

SS049: Empowering Community Voices in Marine Conservation

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Marine conservation in the Western Indian Ocean (WIO) has historically prioritized biodiversity protection through top-down approaches such as Marine Protected Areas (MPAs), often overlooking the rights, needs, and knowledge of local communities. As a result, conservation is frequently perceived not as a partnership, but as an imposition—marked by increasing restrictions and limited alternatives for livelihoods. This has led to community alienation and reduced compliance with conservation goals. This session will explore pathways to shift from enforcement-driven conservation to community-led stewardship models that deliver both ecological and social outcomes. Grounded in the “Communities as Stewards of Sustainability” pillar of the Symposium, the session will present new research conducted by MUVA in Mozambique, focusing on gender dynamics and women's roles in MPAs. It will also provide a platform for sharing experiences across WIO countries on community-led conservation, including Locally Managed Marine Areas (LMMAs) and Other Effective Area-Based Conservation Measures (OECMs). Participants will engage in discussions on constraints facing communities—particularly women—in conservation, identify key challenges and effective practices, and co-develop recommendations for equitable marine governance. The session will also initiate connections with the LMMA Alliance to foster a regional network of practitioners, explore mentoring opportunities, and strengthen communication channels. Outputs will include the dissemination of MUVA's report, a summary of challenges and recommendations, and follow-up publications targeting donors, NGOs, and private sector stakeholders to influence inclusive blue economy programming. The session is designed for NGOs, community leaders, blue economy actors, and development partners committed to advancing locally-driven marine conservation in the WIO.