

# Collaborative Governance in Preserving the Wehea Customary Forest in Nehas Liah Bing Village, Muara Wahau District, Indonesia

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## ABSTRACT

Customary forest management in Indonesia continues to face challenges, including development pressures, land conversion, and weak coordination among actors in natural resource governance. Centralized management approaches are widely considered insufficient to fully ensure forest sustainability and protect the rights of indigenous peoples. This study aims to analyze collaborative governance practices in conserving the Wehea Customary Forest in Nehas Liah Bing Village, Muara Wahau District, East Kutai Regency, Indonesia. The study adopted a qualitative case study design. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, field observations, and document reviews, and analyzed using thematic analysis. The results indicate that the successful management of the Wehea Customary Forest is driven by synergy between the local government, which acts as a policy facilitator; indigenous communities, which play a key role in forest management; and non-governmental organizations, which support capacity building. Furthermore, integrating customary law into the formal governance system has been shown to increase the legitimacy and effectiveness of forest protection and facilitate constructive conflict management. This study concludes that the collaborative governance approach plays a crucial role in conserving customary forests and strengthening recognition of indigenous communities, making it a relevant model for sustainable customary forest management.

**Keywords:** Collaborative Governance, Customary Forest Management, Indigenous Communities, Customary Law, Sustainable Forest Conservation.

## I. Introduction

Natural resource management, particularly in forest areas, is a strategic issue for Indonesia's sustainable development. Forests not only serve as ecological buffers and providers of environmental services, but also as a source of significant social, economic, and cultural values for surrounding communities. However, pressure on forest areas continues to increase due to economic expansion, land conversion, and weak governance, which remains largely centralized and exclusive. Forest management models that place the state as the dominant actor have proven inadequate to ensure forest sustainability while protecting the rights and interests of local communities. In this context, the existence of indigenous communities is a crucial issue in the discourse on forest management. Indigenous communities maintain strong historical, cultural, and spiritual ties to the forest areas they have managed for generations. Forests are viewed not only as economic

resources but also as living spaces regulated and protected through customary norms, values, and laws. Legal recognition of indigenous peoples' forest rights was strengthened by Constitutional Court Decision No. 35/PUU-X/2012, which confirmed that customary forests are no longer classified as state forests. However, implementing this recognition at the regional level continues to face various challenges, particularly those related to coordination among actors and ensuring governance. One of the main challenges in managing customary forests is establishing a governance system that balances the interests of the government, indigenous communities, and non-governmental actors. Divergent interests, limited institutional capacity, and potential conflicts often hinder effective forest conservation. Therefore, a governance approach is needed that relies not solely on regulatory instruments but also encourages participatory and sustainable collaboration among various actors. The Collaborative Governance approach has emerged as a response to hierarchical and top-down governance models. This approach emphasizes collaboration between government and non-state actors, including indigenous communities, non-governmental organizations, and the private sector, in the formulation and implementation of public policy. Through this collaboration, the decision-making process is expected to be more inclusive, transparent, and responsive to local needs. In the context of forest management, collaborative governance facilitates the integration of local knowledge, conservation objectives, and formal policy frameworks into a complementary, integrated governance system.

The Wehea Customary Forest, located in Nehas Liah Bing Village, Muara Wahau District, East Kutai Regency, East Kalimantan, is a prominent example of community-based forest management in Indonesia. Covering an area of approximately 38,000 hectares, the forest is home to a diverse range of endemic flora and fauna native to Kalimantan. The Wehea Customary Forest is managed by the Wehea indigenous community through strong customary institutions supported by customary law, which guides forest conservation efforts. The Wehea indigenous community's success in protecting the forest from the threat of deforestation has positioned this area as a national and international benchmark for customary forest management. The uniqueness of the Wehea Customary Forest management lies not only in the central role of the indigenous community but also in the active involvement of local government and non-governmental organizations in collaborative partnerships. The local government provides policy support and institutional recognition, while non-governmental organizations provide technical assistance, capacity building, and support for conservation initiatives and sustainable economic programs. This synergy demonstrates that customary forest conservation is closely linked to ongoing collaboration among various actors. However, the implementation of collaborative governance in the management of the Wehea Customary Forest is not without challenges. Differing interests among actors, limited resources, and varying levels of commitment remain important issues requiring further study. Furthermore, the scarcity of empirical studies specifically analyzing collaborative governance practices in the context of customary forests underscores the relevance and importance of this research. Based on this background, this study aims to examine how collaborative governance practices are implemented to ensure the sustainability of the Wehea Customary Forest. It also seeks to identify the roles of each actor, the collaborative mechanisms established, and the factors influencing the effectiveness and sustainability of customary forest management. Using a qualitative case study approach, this research is expected to provide a comprehensive understanding of collaborative governance in the context of customary forest management.

## II. Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

### 2.1. Collaborative Governance in Natural Resource Management

The concept of collaborative governance emerged in response to the limitations of traditional hierarchical, centralized governance approaches in addressing complex public problems. Ansell & Gash (2008) explain that collaborative governance is a governance arrangement in which government and non-government actors directly engage in a formal, context-oriented, collective decision-making process aimed at formulating and implementing public policy. This approach places dialogue, trust, and shared commitment

as key prerequisites for successful collaboration. In the context of natural resource management, collaborative governance is increasingly relevant due to the cross-sectoral and trans-regional nature of environmental issues, which involve diverse interests. Forest management, in particular, is inseparable from the involvement of local communities living in and dependent on forest areas. Therefore, collaboration enables the integration of formal state policies with local knowledge and ecologically sound traditional practices. Several studies have shown that collaborative approaches can improve the effectiveness of forest management by increasing stakeholder participation and reducing conflict. Collaboration provides space for previously marginalized actors to participate in decision-making, resulting in more adaptive policies and greater social legitimacy. Thus, Collaborative Governance serves not only as a coordination mechanism but also as an instrument to democratize environmental governance.

## 2.2. Indigenous Communities and Forest Governance

Indigenous communities play a strategic role in forest management due to the strong historical and cultural heritage associated with their customary territories. For indigenous communities, forests are not only viewed as economic resources but also as part of their identity, belief systems, and social aspirations. Therefore, customary forest management is generally based on the principle of balancing utilization and preservation. The recognition of indigenous communities' rights to forests gained legal legitimacy through Constitutional Court Decision No. 35/PUU-X/2012, which affirmed that customary forests are not part of state forests. This ruling is crucial in shifting the paradigm of forest management in Indonesia. However, legal recognition does not automatically guarantee effective customary forest management at the implementation level. Support from regional policies, strong institutions, and collaborative mechanisms that can bridge the interests of the government and indigenous communities is needed. Within the Collaborative Government framework, indigenous communities are positioned as equal partners with the government, not simply as policy objects. The active involvement of indigenous communities in the planning, implementation, and oversight of forest management has been proven to increase compliance with regulations and strengthen community-based monitoring systems. This demonstrates that integrating customary institutions into formal governance systems is a crucial strategy for maintaining forest sustainability.

## 2.3. The Role of Customary Institutions in Customary Forest Conservation

Customary institutions are social institutions that develop within indigenous communities to regulate social life, culture, and natural resource management through customary law and local wisdom (Ibrahim & Papilaya, 2022). In the context of customary forests, customary institutions have strong social and spiritual legitimacy in establishing norms, prohibitions, and sanctions governing forest use. Various studies have shown that customary community-based forest management tends to be more sustainable because it is grounded in cultural values, spiritual ties to nature, and a rigorous social monitoring system (Santoso, 2022). In the Wehea Customary Forest, the role of customary institutions is evident in the formation of the Petkuq Mehuey patrol team, tasked with protecting the forest area from poaching, illegal logging, and forest fires, while also documenting biodiversity. Previous studies have shown that the success of collaboration in forest management is heavily influenced by non-governmental actors' ability to build trust and sustain a desire for cooperation. This role is particularly crucial in the context of indigenous territories, which have limited access to resources and information. Therefore, non-governmental actors serve as enablers in collaborative governance systems. In addition to governments and indigenous communities, non-governmental actors, such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs), play a crucial role in strengthening collaborative governance practices. NGOs often act as facilitators, mediators, and providers of technical resources, helping bridge the gap between actors. The presence of NGOs also strengthens the capacity of indigenous communities through training, technical assistance, and conservation-based economic development.

#### 2.4. Legal Framework for Recognizing Customary Forests and Its Challenges

The legal recognition of customary forests has undergone significant changes since the issuance of Constitutional Court Decision No. 35/PUU-X/2012, which declared that customary forests are no longer part of state forests but are instead included in the category of privately owned forests. This ruling strengthened the position of indigenous communities as legal entities with management rights over their forest areas. The Ministry of Environment and Forestry issued Ministerial Regulation No. P.17/MENLHK/SETJEN/KUM/1/8/2020 concerning Customary Forests and Privately Owned Forests as an effort to provide legal certainty and encourage sustainable forest management. However, in practice, the recognition of customary forests still faces various administrative, technical, and political obstacles, particularly in the ratification process through regional regulations (Dore, 2021). Therefore, collaboration between local governments and customary institutions is crucial to bridge the gap between normative recognition and policy implementation at the local level.

#### 2.5. Collaborative Governance in the Conservation of the Wehea Customary Forest

The conservation of the Wehea Customary Forest demonstrates collaborative governance practices involving the East Kutai Regency government, village governments, Wehea customary institutions, and the indigenous community. The government provides regulations, institutional support, and infrastructure, while customary institutions manage, supervise, and directly enforce customary law in the field. Previous research (Candra, 2022; Rivaldi Mosiq, 2020) shows that the success of collaboration in customary forest management is strongly influenced by active community participation, equal roles between actors, trust, and clear coordination mechanisms. Consistent collaboration can suppress illegal activities, raise collective awareness, and maintain the ecological and cultural sustainability of the customary forest. In the context of the Wehea Customary Forest, the deeply rooted cultural and spiritual values of the Wehea Dayak community strengthen collaborative commitment and serve as important social capital in maintaining forest sustainability. Based on a literature review and the theoretical framework of Collaborative Governance by Ansell & Gash (2008), the preservation of the Wehea Customary Forest is influenced by the quality of collaboration between the government, customary institutions, and indigenous communities. Active participation, equal roles, clear regulations, and facilitative leadership characterize effective collaboration. Chisika et al. (2024) examined the role of interagency collaboration in sustainable forest management through a forest adoption initiative in Kenya. This study demonstrated that a collaborative approach involving the government, the private sector, and non-governmental organizations can improve the effectiveness of forest rehabilitation, resource mobilization, and ecological and economic outcomes. However, this study also revealed unequal distribution of collaboration across regions, potentially leading to social justice issues in forest resource management. Relevant to this research, it confirms that the success of Collaborative Governance in the forestry sector is not only determined by the involvement of multiple actors, but also by clear role divisions, balanced power relations, and inclusive evaluation mechanisms. This strengthens research on Collaborative Government in maintaining the sustainability of the Wehea Customary Forest, placing indigenous communities as the main actors in collaboration with the government and non-state actors, so that forest management is not only oriented towards ecological sustainability but also towards social justice and the recognition of indigenous peoples' rights.

### III. Research Method



This research uses a qualitative approach with the aim of gaining an in-depth understanding of Collaborative Government practices for preserving the Wehea Customary Forest. A qualitative approach was chosen because it allows researchers to explore the meanings, perceptions, and dynamics of relationships between actors involved in customary forest management. Through this approach, the research focuses not only on the final policy outcomes but also on the ongoing collaborative processes among stakeholders. The research design used is a case study, with the Wehea Customary Forest as the primary unit of analysis. Case studies are relevant because they provide space for a comprehensive contextual analysis of government collaboration in natural resource management. This approach allows researchers to understand local characteristics, customary values, and the social and institutional conditions that influence collaborative practices in the research area. Data collection was conducted using several techniques, including in-depth interviews, field observations, and documentation studies. In-depth interviews were conducted with key informants, including representatives from the local government, traditional leaders, members of the Wehea indigenous community, and non-governmental organizations involved in forest management. This interview technique aimed to obtain comprehensive information regarding the roles, perspectives, and experiences of each actor in the collaborative process. Field observations were conducted to directly observe customary forest management practices, including forest patrol activities, customary-based monitoring mechanisms, and interactions among actors involved in management.

These observations helped researchers understand the empirical context and validate the interview data. Meanwhile, documentation studies were conducted by reviewing various policy documents, local regulations, customary decrees, and activity reports relevant to the management of the Wehea Customary Forest. Data analysis was conducted qualitatively using thematic analysis techniques. Data obtained from various sources were classified, coded, and analyzed to identify key themes related to Collaborative Government practices. The analysis process was iterative, with researchers continuously comparing field data with the theoretical framework used, particularly the concept of Collaborative Government. To ensure data validity, this study employed source and method triangulation techniques. Triangulation was conducted by comparing data obtained from interviews, observations, and documentation, as well as from various informants. Thus, the research results are expected to be highly valid and credible. Ethically, this study upholds the principles of informant consent and data confidentiality. Informants were provided with an explanation of the research objectives and were free to determine their level of involvement in the research process. This ethical approach is essential to maintaining trust and a good relationship between the researcher and the indigenous communities as research subjects.

## IV. Result and Discussion

### 4.1. Collaboration between the Government and Traditional Institutions in Protecting the Wehea Customary Forest

To manage the essential Wehea-Kelay ecosystem as part of sustainable green development in East Kalimantan, the Indonesian Ministry of Environment and Forestry is preparing policies and management programs. The East Kalimantan provincial government has taken a serious approach to Kalimantan's forests, given the rapid rate of forest exploitation driven by economic growth, leading to collaborative management of the Wehea protected forest involving multiple stakeholders. The Governor of East Kalimantan signed this cooperation agreement on April 17, 2015. The local government acts as a facilitator, providing the legal basis, policy legitimacy, and institutional support for the management of the Wehea Customary Forest. This role is not dominant but rather aims to create a space for inclusive collaboration. The government acts as a liaison between indigenous communities' interests and regional development policies, ensuring that forest management aligns with conservation goals and community well-being. The management of the Wehea Protected Forest involves stakeholder participation. The East Kutai Regency Government, along with its partner, The Nature Conservancy TNC Indonesia, collaborated with the Wehea Traditional Institution to

develop regulations, including a patrol team comprised of indigenous members known as the petkuq mehuey.

PERJANJIAN KERJA SAMA  
ANTARA  
1. BALAI KONSERVASI SUMBER DAYA ALAM  
PROVINSI KALIMANTAN TIMUR  
2. BADAN LINGKUNGAN HIDUP PROVINSI KALIMANTAN TIMUR  
3. BADAN PENGELOLA HUTAN LINDUNG WEHEA LONG SKUNG METGUEEN  
yang selanjutnya disebut sebagai PIHAK PERTAMA  
DAN  
1. PT. GUNUNG GAJAH ABADI  
2. PT. KARYA LESTARI  
3. PT. NARKATA RIMBA  
4. PT. ACACIA ANDALAN UTAMA  
5. PT. NUSANTARA AGRO SENTOSA  
yang selanjutnya disebut sebagai PIHAK KEDUA  
DAN  
LEMBAGA ADAT WEHEA  
yang selanjutnya disebut sebagai PIHAK KETIGA  
DENGAN  
THE NATURE CONSERVANCY  
yang selanjutnya disebut sebagai PIHAK KEEMPAT  
TENTANG  
Pengelolaan Kawasan Bernilai Konservasi Tinggi  
di Kawasan Bentang Alam Wehea Seluas 264.480  
(Dua Ratus Enam Puluh Empat Ribu Empat Ratus Delapan Puluh) Hektar  
di Kecamatan Muara Wahau dan Kongbeng, Kabupaten Kutai Timur  
dan Kecamatan Kelay, Kabupaten Berau  
Provinsi Kalimantan Timur

**Figure 1. Cooperation agreement document**

The research results show that the local government plays a strategic role in creating collaborative spaces for the management of the Wehea Customary Forest. The government does not act as a dominant actor, but rather as a facilitator, providing legal legitimacy and policy support. This facilitative role is reflected in the recognition of customary institutions and support for forest conservation programs initiated by the indigenous community. Within the framework of Collaborative Government, the role of local government aligns with the principles of facilitative leadership as proposed by Ansell and Gash. The government serves as a liaison between stakeholders, ensuring that conservation, indigenous peoples', and regional development interests are aligned. This approach strengthens the legitimacy of forest management policies while increasing community compliance with mutually agreed-upon regulations. Collaboration is essential through joint planning, management, supervision, and enforcement of customary rules and local government policies. Customary institutions conduct direct field supervision and impose customary sanctions on violators, while local governments provide support through regulations and infrastructure. Supporting factors for collaboration include active community participation, strong coordination between customary institutions and village governments, and sustainable development programs such as ecotourism and the preservation of traditional culture, as seen in the Lom Plai festival.

#### 4.2. Management of the Wehea Customary Forest

The Wehea Customary Forest is a forest protected by the Wehea indigenous community. It is located within Nehas Liah Bing Village, Muara Wahau District, East Kutai Regency, East Kalimantan. It covers 38,000 hectares, a former concession area of PT. Gruti III. The management of the Wehea Protected Forest involves stakeholder participation. The East Kutai Regency government, along with its partner, The Nature Conservancy TNC Indonesia, collaborates with the Wehea customary institution to develop regulations. One

of these regulations is a patrol team comprised of indigenous members known as the petkuq mehuey. The indigenous community closely guards the forest's sustainability through the customary institution, which actively manages and supervises the Wehea customary forest (Alam et al., 2015).



**Figure 2. Wehea protected forest area**

Conservation efforts undertaken by customary institutions earned them the Kalpataru Award on May 1, 2009. Indigenous communities have preserved 38,000 hectares of protected customary forest through their successful implementation of customary law under the supervision of customary authorities. This forest area is home to various rare plant and animal species used by residents for medicinal purposes (Irwansyah Idrus, 2009). Field observations reinforce these findings. The well-maintained, well-preserved forest not only provides pristine natural beauty but also serves as a destination for ecotourism, research, and the collection of herbal medicine samples. The Wehea customary forest serves as a source of life for the community, providing materials for traditional rituals, clean water, food, and medicine. In this management, the government and various stakeholders aim to create effective integration between the management units involved in the collaboration, including:

1. Encouraging stakeholders to implement best practices in sustainable natural resource management.
2. Maintaining the function of protected forests in areas outside the Wehea-Kelay landscape conservation area.
3. Encouraging collaborative orangutan habitat management at the landscape scale and supporting long-term population viability.

Based on the author's observations, the collaborative process is not only committed to protecting the orangutan species, but also the entire ecosystem and various species within the Wehea protected forest. The resulting ecosystem provides a habitat for a variety of wildlife. Management is carried out sustainably because orangutans are nomadic creatures, with areas or spaces beyond administrative boundaries. However, its management faces challenges for the future, such as:

1. Increasing stakeholder involvement in participatory landscape-based management.
2. Establishing long-term certainty regarding the area's status.
3. Institutional and funding sustainability.
4. Initiating rewards for management units committed to orangutan habitat management.
5. Illegal logging and wildlife hunting practices.
6. Implementing corridor functions to support the sustainability of fragmented populations.
7. Legal status for Essential Ecosystem Areas.

The preservation of the Wehea Customary Forest is crucial because it not only harbors high biodiversity but also holds profound cultural and spiritual value for the Wehea Dayak people. Furthermore, this forest serves as a vital watershed, providing a source of livelihood for the surrounding community. Sustainable forest management and the prevention of damage from illegal activities or overexploitation require collaboration between customary institutions and local government (Ahmad Rifandi, 2024). Wehea customary institutions play a central role in the management of the Wehea Customary Forest. Research shows that the application of customary law is a key instrument in maintaining the sustainability of forest areas. Customary norms and sanctions have a strong social binding force and are effective in controlling community behavior regarding the use of forest resources. From a Collaborative Government perspective, the existence of customary institutions reflects the importance of recognizing non-state actors with social legitimacy. The integration of customary institutions into the formal governance system demonstrates that collaboration is not only administrative but also cultural. This reinforces the loss of forest management because the rules applied align with local values and beliefs.

#### 4.3. The Nature Conservancy (TNC) and the Nusantara Nature Conservation Foundation (YKAN)

##### 4.3.1. The Nature Conservancy (TNC)

It is a leading global non-profit organization that protects animals, plants, and natural communities by preserving the land and oceans they need to survive. This organization collaborates with the Wehea Protected Forest. The Nature Conservancy implements five main programs:

1. Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation, often referred to as REDD+. Through this program, TNC supports the government in developing the Berau Forest Carbon Program.
2. Forest land management program in protected areas. This program includes programs in Lore Lindu National Park in Sulawesi, as well as the Wehea Forest and Sungai Lesan Protected Forest in East Kalimantan.
3. Forest land management program outside protected areas. This program encourages sustainable forest management in production forests.
4. Community empowerment program, including community institutional assistance and the development of alternative economic income sources.
5. Orangutan habitat conservation program.

With a mission to conserve plants, animals, and natural communities representing the Earth's biodiversity by protecting the lands and waters necessary for their sustainability. Through this program, TNC has successfully reduced deforestation and forest degradation by adopting sustainable forestland management and balancing social, economic, and ecological values.

##### 4.3.2. Nusantara Nature Conservation Foundation (YKAN)

The Nusantara Nature Conservation Foundation is committed to supporting environmental conservation efforts, working with the government, companies, communities, and non-governmental organizations. Since 2003, YKAN has assisted the Wehea indigenous community in protecting the 38,000-hectare Wehea Forest. It continues to provide technical assistance to parties collaborating to manage essential ecosystem areas.



**Figure 3. Signing of the cooperation agreement for KEE management in the Wehea-Kelay landscape**

This has had a positive impact, manifested in increased human resource capacity, institutional strengthening, green economic development for communities, and the strengthening of cultural values integral to nature conservation. This collaborative commitment not only has a local impact but can also yield lessons that benefit elsewhere. Non-governmental organizations play a crucial role in supporting collaborative governance practices in the Wehea Customary Forest. Their support includes strengthening the institutional capacity of indigenous communities, providing technical support for conservation, and providing sustainable economic development programs. This role broadens the dimensions of collaboration beyond ecological protection to development efforts oriented toward community well-being. From a collaborative theory perspective, non-governmental actors function as facilitators and mediators, helping maintain a balance of interests between stakeholders. Their presence also strengthens trust and the desire for cooperation, particularly in the face of limited resources held by indigenous communities and local governments.

#### 4.4. Petkuq Mehuey

The Petkuq Mehuey, a Wehea customary forest guard group, was established by the government in 2005. They are at the forefront of ensuring the sustainability of the Wehea protected forest, and its culture lives on in every breath. Based on field research conducted by the Petkuq Mehuey team, they patrol the forest to protect it from poachers and illegal logging. Currently, the Petkuq Mehuey team consists of 8 to 10 members, taking turns patrolling the forest, recording its flora and fauna, and guarding wildlife monitoring trails. They once apprehended a group of agarwood thieves who stole 16 kilograms of agarwood and imposed customary sanctions. Furthermore, the Petkuq Mehuey group also encountered a group of bird hunters, whom they reported to the authorities and successfully confiscated five rifles used by the poachers. The research findings indicate that the potential for conflict in the management of the Wehea Customary Forest persists, particularly over economic interests and land use. However, the established collaborative mechanisms allow these conflicts to be managed constructively through dialogue and deliberation. Communication forums involving various actors are an important tool in mitigating potential conflict and preventing the loss of collaboration. These findings strengthen the argument that Collaborative Government functions not only as a collaborative working mechanism but also as an instrument for conflict resolution. By prioritizing dialogue and mutual agreement, collaboration can create social stability that supports the sustainability of customary forests. The Petkuq Mehuey indigenous patrol group represents a concrete form of indigenous community participation in the preservation of the Wehea Customary Forest. Research shows that this group plays an active role in preventing illegal activities such as illegal logging and wildlife poaching. In addition to its monitoring function, Petkuq Mehuey also documents forest conditions and biodiversity. The

existence of Petkuq Mehuey demonstrates that indigenous communities play a role not only as guardians of tradition but also as actors in forest management, adapting to modern challenges. Within a collaborative framework, this group serves as a link between local knowledge and formal management systems, thereby strengthening the effectiveness of forest area protection.

#### 4.5. Customary Law

Customary law is a body of rules that emerges from a community, shaped by its customs, values, traditions, and mindset. Customary law is an unwritten law that reflects identity, provides solutions, and forms the basis for the formation of national law (Abubakar, 2013). Customary law in Nehas Liah Bing Village still uses an unwritten legal system, and serves as a warning. Violating local or non-village residents will be subject to customary sanctions in the form of free-range pigs, free-range chickens, free-range chicken eggs, and possibly cash. In field observations conducted by researchers, customary law is also applied within the Wehea protected forest management area. This is done to prevent illegal logging and hunting, which can reduce the potential of flora and fauna. Therefore, the community applies customary law not only in Nehas Liah Bing Village but also throughout the Wehea protected forest.

#### 4.6. Indigenous Peoples

The Wehea indigenous community plays a central role in forest management through the implementation of customary law, area monitoring, and the transmission of conservation values from generation to generation. The existence of customary patrol groups demonstrates that indigenous communities are not merely recipients of policies but also serve as primary implementers of conservation. This position strengthens the social legitimacy of forest management and increases the effectiveness of area protection. Nehas Liah Bing village is dominated by the Dayak tribe, who help protect the Wehea forest. Other tribes, including the Kutai and Javanese, also exist. The Dayak community in Nehas Liah Bing village is the oldest in Muara Wahau, and their livelihoods depend on natural resources from the forest and rivers, as well as on agricultural products. Every year, the indigenous community celebrates a rice harvest festival called Lom Plai. Lom Plai symbolizes the success of a bountiful rice harvest. It depicts the sacrifice of a princess named Long Diang Yung, a sacrifice made to save the Wehea Dayak community. The Lom Plai ceremony is held annually from April to May. The community adheres to the requirements for the Lom Plai ceremony in the Wehea protected forest, ensuring that the forest plays a vital role in the community and maintains its traditional values. The management of the Wehea Customary Forest represents a relatively mature collaborative governance practice in community-based natural resource management. Research findings indicate that successful forest conservation is not solely determined by the presence of formal institutions, but rather by the synergy among actors built through sustainable collaborative mechanisms. This collaboration brings together local governments, customary institutions, indigenous communities, and non-governmental organizations within a shared framework that places trust, equal roles, and active participation as its primary foundations. Within the Collaborative Government framework, the local government serves as a facilitator, providing legal legitimacy, policy support, and an institutional framework. Meanwhile, the Wehea customary institution performs substantive management functions at the local level through customary law enforcement and direct oversight of forest areas.

This division of roles reflects the principle of collaboration, which is not hierarchical but rather based on the recognition of each actor's capacity and authority. Thus, establishing governance not only improves the effectiveness of forest management but also strengthens the legitimacy of social and conservation policies. The existence of the Petkuq Mehuey patrol group is a clear demonstration of how collaboration translates into operational practice. This group not only acts as forest guardians against illegal activities but also as actors of local knowledge, documenting ecological conditions and biodiversity dynamics. This role demonstrates that indigenous communities are positioned not as objects of policy but as active subjects in

the environmental governance system. This aligns with the view that indigenous community-based forest management tends to be more adaptive and sustainable because it is rooted in ecological experiences and cultural values passed down through generations. Furthermore, this research emphasizes the importance of customary law as an effective governance instrument. Customary law serves not only as a social norm but also as a behavioral control mechanism with strong binding power at the community level. The integration of customary law with formal government regulations creates a complementary dual oversight system, thus suppressing illegal logging and wildlife poaching practices more effectively than a coercive approach alone. The involvement of non-governmental organizations such as The Nature Conservancy (TNC) and the Nusantara Nature Conservation Foundation (YKAN) has significantly strengthened the institutional capacity and human resources of indigenous communities. Technical assistance, green economy development, and the integration of forest management at the landscape scale demonstrate that collaboration focuses not only on ecological aspects but also on the social and economic ecosystems of communities. This dimension is crucial to ensuring that forest conservation efforts do not conflict with local communities' livelihoods. This research contributes theoretically to the development of collaborative government studies, particularly in the context of customary forest management.

The findings demonstrate that effective collaboration is determined not only by formal institutional design but also by the recognition of customary institutions and local values within the community. Thus, this research extends the collaborative governance framework, which has been widely studied in urban and public service contexts, to the realm of indigenous community-based natural resource management. Furthermore, this research confirms that integrating customary law into collaborative governance can enhance the legitimacy and effectiveness of environmental policies. This suggests that the collaborative approach should be understood not only as a coordination mechanism among actors but also as a space for interaction between formal legal systems and local customary law. However, this study also identified several structural challenges that could disrupt collaboration, including securing the area's long-term legal status, ensuring ecosystem sustainability, and ensuring consistent stakeholder commitment. These challenges demonstrate that Collaborative Governance requires ongoing institutional strengthening to avoid dependence on specific actors or programs. Therefore, institutionalizing collaborative governance through regional policies and long-term funding schemes is a necessary strategy. Overall, this study enriches the Collaborative Governance literature by demonstrating that effective customary forest management requires integration between formal government structures and customary institutions. The case of the Wehea Customary Forest demonstrates that collaboration built on recognition, participation, and trust can simultaneously generate ecological, social, and cultural benefits. These findings confirm that indigenous communities play a strategic role in environmental governance and should be positioned as equal partners in natural resource management policies.

## V. Conclusion

The effective utilization of human and natural resources in the Wehea Customary Forest is realized through strong collaboration among multiple stakeholders, including the government, customary institutions, indigenous communities, The Nature Conservancy, and the Indonesian Nature Conservation Foundation. This collaborative approach enables the optimization of local capacities, particularly through the involvement of indigenous communities in the formation and operation of the Petkuq Mehuey patrol. Such participation not only strengthens forest management and protection efforts but also promotes sustainable use of natural resources, including the utilization of medicinal plants, the development of ecotourism, and the conservation of biodiversity within the forest area. Supervision and law enforcement in the Wehea Customary Forest are carried out through the application of customary law, reinforced by formal government regulations. The Petkuq Mehuey community plays a central role in monitoring and controlling illegal activities such as illegal logging, wildlife poaching, and forest fires. The imposition of customary sanctions serves as a deterrent to prevent the recurrence of violations and to ensure adherence to customary norms. This system contributes

to a more structured, secure, and effective model of collaborative forest governance. Community education and participation constitute another important pillar of collaborative management in the Wehea Customary Forest. Indigenous communities demonstrate a high level of awareness of the importance of conservation, fostered through continuous mentoring, the socialization of customary values, and direct involvement in conservation activities. Strong community participation enhances social legitimacy and significantly increases the effectiveness of collective forest management practices. The preservation of the Wehea Customary Forest is reflected in the sustained ecological conditions, the protection of biodiversity, and the continued function of the forest as a source of food, medicine, and materials for traditional rituals. Management practices grounded in sustainability principles ensure that the forest ecosystem can function optimally over the long term while maintaining its ecological and socio-cultural roles for the indigenous community. In addition to its ecological importance, the Wehea Customary Forest holds deep cultural and spiritual significance for the Wehea Dayak people.

The continued practice of traditional rituals, such as *lomplai*, illustrates the community's commitment to ancestral values passed down across generations. The enforcement of customary law in forest management not only strengthens cultural identity but also ensures that spiritual values remain integral to community life. Government policy and regulatory support are crucial factors in the success of Wehea Customary Forest management. Legal legitimacy strengthened through the Constitutional Court Decision No. 35/PUU-X/2012, cooperation agreements, and ongoing conservation programs implemented by relevant forestry institutions provides a stable legal and institutional foundation. This regulatory framework reinforces collaborative governance mechanisms and supports long-term forest protection efforts. Based on the research findings and discussion, it can be concluded that collaborative governance practices in the management of the Wehea Customary Forest are implemented through active, participatory involvement of local governments, indigenous communities, and non-governmental organizations within a sustainable collaborative framework. The local government primarily functions as a facilitator, providing legal legitimacy and policy support, while the core management roles remain with the indigenous community. The Wehea indigenous community emerges as a key actor in maintaining forest sustainability through the application of customary law, the strengthening of customary institutions, and community-based monitoring systems that possess strong social legitimacy. Non-governmental organizations play an important role in enhancing the institutional and technical capacities of indigenous communities and in advocating for the sustainability of cross-sectoral collaboration. The integration of customary law into the formal governance system has proven to increase the effectiveness of forest protection and to facilitate constructive conflict management. Overall, the collaborative governance approach demonstrates strong relevance and effectiveness in sustaining the Wehea Customary Forest while simultaneously strengthening the recognition of indigenous rights and roles in natural resource management.

The sustainability of the Wehea Customary Forest is therefore strongly supported by the implementation of effective collaborative governance involving local governments, customary institutions, indigenous communities, and non-governmental organizations. The findings indicate that collaboration characterized by active community participation, clear role distribution, mutual trust, and facilitative leadership contributes significantly to positive conservation outcomes. These outcomes include preventing illegal logging and wildlife poaching, protecting biodiversity, and preserving the cultural and spiritual values of the Wehea Dayak community. The role of customary institutions, particularly through the *Petkuq Mehuey* forest patrol group, stands out as a decisive factor in ensuring continuous monitoring and enforcement of customary law. Customary law functions not only as a cultural instrument but also as an effective governance mechanism that complements formal regulations. At the same time, government support through regulatory frameworks, institutional facilitation, and infrastructure further strengthens the legitimacy and effectiveness of customary forest management. The results of this study provide recommendations for local governments to strengthen collaborative government practices in managing customary forests. Local governments need to ensure legal certainty regarding the status of customary forests and provide ongoing policy support for customary institutions. This support should not only take the form of regulations but also strengthen

institutional capacity and provide adequate resources. For indigenous communities, this study emphasizes the importance of an active role in protecting and managing forests as part of their identity and social aspirations. Meanwhile, for non-governmental organizations, this study demonstrates that mentoring and facilitation remain key elements in maintaining collaborative aspirations. Thus, the management of the Wehea Customary Forest can serve as a best-practice example for customary forests in other areas. The involvement of non-governmental organizations such as The Nature Conservancy (TNC) and the Nusantara Nature Conservation Foundation (YKAN) has increased local capacity, institutional resilience, and the integration of conservation objectives with community livelihoods. This multi-stakeholder collaboration has enabled sustainable forest management at the landscape level, particularly in protecting critical ecosystems and wildlife habitats beyond administrative boundaries.

These findings suggest that local and regional governments should institutionalize collaborative governance frameworks for customary forest management by ensuring legal certainty, long-term funding mechanisms, and recognizing customary institutions as equal partners in environmental governance. Strengthening the legal status of customary forests, elaborating administrative procedures, and integrating customary law into formal policy instruments are crucial for sustaining collaborative efforts. Empowering indigenous communities through capacity building, ongoing facilitation, and equitable partnership arrangements is crucial. The case of the Wehea Customary Forest provides a replicable model for sustainable forest governance that balances ecological sustainability, cultural preservation, and community well-being, particularly in areas with strong customary ties to land and natural resources. This study concludes that Collaborative Government practices play a crucial role in preserving the Wehea Customary Forest. Successful customary forest management relies heavily on the synergy among local governments, indigenous communities, and non-governmental organizations, fostered through participatory, sustainable, and collaborative mechanisms. The local government acts as a facilitator, indigenous communities as the primary actors in management, and non-governmental organizations as supporters and enhancers of collaborative capacity. The integration of customary law into the formal governance system has been shown to strengthen the legitimacy and effectiveness of forest management. Furthermore, dialogue and deliberation mechanisms within a collaborative framework have constructively managed potential conflicts, thereby supporting the cessation of management of the Wehea Customary Forest. Therefore, this study confirms that the Collaborative Government approach is a relevant and effective strategy for customary forest management in Indonesia. Overall, the Wehea Customary Forest can be seen as a concrete example of collaborative governance practices that focus not only on environmental conservation but also on social justice and the recognition of indigenous peoples' rights. This model is expected to serve as a reference in developing customary forest management policies in other regions.

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