

Equity in conservation – what, why and how?

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Key messages

- 1. Achieving the target to conserve 30% of land and sea requires strong emphasis on equity.**
- 2. Equity in conservation is a matter of governance and includes recognition and respect for actors and their human and resource rights, equity in procedure (e.g., participation, accountability) and equitable cost/benefit distribution.**
- 3. Equity in conservation is crucial both for ethical reasons and for effective conservation and applies both to conservation actions on site, and to complementary actions designed to support conservation (e.g., stewardship incentives, support for local schools).**
- 4. With existing protected and conserved areas,¹ equity can be improved by action on governance, informed by assessment (e.g., the SAGE tool) and social safeguards. Improving equity will, in most cases, be an incremental process.**
- 5. For new protected and conserved areas, equity will be a critical success factor both in terms of conservation effectiveness and social and political legitimacy. Social safeguards should be used to predict and effectively mitigate potential negative impacts.**

What does equity mean?

Recent years have seen unprecedented commitments from governments and philanthropies to nature conservation – notably the Campaign for Nature, Legacy Landscapes and Protecting the Planet Challenge – emphasising approaches that empower Indigenous Peoples and local communities (IPLCs) as stewards of biodiversity and healthy ecosystems. The post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) under the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), has (draft) targets to extend equitably managed/governed protected areas (PAs) and conserved areas (CAs) to 30% of our planet’s land and ocean (target 3) and to ensure equitable participation of IPLCs and respect for their resource rights (target 21). If agreed, target 3 is likely to bring additional financial resources into the sector. Equity is gaining prominence in global agreements, such as the Paris Agreement. It is far more prominent in the Sustainable Development Goals agreed in 2015 than in the preceding Millennium Development Goals. But the meaning of equity in practical terms is unclear and varies according to the sector and context. Here we focus on equity as applied within the context of the CBD and area-based conservation.

A key decision of the Conference of the Parties to the CBD (COP14) in 2018 clarified the meaning of equity in the context of PA/CA conservation:² *The concept of equity is one element of good governance. Equity can be broken down into three dimensions: recognition, procedure and distribution: “Recognition” is the acknowledgement of and respect for the rights and the diversity of identities, values, knowledge systems and institutions of rights holders and stakeholders; “Procedure” refers to*

inclusiveness of rule- and decision-making; “Distribution” implies that costs and benefits resulting from the management of protected areas must be equitably shared among different actors.

This understanding of equity as being a matter of equitable governance with three dimensions is based on the concept of environmental justice (EJ).^{3,4} A group of conservation practitioners, policy advisors and academics led by IIED has taken this a step further to develop a framework of eight principles of equitable governance - based IUCN’s principles and considerations for good PA governance⁵ – that was endorsed by CBD Parties at COP14².

Equitable governance principles for protected areas and conserved areas

Equity: recognition	Recognition and respect for the rights of rights-holders
	Recognition and respect for all relevant actors ⁶ and their knowledge and values ⁷
Equity: procedure	Full and effective participation of all relevant actors in decision-making
	Transparency, information sharing and accountability for actions/inactions
	Access to justice including effective dispute resolution processes
	Fair and effective law enforcement (or, more broadly, the rule of law)
Equity: distribution	Effective mitigation of negative impacts on relevant actors
	Benefits equitably shared among relevant actors

Issues of human rights, rights to lands, territories and resources, and inclusion of IPLCs, women and youth in decision-making are all integral to this framing of equity, and every principle has a gender dimension.⁸ This broad framing of equity can enhance the coherence of the social and rights agendas, and, for policies with severe word limits, enables all key social issues to be covered by the words equity or equitable governance.

This brief focuses on equity in the context of area-based conservation, that is actions to improve conservation of biodiversity and associated ecosystem services in a defined geographic area, either as a primary objective, or as a secondary outcome.⁹ In addition to nature conservation actions per se, there may be other actions designed to support conservation such as incentives for stewardship (e.g., PES), adding value to ecosystem services and support for local schools. Equity considerations should address all actions designed to support conservation of PAs and CAs.

Why is equity important?

Ethical argument. From the creation of the first PAs in the US, through the wave of PA creation in the colonial era to new PAs created in recent years, there is a lot of evidence of negative impacts of PAs on the well-being/quality of life of IPLCs¹⁰, including violations of human rights in some countries especially where approaches to law enforcement are very militaristic. On the positive side, PAs/CAs can make significant material and non-material (including cultural) contributions to the well-being/quality of life of IPLCs.¹¹

IPLCs must be recognised as legitimate, key stakeholders, and in many cases rights-holders, in shaping the objectives and strategy of a PA/CA, whether or not it is on IPLC lands. This means that many PAs/CAs will have objectives related to ecosystem services as well as to biodiversity conservation per se, but managing multiple objectives is nothing new, as has been demonstrated at tens of thousands of sites over many years in countries as different as Italy and Nepal. There will naturally be trade-offs between national/global and IPLCs' objectives but, from an ethical standpoint, conservation approaches where a few powerful actors set the agenda and coerce others to comply and absorb the costs, are not acceptable.

Instrumental argument. Some elements of equity are essential for effective conservation.¹² There is strong evidence that secure IPLC rights to land and resources contribute to conservation as noted in the IPBES Global Assessment of 2019.¹³ Until recently there had been less evidence of the contribution of other aspects of equitable governance¹⁴ such as participation in decision-making and access to information but stronger evidence is now emerging from recent research,¹⁵ and there has long been strong evidence from the related field of common pool resource management¹⁶ where the Nobel-prizing winning work of Elinor Ostrom identified eight conditions for effective community-based management.¹⁷ More recent work¹⁸ has further elaborated this framework to 11 principles, nine of which are aspects of equitable governance where weakness risks a downward spiral of environmental degradation. In other words, secure resource rights are essential for effective conservation but very often not sufficient without addressing other aspects of equitable governance. The question now is less whether governance and equity matter, but rather whether we have effective strategies and tools to improve PA/OECM governance. We do, but there is a legacy of many PA conservation initiatives that have invested in governance - notably community participation - with little or no conservation impact, suggesting that further lessons need to be learned in this regard.¹⁹

Why is equity so important for achieving the 30x30 target?

The "30*30 target" assumes there are substantial areas of more or less natural habitat of high biodiversity value beyond existing PAs which can be, or are already being, conserved. On land, most of these areas have IPLCs living within or nearby who use the resources, and likewise with onshore fisheries.²⁰ Most are common pool resources and with ever-growing external pressures a downward spiral of environmental degradation is a major risk and, in many cases, already advanced. Strict protection that excludes IPLCs defies both legal and best practice norms, including the guidance and decisions of the Convention on Biological Diversity.²¹ Instead, the expansion of conservation to achieve the 30*30 target will depend on management and governance led by IPLCs or co-management where governance is shared between IPLCs and other key actors (e.g., local government, private sector). But, many IPLC groups have grave concerns and currently see the 30*30 target as more a threat than opportunity. Equity is the key to ensuring that the injustices of the past will not be repeated, in particular equity in procedure and recognition including respect for rights – in short a critical success factor for achieving the 30*30 target both in terms of conservation effectiveness and in terms of social and political legitimacy.

What can be done to improve equity?

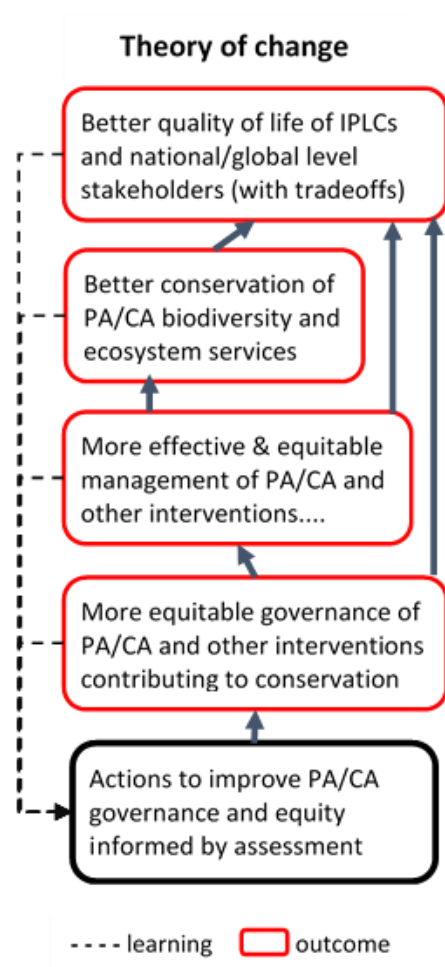
Existing protected and conserved areas: Equity of existing PAs/Cas can be improved by action on key governance issues informed by assessment, for example with the IUCN Green List Standard²² and IIED's

Site-level Assessment of Governance and Equity (SAGE) tool.²³ Work towards equity will, in most cases, be an incremental process taking some years. The SAGE tool has been developed over the last five years by a broad-based partnership led by IIED and has now been used at over 30 PAs/CAs in Africa, Asia, Europe and Latin America.²⁴ The figure below shows a theory of change for SAGE based on an incremental process. In addition to benefits from better nature conservation, improved PA/CA management and governance can also contribute to IPLC's well-being/quality of life via other pathways e.g., employment, enhanced respect in society, better governance in other sectors.

New protected and conserved areas: social safeguards should be used to identify, and effectively mitigate, any possible negative impacts on the wellbeing/quality of life of IPLCs, and to ensure respect for IPLCs' rights and their effective participation in decision-making²⁵. In addition, social safeguards can also address access to information and justice, accountability, and law enforcement. While the primary objective of safeguards is avoiding negative impacts, they can also be used to enhance human wellbeing/quality of life and improve governance.

A safeguard is just a policy and, as with any policy, there can be serious implementation gaps. Effective safeguards must therefore include a system for monitoring whether the proposed mitigation actions are implemented and effective. Much progress has been made with developing safeguards in the last decade across a number of different sectors, and governments, donors, and PA managers (including IPLCs) in collaboration with civil society actors are adapting these safeguards to area-based conservation.

All protected and conserved areas: meeting national targets for new PAs/CAs and more equitable governance of existing PAs will require investing in governance at many sites in a country. According to the GBF's Theory of Change, this should be "primarily through activities at the national level, with supporting action at the subnational, regional and global levels".²⁶ But nationally-led approaches to conservation action have often failed to meet agreed targets.²⁷ Equity points to another way – a locally-led process, enabled (but not driven) by national level actors devolving more authority and resources to the actors at site level.²⁸ The challenge will be achieving the necessary scale. Fortunately, actions to improve PA/CA governance are generally low cost, and peer to peer interaction on-line could play an important role in scaling up better governance and equity outcomes and thereby play a leading role in achieving the 30% target.



The World Commission on Protected Areas is committed to promoting a representative, effectively managed and equitably governed global system of marine and terrestrial protected and conserved areas. It will be focusing significant attention in the next years to providing guidance and perspective on equitable governance and increasing understanding and action around the management and creation of protected and conserved areas that address the wellbeing of humans in and around such areas while contributing to planet-wide management of lands and waters.

References and end notes

- ¹ “Conserved area” is shorthand for other effective area-based conservation measure (OECM). An OECM is a *geographically defined area other than a Protected Area, which is governed and managed in ways that achieve positive and sustained long-term outcomes for the in-situ conservation of biodiversity with associated ecosystem functions and services and where applicable, cultural, spiritual, socio-economic, and other locally relevant values.* (CBD, 2018). OECMs can include areas where the main focus is conservation of ecosystem services if there is also a significant contribution to biodiversity conservation.
- ² Decision CBD/COP/DEC/14/8 <https://www.cbd.int/doc/decisions/cop-14/cop-14-dec-08-en.pdf>
- ³ Schreckenber, K., Mace, G., and Poudyal, M. (eds.). 2018. [*Ecosystem Services and Poverty Alleviation: Trade-offs and Governance*](https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429507090). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429507090>.
- ⁴ Schreckenber, K., Franks, P., Martin, A. and Lang, B. 2016. Unpacking equity for protected area conservation. *PARKS*. 22 (2): [11-26](#).
- ⁵ Borrini-Feyerabend, G., Dudley, N., Jaeger, T., Lassen, B., Pathak Broome, N., Phillips, A. and Sandwith, T. 2013. [*Governance of Protected Areas: From understanding to action*](#). Best Practice Protected Area Guidelines Series No. 20 IUCN, Gland, Switzerland.
- ⁶ “Actors” is shorthand for rightsholders and stakeholders
- ⁷ Shorthand for identities, values, knowledge systems and institutions. See Schreckenber et al – note 4 above.
- ⁸ Franks, P., Booker, F. and Roe, D. 2018. [*Understanding and assessing equity in protected area conservation: a matter of governance, rights, social impacts and human wellbeing*](#). IIED, London.
- ⁹ IUCN-WCPA Task Force on OECMs. 2019. [*Recognising and reporting other effective area-based conservation measures*](#). Gland, Switzerland: IUCN.
- ¹⁰ Dowie, M. 2009. *Conservation Refugees: The hundred-year-conflict between global conservation and native peoples*. The MIT Press, Cambridge Massachusetts.
- ¹¹ Franks, P., Booker, F., Small, R., Nzilani, J., Niwamanya, R., Pinto, R. (2021). [*Assessing and improving the social impacts of protected areas: case studies from Kenya and Uganda*](#). IIED, London
- ¹² Dawson, N.M., Coolsaet, B. and Martin, A. 2018. Justice and Equity in Schreckenber, K., Mace, G. and Poudyal, M. (eds.). [*Ecosystem Services and Poverty Alleviation: Trade-offs and Governance*](#). Routledge, London.
- ¹³ Rainforest Foundation Norway 2021. [*Falling Short*](#).
- ¹⁴ Rasolofoson, R.A., Ferraro, P.J., Jenkins, C.J. and Jones, J.P.G. 2015. Effectiveness of Community Forest Management at reducing deforestation in Madagascar. *Biological Conservation* 184: [271-277](#).
- ¹⁵ Andrachuk, M., Epstein, G., Andriamalala, G., Bambridge, T., Ban, N. et al. 2022. [*Coral Reef Governance: Strengthening Community and Collaborative Approaches*](#): A Vibrant Oceans Initiative Whitepaper. Blue Ventures. <https://doi.org/10.19121/2022.Report.43695>
- ¹⁶ Common pool resources (CPRs) are resources for which the exclusion of users is difficult (referred to as excludability), and the use of such a resource by one user decreases resource benefits for other users (referred to as subtractability). <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199363445/obo-9780199363445-0011.xml>
- ¹⁷ Ostrom, E. 2015. Reflections on the commons. In: (Canto Classics): pp. 1-28. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge, UK.
- ¹⁸ Cox, M., Arnold, G., Villamayor Tomas, S. 2010. A review of design principles for community-based natural resource management. *Ecology and Society* 15: [38](#).
- ¹⁹ Franks, P. and Booker, F. 2015. *Shared governance of protected areas in Africa: Case studies, lessons learnt and conditions of success*. IIED, London.
- ²⁰ ICCA Consortium. 2021. Territories of Life. [ICCA-Territories-of-Life-2021-Report-FULL-150dpi-ENG.pdf \(territoriesoflife.org\)](https://www.territoriesoflife.org/ICCA-Territories-of-Life-2021-Report-FULL-150dpi-ENG.pdf)
- ²¹ Annex I, Decision CBD/COP/DEC/14/8 <https://www.cbd.int/doc/decisions/cop-14/cop-14-dec-08-en.pdf>
- ²² <https://www.iucn.org/theme/protected-areas/our-work/iucn-green-list-protected-and-conserved-areas>
- ²³ <https://www.iied.org/site-level-assessment-governance-equity-sage>
- ²⁴ See: <https://www.iied.org/site-level-assessment-governance-equity-sage>
- ²⁵ **World Bank (2017). The World Bank Environmental and Social Management Framework.** Washington DC.
- ²⁶ CBD 2021. First Draft of the post 2020 Global Biodiversity Framework. <https://www.cbd.int/doc/c/abb5/591f/2e46096d3f0330b08ce87a45/wg2020-03-03-en.pdf>
- ²⁷ Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity. 2020. Global Biodiversity Outlook 5 – Summary for Policy Makers. Montréal. UNEP. 2021) <https://www.cbd.int/gbo/gbo5/publication/gbo-5-spm-en.pdf>
- ²⁸ Franks, P. 2021. *Global Biodiversity Framework: equitable governance is key*. IIED, London <https://pubs.iied.org/20386iied>