

# Perception vs Reality

Rethinking Risk, Value and Scale  
in Community-led Climate Projects



# About Plan Vivo

**Plan Vivo is a leading certification system for high-integrity nature-based projects.** Recognised for its rigorous requirements, participatory approach, and measurable benefits, Plan Vivo certification helps channel finance to community-led initiatives that restore and protect nature, address climate change, and support local people.

PV Climate, Plan Vivo's carbon crediting programme, has been approved as a CCP-Eligible programme under the ICVCM assessment framework under the ICVCM's Core Carbon Principles, demonstrating that Plan Vivo meets the market's benchmark for integrity while keeping high-quality, locally-led projects at the centre of its model.

1. Please note, when we refer to local people within this report, it is in reference to Indigenous Peoples, local communities and smallholder farmers.



# Contents

## Acknowledgements

This report was written by Jaeninne Norris, Fiona McVitie and Aishwarya Katakam, edited by Olivia Horne and designed by Christoph Maurer.

With thanks to the Association for Coastal Ecosystem Services (ACES), Taking Root and Nakau.

- 4 PERCEPTION CHECK**  
How does the market see community-led projects?
- 5 PERCEPTION ONE**  
Community projects are inherently risky because they involve people.
- 7 PERCEPTION TWO**  
Community projects are low-cost to run, so their credits should be cheap.
- 9 PERCEPTION THREE**  
Community projects generate low volumes of credits and can't scale.
- 11 WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE?**  
Recommendations for project developers, buyers and the wider market
- 13 FROM PERCEPTION TO REALITY**  
Revisiting the three perceptions

## Perception check: How does the market see community-led projects?

Plan Vivo specialises in high-integrity NBS projects designed around meaningful participation, not only as a social principle but a delivery one: nature-based solutions are more durable when communities have genuine, long-term stewardship of projects and benefits align with local priorities.

At the same time, market perceptions about how community-led projects work and what they can deliver shape how these projects are assessed, valued and financed.

At London Climate Action Week 2026, we brought together corporate end buyers, rating agencies, investors, intermediaries, project developers, donors and academics to test some recurring perceptions across three sessions.

---

1 Community projects are inherently risky because they involve people.

2 Community projects are low-cost to run, so their credits should be cheap.

3 Community projects generate low volumes of credits and can't scale.

---

The discussions highlighted where market perceptions do not fully reflect how community-led projects operate. This report brings together those insights, Plan Vivo's perspective, and recommendations for how project developers, buyers and the wider market can better communicate and assess the value of community-led projects.



## Perception One:

# Community projects are inherently risky because they involve people.

### ➤ What we heard

Buyers manage risk across diverse portfolios of nature-based credits, and do not necessarily view community-led projects as a distinct risk category. The discussion suggested that risk is driven much more by project quality, site selection and execution, than by community participation.

In fact, stakeholders highlighted the role that local knowledge can play in reducing risk and strengthening monitoring. Communities often hold detailed knowledge of landscapes and ecosystems that digital monitoring tools alone cannot provide.

“Team quality is one of the biggest signals in our risk models.”

Digital tools can improve efficiency and reduce some sources of error, but participants stressed that field-based monitoring remains essential, particularly in projects involving smallholder farmers. The challenge is turning this local insight into concrete evidence that buyers trust.

Participants also discussed permanence and questioned whether it is a useful lens for assessing risk in nature-based projects. As ecosystems face changing conditions, including fire, drought and flooding, long-term permanence is difficult to guarantee.

Participants preferred a durability framing: designing projects around long-term incentives, monitoring, adaptive management and appropriate safeguards. In other words, permanence is actively built by project developers and community stakeholders.





## → The Plan Vivo perspective

For Plan Vivo, community participation is not an additional risk to be managed, but fundamental to how durable projects are built.

By co-designing projects with local participants and tailoring them to local environmental and socioeconomic contexts, risks are reduced.



Credit: Association for Coastal Ecosystem Services (ACES)

## → Community-led projects combine:

- Local ownership and strong long-term incentives.
- Local knowledge alongside technical monitoring.
- Monitoring and adaptive management over the project lifetime.
- Risk management mechanisms, including conservative accounting, verification and appropriate buffers.



Credit: Anthony Ochieng

## → Case study

# Local knowledge in practice

Seeing the success of its sister project, Mikoko Pamoja, the communities of Vanga, Jimbo and Kiwegu approached the Association for Coastal Ecosystem Services (ACES) to develop a larger-scale community-led mangrove conservation project: Vanga Blue Forest.

The project protects and restores mangrove forests, measuring mangrove growth and recovery as indicators of success.

Project partner Kenya Marine & Fisheries Research Institute (KMFRI) regularly trains community members in monitoring, increasing community engagement and building on local knowledge of the mangrove ecosystem.

By co-designing the project and its implementation with community members, Vanga Blue Forest builds long-term incentives for mangrove protection and restoration.



Association for  
Coastal  
Ecosystem  
Services

Vanga Blue Forest, Kenya



## Perception Two:

# Community projects are low-cost to run, so their credits should be cheap.

### ➤ What we heard

Stakeholders discussed the challenge in communicating the value of community-led projects. While some carbon credits on the Voluntary Carbon Market may be cheaper, community-led projects contain different interventions, safeguards and outcomes, so cannot be assessed on price alone.

The premium associated with a high-quality community-led project reflects what goes into delivering it: local ownership, project design, due diligence, monitoring and benefits beyond carbon. These are also some of the mechanisms that help to reduce risk. The challenge is making this work visible through effective communication.

“I don’t hear the market saying these are expensive. I hear ‘justify the premium.’”

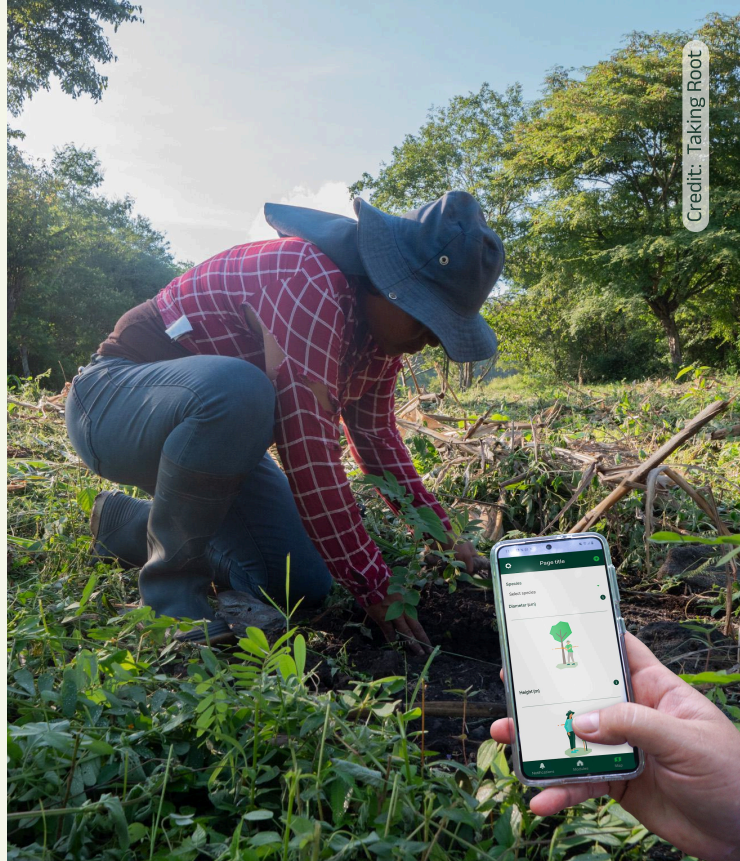




## ➤ The Plan Vivo perspective

Plan Vivo-certified projects are designed to deliver more than carbon benefits.

They are co-designed with local participants and tailored to the environmental and socioeconomic contexts in which they operate.



## ➤ Plan Vivo projects are underpinned by guiding principles:

- Recognising the value of traditional and local knowledge.
- Communities are directly involved in, and compensated for, monitoring activities.
- Projects combine carbon benefits with ecosystem restoration and livelihood improvements.
- Bespoke technology and monitoring systems are used to strengthen local stewardship rather than replace it.



## ➤ Case study

# Technology designed around smallholder farmers

The award-winning CommuniTree Carbon Program is the largest reforestation initiative in Nicaragua, working with thousands of smallholder farmers to create long-term income opportunities from growing trees on underused parts of their land.

The project has developed a technology platform specifically for smallholder farmers to enter

monitoring data, demonstrating how community participation and technology can work together to improve monitoring control.

Digital tools support the process to improve transparency and data quality, while farmers remain the long-term stewards of the information on which the project depends.

 **Taking Root**

CommuniTree, Nicaragua



### Perception Three:

## Community projects generate low volumes of credits and can't scale.

### ➔ What we heard

“ Understand where your communities feed into supply chains. That is what opens the conversation. ”

Participants told us that looking at scale through the lens of credit volume and hectares is too narrow. They highlighted that bigger isn't always better, some projects are designed to maximise co-benefits and livelihood improvements. Scale can be achieved through aggregation, landscape approaches, jurisdictional frameworks and hub-and-spoke models. Available and eligible land matters, alongside technical capacity on the ground. This often looks like multiple projects replicated across areas while retaining locally appropriate governance and implementation.

Importantly, scaling requires financing for years of feasibility and capacity building, before projects begin generating carbon revenues. Corporate and project timelines can also be difficult to reconcile. Buyers may want projects that can deliver quickly, while community-led projects require feasibility work, consultation and capacity building before they are ready to scale.

Participants highlighted supply-chain connections as another potential route into corporate engagement. They suggested that framing projects around resilience, and tracing where community outputs feed corporate supply chains, can start a conversation even without direct insetting.





## → The Plan Vivo perspective

Community-led does not mean small. A quarter of Plan Vivo-certified projects cover more than 10,000 hectares.

Some established projects have demonstrated their ability to expand substantially within a region over time. For example, Plan Vivo certified Trees for Global Benefits has issued an average of 1,163,140 credits per year and added an average of 5,167 hectares per year.

Crucially, hectares and credit volumes are only one way to understand scale. Plan Vivo projects are designed to maximise impact across carbon, ecosystems and livelihoods.



Credit: Dami Pikisagrophy & Film / Nakau



Credit: Douglas Jr Pikacha / Nakau

## → Plan Vivo community-led projects scale through:

- Grouped projects: Expanded within an existing shared framework.
- Sister projects: Replicating proven models.
- Hub and spoke: Shared infrastructure across locally governed projects.

## → Case study

# A hub-and-spoke approach in the Solomon Islands



Babatana Rainforest  
Conservation Project

Nakau works with Indigenous Peoples and customary landowners across the Pacific Islands. Three community-owned carbon projects, Sirebe, Siporae, and Padezaka, are currently Plan Vivo certified, with further projects in development.

This hub-and-spoke model applies a common, replicable project design across multiple project areas within one region, while retaining local ownership and governance.

The model is now being replicated by neighbouring tribes within the same Babatana Rainforest Conservation Project.

Because new project areas draw on shared methodologies and technical support, communities can use existing technical approaches and project management, showing that scale can come from replicating a proven, locally-governed template.



# What needs to change?

The discussions suggested that many of the perceived barriers facing community-led projects are not questions of fundamental project quality. They are questions of **how quality is understood, evidenced and communicated.**



Credit: ZeroC02

Plan Vivo | Perception vs Reality | Report 2026

## For project developers



### Communicate value before complexity

Buyers need a clear entry point into a project. Lead with a concise explanation of what distinguishes the project and why it matters, before introducing the technical detail behind it.

### Make the evidence visible

The safeguards, monitoring and governance behind high-quality projects are valuable, but only if buyers and investors can see them. Make the relevant information accessible in formats that support buyer, investor and rating-agency due diligence.

### Speak the buyer's language

Where relevant, understand how project activities connect with corporate priorities, including resilience and supply chains.

## For buyers



### Assess community projects on their own terms

Community participation should not automatically be interpreted as additional risk. Assess the quality of the project, its team, site, governance, monitoring and safeguards.

### Compare like with like

Price alone provides an incomplete picture of project value. Consider what co-benefits projects deliver and what sits behind the price of the credit.

### Think in portfolios

Participants described buyers combining different types of credits to balance price, quality and risk. Community-led nature-based credits can form the high-impact component of a diversified portfolio.



# For the wider market

## Improve comparability without losing context

Buyers need information that enables them to compare projects, while recognising that community-led projects are necessarily shaped by different landscapes, communities and interventions.

## Assess durability as part of permanence

Participants emphasised the importance of looking at factors which strengthen durability over a project's lifetime. In community-led projects, local ownership, equitable benefit sharing and strong governance can be critical to sustaining outcomes over time. Buyers, rating agencies

and standards can support this by ensuring these project-specific social and governance factors are adequately reflected in how permanence risk is assessed, and projects are compared.

## Support the early years

Community-led projects can take three to five years to reach credit issuance. Private investors will generally engage only once a feasibility study, project idea note and draft project design document are in place, which means the earliest stage is the hardest to finance. The question remains: who pays for the first step? Scaling community-led delivery depends on the answer.



Credit: Dami Pikisagaphy



Credit: Azada Verde





# From perception to reality

The discussions at London Climate Action Week challenged the idea that community-led projects are inherently riskier, cheaper or harder to scale. Participants instead focused on how projects are designed and managed, and how clearly their quality and impact are evidenced to decision-makers.

Overall, there is a shared opportunity to communicate the benefits of community-led projects more effectively, reflecting the reality on the ground. Key market

messages should be made legible to buyers in their own language: that community participation can strengthen project durability and monitoring; that higher prices reflect safeguards, local ownership and co-benefits; and that scale can come through aggregation, replication and landscape approaches.

Making risk, value and scale easier for the market to understand can help ensure that high-integrity community-led projects are valued for what they deliver.



# Are you a carbon credit buyer?

Reach out to support community-led projects delivering impacts for climate, nature and people.



**Aishwarya Katakam**

[aishwarya@planvivo.org](mailto:aishwarya@planvivo.org)



**Nicole Hühnert**

[nicole@planvivo.org](mailto:nicole@planvivo.org)



[Read our Early-Stage Financing for Community-Led Forest Carabon Projects Guide](#)



[Read our Buyer's Guide](#)



[Follow us on LinkedIn](#)

4 Gayfield Place Lane  
Edinburgh, EH1 3NZ

[info@planvivo.org](mailto:info@planvivo.org)  
[www.planvivo.org](http://www.planvivo.org)