SPDA

Catalyzing Youth Conservation Leadership in Latin America

Three Years of “Aceleradores por Naturaleza” Impact
(2021 - 2023)

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Conservamos por Naturaleza is an initiative of the Peruvian Society for Environmental Law (SPDA) that strengthens and expands citizen-led conservation efforts, contributing to national and international goals by increasing the protection and value of priority natural areas.

For more than a decade, we have supported communities, young leaders, private initiatives, and collectives that are transforming the way conservation is carried out in Latin America.

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Executive Summary

"Aceleradores por Naturaleza" (AxN) has demonstrated remarkable success in developing youth conservation leadership across Latin America during its first three years. Our comprehensive evaluation employed a rigorous mixed-methods approach to assess program impact and identify opportunities for improvement, combining quantitative analysis with qualitative insights from multiple stakeholder perspectives.

The evaluation methodology included three complementary data collection streams (see Section 1.3). First, we conducted an extensive online survey of AxN course fellows, achieving a 56% response rate with 50 complete responses across all three cohorts (2021-2023). The 2024 cohort was excluded because the course was on-going during the data collection phase of our evaluation. The survey assessed changes in technical skills, leadership capabilities, and confidence levels, as well as conservation impact achieved by fellows, through both quantitative scales and open-ended questions. To ensure survey validity, we pilot- tested the instrument with five fellows and incorporated feedback from both the CxN team and Wyss Academy for Nature.

We complemented our quantitative approach with 13 in-depth interviews with selected fellows, strategically sampled to represent different nationalities, cohorts, and engagement levels. These 25-minute conversations explored fellows' experiences in detail, from specific learning outcomes to challenges faced and recommendations for improvement. To capture the mentor perspective, we conducted four additional interviews with program mentors. Finally, a two-hour focus group with the AxN organizing team provided further institutional context and insight into operational challenges and opportunities.

Our analysis combined statistical tests with qualitative assessment (see Section 1.4). The quantitative survey data were analyzed using non-parametric tests in R. For qualitative data, we conducted thematic analysis of Spanish-language interview transcripts using NVivo, allowing codes to emerge through iterative review while preserving linguistic nuance.

Our multi-stakeholder approach revealed substantial positive impacts across all measured skill dimensions (see Section 2.1. and 2.2.), in terms of both skill development and subsequent application of skills. Project management capabilities showed particularly strong advancement, with mean self-assessed skill levels increasing from 1.71 to 2.80 on a three-point scale. Fellows demonstrated marked growth in areas like designing conservation strategies using theory of change approaches and developing SMART objectives within logical frameworks. Leadership and communication skills also saw meaningful improvement, though from a higher baseline, with leadership skills increasing from

2.14 to 2.75 and communication from 1.78 to 2.75. We discuss some limitations to our methodology for measuring changes in leadership skills. Notably, these gains were consistent across demographic variables including gender, age, country of origin, and whether the fellow worked in the Andean Amazon, suggesting the program's effectiveness for a range of demographic groups within the basic parameters of AxN applicants. We also found that fellows require further course content on budgets and fundraising.

We found that the AxN course's impact extends beyond technical skill development (see Section 2.3.). 90% of fellows reported increased confidence in their conservation work, while 84% indicated higher motivation to remain in the field. Multiple fellows credited AxN with providing the confidence and tools to pursue conservation careers at critical decision points in their lives when they might otherwise have abandoned the field. The program's effectiveness is further evidenced by current employment statistics: 86% of alumni work in conservation, with over half focused on the high-biodiversity Andean Amazon region.

Our triangulated analysis identified several key factors underlying AxN's success (Section 3.1.). The program's high engagement teaching methods, featuring real-time feedback and guidance, were highly valued by participants. The comprehensive curriculum design effectively integrated technical training with soft skills development, preparing fellows for the complex interpersonal aspects of conservation work. The involvement of experienced mentors provided professional guidance and inspiration, with fellows particularly valuing mentors' technical expertise (rated 2.82 out of 3) and professional development support (2.60 out of 3) (see Section 2.4.).

Importantly, our evaluation revealed important areas requiring attention for future iterations, with strong agreement across stakeholder groups (see Section 3.2.). From the mentor perspective, interviews highlighted the need for clearer program guidelines and better integration into the broader AxN vision. Both mentors and mentees advocated for earlier initiation of mentoring relationships and more than the current three one-hour sessions. The CxN team acknowledged these challenges in the focus group, noting that the mentorship component has proven the most difficult element to implement successfully.

The program's networking aspect shows a similar pattern - while highly effective during the course, maintaining these connections afterward has proved challenging, with the current alumni network not meeting fellows' expectations for sustained connection (see Section 3.5.). Fellows consistently expressed that post-course connections weaken significantly, a concern echoed by the CxN team who cited resource constraints as a key barrier to implementing a more robust alumni platform.

Administrative processes, particularly around AxN seed funding distribution, require streamlining (see Section 2.6.). Some fellows who had won seed funds reported significant delays in receiving funds, which affected project implementation.

Based on these multi-stakeholder insights, we recommend several strategic improvements (see Section 3.2.):

1. **Defining "Aceleradores" in application process:** The application process needs clearer qualification criteria, with recommended focus on candidates having at least three years of professional experience to better leverage program learning.

2. **Program diffusion in application process:** Current social media-focused recruitment requires expansion through institutional partnerships to attract more qualified candidates from target countries..

3. **Course content:** Some areas need enhancement, including extended coverage of financial planning and budgets, additional content on community relations and Indigenous Peoples engagement, well-defined leadership soft skills, and refocused communications training on practical skills like public speaking.

4. **Mentorship:** Program requires restructuring with earlier start times, extended sessions beyond current three-hour limit, clearer guidelines focusing on fellows' professional development and emotional support rather than projects, and more intensive engagement of mentors in the program.

5. **Individual Support:** Fellows need more structured guidance during the course and regular post-course check-ins, with formal feedback systems to monitor progress and program impact.

6. **Alumni Network:** Community engagement needs strengthening through an integrated platform spanning all cohorts, including WhatsApp groups, project updates website, and more frequent gatherings.

7. **Seed Funding:** While positively received, the funding mechanism requires administrative streamlining to address significant delays in distribution, particularly for international fellows.

Our findings allowed us to propose a revised Theory of Change for the AxN course, which we discuss and present as a results chain in Section 3.3.

This study carries broader implications for conservation capacity-building in Latin America (see Section 3.4). Our evaluation demonstrates the importance of balancing technical training with individualized support and confidence building, particularly for young professionals facing complex conservation challenges. The strong value placed by fellows on learning from Latin American experiences and contexts suggests the importance of regional representation in conservation leadership development.

Looking ahead, AxN is well-positioned to strengthen its role as a catalyst for youth conservation leadership in Latin America. The program's comprehensive approach to capacity building – combining technical training with confidence building and network development – offers valuable lessons for similar initiatives in the region. With 86% of fellows currently working in conservation (the majority in the Andes-Amazon region), 24% of fellows securing additional funding for their conservation initiatives and 20% establishing their own NGOs post-program, AxN is already generating meaningful conservation impact. By addressing the identified areas for improvement while building on its core strengths, the program can continue nurturing a new generation of conservation leaders equipped to tackle the region's complex environmental challenges.

01.
Introduction: Evaluating the Impact of Aceleradores por Naturaleza

1.1 Aceleradores por Naturaleza

Aceleradores por Naturaleza (AxN) is an online course created by Conservamos por Naturaleza (CxN), an initiative of the Peruvian civil society organization Sociedad Peruana de Derecho Ambiental (SPDA) ("Peruvian Society for Environmental Law). The course aims to train young conservation professionals (<35 years old) in Latin America in designing, planning and implementing conservation projects and campaigns. The course has taken place for three consecutive years since 2021, with a total of 90 participants overall (Figure 1). A new iteration took place in 2024 but was not included in the current impact evaluation because the course was still on-going at the time of the evaluation.

Figure 1: Map illustrating the geographical distribution of AxN fellows across Latin America (2021-2023).

According to program descriptions used for grant proposals, CxN's vision of the course is "a community of professionals that apply rigorous standards to conservation practice and leadership in Latin America, while being free to innovate and experiment through their youth-led initiatives." To achieve this, the AxN program includes the following learning streams:

1. **Conservation challenge analysis:** Analyzing a conservation problem and building a situation model, sensitivity to gender and intercultural diversity, and political advocacy.

2. **Designing solutions:** Theory of Change for understanding causal relationships between strategies and impact. Designing SMART goals and indicators and using logical frameworks for project planning.

3. **Implementation:** Budget and financing, as well as soft skills in leadership and building a team, and conflict resolution using non-violent communication.

4. **Communication:** Basic concepts and tools, public speaking, and storytelling.

Each year, a maximum of 30 fellows are admitted to the course via a competitive selection process. The course takes place online over four consecutive months, with classes twice a week. These include taught classes, presentations by external experts, and networking dynamics to build rapport between participants. In the second half of the course, fellows complete a project proposal, and CxN awards small grants to 2-3 proposals, considering the quality of the proposal and the fellow's overall level of engagement with the course.

During the course, fellows can opt to have a mentor, an experienced conservation professional with expertise in a field related to the AxN fellows' interests. These experts provide mentoring support on a pro bono basis. Therefore, the mentorship program is optional for AxN fellows, thus ensuring that only those fellows with a genuine interest in receiving mentoring participate. Mentorship pairs meet at least three times during the course period, for around 1.5 hours, for the mentor to provide guidance on professional development or a specific topic in conservation. The mentor may also provide feedback to the AxN on the fellows' AxN project proposal. Mentorship pairs are matched by the CxN team.

For the past two years, the course has been co-financed by the Wyss Academy for Nature, and members of the Latin America Hub of the Wyss Academy for Nature have participated in various taught aspects of the course, as well as the design of this evaluation. CxN has the intention to further carry on with this training program in benefit of future young Latin-American conservationists.

1.2 Research Goals

Our study had three goals.

The first goal was to evaluate the impact the course has had on the professional development of the course fellows. We aimed to test key assumptions on the part of the CxN course team, such as 1) the course content reflects the capacity-building needs of the target audience, and 2) the course content allows fellows to better achieve conservation impact. Based on the results, we aimed to identify which aspects of the course are successful, which approaches are less useful, and how the course could be improved for future generations of fellows. Conducting this evaluation with robust social science methodologies is in line with CxN's and the Wyss Academy for Nature's focus on adaptive management – basing management decisions on sound science and continuous learning.

The timing for the study was opportune because the course has taken place for three consecutive years, and with 90 course fellows, provides an ample population of fellows who have had time to transfer learnings to their work. Importantly, CxN has prioritized AxN as a core activity for the coming years, thus providing opportunities for learnings from this evaluation improve the course.

Our second aim was to contribute to the academic literature on how youth conservation change-makers can be better served by capacity-building programs. Despite its wide-spread prevalence in conservation projects, there is a notable scarcity of literature evaluating capacity-building programs in the conservation field, especially for under-served groups like youth and in non-English-speaking settings like Latin America (Mendez et al., 2007). Existing research shows that most capacity-building evaluations in the conservation setting evaluate changes in knowledge, attitudes or behavior, but do not tend to measure conservation impacts (Sterling et al., 2022). Evaluations also tend to be conducted only in the short term (within a year of the training), with few measuring long-term impacts (ibid). Notable exceptions include the recent evaluation by Sandbrook et al., (2022) of the impacts of the Conservation Leadership Masters at the University of Cambridge after a decade of implementation, which served as a useful guide for our study. Effective monitoring and evaluation tools for capacity-building programs are crucial, given the often limited financial and human resources in the conservation sector. To this end, in addition to this preliminary report, the methods and results of this evaluation will be submitted to an academic journal for Open Access publication.

Our final objective was to support the validation and improvement of the AxN program's underlying Theory of Change, using the results of the study. A Theory of Change outlines the anticipated progression of outcomes following an intervention, and their evaluation assesses whether these outcomes do indeed happen because of the implemented interventions (Margoluis et al., 2013). A Theory of Change will help guide the evolution of the AxN program by providing an explicit outline of expectations for the program and provide the course organizers with a framework to consider future actions and evaluations (Porzecanski et al., 2022)

1.3 Evaluation methodology: data collection

The research design for this evaluation is based on a literature review of academic papers and grey literature that explore the issue of capacity development. This review, done in English and Spanish, allowed us to design the different data-gathering tools employed for the assessment. Following a mix-methods research approach, we conducted surveys aimed at fellows, semi-structured interviews with fellows and mentors, as well as a focus group with the CxN team. The diverse ways of gathering and analyzing data allowed us to triangulate findings and validate the main issues across those involved in AxN (i.e., team, fellows, and mentors).

AxN material review

We reviewed existing background information about the course, including grant proposals to fund the course and the academic material for course participants.

Fellows' survey

We designed an online survey aimed at fellows and implemented it via Qualtrics. Following a workshop that we organized with the CxN team and members of the Wyss Academy for Nature in April 2024, we defined the main topics and variables of the survey (Table 1). After the workshop, we shared a final version of the survey for validation with the CxN and the Wyss Academy for Nature teams, as well as with five fellows from different cohorts. Testing the survey with the fellows allowed us to ensure that the language employed throughout the survey was easy to understand, that all questions were relevant to fellows, and ensure that the amount of time required for completing the survey was within the 25-minutes mark.

Table 1: Sections and types of questions used in the fellows' survey.

Sections	Question types	Gathered information
Personal background	Yes / No questions Multiple choice questions	Demographics (gender, country of origin, year of birth etc.). Main occupation (working, volunteering, etc.). Whether or not they are working in conservation, and their role.
Perceived impact on skills (self-assessment)	The impact on fellows' skill levels was evaluated across three main categories of Project Management, Leadership, and Communication, each with several dimensions, comparing self-assessments from before and after the AxN intervention. A 3-point Likert scale was used to measure skill levels before AxN ("poor," "OK," and "good") and another 3-point scale to assess changes afterward ("skills decreased," "stayed the same," and "improved").	Project Management dimensions: Analyze a conservation problem, design a conservation strategy, integrate gender and interculturality aspects, employ logical framework for project planning, budget, and fundraising skills. Leadership dimensions: Establish a vision, build an effective team, conflict resolution, capacity to adapt to new contexts and generate solutions. Communication dimensions: Planning a communications strategy, design key messages, use of online tools, and public speaking.

Perceived level of skill application after course	The perceived level of application of learnt skills was evaluated along the same three categories and dimensions as for skill levels (above). Fellows answered multiple- choice questions, indicating per skill whether they had applied it after the course ("Yes", "No" or "Can't remember").	Same dimensions as for skill levels.
Effects on motivation, self-confidence and perceived impacts	Rating and ranking questions Multiple choice questions Open-ended questions	General perceived level of impact of the AxN course on skills as conservation professional, their levels of motivation to work in conservation, and their level of self-confidence as conservation professionals. The main spaces where fellows felt they learned and enjoyed the most, as well as suggestions for improving the course structure. Main professional impacts and how fellows perceived that AxN has contributed to those impacts.
Mentorship program and AxN overall support	Likert scale (3-points) Yes/No questions Open-ended questions	Level of satisfaction with mentor, frequency of gatherings, main areas of impact, and suggestions
Network generated by AxN	Multiple choice questions Standard questions employed for a Social Network Analysis (SNA)	Names of those who they interact(ed) the most with, and frequency of interaction (i.e., once a week or more, once a month or more, once every six months or more, once a year or more, never).

We launched the survey in early August 2024 and fellows were given about three weeks to complete it. Multiple reminders were sent via e-mail and WhatsApp groups to ensure maximum participation. The CxN team organized a draw to encourage further participation. A total of 72 persons completed the survey. Of these, 50 responses were used in our final analysis (56% participation rate). Surveys less than 65% complete, and surveys where the participant failed to answer our attention question correctly, were excluded from the analysis. Of the 50 analyzed surveys, three did not answer some of the final questions of the survey, which explains why for some survey items we have a subset of 47 participants. The survey was anonymous. The complete survey is included in the Appendices.

Interviews with fellows

Based on the preliminary findings of the survey, we designed a semi-structured interview for fellows to further explore: fellows' perception of the AxN course's impact on their professional and personal lives; their overall AxN experience and suggestions to improve how the classes (theory and practice) are undertaken; perceived overall support from the CxN team throughout and after the course; their mentoring experience and potential suggestions; perceived impact fellows have on biodiversity conservation once they completed AxN; and for those that had received a AxN's small-grant, their experiences and achievements as a result of the funding.

A total of 13 fellows were interviewed. We conducted all interviews virtually, via Zoom, and each lasted on average 25 minutes. All interviews were done by Rocío López de la Lama to ensure no bias from either the participants or the interviewer. Interviewees were selected to cover a range of nationalities, all three AxN cohorts, and a mix of fellows' level of engagement with the course, based on the CxN team's perspective. Interviews took place throughout September and October 2024. The full interview guide is included in the Appendices.

Interviews with mentors

Once we began analyzing the survey findings and interviews with fellows, it became evident that we needed to include the perspective of mentors. We reached out to six mentors for interviews. Our goal was to explore their reasons for participating as AxN mentors, the challenges and barriers they faced, the positive aspects and successes of their mentoring journey, and their general suggestions for improving future AxN mentoring programs. We were able to interview four mentors in early November 2024. All interviews were done virtually via Zoom and lasted on average 25 minutes.

Focus group with the CxN team

Finally, we also conducted a focus group with the CxN team in December 2024, where Carolina Butrich, Cristian Diaz, and Majo Arguedas participated as the current leaders of the program. The focus group lasted two hours and was audio-recorded with the consent of all participants. The objectives of the focus group were to:

1. Understand the governance process pertaining to AxN,
2. Identification of main challenges, barriers, opportunities, and strengths of AxN,
3. Validation of main topics that have emerged throughout the assessment, and
4. Explore potential opportunities for improvement and key suggestions/next steps for a five-year vision.

Ethics approval for this assessment

This research was approved by the Ethics Committee of Universidad Peruana Cayetano Heredia, Lima, Peru (Project No. 214582). All participants were informed about their rights as participants (free to stop their participation at any moment) and that their responses were to be treated with confidentiality and analyzed and presented with anonymity. Participants gave their explicit consent before participating.

1.4 Evaluation methodology: data analysis

Quantitative data analysis

We conducted statistical analyses using R version 4.2.0 (R Core Team, 2023) via RStudio (Posit team, 2023), using the tidyverse and rstatix packages. Statistical analysis and R coding was supported by Claude (version 3.5), an AI assistant from Anthropic (2024). Statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$ for all tests. We used non-parametric tests appropriate for nominal data.

Employed statistical tests

Perceived changes abilities in skills: To analyze changes in participants' self-reported skills after the AxN course, we employed a hierarchical statistical approach examining three main skill categories: project management (6 dimensions), leadership (5 dimensions), and communication (4 dimensions). For each skill category, we first conducted Wilcoxon signed-rank tests to assess overall improvement by comparing participants' mean ratings before and after the course.

Next, to examine whether some dimensions within each category showed greater improvement than others, we used Friedman tests to compare the magnitude of change scores across dimensions.

Where Friedman tests indicated significant differences, we conducted post-hoc pairwise comparisons using Wilcoxon signed-rank tests with Bonferroni correction to control for multiple comparisons.

Application of skills after AxN course: To analyze how fellows applied the skills learned, we calculated the percentage of AxN fellows who reported applying each skill, excluding "Can't remember" responses. For most dimensions, there were clear differences in application rates, as discussed below. For the two communication dimensions where differences were less evident, we used chi-square goodness-of-fit tests to determine if the proportion of fellows who applied these skills was significantly different from what would be expected by chance.

Next, to compare application rates between the three main skill categories (project management, leadership, and communication), we used a Friedman test.

Changes in motivation and confidence: We employed Wilcoxon signed-rank tests to analyze changes in motivation and confidence levels.

Demographic effects: For all the above data groups, we also tested for effects of demographic differences. We used Spearman's correlation for age at the time of the course, and Kruskall-Wallis tests for ordinal variables: gender, year of participation in AxN, profession, education level and country of origin. We used the Wilcoxon rank-sum test to assess differences depending on whether fellows work or study in the Andean Amazon.

Qualitative data analysis

All interviews were transcribed and analyzed in Spanish to ensure that minimal information was lost in translation to English (Newing, 2011). We employed the software Notta AI to assist with transcription. For the interview analysis we used a deductive approach, using broad categories from the interview guides that allowed the emergence of codes when reviewing the data. After a couple of iterations of reviewing the transcripts, we generated a final set of codes. All analysis was done in NVivo V14. Quotes were transcribed from Spanish to English with AI Claude (version 3.5).

1.5 Fellow demographics and diversity, participant statistics

Profile of participating AxN fellows

A total of 50 fellows completed the survey, with nearly equal representation across all three cohorts (2021-2023) and a diverse set of respondents from various countries. Table 2 summarizes the demographic characteristics of the respondents. The respondent profile closely mirrors the overall demographics of the course participants, suggesting that the survey provides an accurate snapshot of the AxN fellows' profiles and lends confidence to the conclusions drawn from the responses.

In terms of gender, the number of female respondents was more than double that of male respondents (68% vs. 32%, respectively), which also reflects the exact percentage distribution of women and men in the fellow alumni pool. Most survey respondents (53%) were between 26-30 years old during the course, with 30% being younger (17-25), and 17% being in the older age group (31-35 years old). The age limit for participation in AxN is 35 years. The majority of respondents were from Peru (62%), which also reflects participation of Peru in the AxN course overall (64%).

La tendencia de género en AxN puede reflejar un fenómeno global más amplio, que incluye muchas The gender trend in AxN may reflect a larger global phenomenon, including many parts of Latin America, of young women surpassing men in academic completion rates, particularly in secondary and tertiary education (Berniell et al. 2024). As was noted in the focus group with the CxN team: *"More women apply, and the quality of their applications tend to be much better than that of most men. We really struggle to have an equal number of men and women in the course."*

Nearly all respondents (94%) are currently working, and the majority work in the conservation sector (86%), mostly in non-government organizations (NGOs – 32%), followed by the private sector (26%), and academia (16%). About half of respondents are professionals in natural sciences (49%), followed by engineering or technology (21%), and natural resource management (13%). More than half of respondents (57%) indicate their work or studies focus on the Andean Amazon region.

96% of respondents had received a course certificate. Furthermore, 82% indicated that they included AxN in their curriculum vitae, and about half also include it on LinkedIn (52%).

These demographic statistics paint a promising picture for the potential impact of the AxN course: given the high number of fellows working in conservation, this fulfills an important enabling condition for them to generate conservation impact with the new skills and resources acquired. Also notable is the considerable proportion of AxN employed in the private sector, which points to the importance of further strengthening those aspects of AxN not geared towards work in NGOs (e.g. access to impact financing).

Table 2: Descriptive statistics of survey respondentss

AXN EVALUATION			AXN COURSE STATISTICS	
AxN Year	Count (N= 50)	% of total	Count (N= 92)	% of total
2021	17	34%	30	33%
2022	16	32%	33	36%
2023	17	34%	29	32%
Génder	Count (N= 47)	% of total	Count (N= 92)	% of total
Female	32	68%	63	68%
Male	15	32%	29	32%
Age at time of AxN course	Count (N= 50)	% of total	Count(N= 91)	% of total
17-25	14	30%	33	36%
26-30	25	53%	40	44%
31-35	8	17%	18	20%
Country	Count (N= 47)	% of total	Count (N= 92)	% of total
Peru	29	62%	59	64%
Colombia	5	11%	8	9%
Chile	4	9%	5	5%
Bolivia	3	6 %	6	7%
Ecuador	2	4%	5	5%
Mexico	2	4%	4	4%
Brazil	1	2%	1	1%
Cuba	1	2%	1	1%
Venezuela	-	-	1	1%
Paraguay	-	-	2	2%

Current occupation (fellows could mark multiple options)	Count (N= 50)	% of total
Working	47	94%
Volunteering	16	32%
Personal development	15	30%
Studying	13	26%
Capacity-building	12	24%
Looking for work	10	20%
Occupation in conservation?	Count (N= 50)	% of total
Yes	43	86%
No	7	14%
Focus on Andean Amazon?	Count (N= 47)	% of total
Yes	27	57%
No	20	43%
Type og organization	Count (N= 47)	% of total
National NGO	16	32%
Private sector (for-profit)	13	26%
Academia	8	16%
Government	4	8%
International NGO	2	4%
Other	3	6%
Intergovernmental	1	2%
Profession	Count (N= 47)	% of total
Environment / Natural Sciences	23	49%
Engineering / Technology	10	21%
Natural Resource Management	6	13%
Others	3	6%
Social Sciences	2	4%
Arts & Humanities	1	2%
Health & Medicine	1	2%
Law	1	2%

02.
Stories of Transformation: From Learning to Impact

2.1. Overall assessment of AxN

Based on our survey data, AxN fellows considered the general impact of the course on their professional skills in conservation as high, with scores averaging 4.38 out of 5 stars (SD ± 0.70). This overall positive assessment was also reflected in the interviews, as well as more specific evaluations of different course aspects in the survey, although there are notable nuances that we discuss in the sections that follow.

> *"Honestly, it's hard for me to think of anything that didn't meet expectations. In fact, when I think about Aceleradores, I feel they exceeded them. I didn't expect to find, nor did I even know, that such a comprehensive course or initiative existed for people involved in the world of conservation here in Latin America. So, I genuinely didn't know what to expect, but it definitely exceeded my expectations".* – ***AxN fellow from Ecuador, 2022***

> *"I won't lie to you—it's truly a course that stands above average. You can clearly see the care with which it was designed, without a doubt. You can also feel their genuine desire to share this information—it's not something done just for the sake of it."* – ***AxN fellow from Peru, 2022***

Fellows interviewed highlighted several key contributions of AxN to their professional development: becoming part of a network of like-minded conservationists across Latin America, strengthening their project management capabilities, experiencing a transformative shift in their conservation perspectives and motivation, and developing resilience to address current and future challenges. One fellow from the 2021 cohort powerfully illustrates these impacts:

> *"Because I was part of the first cohort and for me there was like a before and after. After Acceleradores, I had already been wanting to do this conservation project thing since university or dedicate myself to creating these projects independently and when the Acceleradores opportunity appeared it was like 'wow, here's everything I needed.' So, after Acceleradores I made important decisions in my life, which I'm now fully dedicated to. And thanks to them I had all this foundation to have everything that we're building now with the organization. That's why I'm super grateful for the course, [...], for everyone... I always tell them that."* – ***AxN fellow from Peru, 2021***

Based on the focus group, for the CxN team, the primary impact of the program lies in its positive influence on the professional development of the fellows. The team emphasized that the AxN curriculum is uniquely designed to deliver, in a short timeframe, an introduction to essential tools for the effective management of conservation projects. According to the team, no similar course—free of charge and offered in Spanish—exists elsewhere in Latin America.

Among the key strengths of AxN, the team highlighted the curriculum's structured design, the program's affiliation with the internationally recognized SPDA, and the unique opportunities it provides for fellows to engage with international conservation experts they would otherwise rarely encounter. Additionally, the program places significant emphasis on the individual progress of each fellow. The team perceives these attributes to be especially valuable for participants with some years of work experience (e.g. not undergraduate students), those already working in conservation or those with a clear vision for projects they intend to pursue after completing the program

The CxN team also identified three key areas for potential improvement to enhance the program's impact:

- Long-term mentoring: Establishing mechanisms to support fellows with promising projects over an extended period.
- Expanded feedback opportunities: Creating more spaces for fellows to receive constructive feedback on grant proposals and project ideas.
- Regular check-ins: Increasing engagement with fellows throughout different stages of the program to monitor their progress in classes, group work, and mentorship relationships.

Figure 2: Word cloud displaying the main words mentioned by interviewees about the contributions of participating in AxN..

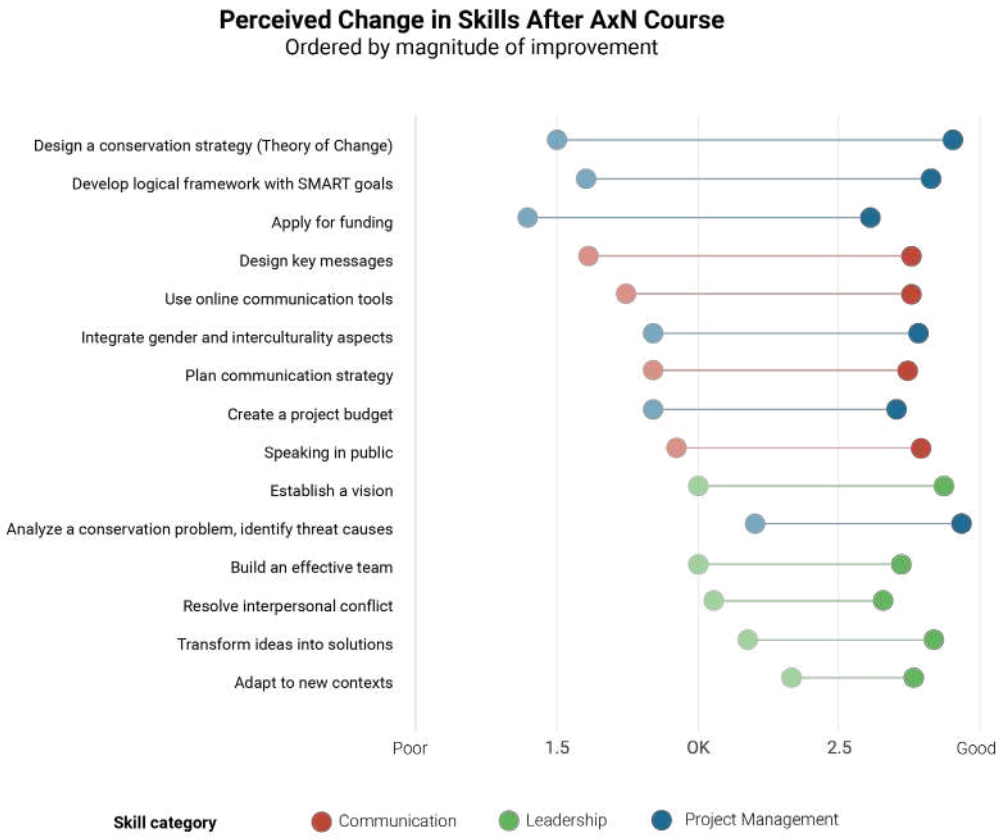
The word cloud in Figure 2 shows that 'Conservation' and 'project' were most frequently cited by AxN when describing the program, followed by 'experience', 'super', and 'helpful'. This highlights AxN's positive impact in fostering collaborative and meaningful conservation efforts.

2.2. Evolving Skills, Motivation and Self-Confidence

Project Management, Leadership and Communication Skills

Based on the survey data, our quantitative analysis of the AxN course's impact on skill development revealed significant improvements across all three skill categories, with particularly strong effects in project management. See Figure 3 for a visual support of the results. For the quantitative results reported in this section for skill level change, when reading the mean values in the analysis, consider that fellows rated their skills from "poor" (1), to "OK" (2), to "good" (3).

Figure 3: Perceived changes in skills after AxN Course across skill dimension



AxN fellows showed substantial growth in their project management skills, with mean ratings increasing from 1.71 (±0.43) to 2.80 (±0.23). Our analysis also suggests that the course not only enhanced these skills but also helped standardize project management capabilities across course participants (lower standard deviations).

Within the project management category, differences between dimensions showed the most complex pattern of improvement, which suggests that certain project management course modules were particularly effective, or represented areas where fellows had the most room for growth.

Notably, participants showed not only low starting knowledge, but also large growth in skills, related to "designing a conservation strategy (theory of change)", "developing SMART goals in a logical framework",

and “applying for funding”.

Project management skills were also considered the strongest aspect of the AxN course based on our qualitative analysis. During the interviews, 77% of participating fellows (10 out of 13) mentioned project management as the main area of impact from participating at AxN. Interviewees mentioned that having tools for adequate project management and the confidence to apply them in their new jobs or initiatives have proven highly useful and positively impactful. Mentions of SMART Objectives, Theory of Change, and Results Chains were prevalent.

> *"Mainly something that always stuck with me and that I apply is the Theory of Change and the Situational Analysis which is very important to apply in a project before proposing funding. That skill has generated very good results for me for new conservation projects."* - ***AxN fellow from Ecuador, 2023***

> *"I think the program helped me validate the intuitive approach I was using (as a scientist, I tried to follow a system that I created myself). With the course, I was able to confirm that what I was doing was headed in the right direction, that it made sense and was logical, and I also came to understand that I could create a lifestyle connected to helping society and solving real environmental problems in local communities."* – ***AxN fellow from Peru, 2021***

Indeed, according to the course curriculum, these are the most intensive aspects of the course, with each skill being taught over two or more sessions, with both theoretical and applied components.

> *"One of the strengths of AxN is that fellows gain a tool box for project management that is rarely taught at universities or at jobs. We have seen throughout the years that fellows really benefit from it and improve their capacities to successfully manage projects – either their personal initiatives or at their jobs."* – ***CxN team***

Interestingly, skill improvements for “creating a project budget” seemed lower than the other three dimensions. We derived further insights about this aspect from the qualitative analysis, where fellows mentioned that this is not due to the quality of the training, but the time allocated to teaching. Budgets, a complex topic, are covered through only one class, and in the interviews, 31% (n=4) of respondents highlighted that this was too short. We therefore suggest for the AxN course to expand on this dimension of project management.

Related to budgets, although the project management dimension “apply for funding” was among those with the highest positive change, this aspect was also highlighted repeatedly in open-ended survey questions and interviews as a need for further expansion in the AxN program. When asked for additional learning topics in the survey, 19% of fellows mentioned the aspect of fundraising and other financial strategies as necessary (n=6). This includes learning more about how to write grants, presenting projects to funders, crowdfunding mechanisms, and having more practical sessions on this topic. Even though there is evident room for improvement in this aspect, five of the fellows mentioned having successfully raised funds for their initiatives.

> *“I think I lacked a bit more knowledge on the budgeting aspect, for example. We covered it very briefly, and I believe budgeting is extremely important. However, I’ve never seen the budgeting component covered in depth in any course. I’ve had to learn on my own through my projects at the university to understand how to create budgets. But I think it’s a very important part of writing a grant. When we request funding or things like that, I feel there isn’t much emphasis placed on it. I guess it’s because it’s boring, but I think it’s one of the most important parts”.* - ***AxN fellow from Peru, 2022***

Leadership was among the main soft skills that fellows mentioned throughout the assessment, together with having greater empathy when working with people, and gender considerations. For many in the interviews, what AxN taught them about leadership was a great first introduction that they later pursued in greater detail. Also, knowing about leadership helped build their confidence in leading teams and working in groups, for which they are thankful. Leadership skills, while starting from a higher baseline (pre-course mean = 2.14(± 0.26)), still demonstrated meaningful improvement, reaching a post-course mean of 2.75. This smaller magnitude of change is consistent with participants' higher perceived initial competency in leadership.

A possible explanation for this high initial rating is that AxN fellows already consider themselves leaders when entering the course, since it is geared towards "a new generation of leaders in Latin America". However, the CxN team expressed doubt about whether the self-perceived impact from taking the AxN course accurately reflects real changes in competency levels. First, questions in the survey were too general when asking about before and after leadership competencies. Similarly, the course does not explicitly teach "leadership", instead offering several related soft skills: conflict resolution, team-building, creating a vision, and working in groups. Social psychology theory suggests that when someone lacks or is unaware of what a particular skills entails, they overestimate their capacities (Kruger & Dunning 1999; Dunning et al. 2005; Dunning 2011; Sheldon et al. 2014, Zell et al. 2020). On the contrary, when asking for self-assessments of technical skills that have tangible success criteria, feedback tends to be more accurate. This suggests why self-ratings of communications and project management skills, which involve more concrete technical abilities, might be less inflated than assessments of leadership capabilities that rely heavily on social skills and personality traits. This leads us to reflect whether the way changes in leadership are currently measured in the survey are appropriate, and we suggest changes to this methodology in Section 4 - Research Limitations.

In the case of three fellows, AxN's initial exposure to leadership prompted the fellows to further explore and continue with this topic. In addition, when asked about fellows' main achievements in their professional lives, leadership was a decisive contribution of the AxN course (n=4, 9% of survey participants).

Differences between dimensions in the leadership skills category were more nuanced, and only the dimension related to adapting to new contexts showed lower rates of improvement. However, here we also re-consider whether the survey item was too vague to elicit meaningful results, based on the above-mentioned research.

> *"Recently, here at the university, while looking at elective courses, I noticed there's a course on leadership that includes something called Theory U. Honestly, I'm not familiar with it, but it caught my attention because I had never heard of it or seen it before. Since the AxN course somewhat touched on topics like leadership, grant applications, and project creation, I think it would have been interesting to go deeper into those leadership topics, maybe even conflict resolution (…) I know each topic might require its own course, but just knowing that these areas exist and what they're about would have been valuable".* - ***AxN fellow from Mexico, 2022***

Communication skills showed similarly robust development, with mean ratings rising from 1.78 (±0.57) to 2.75 (±0.36), indicating the AxN course was particularly effective at elevating those who began with weaker communication abilities.

While improvements in communication skills were more uniform overall, we still found meaningful differences between dimensions. Key message design showed the strongest improvement (+1.14), significantly higher than improvements in online tool use (+1.00), communication strategy planning (+0.92), and public speaking (+0.82). The particularly strong gains in message design appear linked to participants' lower initial proficiency in this skill, indicating the course effectively addressed this specific learning need.

In open-ended questions about additional aspects of the AxN course that contributed to their project management skills (see Table 3), communications skills were mentioned by 26% of respondents (n = 7). In particular, fellows shared how now, after the AxN course, they value the importance of designing and implementing communication strategies for achieving the objectives of their conservation initiatives. However, in interviews with fellows, only one fellow (out of the thirteen) highlighted positive impacts related to communication skills. On the contrary, one fellow from 2021 expressed that she did not enjoy the social media part as much as she perceived it as not well-developed.

The following quotes reveal some of the elements of the course fellows found particularly useful.

> *"Yes, it has helped me a lot, especially with communication in professional settings. I remember we were given guidelines and tips on what to do and what not to do as professionals. These are things nobody usually tells you, but in the course, they explained, for example, that certain phrases might come across poorly…Little things that you could use when writing, preparing for a presentation, or even speaking publicly. For me, it was like a before and after moment; I now think, I shouldn't say this because I've learned better. And once you've learned something, no one can take that away from you."* – ***AxN fellow from Peru, 2021***

> *"It was really important to have the opportunity to present our projects to a panel of expert, not just because it pushed you to lose any fear of speaking in public, but also because you would get valuable feedback."* - ***AxN fellow from Peru, 2021***

We discuss these results further in Section 2.3, in combination with the analysis of skill application.

Across all three skill categories (i.e., project management, leadership and communication), our quantitative analysis revealed a consistent pattern: skills with lower initial proficiency levels typically showed larger improvements, while those with higher baseline ratings demonstrated smaller but still significant gains. This suggests the AxN course was particularly effective at strengthening underdeveloped skills, while still advancing participants' capabilities in areas where they already showed competence. The consistent decrease in standard deviations from pre- to post-course suggests that the program was successful in bringing participants to a more standardized level of competency across all skill areas.

Box 1: Regarding demographic effects

In the survey data, we did not find significant effects of age at the time of the course, gender, year of participation in AxN, profession, education level and country of origin on changes in skill levels across and within dimensions. Respondents active in the Andean Amazon region did not differ significantly in their skill change perceptions as those working in other regions. This suggests that the course was equally effective at increasing skill levels across a diverse set of AxN fellow profiles..

Additional skills learnt through the AxN course were mentioned by AxN in an open-ended question of the survey, see Table 3. Of these, between a third and a quarter of respondents to this questions mentioned better soft skills, the value of communications, self-confidence, and the importance of networks of contacts.

Table 3: Additional skills in project management acquired through course based on open-ended question in survey. A total of 23 fellows answered this question.

Additional skills or aspects developed	Description	Percentage
Soft skills	Better skills to work with others, leading a team, and having more tools to deal with conflict.	30%
Communication strategies	Value the importance of designing and implementing communication campaigns	26%
Sense of professional growthl	Being aware of one's own capacities and feeling more confident about what one can achieve	17%
Network of contacts	Appreciate how important is to work towards a solid network of contacts	17%
Collaborative learning	Awareness of the value of learning from others	9 %
Identification of problems and their root causes	Be better at identifying the reasons for the problems they are working on.	9%

Motivation and Self-Confidence

Regarding motivation to work in conservation, our qualitative analysis revealed significant improvements in both dimensions before and after the course. The survey had defined motivation as "the drive and commitment to do something". 84% of participants reported being more motivated to work in conservation post-course, while 14% indicated motivation maintaining the same level, and 2% reported being less motivated. This improvement was statistically significant, $p < 0.05$.

AxN fellows reported an even more pronounced impact of the AxN course on their confidence in their abilities and knowledge to work in conservation: 90% of respondents reporting increased confidence levels, while 10% reported unchanged levels of confidence. None reported being less confident. This improvement was statistically significant ($p < 0.05$).

Our qualitative data analysis underscored these results. In twelve of the thirteen interviews (92%) fellows clearly expressed how AxN had allowed and encouraged them to pursue their projects or initiatives related to conservation. From starting their own NGOs, setting up ecological restoration initiatives, and applying to more ambitious grants, interviewed fellows conveyed a genuine sense of being grateful for the experience of AxN. Interviewees responded similarly, with notable quotes below.

"For me, the first and most basic thing is that I had already been trying since 2018 to work on environmental issues and especially forest conservation. And when I took Acceleradores in 2022, it was the last option before giving up on that. I was like, I had been facing work and academic difficulties. (…) I was in the mining world. So, I said, no, I should better go back there, I have this resume there, it's easier for me to move around. And I was just about to leave and go back to my dark side [laughs]. And then Acceleradores came along and, well, it really inspired me to know that if I can't find opportunities, I can create them myself, right? And I think that has been the most impactful thing about Acceleradores for me, that first it helped me not give up on something that I always feel I want to do and that makes me feel good. Because even though the other sector develops me more professionally, I didn't feel right being there. So, I think that's an incredibly valuable point and why I really love having participated in AxN, because it gave me the opportunity to continue on this path, which isn't so easy." – ***AxN Fellow from Peru, 2022***

"Aceleradores was totally important beyond the personal aspect (…) I felt like I found something that gave me context, that provided me with tools, that allowed me to converse with people who had similar situations to mine, to unite them at the Latin American level and understand our missions (…) This happens a lot in Chile, in our training, the role models are always from the northern hemisphere, always from Europe, always from the United States. And there is so much richness in terms of knowledge and in terms of understanding our difficult realities in Latin America that I believe we need to get to know each other, to converse. It was something that marked me a lot, it really marked me, and developing that in the future is part of what I want to do. But for me, the course has never died; it wasn't just something I participated in once, it is still alive. I love it, I've always loved the tone of the course in terms of the conversation and the teaching. I find it very positive, and I reiterate that I am grateful for it. Maybe if I hadn't taken that course, my project would have taken a different direction." – ***AxN Fellow from Chile, 2021***

Box 2: Regarding demographic effects on motivation and confidence changes

We did not find any significant differences based on demographic variables. The lack of significant demographic effects, combined with the strong overall positive changes in both motivation and confidence, indicates that the course was equally effective in this regard for AxN fellows, regardless of their background characteristics..

2.3 Applying Skills and Generating Impact

Our results show that AxN fellows actively applied skills from all three categories: project management, leadership, and communication (see Figure 2). However, the rate of application differed significantly between categories ($p < 0.05$), with leadership skills being applied most frequently, followed by project management skills, and then communication skills.

Within the communication category, we found significant differences in application rates between skills ($p< 0.05$). AxN fellows reported higher application rates for 'Plan a communications strategy' and 'Speaking in Public' compared to 'Using online communication tools'. Refer to Figure 3 for a visual guide on the results. This nuance in application of communications skills, taken together with the results mentioned in Section 2.2., could imply that only for a subset of AxN fellows does their post-course engagement with conservation work involve or allow them to apply communications skills related to communications campaign implementation and use of online media, compared to public speaking and planning a communications strategy. The CxN team could re-assess whether more focus on those communications skills that are more transversally applied by a greater proportion of AxN fellows would be more effective.

Box 3. Demographic Variables in Skill Application

Once again, we found no significant effects of any of the demographic variables on the level of application of different skills taught in the AxN course. This strongly suggests that the AxN course was equally relevant in terms of skills taught across different demographic groups.

One of the questions we asked fellows in the survey was what they considered to be their main professional achievement after finishing the AxN course. A total of 45 fellows responded to this question. Achievements were mainly around securing funding for their projects and initiatives (24%), setting up their own NGO or initiative (20%), perceiving themselves as having an added professional value compared to before AxN (16%), being recognized for their efforts at the national or international level (11%), pursuing or finishing a postgraduate course related to nature conservation (9%), and getting a job promotion or securing a new job (7%). We discuss some limitations to this survey item in Section 4, because it did not elicit responses regarding impacts in conservation, instead, AxN fellows mentioned professional development impacts.

When asked what specific aspects of AxN they consider having contributed the most to this, AxN fellows mainly mentioned project management skills (36%). As mentioned before, these skills largely pertain to the implementation of SMART Objectives and Theory of Change. Another critical aspect was AxN as a source of inspiration – through the inspirational talks, interactions with the CxN team and with their mentors, fellows expressed that AxN encouraged them to pursue what they really wanted to do (16%). Two other less- mentioned aspects were soft skills (9%), and knowing they have the support of the CxN team in case they need it (9%).

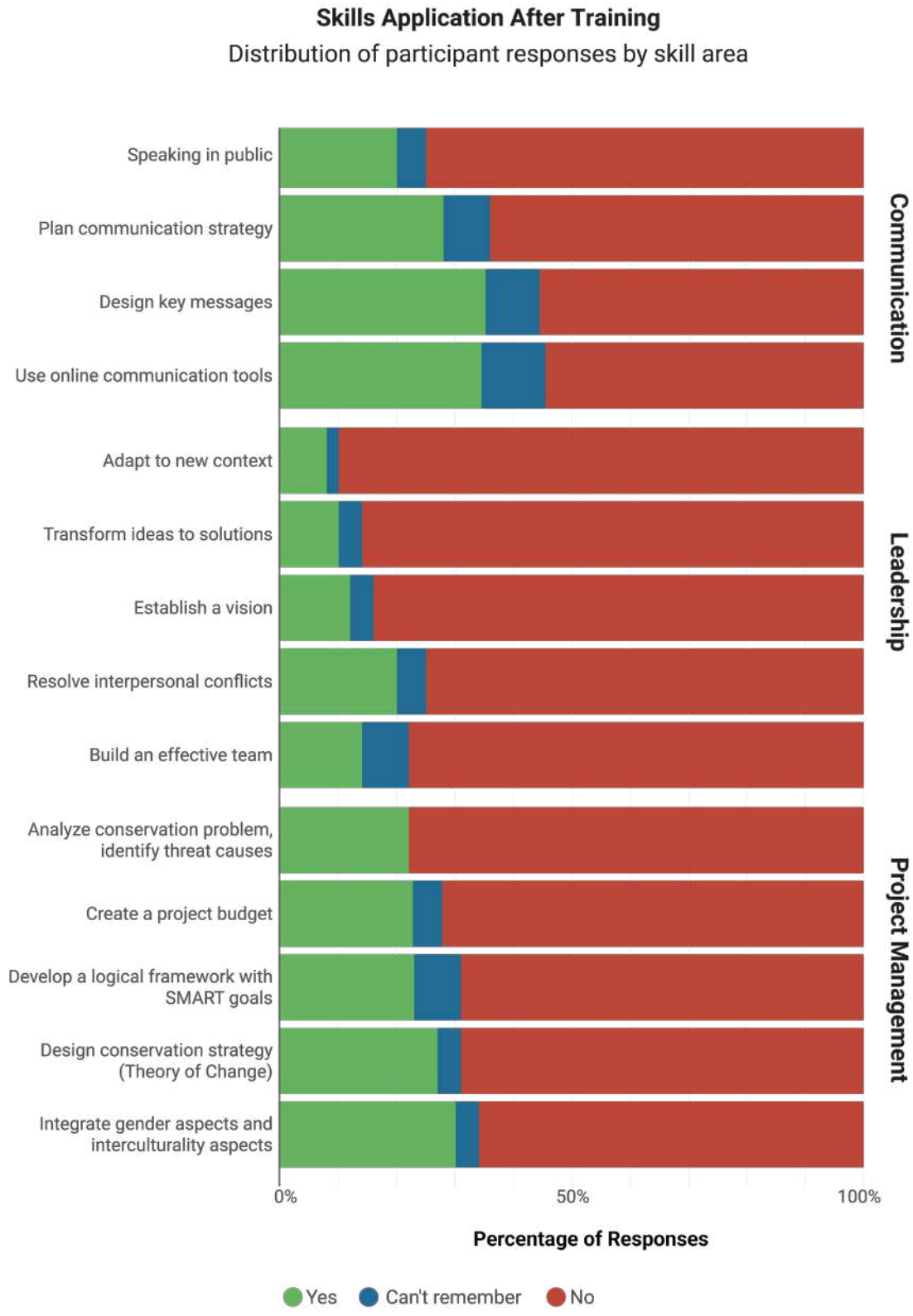
The scope of the impact of AxN is illustrated in the following quotes from open-ended survey questions:

> *"It was a great inspiration that motivated me to set up my own NGO. In the beginning, there were only two of us, and now, after three years since its creation, we have successfully executed two projects and have four more underway. We have a multidisciplinary team of about 10 volunteer collaborators. This journey marked a turning point in my life, driving me to contribute through my professional training, providing me with the necessary foundations to design and execute conservation projects, which is what I*

am currently dedicated to. It has been a process of much learning, but none of this would have been possible without having taken the AxN course. I will always be very grateful for that opportunity, as thanks to it, through the NGO, we are supporting many families in Indigenous communities, which is very rewarding on a personal level". – ***AxN fellow, 2021 [open-ended survey question]***

"My most significant professional achievement since going through AxN has been my two promotions: from Assistant to Specialist in early 2023, and from Specialist to Campaign Coordinator at the beginning of 2024. Without a doubt, AxN played a key role in these achievements because, although I am an environmental professional, my background did not come from conservation; it was more related to climate change and risk management. However, AxN strengthened my knowledge and toolset in conservation, which ultimately made a difference in my professional life." – ***AxN fellow, 2022 [open- ended survey question]***

Figure 4: AxN fellows' reported application of skills after AxN course



2.4 The Role of Mentors

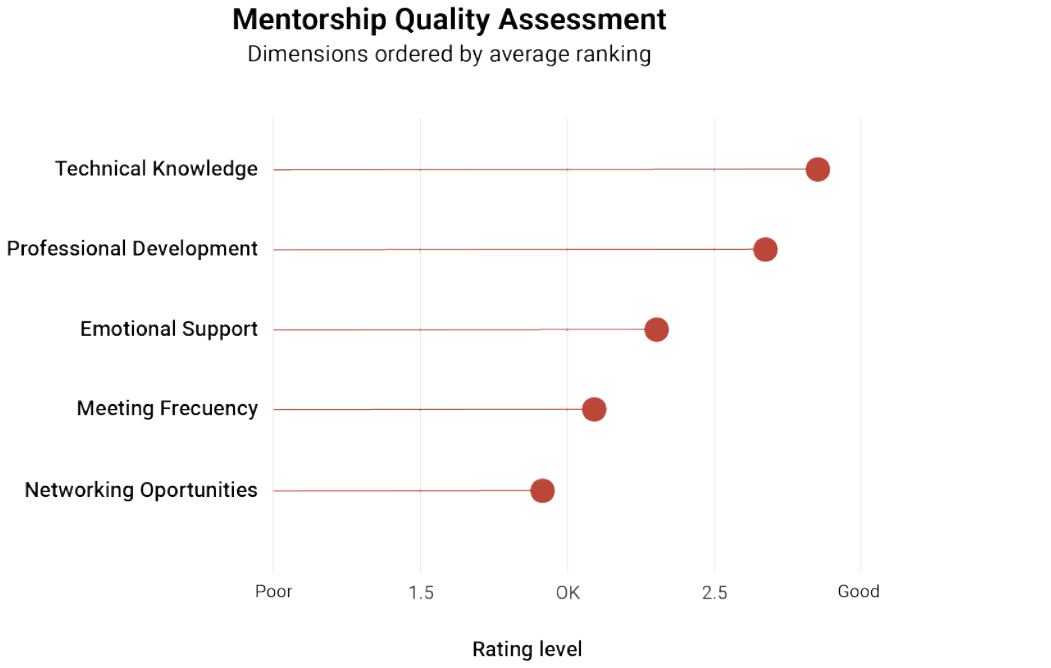
We found strong overall effectiveness of the AxN mentorship program, with participants rating their satisfaction at an average 4.13 out of 5 (±0.99 SD).

However, looking at specific dimensions rated on a 3-point scale, "poor" (1), to "OK" (2), to "good" (3), the strengths and weaknesses of the mentorship program become clear. Technical knowledge of the mentor emerged as the standout strength (2.82 ± 0.39), followed by mentor's support to the AxN's professional development (2.60 ±0.62). While emotional support received moderate ratings (2.33 ±0.74), networking (1.96 ±0.82) and meeting frequency (2.07 ±0.78) show room for improvement. The Friedman test we conducted ($p < 0.05$) confirms these differences between dimensions are statistically significant. It seems that while mentors excel at sharing technical expertise and supporting professional growth, AxN fellows to not feel they have more networking opportunities, and the program could benefit from more structured meeting schedules. See Figure 4 for a visual guide to these results.

Box 4. Demographic Variables in Mentoring Experience

When we analyzed the possible effects of demographic variables, our analysis revealed a significant negative correlation between participant age and ratings of emotional support from mentors ($r = -0.31$, $p < 0.05$), indicating that younger AxN fellows tended to rate their mentors' emotional support more favorably than older participants did.

Figure 5: AxN fellows' ratings of mentorship quality across five dDRimensions



The quantitative survey data is supported by our qualitative analysis. From the survey, 22 fellows provided additional feedback about their mentoring experience in response to the open-ended question. Of these,

32% mentioned a desire for more sessions, either in terms of frequency or session length, and suggested starting the mentoring relationship earlier in the program. Additionally, 27% of fellows recommended ensuring that mentors are aware of, and have the time necessary, for their meetings. 14% wished for a better match in terms of mentee's field and interests with those of the mentor.

A similar pattern emerged in the interviews, where 62% of the 13 fellows reported having a positive relationship with their mentor. This positive relationship was characterized by constructive feedback on their AxN projects, mentorship that inspired them, and contributions to their skill development. However, those who reported a negative experience (38%) cited poor communication and coordination with their mentor, including the failure to secure one or more of the expected meetings. Among the main recommendations that fellows offered, one key suggestion was to provide guidelines for both mentors and mentees to set clear expectations for the mentoring program, as well as ensuring alignment of interests.

These findings align with the experiences shared by mentors themselves. As part of our evaluation, we conducted a total of four interviews with mentors. Mentors were from Ecuador (n=1), Mexico (n=1), and Peru (n=2), with an equal distribution of female and male mentors. Three of the four mentors have participated in AxN twice, while one has participated in all editions. In addition, there is an even split between those mentors with previous mentoring experience (n=2), and those whose AxN was their official mentoring experience (n=2).

We found that mentors participated in AxN primarily because they enjoy guiding younger generations interested in conservation. Through interactions with mentees, we observed that mentors gained renewed optimism about the future of conservation, enabled mentors to learn about different regional contexts and understand the priorities of emerging conservationists. Mentors valued the opportunity to share their accumulated knowledge with others. These intrinsic motivations emerged clearly in our interviews, as demonstrated by the following quotes:

> *"So, from these different experiences, seeing what is happening in conservation in other places, the fact of seeing where the younger generations are at – what their hopes are, what their concerns are. All of that feeds me a lot and also inspires me a great deal. I mean, I feel that mentoring is a space that recharges me, because sometimes the daily routine is exhausting. When you work in conservation, there's a lot of bad news and few things that brighten your day. So, for me, these mentoring spaces are also places to recharge, to have hope... I get a lot of that from these spaces."* – ***Mentor from Ecuador***

> *"You know, I've always liked working with people I identify with, who are involved in conservation projects, who are young, and who are open to receiving feedback. I click with those people, I enjoy it, I like doing that. And when I was young and there was no one to guide me… the truth is, it was very frustrating for me not knowing what to do in the projects I led, and I would have loved for a program like this to exist; it would have saved me a lot of headaches. So, I like helping to pave that part of the path for people who sometimes wander, when you don't have experience and you get too involved with your heart or with the traumas you bring, and that makes it hard to see clearly in the projects, right?"* – ***Mentor from Mexico***

We found that mentors viewed their core responsibility as guiding mentees' AxN projects toward viable outcomes. Professional expertise played a crucial role in this process, with the most productive partnerships emerging when mentors' specializations aligned with mentees' interests. Interviewed mentors held expertise across multiple domains - from legal policies and conservation planning to marine conservation and community-based approaches - which enabled mentors to provide targeted recommendations for project development.

Beyond technical guidance, we identified an important emotional component in these relationships. Two mentors in our study specifically emphasized their role in providing personal encouragement and emotional support – in line with our qualitative findings. Our investigation of gender dynamics revealed an interesting pattern: female mentors reported stronger connections with female mentees compared to their previous experiences mentoring male participants. We interpret this as evidence that shared gender identity may facilitate deeper mentor-mentee relationships in conservation contexts.

> *"Being in AxN allows me to see other perspectives that I'm not necessarily involved in, and I gain that experience because later, in one of my projects where I have to start an ecotourism business, at the end of the day, the barriers are the same: people who have never done business and suddenly have to start one. And that experience I've gained through Accelerators helps me make my work easier, you know? I like it. And I think the most important thing Accelerators gives me is the satisfaction of helping someone I don't know. I feel good in my heart giving time to someone, and especially if I see that they make use of it, that they do their homework, it makes me very happy. I feel happy sharing."* – ***Mentor from Mexico.***

The main challenge identified by mentors was when they had to mentor a group, rather than an individual AxN fellow (n=2). Group dynamics made it harder to connect with the mentees, not everyone connected to the sessions, and there was less accountability and uptake from their meetings. Besides this, mentors concurred that a successful mentor-mentee relationship depends on the disposition of both parties. Hence, when mentors perceived that mentees were highly engaged, they motivated them to similarly engage more.

Suggestions mentioned by mentors for future AxN editions highlight the fact that overall, mentors are willing to offer more time than what is currently stipulated in the mentorship guidelines. For all four mentors, three sessions of one hour were too short, and they reported sometimes feeling rushed. As mentors are mainly intrinsically motivated, this could explain why they are willing to volunteer more of their time.

One mentor suggested that creating networking opportunities for AxN mentees was difficult because these rely on long-standing relationships of trust, and the mentorship program is too short to create such a relationship. This can also help explain why AxN fellows rated this aspect of the mentorship program as weaker. It is therefore worth considering whether it is a realistic expectation of the mentorship program to create networking opportunities for AxN fellows. Specifically, mentors suggested:

- Ensure alignment of interests between mentors and mentees.
- Starting the mentoring scheme earlier in the course and having more mentoring sessions.
- Better guidelines on mentees and AxN expectations of the mentoring scheme.

These first three suggestions align with feedback from the AxN fellows. Furthermore, mentors suggested:

- What is the long-term vision of AxN? More information on what AxN is teaching their students and the overall program timeline.
- What happened to their mentees? They want to know what happened to the projects they contributed to and what their mentees are doing now.
- For groups of AxN fellows, have a group of mentors, so they can divide efforts and have a closer connection and follow-up with the mentees.
- Finally, have clear products to deliver with clear timelines for the mentees, so there is more accountability.

These suggestions are illustrated in the following quotes:

> *"I think this mentorship was something very... as I said, it was the first mentorship I did for AxN... I felt it was something very specific, that more than a mentorship, it felt like a consultation, right? ...but in the end, I lost track of it, I don't know what happened with that proposal. And I think that's one of the lessons learned for the mentoring program, it would be interesting to see after some time what happened to them, the participants, and their projects, to see if they really managed to boost them, to give them a push based on what the mentors gave them. I think that would be good. In the second mentorship, I didn't follow up much either, I mean, I didn't know what happened in the end, the mentorship ended, and I didn't hear anything else about it."* – ***Mentor from Peru.***

> *"But it would be more interesting to know what our role is in the AxN universe, right? Exactly what role we're playing and how they see our contribution to the whole picture, right? I mean, if I were to put it graphically, it's like, you know, in that entire network, where do the mentors fit in and what kind of information are the accelerators receiving, right? What strengths are they developing, skills, and what is the vision of the program? ... It would be good if perhaps the mentors could be helped to locate ourselves within the AxN universe."* – ***Mentor from Peru.***

Our focus group with the CxN team revealed that from an organizational perspective, the mentorship component of the program has proven to be the most difficult element to implement successfully, for a variety of reasons, as highlighted in this quote.

> *"Because we don't have someone hired full-time, the mentoring aspect always happens one month before the course starts. We don't have enough time to ensure an adequate match between mentors and mentees, or that both parties are fully committed to the mentoring aspect of AxN. This always is one of the major sources of stress for us."* – ***CxN team***

Taken together, the mentorship program of AxN is perhaps the most challenging component of the overall course, with the most room for improvement. The clear alignment in the perceived strengths and weaknesses provides a clear path forward for the CxN team, which could focus on: 1) building long-term relationship with committed mentors, 2) creating a better match between mentees and mentors (potentially giving the fellows the opportunity to select their mentor), 3) establishing clear parameters and guidance for the mentorship (focus on the personal development of the fellow rather than on the project), and 4) establishing check-in meetings with the fellows to monitor their satisfaction with their mentor, and similarly, with mentors.

2.5 Networks

We found that network expansion was a significant outcome for 46% of fellows (6 participants) in our study. Our analysis revealed that AxN created two key types of connections: First, fellows developed relationships with peers who shared similar professional trajectories and conservation goals. Second, these connections fostered a broader professional network while simultaneously building a sense of community and partnership among participants.

We identified a critical transition point in this community building: while the sense of connection was strong during the course itself, maintaining these relationships after program completion emerged as a key challenge. Our interviews yielded several concrete suggestions from fellows to address this

issue. Fellows proposed creating an integrated WhatsApp group spanning all cohorts to facilitate ongoing communication. They also suggested developing a comprehensive website featuring fellow profiles to enable targeted networking. Additionally, we found strong support for increasing alumni events, with fellows specifically emphasizing the value of in-person gatherings. Fellows also expressed interest in receiving regular updates about ongoing conservation projects within the network.

Regarding continued engagement with the CxN team, our research showed particular enthusiasm for alumni events like those held in October 2024. We found that some members of the CxN team serve as central connecting figures for many fellows, fulfilling multiple roles: sharing professional opportunities, providing networking connections, assisting with applications, and maintaining personal connections through regular check-ins with fellows.

2.6 AxN Seed Fund

We interviewed three fellows who had won the AxN seed fund of USD 1500 (Mexico, 2022 / Ecuador 2023 / Peru 2023). Fellows reported that the grant allowed them to launch key activities to push ahead with their initiatives. The main area for improvement identified here is the delay in receiving the funds. Activities were initially programmed for a specific time of the year, but according to interviews, the funds were delayed by several months, with too few updates from the CxN team about reasons for the delays.

> *"The AxN funding came at the perfect time... What we are going to do is continue with the activities for another two months. Also, this grant will help us buy some equipment that we really need (…). We were supposed to receive the grant the previous year for the Urban Bird Festival, but there was a delay. It took almost a year and a half—about a year—to get the grant. In fact, I received it in June. But it worked out for us. I'm not complaining. It was perfect timing. So, I'm not complaining, but I just want to point out that the communication regarding grants should be more constant, to let us know, 'Hey, you know what? We're delayed because of this.' I started to think, well, maybe we're not going to get it, maybe there's nothing else we can do."* – ***AxN fellow from Ecuador, 2023***

A clear recommendation is therefore a re-evaluation of the feasibility and/or operationalization of the AxN seed fund, and a review of administrative options to ensure a speedy delivery of funding.

2.7 Course dynamics and the alumni network

As described in the previous sections, overall, AxN fellows perceive that skill-building and receiving tools for generating impact are being effectively delivered by the AxN course, with some room for improvement. We used the interviews and open-ended questions in the survey to assess what the main areas of improvement of the course were. We found that fellows wish to see improvement in three main areas, all related to specific course dynamics – more so than content – and a wish for more human connection and networking during and after the course.

Need for more networking and collaboration spaces for alumni

In 100% of interviews and 43% of open-ended survey questions, AxN fellows mentioned the need for more spaces for networking an alumni collaboration.

In the interviews, fellows mentioned that there is limited interaction between cohorts and groups. They expressed a need to facilitate more networking spaces. There is a widespread feeling of post-course disconnect and that the current AxN alumni network is something hard to grasp. As of October 2024,

WhatsApp groups are perceived as inactive. From the surveys, 43% of AxN fellows would like to have more events for alumni to reconnect and update each other.

> *"Ah, nothing, nothing. And we're all in a single WhatsApp group [from my year]. No, I don't know anything at all. There hasn't been any coordination or communication between teams. The thing is, from the first day, the environment was very competitive, right? Everyone wanted to show the best performance. Everyone wanted to showcase their abilities in different areas. And I think one of AxN's goals was to foster alliances between teams, among those of us who were involved, right? I remember there were people from Piura, people from Bolivia… but no, at least with us, there was no communication, and we didn't communicate with them either."* – ***AxN fellow from Peru, 2023***

> *"It's a totally constructive criticism because I really still hold affection for the course, as it was the starting point for all my adventures that followed. But I believe that getting to know each other more and not forgetting about each other is important. I understand they have their own lives, a work dynamic, and wanted to create a network that had an impact, but I'm still here sending smoke signals, like, look, a lot of things are happening, I have more important projects, and we could have some connection, or they could be of help for what we're trying to achieve. It was one of their main messages, right? The idea was unity, community, and developing specific projects, especially conservation projects in Latin America and in challenging contexts". –* ***AxN fellow from Chile, 2021***

The CxN team agrees with the need to strengthen the AxN alumni network. Ideas around in-person events and better communication channels were mentioned in the focus group with the team. However, there is a need to have a defined strategy for the future of the network, generate opportunities for fellows to interact and connect with each other, as perhaps explore national-level groups (e.g., AxN Peru, AxN Chile). The team expresses that the main challenge to working towards a community of fellows was time and resources.

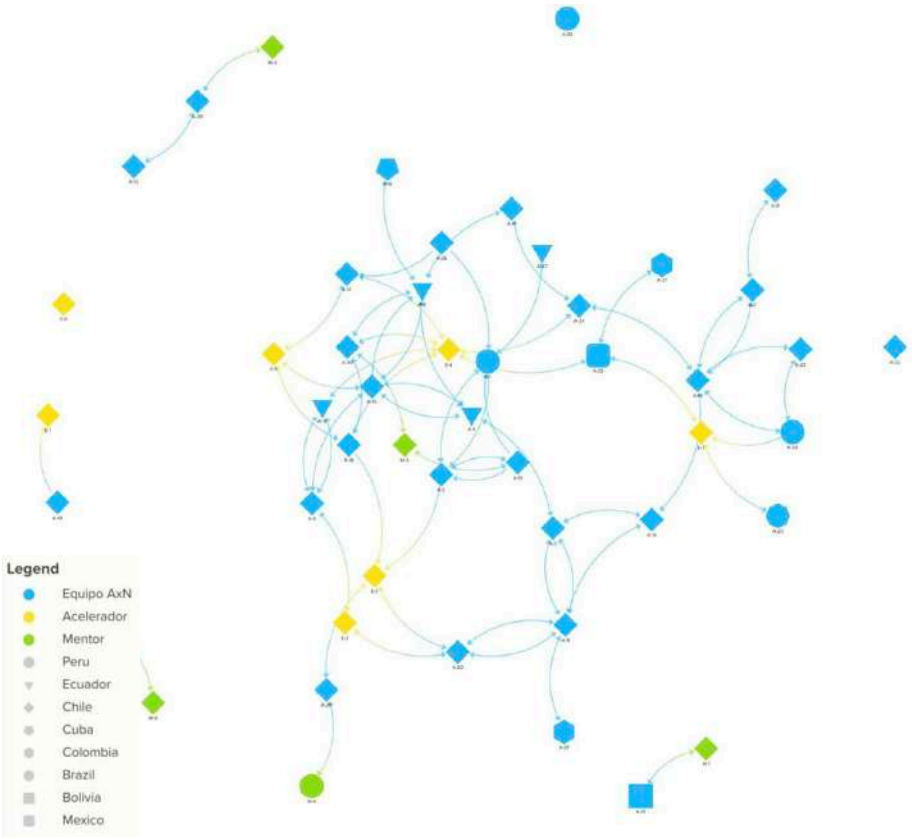
> *"We need to generate opportunities for fellows to interact, among themselves and with us. We need to do a better job at reaching out to offer the CxN platform and to keep everyone updated about everyone's progress. However, currently we don't have the time or resources to have someone working towards that."* – ***CxN team***

Social network analysis

In the survey, we asked fellows whether they continued interacting with people from the course after its conclusion. Of all survey participants, 58% (n=29) completed this section, listing one (n=7), two (n=7), or three names (n=15) each. A total of 35 unique names were recorded, with 66 interactions reported overall. Among these interactions, 64% involved other fellows, 27% referenced members of the AxN team, and 9% mentioned mentors.

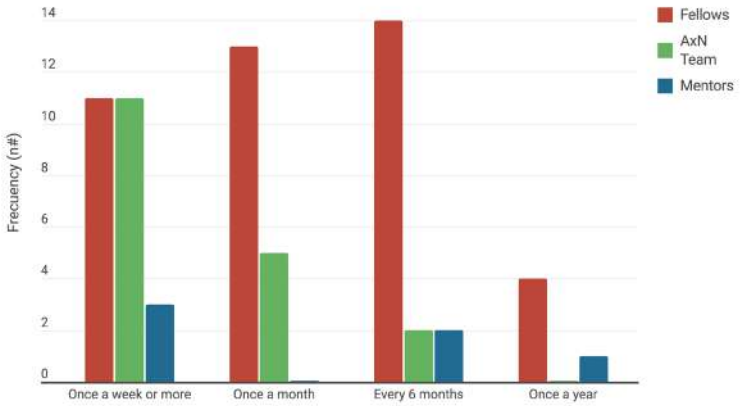
Mentors, however, are not well-integrated into the AxN network, indicating limited interactions with other participants. Interestingly, interactions among fellows from the same country are not guaranteed, and several fellows remain disconnected from the network entirely. Overall, this is a sparse network where E-4 plays a pivotal role in connecting and facilitating interactions across the group.

Figure 6: Social network analysis map (elaborated with Kumu)..



As shown in Figure 7, most interactions among fellows occur at a frequency of once every six months or more, followed by those that happen once a month or once a week. Interactions with the AxN team tend to be more frequent, occurring once a week or more, likely due to fellows seeking updates or news from the program. In contrast, interactions with mentors are the least frequent overall.

Figure 7: Frequency of reported interactions, categorized by the role of the person with whom fellows interact.



Need for more follow-up from CxN team during and after the course

AxN fellows expressed a need for more follow up from the CxN team during and once the AxN course ends (46% from interviews and 26% from surveys). Fellows would have liked to have more guidance on their projects during the course, with more formal spaces for feedback and checking their progress. Once the course ended, fellows would have liked to know more about the status of

other fellows, their achievements, new skills or initiatives that could be shared with the network. Fellows also expressed a desire for increased sharing of resources and opportunities relevant to their professional development and conservation projects.

> *"But it would have been nice if there had been more connection in this process. Because after the laptop was closed and the course ended, a lot has happened, and it would have been nice if the accelerators, as a community or as a team, had supported us more. Because, of course, we felt very supported by them during the course, but once the course ended, we didn't feel as supported."- **AxN fellow from Chile, 2021***

Class dynamics

46% of interviewees indicated some tensions with how group sessions are structured. For some fellows, time for working in their groups was too short. Meanwhile, in the years where groups were assigned a case study besides their personal project, fellows expressed tensions between wanting to quickly finish their group discussions and wanting to proceed with their own project and tasks.

> *"Because the courses were theoretical, we did practical exercises, followed by individual tasks, and then everything was wrapped up. Platforms and spaces to discuss certain topics, to articulate our ideas, and even present a topic and see it from different points of view allowed me to get to know all the participants, or at least my group, and how they think and where their strengths lie. It wasn't just about saying, "Look, I'm a specialist in this, and from my position, I can offer this." Okay, I realized this person knows that, and when I have a need on that topic, I can connect with them. But it didn't feel that way. The articulation didn't happen naturally. Because when we were asked to discuss in groups, the time was limited, and people were focused on something else. Besides, they didn't send us to discuss but to build something. So, for convenience, someone would say, "I think this," and everyone would be like, "Okay, great," because we were looking at the clock and barely making it. We had to make decisions, add something, and deliver it, so that didn't allow us the space to see how each person presents themselves on a topic." – **AxN fellow from Peru, 2022***

> *"Yes, the classes were very good. Besides the theory, there were also practical parts, but sometimes we were left wanting a bit more direct feedback. I understand that it was because we were in many teams, and they would have to spend more time reviewing our progress on the mural. Sometimes, they gave some feedback or left small messages about how we were doing. But I feel that one thing that could be improved or learned as a lesson is having one or two more direct meetings with the team to discuss how to improve the work being done from class to class. Because with each class, we had to make progress on the project, and it was being worked on in the mural. So, that could reinforce the knowledge we were gaining. Sometimes, among ourselves, we had different understandings of things, so we would end up having a whole debate, trying to figure out the best way to present it on the mural." – **AxN fellow from Peru, 2023***

The focus-group with the CxN team revealed that similar frustrations were felt by the CxN team. Course organizers highlighted that the 2023 experiment with groups, rather than individual AxN fellows, showed lower rates of participation and engagement between fellows, because participants seemed content to relate only with their group, leading to poorer in-class dynamics. Meanwhile, the large number of groups (10) made providing in-class feedback during practical exercises very difficult, compared to the smaller number of groups (5-6) in the individual-fellow cohorts (2021, 2022).

Additional topics desired by AxN fellows

Interviews revealed an interesting list of potential topics in future editions, which are based on the experiences and learning needs fellows had after the course. These include:

- The real-world challenges of doing conservation (38%): How should one approach situations where
- people's lives are at stake? What is the behind-the-scenes of conservation projects?
- Community relations (31%): How should one work with communities? How should one deal with community conflict? How should one respectfully engage with with Indigenous Peoples?
- Youth networks and collaboration (15%): How can one to identify and engage with existing networks?

03.
AxN Success Factors: Key Elements for Effective Conservation Capacity-building

3.1 AxN success factors – what is working well?

Our evaluation of AxN revealed several critical factors that contributed to its effectiveness in building conservation leadership capacity among young professionals in Latin America. These insights also offer valuable lessons for designing impactful capacity-building programs in the region.

The high level of engagement and personalized attention from course organizers emerged as a crucial differentiating factor in our analysis. Unlike pre-recorded online courses, AxN's interactive format enabled real-time feedback, guidance and interpersonal connection. The continuous presence and support from the CxN team created accountability and fostered deeper learning, as evidenced by fellow testimonials. As one participant noted: "You can clearly see the care with which it was designed...You can also feel their genuine desire to share this information—it's not something done just for the sake of it." (AxN fellow, 2023)

Our analysis revealed that AxN's comprehensive curriculum design, covering interconnected aspects of conservation practice, served as another critical success factor. The quantitative data demonstrated significant improvements across all skill categories, with particularly strong gains in areas where fellows initially had limited expertise. In project management, fellows showed remarkable growth in designing conservation strategies using theory of change and developing SMART goals within logical frameworks. One fellow from Ecuador (2022) highlighted the practical value of this integrated learning: "Mainly something that always stuck with me and that I apply is the Theory of Change and the Situational Analysis which is very important to apply in a project before proposing funding. That skill has generated very good results for me for new conservation projects."

The integration of leadership soft skills and communication skills complemented the technical training, preparing fellows for the complex interpersonal aspects of conservation work – although we do have suggestions for improving these components, see Section 3.2. Our interviews revealed that fellows valued learning about gender considerations and developing greater empathy when working with communities.

The course's coverage of budgeting and fundraising skills, while identified as areas for potential expansion, provided essential foundations for project implementation. Fellows reported successfully applying these skills, with 24% securing funding for their conservation initiatives after the course.

A particularly significant finding was the program's impact on career commitment in conservation. Our findings demonstrate that AxN played a decisive role in cementing fellows' conviction to pursue conservation careers, especially at critical decision points. As one fellow explained: "For me, the first and most basic thing is that I had already been trying since 2018 to work on environmental issues and especially forest conservation. And when I took Aceleradores in 2022, it was the last option before giving up on that... Aceleradores came along and, well, it really inspired me to know that if I can't find opportunities, I can create them myself." The quantitative analysis supported this finding, showing significant increases in both motivation (84% reported increased motivation) and self-confidence (90% reported increased confidence) among participants.

The AxN program's emphasis on peer learning and network building created lasting value beyond individual skill development. We found that the formation of a community of practice among young Latin American conservationists helped validate participants' experiences and aspirations, although we also found that this aspect of the course requires strengthening. Interview data highlighted the importance of regional representation, as one fellow (2021) observed: "This happens a lot in Chile, in our training, the role models are always from the northern hemisphere...And there is so much richness in terms of knowledge and in terms of understanding our difficult realities in Latin America."

Our research showed that the involvement of experienced mentors from the conservation field provided professional guidance and inspiration. Despite implementation challenges, successful mentoring relationships significantly enhanced the learning experience for both mentors and mentees. Quantitative data showed high satisfaction with mentors' technical knowledge and professional development, demonstrating the value of connecting emerging and established conservation professionals. Importantly, we found that this experience was valued also by mentors.

Box 5. Impact of the AxN program on fellows from the Andean Amazon

The Andes Amazon region is a focal area for the AxN program, given its status as a global conservation priority, and as a priority region for the Wyss Academy for Nature Latin America Hub. In our evaluation, we therefore also applied this lens to assess how effectively AxN is reaching and supporting conservation professionals in this region.

The results show that AxN has successfully engaged a substantial number of fellows from the Andes Amazon, with 57% of participants reporting that their work or studies focus on this region. Notably, 86% of AxN alumni are currently employed in the conservation sector, and over half of these are working directly on Andes Amazon conservation.

We compared outcomes between fellows working in the Andean Amazon and those focused on other regions. Across all key impact metrics assessed - including skill development, motivation and confidence, and skill application - no significant regional differences were found. This lack of regional disparities indicates that the core competencies targeted by AxN are equally applicable and beneficial for conservation work in the Andean Amazon as in other contexts. The personal experiences shared by fellows from the Andean Amazon in the evaluation underscore the program's impact, with several fellows attributing their ability to launch conservation initiatives or secure project funding to the skills and networks gained through AxN.

> *"It was a great inspiration that motivated me to set up my own NGO. […] we have successfully executed two projects and have four more underway. We have a multidisciplinary team of about 10 volunteer collaborators. This journey marked a turning point in my life, driving me to contribute through my professional training, providing me with the necessary foundations to design and execute conservation projects, which is what I am currently dedicated to. It has been a process of much learning, but none of this would have been possible without having taken the AxN course […] thanks to it, through the NGO, we are supporting many families in Indigenous communities, which is very rewarding on a personal level". – AxN fellow working in the Andean Amazon in Peru, 2021*

While we have several recommendations for improving the AxN program (Section 3.2) and identify some research limitations (Section 4), the overall results of our evaluation affirm the significant value of the AxN program in boosting the professional development of young professionals working in conservation in the Andean Amazon. In Section 3.4, we make wider suggestions for how capacity-building should be adapted for the Latin American (including Andes Amazon) context, including issues such as conservation in conflict zones or poor connectivity.

3.2 Room for improvement in the AxN course

Based on the results described in the previous sections, here, we summarize the main areas where our analysis has shown room for improvement in the AxN course.

1. **Defining the "Aceleradores" in the application process:** During the focus group with the CxN team, it became apparent that a clearer definition of who qualifies as an "acelerador" is needed. At present, attention is divided between evaluating the professional profile of the fellow and the quality of their project. The team suggested refining the fellow profile to target individuals with at least three years of professional experience. This would ensure participants are better positioned to address conservation challenges with the tools learned in AxN within their current roles or personal conservation initiatives.

2. **Program diffusion during application process:** The CxN team identified the need for stronger outreach to key institutions in other countries to attract professionals whose profiles align closely with the goals of AxN. Currently, the program relies heavily on social media channels for promotion, which may limit its reach. Strengthening partnerships with targeted institutions could enhance diffusion and ensure a broader pool of qualified applicants.

3. **Course Content:** Regarding course content, we found some specific areas needing expansion or revision.

    - Budget development and financial planning received lower improvement scores compared to other project management skills; therefore, we recommend extending the current single-session coverage of these topics. The CxN team should also consider that a fourth of AxN fellows go on to work in the private sector – content geared not only to non-profit financing could be well received.

    - Additionally, 31% of interviewed fellows expressed interest in more content on community relations and conflict resolution, including work with Indigenous Peoples. The course could benefit from additional modules on these topics or strengthening of the existing modules.

    - Furthermore, the nuanced picture of skill improvement and application for the communications modules suggest that focus could be maintained on skills more commonly applied post-course, such as key message building and public speaking, rather than skills specific to professional communications positions, e.g. using online communications tools. The AxN team could assess what other communications skills, such as interacting with public media, crisis communication, are essential for young Latin American change-makers, and integrate these into the course.

    - The soft skills taught in the course, including conflict resolution and team-building, are highly valued by AxN fellows according to our results. However, the AxN team could consider more clearly defining what soft skills it considers indispensable for a young leader in Latin America, if necessary, with support from expert(s) in talent management. The course modules could then more explicitly focus on these soft skills and clearly tie them to leadership development. These soft skills could also be linked to those trained through the communications modules, such as public speaking.

4. **Mentorship:** The mentorship component requires substantial restructuring to achieve its full potential. Our research shows that while mentors provide valuable technical expertise, the program structure limits their impact. Key changes should include starting mentorship earlier in the course, allowing for more than three one-hour sessions, and providing clearer guidelines to both mentors and mentees. In addition, it needs to be clear that the mentoring program should be aimed at the professional development of the fellow and not their AxN project. Given the strong interest of mentors in dedicating time to the course, further integration of mentors in the course could be considered. If a goal for the

AxN program is to integrate mentors into a larger AxN network, our network analysis indicates that this is not currently the case and would require reinforcement.

5. **Individual support:** Individual follow-up support during and after the course could be increased. Fellows indicated they would benefit from more structured guidance on their projects during the course and regular check-ins afterward. Creating a formal system for project and/or professional development feedback and progress monitoring could address this need, while also providing the CxN team with interesting metrics for evaluating program impact.

6. **Alumni network:** The alumni network needs strengthening to maintain the sense of community that develops during the course. Fellows consistently expressed that post-course connections weaken significantly. The CxN team should consider creating a comprehensive alumni platform that includes an integrated WhatsApp group spanning all cohorts, a website featuring fellow profiles, and regular updates about ongoing conservation projects. The strong interest in the October 2024 alumni event suggests interest for more frequent gatherings.

7. **Seed funding:** The seed funding mechanism requires administrative streamlining, because the funding itself is considered very positively by fellows. Fellows reported significant delays in receiving funds, which affected project implementation. We recommend reviewing the grant distribution process, particularly for international fellows.

3.3 Theory of Change of the AxN Course

Our impact evaluation allowed us to revise the Theory of Change of the AxN course, presented as a results chain in Figure 8. The new version is a suggestion that can be further adapted by the CxN team and also used as a model for other capacity-building programs. Here we discuss the main changes we propose to the initial model, where we have: i) removed results that do not reflect what we found in the evaluation, ii) added results that were previously not considered but were shown to be valuable through the evaluation, and iii) suggested new results that the program could achieve if some changes are implemented. We have kept results, such as those related to the mentorship program and the alumni network, which the AxN program clearly seeks to attain but where the course methodology needs to improve.

We revised the vision statement to emphasize empowerment and lasting impact. Where AxN previously focused on young change-makers applying rigorous standards while innovating, we propose "a community of young change-makers empowered to achieve lasting conservation impact in Latin America." Here, the word “empower” encompasses the diverse set of skills, knowledge, motivation and connections that the AxN program seeks to create for its fellows.

Next, we propose a single long-term outcome that focuses on several sub-components of professional development: new theoretical understanding, new management tools, soft skills and access to networks, rather than separating outcomes only into project management skills and networks.

For the short-term results, we more closely detail the specific skill sets that are targeted by the project management modules. For instance, for “Conservation Problem Analysis” (previously “Situation Model”), the results now mention the specific analytic skills the program teaches. We have also added more details for results related to project planning and implementation, and the conservation themes now include the specific modules covered regularly in the program. Meanwhile, for soft skills and communications taught by the course, we have suggested new results such as “working with local/indigenous communities” and also suggest CxN consider additional results related to leadership soft skills and transversal communication skills.

AXN Draft Theory of Change

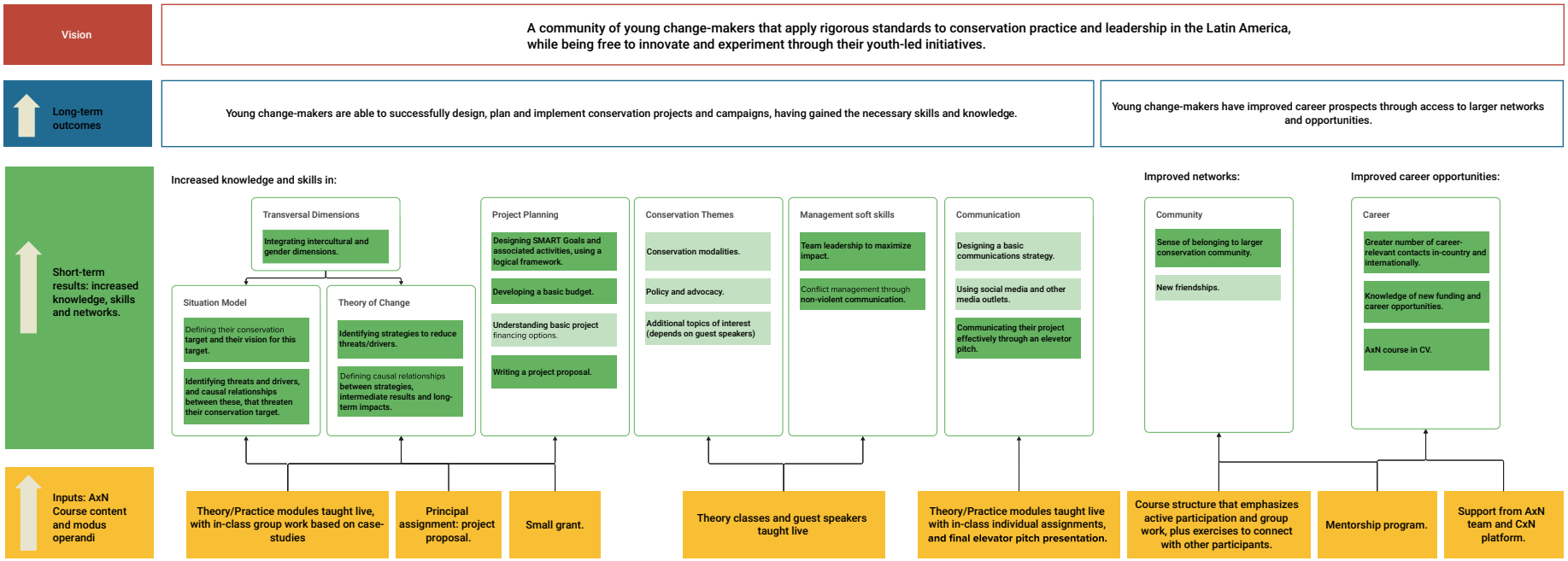
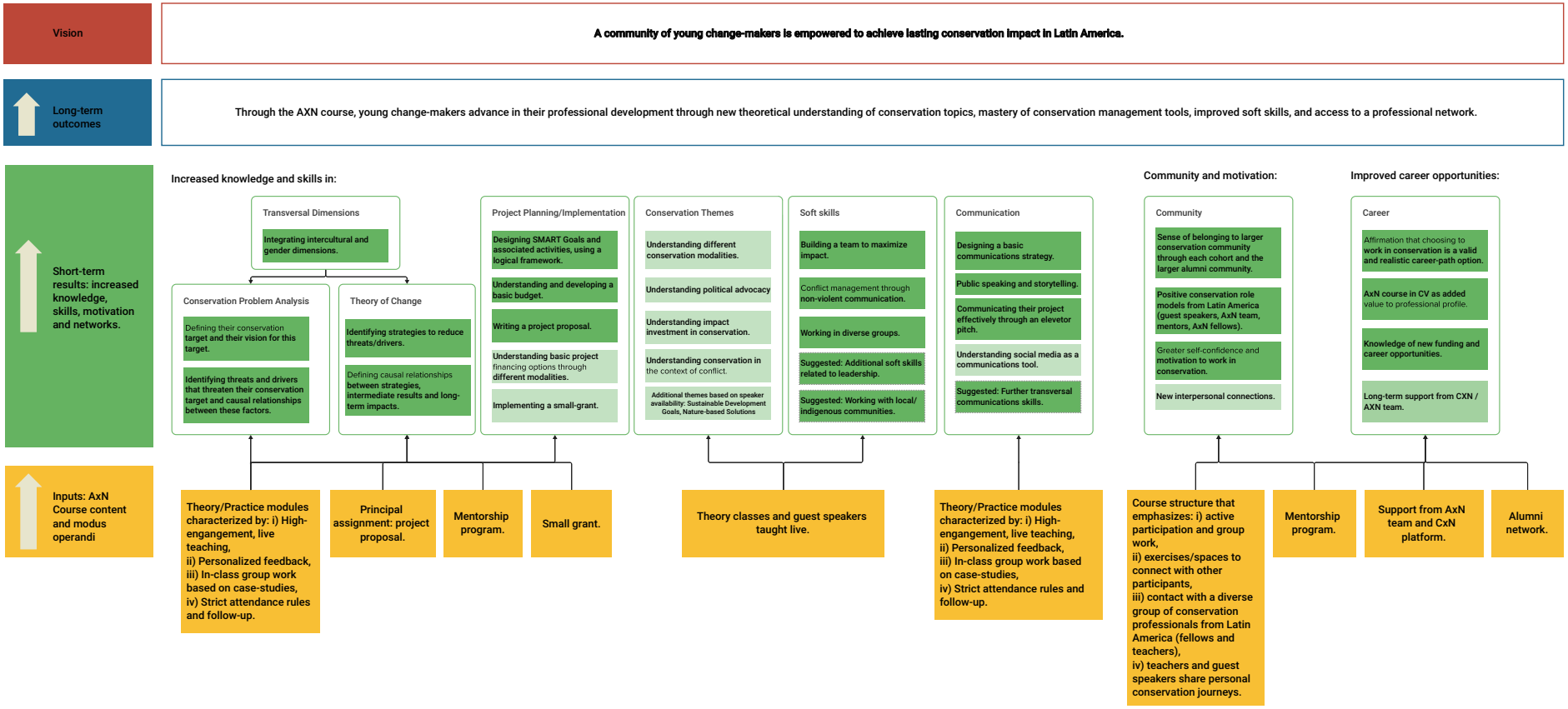


Figure 8: Theory of Change for the AxN program

AXN REVISED Theory of Change



3.4 Implications for youth capacity-building in Latin America

Our findings suggest several broader implications for conservation capacity-building in Latin America. Many of these components are also reflected in the Theory of Change presented above.

Programs should design comprehensive curricula that reflect the complexity of real-world conservation challenges. Our findings indicate that a young professionals have a need for skill-building in technical aspects like project design, management and fundraising, as well as soft skills related to leadership, communication and conflict resolution. We recommend that where the goal is overall professional development, capacity-building for conservation should apply holistic, transdisciplinary approaches, which implies the collaboration of a diverse set of experts in the organizing team. Importantly, organizers should clearly define the skills they hope participants to gain for areas such as leadership.

Our analysis indicates the importance of balancing technical training with individualized support and confidence building, particularly for young professionals facing complex conservation challenges. This means programs will have to balance scale, i.e. reaching many participants, versus quality and individualized attention, i.e. the amount of time program organizers can engage with smaller groups and individuals. Our evaluation showed that real-time feedback and guidance significantly enhanced learning outcomes, and AxN fellows repeatedly expressed the need for more of such interactions. Based on our results, self-paced courses, massive open online courses, and similar approaches would likely be less effective at creating a comprehensive learning environment for holistic professional development.

Regional context and network building also deserve particular attention. Our evaluation highlighted the importance placed by fellows on learning from Latin American experiences and contexts – and the importance of providing young professionals with positive role models from their own region, including through peer-to-peer learning opportunities. Future programs should actively incorporate regional case studies and involve local conservation leaders as instructors and mentors.

Capacity-building programs must also consider the unique challenges posed by the Latin American context with regards to connectivity, resources and security. Many young change-makers live in conflict areas, and Latin America is among the most dangerous places in the world for environmental defenders (Global Witness, 2023). Programs should provide explicit spaces for dialogue on these issues and consider integrating this reality into their curriculum, for instance by including guidance on how decision-making is affected by security concerns. Online-only programs like AxN should also carefully evaluate the internet connectivity of their target audiences, try to support participants where possible (the CxN team provides modems to some participants, funding permitting), or consider in-person trainings where connectivity is too inhibiting. Similarly, programs must consider the resources available to participants – would course fees inhibit participation of key target groups? Do the key target groups have access to the necessary technology, like laptops? The CxN team has chosen to not charge course fees but requires participants to have access to a laptop to allow for effective participation with the online tools the course employs.

We suggest that the integration of emotional support components be systematic. The evaluation demonstrated that building confidence and motivation alongside competence is strongly valued by young professionals in conservation. Programs should deliberately incorporate confidence-building and motivational exercises and create safe spaces for participants to voice the challenges they face in their unique contexts. Related to previous points, highlighting inspiring conservationists from the region, creating more opportunities for fellows to interact and learn from each other (peer-to-peer), and continuing to expand the AxN network will help strengthen fellows' self-confidence in carrying out their conservation work.

In a similar vein, our analysis showed that mentorship is highly valued by both mentors and mentees but requires a significant investment of time and resources to ensure a strong program structure. The initial match of profiles between mentor and mentee is crucial to success. Mentoring programs should have detailed guidelines for mentor-mentee relationships, establish clear expectations and time commitments, create mechanisms for regular progress monitoring, provide follow-up support to both parties, and where desired, involve mentors in the long-term, beyond the capacity-building effort.

Organizations must establish formal mechanisms for sustained networking both during and after the capacity-building activity. While AxN successfully created initial connections among participants, maintaining these networks proved challenging. We recommend implementing structured alumni programs that include regular virtual and/or in-person gatherings, digital platforms for ongoing collaboration (e.g. WhatsApp groups), formal mentorship or peer-to-peer programs extending beyond course completion, and systems for tracking and sharing alumni achievements and opportunities. This also implies a need for funding mechanisms and human resources for long-term sustainability of such networks.

Based on the evaluation findings, long-term support emerged as a critical need for sustaining conservation impact, beyond the initial capacity-building activity. We found that fellows particularly valued their connection to the CxN team during the course, and many fellows specifically expressed a desire for more follow-up from the CxN team after the course. We therefore recommend that rather than focusing only on one-off capacity-building events (e.g. workshops), capacity-building should be designed in the form of long- term support to promising young change-makers.

Finally, it is important to note that the above-mentioned recommendations are based on the results of our analysis of the AxN course, which caters to a specific sub-set of young conservationists in Latin America. AxN fellows are characterized by the basic requirements they must meet to be selected for the course, such as higher-education or equivalent work experience in a field related to conservation, and the ability to effectively vouch for themselves as potential changemakers. They also meet basic material requirements, such as having access to a computer and a good internet connection. However, there are many more demographic groups within the universe of young change-makers in conservation, including those that do not meet these criteria: e.g. youth from underserved communities, without access to internet. The conclusions and recommendations we make here may not extend to such groups, and their needs should be analyzed carefully to design appropriate programs.

04.
Improvements to Monitoring Tool and Research Limitations

Through this evaluation, we have developed, validated, and tested specific variables to assess the short-term outcomes of participating in AxN, with the aim of evaluating long-term impacts. Based on the findings, we identified four key areas for improvement, both in terms of implementation throughout the course and in how these outcomes are measured. Once these four areas are addressed, the survey used in this evaluation can be refined and implemented as an ongoing monitoring tool for fellows after completing the AxN course.

- In the area of leadership, there is a clear desire and need to strengthen leadership skills among fellows. While this is not currently addressed in the curriculum, fellows perceive an improvement in their leadership abilities after completing the course. As mentioned in Section 3.2, this could be improved by clearly defining the soft skills that the AxN program envisions as part of a young leader in conservation, and more explicitly train these skills in the program. By defining clear objectives for leadership development within AxN, it will be possible to effectively evaluate progress across cohorts.

- The mentoring program shows significant potential, provided it is restructured to address the suggestions and concerns raised by both fellows and mentors. Monitoring of the mentoring process should begin as soon as it starts and continue for at least six months after it ends. When assessing the mentor-mentee relationship, both professional development and emotional support must be considered as key factors in the monitoring process.

- The current focus on specific communication tools appears too specialized for professionals who are not necessarily involved in designing and implementing communication campaigns. Fellows have expressed a greater need for more time and space to develop fundraising skills, such as public speaking, writing grant proposals, and creating budgets. As such, the communication topics currently covered in the curriculum should be re-evaluated, and the monitoring variables updated accordingly to better align with fellows' needs and professional goals.

- The revised Theory of Change (ToC) mentions the goal of "achieving significant conservation impact," however, our evaluation methodology did not sufficiently elicit fellows to report on these impacts. In response to the survey item “What is your most significant professional achievement?”, fellows focused on the course’s impacts in their professional development, fundraising, creating their own organizations and similar. They did not mention what impacts these developments had on biodiversity conservation. We suggest adding a question more explicitly about achievements in biodiversity conservation, see Appendix C, where we include a revised short-form version of the survey to be implemented for future monitoring.

Box 6. Research Limitations

We acknowledge two main research limitations. First, the number of interviews with mentors was limited, and conducting additional interviews would provide more comprehensive insights into the mentoring process and its effectiveness. Second, while interviews with fellows were sufficient, reaching saturation, and the survey response rate was relatively high at 63%, the involvement of one AxN team member as part of the evaluation team could have introduced potential bias. These two aspects need to be considered for future evaluations.

Conclusions

Our evaluation demonstrates that AxN makes a substantial contribution to developing youth conservation leadership in Latin America. The AxN program is strong in building both technical capabilities and emotional resilience among young conservationists, with fellows reporting significant improvements across project management, leadership, and communication skills. Most notably, AxN helps cement fellows' commitment to conservation careers at crucial decision points, while providing them with practical tools to create their own opportunities in the field. We found no notable differences based on gender, age, country or profession on the effects the course had on AxN fellows, except for one aspect of the mentorship program, which seems to have provided more emotional support to younger fellows compared to older fellows. This suggests that the course is similarly effective at elevating skills and potential for generating impact across a wide set of demographic groups within the basic characteristics of an AxN course applicant.

The program's success stems from several key factors: high-engagement teaching methods, sound teaching abilities of both the CxN team and guest speakers, comprehensive, holistic curriculum design, strong mentor involvement, and the creation of a supportive peer network. However, our evaluation also shows important areas for improvement, particularly in certain course content aspects, maintaining long-term community engagement, the mentorship dynamics, and streamlining administrative processes. These challenges provide an opportunity for further evolution and adaptive management of the AxN program.

By addressing the identified areas for improvement while building on its core strengths, the program can continue to nurture a new generation of conservation leaders equipped to tackle the region's complex environmental challenges. The high percentage of fellows working in conservation (86%), with over half focused on the high-biodiversity Andean Amazon, underpins not only the importance of the impact the course is already helping generate, but the future potential of the program in helping Latin America's young conservation leaders reach their full potential.

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