Forest Governance in Nigeria: Examining the Limits of Centralised Institutional Frameworks

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DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.1014MG0101

Received: 07 May 2026; Accepted: 12 May 2026; Published: 22 May 2026

ABSTRACT

This study critically examines the structure, dynamics, and outcomes of forest governance in Nigeria, with a focus on the limitations of its centralised institutional framework. The study adopts a narrative review research design, drawing on a systematically selected body of literature published primarily between 2000 and 2025. Relevant studies were identified through major academic databases (Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science, and JSTOR) using defined keyword combinations. A purposive sampling approach guided the inclusion of peer-reviewed articles, policy documents, and empirical case studies that address governance structures, implementation processes, and livelihood implications in Nigeria and comparable contexts. The final sample comprised studies that met explicit inclusion criteria for institutional analysis, community participation, and conservation outcomes. Findings reveal that forest governance in Nigeria is predominantly centralised and top-down, characterised by weak intergovernmental coordination, limited enforcement capacity at the federal level, and discretionary implementation by states. Empirical evidence consistently shows that exclusion of local communities from decision-making undermines compliance, fuels resource-use conflicts and sustains illegal activities such as logging and poaching. While some conservation gains are reported, particularly in protected areas like Cross River National Park, these are offset by adverse livelihood outcomes, including restricted access to forest resources, income loss, and heightened rural poverty. The review also identifies significant gaps in the literature, including limited comparative analyses, overreliance on qualitative case studies, and insufficient longitudinal data to establish causal relationships. The study concludes that the effectiveness of forest governance in Nigeria is contingent on institutional legitimacy, accountability, and the integration of local livelihood needs. It recommends a transition towards inclusive and adaptive governance models that recognise customary rights, strengthen multi-level coordination, and promote participatory forest management for sustainable environmental and socio-economic outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

Forest governance in Nigeria operates within a complex federal structure in which authority is formally shared across federal, state, and local government levels, yet is largely exercised through a centralised, top-down institutional framework [1; 2; 3]. Since the return to democratic rule in 1999, the Federal Ministry of Environment and its agencies, particularly the Federal Department of Forestry, have retained significant influence in policy formulation, while implementation is largely devolved to state institutions with varying levels of capacity and commitment [4; 5]. This institutional arrangement has produced a governance system marked by weak coordination, uneven enforcement, and limited clarity in the distribution of responsibilities across tiers of government.

While this centralised model is intended to promote conservation and regulatory control, growing evidence suggests that it often neglects the socio-economic realities of forest-dependent communities, leading to unintended outcomes such as conflict, non-compliance, and continued resource degradation [6; 7]. These tensions are especially pronounced in protected areas, where strict conservation policies intersect directly with local livelihood systems. Among such areas, Cross River National Park (CRNP) provides a particularly critical

and illustrative case. Established in 1999 to conserve one of Nigeria's last remaining tropical rainforest ecosystems, CRNP represents a flagship conservation initiative under federal control, yet it is also a site of persistent governance challenges [8; 9].

Empirical studies on CRNP indicate that the prevailing command-and-control approach to conservation has resulted in restricted access to forest resources, displacement pressures, and the erosion of customary land rights, thereby intensifying tensions between park authorities and surrounding communities [10; 11; 12]. Despite the intention to safeguard biodiversity, these policies have often undermined local livelihoods, leading to increased dependence on illegal activities such as poaching and unauthorised harvesting as coping strategies [13; 14]. Furthermore, governance interventions such as logging bans and enforcement regimes have been implemented with limited community engagement and inadequate compensation mechanisms, raising questions about their long-term effectiveness and legitimacy [15; 16].

The persistence of these challenges points to a fundamental research problem: Nigeria's centralised forest governance framework's inability to reconcile conservation objectives with the livelihood needs and rights of forest-dependent communities in Cross River National Park. Although existing studies provide valuable insights into either institutional arrangements or livelihood impacts, there remains a lack of integrated analysis that critically examines how the structure and operation of centralised governance specifically shape outcomes within CRNP. Insufficient attention has been given to how institutional fragmentation, power asymmetries, and limited local participation interact to influence both conservation effectiveness and socio-economic wellbeing.

Addressing this gap is essential, given the ecological significance of CRNP and its role in national and international conservation efforts. Understanding the limits of the current governance model in this context not only contributes to ongoing debates on centralisation versus decentralisation in natural resource management but also provides a basis for rethinking policy and institutional reforms. Therefore, this study focuses on Cross River National Park as a critical case to examine how centralised forest governance operates in practice, the challenges it produces, and the implications for sustainable forest management and rural livelihoods in Nigeria.

METHODOLOGY

Search Strategy

This review used a structured, yet flexible search strategy suited to a narrative synthesis. Relevant literature was identified through major academic databases, including Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science, and JSTOR [8;9]. Additional materials were sourced from institutional repositories and policy platforms, including reports from international organisations and governments. The search used keywords related to Nigeria's forest governance, like 'forest governance', 'centralised governance', and 'community participation'. Boolean operators refined the search to find studies on governance structures and their socio-economic and environmental impacts. Reference lists of relevant articles were also checked for additional sources.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The review examined studies providing empirical, theoretical, or policy insights into forest governance in Nigeria and similar developing countries. It included peer-reviewed articles, books, chapters, policy documents, and reports on governance structures, institutional arrangements, and their effects on forest management and local livelihoods [8; 10). Studies examined decision-making, policy implementation, coordination, community participation or exclusion, and conservation outcomes. International studies offering insights into governance systems were also included for broader relevance. Sources lacking clear methodology, opinion pieces, and studies unrelated to governance or forest management were excluded. Articles focused only on technical forestry practices without linking to governance or institutions were omitted.

Time Frame of Literature

The review primarily considered literature published from the early 2000s to the present, reflecting the period following Nigeria's return to democratic governance in 1999 and the subsequent restructuring of environmental institutions [8;10]. This time frame encompasses recent policy changes, reforms, and debates on forest

governance. Earlier studies were selectively included for historical context or to explain Nigeria's evolution of forest governance, especially the military legacy and centralised control.

Approach to Selecting and Synthesising Studies

The study selection process was iterative. It began with screening titles and abstracts to determine relevance to centralised governance [11;12]. Selected articles were then read thoroughly to evaluate their contribution to the main themes of the review [13; 14; 15; 17; 18]. A thematic approach guided the synthesis. Studies were categorised by issues such as institutional structure, policy, governance, community participation, and livelihoods. Instead of isolated summaries, the review links findings, showing agreements, disagreements, and gaps. It explored how authors view the impact of centralised governance on forests and communities, highlighting contradictions and the limits of top-down frameworks. The narrative emphasizes Nigeria's forest governance strengths and weaknesses.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Recent scholarship on forest governance has shifted from purely institutional descriptions toward more critical analyses that interrogate power, inequality, and coercion within environmental management systems (19; 20; 21; 22). In the Nigerian context, this shift reveals that forest governance cannot be adequately understood through formal institutional arrangements alone; rather, it must be analysed as a contested political process shaped by elite interests, justice claims, and securitised conservation practices.

A growing body of literature situates Nigeria's forest governance within broader debates on elite capture and regulatory failure (4; 23; 24). Studies on natural resource governance highlight how state institutions often operate within networks of political and economic interests that distort policy outcomes and weaken accountability (25; 26; 27). Evidence from the Niger Delta demonstrates that regulatory capture allows powerful actors: state officials, private firms, and local elites, to appropriate environmental benefits while externalising ecological and social costs to marginalised communities (28; 29). Although these dynamics are most extensively documented in extractive sectors, similar patterns are increasingly observed in forest governance, where access to timber concessions, conservation funds, and enforcement powers can be monopolised by political and bureaucratic elites.

Applied to Cross River National Park (CRNP), this perspective challenges the dominant narrative that governance failures stem primarily from weak capacity or poor coordination. Instead, it suggests that centralised control may actively enable selective enforcement, rent-seeking, and exclusion (30; 31; 32), particularly where oversight is weak and decision-making is opaque. The implication is that forest degradation and illegal activities are not merely governance failures but may reflect structured incentives embedded within the governance system itself (25; 33; 34).

At the same time, contemporary literature engages critically with environmental justice (1; 34; 35), reframing conservation as a site of distributive and procedural inequality. Environmental justice scholarship in Nigeria emphasises that environmental harms and conservation burdens are disproportionately borne by rural and indigenous populations, who are often excluded from decision-making processes (36). Broader analyses of environmental politics further link such exclusion to forms of environmental racism and structural inequality (37; 19; 31; 32), where resource governance systems reproduce patterns of marginalisation under the guise of development or conservation.

Within CRNP, these insights illuminate how conservation policies such as restricted access to forest resources and enforcement-driven protection can generate justice deficits (37). While biodiversity protection is prioritised, the costs are unevenly distributed, with forest-dependent communities experiencing livelihood losses, displacement pressures, and limited access to compensation or alternative opportunities. More recent work on inclusive environmental governance argues that meaningful participation is not simply a normative ideal but a functional necessity for sustainable outcomes, as exclusion undermines legitimacy and compliance (Sam & Zibima, 2023). However, the literature also cautions against romanticising participation, noting that local institutions themselves may reproduce inequalities if broader power relations are not addressed.

Another emerging strand of scholarship critically interrogates the securitisation of conservation, often conceptualised as green militarization (38; 39; 27). While originally developed in global conservation debates, this concept has increasing relevance in Nigeria, where environmental governance is becoming intertwined with security concerns. Studies on resource governance and human security highlight how environmental degradation, conflict, and enforcement practices are deeply interconnected (27). In such contexts, conservation efforts may adopt militarised strategies such as armed patrols, strict surveillance, and punitive enforcement that frame local communities as threats rather than stakeholders.

Although explicit analyses of green militarization in CRNP remain limited, existing empirical evidence on authoritarian park protection, anti-logging task forces, and conflict between rangers and communities suggests a de facto militarisation of conservation practice (39). This aligns with broader findings that increased security spending and enforcement intensity can shape environmental outcomes, sometimes reinforcing exclusionary governance rather than addressing the underlying drivers of degradation (27). The consequence is a governance paradox: efforts to protect forests may simultaneously erode the social foundations necessary for long-term conservation success (37; 40).

Despite these advances, the literature remains fragmented. Studies on elite capture, environmental justice, and securitisation often develop in parallel (17; 38; 39; 32; 34; 35), with limited integration into a coherent analytical framework. As a result, there is insufficient understanding of how these dynamics intersect in specific contexts, such as CRNP. For instance, the relationship between elite-controlled enforcement regimes and justice outcomes is rarely examined systematically, while the implications of militarised conservation for local legitimacy and compliance remain underexplored.

Moreover, much of the empirical literature continues to rely on single-case qualitative studies, which, while rich in contextual detail, provide a limited basis for generalisation or causal inference (42; 43). There is also a tendency to frame governance challenges in normative terms, advocating participation or decentralisation without fully engaging with the political economy constraints that shape policy implementation. This limits the explanatory power of existing research and obscures the structural drivers of governance failure.

In sum, contemporary scholarship suggests that forest governance in Nigeria and in CRNP specifically is best understood as a politically embedded system characterised by power asymmetries, contested rights, and increasingly securitised practices (39; 34). Moving beyond descriptive accounts, a more integrated analytical approach is needed, one that simultaneously engages with elite capture, environmental justice, and green militarization to explain why centralised governance persists and how it shapes both ecological and socio-economic outcomes (36; 17; 32; 34; 35).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Household Livelihood Security (HLS) framework

This study is anchored in the Household Livelihood Security (HLS) framework, which provides a coherent analytical lens for examining the interaction between forest governance structures and the livelihood outcomes of forest-dependent communities [21]. Unlike conventional institutional analyses that primarily focus on formal governance arrangements, the HLS framework shifts attention to how governance systems shape household-level access to resources, capabilities, and survival strategies (4; 21), thereby strengthening the study's interpretive depth.

The HLS framework, developed within the sustainable livelihoods tradition and operationalised by CARE, conceptualises livelihood security in terms of three interrelated components: human capabilities, access to assets, and livelihood activities [44]. These elements determine how households construct and sustain their livelihoods under varying institutional and environmental conditions. Central to the framework is the recognition that access to assets: natural, financial, social, and informational is mediated by institutions, policies, and power relations, making it particularly relevant for analysing centralised forest governance systems (45; 21).

In the Nigerian context, and specifically in Cross River National Park (CRNP), the HLS framework enables a more rigorous analysis of how top-down governance structures influence livelihood security [4]. Centralised

forest policies such as restricted access to forest resources, enforcement-driven conservation, and limited recognition of customary rights, directly shape households' asset base and constrain livelihood strategies. Rather than treating these outcomes as unintended consequences, the framework highlights how governance systems actively structure who has access to what resources, under what conditions, and with what implications for wellbeing (29; 45).

A key strength of the HLS framework lies in its emphasis on access and entitlements, extending beyond material assets to include claims, social networks, and institutional relationships (44). In CRNP, this perspective reveals how exclusion from decision-making processes, weak tenure security, and limited engagement with state actors reduce households' ability to adapt to conservation restrictions. Consequently, livelihood responses, such as illegal resource use or conflict with authorities, can be understood not simply as deviant behaviour but as adaptive strategies within constrained governance environments.

Furthermore, the HLS framework explicitly focuses on empowerment, distinguishing between personal empowerment (skills, knowledge, and confidence) and social empowerment (collective organisation and participation in decision-making) (44). This is particularly significant in forest governance debates, where the absence of meaningful participation often undermines both livelihood outcomes and conservation effectiveness. By foregrounding empowerment, the framework provides a basis for evaluating the extent to which governance systems enable or restrict community agency.

Methodologically, the framework's reliance on participatory livelihood assessments underscores the importance of grounding governance analysis in lived experiences (46; 47), thereby addressing a key limitation in existing literature that tends to privilege institutional descriptions over household realities. This strengthens the analytical coherence of the study by linking macro-level governance structures to micro-level livelihood outcomes.

In summary, the HLS framework enhances the analytical rigour of this review by offering an integrated approach that connects institutions, access, and livelihood security. It allows the study to move beyond descriptive accounts of centralised governance and instead critically examine how such systems shape patterns of inclusion, exclusion, and adaptation in CRNP. Through this lens, forest governance is understood not merely as a system of regulation, but as a determinant of livelihood security and social outcome (44; 21), thereby providing a more robust foundation for analysing its limits and implications.

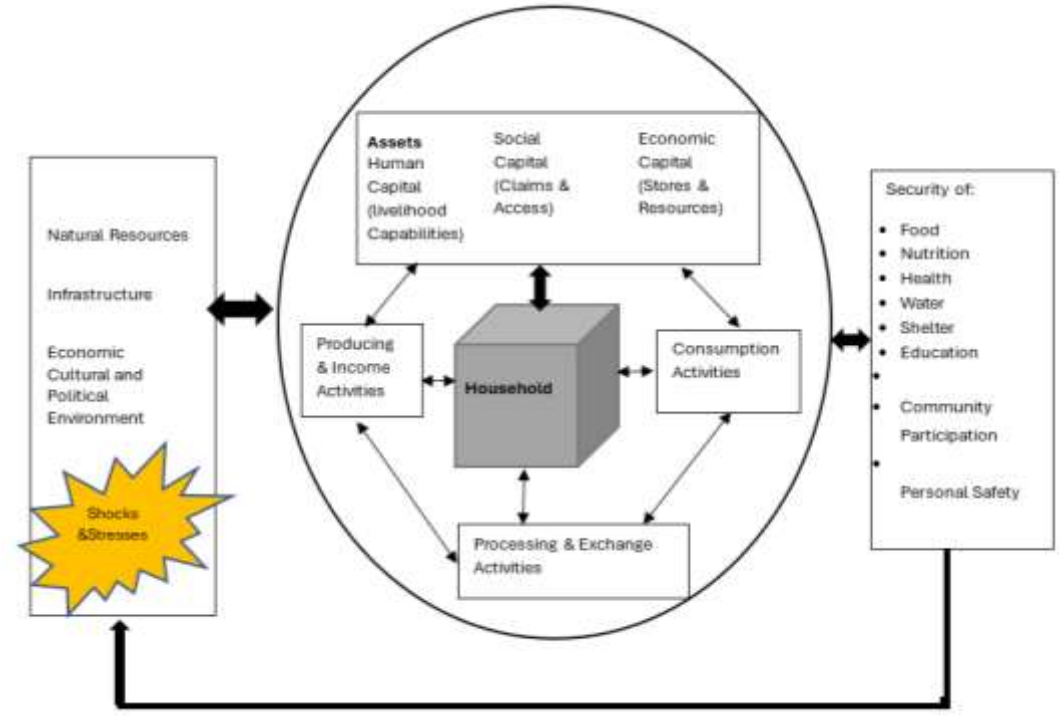

Figure 4. 1: HLS

Source: Krantz (2001)

This study is also anchored in the "Triple G" framework (Government–Governance–Governmentality) proposed by Arts (2014), which provides a robust analytical lens for understanding the evolution, contradictions, and power dynamics of forest governance systems. The framework is particularly suited to this study because it moves beyond descriptive institutional analysis and offers a multi-dimensional interpretation of how authority, power, and control are exercised in forest governance, especially within centralised systems such as those operating in Nigeria and Cross River National Park (CRNP).

At its core, the Triple G framework conceptualises forest governance as a dynamic transition from state-centric control ("government") to more plural and networked forms of decision-making ("governance"), while simultaneously recognising the subtle and often hidden mechanisms of control embedded in policy processes ("governmentality") (Arts, 2014). This tripartite structure enables a deeper interrogation of not only who governs forests, but also how governance is exercised and whose interests are ultimately served.

The first dimension, government, reflects the traditional model of forest management dominated by the state. Historically, forests were treated as public goods under state ownership, with governance driven by scientific forestry principles, regulatory enforcement, and revenue generation (Arts, 2014). This model, which emerged during industrialisation, prioritised timber production and centralised authority, often at the expense of ecological sustainability and local livelihoods. In Nigeria, this paradigm persists through federal and state forestry institutions that retain control over forest resources, policy formulation, and concession allocation. While this system has achieved limited conservation outcomes, it has also produced well-documented challenges, including bureaucratic inefficiencies, weak enforcement, corruption, and the systematic exclusion of forest-dependent communities (Enuoh & Ogogo, 2018; Ribot et al., 2010).

The second dimension, governance, represents a normative and institutional shift towards more inclusive and participatory approaches. Forest governance, in this sense, is understood as "governing beyond the state," involving a broader range of actors, including local communities, civil society organisations, and international agencies (Arts, 2014, p. 18). This shift is closely aligned with the principles of good governance, which emphasise participation, accountability, transparency, equity, and effectiveness. Within forestry, these principles have informed policy instruments such as Participatory Forest Management (PFM), decentralisation, certification schemes, and Payment for Ecosystem Services (PES).

PFM and decentralisation are particularly relevant to this study. PFM promotes shared responsibility between communities and the state, with the expectation that local involvement enhances sustainability and compliance. Decentralisation, on the other hand, seeks to transfer authority from central governments to subnational or local institutions to improve responsiveness and accountability. However, empirical evidence from Nigeria suggests that these reforms remain largely rhetorical or only partially implemented, with limited real transfer of power to local actors (Enuoh & Ogogo, 2018; Ribot et al., 2010). In the context of CRNP, participatory initiatives, including REDD+ programmes, have introduced elements of governance reform, yet these have not fundamentally altered the centralised nature of decision-making.

This limitation is best explained through the third dimension of the framework, governmentality. Drawing on Foucauldian insights, governmentality captures the subtle ways in which the state maintains control, not through direct coercion alone, but through the design of policies, incentives, and institutional arrangements that shape how individuals and communities govern themselves (Arts, 2014). In this sense, governance reforms do not necessarily represent a genuine redistribution of power; rather, they may function as strategies of indirect control, where responsibilities are devolved without corresponding authority or resources.

Applied to CRNP, governmentality provides a critical explanation for the persistence of centralised control despite the adoption of participatory rhetoric. For instance, initiatives such as REDD+ appear to promote decentralised, market-based, and community-oriented governance. However, in practice, the state often retains control over key decisions, funding mechanisms, and access to forest resources, while local communities are expected to comply with conservation objectives and bear associated costs. This creates a situation in which responsibility is devolved, but authority is not, reinforcing existing power asymmetries.

The analytical strength of the Triple G framework lies in its ability to reveal these contradictions. It demonstrates that forest governance reforms may not dismantle centralised authority but rather reconfigure it in more subtle

and less visible ways. This is particularly relevant in contexts where governance is shaped by competing interests, institutional fragmentation, and weak accountability mechanisms. In such settings, governance reforms can inadvertently facilitate elite capture, selective enforcement, and exclusionary practices, even when framed as participatory or community based.

Furthermore, the framework provides a basis for engaging with broader contemporary debates in forest governance. The persistence of centralised control under the guise of decentralisation aligns with critiques of elite capture, where powerful actors retain control over resources and decision-making processes. Similarly, the unequal distribution of conservation costs and benefits highlighted in CRNP reflects concerns within environmental justice literature. The use of enforcement-driven approaches, including anti-logging task forces and strict regulatory controls, also resonates with emerging discussions of green militarisation, in which conservation is increasingly securitised.

By integrating these dimensions, the Triple G framework enhances the analytical coherence and interpretive depth of this study. It moves the analysis beyond a descriptive account of institutional arrangements to a more critical understanding of how governance operates as a system of power, negotiation, and control. Specifically, it enables the study to examine: (i) the dominance of state-centred governance structures in Nigeria; (ii) the extent and limitations of participatory and decentralised reforms; and (iii) the underlying mechanisms through which control is maintained despite apparent institutional change.

In this study, the framework is applied to analyse forest governance in the CRNP as a hybrid system, in which elements of government, governance, and governmentality coexist and interact. While the state remains the dominant actor, governance reforms introduce new actors and mechanisms, and governmentality shapes how these reforms are implemented and experienced. This integrated approach provides a more nuanced and theoretically grounded explanation of why centralised forest governance persists in Nigeria and why it continues to produce mixed ecological and socio-economic outcomes.

FINDINGS

Centralised Forest Governance as a Structurally Fragmented and Politically Mediated System

The findings reveal that forest governance in Nigeria is not simply a hierarchical administrative arrangement but a structurally fragmented and politically mediated system [41; 32] in which authority, resources, and accountability are unevenly distributed across federal, state, and local levels. Although the formal framework suggests a coordinated federal structure, in practice it operates as a hybrid system characterised by institutional ambiguity, discretionary power, and weak enforcement capacity [19; 14].

At the national level, the Federal Department of Forestry (FDF) retains policy authority but lacks corresponding enforcement power, creating a principal–agent problem in which states selectively implement federal directives based on political priorities and resource constraints [55]. This disconnect is not merely administrative inefficiency; it reflects deeper political-economic dynamics in which forest governance is shaped by competing interests, fiscal incentives, and bureaucratic fragmentation [51; 52]. As a result, conservation policies often remain symbolic, while actual practices are negotiated and contested at subnational levels.

In Cross River National Park (CRNP), this structural contradiction is intensified. While the park is under federal control, its governance is embedded in a broader political economy involving state agencies, conservation actors, and local communities with competing claims over land and resources [23; 24]. The concentration of decision-making authority at the centre, combined with limited accountability mechanisms, creates conditions for selective enforcement, rent-seeking, and institutional overlap, undermining both conservation outcomes and governance coherence [55].

Political Economy of Enforcement: Control, Exclusion, and Informal Practices

The top-down governance model is sustained through enforcement mechanisms that prioritise control over inclusion. However, the findings indicate that enforcement is neither neutral nor uniformly applied; rather, it

operates within a political economy of access and exclusion [56]. Regulatory processes such as permits, logging bans, and anti-deforestation measures are formally designed to protect forest resources but, in practice, often function as instruments of bureaucratic control and revenue extraction [20; 29].

In CRNP, enforcement-driven conservation has produced a governance environment in which local communities face high transaction costs, restricted access to livelihood resources, and exposure to coercive state practices [15; 39]. At the same time, weak oversight enables informal practices, including corruption and collusion between officials and commercial actors, thereby reinforcing patterns of inequality in resource access [38]. This duality, strict control over local users alongside permissiveness toward powerful actors, reflects broader patterns of elite capture within environmental governance systems [23].

Consequently, illegal activities such as poaching and unauthorised logging should not be interpreted solely as governance failure but as rational responses to exclusionary institutional arrangements [19; 57]. Households adapt to constrained access by engaging in informal or illegal practices, highlighting how governance systems themselves produce the conditions for non-compliance.

Dispossession, Tenure Insecurity, and Environmental Justice Deficits

A central finding is that Nigeria's centralised forest governance framework systematically generates tenure insecurity and distributive inequalities, particularly in protected areas such as CRNP [58]. The designation of forestlands as state-controlled resources effectively reconfigures customary land rights, transforming long-standing community claims into illegal encroachments [39; 12].

This process of dispossession is not incidental but structurally embedded in conservation policy, where biodiversity protection is prioritised over local livelihood systems. The result is a form of environmental injustice, in which the costs of conservation: restricted access, loss of income, displacement pressures are disproportionately borne by forest-dependent communities, while benefits remain unevenly distributed [37; 14].

The findings further show that procedural justice is equally compromised. Local communities are largely excluded from decision-making processes, and mechanisms for participation, compensation, or benefit-sharing remain weak or inconsistently applied. This exclusion undermines the legitimacy of conservation policies and contributes to persistent conflicts between communities and park authorities [15; 59].

Livelihood Impacts as Structurally Produced Outcomes

The adverse livelihood outcomes associated with forest governance in CRNP: poverty, reduced access to resources, and increased vulnerability, are not simply unintended consequences but structurally produced outcomes of the governance system (4). Policies such as logging bans and access restrictions directly constrain household asset bases, limiting opportunities for income generation and livelihood diversification [20; 60].

Moreover, the absence of viable alternatives such as employment, infrastructure, or social support, exacerbates these impacts, creating a situation in which conservation policies effectively transfer the burden of environmental protection onto already vulnerable populations [14; 37]. Unequal distribution of benefits, including tourism income and employment opportunities, further reinforces socio-economic disparities within and across communities.

These dynamics illustrate how centralised governance systems can generate livelihood insecurity while simultaneously failing to achieve conservation objectives, as economic pressures drive continued reliance on forest resources (4).

Centralisation, Institutional Inertia, and Governance Outcomes

The persistence of centralised forest governance in Nigeria reflects not only institutional design but also institutional inertia and political interests that sustain the status quo (4). Despite extensive evidence of its

limitations, the command-and-control model remains dominant, partly because it aligns with state interests in maintaining authority over valuable natural resources and revenue streams [13; 48].

At the same time, decentralisation efforts remain constrained by weak local capacity, unclear legal frameworks, and the risk of reproducing inequalities at lower levels of governance [16; 37]. This creates a governance paradox: while centralisation limits participation and adaptability, decentralisation without structural reform may fail to address underlying power imbalances.

Synthesis: Governance as a Politically Embedded System

Overall, the findings demonstrate that forest governance in Nigeria, and particularly in CRNP is best understood as a politically embedded system shaped by power relations, economic incentives, and institutional constraints [4]. Centralised governance does not merely fail due to technical inefficiencies; it produces specific patterns of inclusion, exclusion, and resource access that shape both conservation and livelihood outcomes.

By linking institutional structures to political-economic processes, the analysis moves beyond descriptive accounts to show that governance challenges: conflict, illegal activities, weak enforcement, and livelihood insecurity are systemic rather than incidental (25; 49). This underscores the need for reforms that address not only institutional design but also the underlying power dynamics and incentive structures that sustain current governance arrangements [50].

Implications

This review has important implications for natural resource governance, especially in developing countries. Despite its known limitations, Nigeria's centralised forest governance challenges command-and-control models based on classical state theories. State institutions are often fragmented and uneven, supporting views that highlight pluralism, hybridity, and negotiated governance [60; 61]. The Nigerian case shows that excluding local users from decision-making hampers collective action and compliance [50; 51]. It also warns against idealising decentralisation, as local institutions are influenced by internal power dynamics that can reproduce exclusion [37]. Overall, the study suggests forest governance exists on a continuum of centralised and decentralised systems shaped by political, social, and economic factors.

From a practical and policy standpoint, implications are far-reaching for agricultural extension, rural development, and environmental management. The review emphasizes shifting from enforcement-driven conservation to approaches integrating livelihood considerations into forest governance. In rural Nigeria, where agriculture and forests are entwined, policies restricting access without viable alternatives risk increasing poverty and illegal resource use [15; 37; 45]. This highlights the need to reposition agricultural extension to actively support forest governance. Extension services can promote agroforestry, sustainable land-use technologies, and local resource management capacity. Evidence suggests that integrating extension with participatory forest management can improve livelihoods and conservation [45; 51]. Policy reforms should clarify the roles of federal, state, and local actors to reduce overlap and boost accountability. Recognizing customary land rights can improve tenure security and sustainability [52]. Benefit-sharing mechanisms for forest revenues and climate finance, like REDD+, must be transparent and fair to prevent conflicts [29].

This study highlights the need for policymakers to reform forest governance by balancing regulation with community engagement. Forestry agencies should focus on collaboration over enforcement. Local governments must be strengthened to support dialogue, conflict resolution, and community initiatives.

The study highlights the importance of inclusion, tenure security, and access to alternative income for the hardest-hit rural communities. NGOs and civil society can advocate for rights, support local institutions, and foster collaboration among stakeholders. Development partners and international agencies must align global goals with local realities, as Nigeria's REDD+ demonstrates that without meaningful participation and governance, initiatives risk repeating past challenges [29; 52]. The review suggests Nigeria should rethink forest

governance, as sustainable results depend on integrating ecological, social, and economic goals through coordinated efforts, local engagement, and evidence-based reforms.

DISCUSSION

Literature on Nigeria's forest governance highlights centralized, top-down structures. Many studies detail institutions, clarifying roles and interactions among federal, state, and local actors, showing how authority is formally distributed and operates in practice [31; 61]. Empirical studies on protected areas like Cross River National Park contribute by grounding governance debates in lived realities. They consistently show how policy instruments like logging bans, enforcement, and conservation regulations shape rural livelihoods and responses [15; 61]

Another strength is the increasing focus on the socio-economic effects of forest governance. Many studies go beyond policy to explore exclusion, conflict, and livelihood impacts. Emphasising rural communities' marginalisation from decision-making reframes forest governance as both an environmental and a justice issue [48;35]. Comparative insights from other developing countries enrich the discussion by placing Nigeria within a global pattern of centralized conservation models and their limits [34;21].

Despite contributions, the literature has weaknesses. It often treats the state as a coherent actor, overlooking internal fragmentation, competing interests, and informal practices. While many criticize centralization, fewer explore how power functions within and across agencies, or how local actors negotiate or resist these structures [53; 34]. As a result, the analysis often stops at describing institutional arrangements without fully unpacking the political dynamics that sustain them.

There are notable gaps and inconsistencies. While excluding local communities is widely acknowledged, there is limited systematic evidence on regional variations. Most empirical work focuses on a few areas, especially Cross River State, which questions the generalisability of findings [59;37]. In addition, while some studies emphasise the negative impacts of top-down governance, such as conflict, illegal activities, and livelihood loss, others point to modest gains, including biodiversity protection and limited employment opportunities [34; 14]. These differences are rarely reconciled, leaving an incomplete picture of when and under what conditions centralised governance may produce positive or negative outcomes.

Bias appears in literature sections where studies often favour participatory or community-based approaches without critically assessing their limitations. They sometimes present decentralisation as a definitive solution, ignoring issues such as local power imbalances, elite capture, and weak institutions [48; 35]. Conversely, state-led conservation is often portrayed in uniformly negative terms, with less attention to contexts where strong regulation may be necessary to curb large-scale exploitation [54; 33].

Much of the literature relies on qualitative case studies, interviews, and descriptive analysis, offering depth but is limited by small sample sizes and a lack of longitudinal data. Few studies use mixed methods or quantitative data to measure governance outcomes over time, like forest cover, biodiversity, or household welfare [15;21; 37; 12; 59; 47; 52]. This makes it difficult to establish clear causal relationships between governance structures and environmental or socio-economic outcomes. In addition, there is limited use of comparative research designs to explain differences across states or policy regimes.

Empirical evidence is uneven due to incomplete data on enforcement, revenue, and institutions, limiting analysis. Self-reports from community members and officials are valuable but can introduce bias [39]. Furthermore, there is insufficient attention to emerging issues such as climate finance mechanisms, including REDD+, and how they interact with existing governance structures at different levels [29;52].

Within broader theories, this review highlights the limits of command-and-control resource governance. The Nigerian case illustrates a broader tension between centralized authority and local autonomy, a common theme in debates on resource management and political ecology [50; 51]. The persistence of top-down governance, despite its well-documented shortcomings, suggests that institutional inertia, political interests, and revenue considerations continue to shape policy choices [13; 48; 6]. At the same time, the evidence on conflict, non-

compliance, and illegal resource use underscores the risks of governance systems that fail to secure local legitimacy [15; 21].

These patterns also resonate with decentralisation and co-management theories, which argue that sustainable resource management depends on the meaningful inclusion of local actors and the recognition of customary rights [40; 33; 45]. The Nigerian experience shows that devolving authority alone isn't enough. Effective governance needs clear laws, accountability, and a balance between conservation and livelihoods. Without these, both central and local systems may face similar problems [16; 48].

Overall, the literature provides a compelling critique of centralised forest governance in Nigeria but stops short of offering a fully integrated understanding of how alternative arrangements might work in practice. Bridging this gap will require more rigorous, comparative, and interdisciplinary research that connects institutional analysis with measurable outcomes on the ground.

CONCLUSION

The study highlights a gap between Nigeria's forest governance design and its outcomes, emphasising weaknesses in a centralised framework meant for coordination and conservation. The Federal Department creates policies but lacks enforcement power, leading to uneven state-level implementation and poor national forest management. The exclusion of local communities from decision-making, despite being affected by restrictive policies, results in conflicts and non-compliance, weakening sustainable governance. The current approach fails to address socio-economic drivers of forest degradation, pushing locals towards illegal activities, especially where alternatives are lacking. Institutional challenges like underfunding and corruption further hinder governance efforts. The study suggests moving from a strict top-down approach to an inclusive, flexible model that involves local communities in forest management, recognises land rights, incorporates livelihood needs, and clarifies institutional roles to ensure effective conservation.

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