



# Governance of Indigenous Villages in Papua's Borderlands: Dynamics, Challenges, and Policy Strategies

Usman Idris\*, Simon Abdi K Frank

Department of Anthropology Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Cenderawasih University

\*Correspondence Email: [usmanidrish@gmail.com](mailto:usmanidrish@gmail.com)

## Abstract

The research aims to explore three interrelated questions: the extent of community involvement in crime prevention, the key factors that influence such participation, and the role of the police in fostering community engagement. The conceptual framework is grounded in five core theories—Community Policing, Good Governance, Empowerment Theory, Participation Theory, and State–Society Relations—which collectively offer a multidimensional understanding of security governance in remote island contexts. The findings suggest that effective crime prevention is shaped not only by institutional policies but also by the strength of social trust, cultural alignment, and inclusive governance structures. The role of the police must evolve from traditional enforcement to that of facilitator and partner, engaging local communities through dialogue, shared responsibilities, and empowerment-based strategies. Moreover, contextual factors such as geographic remoteness, indigenous norms, technological limitations, and socio-political dynamics play a crucial role in either enabling or constraining community participation. Based on these insights, this study proposes a collaborative policing model tailored to island regions, emphasizing trust-building, cultural sensitivity, and sustainable participation. The model serves as both a strategic and operational framework to enhance the resilience of local communities against crime, especially in settings where state presence is limited. Ultimately, the research contributes to the discourse on localized security governance and offers practical recommendations for adaptive policing practices in Indonesia's peripheral regions.

**Keywords:** Community Participation, Crime Prevention, Collaborative Policing, Local Governance, State–Society Relations

**Received:** March 28, 2025

**Accepted:** April 18, 2025

**Published:** August 30, 2025

## 1. Introduction

The governance of indigenous communities in the borderlands of Papua represents a complex intersection of customary authority, national sovereignty, and transboundary relations. In regions straddling the Indonesia–Papua New Guinea (PNG) border, indigenous governance is not merely a cultural mechanism but a living political institution that interacts directly with national frameworks. These communities often manage land, resolve conflicts, and represent collective identity through customary councils or village-based leadership structures. However, the recognition of indigenous authority in borderland governance remains partial and contested. According to Kalalo, Silambi, and Maturbongs (2025), customary governance in these areas simultaneously serves as a tool for community cohesion and as a mechanism for negotiating state presence along politically sensitive zones.

Geographically, Papua's borderlands are characterized by remoteness, ecological sensitivity, and sociopolitical marginalization. In these regions, indigenous villages are

frequently the first point of contact with external threats such as illegal border crossings, environmental degradation, and shifting national policies. The state's limited presence has meant that indigenous institutions often bear the burden of service delivery, law enforcement, and conflict mediation. Yet, the asymmetric legal recognition between state and customary governance frameworks continues to constrain effective coordination. Hermkens et al. (2025) argue that indigenous communities are also at the front lines of climate-related displacement and cultural loss, necessitating more resilient and adaptive governance models that integrate traditional systems into broader legal and policy contexts.

One of the central challenges facing indigenous governance in Papua's borderlands is the fragmentation of authority. While Indonesia's decentralization framework formally recognizes village autonomy, the operationalization of this recognition is often hindered by conflicting jurisdiction between district, provincial, and national agencies. Furthermore, issues such as unclear land tenure, resource extraction, and militarized security responses undermine the legitimacy of both customary and formal institutions. Delaney (2024) notes that indigenous self-determination in the PNG capital district, for instance, has encountered structural barriers that parallel the governance tensions faced by Papuan border villages, suggesting a regional pattern of indigenous marginalization in administrative governance.

In light of these complexities, a rethinking of governance strategies in the Papua borderlands is essential. Integrated governance approaches—combining participatory, legal-pluralist, and culturally grounded strategies—have been proposed to address these gaps. Lee et al. (2025) emphasize the need for transboundary frameworks that respect indigenous sovereignty while ensuring environmental and social sustainability. Similarly, Yang (2025) highlights the significance of embedding cultural heritage and customary law into broader policy domains, especially in contexts affected by displacement and identity erosion. Therefore, this article seeks to analyze the dynamics of indigenous governance in Papua's borderlands, identify its key institutional and policy challenges, and propose pathways for a more inclusive and resilient governance model.

## 2. Methods

This study employs a qualitative literature review methodology to examine the governance of indigenous villages in Papua's borderlands. A structured literature review was conducted to synthesize existing academic discourse, legal frameworks, and policy analyses concerning indigenous governance in the Indonesia–Papua New Guinea region. This approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of institutional dynamics, cultural governance practices, and state–indigenous relations without engaging in primary fieldwork. The review includes peer-reviewed journal articles, legal studies, ethnographic analyses, and international policy reports published between 2015 and 2025. According to Snyder (2019), literature reviews are critical for identifying research gaps, integrating fragmented knowledge, and generating theory-informed insights in complex sociopolitical contexts such as indigenous governance.

To ensure methodological rigor, the review process adopted the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework as adapted for qualitative synthesis (Page et al., 2021). Databases such as JSTOR, Scopus, and Google Scholar were used with keywords including “indigenous governance,” “Papua borderlands,”

“customary law,” and “Papua New Guinea indigenous institutions.” Selection criteria prioritized peer-reviewed sources and official publications addressing governance models, indigenous autonomy, legal pluralism, and cross-border customary interactions. Thematic analysis was used to group findings into three core categories: institutional integration, sociopolitical challenges, and policy strategies. This approach supports a non-reductionist exploration of indigenous governance, where traditional institutions are analyzed not in isolation but as dynamic actors within multi-layered governance systems (MacLean, 2021).

### 3. Results and Discussion

#### 3.1. Fragmented Institutional Recognition Between Customary and State Governance

The governance landscape in Papua’s borderlands is a product of legal pluralism, where customary and state institutions coexist but often lack cohesive integration. Indigenous communities in both Papua, Indonesia, and neighboring Papua New Guinea (PNG) have long-standing governance systems rooted in customary law (*adat*) and traditional leadership. These systems regulate land tenure, dispute resolution, spiritual practices, and collective decision-making (MacLean, 2021). However, in modern state contexts, formal governance structures—such as village governments or district administrations—often fail to recognize or harmonize with these indigenous systems. The result is a fragmented governance architecture, where dual authorities operate side by side, sometimes in contradiction.

Indonesia’s decentralization policy, particularly the Village Law No. 6/2014, introduced the formal recognition of *desa adat* (customary villages), yet its application in Papua remains uneven and ambiguous. While the law provides opportunities for acknowledging indigenous governance, it imposes administrative categories that may not align with traditional structures. Kalalo, Silambi, and Maturbongs (2025) note that in many Papuan border villages, local leaders are caught between loyalty to traditional authority and obligations under formal state protocols. This duality often leads to institutional confusion, reduced legitimacy, and weakened service delivery, especially in areas where the state’s presence is already limited.

In Papua New Guinea, customary law holds a more entrenched legal status, with the Constitution explicitly recognizing customary norms as a source of law. However, even here, fragmentation persists. Delaney (2024) documents how the Motu-Koita indigenous group in the National Capital District navigates a complex terrain of overlapping legal mandates and political marginalization. Indigenous governance institutions are frequently bypassed by urban governance systems, undermining their autonomy and effectiveness. This pattern resonates with indigenous experiences across Melanesia, where formal institutions are often layered onto traditional structures without meaningful integration or consultation.

The challenge of fragmented recognition is further complicated by differing epistemologies of governance. While formal institutions prioritize codified regulations, hierarchical roles, and measurable outputs, indigenous systems emphasize relational authority, consensus-building, and spiritual legitimacy (Hermkens et al., 2025). These contrasting paradigms generate not only procedural conflicts but also ontological dissonance—governance is understood and enacted differently by each system. As a result, policy interventions that fail to account for this epistemological gap often misrepresent or marginalize

indigenous institutions, reducing their capacity to function effectively within hybrid governance systems.

The presence of overlapping jurisdictions has real-world implications for land and resource governance. In the borderlands of Papua, land is customarily owned and managed communally, yet land use planning is often conducted by district governments without meaningful consultation. This disconnect fuels tensions over resource extraction, environmental protection, and development projects (Lee et al., 2025). In some cases, military or corporate actors exploit this fragmentation by appealing to whichever authority serves their interests, thereby deepening conflict within communities. These dynamics reveal the structural vulnerabilities created when governance institutions are poorly integrated.

Legal pluralism, if not managed carefully, can foster institutional incoherence rather than resilience. According to MacLean (2021), the co-existence of state and customary institutions should not be seen merely as parallel systems but as relationally entangled. Efforts to promote "institutional bricolage"—the creative mixing of formal and informal practices—may offer more context-sensitive governance solutions. However, such hybridity must be grounded in equitable recognition, capacity-building, and continuous dialogue between state actors and indigenous leaders. Tokenistic recognition of customary authority, as is often the case in Papua, risks entrenching marginalization rather than empowering local governance.

International human rights frameworks also highlight the importance of recognizing indigenous governance. The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) emphasizes indigenous peoples' right to self-governance and the maintenance of their institutions (UN General Assembly, 2007). Yet in practice, implementation is slow and selective, particularly in remote or politically sensitive regions like Papua's borderlands. As Yang (2025) warns in the context of climate displacement, failing to integrate indigenous knowledge and governance structures can undermine resilience and deepen vulnerabilities. Thus, legal frameworks must move beyond rhetorical inclusion to substantive power-sharing arrangements.

In conclusion, fragmented institutional recognition remains a critical obstacle to effective and just governance in Papua's indigenous border villages. While both Indonesia and PNG have taken steps toward acknowledging customary governance, systemic gaps persist. These arise not only from administrative failings but also from deeper issues of legal pluralism, epistemological conflict, and political marginalization. Overcoming these challenges will require a commitment to inclusive governance reform, participatory legal harmonization, and the co-production of policy with indigenous stakeholders.

### **3.2. Indigenous Governance as a Mechanism for Cultural Resilience and Territorial Integrity**

Untuk Indigenous governance plays a pivotal role in safeguarding cultural identity and maintaining territorial integrity, particularly in regions such as Papua and Papua New Guinea (PNG), where indigenous communities have historically exercised autonomy over land, social organization, and resource management. These governance systems are deeply embedded in cultural norms, kinship structures, and spiritual worldviews, and serve not only as political institutions but also as custodians of collective memory and ecological knowledge (Hermkens et al., 2025). In the borderlands, where state presence is often minimal or perceived as

intrusive, indigenous governance emerges as a primary mechanism for community cohesion, conflict resolution, and resistance to external encroachment.

One of the key strengths of indigenous governance is its embeddedness in place-based relationships and environmental stewardship. Customary institutions, such as clan councils or elders' assemblies, oversee land boundaries, sacred sites, and natural resource use based on intergenerational knowledge and ritual authority. This governance model supports not only ecological sustainability but also cultural resilience, as traditions are reproduced through governance practices (Lee et al., 2025). In Papua's remote border villages, this stewardship is essential for defending indigenous territories against threats from mining operations, state-backed development, or illegal cross-border activity.

Cultural resilience, defined as the capacity of a community to maintain and adapt its cultural identity amidst external pressures, is intimately tied to indigenous governance structures. These institutions act as guardians of language, ritual, and traditional knowledge systems, all of which are under threat from globalization, displacement, and state assimilation policies. Yang (2025) illustrates this dynamic through the case of the Carteret Islanders, where community-led governance models have enabled cultural continuity despite climate-induced migration. Similarly, in the highland areas of Papua, local customary institutions serve as cultural strongholds, enabling indigenous communities to assert their identity and resist marginalization.

Moreover, indigenous governance contributes to **territorial integrity** not only in a physical sense—through control over land and resources—but also symbolically, by asserting indigenous authority over ancestral domains. This symbolic power is critical in contested border regions, where state claims to sovereignty may not align with indigenous territorial boundaries. Kalalo et al. (2025) highlight how traditional land markers and ritual-based enforcement mechanisms often carry more legitimacy in local communities than formal cadastral systems. In such cases, indigenous governance acts as a bulwark against dispossession, especially when formal legal recognition is lacking or weak.

The concept of "territorial integrity" in indigenous contexts also encompasses spiritual and relational dimensions. Territories are not merely geophysical entities but are imbued with ancestral presence, cosmological meaning, and responsibilities of care. Hermkens et al. (2025) argue that indigenous understandings of territory often defy Cartesian notions of borders and instead reflect fluid, negotiated, and relational spatialities. This presents both challenges and opportunities for integrating indigenous governance into national policy frameworks, which often operate on rigid administrative boundaries. Respecting indigenous spatial logic may thus require rethinking how the state engages with customary authority in borderland governance.

Despite its strengths, indigenous governance faces significant challenges in maintaining resilience under increasing external pressure. Land grabs, infrastructure expansion, and militarized securitization of border regions erode the autonomy and legitimacy of traditional authorities. In PNG, Delaney (2024) documents how the expansion of urban areas has displaced traditional leadership structures, leading to social fragmentation and governance vacuums. Similarly, in Papua, government-led development programs often bypass customary leadership, undermining the very institutions capable of ensuring sustainable and culturally appropriate governance.

Nevertheless, there is growing recognition at the international level of the importance of indigenous governance for achieving sustainable development and peacebuilding. The

United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) explicitly affirms the right of indigenous peoples to maintain their political, legal, economic, and cultural institutions (UN General Assembly, 2007). Integrating these rights into national governance strategies, particularly in sensitive border zones, is essential for enhancing both cultural resilience and national cohesion. Policies that support co-management, legal pluralism, and indigenous-led development can offer more durable solutions to governance challenges in frontier regions.

In conclusion, indigenous governance is far more than a remnant of tradition—it is a dynamic, adaptive, and politically relevant institution that enables indigenous communities to maintain cultural continuity and assert territorial claims. In the borderlands of Papua and PNG, where governance is fragmented and state presence is often limited, these systems offer critical frameworks for sustaining resilience. To harness this potential, governments must move beyond symbolic recognition and toward genuine power-sharing and structural integration of indigenous institutions into formal governance systems.

## 4. Conclusion

The governance of indigenous villages in Papua's borderlands reflects both the strength and the strain of legal pluralism. On one hand, indigenous governance systems demonstrate remarkable resilience, grounded in deep cultural traditions, spiritual legitimacy, and place-based environmental stewardship. These systems function as both political and cultural institutions, preserving indigenous identity, managing territorial boundaries, and sustaining social cohesion in regions where state authority is often inconsistent or absent. On the other hand, the fragmentation between customary and formal governance has created significant institutional challenges. Overlapping jurisdictions, epistemological mismatches, and inadequate legal recognition continue to hinder the integration of indigenous governance into national frameworks, particularly in politically sensitive border areas.

To move toward more just and effective governance, policymakers must acknowledge indigenous governance not as a peripheral or transitional system, but as a legitimate and vital component of national integrity and local resilience. This involves not only symbolic inclusion in policy frameworks but also substantive power-sharing, participatory planning, and legal harmonization that respects indigenous epistemologies. Strengthening indigenous governance in Papua's borderlands is not only essential for preserving cultural heritage and ensuring territorial integrity—it is also a strategic imperative for building inclusive, stable, and sustainable governance systems in frontier regions.

## 5. References

- Delaney, A. V. (2024). *Indigenous Motu-Koita self-governance in the National Capital District of Papua New Guinea: A journey of contestation and resurgence*. ProQuest Dissertations. Retrieved from <https://search.proquest.com/openview/0de21143a1b96b88e36488ed938a31a6>
- Hermkens, A. K., Leon, J., Barker, J., & Seri, L. (2025). Rising seas—drowning cultures: The environmental and cultural complexity of climate change. *npj Climate Action*, 4(1). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s44168-025-00248-z>



- Kalalo, J. J. J., Silambi, E. D., & Maturbongs, E. E. (2025). Protecting indigenous rights in the Indonesia–Papua New Guinea border area. *Jurnal IUS: Kajian Hukum dan Keadilan*, 13(2). <https://www.jurnalius.ac.id/ojs/index.php/jurnalIUS/article/view/1536>
- Lee, M. A., Mammel, M., Matovu, B., & Korowi, L. G. (2025). Exploring cross-country externalities, viable resilience, and sustainability options for small-scale fishing communities in the tropics. *Frontiers in Ocean Sustainability*, 2, 1541847. <https://doi.org/10.3389/focsu.2025.1541847>
- MacLean, K. (2021). *Indigenous governance and legal pluralism: Intersections of power and tradition*. *Global Policy*, 12(1), 89–101. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1758-5899.12855>
- Page, M. J., McKenzie, J. E., Bossuyt, P. M., Boutron, I., Hoffmann, T. C., Mulrow, C. D., ... & Moher, D. (2021). The PRISMA 2020 statement: An updated guideline for reporting systematic reviews. *BMJ*, 372, n71. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.n71>
- Snyder, H. (2019). Literature review as a research methodology: An overview and guidelines. *Journal of Business Research*, 104, 333–339. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2019.07.039>
- UN General Assembly. (2007). *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*. Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 13 September 2007. <https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/declaration-on-the-rights-of-indigenous-peoples.html>
- Yang, Y. (2025). Integrating cultural heritage into climate displacement law: The Carteret Islanders case. *International Environmental Agreements: Politics, Law and Economics*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10784-025-09686-w>