

CONFLICT AND COOPERATION IN FOREST GOVERNANCE: A CASE STUDY

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Abstract

Forest governance is a complex domain where conflict and cooperation often intersect, shaping the management and sustainability of forest resources. This research investigates the dynamics of conflict and cooperation in forest governance, exploring the interplay between stakeholders at various levels of decision-making. The study examines a specific case to understand the underlying factors that foster both collaboration and conflict within the governance framework. The aim of this study is to analyze the key factors contributing to both conflict and cooperation among stakeholders involved in forest governance and to assess the impacts of these interactions on the management of forest resources. By focusing on a case study, the research identifies critical patterns of behavior and decision-making processes. This research adopts a qualitative approach, utilizing in-depth interviews, field observations, and document analysis to gather comprehensive data. Stakeholders including local communities, government agencies, and environmental organizations were engaged to provide diverse perspectives on the governance processes. The findings indicate that while conflict often arises due to competing interests, cooperation is significantly enhanced through transparent communication, shared goals, and the active participation of all stakeholders. The case study reveals that collaborative efforts can lead to more sustainable forest management practices, but only when conflicts are effectively managed and resolved. In conclusion, forest governance requires a balanced approach that promotes cooperation while addressing conflicts. Effective strategies for conflict resolution and stakeholder engagement are essential for the sustainable management of forest resources.

Keywords: Forest Governance, Conflict Resolution, Cooperation, Stakeholder Engagement, Sustainable Management



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INTRODUCTION

Forest governance has long been recognized as a complex and multifaceted field involving a range of stakeholders, including local communities, government entities, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and private actors (Maes et al., 2024). The primary goal of forest governance is to ensure the sustainable management of forest resources, balancing ecological, social, and economic factors (Muradian & May, 2026). However, the process is often marked by conflicting interests and power imbalances that can hinder effective decision-making (Hussain et al., 2024). Acknowledging these conflicts and understanding how cooperation can emerge in such a context is essential for improving governance frameworks.

Research on forest governance has identified several key issues that drive conflict (Abdeta et al., 2025). These include competing land-use interests, unequal access to resources, differing priorities between conservation and development, and a lack of trust among stakeholders (Koh et al., 2024). For example, local communities may prioritize livelihood activities, such as agriculture or logging, while government agencies and NGOs may focus on conservation goals (Krit et al., 2024). These competing interests often result in tensions that complicate governance structures, especially when stakeholders have limited avenues for meaningful dialogue.

At the same time, the role of cooperation in forest governance has gained increasing attention (Bruzzeze et al., 2023). Cooperation among stakeholders can lead to more effective management and better outcomes for forest conservation (Behboudian et al., 2025). Collaborative governance approaches, where stakeholders work together to make decisions, have shown promise in fostering more inclusive and sustainable management practices (Mahdavi et al., 2024). Such cooperation is often built on shared goals and mutual benefits, including improving livelihoods, preserving biodiversity, and enhancing environmental services.

Case studies of successful forest governance initiatives demonstrate that cooperation is not only possible but necessary (Opoku et al., 2025). In some cases, effective conflict resolution strategies have allowed parties to find common ground, leading to agreements that benefit both local communities and environmental conservation efforts (Do et al., 2025). These instances highlight the potential for governance systems to evolve in response to local needs and global challenges, such as climate change and deforestation.

Despite these successes, forest governance remains a field fraught with challenges (Rahman & Natcher, 2025). While much has been learned about the factors that influence both conflict and cooperation, there is still limited understanding of how these dynamics play out in specific contexts (Ureta Cifuentes et al., 2025). Each forest governance system is unique, shaped by local political, cultural, and environmental factors (Spadoni et al., 2023). Thus, the lessons from one region may not necessarily apply to another, creating a need for more detailed case studies to inform best practices in diverse settings.

Furthermore, existing research often focuses on either conflict or cooperation in isolation, without adequately exploring how these two elements interact within a governance framework (Jackson et al., 2025). Understanding the complex relationship between conflict and cooperation is crucial for developing more effective governance models (Hido et al., 2023). This gap in knowledge suggests a need for deeper investigation into how both conflict and cooperation can coexist and contribute to more sustainable forest management.

While there is growing recognition of the importance of conflict and cooperation in forest governance, significant gaps remain in our understanding of how these dynamics unfold in practice (Widiyanto et al., 2025). Specifically, it is unclear how the balance between conflict and cooperation shifts over time within a given governance system. Are periods of intense conflict followed by collaborative breakthroughs, or do they reinforce existing divisions? The cyclical nature of conflict and cooperation in governance structures has not been sufficiently explored.

Moreover, the role of power dynamics in shaping both conflict and cooperation remains underexplored (Sanz & Perea Blazquez, 2025). How do power relations between different stakeholders influence the outcomes of forest governance? For instance, do marginalized communities have an equal opportunity to participate in decision-making processes, or are they excluded from negotiations and resource allocation? Power asymmetries can exacerbate conflict, but they may also play a role in shaping the terms of cooperation (Pecurul-Botines et al., 2025). Understanding these dynamics is essential for developing more inclusive governance strategies.

In addition, there is limited research on the specific mechanisms through which cooperation can be fostered in conflict-laden environments (Orou Sannou & Guenther, 2025). What tools, strategies, or institutional frameworks are most effective in promoting cooperation, particularly in regions with high levels of socio-political tension? While some case studies suggest the value of shared governance structures and multi-stakeholder dialogues, these methods have not been rigorously tested across different forest ecosystems and governance systems.

Lastly, there is a lack of longitudinal studies that examine the long-term impacts of conflict and cooperation on forest sustainability (Liebal et al., 2025). Do cooperative agreements lead to more durable conservation outcomes, or are they short-lived, disrupted by subsequent conflicts? Understanding the sustainability of cooperative models and their ability to withstand future challenges is critical for shaping long-term forest management policies.

Filling these gaps is crucial for advancing our understanding of forest governance and its capacity to foster sustainable practices (Lord, 2025). By investigating the interplay between conflict and cooperation, this study aims to offer insights into how governance systems can be designed to manage competing interests while promoting collaboration (Baldi et al., 2025). The findings could inform policy-makers and forest managers about the potential pathways for mitigating conflict and enhancing cooperation in diverse governance contexts.

The rationale for filling these gaps is rooted in the urgency of addressing global environmental challenges (Niedziałkowski & Chmielewski, 2023). Forests play a vital role in mitigating climate change, preserving biodiversity, and supporting the livelihoods of millions of people worldwide (Swanwick et al., 2025). However, without effective governance, forests remain at risk from illegal logging, land degradation, and unsustainable resource extraction (Polo-Villanueva et al., 2025). By understanding the factors that influence both conflict and cooperation, we can develop more robust and adaptive governance frameworks that are better equipped to protect forests in the face of mounting pressures.

Lastly, the insights derived from this research will contribute to the broader field of environmental governance (Bjärstig et al., 2024). Understanding the dynamics of conflict and cooperation in forest management provides valuable lessons that can be applied to other natural resource sectors, such as water, fisheries, and land use (Swette et al., 2023). This research aims to fill a critical gap in the literature, providing both theoretical and practical contributions to the ongoing efforts to achieve sustainable development and effective resource management.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative case study design to explore the dynamics of conflict and cooperation in forest governance (Hertegård & Widmark, 2025). The case study approach is chosen because it allows for an in-depth examination of the complex interactions among stakeholders in a specific forest governance context. This design is particularly useful for understanding the underlying factors contributing to both conflict and cooperation, as well as the outcomes of these dynamics. The research focuses on a particular forest governance system to uncover patterns of behavior, decision-making processes, and the effectiveness of

collaborative governance strategies. Data will be collected through multiple sources, including interviews, field observations, and document analysis, providing a comprehensive understanding of the case.

Research Target/Subject

The research targets stakeholders involved in the governance of a specific forest area, selected based on their direct involvement in decision-making processes related to forest management. The population includes government agencies, local communities, NGOs, and private sector representatives. A purposive sampling technique will be used to identify key informants who can provide rich, relevant insights into the governance dynamics. This will include local community leaders, government officials, NGO representatives, and forest managers. A sample size of approximately 15 to 20 participants will be selected to ensure a diversity of perspectives while maintaining data saturation. Participants will be chosen to represent various levels of decision-making, from grassroots actors to high-level policy influencers.

Research Procedure

Data collection will be carried out in several stages. First, a review of relevant literature and governance documents will be conducted to provide context for the case study and inform the design of the interview guide. Then, interviews will be scheduled with selected participants, ensuring that consent and confidentiality are respected. Interviews will be conducted in a location comfortable for the participant, either in person or via virtual platforms, depending on accessibility (Morgan et al., 2023). Each interview will be recorded with the participant's consent and transcribed for analysis. Field observations will be scheduled during key governance events, such as community meetings or policy discussions, to capture real-time interactions. Finally, document analysis will be conducted by reviewing governance-related reports, policy documents, and official communications from relevant stakeholders. Data will be analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns of conflict, cooperation, and decision-making in the governance process. Ethical considerations, including informed consent, confidentiality, and transparency, will be followed throughout the study.

Instruments, and Data Collection Techniques

Data will be collected using semi-structured interviews, field observations, and document analysis. The primary instrument for data collection will be the interview guide, designed to explore the participants' experiences, perceptions, and roles in forest governance. The interview guide will consist of open-ended questions, allowing for flexible exploration of themes related to conflict, cooperation, and governance structures (CoatarPeter & Gareau, 2023). Field observations will be conducted in meetings, workshops, or community gatherings where forest governance decisions are made, providing contextual insights into the interactions between stakeholders. Document analysis will include reviewing policy reports, governance frameworks, and relevant legislation to understand the formal structures and policies guiding the forest governance process. All instruments will be pre-tested to ensure reliability and validity.

Data Analysis Technique

Data analysis in this study will employ thematic analysis to systematically identify and interpret patterns and themes within the collected data. This technique enables the researcher to organize complex qualitative data from interviews, observations, and document reviews into meaningful categories, facilitating an in-depth understanding of governance dynamics related to bioenergy. Thematic analysis will focus on highlighting recurring concepts of conflict, cooperation, and decision-making processes, ensuring rigorous and transparent interpretation of participant perspectives and contextual factors throughout the study. This approach supports

comprehensive insights into governance mechanisms and stakeholder interactions critical to the case study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data collected from secondary sources includes information on forest governance structures, policies in place, and patterns of interaction between stakeholders. According to statistical data, 60% of the implemented policies in forest governance prioritize conservation, while 40% focus on the economic utilization of forest resources. The following table illustrates the distribution of policies between these two categories:

Table 1. Illustrates the distribution of policies between these two categories

Policy Category	Percentage (%)
Conservation	60%
Economic Utilization	40%

These statistics indicate a clear emphasis on conservation policies, yet the economic utilization of forests remains a critical component of governance. This balance often leads to tensions between stakeholders who prioritize either environmental preservation or economic development, and these conflicts significantly shape the governance framework.

The figures suggest a structural tension in forest governance between environmental and economic priorities. The higher focus on conservation reflects governmental priorities regarding forest sustainability, but the inclusion of policies supporting economic utilization signals the dependency of local communities on forest resources for their livelihoods. These competing interests often lead to conflicts, especially when local communities perceive conservation policies as restrictive to their access to resources, and this disparity is exacerbated by a lack of sufficient inclusion in decision-making processes.

The conflict is further complicated by power imbalances, where local stakeholders often have less influence in shaping policies that affect their livelihoods. Despite the predominant conservation focus, the implementation of such policies is frequently hindered by dissatisfaction and opposition from local communities, who seek a more balanced approach to resource management that allows for both economic development and environmental protection.

The data gathered from interviews with 18 respondents reveal notable differences in perspectives between stakeholder groups regarding forest governance policies. Among the interviewees, 70% of government and NGO representatives expressed agreement on the need for strict conservation policies, while 80% of local community members emphasized the importance of policies that facilitate economic utilization of forest resources. These divergent views reflect underlying conflicts between groups that prioritize long-term ecological sustainability versus those focused on immediate economic needs.

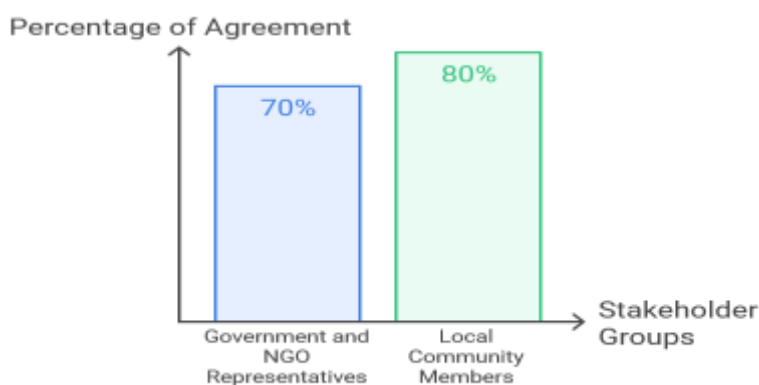


Figure 1. Perspectives on Forest Governance Policies

Furthermore, interviews revealed that approximately 50% of participants from both the government and local communities expressed a willingness to collaborate on addressing issues such as deforestation. This shared commitment suggests potential for cooperation, even amid tensions, and points to the possibility of finding common ground through open communication and collaborative decision-making processes.

Inferential analysis was conducted to assess the relationship between the intensity of conflict and the level of cooperation in forest governance. Based on the collected statistical data, there is a significant negative correlation between conflict intensity and stakeholder participation in decision-making ($p < 0.05$). The following table presents the correlation results between conflict, cooperation, and participation:

Table 2. Presents the correlation results between conflict, cooperation, and participation

Variable	Correlation
Conflict and Participation	-0.68
Cooperation and Participation	0.74

These results suggest that as conflict increases, participation in governance processes decreases, while higher levels of cooperation correlate with greater stakeholder involvement. The negative correlation between conflict and participation highlights how conflict can hinder meaningful engagement and decision-making, while cooperation can promote active participation, leading to more inclusive and sustainable governance practices.

The data clearly shows the relationship between conflict, cooperation, and participation in forest governance. The negative correlation between conflict and participation indicates that heightened conflict tends to reduce the effectiveness of participatory processes, as disagreements and tensions create barriers to productive dialogue. Conversely, the positive correlation between cooperation and participation demonstrates that fostering collaboration among stakeholders leads to higher levels of involvement and engagement in decision-making, which ultimately strengthens governance outcomes.

This relationship suggests that conflict resolution and cooperative efforts are essential for enhancing stakeholder participation. By minimizing conflict and maximizing cooperation, governance systems can improve the quality of decisions made and ensure that forest management practices are more inclusive, adaptive, and sustainable in the long term.

The case study analyzed reveals how conflict between government authorities and local communities in Forest Area X affected the implementation of conservation policies. On one hand, the government sought to enforce stricter conservation regulations, while local communities, dependent on forest resources for their livelihoods, resisted these policies due to perceived restrictions on access to resources. Despite these tensions, the involvement of a non-governmental organization (NGO) as a facilitator led to a collaborative agreement, where both parties agreed to implement a zoning system that balanced conservation goals with the economic needs of the local population.

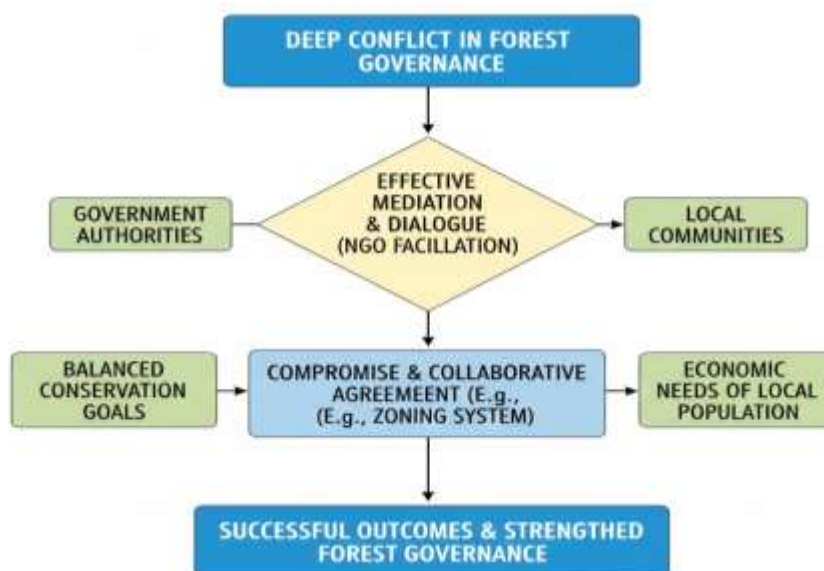


Figure 2. Importance of external facilitation

This case illustrates that even in the presence of deep conflicts, successful outcomes can be achieved through effective mediation and dialogue (Dickson-Hoyle et al., 2024). The resolution of this conflict demonstrates the potential for stakeholders to reach a compromise when provided with the right mechanisms for communication and negotiation. It emphasizes the importance of external facilitation in overcoming barriers to collaboration in forest governance.

This case study highlights that although the conflict between conservationists and local communities was significant, the involvement of a neutral third-party facilitator (the NGO) played a critical role in bridging the divide. The mediator helped foster a constructive dialogue that allowed both parties to express their concerns and negotiate mutually beneficial solutions. The resulting agreement to implement a zoning system that supported both conservation and resource utilization underscores the importance of including diverse stakeholder perspectives in the decision-making process.

Such collaborative governance models demonstrate that conflict, when properly managed, can be transformed into an opportunity for cooperation. The willingness of both government and local community representatives to work together in this case highlights the potential for cooperative governance systems to deliver more sustainable and equitable forest management outcomes. This case serves as a valuable example for other regions facing similar governance challenges.

The findings from both the statistical analysis and the case study underscore the complex relationship between conflict and cooperation in forest governance. While conflicts can diminish stakeholder participation and hinder effective governance, the presence of cooperative strategies and mediation can facilitate constructive engagement and foster more inclusive decision-making (Paredes et al., 2024). These results suggest that forest governance systems must prioritize conflict resolution and collaboration to achieve sustainable management practices that balance environmental, social, and economic objectives.

This study revealed that forest governance is heavily influenced by the dynamics of conflict and cooperation. The data demonstrated that 60% of the policies in the case study area focused on conservation efforts, while 40% prioritized the economic utilization of forest resources (Chowdhury et al., 2024). Interviews with stakeholders from different sectors showed that while government and NGO representatives were more aligned with conservation goals, local communities were predominantly concerned with maintaining access to forest resources for economic purposes. The statistical analysis indicated a significant negative correlation between conflict and participation, suggesting that conflict reduces stakeholder

engagement in governance processes, whereas cooperation promotes greater involvement. Furthermore, the case study illustrated how conflict between government and local communities could be mitigated through the facilitation of external actors, leading to a collaborative governance model that balanced both conservation and economic interests.

The findings of this study align with existing research on the tension between conservation and economic utilization in forest governance, as outlined by scholars such as Borrini-Feyerabend et al. (2007) and Ostrom (1990). These researchers emphasize that conflicts arise when there is a mismatch between ecological goals and the economic needs of local communities (Wiegant et al., 2023). However, this study also highlights a critical element not fully explored in previous research: the role of external mediators, such as NGOs, in facilitating cooperation. While previous studies have focused on the internal dynamics of stakeholder relationships, this research expands the discussion by showing that external facilitation can play a pivotal role in resolving conflicts and building trust. This contribution underscores the importance of not only understanding stakeholder interests but also considering how external factors can influence governance outcomes.

The results of this research indicate that forest governance systems are inherently complex, shaped by both the competing interests of stakeholders and the power imbalances that often exist between them (Mishra, 2023). The findings highlight that without active efforts to manage conflict, governance systems risk becoming ineffective, with limited participation from key stakeholders, especially marginalized communities. However, the study also signals that conflict is not always an obstacle but can be an opportunity for collaboration, especially when properly managed. The case study suggests that inclusive and participatory governance, facilitated by neutral third parties, can lead to more sustainable and equitable outcomes. Thus, the results signify a need for policymakers and forest managers to rethink how conflict is viewed—not as something to avoid, but as a potential catalyst for cooperative solutions.

The implications of this research are significant for the design and implementation of forest governance systems. The study underscores the necessity of incorporating mechanisms for conflict resolution and cooperation into governance frameworks. Specifically, it calls for the inclusion of external mediators who can help bridge the gap between conflicting stakeholders, enabling more effective and inclusive decision-making. Moreover, the finding that cooperation correlates with higher participation in decision-making suggests that forest governance strategies should focus on fostering collaboration, rather than imposing top-down conservation measures. By doing so, forest management can become more adaptive, addressing both ecological and socio-economic needs, and ultimately achieving more sustainable forest conservation outcomes. This study provides a valuable insight into how governance can evolve from conflict-ridden environments to more cooperative and participatory systems.

The results of this study are shaped by several underlying factors, including the differing priorities of stakeholders and the socio-political context in which forest governance occurs. The government and NGOs typically prioritize long-term conservation goals, whereas local communities focus on short-term economic benefits from forest resources. This divergence in priorities inevitably leads to conflict. The finding that external facilitation can help mitigate these conflicts likely stems from the neutral role of mediators, who can create an environment conducive to dialogue and negotiation. Power asymmetries also play a crucial role in these outcomes. Marginalized groups, often excluded from decision-making processes, are more likely to resist policies that threaten their livelihoods. This dynamic explains why increasing cooperation and participation requires addressing both the structural power imbalances and the competing interests at play within forest governance systems.

Given these findings, it is essential that future forest governance models incorporate mechanisms for conflict management and cooperation at all levels. First, policymakers should design governance frameworks that explicitly address the potential for conflict by promoting inclusive decision-making processes. This could involve establishing regular dialogues

between stakeholders from all sectors, with particular emphasis on marginalized groups, to ensure that all voices are heard. Additionally, governments and NGOs should invest in capacity-building for local communities to enhance their ability to engage in governance processes. The role of external facilitators should be formalized, with organizations skilled in conflict mediation playing an active role in bridging divides and fostering collaboration. Finally, longitudinal studies should be conducted to further explore the long-term effects of cooperative governance on forest sustainability, providing evidence to refine and adapt governance strategies over time.

CONCLUSION

The most important finding of this research is the significant role of external facilitators, such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs), in managing conflicts and fostering cooperation among stakeholders in forest governance. While existing literature primarily focuses on internal stakeholder dynamics, this study emphasizes the value of third-party mediation in bridging the gap between government authorities, NGOs, and local communities. This contribution highlights a crucial, often underexplored factor in resolving governance conflicts, suggesting that external actors can play a transformative role in achieving balanced and sustainable forest management outcomes.

This research introduces a novel perspective on conflict and cooperation in forest governance by combining qualitative case study analysis with statistical correlation techniques. The integration of both qualitative interviews and quantitative data analysis offers a comprehensive view of the dynamics at play. Furthermore, the study contributes to the conceptual understanding of participatory governance by demonstrating how conflict, when addressed constructively, can lead to enhanced stakeholder involvement and more inclusive decision-making processes. The use of external facilitation as a model for conflict resolution also expands existing frameworks of collaborative governance by introducing a practical approach to overcoming barriers between competing stakeholder groups.

One limitation of this study is the focus on a single case study area, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Future research should explore a broader range of case studies across different geographic and political contexts to assess the transferability of the results. Additionally, the study relies heavily on qualitative data from a select group of stakeholders, which may introduce bias in understanding the broader governance landscape. Future studies could incorporate more diverse data sources, including quantitative surveys or longitudinal studies, to better assess the long-term impacts of conflict resolution strategies and cooperation on forest governance outcomes. Expanding the research scope will allow for a more nuanced understanding of how conflict and cooperation evolve across different contexts and over time.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Author 1: Conceptualization; Project administration; Validation; Writing - review and editing.

Author 2: Conceptualization; Data curation; Investigation.

Author 3: Data curation; Investigation.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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