

Policy pointers

Evidence shows that changes to make conservation governance more equitable are commonly associated with positive ecological outcomes (in other words, equity and conservation effectiveness are allied and synergistic, see Table 2).

Recognition of the rights, knowledge, values and institutions of Indigenous Peoples and local communities (IPs and LCs) is pivotal to realising improved conservation outcomes, alongside procedural, collaborative and distributional aspects.

To enhance conservation outcomes, state, private and non-governmental organisations should collaborate with IPs and LCs to work towards more equitable governance, including through embedding equitable governance in National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans.

Relevant state, donor, civil society and private organisations should provide financial, technical and political support, including to revitalise and strengthen local institutions and capacities.

Equitable governance underpins effective conservation

The Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) recognises the importance of equity in conservation. Yet there remains a lack of evidence directly addressing the relationship between equity and conservation. This briefing considers 40 papers that describe conservation interventions involving changes in governance quality and associated ecological outcomes. It highlights that equitable governance is important to effective conservation and is associated with positive ecological outcomes. Equitable governance is therefore a critical means to achieve GBF targets and should receive more political, financial and technical support, including being mainstreamed in National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans.

The Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF), adopted in December 2022, has introduced important considerations for global biodiversity conservation policy and practice. Across multiple targets, it recognises the importance of equity in conservation. Various targets refer to the three dimensions of equity as included in guidance endorsed by the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) Parties at COP14.¹ For example, Targets 1, 3, 9, 21 and 22 mandate governments to recognise and respect the cultures, knowledge and rights of Indigenous Peoples and local communities (IPs and LCs). Target 22 focuses on procedural elements such as ensuring “full, equitable, inclusive, effective and gender-responsive representation and participation in decision-making, and access to justice and information related to biodiversity” for IPs and LCs, women, young people and disabled people.²

Target 3, on enabling at least 30% of land and water to be effectively conserved by 2030, mandates that all area-based conservation measures are “equitably governed”,³ among other criteria. Equitable governance emphasises the need for inclusive and fair engagement of all relevant actors (stakeholders and rightsholders) in all

aspects of governance, including respecting rights, transparency, accountability, rule of law, dispute resolution and the sharing of costs and benefits. CBD guidance emphasises the importance of governance quality, noting that area-based conservation that is “well-governed, effectively managed and representative... [is] a proven method for safeguarding both habitats and populations of species and for delivering important ecosystem services and multiple benefits to people”.³

Yet research on the relationship between equitable governance and effective conservation is relatively new. There is mounting evidence from comparative studies that forms of conservation governance involving relative control or autonomy for IPs and LCs perform better ecologically than those in which IPs and LCs have a minimal role or are excluded.⁴⁻⁷ However, few studies have discerned causality or explored in greater detail the relationship pathways between qualities of equitable governance and ecological outcomes.⁸ This briefing therefore reviews evidence from 40 peer-reviewed case studies on how equitable governance might be associated with conservation outcomes. The purpose of this synthesis is to demonstrate³

Shifts towards more equitable governance can lead to more effective conservation alongside improved social outcomes

decision makers the value of providing political, financial and technical support for improving governance in existing as well as new protected and conserved areas.

Methods

This briefing presents a synthesis of evidence from 40 papers collated from the Just Conservation database,⁹ expert

recommendations and a recently published *Policy Matters* special issue.¹⁰

The Just Conservation database is a collection of 723 empirical studies of site-level biodiversity conservation interventions across 104 countries. These studies describe a range of intervention types around the world that, to varying degrees, involve IPs and LCs. We identified 32 papers that describe a change in governance quality as well as social and ecological outcomes.

In June 2023, we attended a workshop on IP and LC governance of area-based conservation and requested case studies describing changes in governance quality. Lastly, we included seven case studies from *Policy Matters* that demonstrate how changes towards more socially equitable governance can be implemented, with a focus on the role IPs and LCs play in designing and implementing conservation action.¹⁰

Only a few of the 40 papers explicitly discuss governance in terms of equity.^{8,11} Many draw on common pool resource theory and design principles, which implicitly relate to equity. Aspects of these common pool resource design principles align with a framework of equitable governance principles (Table 1), including participation in rule or decision making, accountability, benefit sharing, conflict resolution and recognition and respect for rights and institutions. Therefore, if a paper describes an increase in IP and LC women's participation in the development of rules surrounding resource use, we consider this a shift towards more equitable governance.

Results

The 40 papers in this synthesis describe conservation interventions in Europe (3), North (3) and Latin America (6), Asia (9), Oceania (4) and Africa (15), covering terrestrial (31) and marine examples (9). They all feature a change in governance quality over time, specifically through enhanced involvement of IPs and LCs in governance and management. The papers use a range of research methods, including social network analysis, focus group discussions, interviews, surveys, participatory mapping, field observations, social-ecological inventories,

geographic information system (GIS) and ecological assessments (species population counts, habitat surveys).

Of the 40 papers, 27 describe an overall improvement in and shift towards more equitable governance while noting some challenges, such as precarious tenure rights or the need for more equitable benefit sharing. Recognition and respect for IP and LC rights to resources, lands and territories were important foundations for overall governance improvements in seven case studies. Respect for IP and LC knowledge, cultures and institutions was mentioned in five papers and was often associated with other governance improvements. Most of the 40 papers mentioned improvements in procedural aspects of governance, with 17 reporting an increase in IP and LC participation in making decisions or rules. Four of these papers mentioned the inclusion of women and young people in decision making processes and leadership roles. Three papers referred to improvements in accountability and transparency, and three papers described the introduction of conflict resolution and trust-building processes.

In nine of the 27 case studies, the governance improvement related to more effective coordination and collaboration between site-level actors, such as IPs and LCs with NGOs,¹⁴ protected area management,¹⁵ scientists¹⁶ and local government,¹⁷ or development of partnerships and collaborative networks across scales.¹⁰ Lastly, four papers described distributional changes, with two discussing more equitable sharing of benefits derived from conservation of the area and two describing strategies to mitigate negative social impacts, such as human-wildlife conflict. Most of the papers noted changes towards more equitable governance in two or more of these areas.

Of the 27 studies describing more equitable governance, 25 (92.6%) recorded positive ecological outcomes (Table 2). Two papers described a mix of positive and negative outcomes and none noted only negative outcomes. Examples of positive ecological outcomes included increases in target species populations, enhancements in habitats such as forest cover and quality, and improvements in ecosystem services such as improved water quality or reduced erosion and flooding. Some authors directly and causally linked positive outcomes with specific governance improvements, for example, an increase in IP and LC participation in decision making associated with a change in land use resulting in an increase in forest cover.¹⁸ In a case study in Indonesia, the Indigenous Kasepuhan Karang gained legal recognition of their customary forest in 2016 after a long struggle supported by civil society organisations, eventually resulting in degazettement of an area of Gunung Halimun

Table 1. Equitable governance principles for area-based conservation,¹² based on guidance endorsed by CBD Parties and IUCN good governance principles¹³

EQUITY: RECOGNITION	1. Respect for resource rights and human rights of community members
	2. Respect for all relevant actors and their knowledge, values and institutions
EQUITY: PROCEDURE	3. Effective participation of all relevant actors in decision making
	4. Transparency, information sharing and accountability for actions and inactions
	5. Access to justice, including effective dispute resolution processes
	6. Fair and effective law enforcement
EQUITY: DISTRIBUTION	7. Effective mitigation of negative impacts on community members
	8. Equitable sharing of benefits among relevant actors
OTHER	9. Achievement of conservation and other objectives
	10. Effective coordination and collaboration between actors, sectors and levels

Salak National Park. This government decree enabled the reinstatement and revitalisation of customary governance, including an enhanced role for young people in planning and management, after 13 years of exclusion through state control. The study reported that the change led to reduced incidences of illegal logging and forest fires, active restoration of forests on sloped areas and improved quality of water supplies.¹⁹

Other cases involve multiple progressive changes towards more equitable governance. One paper exploring dynamics in marine protected areas concluded that “incorporating multiple governance principles into management regimes and enforcing rules equitably are critical to achieving ecological benefits”.⁹ Another example describes Periyar Tiger Reserve in India, a state-run, exclusive protected area since the colonial era which was mired in severe conflicts. In the mid-1990s, a new trajectory was set, involving conflict resolution and trust-building, enhanced community influence in decisions and active roles in management, and the establishment of funded eco-development initiatives shaped to each community’s priorities.¹⁵ The initiatives included local regulation of annual religious pilgrimages, community and all-women forest patrols, and development and sustainable use of previously prohibited forest products. These changes collectively reduced threats and enhanced collaboration and stewardship to the extent that Periyar has been evaluated as the top-performing tiger reserve of 53 nationwide, with marked increases in forest quality and populations of large mammals, including tigers.²⁰

Papers highlighting mixed ecological outcomes, or

gains offset by losses, included a study on the integrated conservation and development programme of the Pacaya Samiria National Reserve in the Peruvian Amazon. The long-term commitment of the implementing organisation, the opportunities to participate in management groups, and the incorporation of local knowledge into resource management enhanced the sustainability of livelihoods. However, the costs of compliance and the restrictions on resource access associated with the reserve meant not all residents adopted the practices or supported this form of conservation, while the lack of secure local tenure meant local enforcement decreased and threats from illegal loggers intensified.²¹

Of the 27 cases exhibiting more equitable governance, 20 found positive social outcomes, while the remaining seven described a mix of positive and negative social outcomes, and no papers reported purely negative social outcomes (Table 2). Examples of positive social outcomes included increased education, employment opportunities and enhanced livelihoods. Papers describing mixed social outcomes often highlighted unequal or non-inclusive benefit sharing among residents.²²

The remaining 13 case studies noted that while there were some improvements in governance, significant ongoing challenges remained that substantially compromised equity and governance quality. These challenges included elite capture, especially relating to decision making and benefit sharing, issues with accountability and transparency, lack of collaboration between different actors and a lack of recognition and

Table 2. Changes in governance quality and associated ecological and social outcomes (n=40)

Governance change	Ecological outcomes			Social outcomes		
	Positive	Mixed	Negative	Positive	Mixed	Negative
More equitable governance (n=27)	92.6%	7.4%	0%	74.1%	25.9%	0%
Slight improvements in quality, but overall considered inequitable (n=13)	23.1%	53.8%	23.1%	0%	92.3%	7.7%

respect of IP and LC rights, knowledge and institutions. For example, a lack of respect for traditional institutions alongside poor accountability and transparency at a small protected area in Madagascar resulted in local elites engaging in agricultural and fishing practices that hindered long-term conservation success.²³ The ecological outcomes reported in these 13 cases were comparatively less positive than in the 27 featuring enhanced equity (Table 2). Three mentioned positive ecological outcomes, with seven describing a mix of positive and negative outcomes and three only negative ecological outcomes. Most of these 13 papers reported mixed social outcomes.

Taken together, the 40 case studies suggest that shifts towards more equitable governance can lead to more effective conservation alongside improved social outcomes. The 27 papers that described an overall improvement in governance described positive or mixed ecological and social outcomes, with the remaining 13 papers detailing significant governance challenges, most of which resulted in mixed or negative ecological and social outcomes.

Key takeaways

1. This briefing highlights the importance of equitable governance to effective conservation. Through a synthesis of evidence, it describes how shifts towards more equitable governance are associated with positive ecological outcomes (in other words, equity and conservation effectiveness are allied and synergistic, see Table 2). In contrast, cases of weak or inequitable governance are associated with less effective conservation.
2. Recognition of IP and LC rights, knowledge, values and institutions appears pivotal to realising improved conservation outcomes, although all three dimensions of equitable governance (recognition; procedures through

which decisions are made, conflicts resolved and accountability maintained; and distribution of costs and benefits) are associated with gains in the effectiveness of conservation in interrelated and reinforcing ways.

3. We recommend that in addition to devolving governance and recognising IP and LC rights, state, private and civil society actors at new and existing area-based conservation sites work collaboratively with IPs and LCs towards more equitable governance. This represents a critical yet overlooked means to enhance conservation outcomes and achieve targets and should be mainstreamed in National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans.
4. Financial, technical and political support from governments, donors, research institutes and civil society organisations is important to overcome multiple site-level governance challenges that hinder the success of conservation, including where Indigenous and local institutions and capacities need to be revitalised and strengthened.
5. Given the global prioritisation of conservation actions and supporting science, there is a surprising lack of evidence directly addressing the relationship between equity and conservation effectiveness. Research approaches tend to be inconsistent, short-term in focus and many only partially address the breadth of relationships between governance and outcomes. There is a need for more holistic research and conservation monitoring to explore and characterise these links in various contexts.

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Notes

¹ CBD decision COP/DEC/14/8. / ² CBD, GBF Target 22. / ³ CBD, GBF Target 3. / ⁴ Brondizio, ES and Le Tourneau, FM (2016) Environmental governance for all: Involving local and indigenous populations is key to effective environmental governance. *Science* 352(6291): 1272–1273. / ⁵ Schleicher, J, Peres, CA, Amano, T, Lactayo, W and Leader-Williams, N (2017) Conservation performance of different conservation governance regimes in the Peruvian Amazon. *Scientific reports* 7(1): 11318. / ⁶ Corrigan, C, Bingham, H, Shi, Y, Lewis, E, Chauvenet, A and Kingston, N (2018) Quantifying the contribution to biodiversity conservation of protected areas governed by indigenous peoples and local communities. *Biological Conservation* 227: 403–412. / ⁷ Garnett, ST, Burgess, ND, Fa, JE, Fernández-Llamazares, A, Molnár, Z, Robinson, CJ, Watson, JEM, Zander, KK, Austin, B, Brondizio, ES, Collier, NF, Duncan, T, Ellis, E, Geyle, H, Jackson, MV, Jonas, H, Malmer, P, McGowan, B, Sivongxay, A and Leiper, I (2018) A spatial overview of the global importance of Indigenous lands for conservation. *Nature Sustainability* 1(7): 369–374. / ⁸ Fidler, RY, Ahmadi, GN, Amkieltiela, Awaludinnoer, Cox, C, Estradivari, Glew, L, Handayani, C, Mahajan, SL, Mascia, MB, Pakiding, F, Andradi-Brown, DA, Campbell, SJ, Claborn, K, De Nardo, M, Fox, HE, Gill, D, Hidayat, NI, Jakub, R, Le, DT, Purwanto, Valdivia, A and Harborne, AR (2022) Participation, not penalties: Community involvement and equitable governance contribute to more effective multiuse protected areas. *Science Advances* 8(18). / ⁹ Coolsaet, B and Dawson, NM (2023) JustConservation - global data of site-level biodiversity conservation and its social-ecological outcomes (1970–2019). Zenodo. / ¹⁰ Dawson, NM, Bhardwaj, A, Coolsaet B, Scherl, LM, Massarella, K, Ndoinyo, Y, Oliva, M, Suich, H and Worsdell, T (eds) (2023) Journeys to more equitable and effective conservation: the central role of Indigenous peoples and local communities. *Policy Matters*. Issue No. 23. IUCN, Gland, Switzerland. / ¹¹ Lund, JF and Treue, T (2008) Are we getting there? Evidence of decentralized forest management from the Tanzanian Miombo woodlands. *World development* 36(12): 2780–2800. / ¹² Franks, P (2023) Site-level Assessment of Governance and Equity (SAGE) for protected and conserved areas: manual for SAGE facilitators. IIED, London. / ¹³ Franks, P (2021). Global Biodiversity Framework: equitable governance is key. IIED, London. / ¹⁴ Gbedomon, RC, Floquet, A, Mongbo, R, Salako, VK, Fandohan, AB, Assogbadjo, AE and Kakai, RG (2016). Socio-economic and ecological outcomes of community based forest management: A case study from Tobé-Kpobidon forest in Benin, Western Africa. *Forest Policy and Economics* 64: 46–55. / ¹⁵ Bhardwaj, A, Bhardwaj, AK, Vinod, TR, Anoop, KR, Sunil, CG, Mohan Ram, V, Ramesh Babu, M and Mathew, J (2023) Redefining conservation: eco-development initiatives in Periyar Tiger Reserve, India. In: note 10. / ¹⁶ Rulmal Jr, J, Crane, NL and Wongbusarakum, S (2023) Collaborative conservation on Ulithi Atoll, Federated States of Micronesia: Indigenous leadership supported by Western science promotes effective, adaptive stewardship. In: note 10. / ¹⁷ McClenachan, L, Lovell, S and Keaveney, C (2015) Social benefits of restoring historical ecosystems and fisheries: alewives in Maine. *Ecology and Society* 20(2). / ¹⁸ López-Sandoval, M and Maldonado, P (2019) Change, collective action, and cultural resilience in páramo management in Ecuador. *Mountain Research and Development* 39(4): R1. / ¹⁹ Tillah, M, Fernandez, PW and Supriadi (2023) Sense of belonging: Kasepuhan Karang customary forest recognition for community-based conservation. In: note 10. / ²⁰ Yadav, SP, Tiwari, VR, Mallick, A, Garawad, R, Talukdar, G, Sultan, S, Ansari, NA, Banerjee, K and Das, A (2023) Management Effectiveness Evaluation of Tiger Reserves in India, 2022 (Fifth Cycle), Summary Report. Wildlife Institute of India, Dehradun and National Tiger Conservation Authority, Government of India, New Delhi. / ²¹ Gockel, CK and Gray, LC (2009) Integrating conservation and development in the Peruvian Amazon. *Ecology and Society* 14(2). / ²² Mohammed, AJ and Inoue, M (2014) Linking outputs and outcomes from devolved forest governance using a Modified Actor-Power-Accountability Framework (MAPAF): Case study from Chilimo forest, Ethiopia. *Forest Policy and Economics* 39: 21–31. / ²³ Lammers, PL, Richter, T, Lux, M, Ratsimbazafy, J and Mantilla-Contreras, J (2017) The challenges of community-based conservation in developing countries—A case study from Lake Alaotra, Madagascar. *Journal for Nature Conservation* 40: 100–112.

