

<https://www.downtoearth.org.in/wildlife-biodiversity/most-countries-still-failing-to-recognise-community-led-conservation-new-report-warns>

**Wildlife & Biodiversity**

# Most countries still failing to recognise community-led conservation, new report warns

*Nearly every country has the legal foundation to implement it; what is missing is political will*

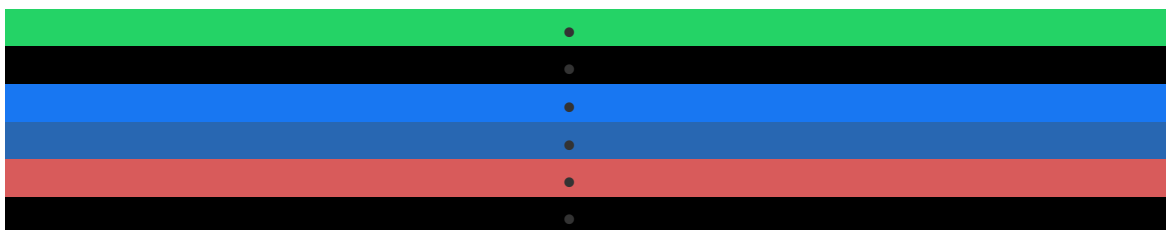


Local villagers in Uttarakhand collecting firewood. Out of more than 12,000 protected areas surveyed, fewer than 1,000 are governed by communities. Photo for representation. iStock

**Shimali Chauhan**

Published on:

22 Sep 2025, 9:12 am



## Summary

- *Legal frameworks for community-led conservation exist in many countries but are rarely implemented.*
- *Governments prioritise top-down approaches, sidelining communities that are best placed to protect biodiversity.*
- *Experts call for recognising Indigenous territories, ensuring consent rights and bridging the gap between law and practice.*

A new global report highlighted a critical gap in conservation: While governments are racing to meet global biodiversity targets, they are often sidelining the very communities best placed to protect nature.

Released by the Rights and Resources Initiative, Forest Peoples Programme and the [Indigenous and Community Conserved Areas Consortium](#), the study examined legal frameworks, protected areas and biodiversity plans in 30 high-biodiversity countries across Africa, Asia and Latin America.

The report found that although almost every country has legal pathways to recognise community-led conservation, very few have implemented them in practice.

Out of more than 12,000 protected areas surveyed, fewer than 1,000 are governed by communities, the findings showed. This shows that conservation is still dominated by state-controlled or privately managed protected areas, leaving little room for local decision-making.



Indigenous and Traditional Territories (ITT), a key demand from Indigenous communities globally are not yet recognised as a separate legal category in any of the countries assessed.

While legal options exist, they are underused. For example, 29 out of 30 countries have some legal mechanism for community-led conservation, but governments overwhelmingly prioritise top-down approaches.

This imbalance illustrates a central contradiction: The tools for community-led, rights-based conservation exist almost everywhere, yet conservation is still treated as something imposed from above, rather than nurtured from the ground.

Reforms since 2015 have been uneven, the researchers found. Some 17 countries introduced legal changes, but the progress has been fragile. In Cambodia, for instance, Indigenous communities lost protections under a new environment law, demonstrating how quickly rights can be rolled back.

Liberia provides a rare example of progress: Its 2018 Land Rights Act allows protected areas to be established on customary land, while maintaining community ownership.

This approach enables communities to lead conservation while balancing their development priorities, showing that legal tools can work effectively when governments respect and implement them.

The report also highlighted critical gaps in Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC). Fewer than half of the countries recognise FPIC as an enforceable right, leaving communities vulnerable to being sidelined, as states expand protected areas to meet the 30x30 target.

This exposes a deeper risk: In pursuing global biodiversity goals, states could unintentionally violate human rights if consent is not guaranteed.

Gender inequity remains another serious concern. Only two legal systems fully protect women's voting rights in community conservation, and just three recognise their leadership rights.

Excluding women undermines conservation itself, as women often play central roles in farming, food security and ecological knowledge. Ignoring their participation means losing half of the expertise crucial for sustaining biodiversity.

National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans (NBSAP) also show inconsistencies, the analysts observed. While most countries report participatory planning, only 12 explicitly adopt a human rights-based approach.

Many missed the 2024 deadline to submit updated plans under the Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF), signaling a disconnect between stated commitments and actionable strategies.

This suggests that countries may meet the formal targets of 30x30, but fail to honor the spirit of inclusive, rights-based conservation.

In Guyana, for instance, the Wapichan people have conserved their forests for generations, yet the government has not granted them full legal title to their headwaters. Past attempts to create Indigenous-owned protected areas were top-down and even caused displacement.

Today, the Wapichan are proactively seeking recognition of their conserved lands as part of Guyana's 30x30 targets, demonstrating both the risks of state-driven conservation and the potential benefits when communities are empowered.

In India, the Forest Rights Act of 2006 created one of the world's strongest legal frameworks for community forest governance. In theory, it allows millions of forest-dependent villages to claim collective rights and manage forests sustainably. In practice, however, implementation has been slow and patchy. Very few community forest resource rights have been formally recognised compared to the vast number of eligible villages.

India's updated NBSAP has also not explicitly adopted a human rights-based approach, missing an opportunity to align its ambitious conservation goals with community leadership. India's case shows how strong laws on paper can fall short without political will and administrative follow-through.

By contrast, Liberia showcases a model where legal reforms have strengthened community-led conservation.

The 2018 Land Rights Act allows communities to manage protected areas on customary land while retaining ownership, showing how governments can align biodiversity targets with local rights and development priorities.

The report showed that ignoring community rights undermines conservation outcomes. Fortress-style protected areas may expand on paper, but they risk fueling conflict, dispossession and mistrust. In contrast, rights-based, community-led approaches leverage local knowledge and stewardship, offering a more effective and equitable path to protecting biodiversity.

The authors called on governments to act now, identifying six priorities:

1. Recognise community lands and territories — Secure tenure rights and prevent conservation laws from weakening them.
2. Recognise ITTs — Establish ITTs as a distinct legal pathway under GBF Target 3.
3. Guarantee FPIC — Make consent rights clear, enforceable and operational in practice.
4. Guarantee women's equal rights — Reform laws to allow full participation, voting and leadership for women in community conservation.
5. Make NBSAPs rights-based — Develop biodiversity plans in partnership with communities, with measurable goals for community-led conservation.
6. Bridge the gap between law and practice — Convert legal commitments into real protections, backed by funding, enforcement and safeguards against violence.

The report concluded that rights-based, community-led conservation is “within reach”. Nearly every country has the legal foundation to implement it; what is missing is political will.

Without secure tenure and strong protections, states risk repeating past mistakes, displacing communities in the name of nature protection.