

# Leveraging Paradiplomacy for Enhanced Cooperation and Sustainability: Analysing Cross-Border Cooperation in the Maloti–Drakensberg Transfrontier Conservation Area Through its Working Groups

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## Abstract

This article examines the role of paradiplomacy in the Maloti–Drakensberg Transfrontier Conservation Area through the strategic interventions of its working groups. The Maloti–Drakensberg Transfrontier Conservation Area is also referred to as the Maloti–Drakensberg Transfrontier Project/Programme (where Project was later changed to Programme). The study uses a qualitative desktop-based approach. It analyses literature, policy documents and stakeholder communications to assess the ways in which these working groups facilitate cross-border cooperation among subnational actors, including local governments, NGOs, private companies and community organisations in South Africa and Lesotho. The study focuses on four key working groups, namely, Biodiversity and Protected Areas, Tourism, Cultural Heritage, and Bilateral Security. It explores their contributions to biodiversity conservation, sustainable tourism, cultural heritage preservation, and regional security. The findings demonstrate the ways in which paradiplomacy strengthens institutional collaboration, enhances local governance and fosters inclusive community participation. Based on these insights, the study provides policy recommendations for improving multilevel governance, securing sustainable funding and advancing transfrontier cooperation in similar ecological and socio-economic contexts.

**Keywords:** cross-border cooperation; environmental governance; Maloti–Drakensberg Transfrontier Programme; paradiplomacy; regional integration; sustainable development

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## Introduction

For developing societies, it makes sense to approach paradiplomacy in a comprehensive way and to attach many different objectives to it . . . cooperation agreements can produce a multifaceted and beneficial relationship for the region of the developing country. (Lecours 2008, 4)

Diplomatic cooperation through paradiplomacy expands the scope and depth of what diplomacy can facilitate and achieve (Alvarez 2020; Yami and Darmawan 2014). One such study by Okunade (2024) indicates how paradiplomacy can facilitate trade and the movement of people among member states in West Africa to accelerate regional integration, which ultimately fosters broad-based development across the region. However, this article focuses on the ways in which paradiplomacy can contribute to collaboration and the mitigation of challenges faced by the Maloti–Drakensberg Transfrontier Conservation Area (MDTFCA), especially given how important these areas are for biodiversity, water, agriculture and the livelihoods of millions of people (Delves et al. 2021).

The MDTFCA was chosen as a case study because it exemplifies the complex environmental challenges and collaboration opportunities across southern Africa’s national borders, which can be found in other regions facing similar cross-border ecological and sustainability challenges. Focusing on the roles of the four working groups (WGs) in the MDTFCA displays the role of NGOs, private companies, community groups, subnational governments and local authorities in both South Africa and Lesotho. These relations highlight the importance of paradiplomacy in dealing with biodiversity conservation, water resource management, sustainable land use, and even climate change adaptation.

## Literature Review

Paradiplomacy is defined by Oddone and De Souza (2017, 200) as the international engagement of local authorities and sub-state entities in diplomatic activities independent of or in parallel with national governments. It is a phenomenon that is becoming increasingly nuanced and complex and encompasses participation in cross-border cooperation, regional integration and international policy initiatives (Oddone and Rodríguez Vázquez 2015). The process includes democratising foreign policy, which allows subnational actors to articulate and pursue their specific interests in certain regions while contributing to broader diplomatic and economic objectives. In line with *Paradiplomacy’s Three Cumulative Layers* by André Lecours, as illustrated in figure 1 in the following section, governance becomes more multilayered, and addresses needs and priorities at different levels within the nation-state framework (Lecours 2008; Oddone and De Souza 2017; Tarasova 2023).

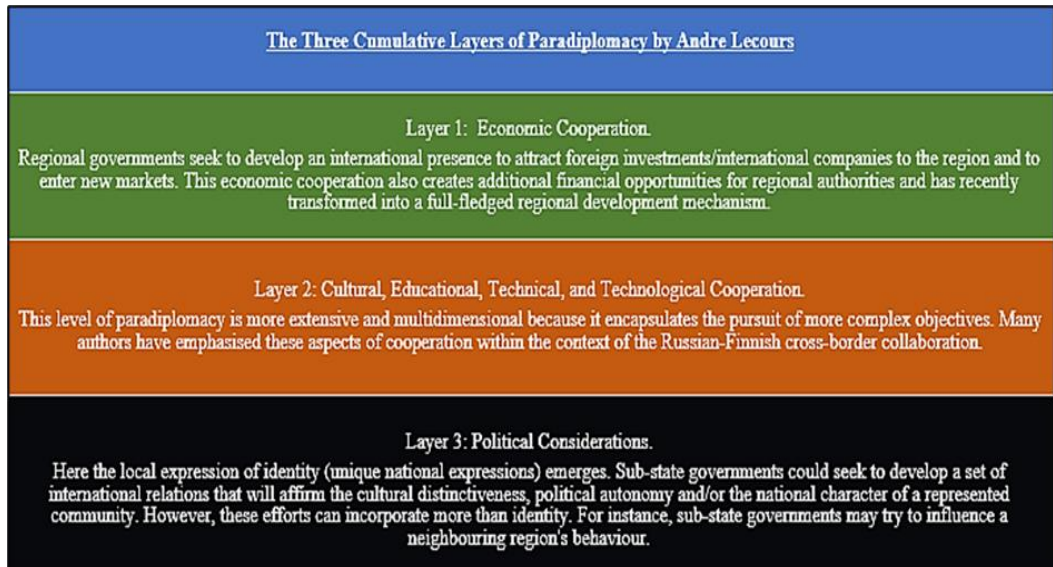
Understanding transfrontier conservation areas (TFCAs) is essential to effectively analysing their role within the broader framework of cross-border paradiplomacy. As outlined in the Protocol on Wildlife Conservation and Law Enforcement of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) (1999), TFCAs are a section of a broader ecological region that extends across the borders of two or more countries, and incorporate both protected areas and zones designated for multiple resource uses (SADC 2022). These areas were therefore established to conserve and sustainably utilise biological and cultural resources and aim to foster regional peace, cooperation and socio-economic development (Department of Forestry Fisheries and the Environment, 2024). In addition, TFCAs create vital employment opportunities and revenue streams for local communities.

Given the definition of TFCAs, this article proposes that paradiplomacy plays a crucial role in achieving the abovementioned objectives by facilitating conservation policies and cross-border collaboration while strengthening partnerships among subnational actors. When these objectives are achieved, biodiversity conservation is enhanced, socio-economic development is boosted, and local communities are empowered through inclusive decision-making. In the case of the MDTFCA between South Africa and Lesotho, cross-border paradiplomacy is particularly invaluable in fostering regional cooperation and sustainable resource management as exhibited by the mechanisms of the four key WGs – Biodiversity and Protected Areas, Tourism, Cultural Heritage, and Bilateral Security (Loza 2024).

## Theoretical Framework

The various components of TFCAs underscore the critical need for cooperation and sustainability in these regions to achieve peace, conservation goals, socio-economic development, and thriving communities. In the case of the MDTFCA, collaboration between South Africa and Lesotho is essential to achieving these objectives. This highlights the indispensable role of paradiplomacy in facilitating and sustaining cross-border cooperation, particularly in addressing the complex challenges that arise in transboundary conservation efforts (discussed later).

This study uses Lecours' three layers of paradiplomacy, and the projected goals include conservation, water management, and enhanced community adaptation and resilience in the region (Kuznetsov 2014; Lecours 2008). Lecours' three layers are a framework that categorises paradiplomacy into symbolic, functional and expansive layers (see figure 1) (Lecours 2008; Tarasova 2023). However, the model is extended in this study to incorporate all the various actors exercising paradiplomacy in the MDTFCA as mentioned before (Loza 2024).



**Figure 1:** Paradiplomacy's three cumulative layers by Lecours (Created by the author using Lecours (2008) and Tarasova (2023))

## Methodology

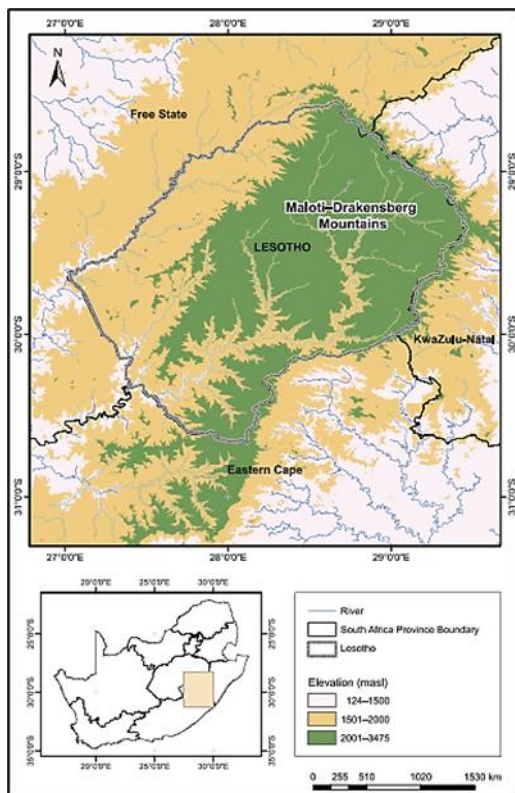
This study explored the role of the four WGs in the MDTFCA in facilitating paradiplomacy, which promotes cross-border cooperation and regional integration. The research design employed a desktop approach, which involved an extensive review and analysis of existing literature, published documents and information from various NGOs and other foundations or websites. This method was chosen to build a comprehensive understanding of the activities and impacts of the WGs on cross-border collaboration in the MDTFCA based on the roles and functions of the Biodiversity and Protected Area WG, the Tourism WG, the Cultural Heritage WG, and the Bilateral Security WG.

The study gathered qualitative data through document analysis and direct communication with key stakeholders. Most notably, Joyce Loza, a Conservation Specialist and Acting Programme Coordinator at the Maloti–Drakensberg Transfrontier Programme, provided critical documents, insights and guidance that informed the study's findings (Joyce Loza, personal communication with the author, 6 August 2024). Additional data were sourced from reports, policy documents and academic publications related to the MDTFCA. The collected data were then used for thematic analysis to identify patterns and themes related to paradiplomacy and cross-border collaboration. This analysis focused on the roles and functions of these four mentioned WGs to examine the ways in which they facilitate cooperation between subnational entities in

South Africa and Lesotho. This examination revealed that paradiplomacy is central to the shared goals in conservation, tourism, cultural heritage management, and security in the MDTFCA.

## The Maloti–Drakensberg Mountain System

The Maloti–Drakensberg (MD) mountain system is the most expansive and highest in southern Africa, as it spans 40 000 km and peaks at about 3 500 m (see figure 2) (Delves et al. 2021). It also provides various ecosystem services crucial to the entire region. For this reason, current rapid socioecological changes threaten all of these services and lead to what Delves et al. (2021) call “multidimensional challenges”.

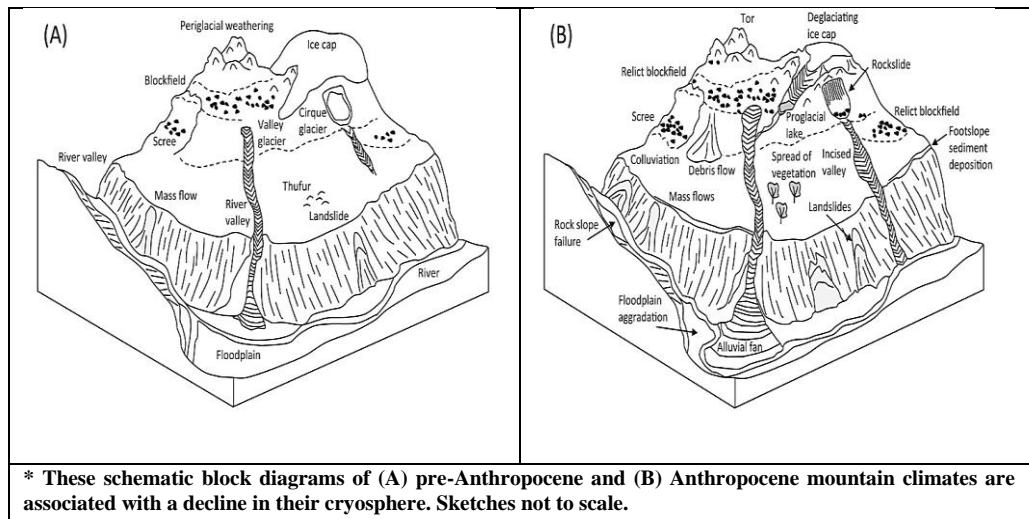


**Figure 2:** Geographical location of the Maloti–Drakensberg Mountains (Source: Adelabu et al. 2020, A2)

These challenges are evident in the following observations: First, the MD system is highly complex as numerous stakeholders depend to varying degrees on the ecosystem services it provides. However, this dependence is threatened owing to continued land degradation and perpetual socio-economic issues (discussed later) (Delves et al. 2021).

Second, these mountains serve as a “water tower” that captures, stores and filters water. This function means the MD system supplies over 12 million people and Gauteng’s (in South Africa) industrial sector with water. Third, it supplies rangeland and productive/fertile soil, which is essential to the subsistence livelihoods of numerous rural inhabitants. However, overgrazing has resulted in soil erosion, which threatens livelihoods and downstream water supply. At the same time, ecosystem degradation tendencies form negative feedback loops where decreasingly productive land yields lower outputs even when there is intensive use.

Fourth, protected natural areas such as the MDTFCA were established to safeguard endemism, biodiversity and water resources. However, conservationists, local farmers and private businesses have dissimilar land use values, which can cause conflict, especially in impoverished and inequality-stricken areas (Delves et al. 2021; SADC TFCA Portal, n.d.; UNESCO World Heritage Convention 2024). Fifth, the MD’s mountain environment (similar to those found worldwide) is especially sensitive to global climate change (Knight 2022). This sensitivity is due to global anthropogenic changes taking place that alter the unique heat balance properties and the presence of climatically sensitive snow, ice, permafrost and ecosystems in these mountains (see figure 3).



**Figure 3:** The geomorphic patterns and processes in mountains under (A) pre-Anthropocene and (B) Anthropocene climates (Source: Knight 2022)

Figure 3 from Jasper Knight’s (2022) research demonstrates the fundamental biophysical properties of mountain landscapes and the anticipated changes to occur due to climate change. In figure 3(B), the warming climate is projected to cause spatial variations in mountain process domains, leading to the contraction of glacial and periglacial areas and an increase in slope instability (due to paraglaciation or the non-

glacial Earth-surface processes, sediment accumulations, landforms, land systems and landscapes that are directly conditioned by glaciation and deglaciation) (*Oxford Reference*, n.d.). These findings reiterate the sensitivity of these mountain ecosystems to environmental changes, illustrated by predictive models with regard to changes in biome areas, ecosystem compositions, carbon storage, disease spread, and species viability (including those changes brought about by human activities) (Knight 2022).

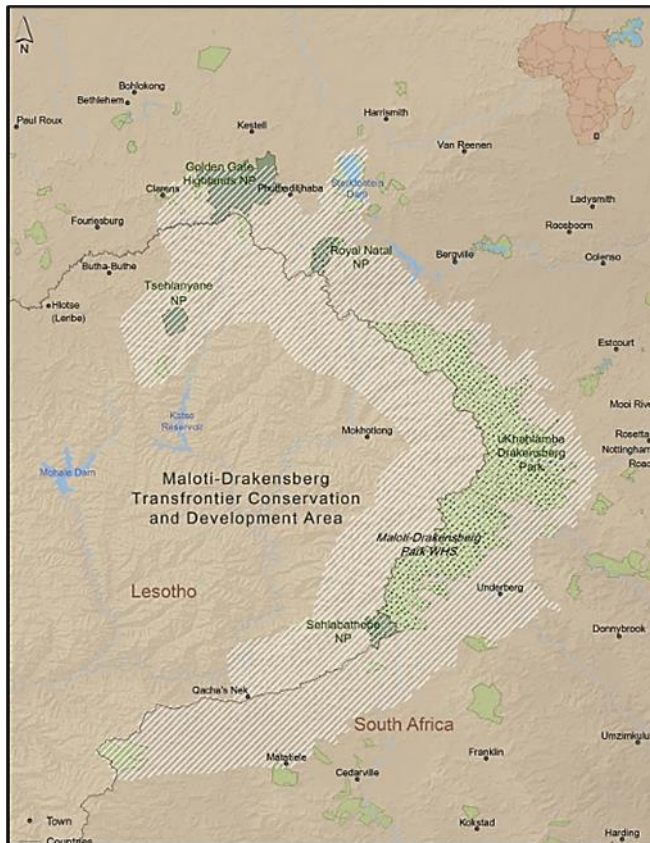
Findings by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2024) contribute to these discoveries as several factors compromise the MD site's integrity. These threats include invasive species, fire, infrastructural developments, soil erosion, tourist impacts on fragile alpine trails, and poaching (UNESCO World Heritage Convention 2024). Of these, invasive species and fire contribute towards the most significant management challenges. These issues are exacerbated by lacking formal protection for the mountain ecosystem across the border in Lesotho, beyond the Sehlabathebe National Park buffer zone. The hope is that paradiplomacy can mitigate these challenges by creating and implementing shared management plans and joint initiatives between Lesotho and South Africa regarding the MD mountain system and its ecosystem services. Through these cooperative agreements by subnational governments, the goal could be to coordinate efforts better in managing threats such as invasive species, soil erosion and fire.

Finally, Knight's (2022) study also highlights the effects of these environmental changes on vulnerable mountain communities and their societal and socio-economic responses. Although research exists on some of these types of community, many mountainous regions lack in-depth studies, particularly those in the developing world. This lack of knowledge is why the MD mountain system represents such a significant research priority, especially regarding the role that paradiplomacy can play in dealing with these challenges through development policy creation and the promotion of environmental cooperation and sustainability collaboration. Paradiplomacy can also aid in enhanced and integrated approaches to foster better community adaptation and resilience in the region and improve water transfer, rangelands, conservation and tourism. Tourism is noteworthy as this industry markets the MD's protected areas for the many recreational and cultural uses of its ecosystem services, and then the economic benefits can, in turn, fund local development (Delves et al. 2021; Knight 2022). This local development through tourism is another area in which paradiplomacy can be utilised (discussed in more detail under the theoretical framework).

### **Case Study of the Maloti–Drakensberg Transfrontier Conservation Area**

In the expansive MD mountain range lies the case study of this article, the MDTFCA (SADC TFCA Portal, n.d.). This conservation area spans 14 740 km<sup>2</sup>, and sprawls across the north-eastern boundary between Lesotho and South Africa (see figure 4). The TFCA is subdivided into four distinct regions: the Eastern Cape Drakensberg and Witteberge, the KwaZulu-Natal Drakensberg, the Lesotho Maloti Mountains, and the Eastern Free State. It comprises three separate national parks: the Sehlabathebe and

Tsehlanyane National Parks in Lesotho and the Golden Gate Highlands National Park in South Africa (SADC TFCA Portal, n.d.).



**Figure 4:** The Maloti–Drakensberg Transfrontier Conservation Area (Source: Peace Parks Foundation 2018)

On 11 June 2001, both Lesotho and South Africa signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) regarding the TFCA, and, by 2008, these two states collaborated to establish the management plans for this area (SADC TFCA Portal, n.d.). On 22 June 2013, UNESCO recognised Lesotho’s Sehlabathebe National Park as an extension of South Africa’s uKhahlamba Drakensberg World Heritage Site. This acceptance resulted in Lesotho’s first listing of a World Heritage Site and the moniker of the Maloti–Drakensberg Transboundary World Heritage Site.

In 2009, a \$15.24 million project was funded by the Global Environment Facility (GEF) (Peace Parks Foundation 2018). To remedy this and to ensure the project’s sustainability, funding was primarily sourced from the governments of Lesotho and South Africa, which allowed the project coordination unit, project coordination

committee and bilateral steering committee to continue their operations. The 20-year strategic plan also emphasised the ongoing operation of government implementation agencies established during the project's initial phase.

Between 2017 and 2019, the Peace Parks Foundation (PPF) served as a conduit for funding from the South African Department of Environmental Affairs to the government of Lesotho (Peace Parks Foundation 2018). This funding supported and enhanced project management in Lesotho's Sehlabathebe National Park in collaboration with the South African government. The initiative was planned to span three years, from 2017 to 2019, to strengthen the project's impact and sustainability.

### **The Importance of this Transfrontier Conservation Area**

There are several reasons why the TFCA is so significant (SADC TFCA Portal, n.d.). First, the TFCA grassland and afro-montane forest biome form important endemism centres for montane plant species. For instance, the African alpine tundra ecosystem of Sehlabathebe National Park has 250 endemic plant species, which significantly improve the uKhahlamba Drakensberg Park World Heritage Site and accounts for 23% of all the plant species found throughout the Maloti–Drakensberg region.

Second, the importance of this region as a water catchment area for both Lesotho and South Africa and its integrated wetland systems cannot be underestimated. The wetlands present a critical source of water purification and ecosystem storage services for both states. Much-needed water is transported to Johannesburg (in South Africa) and its surroundings, while electricity is generated for the Lesotho population as part of the Tugela-Vaal Scheme and the Lesotho Highlands Water Project.

Third, globally significant fauna and flora are present in the TFCA, including over 2 500 flowering plant species and endangered animals such as the bearded and Cape vultures (SADC TFCA Portal, n.d.).

Fourth, over 600 documented sites feature between 35 000 and 40 000 individual rock paintings created over 4 000 years by the San people. This number makes the region the largest and most concentrated collection of sub-Saharan Africa rock paintings.

Fifth, the vast TFCA region is home to nearly two million people, and contributes to an explicit goal of this conservation area – to make a positive difference in people's livelihoods by ensuring they benefit from nature-based tourism.

Finally, owing to all these aspects and findings, the MDTFCA is a cross-border protected area that preserves the region's globally significant biodiversity and cultural value while supporting the livelihood of many people (Peace Parks Foundation 2018).

## Background of the Maloti–Drakensberg Transfrontier Project and Its 20-Year Strategy Plan

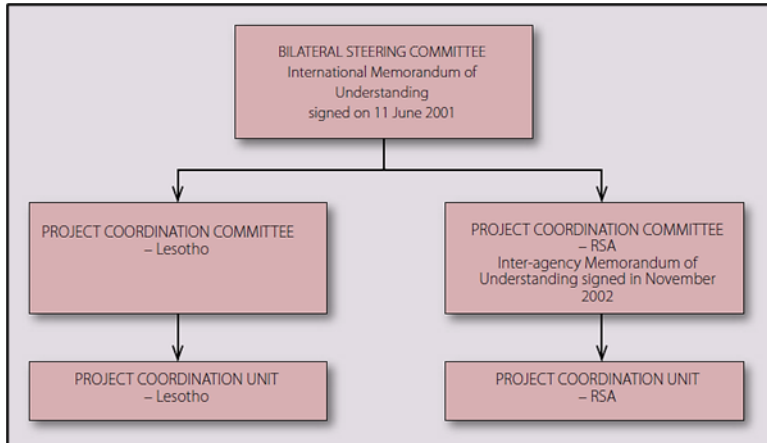
Lesotho and South Africa started discussing common issues regarding the Maloti–Drakensberg mountain region in the 1980s, which focused on biodiversity conservation and security issues such as stock theft and dagga trade (Maloti–Drakensberg TFCA – 20-Year Strategy 2008). By the mid-1990s, these countries realised that there was a need for more formal cooperation, and therefore the Giants Castle Declaration was signed in 1997. This agreement committed both states to a transfrontier conservation and development programme. Then, from 1999 to 2000, the World Bank and the Japanese government funded a preparation phase in the region. This phase created task reports that informed further actions and led to a funding application to the GEF and the World Bank. The phase also culminated in a bilateral MoU in 2001 signed by the environment ministers of both countries, which secured joint implementation of the programme. Afterwards, grant funding was committed, and the programme officially began Phase I in 2002 (the same year the four WGs were established, as discussed in the next section) (Maloti–Drakensberg TFCA – 20-Year Strategy 2008).

The vision for Phase I (2003–2007) was to create a cooperative framework to protect and sustainably use the natural and cultural heritage of the Maloti–Drakensberg Mountains (Maloti–Drakensberg TFCA – 20-Year Strategy 2008). During Phase 1 in South Africa, the main programme partners, referred to as the eight agencies, are responsible for biodiversity conservation, among other things. These eight agencies include the Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism, the South African National Parks (SANParks), Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife (EKZNW), the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Agriculture and Environmental Affairs, the Eastern Cape Department of Economic Development and Environmental Affairs, the Eastern Cape Parks Board, and the Free State Department of Tourism, Environment and Economic Affairs (Loza 2024).

In Lesotho, the programme partners range from community-based organisations (CBOs) to various national ministries, including Tourism Environment and Culture, Foreign Affairs, Finance and Development Planning, Home Affairs, Forestry and Land Reclamation, Agriculture and Food Security, and Local Government, alongside partners such as Skillshare International, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), the PPF, NGOs, and other stakeholders who were involved in Phase I (Loza 2024; Maloti–Drakensberg TFCA – 20-Year Strategy 2008).

The programme partners listed above in South Africa and Lesotho operate through their respective national coordination committees (NCCs), supported by the programme coordination units (PCUs) in each nation (see figure 5). These PCUs collaborate with the designated programme partners to ensure the achievement of the MDTP's project development objectives for Phase I and subsequent phases. Lastly, the two NCCs (the NCC RSA and the NCC Lesotho) regularly meet as one bilateral coordination committee (which used to be called the Bilateral Steering Committee (BSC)) to discuss

issues of mutual bilateral interest (Loza 2024; Maloti–Drakensberg TFCA – 20-Year Strategy 2008). This multilayered governance structure ensures that the programme’s activities are well-coordinated, effectively implemented, and align closely with the strategic objectives of both South Africa and Lesotho regarding the MDTFCA.



**Figure 5:** The framework of cooperation for the implementation of the MDTP – Phase 1 (Source: Maloti Drakensberg TFCA – 20-Year Strategy 2008)

Transitioning to Phase II, the abovementioned agencies committed themselves through an inter-agency MoU to fund the ongoing interventions of the MDTP Coordination Unit, referred to as the PCU (Loza 2024). While the PCU is actively involved in the programme’s implementation, the eight agencies mentioned constitute the South African NCC (what used to be called the Project Coordination Committee PCC), see figure 5). The NCC has both a South African and Lesotho organ and is responsible for the decision-making regarding implementing the MDTFCA interventions nationally. The conservation partners, over and above the MDTP agencies, who partner with the MDTFCA are, but not limited to, NGOs such as the World Wildlife Fund, Environmental and Rural Solutions, Conservation South Africa, the Institute of Natural Resources and government entities such as the South African National Biodiversity Institute, the Water Research Commission, the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research and academic institutions such as the University of KwaZulu-Natal and the Afromontane Research Unit of the University of the Free State. Other entities also involved in the NCC are CBOs and community trusts (such as the Nkosi Matiwane Trust of the AmaNgwane and AmaZizi Development Trust), traditional authorities in the MDTFCA (in the Eastern Cape and the Free State), GIZ and PPF (Joyce Loza, personal communication with the author, 2024; Maloti–Drakensberg TFCA – 20-Year Strategy 2008).

## The Maloti–Drakensberg Transfrontier Programme Working Groups

The framework of cooperation, depicted in figure 5, is also crucial to the substantial contribution of the South African WGs in the MDTP. The WGs, which operate under the South African PCU (the PCU RSA), each have distinct and well-defined roles (see table 1) (Joyce Loza, personal communication with the author, 2024).

The four WGs – the Biodiversity and Protected Area WG, the Tourism WG, the Cultural Heritage WG, and the Bilateral Security WG – function collectively to achieve comprehensive conservation and sustainable development in the Maloti–Drakensberg region (Joyce Loza, personal communication with the author, 2024). Their joint efforts focus on biodiversity conservation, and promote sustainability and tourism by preserving cultural heritage and ensuring security to support environmental and tourism-related activities. Through their roles and partnerships, the significant paradiplomacy that occurs through these WGs in the MDTP therefore becomes apparent as they aim to collectively enhance cross-border cooperation and regional integration. This is to benefit the MDTFCA’s natural and cultural resources and tourism development while also contributing to community development through the sustainable use of these resources (Loza 2024).

**Table 1:** Paradiplomacy in the MDTFCA

<b>The MDTFCA Working Groups, Entities and Roles</b>			
<b>Working Group</b>	<b>Interventions</b>	<b>Entities</b>	<b>Roles</b>
1 Biodiversity and Protected Area WG	Fires, rangeland management, water security, research and protected area management, food production	NGOs  Private companies  Community groups (including farmers associations) Government (including district and local municipalities)	Collaborate with TFCA on implementing natural resources management interventions and food production Train community members on livestock production and management Implement initiatives in partnership with MDTFCA while monitoring projects in their communities Provide training on fire management for staff and communities, support community fire interventions and collaborate with the TFCA on fire awareness For example, the Department of Agriculture creates fire awareness in schools Provide Protected Area Management interventions, funding support and technical support Implement and monitor/evaluate of the MDTFCA 20-Year Strategy

**The MDTFCA Working Groups, Entities and Roles**

<b>Working Group</b>	<b>Interventions</b>	<b>Entities</b>	<b>Roles</b>
		Traditional authorities <sup>a</sup>	These are the first lines of communication with communities, and they grant permissions for project implementations
		Academia	Conduct research to guide management and conservation strategies
2. Tourism WG <sup>b</sup>	Marketing, branding, planning of projects, fundraising, supporting community eco-cultural-based tourism	NGOs/Tour operators	Collaborate with TFCA in implementing tourism development initiatives – branding and marketing, Maloti–Drakensberg Route Development, and implementing cross-border tourism
		Government	Collaborate with the TFCA in implementing tourism development initiatives – branding and marketing, Maloti–Drakensberg Route Development, and implementing cross-border tourism
		Community trusts and traditional authorities	Responsible for community tourism interventions supported by the MDTFCA Tourism WG
3. Cultural Heritage WG	Cultural heritage management	Government	Collaborate on cultural heritage management initiatives to preserve and promote the heritage sites
4. Bilateral Security WG	Provides support to the MDTFCA on environmental and tourism-related crimes and supports the TFCA's security strategy execution	Security Agencies	Implement interventions to strengthen security and support the MDTFCA Security Strategy
		Government	Ensure execution of the MDTFCA Security Strategy and enhance security for conservation and tourism areas

*Source:* Paradiplomacy MDTFCA by Joyce Loza (personal communication with the author, 6 August 2024).

<sup>a</sup> The traditional authorities, private companies and livestock associations are not necessarily part of the WG; however, they contribute to the WG's mandate.

<sup>b</sup> This WG has a subgroup called the MD Route Forum (MDRF), which is constituted of the private sector. It collapsed, and efforts are underway to revitalise it.

### **The Biodiversity and Protected Area Working Group**

The first WG is the Biodiversity and Protected Area WG and was established in 2002 (Loza 2024). This WG is vital to the MDTP as it guides all matters relating to biodiversity and protected areas (Biodiversity and Protected Area Working Group 2024). The WG has implementing agencies in both South Africa and Lesotho, namely, the national Department of Environmental Affairs, EKZNW, SANParks, the Eastern

Cape Parks and Tourism Agency (ECPTA), the Free State Department of Tourism, Environmental and Economic Affairs (FS DETEA), the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Agriculture, Environmental Affairs, and Rural Development (KZN DAERD). However, it excludes the South African Heritage Resources Agency (SAHRA).

In Lesotho, the relevant agencies include the Ministry of Environment and Forestry, which oversees the Department of Environment and the Department of Range. The Ministry of Tourism, Sports, Arts, and Culture is responsible for the Department of Tourism and the Department of Culture. The Ministry of Agriculture, Food Security, and Nutrition plays a significant role through its Department of Agricultural Research and the Department of Livestock. In addition, the Ministry of Natural Resources contributes to these efforts through the Department of Water Affairs. The Lesotho Highlands Development Authority and the Lesotho Electricity Company also play crucial roles in this context, and, finally, the National University of Lesotho also contribute to the WG (Loza 2024).

The aim of this WG is conserving biodiversity, managing protected areas and aiding with food production, rangeland management, fires, water security, and research (see table 1). In addition, the WG's agencies ensure the successful implementation of the MDTFCA 20-year strategy. Finally, it liaises with local communities to facilitate project approvals and conduct research to inform and guide conservation and other strategies.

### **The Tourism Working Group**

Second is the Tourism WG, which focuses on marketing, branding, project planning and fundraising to enhance regional tourism. This WG comprises government tourism and MDTP agencies in the Free State, the Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal, and Lesotho (Loza 2024). In South Africa, the members of this group include the national Department of Tourism, the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Economic Development, Tourism and Environmental Affairs, the FS DETEA, EKZNW, SANParks, the ECPTA, Tourism KwaZulu-Natal and the Free State Gambling and Liquor Authority. The MDTP is also strengthening the private sector's participation in the MDTP through a body called the Maloti–Drakensberg Route Forum (MDRF) (based on Paradiplomacy MDTFCA by Joyce Loza (personal communication with the author, 6 August 2024)).

The MDRF, which collapsed but is being re-formalised, mainly comprises the private sector and tour operators in the three provinces and Lesotho and has also attracted the participation of the District Municipalities Economic Development Agencies in KwaZulu-Natal. In addition, community trusts and traditional authorities, such as the Mehloing Community Tourism Trust and Witsieshoek Mountain Lodge under the Batlokoa Traditional Authority, are community-owned tourism enterprises. These enterprises aim at improving community livelihoods through leading community-based tourism establishments, which ensure that local communities benefit from the tourism development efforts and are actively involved in MDTP programmes. Together, these

entities strive to promote sustainable tourism that benefits both the environment and the local communities in the MDTFCA (Loza 2024).

### **The Cultural Heritage Working Group**

The third WG is called the Cultural Heritage WG. This WG and its agencies focus on managing and preserving cultural heritage in the MDTFCA by collaborating with the TFCA to implement cultural heritage management initiatives and preserve/promote cultural heritage sites in the region (based on Paradiplomacy MDTFCA by Joyce Loza (personal communication with the author, 6 August 2024)). These efforts ensure that these resources are managed effectively and sustainably in the broader context of the conservation area. The WG is made up primarily of government entities. These government entities are the SAHRA, the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment (DFFE), EKZNW, SANParks, the ECPTA, and the Cultural Heritage Unit of the Ministry of Forestry and Environment in Lesotho. There is also the participation by the Eastern Cape Provincial Heritage Resources Authority, Amafa aKwaZulu-Natali, and the Department of Sports, Arts, Culture and Recreation in the Cultural Heritage WG activities. The work and collaboration in this WG require strengthening for future endeavours (Loza 2024).

### **The Bilateral Security Working Group**

The last WG is the Bilateral Security WG. This group is essential as one of the founding issues in the MDTFCA was security issues such as stock theft and illicit trade. The Bilateral Security WG focuses on supporting the MDTFCA in dealing with environmental and tourism-related crimes and implementing the MDTFCA Security Strategy (based on Paradiplomacy MDTFCA by Joyce Loza (personal communication with the author, 6 August 2024)). The security agencies involved have been the South African Police Service (SAPS) and the South African National Defence Force (SANDF). Unfortunately, this collaboration between the WG and SAPS/SANDF fell on hard times during the COVID pandemic and is also being reinvigorated. However, their participation is crucial to ensure that security measures are effectively executed to protect the region's natural resources and tourists. The FS DETEA, EKZNW, SANParks, the ECPTA, and the Matatiele Local Municipality are other entities participating in this WG (Loza 2024).

## **Paradiplomacy and the Working Groups**

The paradiplomatic activities of the WGs in the MDTP (in table 1) become apparent when analysed using Lecours' three cumulative layers of paradiplomacy – Economic Cooperation, Cultural/Educational/Technical/Technological Cooperation, and Political Considerations (in figure 1) (Lecours 2008; Loza 2024; Tarasova 2023). These layers provide a comprehensive framework for understanding these four WGs' diverse and multifaceted roles in this cross-border transfrontier initiative.

As mentioned, the WGs involve many stakeholders, which include NGOs, private companies, community groups, government entities (district and local municipalities), traditional authorities, security agencies, and academia. Each of these stakeholders is crucial to the operation of the MDTP, as they collaboratively engage in efforts that promote environmental sustainability, economic and tourism development, food security, cultural preservation and regional security. By applying Lecours' framework, it becomes clear that paradiplomacy is integral to the operation of these WGs, as discussed in the next section (Lecours 2008; Loza 2024; Tarasova 2023).

### **The Three Layers and the Biodiversity and Protected Area Working Group**

#### *Layer 1: Economic Cooperation*

The Biodiversity and Protected Area WG contributes to the economic cooperation in the region by implementing management interventions for natural resources and contributing to food production and eco-tourism in this transfrontier region (Lecours 2008; Loza 2024; Tarasova 2023). By managing biodiversity and protected areas, the group assures that there are proper water resources, rangeland and productive/fertile soil, which are essential to the subsistence livelihoods of numerous rural inhabitants on both sides of the border (Delves et al. 2021; SADC TFCA Portal, n.d.; UNESCO World Heritage Convention 2024). By mitigating ecosystem degradation tendencies and decreasing productive land yields/outputs even when there is intensive use, the WG helps to ensure that the MDTFCA remains a protected natural area which safeguards endemism, biodiversity and water resources. However, for this to work, this and other WGs have to coordinate the conservationists, local farmers, and private businesses who all have dissimilar land use values and aims (Delves et al. 2021; SADC TFCA Portal, n.d.; UNESCO World Heritage Convention 2024).

#### *Layer 2: Cultural, Educational, Technical and Technological Cooperation*

The WG plays a crucial role in technical and educational cooperation in the MDTFCA by facilitating cross-border research initiatives, fire management training, and conservation strategies (see table 1). This WG coordinates collaborative efforts between South African and Lesotho-based NGOs, government departments and municipalities to address the significant fire threat. These efforts range from school programmes on fire awareness to implementing combined community and fire protection strategies. Academic research also furthers educational cooperation in the region while guiding the management and conservation strategies of the MDTP. These activities reflect Lecours' second layer, which emphasises multidimensional cooperation that transcends economic interests, including knowledge-sharing and capacity-building (Lecours 2008; Loza 2024; Tarasova 2023).

#### *Layer 3: Political Considerations*

Politically, the Biodiversity and Protected Area WG plays a crucial role in maintaining the ecosystem services of the entire region (Delves et al. 2021). The WG's activities

underscore the importance of the listed sub-state actors and assert their political autonomy and cultural distinctiveness (given the local companies, community groups and municipalities involved) through sustainable management practices. This role aligns with Lecours' (2008) third layer, where sub-state actors seek to develop a set of international relations that will affirm the cultural distinctiveness, political autonomy and the national character of the community they represent.

## **The Three Layers and the Tourism Working Group**

### *Layer 1: Economic Cooperation*

The Tourism WG epitomises economic cooperation by developing and promoting cross-border tourism routes, such as the Maloti–Drakensberg Heritage Route (Southafrica.net 2024). This route is a joint eco-tourism initiative between South Africa and Lesotho and covers about 13 000 km<sup>2</sup> along South Africa's north-eastern border with Lesotho's Sehlabathebe National Park. These types of initiative help to attract international tourists and investment, and result in the region's economic development. This example aligns directly with Lecours' first layer of paradiplomacy, where regional entities focus on economic expansion and market access, in this case through tourism (Lecours 2008).

### *Layer 2: Cultural, Educational, Technical and Technological Cooperation*

In addition to economic objectives, the Tourism WG engages in cultural cooperation by highlighting the shared cultural heritage of the Maloti–Drakensberg mountain region. Promoting cultural tourism, which includes visits to the UNESCO-recognised Sehlabathebe National Park as an extension of South Africa's uKhahlamba Drakensberg World Heritage Site, reflects Lecours's (2008) second layer of paradiplomacy. In this context, cooperation transcends mere economic concerns by encompassing cultural and educational dimensions, where the rich cultural heritage of the MD region plays a pivotal role in cultivating a shared identity between South Africa and Lesotho (Lecours 2008; SADC TFCA Portal, n.d.).

### *Layer 3: Political Considerations*

The Tourism WG's efforts to develop a unified cross-border tourism strategy also have political implications. By implementing tourism development initiatives and promoting regional tourism, the WG helps to strengthen the political ties between South Africa and Lesotho, and reinforces their commitment to regional integration and collective identity and incorporation. This WG also unites various entities, from national departments, district municipalities and economic/tourism agencies to community tourism trusts and even lodges. This make-up means that paradiplomacy is exercised as a multifunctional vehicle and aligns with Lecours' (2008) third layer, where political considerations and local identity shape cross-border interactions and help to gain recognition for the MDTFCA.

## **The Three Layers and the Cultural Heritage Working Group**

### *Layer 1: Economic Cooperation*

Although primarily focused on cultural preservation, the Cultural Heritage WG also contributes to economic cooperation by integrating heritage sites into the broader tourism economy. The group also leverages the primary cultural resources of the region, which range from rock art, various forms of palaeontology, and living heritage to the different forms of intangible cultural heritage, for economic gain through heritage tourism (Cultural Heritage Working Group 2024). By doing so, this WG supports the local economy, which generates revenue and promotes economic sustainability. This economic dimension ties into Lecours' (2008) first layer of paradiplomacy.

### *Layer 2: Cultural, Educational, Technical and Technological Cooperation*

The Cultural Heritage WG is at the heart of the second layer of paradiplomacy, and focuses on the preservation and promotion of the shared cultural heritage of the TFCA, as mentioned (Cultural Heritage Working Group 2024). The WG's activities include cross-border cooperation between South African and Lesotho cultural entities, and emphasise the importance of shared history and identity. These efforts foster cultural understanding and educational exchanges, which reflect the multidimensional nature of paradiplomacy (Lecours 2008).

### *Layer 3: Political Considerations*

Politically, the Cultural Heritage WG's work in preserving and promoting cultural heritage underscores the importance of cultural identity in cross-border relations. By ensuring that cultural heritage is preserved and celebrated, the WG supports the political autonomy and distinctiveness of the local communities and authorities involved (see table 1). This political role aligns with Lecours' (2008) third layer, where political and cultural identity is crucial to paradiplomatic activities that influence this cross-border region.

## **The Three Layers and the Bilateral Security Working Group**

### *Layer 1: Economic Cooperation*

The Bilateral Security WG indirectly contributes to economic cooperation by ensuring the safety and security of the MDTFCA, which is essential to maintaining a stable environment for tourism and economic activities. Security measures that limit theft and dagga trade while protecting the region's natural and cultural resources also safeguard local communities' economic interests, and align with Lecours' (2008) first layer of economic paradiplomacy.

### *Layer 2: Cultural, Educational, Technical and Technological Cooperation*

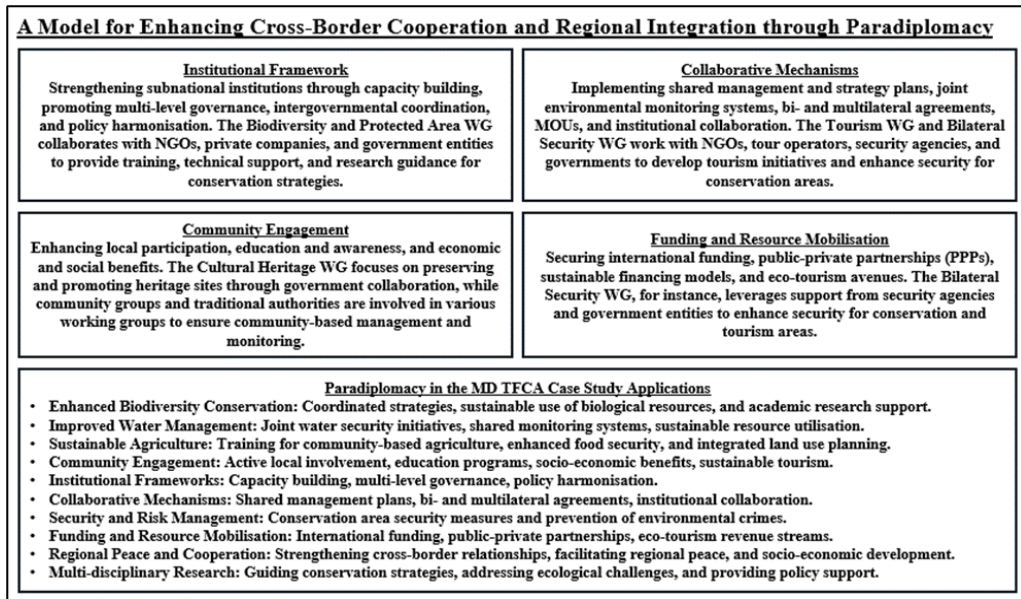
Regarding technical cooperation, the Bilateral Security WG engages in cross-border collaboration to develop and implement security strategies that address environmental

and tourism-related crimes. The WG’s efforts to share knowledge and best practices in security management reflect the second layer of paradiplomacy, and emphasise the importance of technical and educational exchanges in transfrontier areas (Lecours 2008).

*Layer 3: Political Considerations*

The Bilateral Security WG’s role in managing security in the MDTFCA has significant political implications. The WG reinforces South Africa and Lesotho’s sovereignty and political cooperation by addressing transboundary security challenges. This cooperation reflects Lecours’ (2008) third layer, where political considerations and local identity are central to the success of paradiplomatic efforts.

Based on these findings, the four WGs in the MDTP exemplify paradiplomacy through its collaborative efforts across national and subnational levels. The engagement of provincial governments in South Africa and local authorities in Lesotho, supported by a robust framework of agreements and institutional structures, underscores the significance of paradiplomacy in addressing transboundary environmental challenges. This approach fosters regional integration and enhances conservation efforts’ effectiveness through shared resources, knowledge and expertise. Lastly, these four WGs and the article’s findings can be utilised to create a new model (see figure 6) for enhancing cross-border cooperation and regional integration through paradiplomacy.



**Figure 6:** A model for enhancing cross-border cooperation and regional integration through paradiplomacy in transfrontier conservation areas (Source: Created by the author and Chat GPT using the details and findings of the article)

## Conclusion

The analysis of the four WGs in the MDTFCA underscores the essential role that paradiplomacy plays in fostering cross-border cooperation and regional integration. The Biodiversity and Protected Area WG, the Tourism WG, the Cultural Heritage WG, and the Bilateral Security WG demonstrate the ways in which subnational actors can effectively collaborate to address complex transboundary environmental challenges.

Each WG contributes to the overarching goals of biodiversity conservation, sustainable tourism, cultural heritage preservation, and regional security by leveraging various entities' collective expertise and resources. These resources include government agencies, NGOs, community groups, traditional authorities and academia. This collaborative approach enhances the effectiveness of conservation and development initiatives in the MDTFCA and strengthens the political and institutional frameworks that support these efforts.

The study has indicated that paradiplomacy, as practiced in the MDTFCA, is instrumental in creating a cohesive strategy for managing shared natural and cultural resources. The successful implementation of the MDTFCA's 20-year strategy, supported by robust inter-agency agreements and the active participation of local communities, highlights the importance of multilevel governance and the engagement of subnational actors in achieving sustainable development outcomes.

In summary, the WGs in the MDTFCA exemplify how paradiplomacy can serve as a powerful tool for advancing regional cooperation and integration. By fostering partnerships across borders and levels of government, these WGs contribute to the sustainable management of the region's invaluable natural and cultural heritage, setting a model for other TFCAs facing similar challenges. The continued success of these efforts will depend on the sustained commitment of all stakeholders involved and the ongoing support of international partners and funding mechanisms.

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