

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Growing together: Strengthening the partnership and impact of a zoo and community-led conservation organization

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## Abstract

1. Indigenous peoples and local communities play a pivotal role in addressing the climate and biodiversity crises. The South Rift Association of Land Owners (SORALO) is a community-driven organization representing 30 Indigenous Maasai communities in Kenya, which cultivates resources to support communal landscape management. The Cincinnati Zoo & Botanical Garden (CZBG) is an Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA)-accredited zoological facility and has partnered with SORALO since its inception in 2004.
2. This study evaluates the strengths and challenges of the SORALO-CZBG partnership using the PARTNERS framework and examines its alignment with the Naivasha Vision—principles established by African conservation leaders in 2023 at the African Community Conservation Forum. We conducted eight semi-structured interviews with SORALO and CZBG staff (four from each organization) and analysed them through thematic analysis and constant comparative methodology.
3. The analysis shows the PARTNERS framework is an effective tool for evaluating the strengths and opportunities for growth between an international conservation partner and a community-based conservation organization. The SORALO-CZBG partnership is aligned with the Naivasha Vision and has strengths in all facets of the PARTNERS framework.
4. Key opportunities for growth in the partnership were found in aptness, responsiveness, negotiation, empathy and strategic support. This evaluation acted as a tool for SORALO-CZBG leaders to talk through strengths and opportunities for growth, along with plans to address each.
5. *Practical Implication:* Our findings highlight key factors that strengthen conservation partnerships and offer recommendations for conservation organizations, especially international non-governmental organizations, to examine their partnerships and practices to enhance collaboration with community-led conservation initiatives and their leaders.

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## KEYWORDS

coexistence, community-driven conservation, Indigenous peoples, Naivasha Vision, PARTNERS framework, partnership evaluation, zoo

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Conservation efforts need to be more intentional, creative and collaborative to address massive global crises. Within the contemporary conservation discourse, the imperatives outlined in global frameworks like the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, which aims for the conservation of 30% of Earth's land and ocean areas by 2030 (Convention on Biological Diversity, 2021), underscore the urgency of action amidst escalating biodiversity loss. This urgency is compounded by findings that one-third of protected land globally faces intense human pressure (Jones et al., 2018). Amidst these challenges, there is a growing consensus that traditional Western conservation paradigms must evolve to encompass broader landscapes and engage diverse stakeholders (Decker et al., 2016; Sterling et al., 2017; Vermeulen & Sheil, 2007). This necessitates a shift towards collaborative approaches that extend conservation efforts beyond the confines of existing protected areas, particularly through partnerships with Indigenous peoples and local communities (Convention on Biological Diversity, 2021; Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), 2019). Inclusive conservation strategies emphasizing the human dimensions of conservation, prioritizing the involvement of diverse stakeholders and empowering local communities are increasingly recognized as essential for achieving meaningful and sustainable conservation outcomes (Armitage et al., 2020; Lees et al., 2021).

Externally controlled conservation initiatives often lead to ineffective programs and negative social impacts when they attempt to supersede existing institutions, cultural norms and local practices (Berkes, 2010). Locally led conservation efforts consistently outperform exclusionary or top-down interventions, with Indigenous peoples and local communities playing a central role in achieving positive outcomes for both human well-being and conservation (Dawson et al., 2021). In the context of African conservation, local community-based and grassroots organizations are increasingly acknowledged for their pivotal role in these efforts (Western et al., 2020). These local organizations often collaborate with international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), leveraging their funding, networks, expertise and technical resources to add capacity to initiatives (Berkes, 2007).

Partnerships between international and local entities frequently encounter challenges and complexities such as power dynamics, transparency, accountability and alignment of interests (Buzzard et al., 2023). Some of the major barriers to effective partnerships that local organizations have identified include misaligned organizational goals, devaluation of local knowledge and experience, mistrust, funding restrictions, intensive administrative processes, lack of long-term approaches and ineffective communication, among others (Buzzard et al., 2023; Paul et al., 2022). It is critical to acknowledge these common issues while moving beyond traditional philanthropic approaches

to shift partnership dynamics. Long-term, impact-driven conservation at the grassroots level requires deeper relationships and decolonizing efforts through culturally relevant governance and international NGO's recognition of their partners' autonomy and expertise (Buzzard et al., 2023; Dawson et al., 2021). This study evaluates the relationship between two such organizations, the South Rift Association of Land Owners (SORALO) and the Cincinnati Zoo & Botanical Garden (CZBG), striving to achieve a more meaningful and successful partnership.

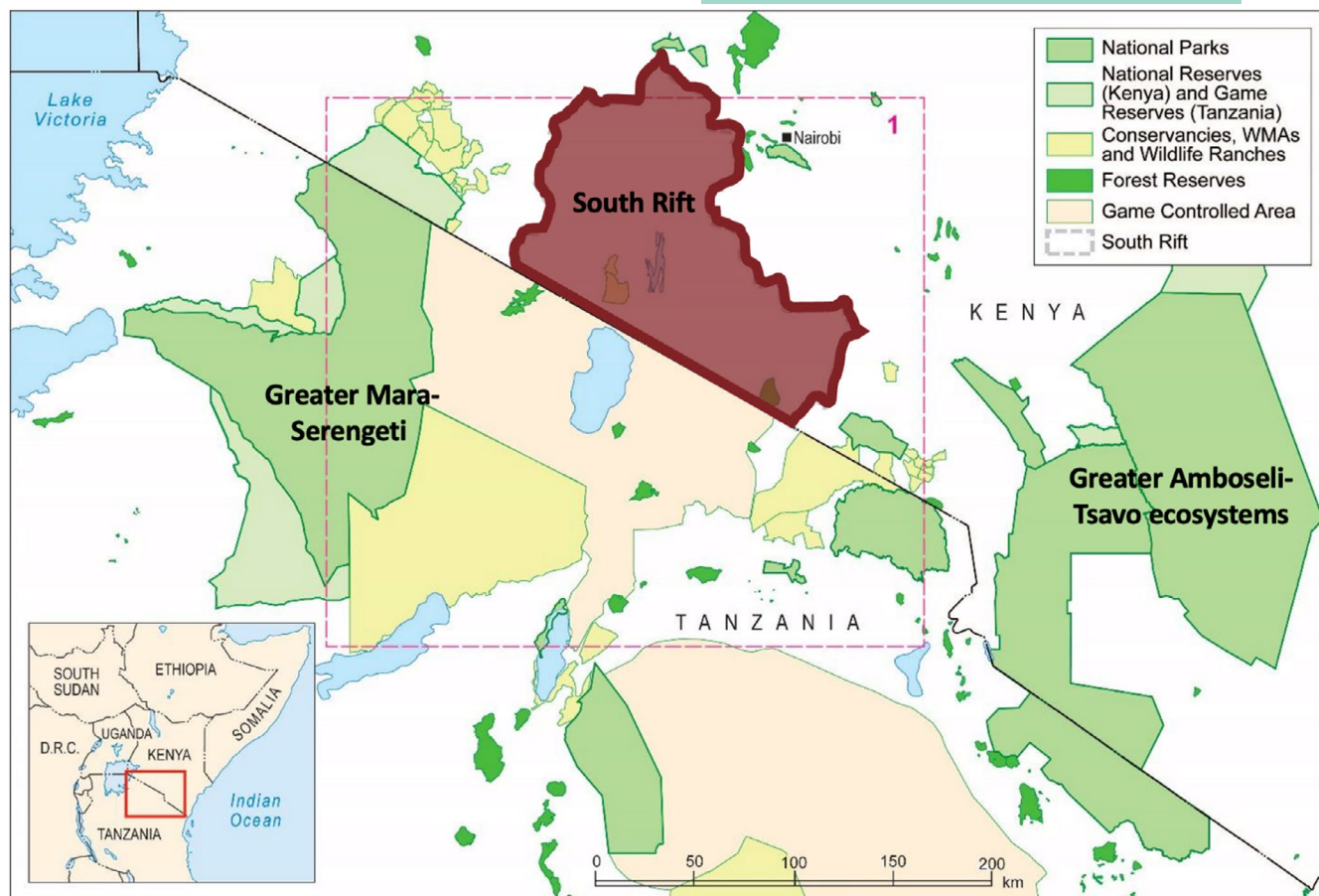
### 1.1 | Institutional backgrounds

Established in 2004, Kenya's SORALO is a community-based, community-driven land trust uniting 30 Indigenous Maasai communities to manage and secure their landscape, spanning nearly 15,000km<sup>2</sup> between the Amboseli National Park and Maasai Mara National Reserve ecosystems (Figure 1). SORALO has been dedicated to improving rangeland governance, natural resource management and conservation efforts while promoting human–wildlife coexistence and sustaining cultural values. Communities within SORALO's landscape have established and continue to manage community conservancies within local governance structures. Two of these communities were evaluated and have shown positive social and ecological conservation outcomes (Brehony & Leader-Williams, 2023). Community-driven approaches in decision-making for conservation interventions in SORALO's open ecosystems have been shown to build community and ecosystem resilience when they connect key aspects of both human and wildlife needs—such as livelihoods and productivity (Western et al., 2020). These impact evaluations have informed SORALO's adaptive approach and showcase the success of SORALO's work.

Meanwhile, the CZBG, an Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA)-accredited zoo in Ohio, USA, has supported global conservation efforts for over 40 years, including partnering with SORALO since its inception. In 2021, CZBG established the Conservation Impact department to expand its focus on proactive partnerships that address the needs of local and global conservation partners beyond philanthropic support. Since the creation of this department, collaborative partnerships have increased from 15 to over 40 partnerships—advancing our goal to better understand capacity-building needs of partners globally (Celebrating Conservation Impact, 2024).

### 1.2 | Partnership history and evolution

SORALO and the CZBG have been growing as conservation organizations and partners since the inception of SORALO in 2004. Since 1964, CZBG has offered travel opportunities to donors eager to experience wildlife, conservation and global ecosystems around the



**FIGURE 1** A map of the southwestern border of Kenya, showcasing the landscape collective (shown in deep red) comprising the South Rift Association of Land Owners (SORALO) with regional geographic context. Image credit: SORALO.

world. During the early 2000's itinerary of travel programs, Kenya-based conservationist Dr. David Western introduced CZBG leadership to a rising leader within the Maasai community, John Kamanga, who has contributed to this manuscript as a co-author. Upheld as an African leader striving to work at the landscape level for the benefit of wildlife and people, CZBG leadership made the decision to invest in the future of this community-led initiative that eventually developed into SORALO.

From the beginning of the partnership, CZBG has been a committed financial supporter of SORALO, investing \$75,000 dollars in funding annually, then increasing that in more recent years to \$84,000 with additional support for SORALO staff development, education centre site development, emergency response and more. CZBG has been bringing graduate students each year to learn from SORALO and gain firsthand experience and insights from conservation practitioners on the ground as part of Miami University's Project Dragonfly Earth Expeditions study abroad program. This program brings about 20 master's students per class; thus, over the course of the partnership, over 300 graduate students have been brought to SORALO by CZBG and Project Dragonfly.

As the partnership matured, CZBG's involvement evolved beyond financial support and student groups, with SORALO and CZBG now co-designing and implementing research studies

focused on wildlife conservation, governance and stakeholder engagement, among other critical areas (e.g. Maynard et al., 2020; Maynard & Jacobson, 2016, 2019; Western, 2018). Recognizing the diverse skills within Zoo staff that could help fill gaps for global partners, the Coexistence Champions program was initiated to send a cohort of Zoo personnel annually to work alongside SORALO. Over the years, staff from various departments, including Animal Care, Maintenance, Sustainability, Marketing, Architecture and Education, have contributed to strategic planning, design and construction of new learning centres and community outreach initiatives during onsite visits. CZBG has facilitated capacity-building efforts by inducting a SORALO staff member as a CZBG Coexistence Impact Fellow, mentoring them on a project examining landscape-scale distribution and conflict between people and large carnivores. CZBG has provided emergency relief, adapting to shifting priorities during extreme droughts, and subsequently transitioning into a long-term water and energy sustainability project. CZBG supports the economic empowerment of women in these communities by selling traditional Maasai bead jewellery at the Zoo's in-person and online gift shops, working within the women's group governance structures to support envisioned growth. Through these multifaceted initiatives, the SORALO-CZBG partnership deepened over time with shared

goals around biodiversity conservation and community development. This study will examine the partnership for opportunities for improvement to facilitate these goals.

SORALO has committed to the growth of CZBG as a conservation organization. Through the growing friendships, SORALO has informally mentored the Zoo's leadership to understand the significance of a coexistence approach that CZBG now uses as the focal commitment for all global conservation partners. The team advised on the design of CZBG's East African savannah habitat, with all photos and stories in the interpretive signage representing community voices in the SORALO landscape, kick-starting the Zoo's coexistence messaging within habitat interpretation. SORALO further demonstrated the benefits of open communication by extending relief of CZBG's typical financial commitments during the fiscal strains caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. SORALO has provided strategic support in the form of inviting CZBG conservation leaders to listen to and learn from African community conservation leaders by attending the 2023 African Community Conservation Forum, which resulted in the Naivasha Vision (African Community Conservation Forum, 2023). Since the establishment of CZBG's Conservation Impact department, SORALO has supported growing a culture of coexistence throughout the Zoo via active collaborations with CZBG staff, including in-person visits within the SORALO landscape through the Coexistence Champion's program. SORALO's team has invested in sharing their story of coexistence with most CZBG staff.

### 1.3 | Evaluation framework

Employing structured evaluation methods to assess partnership effectiveness is crucial for several reasons. Firstly, it allows for a systematic examination of the partnership's strengths, weaknesses and overall impact, providing valuable insights for adaptive management and continuous improvement (Austin et al., 2018). Secondly, evaluation methods can inform decision-making processes, aid resource allocation strategies within the partnership and support cyclical reflexive processes (White et al., 2023).

In this paper, we utilize the PARTNERS framework as a structured evaluation tool. The PARTNERS framework, as introduced by Mishra et al. (2017), comprises eight key elements: Presence, Aptness, Respect, Transparency, Negotiations, Empathy, Responsiveness and Strategic support (Table 1). Each element represents a critical aspect of partnership functioning and is assessed based on specific indicators and criteria. For instance, Presence refers to the degree of involvement and engagement of stakeholders within the partnership, while Transparency evaluates the openness and accessibility of information-sharing processes. Khanyari et al. (2023) used the PARTNERS framework to co-design community interventions for snow leopard conservation and later evaluate their effectiveness by exploring the key takeaways and challenges for each of the eight PARTNERS constructs. By systematically evaluating each element of the PARTNERS framework, a comprehensive understanding of the partnership's dynamics, strengths and areas for improvement can be

achieved. We selected this structured approach for the evaluation when hypothesizing that the results will identify best practices, address challenges and enhance the overall effectiveness and sustainability of the SORALO-CZBG partnership.

The PARTNERS principles framework was used to evaluate the alignment of the SORALO-CZBG partnership with a set of principles created by African conservation leaders. In 2023, the African Community Conservation Forum was convened in Naivasha, Kenya, where community leaders across the region shared their insights, best practices and challenges, leading to the establishment of the Naivasha Vision, a comprehensive framework for African conservation and sustainable development while prioritizing the role of Indigenous peoples and local communities as key actors (African Community Conservation Forum, 2023). Central to the vision are three tenets: (1) recognize communities as central to African conservation efforts, (2) conservation must prioritize supporting and strengthening community governance institutions, including rights over lands and natural resources and (3) build the capacity of other stakeholders to better collaborate with and support communities and local organizations (ibid.). Additionally, the vision defines principles for community rights and conservation, emphasizing upholding human rights and ensuring that community knowledge, experience and desires inform conservation decisions (ibid.). It advocates for equitable and transparent partnerships, flexible and long-term funding principles centred around community needs and aligned goals, and the establishment of strong African civil society organizations committed to diversity, equity and inclusion. Lastly, the vision promotes impactful partnerships with communities to achieve social, ecological and economic objectives. As African conservation efforts continue to evolve, the Naivasha Vision serves as a guiding framework, inspiring collective action towards a more sustainable and equitable future for both people and the planet (ibid.). In this study, we used the PARTNERS framework to evaluate the alignment of the SORALO-CZBG partnership with the Naivasha Vision to identify opportunities to better 'walk the talk' of the vision that was endorsed and committed to by CZBG (ibid).

## 2 | MATERIALS AND METHODS

In this study, we employed a qualitative methodology comprising semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis (Saldaña, 2013) to assess the SORALO-CZBG partnership. Our sampling technique involved purposeful sampling of eight staff members (four from each organization), selected based on their tenure of over 2 years in their roles and active participation in collaborative projects between the two organizations.

### 2.1 | Participant recruitment and consent

All interviewees were above the age of 18, and oral informed consent was obtained before beginning the interview. Participation in



**TABLE 1** PARTNERS principles designed by Mishra et al. (2017) used to guide the semi-structured interviews of South Rift Association of Land Owners (SORALO) and Cincinnati Zoo & Botanical Garden (CZBG) staff.

Construct	Definition	Examples within SORALO-CZBG partnership
Presence	The organization should maintain a consistent presence with the community organization.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Earth Expeditions—predictable annual visits bringing large groups of graduate students with tourism income for SORALO</li> <li>• Coexistence Champion trips 2022, 2023 and 2024 (2)—at least one annual group of CZBG staff chosen for their skills to complement projects initiated by SORALO (30 total staff to date have participated)</li> <li>• Financial presence of consistent annual income</li> <li>• Regular communication on WhatsApp and Zoom</li> </ul>
Aptness	The organization must take into account the cultural, situational and ecological context while employing a multifaceted approach for impact.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Follow SORALO's lead to define appropriate activities that meet their needs</li> <li>• CZBG signed onto Naivasha Vision principles</li> <li>• SORALO requested Architectural/Interpretive design support; CZBG followed their project lead</li> <li>• SORALO provided design support for the CZBG Africa exhibit</li> </ul>
Respect	There should be no power dynamic between the organization and the community organization. An organization should follow the ideals of beneficence and non-maleficence. Organizations should not use divisions to promote conservation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unrestricted funds with a Memorandum of Understanding outlining annual financial support</li> <li>• CZBG continues learning about Enkainyit, the Maasai principle of respect</li> </ul>
Transparency	The organization should not withhold information from the community organization and should explain goals and decisions to the community organization. The community organization should have opportunities to engage with the organization and be involved in decision-making. All levels of the community organization should have the opportunity to communicate, seek explanations and express misgivings.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coexistence Champions program increases collaboration between organizations' mid-level staff, increasing transparency at a new level</li> <li>• Coexistence Fellow opportunity for SORALO staff members for professional development training and organizational capacity-building increases communication avenues between organizations</li> </ul>
Negotiation	Negotiating should focus on objective goals and incentives, not on positional bargaining. The agreed terms should be formalized with roles and responsibilities. If negotiations do not progress, more relationship building and communication are required.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Active and frequent communication provides access to each other</li> <li>• SORALO leader's salary paid for years</li> </ul>
Empathy	Empathy is required to understand the community organization and its views on the current conservation situation and the changes wanted. Empathy allows understanding when there are issues and problems arise in the community organization.	<p>CZBG goes beyond direct ecological initiatives to support:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The women's groups in SORALO's landscape with increased bead sales and new markets</li> <li>• SORALO's needs surrounding water and energy sustainability through the Coexistence Champions program</li> <li>• The SORALO team was empathetic to CZBG during the financial difficulty experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic</li> </ul>
Responsiveness	Constant change requires organizations to monitor and evaluate all aspects of the communities (not just ecologically) for issues and opportunities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In the two significant droughts experienced during the SORALO-CZBG partnership, CZBG responded with emergency funds to support water trucks and food. CZBG also supported storytelling and donation campaigns</li> </ul>
Strategic support	The organization must work with the government or other stakeholders and be the bridge between the community organization and the government, if necessary.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leverage CZBG skills for SORALO support—for example Tusk Trust funds were unlocked with architectural drawings and interpretive plan co-created by CZBG architects/interpreters and SORALO staff</li> <li>• Expanded women's groups bead market through partnership with CZBG's retail vendor</li> <li>• SORALO's Ranger team supported through the CZBG Coexistence Champions program</li> <li>• Introduction to international foundations/philanthropic organizations to support CZBG programs</li> </ul>

the interviews was voluntary and anonymous in the data records. The study's methods, sampling technique and interview protocol were reviewed by the Miami University of Oxford, Ohio Institutional Review Board for human subjects research approval and granted an exemption (IRB number: 04887e).

## 2.2 | Data collection

Interviews were conducted in person or over virtual Zoom conference calls by a team of two CZBG staff members in February 2024. One staff member conducted the interview while the other took notes, interviews lasting less than 1 h. Data were recorded using a Microsoft Office Word document for notetaking, and the Zoom call audio was recorded for transcribing quotes. After transcription, the audio recordings were deleted to ensure confidentiality. No sensitive information was collected from respondents. Each interview was assigned a unique code, disassociated from any identifiers related to the respondent, ensuring that data were only accessible to the research team.

Each interview was conducted individually to prevent responses from biasing other participants' ideas. This independent sampling approach allowed for the collection of more diverse and wide-ranging thoughts from respondents. The researchers that conducted the interviews and analysed the results of this study are mid-level staff at the Cincinnati Zoo that act as a liaison between leadership and lower-level staff at both their organization and with their conservation partner organizations.

## 2.3 | Interview guide and framework

Our interview guide, structured around the PARTNERS principles, provided a deductive framework for the semi-structured interviews, following Mishra et al. (2017). The PARTNERS framework comprises eight key principles: Presence, Aptness, Respect, Transparency, Negotiations, Empathy, Responsiveness and Strategic support. For each principle, the interviewer narrated the principles' definition (Table 1) and asked the respondents three questions:

1. Can you provide examples of how CZBG and SORALO have exemplified this principle in their collaborations?
2. What strengths of the SORALO-CZBG partnership enabled this principle to be supported?
3. What challenges in the SORALO-CZBG partnership hindered achieving this principle?

These questions aimed to explore how each of the eight principles was operationalized in the partnership, along with identifying strengths and challenges, similar to Khanyari et al. (2023). At the end of this exercise, each respondent was asked to identify opportunities for future growth and share any additional information or anecdotes about the partnership.

## 2.4 | Data analysis

Two researchers independently analysed each interview to explore and extract all useful information. Each researcher examined the cases to identify themes, looking for similarities and differences among the respondents. Using thematic analysis, the researchers summarized the responses concerning partnership practices, issues, sources of conflict and ideas for improvement. The constant comparative method (Saldaña, 2013) was used to develop and refine categories or themes through discussion and review of the two researchers' independent assessments, followed by consensus of categorizing quotes to themes aligned with the PARTNERS framework, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the partnership's dynamics.

## 3 | RESULTS

The thematic analysis reveals the narrative across the interviewees of this partnership's progression through time. The PARTNERS Principles framework illustrates a model for evaluating dynamics leading to the success of the partnership and opportunities for growth. The Naivasha Vision principles further illuminate best practices in partnership and resource sharing that follow African leaders' perspectives.

The *presence* principle has been strengthened through capacity-building efforts by both teams. Initially, limited staff capacity posed challenges to effective, active collaboration, restricting consistent engagement between organizations. To address this, CZBG expanded its Global Conservation Impact team, enhancing the organization's ability to maintain a more consistent presence with all conservation partners. Simultaneously, through programs highlighted in Table 1, the partnership diversified and decentralized by establishing cross-organizational relationships, particularly among mid-level staff, which increased support for the partnership beyond leadership level interactions. However, maintaining presence remains challenging due to differences in time zones, geographical distance and cultural contexts, making in-person collaboration difficult. Adopting tools such as WhatsApp and Zoom has helped address these issues, facilitating regular communication and engagement despite these barriers. Continuous, consistent involvement—evidenced by annual funding and programmatic commitments from CZBG—further reinforces their presence with SORALO. Moreover, SORALO's receptiveness to collaborate at multiple organizational levels has been essential in driving this partnership forward. This quality of presence is underscored by SORALO's ongoing requests for CZBG's active support.

CZBG trusts SORALO to know their own social and cultural context as SORALO decision-makers are largely community members, laying the groundwork for the *aptness* principle. While SORALO is a conservation organization, its work does not come at the cost of the communities living with wildlife but contributes to the well-being of these communities. SORALO envisions 'a healthy and

intact landscape that sustains pastoralist communities and wildlife'. (SORALO, 2025). CZBG team members are dedicated to learning the local context and the SORALO team, grounding the relationship in cultural and ecological co-learning. CZBG supports SORALO with unrestricted funds, which SORALO can utilize flexibly for their strategic goals and responding to unexpected situations, while working together towards their coexistence-focused vision. Aligning in coexistence vision, as reinforced in the negotiation section below, was apt to SORALO's community-driven focus on sustainable community development and landscape-level resource management. A SORALO team member stated,

*CZBG probably understands us better than any other partner we have, including our larger donors.*

(SORALO LEADER)

For true reciprocity, SORALO wants to better know the CZBG context as well, learning the variety of CZBG's work and organizational culture just as much. Designing CZBG's exhibits, which aim to achieve excellence for their animals and mimic the ecosystems they represent, is integral to its mission to inspire people with wildlife every day. CZBG's Africa area is modelled after the SORALO landscape, with SORALO's timely input on the design. This collaboration led to more accurate cultural and landscape representation in the exhibit at CZBG and is a point of pride for the SORALO staff. When SORALO staff visit the Africa sections, they are excited to recognize community members in photos and signage. Challenges to aptness tend to happen on an individual-to-individual level such as community members in the SORALO landscape requesting personal support from CZBG staff members, leading to tension and difficulty. Additionally, when CZBG brings students to the landscape to learn from SORALO staff and community members, their limited time and lack of cultural context can sometimes lead to misunderstandings or culturally inappropriate actions—for example, using scarce resources like water without awareness of local conditions—highlighting the challenge of developing deeper understanding and meaningful relationships within short-term engagements. These tensions are overcome through strong vision alignment, expectation setting and empathy, discussed further in the following paragraphs.

*Enkainyit* is a tenet of Maasai culture teaching that without respect, everything falls apart and that culture weaves everything together. SORALO and their community shared these ideas with the CZBG team. Together, SORALO and CZBG translated this teaching into our relationship, as the relationship is built not on projects but instead on personal respect between individuals in each organization that are the foundations for creating systems founded on trust and continuous relationship building. These relationships led to an unrestricted funding model built on CZBG's trust of SORALO's vision and team. This funding model shows respect through giving SORALO autonomy in deciding where and how to spend funds, as they said in this quote:

*Conservation is not a project; it is a long-term commitment, and our funding should be reflective of that reality.*

(CZBG LEADER)

For active support beyond financial contribution, CZBG has led with 'how can we support?' rather than pushing their predefined project goals. CZBG's main interest is SORALO's growth, and therefore, they do not impose conventional donor boundaries such as restrictive reporting requirements, earmarked budgets or project-specific deliverables. Instead, unrestricted funding has allowed SORALO the flexibility to allocate resources according to emerging needs and priorities. This relationship framework has decreased the time SORALO spends managing donor relationships. This is built on the reciprocated respect given to CZBG by SORALO as they continue to welcome Zoo staff through in-person visits and sharing Maasai culture.

Exemplifying the concept of respect through active partnership, the four Coexistence Champions teams from CZBG supported SORALO by facilitating the Lale'enok Resource Centre's master planning and interpretive design while collaborating with SORALO leadership and staff, the Olkiramatian Reto Women's Group that owns the land and other community members. This interpretive plan is centred on five Maa words that each begin with the letter E. The 'Five Es' capture Maasai cultural values that promote coexistence and communal resource use and allow a space for those in the closest communities to engage in management conversations. After having learned foundational Maasai cultural values centred on respect in the co-design of educational experiences, CZBG continues to proactively integrate these values in its capacity-building support of SORALO, such as through facilitating supply chain expertise sharing around scaling a sustainable livelihoods program beyond CZBG's network.

*Transparency and negotiation* fostered the two organizations to grow together in their conservation identities. The strength of zoos is connecting wide audiences with individual animals or wildlife species. Initially, CZBG was interested in aligning with SORALO's 'Rebuilding the Pride' campaign due to its focus on African lions (*Panthera leo*) as charismatic megafauna. Over the years, and with deepened learning from SORALO, CZBG transitioned away from this species-specific approach to more holistically support SORALO's vision and mission of landscape-level conservation for both people and wildlife. Leadership across both organizations negotiated by transparently sharing their organizational needs to arrive at a shared vision, centring community-driven initiatives. As the two organizations continue to evolve together in their conservation identities, they are consistently negotiating, transparently explaining each organization's needs to explore areas of alignment. The partners prioritize meeting the other's priority needs. For example, a deep partnership with SORALO supports CZBG in their vision to inspire people with wildlife every day with interpretive content about the lived experiences of people in SORALO's landscape shared with the CZBG visitors everyday in the large

African habitats in the zoo. From the other perspective, CZBG has supported SORALO in programs highlighted in Table 1, and as such SORALO has been more transparent surrounding the work they do with the community, beyond wildlife-related work that was the focus of the beginning of the partnership. Transparency has mitigated territoriality between the organizations from arising because there is an understanding of each other's *whys*. Now, open communication occurs even when there is uncertainty and learning happens together on the go. Transparency now goes beyond leadership-to-leadership interaction to include mid-level employees of both organizations that have built relationships. This is exemplified with this quote:

*We started the relationship with leadership—now the middle management is engaging more with Cincinnati than even the top leadership. To bring people from multiple levels from Cincinnati, the communities can interact directly with Cincinnati [Zoo & Botanical Garden staff]. There is open space in how we are running our business and that is a key principle.*

(SORALO LEADER)

This decentralization of the relationship has increased transparency and efficient growth of projects (e.g. the Coexistence Champions programs which have created collaborative teams of interconnected staff from both organizations working together to implement education program design and solar energy restoration). This shift simultaneously introduces the challenge of understanding the appropriate team members across organizations to be made aware of appropriate information. Negotiations occur as new members are added from each team to the partnership. Newer team members have seen the existing system work because of prior negotiations. However, projects and relationships must be facilitated before they can be effectively decentralized. As the SORALO-CZBG partnership has continued to decentralize, mid-level staff have collaborated more freely. However, the absence of clear consensus and strategic direction from leadership has at times hindered the successful implementation of projects. On one hand, partnership rooted in trusted relationships between organizational leaders is facilitating open exchange of advice as opportunities arise. At the same time, to enable lower-level managers to move projects collaboratively, the two organizations need to invest in trust building at multiple scales. Nevertheless, in the current collaborations and the desired integration across all levels of the team, the depth of the partnership allows for cross-organizational accountability and a shared commitment to continual improvement. Additional challenges that remain include those similar in *presence*. Working across time zones, on different continents and on a multi-organizational team can lead to delayed or lost updates. The SORALO team increasing their responsiveness in communication is a remaining challenge.

*Empathy* is the key to not exploiting the power dynamic between donor and recipient and extending beyond that traditional

philanthropic framework into active partnership. Empathy drove negotiation and transparency in the partnership's early days towards a shared vision of coexistence, as mentioned above. Reciprocity in this empathy was given by SORALO when CZBG was transparent in communicating early and often the expected financial support given the constraints accompanying the COVID pandemic, as the partnership continued through these difficulties. Another challenge tied to empathy is effectively conveying SORALO's holistic story to CZBG's audiences. While CZBG is used to telling stories that build empathy for individual animals or species, there remains a growth opportunity to extend that empathy towards the people living alongside this wildlife. SORALO has shared many powerful stories with CZBG which has deepened the Zoo's organizational commitment to coexistence and inspired efforts to engage CZBG's broader community—staff, visitors, leaders and social media followers—in supporting SORALO's work with communities living alongside wildlife. The empathy cultivated with its relationship with SORALO has led CZBG to better understand the complexities of coexistence, in particular the integral prioritization of local people's needs to achieve conservation goals. Thus, CZBG has committed to facilitating coexistence with local communities with other conservation partners around the world. SORALO is challenged in how to be empathetic to their community concerning our partnership. For example, is it right to bring students to visit the landscape, through the Earth Expeditions program defined in Table 1 and utilize resources when the communities are facing a drought? Empathy is the driving force behind the other PARTNERS principles and should be embraced in the face of challenges.

*Responsiveness* to all aspects of SORALO's work has been integral to shaping the partnership and active collaboration between SORALO and CZBG. Early in the partnership, CZBG did not have the internal organizational structure to be timely in their response to situations and opportunities that arose for SORALO. Over time, CZBG has grown internal capacity and decreased the number of questions decision-makers need to ask internally to get to a 'yes, we can support this ask'. SORALO's insight into CZBG's responsiveness is illustrated with the following sentiment:

*Whenever we have an opportunity or a threat, the Zoo is the first partner we can go to address or capitalize on them.*

(SORALO LEADER)

There are many projects actively co-developed and implemented by members of both organizations. When situations requiring support arise, they are now addressed more swiftly. At times, this response means pausing ongoing work. For example, CZBG had begun work collaborating with SORALO to expand the solar system at SORALO's community centres. However, SORALO indicated a need to prioritize other projects and temporarily paused the solar initiative. CZBG respected this decision and adjusted its timeline accordingly. As the partnership has evolved,



CZBG has developed internal mechanisms to enhance preparedness and improve response time. However, a continued challenge to this adaptive responsiveness is the ongoing need for CZBG to build broader institutional buy-in for deeper collaboration across all departments. The Coexistence Champions program, defined in Table 1, has helped to create this buy-in and expand skillsets available for active collaboration.

The partners' *strategic support* of each other has been strong due to the lack of territoriality of either partner. SORALO and CZBG share the approach of continually building the organizations' relationships with each other towards cultivating their shared vision. The SORALO-CZBG partnership resulted from a mutual connection introducing the leaders of both organizations, and the partnership has kept this ideal of strategic connections as a central focus. There is excellent reciprocity in this area of strategic support, as SORALO supports CZBG in sharing stories and opportunities for staff through the development of CZBG's Coexistence Champion program highlighted in Table 1. The Coexistence Champion program has increased collaboration with the Olkiramatian Reto Women's Group, leading to the expansion of women's international market to include CZBG visitors and social media followers. The largest opportunity for growth is to overcome challenges presented by geographic distance, which limits CZBG and SORALO from reaching their full strategic support potential as it is fiscally difficult for in-person meetings to be coordinated. It has been important to prioritize opportunities that arise and overcome financial barriers. For example, SORALO trusted CZBG and invited their leaders to a convening of African conservationists that led to the Naivasha Vision. CZBG was invited to listen. Now CZBG works to amplify this vision to other zoos and agencies.

### 3.1 | Using the PARTNERS framework to evaluate alignment with the Naivasha Vision

The Naivasha Vision principles and best practices encouraged by the diverse African leaders complement and reinforce several concepts encouraged by the PARTNERS principles, first developed in Asia by the Snow Leopard Trust (Figure 2). Specifically, the concepts of transparency, empathy and respect are directly shared by both frameworks. Additionally, they each provide a few dimensions that reinforce methods for strong relationship building between partnering organizations. For example, the PARTNERS principles advocate for presence, responsiveness and strategic support to advocate for active, in-person involvement in dynamic situations, while the Naivasha Vision illuminates partnership approaches based on kindness, equity and intentionality to enable trust building (Figure 2). The SORALO-CZBG partnership has benefited and grown over time through following the concepts and approaches encouraged by both frameworks, as shown by the friendships built over the 20-year partnership based on active communication of intentions and strategic support in times of need.

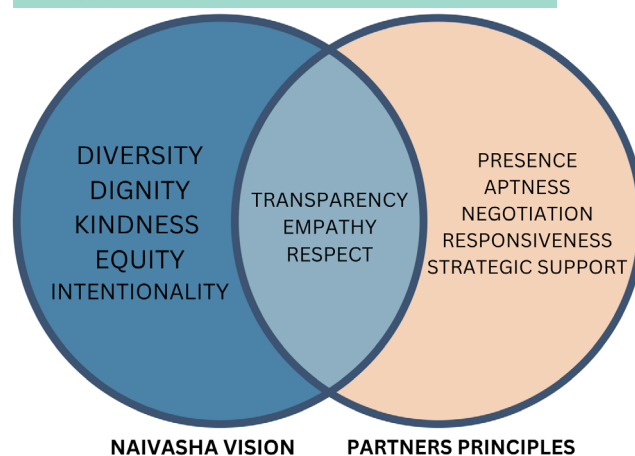


FIGURE 2 Comparison of the priority dimensions of the Naivasha Vision and the PARTNERS principles.

## 4 | DISCUSSION

The results narrative has shown how SORALO and CZBG have worked together in ways that align with the PARTNERS framework over time, resulting in increased organizational capacity-building for both SORALO and CZBG. Additionally, the organizations have collaborated towards shared conservation visions because of their relationships and collaborations (Convention on Biological Diversity, 2021; Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), 2019; Kark et al., 2015).

### 4.1 | PARTNERS framework evaluation narrative

Results from the qualitative interviews and the PARTNERS framework analysis show that SORALO and CZBG have grown in their conservation identities together. The SORALO-CZBG partnership has grown from a philanthropic framework towards a reciprocal relationship. The organizations' leaders quickly embraced *transparency* to share their distinct, seemingly different organizational needs. Through *negotiation* and *empathy*, the leaders of these organizations came to aligned coexistence visions. The structure of the partnership is a model of *aptness* as CZBG follows SORALO's lead to consider cultural, situational and ecological contexts when making decisions. *Empathy* has driven this partnership built on a shared understanding of each other's situational factors. The Maasai tenet of *respect*, *Enkainyit*, guided this partnership to be built on foundations of deeper trust-based relationships with long-term commitments, as reflected in the unrestricted, predictable funding model. CZBG's consistent *presence* through annual programming and expanded dedicated staff, as well as SORALO's willingness to engage, has led to more active collaborations between the teams. *Responsiveness* is a result of the deep organizational understanding between CZBG and SORALO. CZBG's internal capacity has grown and the number of barriers to arrive at a 'yes' has reduced so that CZBG may respond quicker when SORALO comes to CZBG with a timely ask. The *strategic support* results from shared values of effective collaboration

and a lack of territoriality. This component of the partnership resulted in SORALO inviting CZBG to the convening of African conservationists which led to the Naivasha Vision, adding a deeper, context-specific dimension to this evaluation.

This PARTNERS framework evaluation has focused on an international organization's partnership with African community conservation organization(s) in alignment with the Naivasha Vision, which is novel in comparison to the framework's current application to evaluate a conservation organization's partnership directly with a community (Bayarjargal et al., 2016; Khanyari et al., 2023; Mishra et al., 2017). The comparison of the two frameworks generated by community-driven organizations in Asia and Africa, respectively, helps identify where it is necessary to build organizational capacity 'to better support, strengthen, and collaborate with communities and the local organizations that support them' (African Community Conservation Forum, 2023, para. 5).

## 4.2 | Contribution to conservation and community development

Investing in Indigenous peoples' autonomy in decision-making is correlated to positive conservation outcomes (Dawson et al., 2021; Latulippe & Klenk, 2020). SORALO's theory of change prioritizes building local communities' governance capacity. One of SORALO's activities that CZBG has supported is the Lale'enok Resource Centre. This community centre has been designed to build governance through strengthening Maasai culture and is intended to be a gathering space for community members to come and share information to make decisions. CZBG has supported SORALO's vision for Lale'enok Resource Centre through four Coexistence Champions trips focused on adding capacity to SORALO's team towards the Centre's development, while SORALO has mentored many CZBG staff in their coexistence approach.

Investing in women is a known climate solution, as women reinvest more of their resources on community benefits, such as health care for community members, than men (Hawken, 2017). SORALO invests in women's groups throughout their landscape to build their capacity. CZBG has supported the Olkiramatian Reto Women's Group by increasing the international market for bead sales in CZBG's visitors via Zoo gift shops, education programs and social media followers. This beadwork program is rooted in the message that supporting this beadwork is supporting Maasai culture, which is supporting conservation. The women receive funds from these sales and throughout the program's history have invested revenue into girls' education, health initiatives and other communally beneficial acts.

## 4.3 | Best practices for forming and maintaining effective conservation partnerships

Effective conservation partnerships require a foundation of trust, mutual respect and shared vision (White et al., 2023). To enhance

collaboration and communication between international NGOs and local organizations, it is essential to prioritize regular, transparent communication (Kark et al., 2015). This can be achieved using technology to bridge geographical distances, scheduling regular check-ins across all levels of the organizations, and fostering an environment where open dialogue is encouraged. In this evaluation, it was shown how involving a diverse range of staff from both organizations in the partnership can prevent the concentration of knowledge and ensure that collaboration is more inclusive and comprehensive.

Building capacity within organizations and communities is another critical aspect of sustainable conservation partnerships (Hauptfeld et al., 2022; O'Connell & Carter, 2022). Capacity-building should be approached as a collaborative effort, where international NGOs provide not only financial resources but also training, technical support and opportunities for local organizations to lead initiatives (Porzecanski et al., 2022). This empowerment allows local communities to take ownership of conservation efforts, ensuring that they are tailored to the cultural and ecological contexts in which they operate (Elliott et al., 2018; Imbaya et al., 2019; Simpson et al., 2003). Moreover, capacity-building should be ongoing, with a focus on adapting to new challenges and opportunities as they arise, which is dependent on the regular and open communication mentioned above.

Flexible, long-term funding models are crucial for supporting community-centred conservation efforts (Paul et al., 2022). This evaluation adds to the growing body of literature emphasizing that rather than tying funds to specific short-term projects, donors should consider providing unrestricted or flexible funding that enables local organizations to respond to evolving priorities and contextual realities. For example, the Nature United report (Eyzaguirre et al., 2024) demonstrates how flexible funding supports core functions and enables organizational resilience. Studies by Nuijten et al. (2023) and Kachena and Spiegel (2023) show that reducing administrative burden and conditional reporting fosters equity and better partnership outcomes. These works reinforce the need for funders to invest in trust-based, long-term relationships that place decision-making power closer to communities. Multi-year commitments are also essential, as they provide the stability needed for long-term planning and sustained impact. Aligning funding with community-defined goals ensures that conservation efforts are both relevant and effective, fostering partnerships that are resilient and capable of driving meaningful change, for example following the '10 Funding Principles' of the Naivasha Vision (African Community Conservation Forum, 2023, 10 Funding Principles section).

SORALO invited CZBG to participate in the Forum where the Naivasha Vision was developed to listen and learn from many African leaders, so that CZBG would work to promote the vision to their audiences. As AZA conservation professionals and international conservation organizations, they must listen and 'improve their ability to support communities as equal and equitable partners' according to the call put out by the Naivasha Vision (African Community Conservation Forum, 2023, para. 5). CZBG invites other organizations to evaluate their partnerships with community-driven organizations in the same manner to determine what we are doing well and how we can improve to answer this call

from African communities leading conservation work. Together, we will have greater conservation impact by using the PARTNERS principles and following the Naivasha Vision of appropriately and effectively collaborating with the people at the centre of African conservation.

## 5 | CONCLUSIONS

### 5.1 | The role and responsibility of the modern zoo

Zoos often act as third spaces, places for people to gather and enjoy wildlife (Oldenburg, 2023). Zoos have a responsibility to engage their vast audiences, connecting people with wildlife and embracing the human dimensions of conservation, unlocking the willingness to act. Beyond this responsibility of visitor engagement, zoos need to contribute to in situ conservation, both locally and globally.

We share this research approach to encourage other AZA facilities and conservation organizations collaborating with communities worldwide to evaluate their partnerships through a structured framework. As zoos worldwide, especially AZA facilities, continue to increase their conservation impact through active involvement, this evaluation provides a roadmap for effective partnerships between the AZA facilities and community-driven conservation organizations. This study aims to increase the collective capacity of zoos and conservationists to establish intentional strategies aligned with the goal of the Naivasha Vision to 'better collaborate with and support communities and local organizations' in an ethical, community-led manner, which will better ensure a future where both people and wildlife thrive (African Community Conservation Forum, 2023). The PARTNERS framework is useful to examine the alignment between zoos and the community leaders' voices as we work together for increased biodiversity impact.

### 5.2 | Opportunities for growth in SORALO-CZBG partnership

The partnership has opportunities for growth in aptness, negotiation, empathy, responsiveness and strategic support that were identified through this evaluation.

SORALO aims to increase their understanding of CZBG's context. CZBG plans to support this reciprocal, cross-cultural understanding through funding a visit of SORALO team members to CZBG for onsite training and relationship building. Through even more proactive communication as a result of this evaluation, the SORALO and CZBG teams are committing to problem-solving together. For example, in the past, CZBG staff felt awkward when individual community members in SORALO's landscape requested financial support; now the teams will proactively communicate the investments made at systemic organizational and community levels leading to benefits for many, so as to prevent or redirect these asks as well as invite more community members' needs systematically into the partnership

conversations. From the opposite perspective, SORALO has felt frustrated when graduate students or other Zoo-hosted groups arrive without the relevant understanding or context and more time is needed to guide their learning; as a result of this evaluation, CZBG has renewed specific pre-visit learnings to enable onsite deeper and more engaging discussions and experiences that benefit SORALO, CZBG and the graduate students.

The two organizations have identified an opportunity to increase trust-building work and invest in professional development resources to overcome the barriers associated with decentralizing the partnership from the leadership level, towards collaboration of staff at all levels of leadership and project management.

CZBG has identified a need to increase internal organization commitment to support storytelling that extends empathy to people living alongside wildlife, in addition to the empathy for species and individual wildlife. CZBG also has committed to working on building buy-in for collaboration with SORALO teams across all departments within the organization. To maximize potential for strategic support, SORALO and CZBG have committed to prioritizing opportunities for collaboration with each other, as well as with networks like the attendees of the African Community Conservation Forum and overcoming financial barriers associated with geographic distance.

### 5.3 | Calls to action for AZA-accredited zoos and other conservation institutions

The PARTNERS evaluation presented in this paper offers a practical methodology to assess an organization's alignment with the Naivasha Vision and identify areas for improvement and opportunities for enhancing growth, equity and greater conservation impact. Based on our learnings, we encourage AZA-accredited institutions and other international conservation organizations to consider the following actionable steps:

1. *Identify your conservation partnerships that align with both conservation and human well-being targets:* Prioritize building stronger, active relationships with conservation organizations that integrate the human dimensions of conservation with wildlife protection.
2. *Broaden access to conservation partnerships across your organization:* Decentralize conservation engagement from a single department or leadership level and create avenues for more staff to connect with conservation partners, active collaborations and participate in decision-making.  
Example: Host regular webinars to virtual presentations where conservation partners share their work. Open these sessions to all staff and encourage active dialogue.
3. *Restructuring funding models to reflect trust-based partnerships:* Prioritize unrestricted or flexible funding for community-led partners. Such models signal trust, enable responsiveness to evolving local needs and support long-term, partner-defined outcomes.

4. *Understand and support the holistic needs of your conservation partners:* Move beyond a focus solely on biological outcomes. Engage partners in conversations about operational or technical support needs—such as logistics, communications, data management or infrastructure—and identify where your organization can provide meaningful support.
5. *Foster collaboration across departments and leadership levels:* Engage a wider array of departments—from education to maintenance—in conservation partnerships. Leverage digital tools like Zoom and WhatsApp for ongoing collaboration, while recognizing the added value of in-person engagement where feasible and when work on the ground is agreed upon by both partners.
6. *Apply lessons from international partnerships to your local context:* Reflect on the community-based approaches of trusted conservation partners and explore how similar principles—such as shared governance, inclusion or long-term relationship building—can enhance your local conservation or outreach efforts.

## 5.4 | Limitations and next steps

A limitation of this study is that the staff interviewed to evaluate the SORALO-CZBG partnership were exclusively individuals in leadership roles or positions with greater influence within their organizations. This sampling bias is acknowledged by the authors. Future studies utilizing this methodology should aim to include staff with less decision-making authority to capture a broader range of perspectives or to focus on a sample of staff with less decision-making authority to capture further opportunities for growth. Genuine collaboration between organizations extends beyond leadership alignment and requires intentional efforts to create pathways for operational staff to engage and collaborate effectively. Additionally, we acknowledge the potential confirmation bias of the sample participants' interests in the outcomes of the partnership continuing, which could have influenced their responses to be more positive or constructive than independently transparent in describing conflicts. Future studies could utilize independent consultants as interviewers to conduct data collection to intentionally overcome this bias. However, the purpose of the research study was to identify constructive opportunities for improvement, so the applied and goal-oriented influence on the study is expected. Furthermore, the collaborative co-creation of steps forward to improve the partnership in this study's results demonstrates the organizations' commitment to acting out the best practices of the PARTNERS framework; while the confirmation bias could have influenced the results, the study was also enhanced with the appropriate methods aligned with the analytical framework which reinforced the organizations' commitments to continuous improvement towards shared goals.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Bailey Cadena, Samuel David Jenike, Lily Maynard and Mahi Puri conceived the ideas and designed methodology; Bailey Cadena, Lily Maynard, Mahi Puri and Patrick Cole collected the data; Bailey

Cadena and Mahi Puri analysed the data; Bailey Cadena and Mahi Puri led the writing of the manuscript. All authors contributed critically to the drafts and gave final approval for publication.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

Authors listed in this manuscript are also employed by the organizations being evaluated in this manuscript. As mentioned above, the founder of SORALO contributed as a co-author. To avoid bias, data collection and analysis were conducted by authors not employed by the organization. A third-party evaluator was not used, as this qualitative analysis was intended to also spark conversation rooted in PARTNERS principles in how to continuously improve.

## PEER REVIEW

The peer review history for this article is available at <https://www.webofscience.com/api/gateway/wos/peer-review/10.1002/2688-8319.70182>.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data available from the Dryad Digital Repository: <https://datadryad.org/dataset/doi:10.5061/dryad.mcvdnckf0> (Cadena et al., 2025).

## STATEMENT ON INCLUSION

Our study investigated the relationship between two partner organizations and the results have been shared among leaders. Literature published within each partner's professional networks were incorporated and referenced in the design of this evaluation. Manuscript edits and reviews involved staff from both organizations. Results will be shared with different leadership levels within each organization upon publication.

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