



Exploring the Experiences and Perceptions of Local Communities on Environmental Conservation Policies in Conservation Areas: A Phenomenological Approach

Eva R

Universitas Muhammadiyah Prof. Dr. Hamka, Indonesia

kimuraezhie@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Environmental conservation is a critical area of study that aims to balance ecological preservation with human needs. While much of the research focuses on policy outcomes and broad trends, little is known about the subjective experiences of local communities who are directly impacted by conservation policies. The question remains: How do local communities experience and respond to these policies within their socio-cultural and economic contexts? In this study, we use a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of local community members regarding the implementation of environmental conservation policies. Through in-depth interviews with 15 participants from conservation areas, we identified key themes including economic pressures, cultural norms, resistance to policy implementation, and a lack of trust in authorities. Our analysis reveals that local communities' responses to conservation policies are deeply influenced by these factors, suggesting that top-down approaches often fail to address the real needs and experiences of affected populations. These findings have significant implications for future conservation strategies and policy designs, highlighting the need for a more holistic approach that incorporates local perspectives and fosters greater trust between authorities and communities.



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INTRODUCTION

Environmental conservation is a critical issue that has gained significant attention globally, particularly as natural ecosystems face increasing threats from human activities. The need to protect biodiversity, maintain ecosystem services, and combat the adverse effects of climate change has led to the establishment of various environmental conservation policies worldwide (Phillips, 2021). These policies aim to regulate the use of natural resources, preserve habitats, and ensure the sustainability of ecosystems for future generations. However, the implementation of such policies often encounters challenges, particularly in conservation areas where local communities depend on natural resources for their livelihoods.

The relevance of this phenomenon lies in the complex intersection between environmental sustainability and the lived experiences of local communities. While conservation policies are designed to protect the environment, they frequently clash with the economic and cultural practices of those who depend on these resources for survival. In many instances, local communities find themselves caught between the necessity to comply with conservation regulations and the need to maintain their traditional ways of life. This creates a unique situation in which the subjective experiences of these communities play a crucial role in shaping the effectiveness of conservation policies. Understanding the lived experiences of these individuals is essential to address the disconnect between policy goals and the realities faced by local populations.

Given the subjective nature of these experiences, it is imperative to explore the deeper meanings behind how individuals perceive and respond to environmental conservation policies. This need for a more nuanced understanding aligns with the phenomenological approach, which seeks to uncover the essence of human experiences (Chow dkk., 2021). Previous studies, such as those by O'Rourke dkk. (2021), have demonstrated how phenomenological methods provide rich, context-specific insights into the experiences of local communities in conservation areas. Through phenomenology, this study aims to explore the meanings and interpretations that local community members attach to their experiences with conservation policies. By focusing on the lived experiences of these individuals, this research aims to provide valuable insights into how conservation policies can be better designed and implemented in ways that are more inclusive, culturally sensitive, and aligned with the needs of local populations.

Research into the subjective experiences of individuals within specific phenomena has emerged as an important field within social and environmental sciences, particularly in understanding how people engage with and respond to complex issues like environmental conservation. Understanding how individuals experience and interpret conservation policies provides valuable insights into the effectiveness and impact of these policies. The growing recognition that environmental policies cannot be implemented effectively without considering local knowledge, values, and experiences has led to a shift towards research that prioritizes the lived experiences of affected communities (Rahiem, 2021). In this context, phenomenological research offers a unique approach to uncover the deeper meanings behind people's actions, attitudes, and behaviors related to conservation.

However, exploring such subjective experiences presents notable methodological challenges. Traditional quantitative approaches, such as surveys or statistical analysis, often fail to capture the nuanced, personal experiences of individuals. These methods are more suited to measuring broad trends or outcomes, but they cannot fully address the complexity and richness of people's lived realities. For example, while quantitative studies can highlight the general prevalence of compliance or resistance to conservation policies, they do not provide insight into the emotional, cultural, or economic factors that shape these behaviors. In contrast, phenomenology seeks to explore these dimensions in depth, but it requires careful, nuanced approaches to data collection and analysis, such as in-depth interviews or focus groups, to ensure that participants' voices are authentically represented.

Given these limitations, many previous studies on environmental conservation policies have been unable to adequately capture the subjective, lived experiences of local communities. The predominant use of quantitative methods in this area has left a significant gap in understanding the personal and collective challenges faced by communities living in conservation areas (Lipira dkk., 2019). Phenomenological research, therefore, provides a critical methodological framework for addressing these gaps by focusing on how people make sense of their interactions with conservation policies and how these policies are experienced in the context of their everyday lives.

In the field of environmental conservation, traditional solutions often focus on practical, top-down approaches aimed at achieving broad policy objectives. These approaches typically involve quantitative data collection, such as surveys or statistical analyses, which seek to measure the outcomes of conservation efforts in a general sense. While these methods are useful for assessing the overall effectiveness of policies, they fall short in capturing the nuanced, lived experiences of local communities affected by these policies (Zahodne, 2021). The experiences, motivations, and challenges that individuals face are often overlooked, leading to a limited understanding of how conservation policies truly impact people's daily lives. This lack of depth in capturing the subjective experiences creates a significant gap in the current literature.

The alternative to these conventional approaches is the adoption of a phenomenological method, which allows for a more holistic and in-depth exploration of the essence of human experience. Phenomenology provides a framework for investigating how individuals interpret and make sense of their interactions with conservation policies, uncovering the meanings they attach to these experiences. This approach offers the opportunity to explore not just the external factors

influencing behavior but also the internal, subjective realities that drive people's responses to policy. By focusing on the lived experiences of local communities, phenomenology can provide a richer, more comprehensive understanding of the challenges they face, leading to more contextually relevant and effective conservation strategies.

In sum, while existing research provides valuable insights into the outcomes of conservation policies, it fails to address the deeper, subjective experiences of those directly impacted. The need for a phenomenological approach is clear, as it offers a method to bridge this gap by exploring the personal and collective meanings behind individuals' interactions with conservation efforts, thus providing a fuller picture of how these policies are experienced and understood.

Previous research has explored various aspects of environmental conservation, but much of the literature focuses on the effectiveness of policy outcomes or statistical trends, often overlooking the subjective experiences of local communities. Studies examining the lived experiences of individuals in conservation areas highlight the complex interplay between cultural, social, and economic factors that shape community responses to conservation efforts. However, these studies often fail to delve deeply into the personal meanings behind individuals' actions and perceptions (O'Rourke dkk., 2021). Theoretical frameworks such as the Theory of Planned Behavior or Social Exchange Theory have been applied to understand attitudes towards conservation, but these approaches do not fully capture the nuanced, lived realities of those directly impacted by conservation policies. Thus, there remains a gap in understanding the personal, subjective experiences that drive behavior in these contexts.

In addressing this gap, this study adopts a phenomenological approach, aiming to explore the deeper meanings behind the experiences of local communities in response to environmental conservation policies. Phenomenology is particularly suited to this study as it allows for an in-depth examination of how individuals interpret and make sense of their lived experiences within the context of conservation efforts. By focusing on the personal narratives of community members, this method provides insight into the internal processes that influence their responses to conservation policies, filling the gap left by more traditional, quantitative research methods. This approach is intended to offer a richer, more detailed understanding of the challenges faced by these communities, which is essential for designing more effective and culturally sensitive conservation strategies.

This article is structured to provide a comprehensive overview of the study. The introduction outlines the background and context of the phenomenon, followed by a discussion of the phenomenological approach and its relevance to the research questions. The methods section describes the data collection and analysis processes, including the use of in-depth interviews and thematic analysis (Sumbulah, 2019). The results section presents the key themes identified through data analysis, followed by a discussion of the findings in relation to existing literature. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the study's contributions and suggests implications for policy and practice.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

A phenomenological approach was adopted in this study to explore the lived experiences of local communities regarding the implementation of environmental conservation policies in conservation areas. Phenomenology focuses on understanding and describing the subjective experiences and perceptions of participants, providing insight into how individuals make sense of and interpret their everyday interactions with their environment (Liddle dkk., 2022). This design is particularly relevant for addressing the research questions as it enables a deep exploration of the meaning participants attach to their experiences and challenges related to conservation efforts. Specifically, an interpretative phenomenological approach was chosen, which emphasizes the individual's interpretation of their experiences within their socio-cultural context. This approach allowed for an in-depth understanding of how participants perceive and respond to conservation policies, exploring the meanings they attribute to these experiences and the factors that influence their perceptions. To determine data saturation, the research team continuously reviewed the emerging

themes during data collection. Given the relatively small sample size of 15 participants, it was observed that new themes began to repeat after the 12th interview, signaling that additional data would likely yield diminishing returns.

Additionally, the inclusion of policy-makers' perspectives could have enhanced the depth of analysis by providing a broader understanding of the policy implementation process. Future studies may consider integrating perspectives from both local community members and policymakers to better capture the complexities of conservation policy enforcement and its impacts on communities.

Participants

Participants in this study were selected using purposive sampling, focusing on individuals who have direct experience with environmental conservation policies in conservation areas. The inclusion criteria required participants to be local community members who have actively engaged with or been affected by such policies. The participants' ages ranged from 25 to 65 years, with an equal distribution of male and female participants. Specific inclusion criteria also encompassed individuals who had lived in the conservation area for at least five years, ensuring that they had adequate experience to provide relevant insights (shoib dkk., 2022). Exclusion criteria included individuals who were not involved in the local community or those without direct exposure to conservation policies. In total, 15 participants were involved in the study, each contributing valuable perspectives based on their unique roles in the community, such as farmers, community leaders, and local workers.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth interviews, conducted face-to-face with participants in a private setting to ensure confidentiality and comfort. The interviews were semi-structured, allowing participants to freely express their experiences while ensuring key topics related to the research questions were addressed. The duration of each interview ranged from 45 to 60 minutes, with the majority taking place in the participants' homes or community centers, where they felt most at ease. A semi-structured interview guide was used to facilitate the conversation, with open-ended questions that encouraged participants to describe their personal experiences with the conservation policies, the challenges they faced, and the impact on their lives. The interview protocol was adapted to suit the local context, ensuring cultural sensitivity and relevance. Prior to data collection, the interview guide was reviewed by experts in environmental policy and phenomenological research to ensure its validity and comprehensiveness.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a method commonly employed in phenomenological research to identify and explore significant themes within participants' narratives. The analysis process began with the transcription of all interviews, followed by a thorough reading of the transcripts to gain an initial understanding of the data. Meaning units were then identified, and coding was applied to categorize and group similar units under broader themes (Soehl, 2020). Thematic analysis was performed through a systematic process of identifying, reviewing, and refining themes, ultimately aiming to uncover the essential meanings within participants' experiences. NVivo software was used to aid in the organization and coding of the data, but the focus remained on the interpretative process of deriving meaning from the participants' lived experiences. The analysis culminated in the identification of key themes related to community engagement, economic pressures, cultural norms, and trust in authorities, all of which significantly shaped participants' responses to conservation policies.

Ethics

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the relevant research ethics committee, ensuring compliance with local and international ethical standards. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, with written consent provided prior to participation. The consent form detailed the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and the assurance of confidentiality. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without consequence.

(Tanyanyiwa, 2019). To protect participants' privacy, all personal identifiers were removed from the data, and responses were anonymized. All data were stored securely and were accessible only to the research team. The study adhered to ethical guidelines concerning participant rights and confidentiality, ensuring that all procedures followed the principles of respect, integrity, and fairness.

RESULTS

The following section presents the results of the phenomenological analysis of the challenges faced by local communities in implementing environmental conservation policies in conservation areas. Through in-depth interviews with participants, the study explores the lived experiences, perceptions, and challenges that arise from the interactions between local communities and environmental conservation policies. The data has been organized into several key themes, each highlighting distinct aspects of the participants' experiences. In each theme, the socio-cultural context of the participants plays a significant role in shaping their experiences, demonstrating how deeply local culture, traditions, and socio-economic conditions influence the effectiveness of conservation policies.

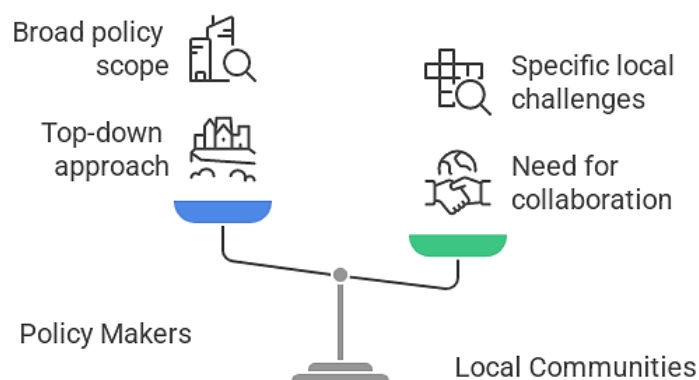
Community Engagement and Resistance to Policy Implementation

One of the prominent themes that emerged from the interviews was the difficulty local communities face in engaging with conservation policies. While many participants acknowledged the importance of environmental conservation, they expressed frustration with the top-down nature of policy implementation. A common sentiment shared by the participants was the perceived disconnect between policy makers and the realities of local life. As one participant, a community leader, remarked:

"We understand the need to protect our environment, but these policies seem to ignore how we live and the challenges we face every day. It's as if the government is in another world, far from the struggles we experience."

This theme highlights a critical barrier to effective policy implementation: the lack of contextual understanding and involvement of the local community in decision-making processes. For many, conservation efforts felt imposed rather than collaborative, which contributed to resistance and non-compliance with policy measures.

Bridging the Gap in Conservation Policy



Economic Pressures and Livelihoods

Economic pressures were another significant theme identified in the analysis. Many participants revealed that conservation policies often clash with their livelihood needs, particularly in areas where natural resources such as forests or rivers are central to local economies. The need to balance conservation with economic survival created tension among participants. A farmer shared:

"It's difficult to abide by the rules when the forest provides us with everything. How can I feed my family if I cannot gather firewood or sell some timber? These rules are hard for people like me to follow."

This quote underscores the challenge of reconciling environmental conservation with the economic dependency many locals have on natural resources. Despite understanding the importance of conservation, the economic necessity to utilize these resources creates a significant barrier to policy compliance.

Cultural and Social Norms in Conservation Practices

Another important theme that surfaced was the influence of local cultural and social norms on conservation practices. Participants highlighted how traditional practices and local knowledge, which have evolved over generations, are often overlooked or misunderstood by policy makers. A local elder noted:

"We've always known how to take care of the land. It's in our culture, it's in our blood. But these new policies just don't fit with how we've lived for centuries. It's like we're being told that everything we've done is wrong."

This theme reflects the cultural clash that occurs when external conservation policies fail to integrate traditional knowledge and practices. The participants expressed a strong sense of attachment to their cultural methods of managing natural resources, which they felt were effective and sustainable in their context. The disregard for these cultural practices in the implementation of modern conservation policies contributed to the perceived ineffectiveness of these policies.

Trust in Authorities and Policy Effectiveness

The theme of trust emerged as a critical factor in the effectiveness of policy implementation. Many participants voiced a lack of trust in the authorities responsible for environmental conservation. They felt that local government officials were more interested in fulfilling regulatory obligations than in genuinely supporting the community. A participant who works in local governance expressed:

"The authorities keep changing the rules, and every time they come here, they just tell us what to do without asking for our opinion. It's hard to trust them when they don't even understand our lives."

This sentiment illustrates the breakdown in communication and trust between local communities and authorities, which is crucial for successful implementation of conservation policies.

The results indicate that the challenges faced by local communities in implementing environmental conservation policies are multifaceted, involving economic, cultural, and social factors. The disconnect between policy makers and local communities, coupled with economic pressures and a lack of trust in authorities, emerged as the primary barriers to effective policy implementation. The findings underscore the importance of involving local communities in the policy-making process and integrating traditional knowledge and practices into modern conservation strategies.

DISCUSSION

Summary of Key Findings

This study revealed the complex and multifaceted challenges local communities face in engaging with environmental conservation policies (Terrana dkk., 2022). The primary themes that emerged from the data include resistance to policy implementation, economic pressures, cultural norms, and a lack of trust in authorities. These findings highlight the disconnection between top-down conservation policies and the lived experiences of community members, offering valuable insights into how such policies are perceived and experienced in practice.

Contribution to the Research Question

The findings contribute significantly to our understanding of the ways in which local communities interpret and respond to environmental conservation policies. By focusing on the subjective experiences of participants, the study reveals that policy implementation is often seen as disconnected from the real-life struggles and values of those affected. The resistance to policy adherence is not merely a reaction to the rules themselves but a reflection of the broader socio-economic and cultural contexts in which these policies are introduced. For instance, economic dependence on natural resources, coupled with a deep attachment to traditional practices, shapes how policies are perceived. This research underscores the need for more inclusive and contextually sensitive policy-making that considers the lived realities of local communities. Building on these findings, policy-makers could develop actionable strategies by engaging in direct dialogue with local communities, ensuring that conservation policies are designed with a deeper understanding of local socio-economic challenges. This approach would promote collaboration, reducing resistance and fostering greater community buy-in for policy implementation.

Relationship to Previous Literature and Theory

The findings of this study align with existing literature on the importance of community engagement in conservation efforts, as highlighted by authors such as Cetrez dkk. (2022), who emphasize the necessity of incorporating local knowledge and perspectives in environmental management. However, the study goes further by providing a deeper understanding of the emotional and cultural dimensions of this engagement. The resistance observed in this research echoes the work of Rahman, (2022), who argues that top-down conservation strategies often ignore the social fabric of local communities, leading to non-compliance and even resentment. This study also complements theoretical frameworks like the Theory of Planned Behavior, which suggests that behavioral intentions are shaped by attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. However, it extends this framework by illustrating how local communities' resistance is influenced by deep-seated cultural norms and economic necessity, which are often overlooked in traditional behavioral models. Therefore, while this study confirms existing theories, it also challenges the assumption that economic incentives or educational campaigns alone can lead to meaningful compliance with conservation policies.

Implications of Findings

The findings of this study have both theoretical and practical implications for environmental conservation policy. From a theoretical standpoint, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the ways in which socio-economic and cultural factors influence community responses to conservation efforts. The resistance to conservation policies, as evidenced in the study, suggests that policy-makers need to consider the complex interplay between policy objectives and local realities. Practically, these findings highlight the importance of involving local communities in the policy-making process. It is evident that top-down conservation policies often fail to address the everyday struggles of the people they aim to protect, making these policies less effective. This study calls for more inclusive, culturally sensitive conservation strategies that take into account the values, traditions, and economic realities of the communities directly impacted. Such an approach could foster greater compliance, reduce resistance, and ultimately lead to more sustainable conservation outcomes.

Limitations of the Study

While this study provides valuable insights into the experiences of local communities regarding environmental conservation policies, it is not without its limitations. One notable limitation is the scope of the research, which was confined to a specific geographical area and a relatively small sample size (Simpson, 2021). This may limit the generalizability of the findings to other regions or communities with different socio-cultural contexts or conservation challenges. Additionally, the reliance on qualitative data from in-depth interviews means that the findings are subject to the perspectives and interpretations of the participants, which may not fully represent the experiences of all members of the community. Furthermore, the study did not explore the perspectives of policy-makers or conservation authorities, which could provide a more balanced view of the challenges in policy implementation. Future research could address these limitations by including a larger, more diverse sample and incorporating a broader range of stakeholders in the study.

Prospective Future Research

The findings from this study open several avenues for future research. One potential direction is to further explore how local cultural norms and traditional practices can be integrated into modern conservation policies. Understanding how cultural values shape community responses to conservation efforts could lead to more effective and respectful conservation strategies. Additionally, future research could examine the role of policy-makers in bridging the gap between top-down policies and local community needs. Investigating the perspectives of conservation authorities and comparing them with those of local communities could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced in policy implementation. Finally, longitudinal studies could be conducted to assess how community attitudes towards conservation evolve over time, particularly in response to changes in policy or community engagement practices.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the challenges faced by local communities in implementing environmental conservation policies, focusing on their subjective experiences. The research revealed that resistance to policies is driven by economic pressures, cultural norms, and a lack of trust in authorities, emphasizing the disconnection between top-down policies and local realities. By adopting a phenomenological approach, the study provided deep insights into how these factors influence community responses, addressing a gap in previous research that primarily relied on quantitative measures. These findings contribute to the understanding of how conservation efforts can be more effectively integrated with local needs and cultural practices. Future research could expand on this study by examining the role of policy-makers in bridging the gap between policy objectives and community expectations. Additionally, exploring the impact of community-based conservation approaches could provide valuable insights into how local engagement and ownership can enhance the effectiveness of conservation efforts. Another promising direction could be to investigate the role of education in fostering community engagement, as educational programs might help to build trust and increase compliance with conservation policies. Such studies could further refine conservation strategies by incorporating the experiences and perspectives of both communities and authorities.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest related to this study. The research was conducted independently, and there were no financial, personal, or professional relationships that could influence the outcomes or interpretations of the study.

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