



Statement on behalf of Resource Africa and the Southern African Community Leaders Network - CLN.

**Impact of COVID – 19 on Communities and Conservation:
Towards a Conservation-Sensitive Social Protection in
Southern Africa.**

The CLN involves over 50 rural community leaders from 9 countries in southern Africa representing hundreds of thousands of rural households who rely on nature-based tourism – both photographic and hunting - as a mainstay of our livelihoods. The impact of COVID19 has been devastating throughout the world but has had disproportionate effect on our communities who largely depend on tourism related income.

Over the last 6 months we have undertaken a rapid assessment with our communities in 5 countries (*Namibia, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Zambia and Malawi*). This research confirms what we already know as leaders:

- Tourism and its related income have reduced on average by 90% in our areas compared to 2018 and this has left thousands of affected households facing increasing poverty, food insecurity, and shrinking livelihood options while local development initiatives have stalled.
- Female-headed and poor households have been affected disproportionately given their inability to withstand financial shocks. It is expensive to be poor in a pandemic.

- For survival, our communities are increasingly resorting to negative coping strategies such as poaching, unsustainable harvesting of forest resources, and encroachment into protected areas which poses a real risk to the conservation gains our communities have made so far.
- The pandemic has shifted focus away from conservation towards survival challenges, and this risks not only our long-term conservation efforts and livelihood options but could also exacerbate the risk of future pandemics as habitat destruction and consumption of wild animals could increase zoonotic disease transmission. Such risks reinforce the need for urgent action to address the negative impacts of Covid-19 in our communities.

Emergency intervention options could include:

- Supporting alternative livelihood programs including conservation linked social safety net programs
- In the longer term, strengthening and respecting the rights of rural communities to manage and benefit from the sustainable use of natural resources on which our livelihoods rely must be a cornerstone of future biodiversity conservation efforts.

COVID 19 has starkly demonstrated that removal of incentives to manage natural resources sustainably, which is contingent on our tenurial rights, is a recipe for disaster for biodiversity management.

Thank you.