

Synchronicity Earth – Congo Basin Programme

Type: Non-Profit Organization

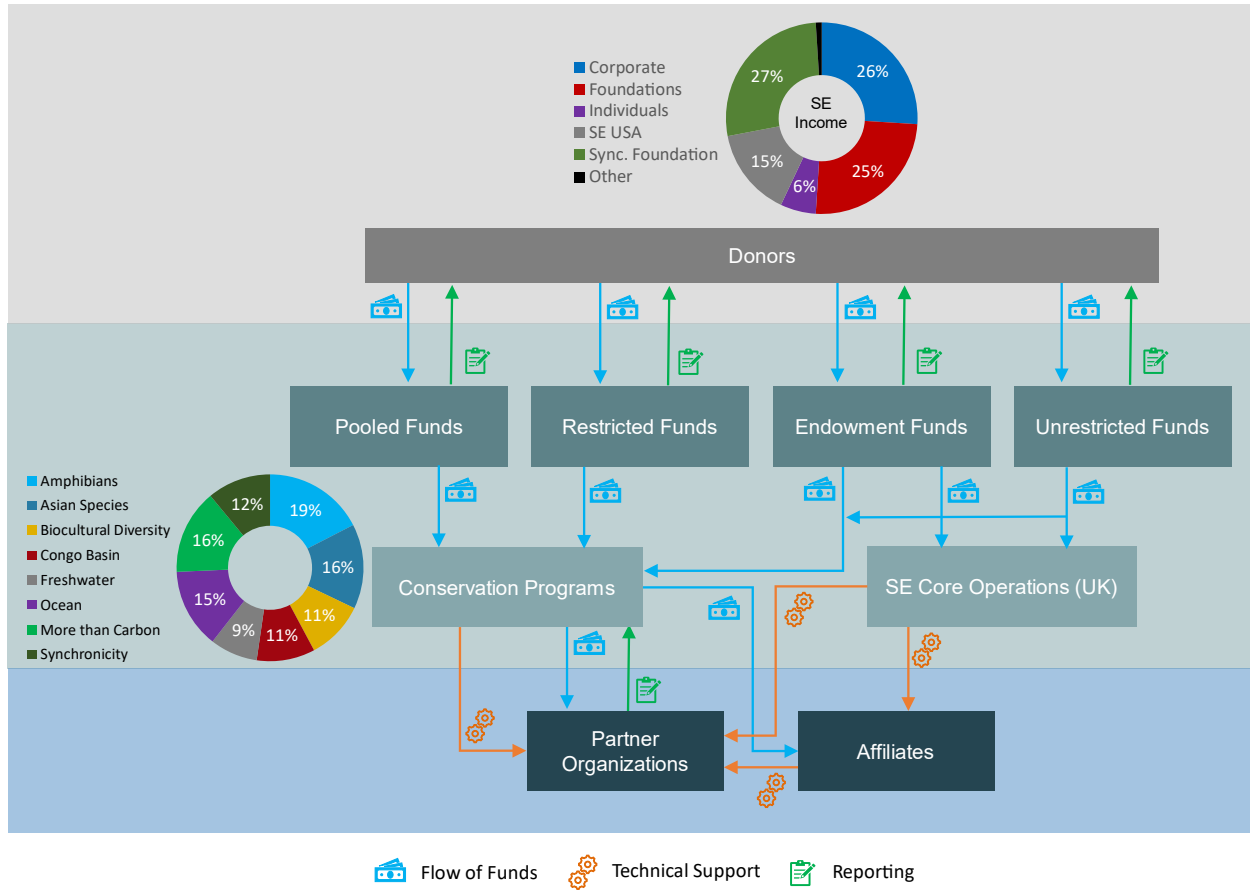
Objective: Biodiversity and biocultural diversity conservation

Synchronicity Earth (SE) is a UK-based non-profit founded in 2009 by Adam and Jessica Sweidan. The Congo Basin Programme (CBP) – launched in 2017 – is supported by a pooled-fund model. It is funded by grants from private philanthropy. The CBP, which is one of SE’s six conservation programs, is managed and administered by SE.



Current Funding sources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Private Donors:</i> Corporates, private philanthropies (foundations), and its founding organization, the Aurum Kaleidoscope Foundation.
Annual Turnover	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • USD 3.9 million (2021)
Management/Administration – % of total funds	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 27% for country-based local staff and operational costs of partners
Scale of Representation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low – IP & LCs as stakeholders
Replicability potential	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Medium – the potential for replication would be contingent on the existence of organizations that have a clear track record of supporting frontline IP & LC organizations, as well as pre-established trust relationships and legitimacy with relevant local organizations
Absorption capacity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High in relative terms and low in absolute terms
Expansion potential	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SE as a whole aims to increase its annual disbursements to USD 8 to 12 million by 2027

Synchronicity Earth Fund Flow Diagram



Synchronicity Earth – Congo Basin Programme

What is Synchronicity Earth and its Congo Basin Programme? Synchronicity Earth (SE) is a UK-based non-profit founded in 2009 by Adam and Jessica Sweidan. The Congo Basin Programme (CBP) – launched in 2017 – is supported by a pooled-fund model. It is funded by grants from private philanthropy. The CBP, which is one of SE's six conservation programmes, is managed and administered by SE.

Global objective (-s): Biodiversity and biocultural diversity conservation

Organizational objective (-s): Synchronicity Earth – To “...bring conservation to life through championing effective approaches and increasing funding for Earth's overlooked species and ecosystems and the communities working to protect them.”

Congo Basin Programme – To empower “...communities and indigenous peoples to...resist destructive developments that threaten forests and rivers...to defend their territories; and protect and revive ecosystems through regenerative approaches to development.”

Typology: Accountability – IPLCs as stakeholders. Scale of target outcomes – Strengthening Specific IPLCs communities.

Focal region: Congo Basin, with active support in Cameroon and DRC at present.

Operational context: The Congo Basin is home to the second largest contiguous tract of rainforest in the world and is classified as a High Biodiversity Wilderness Area by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). In addition to housing vast tracts of biodiversity and carbon stores, the Congo Basin forests support the livelihoods of 40 million forest-dependent people, including an estimated 920,000 Indigenous Peoples.ⁱ The region is highly threatened by logging, agribusiness, hydropower, oil and gas, mining, and infrastructure developments, which have led to negative environmental and human impacts. As of 2021, over 60,000 km² of concessions were requested for agro-industrial and forestry projects. Over the past decade, the DRC has lost over 6.6% (>13 Mha) of its tree cover.ⁱⁱ

Despite the high biodiversity and carbon store values, and urgency of their protection, conservation in the region is underfunded due to perceived risks that include political instability, conflict, corruption, and civil unrest. Four of the six Congo Basin countries are currently classified amongst the Fragile and Conflict-Affected Statesⁱⁱⁱ. Rates of extreme poverty are high, and benefit-sharing arrangements from extractive industries are woefully inadequate.^{iv} The legal framework for securing customary land and forest tenure is equally inadequate, resulting in a historic lack of recognition for IPLC rights. While the Congo Basin has an active and well-organized civil society advocating for forest defense and IPLC rights, these organizations largely lack the capacity to secure funding from traditional aid sources.^v

How it works: The Congo Basin Programme (CBP) is one of six programmes within SE's global portfolio. Each programme supports 10-20 organizations and/or individuals working to safeguard and regenerate diverse species and ecosystems in SE's priority regions, typically regions of high ecological value that have been historically underfunded.

The CBP is one of two SE programmes that operates on a pooled fund model. Donations to the pooled fund are restricted for use within the CBP but are flexible to be spent at SE's discretion through consultation with affiliates and partners. Each pooled fund donor has specific areas of interest, so SE staff work with them and the partners collaboratively to ensure alignment between the needs of the partners and the funding allocated towards specific themes.^{vi} All of the CBP funds are disbursed directly to partners or to compensate affiliates.^{vii}

SE's pooled funds are marketed to donors with pre-determined thematic or geographic goals and provide donors an opportunity to co-fund and collaborate with one another. The pooled funding approach reduces the logistical burden on donors who wish to support promising organizations with limited capacity in remote regions, while buffering partners from the burdens of securing funding.^{viii} CBP staff and donors interviewed both noted the strong trust relationships that have been built over time between SE and its donors to the pooled fund.

CBP's current donors are providing funding commitments of between two and three years. Donor funding is continuous, but funding discussions between SE and the donors are re-opened every one to two years.

Donors typically increase their contributions over time. For example, Good Energies has given three grants, with their initial contribution in 2018 of 100k EUR, followed by larger contributions of 250k and 500k EUR in 2019 and 2021, respectively. One donor interviewed noted that their current risk tolerance only allows for two- or three-year grant cycles, pointing to the importance of regular reporting and upward accountability. In this way, the pooled fund model provides donors with an opportunity to provide longer-term funding to partners while keeping their own commitments in a comfortable two- to three-year timeframe.

The typical grant cycle for partners/grant recipients is one to three years, reflecting the timing of grant commitments from donors. But with renewed commitments from donors via the pooled model, SE has been able to offer renewals to several partners.^{ix} Many relationships with partners date back to the programme's inception. Grants to partners range from GBP 15,000 to 90,000 annually.^x While SE does not expect partner proposals to be co-financed, CBP funding is often leveraged by partners as co-financing to secure further funding from other sources. SE's staff also see their role as supporting partners' access to resources to fulfil their own visions; they have been successful in several cases with partners accessing other donor funding to ensure financial sustainability of their work.

SE's endowment funds. SE's endowment funds. Beyond its programme-specific, pooled funds – such as the one supporting the Congo Basin Programme - SE has five programmatic and one general endowment fund, which jointly held over GBP 6.9 million as of December 2022. The annuities from these funds enable SE to deliver long-term support for specific conservation purposes (e.g., Ape Fund for conservation of endangered ape species). One of the endowment funds, the SE Living Fund, in addition to providing funding for conservation programmes also supports SE's core operations (e.g., strategic work, partnership building, and staff salaries).

The endowment funds receive donations primarily from corporate and high-net-worth individual donors. Investment returns from the endowment funds provide a low-burden source of income for SE, as the donations come with limited reporting duties and do not require renewal. The endowment funds are invested according to the SE Investment Policy, which includes a diversified, absolute return approach for investments. On an annual basis, SE aims to disburse 10-15% of the total value from each endowment, with the goal of drawing the funds down over the course of 15-20 years. The longest-term active programmatic grants from the endowment funds are currently three years, but SE is experimenting with support to longer-term grants using endowment funding. For example, one partner has been granted a five-year funding arrangement with three years of financing provided upfront, and two years conditional funding based on progress made.

Governance: Synchronicity Earth is governed by a five-person Board of Directors and Trustees that is responsible, amongst others, for oversight of asset management, financial policies and procedures, the audit process, high-level strategy and operational decisions, and fundraising.

An eleven-member Advisory Panel provides expert knowledge and advice on critical conservation issues and assistance to orient SE's strategic direction. They also advise on interventions and points of change and highlight opportunities and innovations.

A Senior Leadership Team is responsible for implementing SE's strategy, developing policies and best practices, and ensuring compliance with relevant regulations and legislation, among other responsibilities.^{xi} Core operations such as administration, due diligence, finance, communications, and fundraising are London-based. Pooled and endowment funds are housed in the UK.

In the case of CBP, three local part-time affiliates in the Congo Basin provide oversight and support to partners, including on monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL), project management, integration of gender-inclusive approaches, and networking/relationship building. The affiliates consult with partners to inform goal setting and strategy, provide training and capacity building support, and communicate with the London office for networking and communications.

Priorities: SE's research team targets and prioritizes regions with high potential conservation impact that have historically received limited funding. The idea is for SE to make funding accessible to organizations that often lack connections with larger donors; an approach that also implies a higher-risk portfolio than

one which other funders might typically be comfortable. Of the total SE funding provided over the years, 64% has gone to local and national partners.

CBP does not host open calls for funding, but rather generates partnerships through relationship building and networking via local consultants. The three local affiliates are responsible for scoping partnerships. CBP programming emphasises core support to strengthen organizations and empower partners to achieve their self-determined priorities.

While support of Indigenous Peoples falls within CBP's mandate, there is no formal distinction in prioritization between IPs and LCs. The prioritization of the specific investments to be made with the SE grant funding is defined by the partner/recipient organization. The partner identifies the issue/problem they would like to address – generally within SE's list of priority themes and something on which they already have a proven track record — and develops the funding proposal using participatory approaches.

Primary Outputs/Outcomes: Across its global portfolio, SE has supported 600,000 marginalized or underrepresented people through the work of its partners, and protected 690 Mha of terrestrial, ocean, and freshwater habitats. Its work has supported the identification of 170 Key Biodiversity Areas and contributed to IUCN Red List assessments for 14,000 species, with 1,200 species monitored and researched with SE support.^{xii}

A key part of SE's overall success has been in its support to partners. So far, SE supported 56 partners beyond funding, and helped 15 partners receive funding from others upon recommendation. Of total funding provided over the years, 64% has gone to local and national partners. SE has supported 52 organizations where women are represented in leadership roles. Through its Biocultural Diversity Programme, SE engaged 21 additional Indigenous communities in 2021 in reviving biocultural and biodiversity integrity with its partners.^{xiii} Relevant to its work in the Congo Basin is work supported through the Biocultural Diversity Programme to the Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa (AFSA), to inform the development of an inclusive African Food Policy to deliver just and sustainable food systems that draw upon traditional knowledge systems.

Specific to the CBP, since 2016 195,000 ha of forests were covered by participatory mapping programmes, and 160,000 ha were secured across eleven community forests for IPLCs. At least 24 IPLC communities in the DRC and Cameroon have been supported by SE partners, and at least 8,600 IPLC individuals have been trained in sustainable livelihoods and biodiversity management practices.^{xiv} Given the community-driven nature of projects and long-term conservation objectives, SE are reluctant to point to specific impacts of their work at this stage. SE understands that there may be potential for these projects and lessons to be replicated on a larger scale but are currently still in the stage of assessing the results of existing projects and harvesting lessons.

Funding sources: Three-quarters of Synchronicity Earth's overall funding comes from corporates, private philanthropies (foundations), and its founding organization, the Aurum Kaleidoscope Foundation. Each contribute about 25 percent of total income. Synchronicity Earth USA provides an additional fifteen percent,¹ and the remaining 10 percent is from individuals and other sources. The CBP is currently funded by a consortium of five foundation donors, including Good Energies and Packard Foundation.

Financial mechanism: The CBP pooled fund is hosted and managed by SE. Between 2018 and 2021 a total of about 1.68 million GBP was raised in donations for its operations, of which GBP 1.23 million (73%) have been disbursed to partners,² and GBP 0.45 million (27%) utilized for local staff based in country and other operational costs for partners. SE covers the core costs of managing the CBP programme, whilst the pooled fund covers the costs of local affiliates.

Upon selecting and approving a partner for funding, SE typically begins funding an organization with a small seed grant. Initial grant amounts vary based on risk assessment, but generally start small and scale up over time as SE builds a trusted relationship with the partner. In cases with exceptionally high risk, SE will pivot to increased involvement in organizational strengthening. Partners are required to obtain legal

¹ Synchronicity Earth USA was set up to support and raise funds for Synchronicity Earth.

² This case study refers to grantees as partners, reflecting the collaborative rather than hierarchal spirit of SE's relationships with organizations on the ground.

status before securing pooled fund resources. If the organization does not have legal status, or is otherwise unable to receive funds, SE's policy is to consider providing a consultancy contract of up to GBP 5,000, or to grant directly to an individual with legal status.^{xv} Partners that lack legal status are provided an eight-point roadmap of milestones to achieve over two years, and the funding decision is reconsidered upon completion.^{xvi}

Annual turnover: As of December 2021, SE held GBP 4.1 million in total assets. It turned over GBP 3.3 million, with GBP 2.13 million disbursed directly as conservation funding through its six programs and through the Synchronicity Portfolio. SE aims to maintain three months non-discretionary operating costs in its cash reserves, which serves a buffer against unexpected events or funding uncertainty.^{xvii} The CBP disbursed GBP 1.4 million to its partners between 2020 and 2022 (472,000 per year in average).

Absorption capacity: Capacity to receive additional funding is high in relative terms and low in absolute terms. SE has chosen not to apply for multi-lateral donor funding as the administrative requirements are unsuitable for the organisations they fund and do not align with SE's funding philosophy, however, they have considerable capacity to work with like-minded funders to increase grant funding.

There are also contextual challenges in the Congo Basin constraining the potential for channelling significantly greater resources. Partners in the region face complex challenges, negotiating periods of unrest, working in regions with limited infrastructure and with communities that struggle to produce sustainable livelihoods. Risk management by the SE team involves regular dialogue with partners to understand their specific operational contexts and support mitigation.^{xviii} For example, the work of CBP partner Réseau CREF has been impacted by a recent insurgence of M23 rebels; political tensions and violence have forced postponement of many activities. Similarly, the Okapi Conservation Project in the Ituri province of DRC suffers from political instability and frequent conflict between local communities and national park authorities. CBP's approach is a testament to the fact that success is possible amidst challenging local conditions, and thanks to its diverse portfolio of partners it offers opportunities for significant scaling-up as its support focuses on partner organizations rather than projects.

What works: SE's underlying mission to fund the underfunded and overlooked requires a certain embedded appetite for risk which is mutually understood by SE and its donors. This is even more the case in fragile and conflict-affected countries such as those in which the CBP operates. Some of the key elements that allow SE's approach to successfully reach and directly fund IPLC organizations in this and other contexts include:

- SE's pooled-fund model and CBP's local affiliates allow them to provide consistent, long-term funding to grassroots conservation programmes. The CBP provides timely funding to address emerging threats and internalizes the essential need for flexibility to accommodate changing project timelines. CBP's in-country affiliates' local knowledge and networks position them to build trust with local organizations, respond appropriately to risk and provide support when needed.^{xix}
- The pooled-fund approach has been instrumental in enabling its philanthropic donors to fund organizations aligned with their interests and mitigating their perception of risk while supporting the self-determined priorities of partner organizations, including frontline organizations that donors may otherwise not know about or be comfortable funding directly themselves.
- SE's pooled funds provide efficiency in terms of enabling more unified reporting to donors, rather than needing to submit a different report for every donor. CBP then brings its partners, affiliates, and donors together through webinars and other events to share the learnings and catalyze new collaborations.
- SE's due diligence process (spanning trust indicators and an organizational health assessment) is in-depth on SE's side, but low burden on the partners' side. Paired with an iterative risk management process, it makes funding accessible to high-impact local organizations at different levels of capacity that may not qualify for more conventional sources of funding, while still maintaining a responsible level of risk.
- CBP's affiliates initiate engagements with partners with a needs assessment, and the co-development of a work plan to address gaps. CBP's affiliates work with the partner organizations to address their technical capacity needs, and as required provide support on design and development of a strategy, advise on how to effectively consult with communities, and train partners on MEL and related efforts

such as gender mainstreaming. Affiliates also review partners' project reporting prior to submission to SE. Staff in the SE UK office provide support to partners on developing organizational policies, including training on safeguarding in order that they may recognize and address safeguarding concerns in their work and during project implementation.

- SE's commitment to capacity building of partners reflects both their higher tolerance for risk, as well as providing a risk mitigation approach that allows work with organizations whose vision is compelling but that have technical or administrative weaknesses that could otherwise exclude them from consideration for funding.
- SE has invested in building trust relationships through long-term partnerships, which opens the option of largely deferring to the partners' own approaches and priorities in determining scopes of work for funding. Partners define their own approaches and are not relegated to being "beneficiaries" tied to the life cycle of an individual grant project.
- An emphasis is placed on core support to strengthen organizations and empower partners to achieve their self-determined priorities. Funding is oriented around project-based outcomes but is very flexible and can be used to address core needs like administration, staff salaries, and organizational infrastructure. The CBP also maintains an emergency facility to support partners in times of dire need.
- SE has co-created its approach to monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) with its partners, blending participatory MEL with tools from traditional MEL systems.^{xx} Implementation of the MEL system is adaptive, with regular reassessments of indicators and theories of change, triggering changes in approaches and strategies as needed.
- In the CBP, jointly with partners, SE has defined and implemented a MEL system based on indicators and storytelling that stakeholders on the ground find useful and which are not overly burdensome to measure and record. This has strengthened partners' ability to monitor progress and generate learnings, as well as supported CBP's ability to monitor against its own Theory of Change without the need for complex funding proposals or of top-down indicators or logframe requirements. Partners are given the flexibility to complete annual progress reports in a written or verbal format in various languages. Partners can measure and report on impacts in other ways that are meaningful to them, for example by complementing metrics-based data with anecdotal evidence and storytelling. Such an approach has the added benefit of providing essential knowledge on effective conservation approaches through the telling of success stories.
- While much of the focus of its work is at the local level, SE also connects with larger-scale changes at the policy level, including national and subnational policy advocacy, to ensure scalability and durability of strengthened rights and conservation outcomes.

Strategic Insights

The success of SE and the CBP can largely be attributed to trusted relationships with partners as well as donors. Mutual trust up and down the funding chain, from donor to intermediary to partner to community, has been key to effectively achieving the goals of protecting the rights of forest-dependent people and in turn conserving forests and biodiversity. Such strong trust-based relationships are built up through systematic engagement over time, something that short-term, and sporadic engagement does not readily lend itself to, particularly at the level of local organizations and communities.

Trust-based approaches enable the shift from traditional top-down approaches. Partner organizations interviewed for this case study noted that SE is one of the best funders they work with when it comes to providing them with discretion to use funds as they see fit. Flexibility in funding arrangements, MEL systems tailored to the local organizations and communities needs and interests, and ongoing capacity building and organizational strengthening have been key to empowering civil society and IPLCs towards achieving their goals.

Clear and systematic risk assessment, with effective risk mitigation, allow for greater appetite for risk. SE's success in funding geographies, themes, and organizations that have been historically neglected by the philanthropic and development aid communities, especially in the Congo Basin, has been enabled by a tactful approach using a combination of due diligence, safeguarding, organizational

strengthening, and deep local and situational knowledge for which a local presence is an essential element. By demonstrating awareness and capacity to assess and mitigate risk, SE can secure donor funding and responsibly undertake efforts to fulfil its mission to “fund the underfunded.”

Success enabled by philanthropic donors does not readily translate to bilateral or multilateral donors. The SE model, the size of its programs, and the participatory approach it takes with its partners means that SE is not in a position to secure larger bilateral and multilateral donor funding. Indeed, SE has never applied for funding from bilaterals or DFIs, and staff noted that they do not plan to pursue this type of funding given the lack of alignment with their own and their partners' approach, and the complexity of proposal submission and associated monitoring and reporting requirements. This constraint points to a larger, sector-wide barrier to scaling up funding for IP & LC tenure and forest governance.

There is a need for “complementary” monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL). Frontline local organizations and the communities they support recognize and understand the value of monitoring, evaluation, and learning when it is directly relevant to their lives and pursuits, and what they wish to accomplish. For them, simpler approaches that track inputs and output/outcome indicators, along with participatory approaches – what works, what doesn't work, storytelling, etc. – to capture perceptions of changes and impacts are more often relevant and useful and serve to hold implementers accountable for their use of funds. However, major donors often have their own “bigger picture” outcome/results/ impact interests and metrics that not uncommonly are neither directly relevant to, nor easily captured by, frontline organizations and the communities with whom they work. In the absence of significant additional financing from donors to organizations like SE to set up parallel systems to capture these, donor desires for more comprehensive outcome/impact reporting can be, at best, a time consuming and costly distraction to local organizations or, at worst, a barrier to organizations like SE that could otherwise be a channel for major donors to directly finance frontline IPLC organizations. Some rethinking of approaches to implementing a “comprehensive framework” for MEL that recognizes the different needs, interests, and capacities of the stakeholders at each level and tailors expectations and requirements accordingly – as well as avoiding “unfunded” MEL mandates – is worthy of consideration if direct financing to IPLCs is to be significantly increased.

Investing in local frontline organizations offers value-added impact. As noted by one of SE's partners, their longer-term and systematic approach to supporting local organizations has allowed the development of more meaningful partnerships with local communities in ways that other unpredictable, shorter-term funding models have not. In turn, that longer term engagement has increased the potential that the work with the communities would result in more durable and sustainable results.

Scalability

Replicability. Developing the SE model has taken substantial time, resources, experience, and local knowledge and input, so it is not necessarily a model that would be easy to replicate. To do so would be contingent on the existence of organizations that have a clear track record of supporting frontline IPLC organizations, as well as pre-established trust relationships and legitimacy with relevant local organizations.

It is an interesting question if intentionally setting out to replicate the supply of high quality re-grantors like SE in priority geographies where they are lacking is even a sensible goal. Rather, a more logical approach may be to work with the existing re-grantors and intermediaries to provide them with the organizational development support required for them to scale up their capacity and extend their coverage over the medium-term to underserved geographies. In addition, greater exploration of how the successful elements of the SE model may be adopted and adapted to work for larger funders, including bilateral and multilateral donors, may provide an alternative and equally important path to scale.

Expansion. SE as a whole aims to increase its annual disbursements to GBP 7 to 10 million by 2027, as compared to around GBP 2.8 million in 2022, while ensuring that 75% or more of their partners are local or national organizations. Building on the success of its current funds, SE aims to develop further pooled funds over the next few years and is currently preparing to launch a new pooled fund focusing on supporting young leaders and youth groups in the ‘Global South’ working on initiatives at the intersection

of climate, biodiversity and cross-cutting social and environmental movements.^{xxi} SE's five-year strategic plan also includes supporting five locally-led and/or Indigenous-led funds.^{xxii}

Through CBP, SE looks to deepen its engagement in Cameroon and the DRC while also expanding its partnerships to other countries in the region. Scaling up in the Congo Basin will come with challenges. SE staff noted the struggle to find adequate partners when trying to expand geographically, particularly in their efforts to scale up programming in Cameroon. Other intermediaries conducting rights-based conservation work in the Congo Basin include Well Grounded, Maliasili, Rights and Resources Initiative, the Tenure Facility, Rainforest Foundation Norway, and Global Green Grants, but the funding landscape remains relatively limited in terms of donors active in providing more direct support to IPs & LCs in the region.

SE's core operational costs are largely covered by unrestricted funding initially from the Synchronicity Foundation and since March 2023, from the Aurum Kaleidoscope Foundation. This means that donors do not incur any overhead costs for supporting SE programs. SE's endowment fund structure also provides a unique opportunity for growth. The SE Living Fund endowment has built-in flexibility to cover the organization's core costs as needed to support growth, as well as programme spending to support the growth of their portfolio and partners' organizations. As the CBP scales up, the SE Living Fund could provide vital support to help buffer the programme against increasing overhead costs that may outpace pooled fund financing cycles.

Growing its portfolio in line with its strategy will require SE to continue scaling up partnerships with IPLCs, and connecting partners with proven track records to allied organizations that can provide the types of sustained technical and financial support needed to scale up activities, such as efforts to secure IPLC tenure.

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