

CONCEPT NOTE: THE 2025 NATIONAL LAND REFORM AND BIODIVERSITY STEWARDSHIP INITIATIVE LEARNING EXCHANGE

Theme: Biodiversity stewardship: A catalyst for transformation in conservation.

1. Contextual Background

The Land Reform and Biodiversity Stewardship Initiative (LRBSI) was launched in 2009 by the Department of Fisheries, Forestry and the Environment (DFFE), the Department of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development (DALRRD), and the South African National Biodiversity Institute (SANBI) as the host. This initiative was established in response to the conservation challenges in land reform and communal areas, aiming to bridge the gap between socio-economic development and biodiversity conservation. It focuses on land reform projects in critical biodiversity areas, seeking to find balance between economic development and conservation of ecosystem functions that are essential to human existence. To this day, the LRBSI continues to play a key role in integrating conservation, socio-economic development, and the improvement of livelihoods.

The Initiative's main goals are to (i) create a nationwide learning network and community of practice focused on integrating land reform with biodiversity stewardship, facilitating knowledge sharing among diverse sectors; and (ii) to showcase projects that effectively deliver socio-economic and conservation benefits, demonstrating the feasibility of integrating these objectives at the local level. It has been evident that achieving this necessitates the collaboration of diverse stakeholders, including NGOs government agencies, private investors, donors, and community members. This cooperative approach is crucial for optimising resources, minimising duplication of efforts, and ensuring the initiative's objectives are successfully achieved. It also calls for a shift towards an initiative that deeply integrates conservation with socio-economic development, while emphasising sustainable use, improved livelihoods and collaborative governance.

The 2025 LRBSI LE marks the 8th learning exchange to be convened in a collaborative effort since the dawn of this initiative, the last exchange was held in Hluhluwe in February 2020 and has attracted over two hundred (200) participants. This platform brings together local communities across the country, practitioners from both public and NGOs sector, financial institutions, policy makers and so forth for the purpose of learning and co-creating solutions towards a better future for the benefit of both people and the environment. South Africa adopted a "whole-of-society" approach, engaging a broad range of stakeholders—including national and local governments, policymakers, indigenous and local communities, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), community-based organizations (CBOs), the private sector, the general public, wildlife and conservation practitioners, and academic institutions—to secure biodiversity priority areas through initiatives like the biodiversity stewardship program.

Biodiversity stewardship involves securing land in critical biodiversity areas through agreements with private and communal landowners. While conservation authorities provide technical guidance and support, landowners retain responsibility for management of their properties. The National Environmental Management Protected Areas Act allows for the designation of protected areas on both private and communal land, fostering collaborative conservation efforts.

Further to that biodiversity stewardship has gained recognition as a key mechanism for conservation within several national policy frameworks. These include the National Development Plan (NDP), the National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP), and the National Protected Areas Expansion Strategy (NPAES). Initially, biodiversity stewardship was recognised as a tool for expanding protected areas, but its role has since

evolved. It has now evolved to support a wider array of initiatives, including the biodiversity economy (including ecotourism), the conservation of critical water-source areas, the protection of other vital ecological infrastructure, and a wide range of community-based conservation projects for social development. This ensures that conservation objectives align with social and economic development.

2. Introduction to the 2025 LRBSI Learning Exchange and its funding

The South African National Biodiversity Institute, the Department of Fisheries, Forestry and the Environment, and their partners will be hosting the 2025 National Land Reform and Biodiversity Stewardship Initiative Learning Exchange. This event is funded by the Global Environment Facility (GEF) under the project titled ***Catalysing Financing and Capacity for the Biodiversity Economy around Protected Areas*** (the Biodiversity Economy Project). The project is building biodiversity economy nodes that promote community stewardship and sustainable livelihoods, while expanding the national biodiversity economy to increase local communities' involvement in wildlife conservation. Activities focus on three key biodiversity economy nodes in South Africa: the Greater Addo to Amathole Node in the Eastern Cape, the Greater Kruger-Limpopo Node in Limpopo, and the Greater iSimangaliso Node in KwaZulu-Natal. The project design is aligned with South Africa's National Biodiversity Economy Strategy (NBES), which seeks to transform the biodiversity economy by fostering inclusive economic opportunities.

3. Details of the 2025 National Land Reform and Biodiversity Stewardship Initiative Learning Exchange

- Venue : Garden Court Hotel, Durban in KwaZulu-Natal Province
- Date: 24 – 28 February 2025
- Duration: 5 Days(including travelling days)

4. Purpose of the National Land Reform and Biodiversity Stewardship Initiative Learning Exchange

The purpose of the Learning Exchange is to bring together key stakeholders from communities, the conservation sector, and the private sector across South Africa to share experiences and insights on integrating land reform and communal land areas within the context of biodiversity conservation and community development. The exchange aims to foster collaboration, knowledge-sharing and learning among stakeholders involved in biodiversity stewardship and community-led conservation initiatives, with a focus on supporting sustainable socio-economic development in South Africa through land reform and biodiversity conservation efforts. Additionally, the event will explore the role of Indigenous knowledge systems in climate change disaster risk reduction (DRR), and how these systems can transform biodiversity governance through the active participation of Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities. It will also address land management and biodiversity conservation innovations while reflecting on the outcomes of previous learning exchanges through an impact assessment.

5. Objectives of the National Land Reform and Biodiversity Stewardship Initiative Learning Exchange

- Facilitate knowledge exchange and peer-to-peer learning amongst diverse stakeholders to enhance the biodiversity stewardship and land reform programme.
- Create an environment for communities to engage with global and national policies that supports expansion of the conservation estate and the biodiversity economy.
- .Facilitate collaboration and partnership between local communities, NGOs, public , private sector promoting cross pollination of information and support.

- Create space for collaboration and partnership between local communities, NGOs and private and public sector stakeholders as a foundation for communities to access support, investment and other resources needed to participate in the biodiversity economy
- Reflect on Progress and Lessons Learned: share progress on LRBSI together with outcomes of the previous learning exchanges.

6. Envisaged output and key results of the National Land Reform and Biodiversity Stewardship Initiative Learning Exchange

- Participants gain insights and learning from the experiences of their peers.
- Cross-pollination of information on key issues such as beneficiation, diversification, governance, and community empowerment.
- Effective amplification of voices from local communities (LCs), ensuring their perspectives influence and shape biodiversity policies.
- Better understanding of public perceptions around transformation in the context of biodiversity and conservation.
- Progress is assessed out of reflection on the outcomes of previous learning exchanges, and areas for improvement are identified.
- The role and integration of the Land Reform and Biodiversity Stewardship Initiative (LRBSI) within the broader concept of Mega Living Landscapes is clarified.

7. Target audience and number of participants

The event is expected to bring together a diverse range of key stakeholders in the conservation sector. Identified partners include representatives from local communities, landowners, the conservation sector, the private sector, NGOs, provincial conservation management authorities, and national government departments. The event is planned to host between 100 and 150 participants.

8. Logistical and Financial requirements

The planning and execution of the event will be led by the Biodiversity Stewardship Team at the South African National Biodiversity Institute (SANBI), with support from the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment (DFFE), iSimangaliso, Ezemvelo KZNWildlife, WWF-SA, ECPTA and SANParks. SANBI has allocated a budget to cover essential event costs, including accommodation, venue, catering, stationery and so forth.