



SOUTH AFRICA



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INCLUSIVE LIVING LANDSCAPES WITH THRIVING COMMUNITIES

ENABLING COMMUNITY CHAMPIONS

Community engagement, through the upskilling of young community champions, can support non-governmental organisations (NGOs), government and researchers in the facilitation of rural development, as well as management and research related to natural resources. They can also provide an integral link between local residents, leadership and support agencies like NGOs and the state.

WHAT ARE COMMUNITY CHAMPIONS?

Community champions are a specific form of citizen engagement. Selected community members represent their community in the decision-making and implementation of natural resource management, together with governments, NGOs or both. Community champions can be active in various sectors, including ecosystem services, water planning and healthcare.

WHY IS CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT IMPORTANT?

In rural areas, many communities rely on natural resources for their daily lives and livelihoods. Effective citizen engagement is an effective way to manage natural resources. It can enhance the acceptance, self-regulation and compliance of management around these shared natural resources.

WHAT ROLE CAN COMMUNITY CHAMPIONS PLAY?

In addition to their role in managing natural resources, community champions can play a valuable role in participatory action research or citizen science. They can help make the research more societally relevant, as well as translate and disseminate information to ensure the uptake of knowledge into action.

WHAT IS AN EXAMPLE OF COMMUNITY CHAMPIONS?

Most examples of community champions around the world are either a management or research approach, but rarely a combination of both.

On the next page, we present a case study from Matatiele, where a local NGO, ERS, employs local youth with limited education and employment opportunities. They call them “Ecochamps”. These youth are agents of change in the local communities they work in around Matatiele and the wider catchment of the uMzimvubu River, on which almost 200 000 people depend. Between 2017 and 2025, ERS has upskilled over 135 young community champions through various sources of funding. These young people play a crucial and complementary role in the NGO’s implementing work, with a core focus being fostering communication between traditional leadership, community residents and ERS staff.



WATER ENERGY FOOD NEXUS
TOWARDS SOCIAL JUSTICE

www.wefcommunities.co.za

WEF NEXUS PROJECT

The project is an initiative by a consortium of four research institutions from the Netherlands and South Africa (see back page), partnering with WWF and an Eastern Cape-based implementing partner, Environmental and Rural Solutions (ERS).

While WWF has produced thought leadership on the WEF nexus over the years, this project took it a step further by introducing the concept of “WEF communities” as a bottom-up approach to integrating local decision-making into national frameworks.

Rural communities demonstrate potential for fostering self-determination while addressing trade-offs between needs for water, energy and food. The water-energy-food (WEF) nexus offers an integrated approach to managing such growing demands.

This factsheet provides recommendations for engaging community champions in a rural context. It draws on findings from the “Ecochamps” who work in the grasslands of Matatiele in the Eastern Cape of South Africa.

CASE STUDY: THE ECOCHAMPS OF THE EASTERN CAPE

IN SHORT, WHAT DOES AN ECOCHAMP DO?

An Ecochamp's central role is to facilitate dialogue, promote sustainable practices and ensure that development efforts align with the community's cultural and environmental realities. They also play a central role in co-creating plans for project implementation, fostering and monitoring landscape-based activities.

WHO ARE THE ECOCHAMPS?

The Ecochamps are young people, typically aged 18 to 35. They are selected from the local communities in collaboration with local leadership. These young people are provided with capacity building exposure and mentoring to boost their self-esteem and life skills, to provide a foundation upon which they can be provided with technical and social training to enhance their agency as facilitators.

HOW ARE ECOCHAMPS SELECTED AND SUPPORTED IN THE COMMUNITY?

Ecochamps are selected through opportunity calls, when funding is available, which are shared with traditional chiefs who help identify suitable candidates for the positions. In Matatiele, the Ecochamps form a valuable part of the uMzimvubu Catchment Partnership (UCP) – a local partnership of non-governmental organisations, government departments and universities that contribute to the sustainable management, restoration and economic viability of the uMzimvubu catchment area.

WHAT ARE THE DAY-TO-DAY ACTIVITIES?

Ecochamps are engaged in the daily work of the NGO, such as natural resource and agricultural management, knowledge sharing, and liaison with traditional authorities and government departments. They are an essential part of the ERS team, acting as ambassadors and community connectors to facilitate hands-on support. They are involved in various activities, including animal husbandry, veld condition assessments, spring protection, alien plant clearing, climate-smart agroecology, biodiversity bioblitzes, waste clean-ups and WASH awareness. They play a vital role in the citizen-science-based monitoring that helps ERS track its metrics and its impact, with a central learning focus.

The Ecochamps serve as liaisons who not only translate technical information for local communities but also mediate relationships between stakeholders, helping to build trust and resolve conflicts that might arise between communities and external actors. This is particularly important in areas where language barriers, cultural differences and historical mistrust may impede collaboration.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF BEING AN ECOCHAMP?

Ecochamps receive on-the-job training in research, agriculture, communication and digital skills, among other key skills. This helps them not only in their daily work, but also develops their professional skills, while they empower themselves within society and increase their employment opportunities.



WHY ARE ECOCHAMPS VALUABLE?

The unique combination of being locally employed and receiving on-the-job training while working for an NGO, liaising with the government and engaging in research makes Ecochamps very valuable. They are well integrated in the local management authorities and practices, such as traditional chief meetings and rangeland association committees. This means they help to align the work by NGOs, the government and researchers and make it more attuned to local needs and realities on the ground.

At the same time, Ecochamps can direct research projects in their area to more societally relevant themes and approaches, and help translate findings into meaningful activities and actionable approaches, including in the work they do for NGOs or governments.

HOW DO ECOCHAMPS BENEFIT PEOPLE AND NATURE?

Through their work, Ecochamps promote social cohesion and environmental stewardship, particularly in rural areas that are often neglected by formal governance systems. The initiative fosters a sense of ownership within the community, as local youth are not only trained but are also empowered to take responsibility for the sustainable management of natural resources such as water, energy and food systems.

WHAT ADDITIONAL OPPORTUNITIES EXIST?

Ecochamps are occasionally employed as local researchers in various university projects that are conducted in the region, coordinated through ERS and its partners under UCP.

As graduates of a mentorship process, an important evolution for these young agents is the opportunity to mentor new cohorts of Ecochamps. Since 2017, more than 50% of the Ecochamps have found permanent employment in local NGOs, as well as running their own enterprises, including charcoal production, animal husbandry and fresh produce sales. In 2025, ERS had 3 Ecochamps in its technical management team.

WHAT ARE THE ROLES THAT ECOCHAMPS FULFIL?

Ecochamps play a key role in facilitating communication between communities and other stakeholders in the region, particularly those that are part of the UCP. Thanks to the Ecochamps, NGOs, government agencies and researchers find their way to communities, including more marginalised groups, to consult them on their management and research activities. These are some of the many roles that Ecochamps fulfil:



Ecochamps facilitate multidirectional communication streams, including through language translations and fostering mutual understanding.



Ecochamps help with the integration of knowledge into their NGOs' day-to-day work and strategies. They also help to build comprehensive understandings of the local contexts, which are crucial for many research and management activities.



Ecochamps build trust among stakeholders and citizens due to transparent communication, as well as resolving conflicts that result from the implementation of management activities.



Ecochamps help build environmental knowledge and awareness among communities. This results in enhanced collaboration and self-management of natural resources, as well as improved skill sets, knowledge and social cohesion among communities.



Ecochamps enable knowledge sharing among practitioners, researchers and citizens, whereby they draw on, help build and integrate both traditional and scientific knowledge.

ECOCHAMPS IN THE WEF NEXUS KNOWLEDGE FESTIVAL

The Water-Energy-Food (WEF) Nexus Knowledge Festival, organised by local NGO Environmental and Rural Solutions (ERS), took place in March 2024 in Matatielle. Local communities and traditional leaders were involved from the start, ensuring diverse perspectives and ownership of the event.

During the festival, Ecochamps, played a key role by facilitating communication – translating between local languages and English – so everyone could participate comfortably in the language they preferred. Over the three-day event, more than 200 participants engaged in a variety of activities, combining research, art and community-driven solutions. The Ecochamps arranged roundtable panel discussions and coordinated traditional dances and songs performed by local schoolchildren. They also delivered a theatre performance that addressed local WEF challenges through storytelling and drama.



“At the end of the last day of the festival, the NRF Director asked me: ‘Who’s your event organiser? This was incredible!’ I could only point to my team members as I was rendered speechless. My heart was overflowing with pride! They spent months of weekends with the school kids prepping dance and drama, sourcing suppliers, negotiating venues, phoning community reps and leaders, arranging travel and sound systems, tweaking and re-tweaking. They curated an incredible event with the assistance of the Ecochamps. All that background work often goes unseen.”

- Nicky McLeod, Co-founder and CEO Environmental and Rural Solutions

PRACTICAL GUIDELINES TO ENABLE COMMUNITY CHAMPIONS

A number of lessons can be drawn from the experiences of the Ecochamps initiative in Matatiele in the Eastern Cape of South Africa.

We present guidelines for upskilling community champions:

- ✔ **Diversity and inclusivity:** The Ecochamps programme provides a clear example of how youth empowerment, community-driven sustainability and research integration can contribute to a more just and sustainable future. By prioritising the empowerment of marginalised groups, such as young women, youth with limited education possibilities, and indigenous communities, Ecochamps foster both environmental and social justice, ensuring that the governance of the water-energy-food (WEF) nexus reflects the diverse needs and wisdom of all stakeholders.
- ✔ **Joint decision-making:** This is required whereby citizens feel they have an influence on the aims and design of Ecochamps-led management and research activities. While Ecochamps are representing their communities, they cannot be seen as the sole and full representation of communities' views. It should be noted that Ecochamps are employed by an NGO, which can limit their independence in collaborating with all community members and stakeholders, while fostering their agency through having mandate to facilitate funded interventions. This means that additional community consultation and participation remain necessary in addition to employing community champions. Ecochamps play a very important role in fostering co-creation of action plans and interventions, ensuring that indigenous knowledge is integrated with scientific approaches.
- ✔ **Local knowledge hubs:** While Ecochamps help to integrate and facilitate the use of traditional and scientific knowledge, this could be more impactful if knowledge and data are better managed in the region. The establishment of a more formalised and better resourced local knowledge hub would help to aggregate and make better use of existing traditional and scientific knowledge, which can help Ecochamps, communities, stakeholders and researchers active in the region. These hubs serve as spaces where information can be exchanged between the Ecochamps, local stakeholders and external actors, enabling better knowledge management and collaborative problem-solving.
- ✔ **Scalability:** The success of Ecochamps lies in its scalability. The model has demonstrated how local champions can take on significant roles in resource management, meaningful engagement, research and policy advocacy. It serves as a replicable model for other communities around the world. The training and empowerment of local youth in sustainable practices, citizen science and knowledge integration are vital for fostering more inclusive and participatory governance structures.

This factsheet is part of a series. See also a factsheet on *WEF Knowledge festivals* and a policy brief on *Lessons from WEF governance*



THE OPPORTUNITY

The Ecochamps initiative in Matatiele is a small-scale initiative with very limited impact worldwide, but is having influence across the country through various catchment partnerships and networks. The Ecochamps make a resounding impression when they attend national events, acting as ambassadors for the youth. Scaling up and increasing the number of community champions around the globe could help tackle the many sustainability challenges, both at local and global levels. We therefore encourage NGOs, government agencies and researchers around the world to consider the upskilling of community champions as a way to reflect on challenges and possible solutions with the local community in their work.

FURTHER INFORMATION:

- Experiences of the Ecochamps: enviros.co.za/eco-champs-2
- The WEF Nexus Knowledge Festival in Matatiele: enviros.co.za/wefnexusfestival
- The research project: www.wefcommunities.co.za



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