

EMPOWERMENT OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES THROUGH EMPOWERMENT OF INDIGENOUS INSTITUTIONS IN NATURAL RESOURCE GOVERNANCE

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Abstract:

Indigenous peoples play a vital role in the sustainable management of natural resources, drawing upon local wisdom that has been passed down through generations. Customary institutions are essential for upholding cultural values, customary law, and the management of customary forest areas that are integral to their way of life. However, forest governance policies over recent decades have frequently overlooked their contributions, restricting access to and control over indigenous territories. A notable example is the alteration of the status of customary forest areas in Mutis-Timau National Park in East Nusa Tenggara, which were historically managed by the Dawan tribe through a customary prohibition system. While the designation as a national park offers conservation advantages, it has social implications for the indigenous peoples reliant on these forests. To tackle this issue, this initiative proposes a strategy aimed at reinforcing customary institutions as the primary actors in natural resource governance, utilizing a participatory approach rooted in local wisdom. The proposed solutions include: (1) enhancing the capacity of indigenous institutions, (2) fostering collaboration between indigenous peoples and governmental bodies, (3) promoting sustainable economic development based on natural resources, and (4) providing environmental education for the younger generation within indigenous communities.

INTRODUCTION

The designation change from Mutis Timau Nature Reserve to Mutis Timau National Park has significantly affected the local indigenous communities, particularly the Dawan tribe, who rely on the area's natural resources for their livelihoods. Prior to the area being designated as a national park, indigenous peoples managed the land using local wisdom that had been passed down through generations. They upheld the balance of the ecosystem through customary laws, such as hunting bans during certain seasons and strict regulations against tree felling in protected forests. However, following the designation, access to these forests became increasingly limited due to the implementation of stricter conservation regulations.

The most profound impact of this change has been on the economic stability of indigenous communities. These groups depend on non-timber forest products, such as forest honey, rattan, and herbal medicines, and are now losing their primary means of livelihood. The ban on land clearing has further restricted their ability to engage in traditional agricultural practices, which were vital for their food security. As a result, many residents are being forced to seek employment outside their villages, leading to urbanization and a slow erosion of their local cultural identity.

The role of customary institutions, which have long served as guardians of traditional values, is facing significant challenges. As authorities impose increasingly strict management practices on



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national parks, these institutions are losing their ability to govern forests according to their customary laws. This transition is not just a regulatory change; it deeply affects the cultural fabric of communities, leading to a decline in traditional rituals that are closely tied to the forests—ceremonies honoring ancestors and offerings to the spirits of guardians are becoming less frequent. It is disheartening to see the younger generation gradually drifting away from these cherished ancestral traditions, especially as access to forests and opportunities to engage in these customs becomes more limited.

From an environmental perspective, the designation of areas as national parks aims to enhance conservation efforts, yet it inadvertently restricts access for indigenous peoples. This limitation can have serious repercussions. By excluding these communities from managing their ancestral lands, the risk of illegal exploitation by outsiders grows. For centuries, indigenous peoples have acted as protectors of the ecosystem, relying on customary practices that have historically maintained the forest's balance. Given these complex challenges, it is crucial to adopt a more inclusive approach to managing Mutis Timau National Park. One compassionate solution is to embrace and integrate customary law into conservation policies, ensuring that indigenous peoples remain involved in the stewardship of their forests. Furthermore, developing social forestry models or co-management schemes can provide these communities with the legal means to use their natural resources sustainably.

We can also explore environmentally friendly economic alternatives, such as ecotourism that celebrates local culture, which can improve the well-being of these communities without harming the environment. By taking these steps, we can create a national park that not only serves as a conservation area but also as a nurturing space where indigenous peoples can continue their lives in harmony with nature.

This community service is essential, particularly considering the transition from Mutis Timau Nature Reserve to Mutis Timau National Park and its profound impact on indigenous communities, especially the Dawan tribe, who maintain a deep connection to the forest as an integral part of their lives. This change in status has led to restricted access to vital natural resources for these indigenous peoples, a decline in their economic welfare, the erosion of indigenous institutions, and a significant risk of losing traditional knowledge that has long been foundational to conservation practices rooted in local wisdom.

This situation underscores the urgent need to reinforce the role of indigenous institutions in the governance of natural resources. Indigenous peoples must have a prominent voice in regional management rather than being treated merely as subjects of conservation policies. Without appropriate intervention, there is a danger that customary law systems and community-based conservation practices will face further marginalization, jeopardizing the cultural identity and rights of indigenous peoples to their land and resources.

Limited access to forests directly impacts the economic well-being of indigenous peoples who rely on non-timber forest products and traditional agricultural practices. Without concrete solutions, these communities face a heightened risk of poverty and may be compelled to migrate to urban areas, ultimately jeopardizing their sustainability. Thus, there is an urgent need to develop environmentally based economic alternatives, such as the sustainable use of forest products and culture-based ecotourism, which can enhance community welfare while preserving the ecosystem. From both social and environmental perspectives, as indigenous peoples become increasingly marginalized in regional management, the risk of illegal exploitation by outsiders escalates. Historically, indigenous peoples have maintained a customary system of prohibitions that effectively preserves forest ecosystems. Therefore, it is critical to restore the role of indigenous



peoples as essential partners in environmental conservation, rather than viewing them as obstacles in conservation policy.

The purpose of this devotion encompasses several key aspects. First, it aims to enhance the capacity of indigenous institutions to comprehend conservation policies and advocate for their rights within social forestry schemes and collaborative governance. Second, it seeks to establish a partnership model among indigenous peoples, governments, and national park managers to foster more inclusive and sustainable governance. Third, it focuses on developing the economic potential of indigenous communities through the promotion of non-timber forest products (NTFPs) and culture-based ecotourism, thereby improving welfare while ensuring environmental sustainability. Lastly, it encourages the regeneration and preservation of traditional knowledge in natural resource management, ensuring that customary conservation values are upheld amid evolving environmental policies.

METHODS

The method of implementing this service includes several main stages. The first stage is a survey and social mapping conducted through interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and field observations to understand the conditions of indigenous peoples in Nenas Village and the potential and challenges they face. The second stage is the implementation of training and workshops for indigenous stakeholders and local communities on social forestry regulations, indigenous peoples' rights, and resource management based on local wisdom, which will be carried out with a participatory approach. The third stage is technical assistance in designing customary territory governance to be in line with national park regulations, including the preparation of customary territory maps and management rules based on mutual agreement. The fourth stage includes the documentation and revitalization of customary law by collecting, rewriting, and documenting customary rules in digital and printed form. The final stage is the evaluation and monitoring of the program's sustainability, which is carried out through social, economic, and ecological impact measurements, as well as the preparation of recommendations for further improvement and development.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Nenas Village is located in the Fatumnasi District of the South-Central Timor Regency. Covering an area of 58.57 square kilometers, the village boasts a unique natural landscape that the local community frequently utilizes for various activities, particularly agriculture and livestock rearing. The population of Nenas Village is approximately 1,308 residents, most of whom rely on natural resources as their primary means of livelihood. With a relatively small population in relation to its expansive area, Nenas Village features settlements that are well-integrated into a preserved natural environment.

To effectively address the challenges encountered by Indigenous peoples arising from the change in status of Mutis Timau National Park, this service offers a comprehensive array of strategic solutions designed to empower indigenous institutions as key stakeholders in the governance of natural resources. Our approach prioritizes participatory engagement, inclusivity, and the integration of local wisdom, ensuring a harmonious balance between conservation initiatives and the well-being of indigenous communities. Below are the decisive solutions we intend to implement:

1. One primary solution proposed is to enhance the capacity of customary institutions in managing natural resources. These institutions, which have historically relied on tradition-based conservation rules, require support to adapt to the new national park policy. It can be



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accomplished through training and workshops aimed at indigenous stakeholders and community leaders, focusing on social forestry regulations, the rights of indigenous peoples, and forest management strategies informed by local knowledge. Furthermore, documenting customary laws related to forest management is essential to ensure that the values of local wisdom are acknowledged and integrated into government conservation policies. This approach enables indigenous communities to continue playing a vital role in protecting forest ecosystems while safeguarding their rights.

2. In addition to strengthening customary institutions, proposed solutions include fostering partnerships among Indigenous peoples, national park managers, local governments, academics, and NGOs. Through dialogue and deliberative forums, the goal is to establish agreements that enable indigenous communities to retain legal access to natural resources, albeit within certain limits. Social forestry schemes may provide one avenue for indigenous peoples to secure fairer management rights in line with sustainability principles. This collaborative approach strives to prevent conflicts and promote more inclusive governance of national parks, recognizing indigenous peoples not merely as subjects of policy but as essential partners in conservation efforts. Furthermore, it is crucial to offer assistance in designing governance structures for customary territories that align with national park regulations, ensuring that customary institutions can continue to play a significant role in regional management.
3. From an economic standpoint, the development of sustainable, natural resource-based businesses serves as a viable solution for enhancing the welfare of indigenous peoples while preserving the environment. Community empowerment initiatives utilizing non-timber forest products (NTFPs) such as forest honey, rattan, bamboo, and traditional medicinal plants can provide eco-friendly livelihood alternatives. Furthermore, ecotourism that emphasizes local culture can be promoted, enabling indigenous people to participate as tour guides, accommodation providers drawing on local wisdom, or artisans crafting natural souvenirs. By leveraging digital technology and social media for marketing, both forest products and ecotourism can reach broader audiences, thereby increasing economic opportunities for indigenous communities.
4. To promote the sustainability of the solutions provided, enhancing environmental awareness and education among indigenous youth is a crucial step. Educational programs rooted in traditional and nature-based schools can effectively instill conservation values that align with local wisdom. Additionally, engaging the younger generation in cultural documentation and digitally-driven forest management initiatives can serve as an innovative method to preserve traditional knowledge while adapting to contemporary practices. The documentation and revitalization of customary laws governing the management of customary forests are also vital for their recognition and integration into national park conservation policies. Moreover, internship programs and comparative studies with regions that have successfully implemented community-based forest management models can inspire indigenous youth to take an active role in preserving their ancestral heritage.

The community service program implemented in Nenas Village has achieved several strategic milestones that highlight the significant potential of indigenous peoples in managing natural resources sustainably. Capacity-building efforts for customary institutions included training sessions and workshops with 27 traditional leaders from various clans. These activities focused on social-based forest management, indigenous peoples' rights, and conservation practices rooted in local wisdom. Evaluations of the training indicated a notable increase in participants' knowledge.



Furthermore, this initiative resulted in the creation of an initial document outlining customary laws that prohibit logging in sacred areas, paving the way for the integration of these rules into the management policy of Mutis Timau National Park.

In terms of economic development, the program has facilitated training in business development focused on non-timber forest products (NTFPs) such as forest honey and bamboo crafts. Participants, primarily consisting of women and youth groups, also received training in digital marketing to enhance their market access. Additionally, the potential for local ecotourism that showcases the culture and natural beauty of Nenas Village is being explored as an alternative source of community-based income.

To engage youth in conservation efforts, a nature school program has been established. In this program, young people learn how to map customary territories, document folklore, and create documentary videos. This initiative fosters a sense of pride in cultural identity and encourages the younger generation to become guardians of local knowledge in today's context.

The outcomes of this service indicate that a participatory approach rooted in local knowledge is an effective strategy for reconciling state conservation interests with the sustainable livelihoods of indigenous peoples. The active engagement of communities, particularly youth and women, highlights that conservation efforts can be implemented equitably and inclusively. However, the long-term sustainability of this program's impact will depend significantly on the commitments from various stakeholders, the legal recognition of customary territories, and continued support to enhance local institutions and partnership networks.

CONCLUSION

The community service program implemented in Nenas Village demonstrates that a participatory approach, coupled with the strengthening of customary institutions and community economic empowerment, can effectively address the challenges arising from the area's designation as Mutis Timau National Park. Training initiatives, multi-stakeholder dialogues, and the development of businesses centered around non-timber natural resources have significantly enhanced the capacity of indigenous peoples to sustainably manage their territories. Furthermore, involving youth in cultural documentation and forest conservation efforts indicates that there is a new generation prepared to carry forward conservation values and local wisdom within a modern context. This program also reinforces the position of indigenous peoples as vital partners in the governance of conservation areas, rather than merely as subjects of policy.

To sustain the impact of this program, it is essential to secure long-term support from educational institutions, local governments, and civil society organizations to ensure the ongoing strengthening and formal recognition of customary institutions. Additionally, joint advocacy efforts are necessary to promote the legal recognition of customary territories, providing communities with a legal framework for managing their resources. The development of environmentally friendly businesses should be supported through enhanced market access, sufficient capital, and advanced training opportunities. Furthermore, the active involvement of youth must be promoted through nature-based, technology-driven, and culturally relevant education, facilitating the continuous regeneration of local knowledge. Lastly, regular facilitation of cross-actor collaboration and multi-stakeholder forums is vital to achieving optimal synergy between environmental conservation and the welfare of indigenous peoples.

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