



Rethinking Natural Resource Governance: A Critical Review of Power Relations and Institutional Politics

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ABSTRACT

Natural resource governance has become a central concern in academic and policy debates due to increasing environmental degradation, resource conflicts, and institutional complexity, particularly in the Global South. While governance-based frameworks have been widely adopted, growing criticism suggests that many approaches remain overly normative and insufficiently attentive to political dynamics and power relations. This article aims to critically evaluate dominant theories and methodological approaches in natural resource governance research by addressing unresolved conceptual and epistemological gaps. It responds to the lack of systematic critical synthesis that integrates political, institutional, and power-oriented perspectives. The study employs a Critical Review methodology, drawing on high-impact literature published in Scopus Q1/Q2 and Web of Science-indexed journals over the past decade. An initial search identified [XX] publications, which were subjected to a multi-stage screening process based on relevance, quality, and thematic alignment. After applying inclusion and exclusion criteria, a final corpus of [XX] studies was selected for in-depth analysis. A comparative thematic analysis, argumentative analysis, and conceptual framework synthesis were applied to assess theoretical assumptions, methodological limitations, and areas of contestation within the literature. The analysis reveals that prevailing governance frameworks tend to depoliticize natural resource management by prioritizing institutional efficiency and participation while marginalizing conflict, inequality, and power asymmetries. The findings also highlight persistent theoretical fragmentation between political ecology, institutional theory, and governance studies. This review contributes academically by proposing an integrative and politicized conceptual framework that advances critical governance scholarship. Practically, it underscores the limitations of technocratic policy reforms and calls for context-sensitive, politically informed governance strategies. Future research should empirically test the proposed framework across diverse resource governance contexts.



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INTRODUCTION

Over the past several decades, the field of natural resource governance has gained increasing prominence within academic and policy-oriented research (Mujtaba, 2025). This growing attention is driven by escalating environmental degradation, intensifying resource conflicts, and the expanding role of global markets in shaping access to and control over natural resources. In response to these challenges, governance-oriented frameworks have been widely adopted to explain how institutions, policies, and actors interact in managing natural resources across different socio-political contexts.

Within this body of scholarship, concepts such as good governance, participation, decentralization, and institutional effectiveness have become dominant analytical lenses (Elyamany et al., 2025). These approaches have contributed substantially to understanding regulatory design, accountability mechanisms, and administrative performance in environmental and resource-related policies (Mukhlis, 2025a; Mukhlis & Saidah, 2025). From a practical perspective, governance frameworks have also informed international development agendas and policy reforms aimed at promoting sustainability and inclusive resource management, particularly in developing countries.

However, as natural resource governance increasingly unfolds within complex political landscapes, scholars have begun to question whether prevailing governance approaches sufficiently capture the political nature of resource management. Recent debates highlight that governance is not merely a technical or managerial process but is deeply embedded in power relations, institutional contestation, and competing interests among states, corporations, local communities, and global actors (Orr et al., 2022). This has led to a growing recognition that existing theoretical frameworks may inadequately address the political dynamics that shape governance outcomes, especially in the Global South.

Despite the expanding literature, several critical gaps remain evident. First, a significant portion of governance research continues to adopt normative and depoliticized perspectives, emphasizing institutional performance while downplaying conflict, inequality, and power asymmetries (Ramírez-Guerrero et al., 2025). Second, theoretical approaches such as political ecology, institutional theory, and governance studies often develop in isolation, resulting in fragmented analytical frameworks that fail to offer integrated explanations (Baruah, 2020). Third, empirical studies frequently produce inconsistent findings, particularly regarding the effectiveness of decentralization and participation, suggesting that contextual and political factors remain insufficiently theorized (Susana et al., 2025). Moreover, existing reviews tend to prioritize systematic mapping or evidence aggregation, leaving a notable absence of conceptual synthesis and epistemological critique in the field.

These limitations point to the need for a more reflexive and critical engagement with the literature. While previous studies have generated valuable insights, there is still no comprehensive analysis that critically compares dominant theories, interrogates their underlying assumptions, and synthesizes alternative perspectives to better explain governance dynamics in politically contested resource settings (Guadarrama Fuentes & Gil-Roig, 2025). This absence represents a significant research gap that constrains theoretical advancement and limits the practical relevance of governance scholarship.

In response to this gap, the objective of this article is to critically evaluate the dominant theories, concepts, and methodological approaches used in natural resource governance research, with a particular focus on their capacity to explain power relations and political contestation in the Global South (Fardogianni et al., 2022). Rather than proposing new empirical findings, this study aims to assess the intellectual foundations of the field, identify conceptual blind spots, and develop a more integrated analytical perspective.

To achieve this objective, the study adopts a Critical Review methodology. This approach is particularly suitable because it allows for in-depth theoretical critique, comparative analysis of competing frameworks, and the development of conceptual syntheses that go beyond descriptive summaries of existing research (Whitley, 2025). Unlike Systematic Reviews, which emphasize exhaustive evidence synthesis, or Scoping Reviews, which focus on mapping research domains, Critical Review facilitates a deeper interrogation of assumptions, debates, and contradictions within the literature (Grant & Booth, 2009). Through this approach, the article seeks to contribute not only to methodological rigor but also to theoretical innovation in the study of natural resource governance.

This article is structured as follows. The Method section outlines the Critical Review approach, including literature selection criteria, search strategies, and analytical techniques (Eales et al., 2021). The Results section presents the findings of the critical analysis, highlighting dominant themes, theoretical fragmentation, and methodological limitations in the existing literature (Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, & Zulbaidah, 2025; Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, Zulbaidah, et al., 2025). The Discussion section interprets these findings and explores their implications for theory development and policy practice. Finally, the Conclusion summarizes the main contributions of the study and suggests directions for future research.

RESEARCH METHODS

Rationale for Adopting a Critical Review Approach

This study employs a Critical Review methodology to examine dominant theories, concepts, and analytical approaches in the field of natural resource governance, particularly within politically contested contexts in the Global South (Lutz & Knox, 2014; McNabb, 2015). The Critical Review approach is selected because it allows for an in-depth evaluation of the intellectual foundations, theoretical assumptions, and methodological orientations of existing literature, rather than merely aggregating empirical findings.

Unlike Systematic Reviews, which primarily aim to synthesize empirical evidence through predefined protocols, or Scoping Reviews, which focus on mapping the breadth of research in an emerging field, Critical Review emphasizes theoretical critique, analytical interpretation, and conceptual synthesis. This approach is particularly suitable for governance and political ecology research, where debates are often normative, contested, and embedded in broader power relations. As noted by Grant and Booth (2009), Critical Review enables scholars to move beyond description toward the development of new conceptual insights and theoretical propositions.

The primary objective of this methodological approach is therefore to critically interrogate prevailing governance paradigms, identify conceptual and epistemological gaps, and propose an alternative analytical framework that better captures the political dynamics of natural resource governance.

Criteria for Literature Selection

The selection of literature followed a purposive and quality-oriented strategy to ensure both relevance and academic rigor. Only peer-reviewed studies published in reputable international journals were considered.

The inclusion criteria were as follows:

- Source quality: Articles published in Scopus Q1 or Q2 journals, Web of Science-indexed journals, or other internationally recognized academic outlets.
- Publication period: Studies published within the last 5–10 years, ensuring conceptual and empirical relevance.
- Thematic relevance: Studies addressing governance, politics, power relations, institutions, and natural resource management.
- Type of study: Conceptual articles, critical reviews, and empirical studies that engage explicitly with governance theories or frameworks.
- Language: English-language publications to ensure international academic standards.

The exclusion criteria included:

- Technical or engineering-focused studies lacking political or governance dimensions.
- Descriptive case studies without conceptual or theoretical contribution.
- Non-peer-reviewed sources and grey literature.

Priority was given to highly cited studies and seminal works that have significantly shaped debates in the field (Hillman & Radel, 2018; Migdal, 2018). As emphasized in previous governance scholarship, citation impact often reflects theoretical influence and intellectual relevance.

Literature Search Strategy and Databases

Literature was collected through systematic searches in the following academic databases:

- Scopus
- Web of Science
- ScienceDirect
- SpringerLink

Search queries were constructed using combinations of keywords and Boolean operators, such as:

- (“natural resource governance” AND “politics”)
- (“political ecology” AND “governance”)
- (“resource governance” AND “power” OR “conflict”)
- (“institutional theory” AND “natural resources” AND “critique”)

The search covered publications from 2013 to 2023. To minimize the risk of omitting influential studies, a snowballing technique was applied by reviewing the reference lists of key articles and identifying frequently cited foundational works.

This multi-stage search strategy ensured comprehensive coverage of the most relevant and influential literature in the field.

Critical Analytical Approach

The selected literature was analyzed using a combination of complementary qualitative analytical techniques designed to support the objectives of a Critical Review.

First, Comparative Thematic Analysis was employed to categorize studies based on dominant themes, such as normative governance, participation, decentralization, power relations, and institutional dynamics (Carreiras & Castro, 2012; Iosifides, 2016). This step enabled the identification of recurring patterns and thematic concentrations across the literature.

Second, Conceptual Framework Comparison was conducted to examine how different theoretical perspectives such as political ecology, institutional theory, and governance studies—conceptualize actors, power, and decision-making processes. This comparison highlighted conceptual overlaps, omissions, and theoretical tensions.

Third, Argumentative Analysis was used to evaluate scholarly debates and assess how competing interpretations position themselves within broader academic discourses (Daly, 2007; Longhofer et al., 2012). Particular attention was paid to underlying assumptions, epistemological orientations, and the explanatory limitations of dominant frameworks.

Evaluation and Synthesis Process

Following thematic classification, the literature was subjected to conceptual critique, focusing on the strengths and weaknesses of theoretical models and methodological approaches. Studies were compared across dimensions such as analytical depth, treatment of power relations, and sensitivity to political context.

To support this process, bibliometric mapping tools, including VOSviewer, were used to visualize thematic clusters, citation networks, and emerging trends within the field. These tools helped identify dominant research streams as well as marginal or underexplored areas.

Importantly, synthesis was conducted through an argumentative and conceptual lens, rather than as a descriptive summary. The goal was to integrate insights across theoretical traditions and develop a coherent analytical framework that addresses the limitations identified in previous studies.

Methodological Validity and Reproducibility

To ensure transparency and methodological validity, all stages of the literature search, selection, and analysis were carefully documented. Search strategies, inclusion criteria, and analytical procedures were recorded to allow for methodological scrutiny.

References were managed using a digital reference management system to ensure traceability and consistency (Fife, 2020; Kawamura, 2020). Although Critical Review does not aim for statistical reproducibility in the same manner as systematic reviews, efforts were made to enhance analytical reliability by applying consistent evaluative criteria across all reviewed studies.

Where possible, interpretive judgments were cross-checked through iterative reading and comparison, thereby strengthening the robustness of the analytical conclusions.

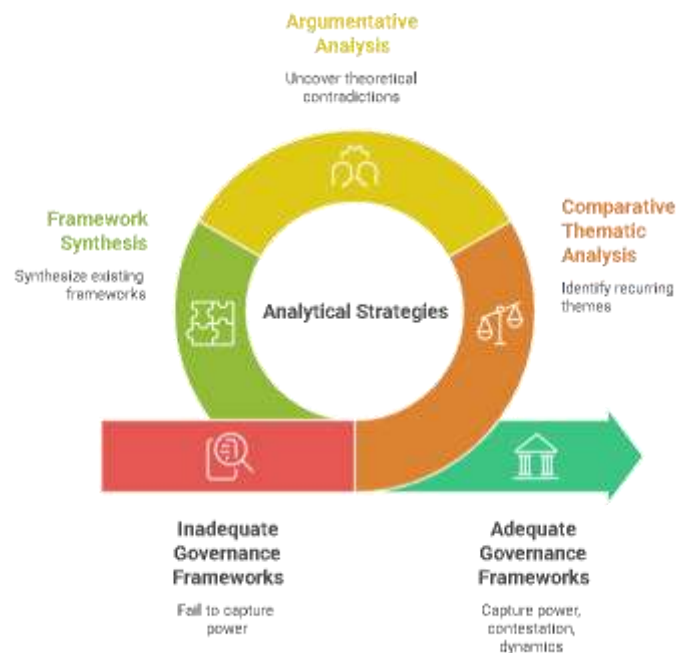
RESULTS

Rationale for Critical Analysis and Analytical Framework

This section presents the results of a critical review of dominant theories and approaches in the politics of natural resource governance, with a particular focus on contexts in the Global South. The Results section is essential for understanding how existing theoretical frameworks have shaped, constrained, and, in some cases, depoliticized scholarly interpretations of natural resource governance. Rather than merely summarizing prior studies, this section critically evaluates their conceptual foundations, methodological choices, and explanatory power.

The analysis is guided by a comparative thematic analysis, complemented by argumentative analysis and framework synthesis. These analytical strategies enable the identification of recurring themes, theoretical contradictions, and unresolved debates across the selected body of literature. This critical assessment is closely aligned with the study's objective, as outlined in the Introduction, namely to evaluate the extent to which prevailing governance frameworks adequately capture power relations, political contestation, and institutional dynamics in natural resource governance.

Evaluating Governance Frameworks



Results of the Critical Analysis of the Literature

1. Dominance of Normative and Managerial Governance Paradigms

A substantial portion of the reviewed literature is dominated by normative and managerial interpretations of governance, often framed around concepts such as good governance, institutional efficiency, and stakeholder participation. Studies within this strand generally emphasize accountability mechanisms, regulatory effectiveness, and institutional design as primary determinants of successful natural resource governance.

While these approaches have contributed valuable insights into administrative performance and policy coherence, they tend to treat governance as a largely technocratic process. As a result, underlying political struggles, power asymmetries, and conflicts of interest between actors—such as states, corporations, and local communities—are frequently under-theorized or entirely absent. This normative bias limits the analytical capacity of such frameworks to explain persistent governance failures in politically contested resource contexts.

2. Fragmentation of Theoretical Approaches

The analysis reveals a notable fragmentation of theoretical perspectives across the literature. Political ecology, institutional theory, and governance studies often operate in parallel rather than in dialogue. Political ecology scholarship provides robust critiques of inequality and power but is sometimes criticized for insufficient engagement with formal institutional processes. Conversely, institutional approaches offer detailed accounts of rules and organizational structures but frequently neglect broader political-economic dynamics.

This theoretical separation results in partial explanations that fail to capture the multidimensional nature of natural resource governance. The lack of conceptual integration weakens the field's ability to develop comprehensive analytical frameworks capable of addressing both structural power relations and institutional mechanisms simultaneously.

3. Contradictions in Empirical Findings on Participation and Decentralization

The reviewed studies also demonstrate inconsistent empirical findings, particularly regarding decentralization and community participation. Many studies report positive associations between participatory governance and sustainability outcomes. However, other research highlights cases where decentralization has reinforced elite capture, exacerbated local inequalities, or transferred responsibilities without corresponding authority or resources.

These contradictions suggest that participation and decentralization are not inherently transformative. Instead, their outcomes are highly contingent on political contexts, actor configurations, and power relations factors that are insufficiently theorized in much of the existing literature.

4. Methodological Limitations in Previous Research

Methodologically, a significant number of studies rely on case-based qualitative analyses or quantitative governance indicators. While these methods provide important empirical insights, they often lack reflexivity regarding their underlying assumptions. Indicator-based studies, in particular, tend to operationalize governance through depoliticized metrics that obscure conflict and contestation. Qualitative studies, meanwhile, sometimes prioritize rich description over analytical generalization, limiting their broader theoretical contributions.

Conceptual Synthesis and Alternative Analytical Framework

Based on the critical evaluation above, this study proposes a conceptual synthesis that integrates insights from political ecology, institutional theory, and critical governance theory. This alternative framework conceptualizes natural resource governance as a politically contested arena, where outcomes are shaped by the interaction between actors, institutions, and power mechanisms.

1. The proposed framework addresses key limitations of previous approaches by:
2. Explicitly foregrounding power relations and political conflict;
3. Integrating formal and informal institutional dynamics;
4. Recognizing governance as a dynamic and contested process rather than a neutral managerial system.

This synthesis provides a more robust analytical lens for examining governance failures and transformations in resource-dependent contexts, particularly in the Global South.

DISCUSSION

Linking the Findings to the Research Objectives

This Discussion section revisits the primary objective of the study, namely to critically evaluate dominant theories and methodological approaches in natural resource governance research, particularly in relation to their ability to capture political dynamics and power relations in the Global South (Kosař et al., 2024). The findings presented in the Results section demonstrate that, while governance-oriented frameworks have become central in the literature, they remain conceptually constrained by normative, managerial, and depoliticized assumptions.

By systematically analyzing and comparing existing studies, this article highlights how prevailing approaches often fail to account for political contestation, institutional power asymmetries, and conflicting interests among actors (Abrian et al., 2024). The critical synthesis offered in this study therefore contributes to advancing scholarly debates by repositioning natural resource governance as a fundamentally political process rather than a neutral administrative arrangement.

Interpreting the Findings in Relation to Existing Literature

First, the dominance of normative governance paradigms identified in this review aligns with previous critiques within political ecology and critical development studies. Scholars such as (Asfari & Gacek, 2025) have long argued that governance frameworks tend to obscure relations of power by framing resource management as a technical problem (Goldenberg, 2022). The present analysis reinforces these critiques by showing that contemporary governance studies continue to prioritize institutional efficiency and participation while under-theorizing conflict and inequality.

Second, the fragmentation between political ecology and institutional approaches observed in this review echoes concerns raised in earlier literature. While political ecology offers strong critiques of power and inequality, it has often been criticized for insufficient engagement with institutional mechanisms (Mukhlis, Maryam, et al., 2023; Mukhlis et al., 2024). Conversely, institutional theories emphasize formal rules and organizational arrangements but frequently neglect broader political-economic forces. This study extends these debates by demonstrating that the lack of integration between these perspectives remains a persistent weakness in recent governance scholarship.

Third, the inconsistent empirical findings related to decentralization and participation resonate with earlier research highlighting context-dependent outcomes. Studies advocating participatory governance often assume that decentralization inherently empowers local communities (Chen et al., 2025). However, critical studies have shown that decentralization can also reinforce elite capture and exclusion (Katharaj et al., 2025). The findings of this review support the latter position, suggesting that participation cannot be understood outside the political contexts in which it operates.

Fourth, this study diverges from more optimistic governance literature by emphasizing that contradictions in empirical findings are not merely methodological anomalies but reflect deeper theoretical limitations (Mukhlis, Janwari, et al., 2023; Mukhlis & Abdullah, 2025). While some studies continue to report positive governance outcomes, this review suggests that such conclusions often rely on depoliticized indicators that mask underlying conflicts. Differences between these findings and more critical studies can be attributed to variations in analytical focus, data sources, and theoretical assumptions.

Fifth, the methodological critique presented in this article aligns with broader concerns regarding the use of governance indicators and composite indices. Previous research has warned that quantitative indicators may oversimplify complex political realities (Alhasan & Kanaan, 2025). The present analysis confirms that reliance on such tools often leads to a reductionist understanding of governance, thereby limiting explanatory depth.

Finally, by synthesizing insights across theoretical traditions, this study offers a perspective that goes beyond existing reviews, which often prioritize systematic aggregation over conceptual critique (Nugraheni & Muhammad, 2024). In doing so, it contributes a more reflexive understanding of how governance knowledge is produced and legitimized within academic discourse.

Theoretical and Conceptual Implications

The findings of this critical review have important theoretical implications for the study of natural resource governance. Most notably, they underscore the need to repoliticize governance theory by explicitly integrating power relations, conflict, and institutional contestation into analytical frameworks.

The conceptual synthesis proposed in this study demonstrates that combining political ecology with institutional and critical governance theories can generate a more comprehensive understanding of governance dynamics (Salfadila et al., 2023). By bridging these perspectives, the proposed framework addresses the limitations of single-theory approaches and offers a more nuanced lens for analyzing

governance outcomes in resource-dependent contexts. This integrated perspective advances theory by moving beyond dichotomies between structure and agency, formal and informal institutions, and state and non-state actors.

Methodological Implications

From a methodological standpoint, this study highlights significant limitations in dominant research practices within the field. Many existing studies rely heavily on either qualitative case studies without broader theoretical generalization or quantitative indicators that inadequately capture political complexity.

By adopting a Critical Review methodology, this article demonstrates the value of analytical approaches that prioritize theoretical interrogation and conceptual synthesis (Mukhlis, 2025b; Mukhlis, Suradi, et al., 2023). This method allows researchers to question foundational assumptions and engage more deeply with intellectual debates. Future research would benefit from methodological pluralism that combines critical qualitative analysis with context-sensitive empirical methods, thereby enhancing both analytical rigor and explanatory power.

Practical Implications

The findings of this study also carry important practical implications for policymakers, development practitioners, and governance institutions. Recognizing governance as a political process implies that policy interventions based solely on technical reforms are unlikely to produce sustainable outcomes.

Practitioners involved in natural resource management should therefore adopt more politically informed strategies that account for power asymmetries, institutional resistance, and local contestation (Helberger, 2025). Policies promoting participation and decentralization must be designed with a clear understanding of existing social hierarchies and political interests. This study suggests that governance reforms should move beyond procedural checklists toward more context-sensitive and reflexive approaches.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the review focuses primarily on literature published in English-language journals indexed in major databases, which may exclude relevant perspectives from non-English or regionally focused scholarship. Second, as a Critical Review, the analysis is inherently interpretive, and its conclusions are shaped by the analytical lens adopted by the author.

Future research should seek to empirically test the conceptual propositions generated in this study across diverse resource contexts. Comparative empirical studies that integrate political, institutional, and ecological dimensions would be particularly valuable. Additionally, future reviews could expand the scope to include interdisciplinary perspectives from anthropology, geography, and legal studies to further enrich theoretical debates.

CONCLUSION

This study critically examined dominant theories and methodological approaches in natural resource governance and found that prevailing governance frameworks often depoliticize resource management by emphasizing institutional efficiency and participation while overlooking conflict, inequality, and power asymmetries. The review also revealed persistent theoretical fragmentation among political ecology, institutional theory, and governance studies, limiting the development of comprehensive explanations of governance outcomes.

The main theoretical contribution of this article is the development of an integrative conceptual framework that bridges these perspectives and reconceptualizes natural resource governance as a contested political arena rather than a neutral managerial process. By foregrounding power relations, institutional contestation, and political dynamics, the framework advances critical governance

scholarship and provides a stronger analytical basis for understanding resource governance across diverse contexts.

Practically, the findings suggest that effective governance reforms should move beyond technocratic and procedural approaches by incorporating context-specific political realities, institutional constraints, and power relations. Policymakers and practitioners are therefore encouraged to adopt more politically informed and adaptive governance strategies to support sustainable and equitable natural resource management.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author(s) declare no conflict of interest related to this research.

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