” model, a culturally appropriate and community-centered approach that fosters sustainability, equity, and social cohesion. Under this model, each goat recipient committed to donating the first female offspring (kid) to a neighboring household in need. This system not only ensured that the benefits of the intervention would ripple through the wider community but also instilled a strong sense of mutual responsibility and solidarity among participating families.

Since the initiative’s rollout, the project has recorded encouraging early results. To date, 6 goats have successfully produced 10 kids a positive indicator of both animal health and beneficiary commitment to the project. Of these, 6 kids have already been passed on to new households, while the remaining four are expected to be shared in the coming months. This organic growth is gradually expanding the circle of impact, with more families gaining access to alternative sources of livelihood.

Beyond livestock ownership, the initiative has contributed to reduced pressure on forest biodiversity, particularly through a noticeable decline in bushmeat hunting. Participants reported an increased sense of pride and responsibility, especially knowing their animals are not only supporting their own households but also benefitting neighbors. Many shared that the goats have become a symbol of hope, stability, and opportunity, especially for households previously involved in unsustainable forest practices.

Furthermore, the goats have begun to offer multiple livelihood benefits:

- Protein source: Households now have improved access to animal protein, improving nutrition and food security.
- Income generation: Some beneficiaries have started exploring local markets for goat sales, opening pathways to additional income.

- Social capital: The gift-passing system has deepened trust and interdependence within and across villages, reinforcing community resilience.

As this cycle continues and more goats reproduce, the livestock seed bank is expected to scale naturally, transforming the socioeconomic landscape of these forest-edge communities while complementing broader conservation goals. By creating a sense of shared investment in each other's well-being, the model exemplifies how community-led solutions can achieve both wildlife conservation and livelihood development in a mutually reinforcing way.



Photo 2: *Promoting Sustainable Livelihoods – A project beneficiary hands over a female goat kid to a neighbor as part of the “Pass-on-the-Gift” model, supporting community efforts to reduce dependence on bushmeat hunting. © Byron Ssemambo.*

Activity 3: Evaluating the SACCO group for Financial Empowerment and Conservation Sustainability

As part of the broader strategy to integrate community welfare with biodiversity conservation, the project initiated the establishment of Savings and Credit Cooperative Organizations (SACCOs) across the villages of Abangi, Ogadra, and Onieni. This intervention was designed to promote financial inclusion, build economic resilience, and provide a sustainable pathway out of poverty

particularly for households living near the Ongo Community Private Forest who are most vulnerable to engaging in unsustainable practices like bushmeat hunting.

At the core of this initiative was the provision of a seed fund to jumpstart SACCO operations. The seed fund was handed over as a revolving loan facility, empowering SACCO members to borrow funds under terms they defined and managed collectively. This approach not only encouraged ownership and transparency but also allowed members to tailor financial services to their unique needs and economic realities.

A total of 15 members comprising 10 men and 5 women were the first to benefit from this facility. The members accessed business loans at a low-interest rate of 5% for a three-month term and agricultural loans at 10% for a six-month term, as resolved during the SACCO's Annual General Assembly (AGA). The AGA, held in a participatory manner, allowed members to agree on loan conditions, repayment schedules, and the reinvestment of profits ensuring democratic decision-making and accountability.

The first cycle of loans yielded an interest income of 324,000 UGX (approx. \$90) a modest but significant achievement reflecting both the viability of the SACCO and the commitment of its members to timely loan repayment. Importantly, this fund did not sit idle. A portion of the interest earned was reinvested into supporting the livestock initiative, particularly covering veterinary treatment for goats distributed through the livestock seed bank. This cross-linkage between financial services and livestock care highlights a synergistic model where community-led financial management directly supports conservation-linked livelihood interventions.

Even more promising is the SACCO members' forward-looking vision for the accumulated profits. During group discussions, it was agreed that future interest earnings would be used to support critical conservation efforts, including:

- Providing safety gear and modest allowances to community wildlife monitors conducting weekly anti-poaching patrols in Ongo Forest.
- Supporting the expansion of the livestock seed bank, particularly for vulnerable households not yet reached by the “pass-on-the-gift” model.
- Emergency funds to respond to sudden community or wildlife-related challenges, enhancing the community's ability to adapt and respond.

This approach has reinforced a strong sense of shared responsibility and ownership over both the SACCO and the conservation outcomes it supports. It has also helped to deepen the connection between improved livelihoods and environmental stewardship, reinforcing the understanding that sustainable development and biodiversity protection are mutually reinforcing goals.

Beyond the financial gains, the SACCOs have become a platform for social inclusion, capacity building, and local leadership. Members report feeling more empowered to make informed

decisions, manage finances, and explore new income-generating ventures ranging from small retail shops to poultry farming and seasonal crop investments. Women, in particular, expressed gratitude for being part of the financial decision-making process and noted that SACCO participation had improved their status within the household and community.

As more cycles are completed and the fund grows, the SACCO is expected to expand its membership base, increase the size and number of loans disbursed, and broaden its impact on both household income levels and conservation outcomes. The integration of loan profits into conservation support mechanisms demonstrates how local financial systems can become powerful tools for protecting endangered species in this case, the elusive and vulnerable African Golden Cat (AGC).

In summary, the establishment of SACCOs has produced tangible and far-reaching results:

- Increased access to credit for underserved community members
- Empowerment of local decision-making and financial governance
- Support to livestock and conservation activities from reinvested interest income
- Reduced reliance on forest-based livelihoods, including illegal hunting
- Stronger community ownership of conservation-linked development models

This activity has laid a solid foundation for long-term sustainability, helping ensure that conservation is not viewed as a constraint, but rather as a shared opportunity for community prosperity and ecological integrity.

Activity 4: Strengthening Wildlife Protection through Community Monitoring and Anti-Poaching Patrols

As part of its multifaceted approach to conserving the African Golden Cat (AGC) and other wildlife species in the Ongo Community Private Forest, the project has prioritized community-led anti-poaching patrols and monitoring efforts. This activity has emerged as a cornerstone of the initiative, combining practical conservation action with community empowerment and capacity building.

At the heart of this intervention is a dedicated team of community monitors local volunteers who have been trained under the project to identify and respond to wildlife threats, particularly illegal hunting practices. These individuals, drawn from Abangi, Ogadra, and Onieni villages, have embraced their role with commitment and pride, carrying out weekly patrols across key forest zones identified as vulnerable to poaching activity.

These patrols have already yielded measurable conservation outcomes. In recent months, the community monitors successfully removed four snare traps and one wooden trap designed to capture birds and small mammals' devices that pose a significant threat to biodiversity, including

the endangered African Golden Cat. Each removal not only reduces immediate danger to wildlife but also sends a powerful message that illegal hunting will not go unnoticed or unchallenged.

Beyond the physical removal of traps, the patrols have had a profound social and behavioral impact. Community members reported a noticeable shift in attitudes toward wildlife, with more people expressing respect and concern for species conservation. This transformation is largely credited to consistent community engagement sessions and the visible presence of patrols, which have elevated awareness and fostered a culture of shared responsibility. The presence of monitors serves as a deterrent to would-be poachers, while their involvement in awareness campaigns strengthens local ownership of conservation outcomes.

While the monitors continue to face challenges such as limited equipment, lack of protective gear, and logistical support, their perseverance has led to enhanced surveillance and reporting of illegal activities. This grassroots surveillance network complements broader conservation goals and is gradually improving the forest's security landscape. In some areas, traditional hunters have voluntarily stopped setting traps after engaging in dialogue with monitors or attending sensitization meetings, indicating early signs of behavioral change and community-led enforcement.

Importantly, this initiative has done more than protect wildlife it has also built capacity and fostered leadership within local communities. The monitors have gained practical skills in navigation, data collection, wildlife identification, and basic enforcement principles. Their experience is cultivating a new generation of local conservation stewards, whose efforts are crucial for sustaining the gains made so far.

In addition to its conservation benefits, the anti-poaching and monitoring program has become an entry point for broader ecosystem protection and sustainable forest management. The frequent patrols are not only about snare removal but also about monitoring habitat conditions, identifying threats such as illegal logging or encroachment, and building relationships with forest-edge households.

Looking ahead, the project team envisions further strengthening these efforts by providing basic support to monitors including safety gear, communication tools, and modest incentives financed in part by SACCO interest earnings and reinvested community contributions. This model ensures that conservation work is community-driven, locally resourced, and financially sustainable over the long term.

In summary, the anti-poaching patrols and community monitoring initiative have delivered tangible and far-reaching results:

- Direct reduction of threats to wildlife through snare and trap removal
- Improved community attitudes and awareness about the importance of wildlife protection

- Increased local capacity in conservation monitoring and enforcement
- Emerging behavioral changes among former poachers and forest users
- Stronger integration of conservation with community structures and decision-making

This activity has proven that when local people are equipped, trusted, and involved, they can become the most effective protectors of their natural heritage. Through these efforts, the African Golden Cat and countless other species now have a better chance of survival in a safer, more respected forest ecosystem.



Photo 3: *Community monitors preparing to dismantle a wooden man-made trap near Ongo Community Forest. © Byron Ssemambo*



Photo 5: *Community monitors removing a snare trap in Ongo Community Forest. © Byron Ssemambo.*

Key recommendations and suggestions

1. Scale Up Conservation Interventions to Additional Villages

- Expand project activities to include two more villages surrounding Ongo Community Forest. This will increase the geographic reach of conservation efforts and ensure wider community involvement in protecting the African Golden Cat and its habitat.

- Prioritize outreach and sensitization in the new villages to build awareness and community buy-in for proposed interventions.

2. Increase the Number of Beneficiaries Across All Activities

- To achieve tangible and more inclusive results, the number of households benefiting from initiatives such as livestock seed banks and SACCOs should be scaled up.
- Expanding the pool of beneficiaries will promote greater social equity and accelerate the positive behavioral shift away from bushmeat hunting and illegal forest use.

3. Strengthen the Livestock Seed Bank Program

- Support more families through the "Pass-on-the-Gift" model by increasing the number of livestock distributed and providing ongoing veterinary support and training in animal husbandry.
- Monitor the growth of the livestock population and improve tracking of pass-on commitments to sustain the model.

4. Enhance SACCO Capacity and Seed Fund Capitalization

- Increase the seed fund capital to enable SACCOs to offer larger and more flexible loans to members, particularly for agricultural and small business activities.
- Provide additional training on financial literacy, savings culture, and investment planning to build long-term economic resilience.

5. Strengthen Community Monitoring and Anti-Poaching Efforts

- Equip community monitors with protective gear, communication tools, and basic field supplies to enhance patrol effectiveness and safety.
- Explore small incentive schemes (e.g., stipends or in-kind rewards) to maintain morale and commitment.
- Regularly evaluate patrol data to guide adaptive conservation strategies.

6. Integrate Sustainable Livelihood Options Like Beekeeping and Agroforestry

- Introduce beekeeping and agroforestry practices as complementary livelihoods that provide income and promote forest conservation.
- Offer targeted training and startup inputs to households interested in diversifying income sources.

7. Enhance Awareness and Education Campaigns

- Continue conducting community sensitization meetings, youth engagements, and school-based programs to foster a conservation ethic and shift attitudes towards species like the AGC.

8. Mobilize Additional Funding to Deepen and Broaden Project Impact

- Current interventions are limited to three villages, yet surrounding communities exert equal pressure on Ongo Forest.
- Additional funding is urgently needed to extend project coverage to at least five villages, increase beneficiary numbers, and ensure long-term sustainability of conservation gains.
- New funding will also allow the team to strengthen infrastructure (e.g., SACCO record systems), support innovation in livelihoods, and implement broader conservation education programs.

Upcoming activities

1. *Final Reporting to MBZSC*