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ADVANCING COLLECTIVE RIGHTS AND LIVELIHOODS:

A BASELINE ASSESSMENT OF ENABLING POLICY CONDITIONS IN SIX COUNTRIES



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According to ancestral wisdom, the water apple tree pictured here is older than the Kasepuhan Pasir Eurih Indigenous community that protects it. Urban youth learned this and more from Indigenous elders at a Green Camp in Indonesia. Eki and RMI, 2022.

1 Introduction



Over the past two decades, significant progress has been made in recognizing the collective tenure rights of Indigenous Peoples, Afro-descendant Peoples, and local communities. Since 2002, the combined forest area legally designated for and owned by communities increased by over 250 million hectares, an area more than four times the size of France, with particularly significant advances in lower- and middle-income tropical forest countries.[1] This progress has been accompanied by systematic research and monitoring of the extent and strength of collective tenure rights, providing governments, rightsholders, civil society, and donors with a common evidence base for advocacy and reform. These advances have taken different forms, from national legal reforms to growing recognition in international policy frameworks. Examples include Indonesia's landmark 2013 Constitutional Court decision recognizing customary forests as distinct from state forests; the DRC's 2014 community forest concession decree and 2022 Indigenous Peoples' rights law; and Colombia's Decree 129 of 2024, which established procedures for expanding and regularizing Afro-descendant communities' collective lands and mechanisms for protecting the legal security of their ancestral and traditional territories.[2]

A substantial body of research has demonstrated the importance of secure collective tenure rights for climate mitigation and biodiversity conservation. Studies in the Amazon have found substantially lower deforestation rates in tenure-secure Indigenous forests than in comparable forests without secure tenure, while research in Peru has shown that formal recognition of Indigenous community lands can significantly reduce forest clearing and disturbance.[3] Research across the tropics has similarly found lower rates of

deforestation and degradation in Indigenous territories, with outcomes comparable to formally protected areas.[4] Community-managed forests also store substantial forest carbon stocks, contribute to avoided emissions, and play an essential role in biodiversity conservation.[5] Yet the environmental contributions are inseparable from the people who live in and manage these territories, where forests and natural resources sustain livelihoods, food systems, cultures, and local economies. Communities' ability to continue managing and conserving their territories over time is closely connected to their ability to sustain livelihoods and benefit from the resources they steward. Sustaining conservation outcomes therefore requires that communities have not only secure rights and authority over their territories, but also the opportunities and means to pursue their own livelihood priorities.[6]

Yet legal recognition of tenure rights does not necessarily translate into communities' ability to exercise those rights or realize their livelihood aspirations. In many countries, recognition has not been accompanied by the transfer of effective decision-making authority, adequate public support, or protection from competing claims over land and resources. A community may have recognized rights to its forest but lack the permits, infrastructure, or technical support needed to develop and market forest products. More broadly, communities may continue to face costly administrative procedures, restrictions on resource use, conflicts with more powerful actors, and limited access to the institutions responsible for implementing and enforcing their rights.[7]

These challenges extend beyond the protection of territories to the opportunities available to communities to pursue their own development priorities. While many communities have established effective systems of resource governance and management with limited external support, their ability to build on these foundations depends in part on political and economic conditions beyond their control.[8]

Recognizing this challenge across regions, RRI undertook a coalition-wide process to develop a shared vision for community livelihoods. The resulting Livelihoods Vision reflects the understanding that securing collective tenure rights and advancing livelihoods are mutually reinforcing objectives.[9] Secure tenure

provides the foundation for communities to pursue their own development priorities, while stronger livelihoods can reinforce the institutions, resilience, and capacities necessary to govern and defend their territories.

The coalition also recognized that livelihoods cannot be understood simply in terms of income generation, enterprises, or market participation. Rather, they encompass the diverse ways in which land, territories, and natural resources sustain communities' economic activities, social and cultural identities, well-being, and aspirations for future generations. This broader understanding places self-determination at the center of the livelihoods agenda: communities themselves must define their priorities and what constitutes prosperity, development, and well-being, rather than having these determined for them by governments, donors, or markets.

Enabling Indigenous Peoples, Afro-descendant Peoples, and local communities to realize their own visions for livelihoods requires engagement with a broader set of institutions, policies, and economic systems than those traditionally addressed through tenure reform. While tenure reforms have focused primarily on the legal recognition, protection, and governance of collective rights, governments also shape the wider conditions that determine whether communities can translate these rights into viable livelihood opportunities. National development policies, public investment priorities, and economic regulations influence whether communities have access to the infrastructure, education, technical assistance, finance, and markets needed to pursue their priorities. Governments also establish the rules governing natural resource-based activities, allocate public resources, deliver services, and enforce rights, with important consequences for the opportunities and constraints facing communities. Although these conditions are shaped by the interaction of public institutions, private actors, civil society, and communities themselves, governments have the important responsibility to ensure that policies and investments respond to rightsholders' priorities. Advancing community livelihoods therefore requires greater attention to how these wider systems function, where they create barriers to self-determined development, and what reforms or investments are needed to address them.

Building on RRI's longstanding research and monitoring of collective tenure rights, this study proposes an initial framework for systematically analyzing the broader enabling conditions for Indigenous Peoples, Afro-descendant Peoples, and local communities to realize their rights and pursue self-determined livelihoods. Developed in collaboration with researchers at the University of Notre Dame and rightsholder leaders from each region, the framework examines five interconnected domains across six countries—Brazil, Colombia, Peru, the DRC, Indonesia, and Nepal. These domains encompass tenure security; institutional autonomy and accountability; livelihood development and capacity building; infrastructure and connectivity; and inclusive governance and cultural respect, with a particular focus on the laws, policies, institutions, and public investments shaped by national governments.

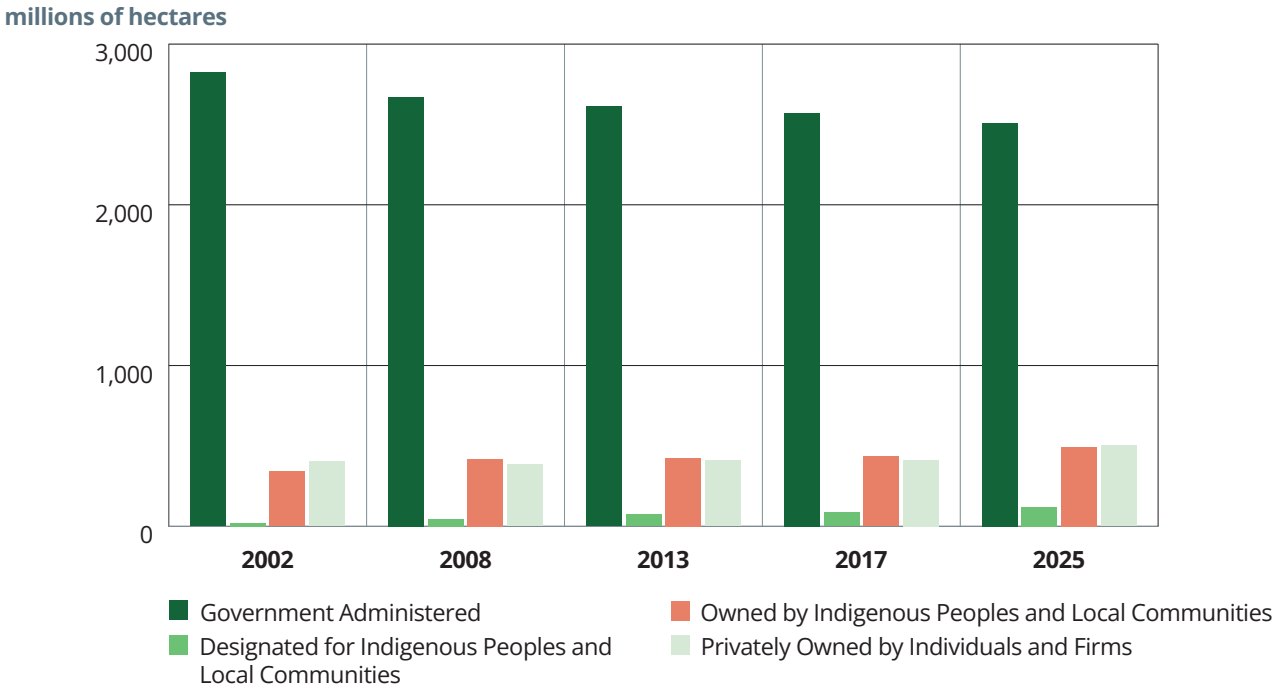
By comparing national-level conditions with assessments of conditions in forest territories, the study seeks to identify areas of progress, gaps, and priorities for further research and action. As an initial baseline, it is not intended to provide a comprehensive assessment of community livelihoods or a definitive measure of government performance, but rather to establish a common analytical approach that can be refined and expanded over time. We hope this framework will provide an evidence base for the next generation of collective action, aimed not only at advancing tenure reforms, but at ensuring that Indigenous Peoples, Afro-descendant Peoples, and local communities have the conditions and opportunities to exercise their rights and pursue their own visions for development.

BOX 1. Status and Progress of Collective Forest Tenure Reform

Since 2002, RRI has systematically tracked the extent of forests legally owned by or designated for Indigenous Peoples, Afro-descendant Peoples, and local communities. Complementing this global monitoring, RRI has also assessed the strength of collective forest tenure regimes, examining the bundle of rights recognized under national laws and regulations. These include rights to access and withdraw forest resources, manage forests, exclude outsiders, and exercise other legal protections that determine the scope and security of collective tenure.

More than two decades of research document important advances in the legal recognition of collective forest rights, although progress remains uneven. Across 61 countries representing 91 percent of the world's forests, the proportion of forest area legally owned by or designated for communities increased from approximately 10 percent in 2002 to 16.3 percent in 2025. Nevertheless, governments continue to administer more than two-thirds of the forests assessed, and legal recognition does not always confer a comprehensive or secure set of rights.





[Figure 1: Changes in global forest tenure, 2002-2025. Adapted from Rights and Resources Initiative 2026.]



Sumatra, Indonesia. Jacob Maentz, 2022.

2 Collective Livelihoods and the Framework



2.1 Understanding Collective Livelihoods

Building on established scholarship on sustainable livelihoods, as well as RRI's Livelihoods Vision and the Brasília Declaration on Collective Livelihoods, [10] [11] [12] this study understands livelihoods as the capabilities, assets, activities, rights, and relationships through which people and communities sustain their ways of life and pursue their aspirations across generations. For Indigenous Peoples, Afro-descendant Peoples, and local communities, collective livelihoods are rooted in relationships to lands, territories, and resources, and in the institutions through which these are governed. They encompass material and economic well-being alongside culture, identity, food systems, stewardship, resilience, and self-determination. Economic activity is an important component of this conception, but not its entirety.

This understanding recognizes that communities pursue different combinations of cultural, subsistence, conservation, and market-oriented activities, and that their relationships to territory encompass social institutions, knowledge, identity, and culture.[13] Supporting collective livelihoods therefore involves navigating tensions between government support and community autonomy, and between expanding economic opportunities and respecting livelihoods grounded in reciprocity and stewardship. The study does not seek to prescribe livelihood models or assess how well communities govern their

territories. Rather, it examines whether the broader policy and institutional environment enables communities to make and pursue their own choices, including whether and how to engage with governments and markets.

BOX 2. The Brasília Declaration: A Collective Agenda for Rights-Based Livelihoods and Economies

On May 29, 2026, representatives of Indigenous Peoples, Afro-descendant Peoples, local and traditional communities, and their allies adopted the Brasília Declaration at the Global Summit on Collective Livelihoods and Conservation in Brazil. The Declaration articulates a shared agenda for translating collective rights to lands, territories, and resources into self-determined livelihoods, stronger community economies, and lasting social and environmental well-being.

The Declaration emphasizes that legal recognition of collective tenure, while essential, is insufficient without the conditions that allow communities to exercise their rights and pursue their own development priorities. It calls for stronger protection of territories and customary governance; accessible, long-term financing; equitable market access; and meaningful participation in decisions affecting territories and economies. Particular attention is given to women's and youth leadership, intergenerational knowledge, and safeguards in conservation and climate finance.

Central to the Declaration is the recognition and support of economic models rooted in collective governance, traditional knowledge, cultural identity, and sustainable relationships with territories. Rather than treating communities solely as participants in existing markets, it emphasizes their agency in defining economic priorities, managing resources, and developing enterprises and livelihood systems consistent with their values and aspirations. Realizing these opportunities requires overcoming persistent barriers in policy, finance, institutional support, and market access.

The Declaration also calls for collective livelihoods and community economies to be integrated into national policies and global climate, biodiversity, and sustainable development agendas, providing a shared framework for continued advocacy and collective action.

Source: Brasília Declaration," Global Summit on Collective Livelihoods and Conservation, Brasília, May 29, 2026.

2.2 A Framework for Assessing Enabling Conditions

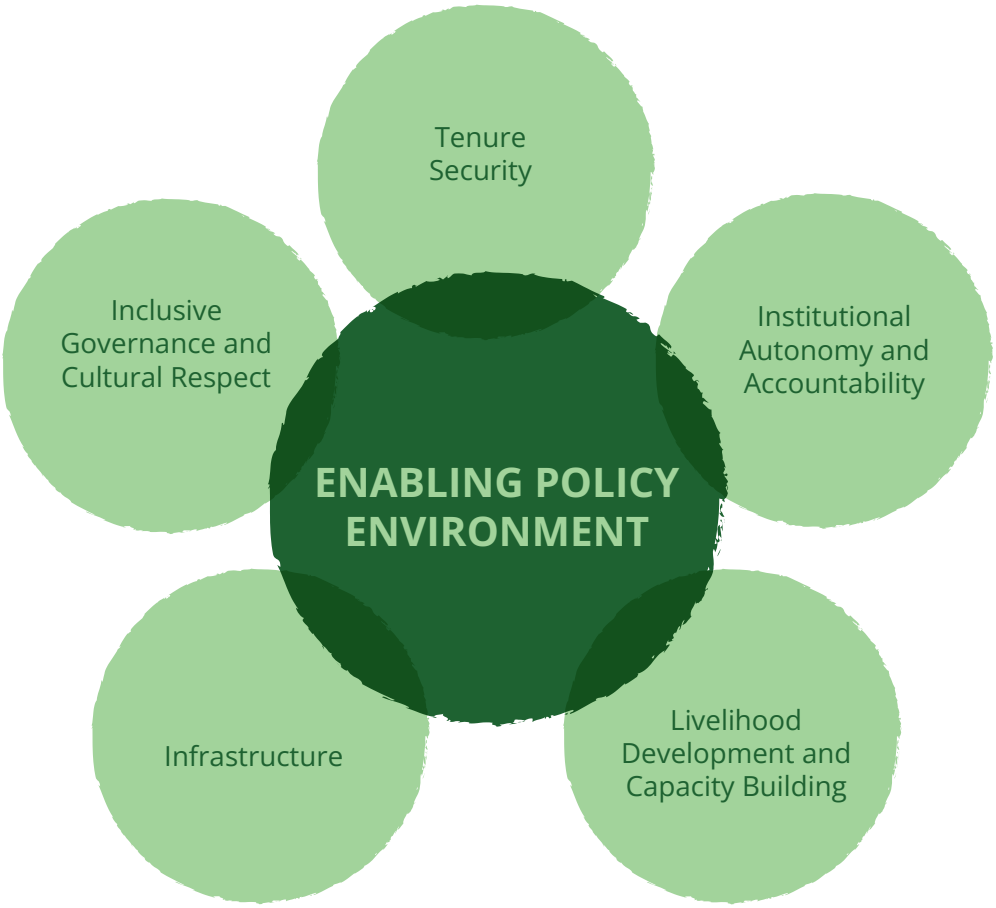
For the purposes of this study, an enabling policy environment comprises the conditions shaped by national governments that recognize and support communities' rights to govern themselves and their territories in pursuit of the livelihoods they choose. Governments influence these conditions through laws, policies, public investments, programs, services, administrative procedures, oversight, and enforcement. The framework therefore focuses not on measuring livelihood outcomes, but on assessing whether public institutions uphold community rights and provide the incentives, protections, services, and opportunities that support communities' self-determined development.

The framework organizes these conditions into five interconnected policy domains (Figure 2). Tenure security examines whether collective rights are recognized, sufficiently comprehensive, and protected in practice.



An Indigenous Maasai shows their land title deed, Kenya. Asha Stuart, 2025.

Institutional autonomy and accountability considers the recognition of community institutions and the responsiveness, transparency, and accountability of public institutions. Livelihood development and capacity building addresses access to appropriate finance and sustained technical support for community-defined activities. Infrastructure and connectivity considers access to services, information, communications, security, and mechanisms for seeking remedies. Inclusive governance and cultural respect examines whether communities can meaningfully participate in, influence, and challenge decisions affecting their territories and livelihoods.



[Figure 2: The five policy domains of an enabling policy environment. Source: Authors' elaboration.]

These domains are closely connected and should not be understood as independent areas of government activity and performance. Tenure security provides an essential foundation, but recognized rights have limited value without the means to exercise and defend them. Similarly, access to finance may have little effect without appropriate technical support, while opportunities for participation may remain largely symbolic without decision-making authority, information, or effective recourse.[14] The framework therefore examines how conditions across the five domains collectively support or constrain communities' livelihood opportunities.

Within each domain, the study examines three dimensions of government performance. De jure conditions concern the rights, mandates, and procedures established in law. De facto conditions concern implementation, institutional performance, and the extent to which policies and services reach forest territories. Protection from harm considers government action to prevent or address violence, corruption, discrimination, elite capture, and arbitrary loss of rights. Together, these dimensions distinguish the existence of formal commitments from their implementation and the protections needed for communities to exercise their rights. They are consistent with the duties to respect, protect, and fulfil rights under international human-rights law[15] and the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure.[16]

To examine these conditions, the baseline combines national statistics with localized estimates of conditions facing Indigenous Peoples, Afro-descendant Peoples, and local communities in forest territories, as well as reference levels reflecting what informed respondents consider acceptable government performance. This approach makes it possible to identify differences between national averages and conditions in forest territories, and between current performance and expectations. Rather than reducing performance to a single national score or ranking, the framework seeks to make specific gaps visible and inform priorities for policy reform and public investment. The indicators, data sources, and methods used to generate these comparisons are described in Section 3.

The baseline framework is applied in six countries: Brazil, Colombia, the DRC, Indonesia, Nepal, and Peru. Together, these countries contain an estimated 46 percent of the world's remaining tropical forest.[17] They represent diverse histories of collective tenure recognition, decentralization, and conflict, as well as different institutional capacities, approaches to governance, levels of political inclusion, and conditions for accessing markets and public services.[18] Although the countries are not a representative sample of all tropical forest countries, their diversity provides an opportunity to test the framework across different contexts, identify recurring patterns and important differences, and establish an initial baseline that national partners can refine and repeat.



A shepherd with a herd of sheep in Peru. Shutterstock

BOX 3 – Why a Global Baseline?

Existing approaches to assessing government performance provide important but incomplete pictures of the conditions facing Indigenous Peoples, Afro-descendant Peoples, and local communities. National statistics allow comparisons across countries, but often obscure the realities of remote forest territories, where access to infrastructure, finance, public services, and government institutions may differ substantially from national averages. Legal assessments establish whether rights and protections exist in law, but cannot necessarily determine whether communities can exercise them in practice. Formal recognition and experienced tenure security are related but distinct.[19] Program evaluations, meanwhile, can assess the results of individual interventions without revealing whether the wider policy and institutional environment supports their long-term success.

This study seeks to connect these perspectives through a common framework for assessing enabling conditions across countries and over time. By examining legal commitments, their implementation, and protections against harm, and by comparing national conditions with those experienced in forest territories, the baseline can help identify where government policies and investments fall short of communities' needs. Its purpose is not to rank countries or reduce complex conditions to a single score, but to establish a shared evidence base for identifying recurring gaps, informing reforms, and tracking progress toward an environment in which communities can exercise their rights and pursue self-determined livelihoods.



Member of the Indigenous Ipeti Embera community in Panama plants seedlings. Asha Stuart, 2025.

3 Data and Methods



This study develops an initial baseline of the policy and institutional conditions that enable Indigenous Peoples, Afro-descendant Peoples, and local communities to pursue self-determined livelihoods. It draws on published research, national statistics, and structured assessments by key informants in six countries. This section describes how the indicators were selected, what they measure, how national and localized values were established, and how differences between these values are used to identify gaps in government performance.

3.1 Framework Development and Indicator Selection

The framework was developed through a review of research on collective action, common-property institutions, community-based resource governance, forest livelihoods, tenure, and public administration, complemented by an online survey of 120 RRI coalition members. The survey helped identify conditions beyond tenure that governments can influence and that affect communities' ability to pursue their livelihood priorities.

From these inputs, the research team selected 23 indicators across the five policy domains introduced in Section 2. Indicators were chosen for their relevance to community self-determination and livelihoods, the extent of government influence, the availability of comparable data across countries, ease of interpretation, and potential for repeated measurement. The framework was tested and refined in Peru and the DRC before being applied across all six countries (Figure 4).

The indicator set is deliberately selective rather than comprehensive. A limited number of complementary indicators makes it easier to identify specific gaps in government performance and track changes over time without obscuring them within a composite score. This necessarily leaves some important conditions unmeasured, particularly within broad domains such as infrastructure and connectivity. The indicators should therefore be understood as signals of enabling conditions, not exhaustive measures of each domain.

3.2 Indicators and Measures

Table 1 presents the 23 indicators organized by policy domain and dimension of government performance: de jure conditions, de facto conditions, and protection from harm. Together, they translate the framework's broad policy domains into observable measures of rights recognition, institutional performance, public services, and protections affecting forest communities. Additional explanation of the indicators, including source material and selection rationale, is available in the attached Annexes 1 and 3.



The indicators vary in what they capture. Some directly assess government commitments or actions, while others use national statistics as proxies for conditions that are difficult to measure consistently across countries. The table identifies what each indicator measures so that readers can distinguish between the policy condition of interest and the available evidence used to assess it. The indicators are considered individually rather than combined into a single index.

Indigenous Ashaninka women from the Waypancuni community, Peru. Juan Llasca, 2024.

Table 1. The Five Domains and Their Indicators

Domain	Indicator	Dimension	What the national data measure	Localized estimate
Tenure security	Legal recognition of land and forest rights	De jure	Whether the land and forest rights of Indigenous Peoples, Afro-descendant Peoples, and local communities are recognized in law	—
	Completeness of the bundle of rights	De jure	Whether each community-based tenure regime recognizes the full bundle of rights	—
	Share of forest land under recognized community tenure	De facto	Area designated for or owned by communities as a share of total forest land[20]	—
	Share of total land under recognized community tenure	De facto	Area designated for or owned by communities as a share of total land[21]	—
	Protection of property rights	Protection from harm	Expert assessment of property-rights security (V-Dem)	•
Institutional autonomy and accountability	Legal recognition of self-rule and customary governance	De jure	Whether community-based tenure regimes recognize community self-rule and customary governance	—
	Ombudsman and grievance mechanisms in law	De jure	Whether laws provide for ombudsman or grievance institutions	—
	Trust in political institutions	De facto	Citizens' trust in the national congress (Nepal: public service commission; DRC: protection of civil rights)	•
	Anti-corruption measures	Protection from harm	Government success in containing corruption (Bertelsmann Transformation Index)	•
	Reported level of corruption in government	Protection from harm	Share of public-service users who did not pay a bribe in the past year	•
Livelihood development and capacity building	Ability to use collective title as collateral	De jure	Whether the tenure regime allows collective title to be used as collateral or alienated	—
	Perceived business climate	De facto	Share of people who consider their area a good place to start a business (Gallup)	•
	Loan approval rate	De facto	Share of firms whose loan application was approved (Indonesia: rural financial-inclusion survey; no estimate for the DRC)	•
	Access to capacity building	De facto	Share of adults (25–64) who took part in adult education or vocational training in the past year (SDG 4.3.1)	•

Infrastructure and connectivity	Constitutional right to water	De jure	Whether a right to water is recognized at the constitutional or national level	—
	Access to safely managed drinking water	De facto	Share of people who believe their drinking water is safe (Gallup)	•
	Access to mobile network	De facto	Share of people with a mobile phone for personal calls	•
	Trust in legal system	De facto	Firms' confidence in the reliability and fairness of the courts (Enterprise Surveys)	•
	Freedom from violent conflict	Protection from harm	Political stability and absence of violence, percentile rank (Peru: perceived public security)	•
Inclusive governance and cultural respect	FPIC standards acknowledged in national legislation	De jure	Whether standards for Free, Prior and Informed Consent are acknowledged in law	—
	Non-colonial languages recognized as official languages	De jure	Whether non-colonial languages are recognized as official languages	—
	Lethal attacks on community activists	Protection from harm	Number of land and environmental defenders killed, 2012–2024 (Global Witness)	0
	Rural marginalization or exclusion from decision-making	Protection from harm	Urban–rural distribution of political power (V-Dem; Peru: districts with participatory development plans)	•

• Localized estimate and national reference level available. 0 The national value is a count of killings; for the localized estimate and reference level the count was rescaled, standardized across the six countries (mean 50, standard deviation 10), and reversed so that higher values indicate fewer attacks; the resulting values express relative position, not percentages (Section 3). — De jure and area indicators are reported at national level only. Sources: Bertelsmann Transformation Index; Gallup World Poll; Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem); World Bank Enterprise Surveys; UNESCO Institute for Statistics; Global Witness; RRI (2020); national sources listed in the appendix.



3.3 National Values, Localized Estimates, and Reference Levels

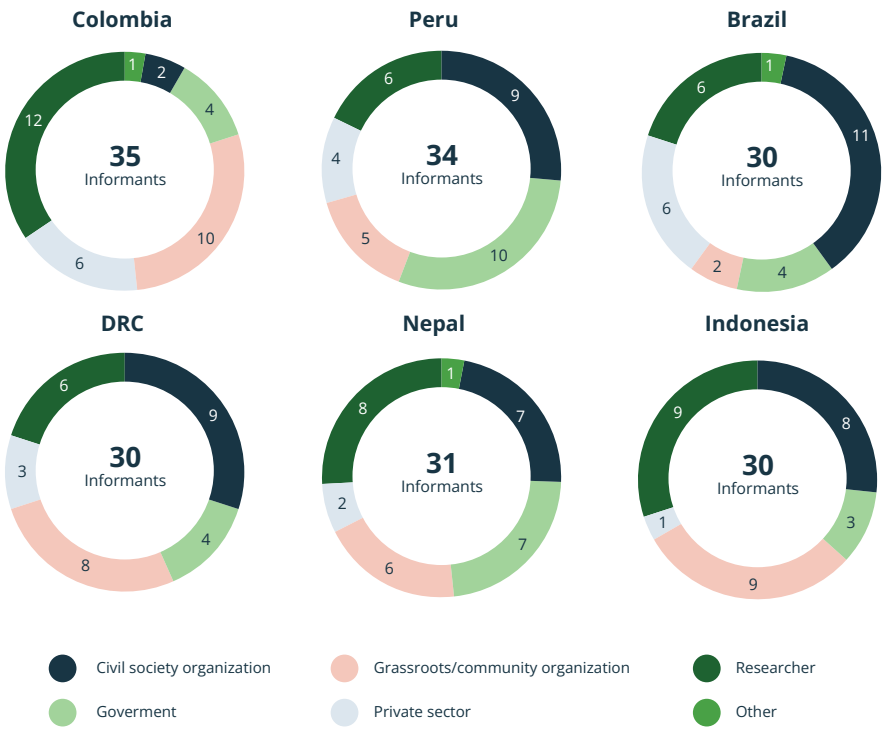
For each indicator, country researchers established a national value through a structured review of published data. Official national and international statistics were prioritized, supplemented by RRI tenure and legal data and other research datasets where appropriate. Researchers documented the source, reference year, population covered, and limitations of each measure, including cases where available statistics served as indirect proxies for the conditions being assessed. Reference years vary across countries and are reported in the appendix. Where necessary, indicators were adjusted so that higher values consistently represent more favorable conditions. One indicator, lethal attacks on community activists, required different treatment because the underlying national measure is a count rather than a percentage.

National statistics, however, rarely provide comparable information about conditions specifically affecting Indigenous Peoples, Afro-descendant Peoples, and local communities in forest territories. To address this limitation, national research partners conducted structured interviews with 190 key informants across the six countries, with at least 30 informants in each country. Participants were selected for their knowledge of forest communities and to reflect perspectives from rightsholder and community organizations, civil society, government, research institutions, and the private sector (Figure 3). The objective was to obtain informed judgments from diverse perspectives, not to construct a statistically representative sample.

Informants were presented with each indicator's definition, national value, source year, and population coverage, together with a common definition of the focal population. They were then asked to estimate how the national value differed for Indigenous Peoples, Afro-descendant Peoples, and local communities in forest territories, using five predefined adjustment categories. They also identified the level of government performance they would consider acceptable for each indicator and could provide explanations or flag limitations in the measures. The two indicators concerning the area under recognized community tenure were not adjusted.

These responses produced two additional measures.[22] The localized estimate approximates conditions facing collective forest rightsholders by averaging informants' assessments of how local conditions compare with national values, converting the average into a percentage adjustment, and applying that adjustment to the national value. As a result of the methodology used to develop the localized estimates, they may understate larger differences between national values and conditions in forest territories. The national reference level is the average level of performance that informants in each country considered acceptable. The localized estimates are structured judgments anchored in published data, not direct measurements or representative surveys of community members. Using a common reference point and predefined adjustments was intended to make judgments more consistent and transparent, while recognizing the uncertainty inherent in expert assessments.[23]

An important exception concerns Indonesia, where informants interpreted the question about acceptable performance as asking about current government performance. These responses therefore cannot be treated as reference levels. Indonesia is excluded from the calculation of the cross-country reference level, which averages the national reference levels for Brazil, Colombia, the DRC, Nepal, and Peru. Indonesia's localized estimates are compared against this cross-country reference level instead.



[Figure 3: The number and composition of key informants in the six countries. Source: Authors' elaboration.]

3.4 Comparing Values and Assessing Gaps

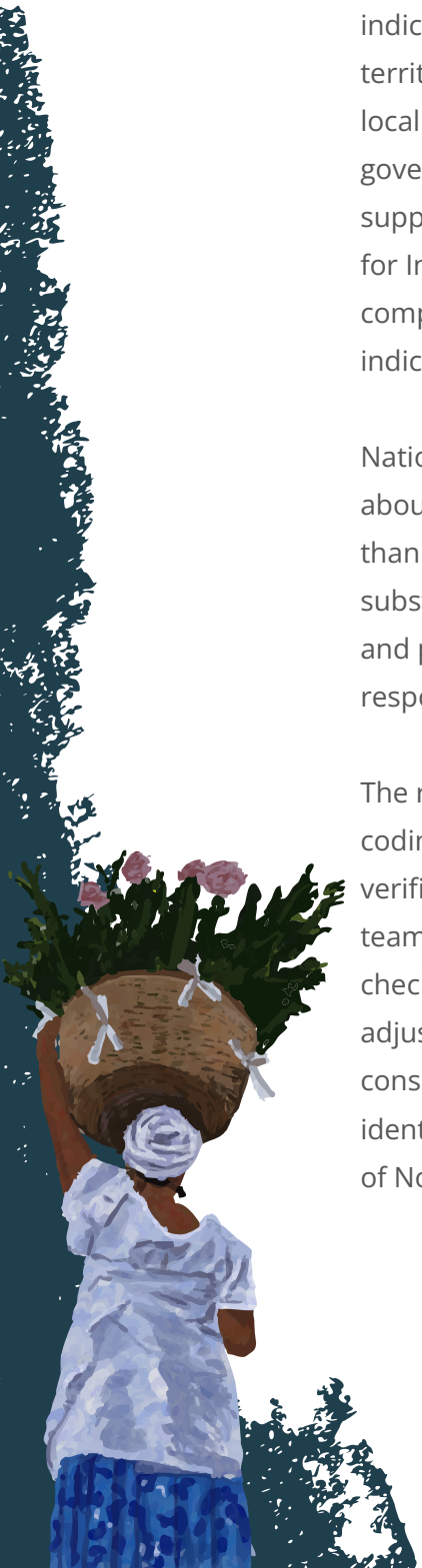
The baseline uses these measures to examine two principal questions: how conditions facing forest communities differ from national averages, and how far those conditions fall below levels that informed national respondents consider acceptable. A third comparison, using the average reference level across countries, provides a common point of comparison. Table 2 summarizes the values and gaps used in the analysis.

Table 2. Values and Gap Measure

Value	What it shows	How it is obtained
National value	What an existing national statistic reports for the country as a whole	Official national or international data sources
Localized estimate	The same indicator, as estimated for the focal population	National value adjusted by the mean of key informants' category responses in each country, converted to a percentage (Section 3)
National reference level	The level of government performance that key informants in a country consider acceptable	Average of the acceptable levels stated by key informants in each country (not available for Indonesia; see below)
Cross-country reference level	A common reference level for comparing countries	Average of the national reference levels of Brazil, Colombia, the DRC, Nepal, and Peru, each weighted equally
Gap	**Calculation**	**A Positive Value Means:**
Difference from the national value	National value − localized estimate	The national statistic is more favorable than conditions estimated for the focal population
Shortfall from the national reference level	National reference level − localized estimate	The localized estimate falls short of what key informants in that country consider acceptable
Shortfall from the cross-country reference level	Cross-country reference level − localized estimate	The localized estimate falls short of the common cross-country level

In the appendix tables, these three gaps appear as the national-to-local gap, the national benchmark gap, and the cross-country benchmark gap.





The difference between the national value and the localized estimate indicates where national statistics may obscure conditions in forest territories. The difference between the national reference level and the localized estimate indicates where informants perceive shortfalls in government performance. The cross-country reference level provides a supplementary comparison across countries and serves as the reference for Indonesia. Gaps are expressed in each indicator's own units and can be compared across countries for the same indicator, but not directly across indicators measured on different scales.

National reference levels are intended to reflect informed judgments about acceptable government performance in a particular context, rather than rankings against other countries.[24] They are not legal thresholds or substitutes for international human-rights obligations. For fundamental rights and protections, full realization remains the objective regardless of what respondents consider attainable.

The research followed common procedures for source selection, interviews, coding, and analysis across the six countries. Notre Dame researchers verified source values, reference years, and transformations, while country teams reviewed indicator interpretation and the coordinating team checked consistency. The analysis files document missing data, exclusions, adjustments, and aggregation decisions. Interviews followed informed-consent and data-protection procedures, with participation voluntary and identifying information protected. The study was approved by the University of Notre Dame Institutional Review Board (Protocol 26-06-10172).

1 Identify
What conditions matter?

Literature review
Published research on collective action, common-property institutions, community resource governance, forest livelihoods, tenure, and public administration

Practitioner survey
120 RRI coalition members identified government-controlled conditions beyond tenure security

RESULT
A broad set of candidate factors that matter in different contexts

2 Select
What can be measured and tracked?

Selection criteria
Relevance to self-determination and livelihoods
Substantial national government influence
Data available across countries
Easy to interpret
Can be updated periodically

23 indicators in 5 domains, each covering 3 dimensions

	De jure	De facto	Protection from harm
Tenure security	●	●	●
Institutional autonomy & accountability	●	●	●
Livelihood development & capacity building	●	●	●
Infrastructure & connectivity	●	●	●
Inclusive governance & cultural respect	●	●	●

3 Test and apply
What do the indicators show?

Pilot and revision
Framework tested in Peru and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, then revised

Six-country application
Brazil · Colombia · DR Congo · Indonesia · Nepal · Peru

National values
Desk review of official and international data

Key-informant interviews
190 informants, at least 30 per country, across six sectors

RESULT, FOR EACH INDICATOR
National value · Localized estimate
Country and cross-country performance benchmarks
Compared through three gaps (Table 1)

[Figure 4: How the framework was built and applied. Evidence from published research and a practitioner survey was narrowed, using five selection criteria, to 23 indicators covering three dimensions in each of five domains. These were tested in two countries and applied in six, pairing national values with key-informant judgments. Source: Authors' elaboration.]



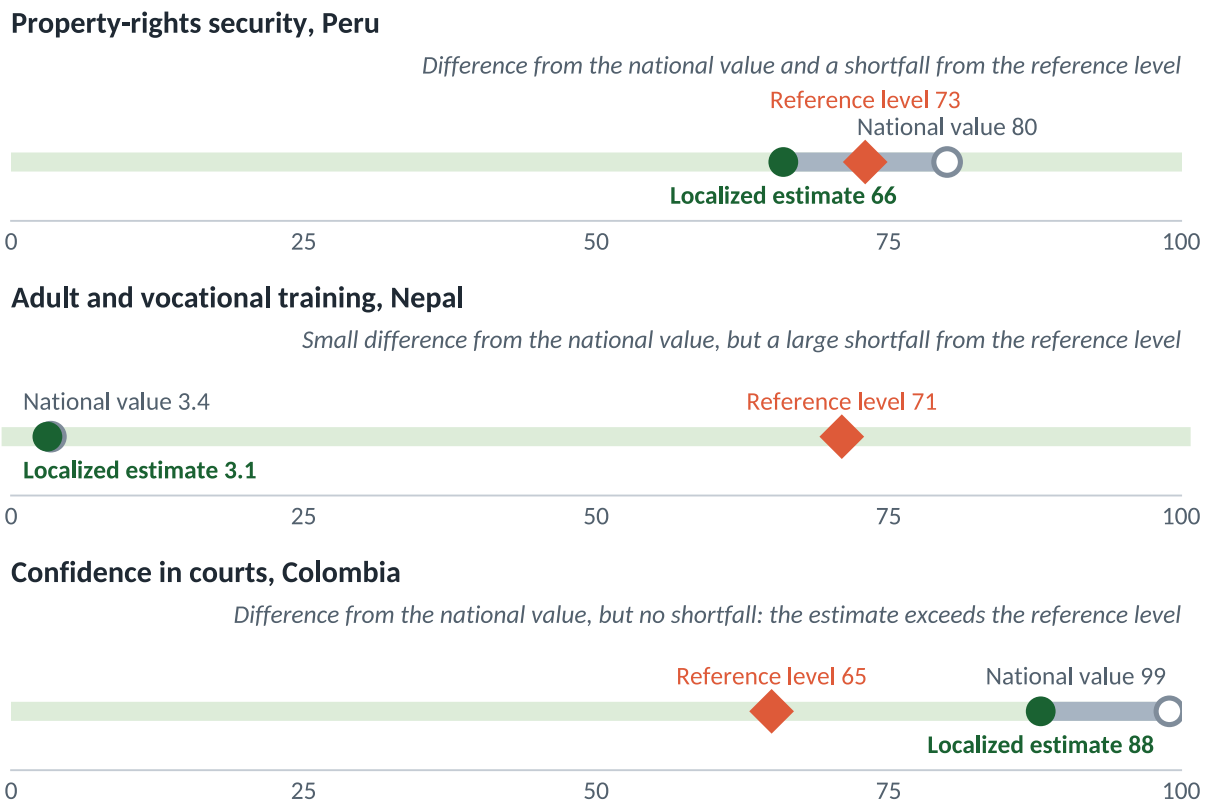


Members of the Indigenous Ipeti Embera community in Panama plant seedlings. Asha Stuart, 2025.

4 How to Read the Baseline

The baseline uses two principal comparisons to interpret the results. The first examines how conditions in forest territories differ from what national statistics suggest. This comparison helps identify where national averages may obscure the circumstances facing Indigenous Peoples, Afro-descendant Peoples, and local communities. The second examines how far localized estimates fall below the levels of government performance that key informants consider acceptable within each country. This helps identify where existing conditions fall short of expectations, even when national and localized values are similar.

These comparisons can yield different conclusions (Figure 5). In Peru, estimated property-rights security in forest territories falls below both the national value and the level informants consider acceptable. In Colombia, estimated trust in the legal system in forest territories is below the national value, yet informants consider it adequate. In Nepal, national and localized values for adult training are similar, but both fall well below the level considered acceptable. The first example illustrates a disparity between national and localized conditions; the second shows that a localized estimate can fall below the national value while still meeting the reference level; and the third points to a broader shortfall in government performance.



[Figure 5: Interpreting national values, localized estimates, and reference levels. Each example illustrates how comparing localized estimates with national values can reveal disparities affecting forest communities, while comparing localized estimates with reference levels identifies shortfalls relative to what informants consider acceptable.Source: Authors' elaboration from appendix tables.]

For comparisons across countries, the study also uses a cross-country reference level, including as the reference for Indonesia, where national reference levels could not be established. These comparisons are diagnostic rather than explanatory. They identify where national averages may obscure conditions in forest territories and where localized estimates fall short of acceptable levels, but further country-level analysis is needed to understand the underlying causes and identify appropriate policy responses. Detailed findings for each of the six countries may be accessed in the attached Annex 2.



A performer is captured on camera during the opening ceremony of RRI's 20th anniversary celebration in Kathmandu, Nepal. Sandesh Chaudbury, 2025.

5 Results



The baseline identifies four recurring findings across the six countries, revealing important gaps and patterns in the enabling conditions for community livelihoods.

Finding 1.
National averages frequently obscure conditions in forest territories.

In 65 of the 71 indicator-country comparisons for which both national values and localized estimates were available (92 percent), key informants estimated that conditions facing Indigenous Peoples, Afro-descendant Peoples, and local communities in forest territories were less favorable than those reflected in national statistics. This pattern holds across all six countries and five policy domains, suggesting that national averages may obscure less favorable conditions facing forest communities.

Localized estimates were typically about 85 percent of corresponding national values. In Peru, for example, property-rights security falls from 80 percent nationally to an estimated 66 percent in forest territories. In Brazil, mobile access falls from 87 percent nationally to an estimated 73 percent in forest territories. These differences do not mean that national statistics are incorrect, but rather that they can obscure disparities affecting forest communities. Because the estimates use bounded adjustment categories, the actual differences may be larger.

There are important exceptions. Four of the six comparisons in which localized conditions were estimated to be more favorable than national values occur in Colombia, including property-rights security, institutional trust, freedom from bribery, and participation in decision-making. The other two are in Indonesia, where informants estimated better access to safe drinking water in forest territories, reflecting community management of springs and rivers; and participation in decision making. In the DRC, the loan approval indicator could not be estimated because communities assume that applications will be rejected and thus often do not apply. This illustrates a broader limitation of indicators that measure access only among those who participate in formal systems.

Although localized estimates are based on structured judgments rather than direct measurements, the overall pattern is consistent across countries and policy domains. National reporting on climate, biodiversity, development, and rights commitments may therefore present a more favorable picture than the conditions facing the communities whose rights and livelihoods those commitments are intended to support.

Finding 2.

Legal recognition of collective rights does not ensure the conditions needed to exercise them.

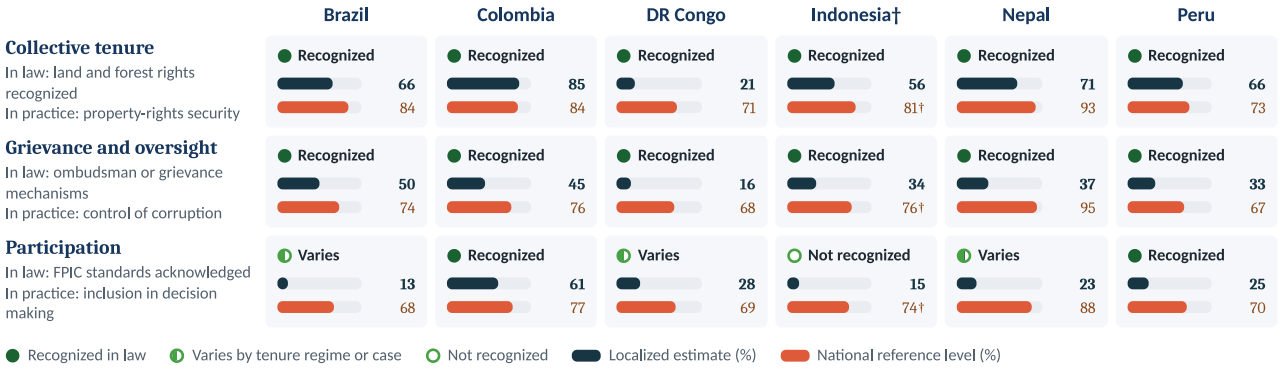
All six countries recognize community land or forest rights in law, yet the broader conditions needed to exercise those rights remain substantially weaker. Across the baseline, formal recognition of rights and institutions coexists with significant gaps in tenure security, government accountability, and meaningful participation in decision-making (Figure 6).

The contrast is particularly evident in tenure security. In the DRC, the localized estimate of property-rights security is just 21 percent, while estimates in Indonesia, Peru, Brazil, and Nepal range from 56 to 71 percent. Colombia is the only country where the localized estimate (85 percent) reaches the level considered acceptable by informants. Similar disparities emerge in other domains. All six countries provide for ombudsman or grievance institutions in law, yet estimated government success in containing corruption ranges from

16 to 50 percent and falls short of the level informants consider acceptable in every country. Peru recognizes free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) in law, but estimated inclusion in decision-making is only 25 percent, about the same as the national value, compared with a national reference level of 70 percent. Colombia, which also recognizes FPIC, is the only country where estimated inclusion comes within 20 points of its reference level.

These comparisons do not establish whether particular laws are being implemented or enforced since the indicators measure broader conditions influenced by multiple factors. They nevertheless reveal an important distinction between recognizing collective rights and creating the institutional environment in which communities can exercise them. Tenure recognition remains a fundamental achievement, but its contribution to collective livelihoods depends on the security, accountability, and participation that make those rights meaningful in practice. Figure 5 juxtaposes the legal recognition of selected rights and institutions with estimates of related conditions in practice, illustrating that formal recognition alone does not ensure an enabling environment for collective livelihoods.

Rights and institutions exist in law across the six countries; conditions in practice fall short of what informants consider acceptable



[Figure 6: Legal recognition and conditions in practice for three enabling conditions. Each cell shows whether the provision exists in law, the localized estimate for a related condition in practice (blue), and the national reference level informants consider acceptable (orange). For Indonesia the orange bar is the cross-country reference level. The paired indicators illustrate the distance between recognition and practice; they do not measure compliance with the specific legal provision. Source: Authors' elaboration from appendix tables.]

Finding 3.

Political voice, security, and accountability are consistent weaknesses across all six countries.

Across all six countries, estimated conditions for meaningful participation in decision-making, freedom from violent conflict, and government control of corruption fall substantially below reference levels. These are among the largest and most consistent shortfalls identified by the baseline, underscoring the importance of political inclusion, security, and accountable institutions for collective livelihoods.

In Brazil, Colombia, the DRC, Nepal, and Peru, all three indicators fall below the levels considered acceptable by national informants. Shortfalls in participation exceed 40 percentage points in four countries—Brazil, the DRC, Nepal, and Peru—while freedom from violent conflict falls more than 50 points below reference levels in Peru and the DRC. Anti-corruption performance falls short by 24 to 58 points across the five countries. Indonesia also falls below the cross-country reference level on all three indicators. Overall, indicators measuring protection from harm show larger median shortfalls than those measuring de facto conditions (40 versus 20 percentage points).

The risks associated with exercising rights are particularly stark. Between 2012 and 2024, 509 land and environmental defenders were killed in Colombia and 413 in Brazil. These figures are not adjusted for population, reporting differences, or other contextual factors and should not be interpreted as directly comparable measures of risk. Nevertheless, they illustrate the violence that can accompany efforts to defend territories and exercise collective rights. These findings reinforce the broader understanding of livelihoods articulated

in the Brasília Declaration. Beyond access to finance, markets, infrastructure, and enterprise support, communities need the ability to participate in decisions, negotiate with external actors, defend their territories, and exercise their rights without intimidation or violence. Political voice, security, and accountable institutions are not peripheral governance concerns; they are fundamental enabling conditions for self-determined livelihoods.

Finding 4.

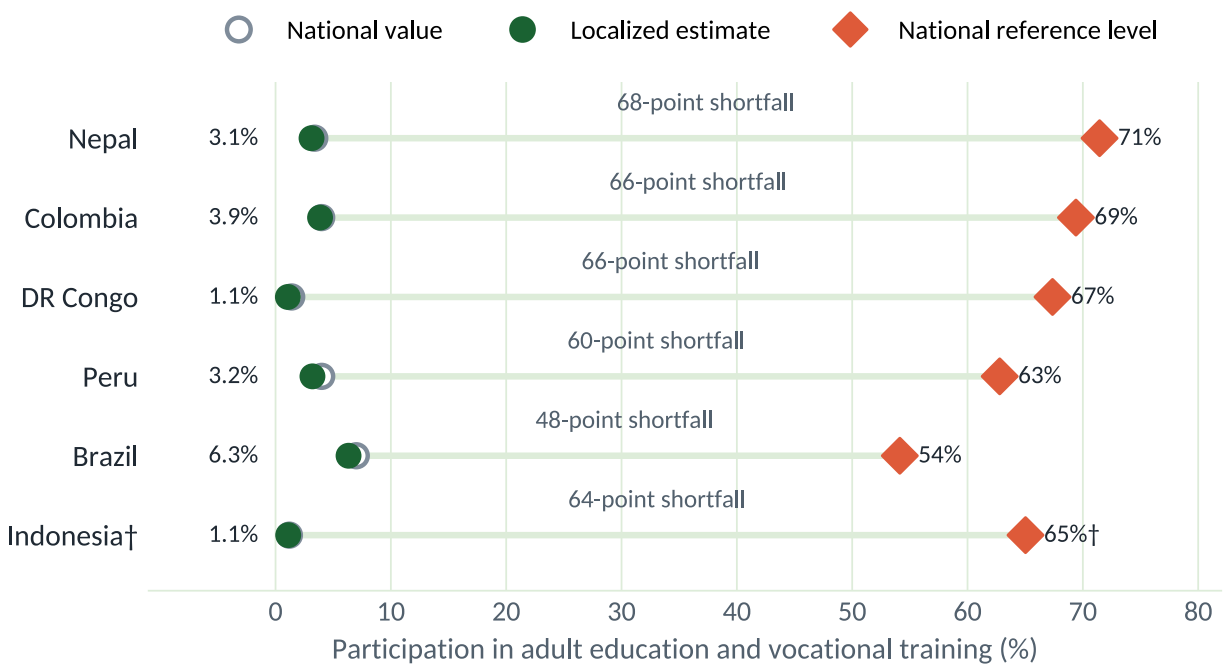
Limited access to sustained capacity development is a shared constraint across all six countries.

Access to adult education and vocational training is among the weakest enabling conditions identified by the baseline. Across all six countries, localized estimates of participation range from just 1.1 percent in Indonesia to 6.3 percent in Brazil, far below the levels considered acceptable by key informants (Figure 7). National participation rates are also exceptionally low, ranging from 1.2 to 7 percent. This suggests that the shortfall reflects weaknesses in national education and training systems, with even lower rates estimated in forest territories.

In the five countries with national reference levels, informants identified acceptable participation rates of 54 to 71 percent, leaving shortfalls of 48 to 68 percentage points. Indonesia also falls substantially below the cross-country reference level. The consistency and magnitude of these gaps suggest that sustained capacity development is a common challenge across otherwise diverse national contexts.

The indicator draws on UNESCO data for Sustainable Development Goal 4.3.1, measuring adult participation in formal or non-formal education and training during the preceding 12 months. It captures organized learning opportunities rather than isolated workshops, but remains an imperfect proxy for the technical, organizational, managerial, and negotiating capabilities needed to support collective livelihoods. Future iterations of the baseline should develop more targeted measures in collaboration with rightsholders.

The findings nevertheless point to an important distinction between temporary project-based assistance and sustained access to capacity development. Training provided through individual projects, NGOs, or private-sector initiatives can be valuable, but cannot substitute for accessible and reliable systems of adult learning and technical support. For communities to exercise their rights and pursue self-determined economic opportunities, capacity development must be treated as a long-term enabling condition rather than an occasional project intervention.



†Indonesia is shown against the cross-country reference level (average of the other five countries).

[Figure 7: Participation in adult education and vocational training: national value, localized estimate, and national reference level in each country. For Indonesia the reference level shown is the cross-country level. Source: Authors' elaboration from appendix tables.]



A circle of workers cracking babaçu coconuts for production. Davie Melo.

6 From Evidence to Policy Action:

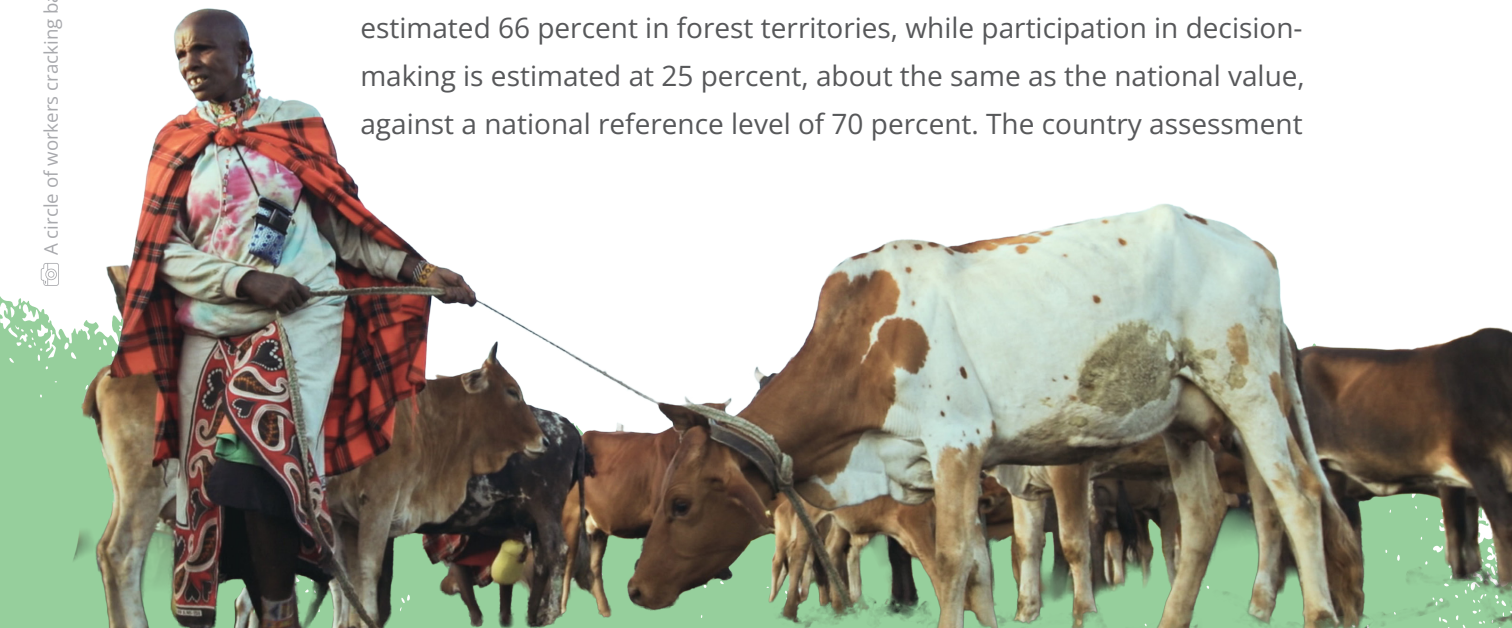
Illustrative Country Applications

The baseline provides a starting point for identifying where laws, public institutions, and investment arrangements may not be creating the conditions needed for collective livelihoods. The following examples draw on the country assessments (Annex 2) to illustrate how the findings could inform policy dialogue and investment decisions. They are illustrative rather than prescriptive: further analysis with rightsholders and national experts is needed to establish the causes of identified gaps and determine appropriate responses. The policy entry points identified below are RRI's reading of the evidence, developed with its country partners, rather than findings of the study.

6.1 Peru and Colombia: Making Collective Rights Effective in Practice

Peru and Colombia demonstrate why formal tenure recognition is an incomplete measure of the conditions needed for collective livelihoods. Both countries have established legal frameworks for collective rights, but the baseline identifies different constraints on communities' ability to exercise those rights.

In Peru, protection of property rights falls from 80 percent nationally to an estimated 66 percent in forest territories, while participation in decision-making is estimated at 25 percent, about the same as the national value, against a national reference level of 70 percent. The country assessment



A circle of workers cracking babaçu coconuts for production. Davie Melo.

identifies important differences among tenure regimes: the bundle of rights is complete for Native Community Forest Lands and Peasant Community Forestlands, but not for Indigenous Reserves and Communal Reserves. These different tenure regimes therefore do not confer the same powers of resource management and governance across all community territories

These findings provide a basis for examining implementation of Peru's Forest and Wildlife Law (Law No. 29763), including the responsibilities of national forestry authorities, the Agency for the Supervision of Forest and Wildlife Resources (Organismo de Supervision de los Recursos Forestales y de Fauna Silvestre, OSINFOR), and regional governments. Recent efforts to simplify community forest management procedures offer an entry point for assessing whether administrative reforms are reducing barriers to lawful forest use and community enterprise development. The assessment also identifies mobile access below the national average, insufficient sustained technical assistance, and financing arrangements that may expose collective assets to disproportionate risk. Together, these constraints suggest a need to examine how tenure recognition translates into approved management plans, access to support and finance, and meaningful participation in decisions affecting community territories.

Colombia presents a different challenge. Indigenous resguardos and Afro-descendant collective territories have comparatively strong legal recognition, with community tenure covering an estimated 57 percent of forest land. Localized property-rights security is estimated at 85 percent, the highest in the study. Yet violence, intimidation, and limited economic opportunities remain significant constraints. The assessment also cautions that conventional tenure-security indicators may overlook indirect dispossession through economic pressure and environmental displacement.

Differences among tenure regimes shape the available responses. Indigenous resguardos and Afro-descendant territories benefit from constitutional protections against alienation, while Peasant Reserve Zones have a different legal status. These protections safeguard collective territories but also limit the use

of land as collateral, reinforcing the need for financial instruments suited to collective ownership. The assessment further identifies risks associated with carbon-credit projects proceeding without adequate consent and gaps in official systems for tracking threats against defenders.

For Colombia, relevant policy entry points include strengthening territorial protection mechanisms, improving coordination between Indigenous and ordinary justice systems, and adapting enterprise finance and carbon-market safeguards to collective rights. Law No. 70 of 1993, the land restitution framework under Law No. 1448 of 2011 —and its implementing decrees 4633 and 4635 of 2011— as well as territorial protections associated with the Peace Agreement provide institutional foundations for this work.

The contrast is instructive. In Peru, the implementation of rights across different tenure regimes and public agencies merits scrutiny. In Colombia, comparatively strong formal rights coexist with threats to physical security and economic participation that require different institutional and investment responses. Challenges with security are also present in Peru.

6.2 Nepal: Linking Community Forestry Rights, Enterprise Development, and Returning Workers

Nepal's community forestry system provides a substantial institutional foundation for collective livelihoods. More than 23,000 Community Forest User Groups (CFUGs) manage approximately 2.5 million hectares of forest under arrangements established through the Forest Act of 1993, revised in 2019. Yet the country assessment identifies significant barriers to translating community forest management into viable enterprises, particularly access to finance, sustained capacity development, and equitable participation in economic opportunities.

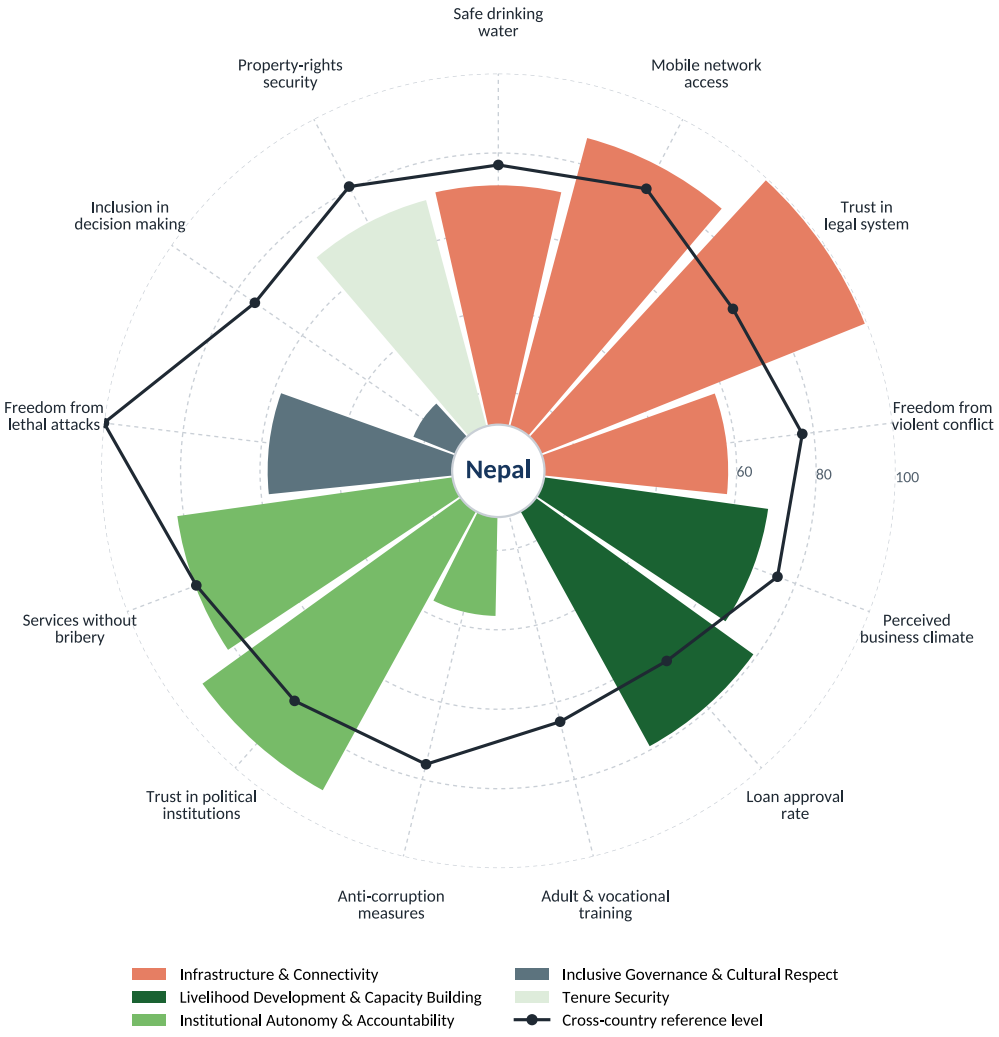
Participation in adult education and vocational training is estimated at 3.1 percent in forest territories, compared with 3.4 percent nationally, and a reference level of 71 percent. Informants described existing training as short-term, donor-driven, concentrated among local elites, and poorly connected

to markets. The assessment also identifies a mismatch between community forestry rights and conventional lending arrangements. Collateral eligibility varies across tenure regimes, while CFUGs face restrictive lending requirements, limited awareness of concessional finance, and administrative barriers despite managing substantial forest resources.

These findings point to the importance of connecting community forestry institutions with public vocational training, enterprise development, and financial inclusion policies. Nepal's Forest Act and its implementing arrangements provide one entry point, alongside the Council for Technical Education and Vocational Training and the responsibilities of federal, provincial, and local governments. More coordinated public support could improve the relevance and accessibility of training, address financing constraints associated with collective forest management, and better align enterprise programs with CFUG priorities.

Migration adds another dimension. The country assessment identifies outmigration as reducing the labor available for forest management and highlights demographic change as a priority for further analysis. RRI partners have suggested that returning migrant workers may also represent an opportunity for community enterprise development, bringing skills, savings, and experience acquired abroad. Connecting labor reintegration programs with vocational training, local enterprise support, and community forestry institutions could help communities explore this potential, although this possibility was not examined in the baseline and its scale and feasibility require further assessment.

Nepal therefore illustrates the need for complementary reforms in finance, skills development, and institutional coordination to build on an established community forestry system. The assessment's findings on elite capture and opaque allocation of community funds also underscore the importance of equitable governance and benefit-sharing as economic opportunities expand.



[Figure 8: Spider chart comparing localized indicators (colored wedges) for the five policy domains to a cross-country reference level (black points). Source: Authors' own elaboration.]

6.3 Democratic Republic of the Congo: Addressing Exclusion From Finance and the Conditions for Community Enterprise

The DRC illustrates the challenges of advancing collective livelihoods where emerging legal frameworks for community forest management coexist with insecure rights, weak institutions, and limited economic opportunities. The 2002 Forest Code and subsequent regulations, including the 2014 decree and 2016 ministerial order governing Local Community Forest Concessions, provide a basis for community forestry. By early 2024, more than 160 concessions had been granted, covering approximately 3.3 million hectares. Law No. 22/030 of 2022 also recognizes the rights of Indigenous Pygmy Peoples.

Despite these advances, only approximately 4 percent of forest land is recognized as owned or managed by communities, and localized property-rights security is estimated at 21 percent. Informants identified eviction, encroachment, and arbitrary withdrawal of rights as recurring concerns. The country assessment also highlights tensions between customary understandings of territorial ownership and statutory approaches requiring forests to be formally designated or allocated by the state. Advancing tenure security therefore involves not only accelerating recognition but also addressing the content and legal basis of community rights.

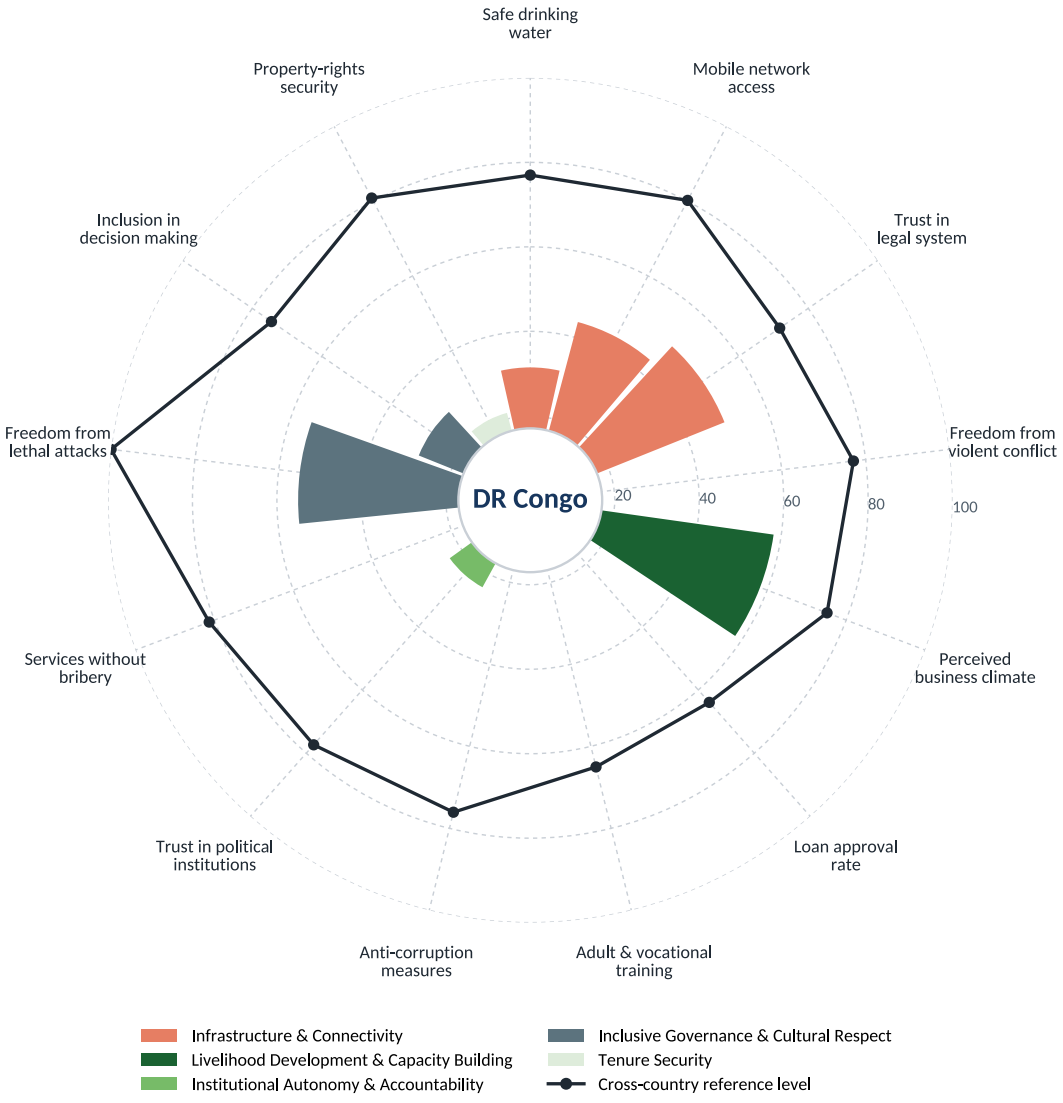
Access to finance presents a related challenge. The baseline could not produce a meaningful localized estimate of loan approval because informants reported that communities rarely apply for formal credit, anticipating rejection. The assessment identifies differences in collateral eligibility across community tenure regimes and notes that carbon-credit financing, sometimes proposed as an alternative, has not reached the communities consulted. Participation in adult education and vocational training is also estimated at approximately 1 percent nationally and locally, although informants cautioned that this measure does not capture informal and community-based learning.



These findings point toward a more integrated approach to community enterprise development. Implementation of the community forestry framework requires attention to the technical, organizational, and administrative support available to Local Community Forest Concessions. Financial instruments must also accommodate collective governance and the forms of tenure recognized under Congolese law. Grant finance, enterprise preparation, and sustained technical assistance may be particularly important where communities cannot meet conventional lending requirements or are not yet positioned to seek formal investment.

Finance, however, cannot be separated from security and institutional accountability. Freedom from violent conflict is estimated at under 5 percent in forest territories, while informants described corruption, exclusion from decision-making, and limited access to effective remedies. These conditions can undermine enterprise development even where legal recognition and financing opportunities exist. Support for community institutions and economic activities must therefore be considered alongside territorial protection, accountable administration, and mechanisms for enforcing rights.

The DRC illustrates why the number of concessions granted or the availability of financing facilities cannot, on their own, establish progress toward collective livelihoods. The more consequential question is whether communities can exercise recognized rights, obtain suitable support, and pursue economic opportunities without prohibitive insecurity or institutional barriers.

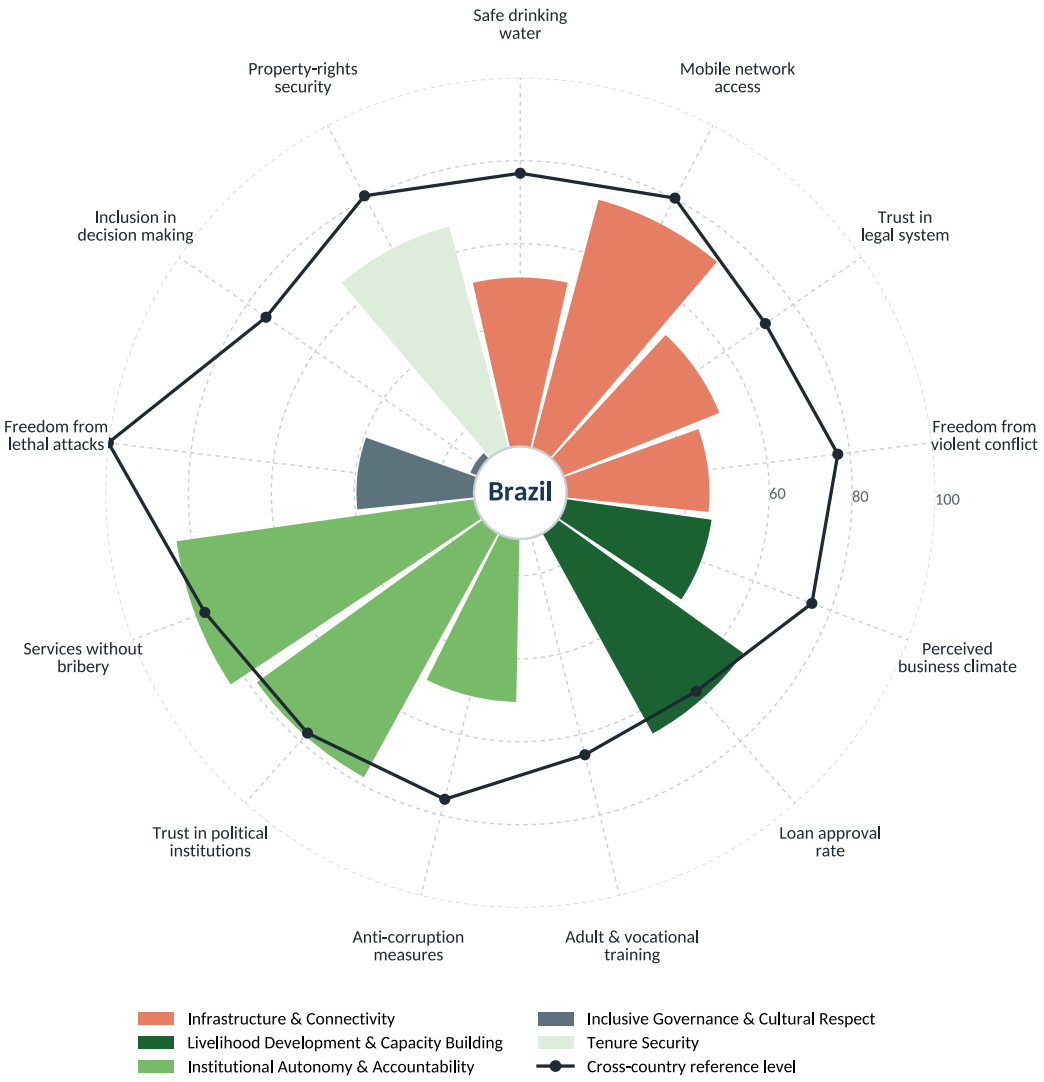


[Figure 9: Spider chart comparing localized indicators (colored wedges) for the five policy domains to a cross-country reference level (black points). Source: Authors' own elaboration.]

6.4 Brazil: Strengthening Territorial Protection and Implementation Across Tenure Regimes

Brazil has an extensive legal framework for collective tenure, including Indigenous Lands, Quilombola Territories, Extractive Reserves, and other community forest arrangements. However, the rights and protections afforded under these regimes vary substantially. Indigenous Lands and Quilombola Territories provide more complete bundles of rights, while other arrangements offer more limited autonomy and resource rights. The baseline estimates property-rights security at 66 percent in forest territories, compared with 81 percent nationally, and identifies serious shortcomings in community participation and protection from violence.

These findings point to several policy entry points. Completing territorial regularization and strengthening enforcement against encroachment could improve the security of recognized rights. Consultation protections, currently clearer for Indigenous Peoples and Quilombola communities than for other collective tenure holders, could be extended across tenure regimes. The country assessment also identifies the establishment of a national system to monitor attacks on territorial and environmental defenders as a priority--stronger mechanisms for their protection would be a natural complement. These measures could address immediate threats to community governance while creating more secure conditions for long-term livelihood activities. Expanded access to technical training and enterprise support would complement these protections, particularly given the low participation in adult education and vocational training estimated by the baseline



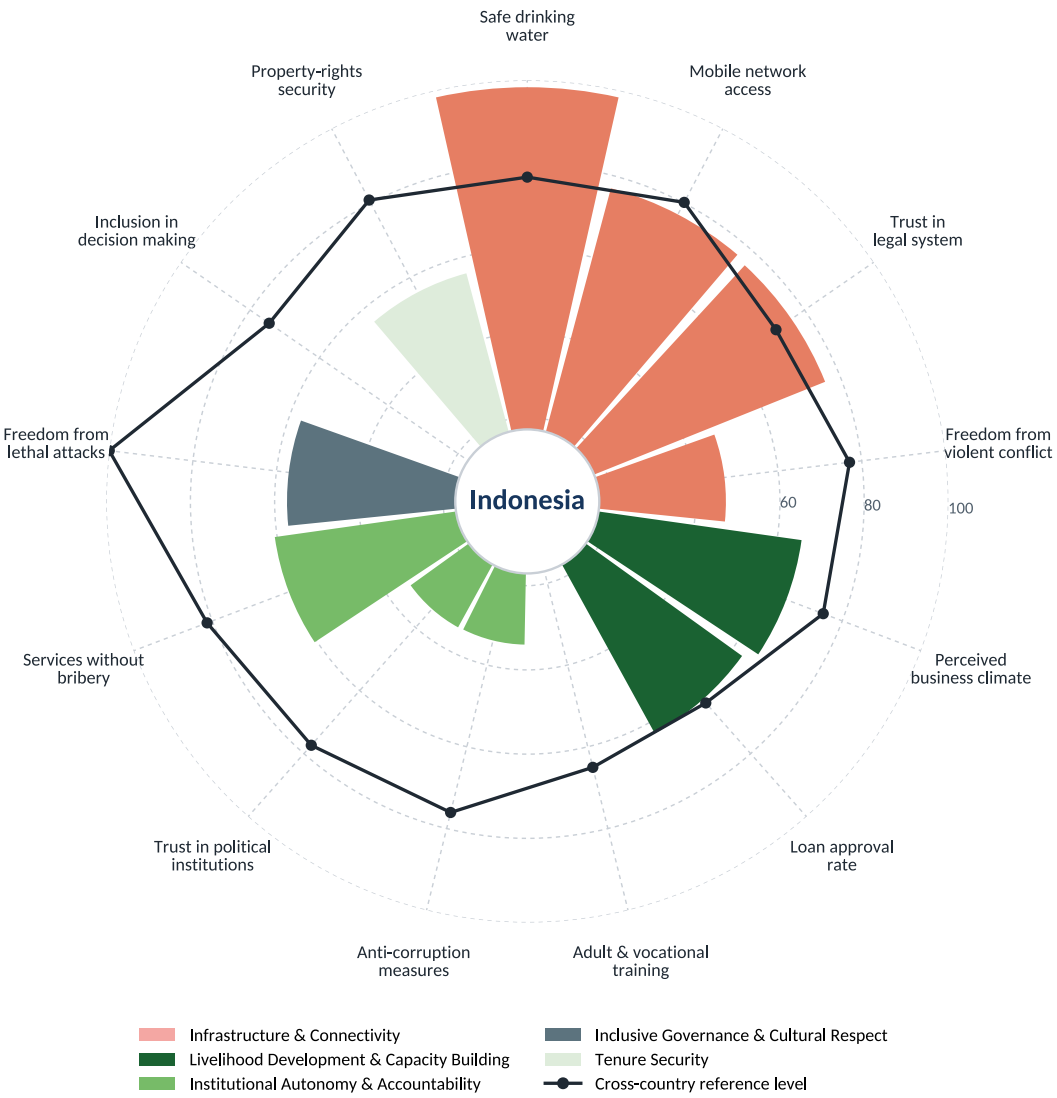
[Figure 10: Spider chart comparing localized indicators (colored wedges) for the five policy domains to a cross-country reference level (black points). Source: Authors' own elaboration.]



6.5 Indonesia: Customary Rights and Participation in Forest Governance

Indonesia has expanded community forest access through its Social Forestry program and recognition of customary forests following the Constitutional Court's 2013 decision. However, the country assessment finds that only 6.7 percent of forest land is formally recognized for communities and that a complete bundle of rights is available under only one of the five tenure regimes examined: Customary Law Forest. Other arrangements generally provide more conditional or time-limited access. The baseline also identifies major weaknesses in inclusive governance: Indonesia is the only study country whose national law does not acknowledge FPIC standards, and estimated participation in adult education and vocational training is just 1.1 percent. Inclusion in decision-making is as low nationally (14 percent) as in forest territories (15 percent), which means that the exclusion informants describe is a weakness of the national system rather than of its reach into forest areas.

These findings suggest several complementary policy priorities. Accelerating recognition of customary forests and strengthening the rights available under other social forestry arrangements could improve tenure security and communities' ability to manage resources and develop enterprises. Establishing national FPIC protections and strengthening accountability in provincial and district decision-making could address the exclusion identified by informants, including concerns about elite capture under regional autonomy. In Papua, where special autonomy has not necessarily translated into meaningful community influence over land and resource decisions, the country assessment points to the need for governance arrangements responsive to Indigenous institutions and territorial priorities. These reforms would likely need to be accompanied by sustained technical training and enterprise development support to address the substantial capacity gap identified by the baseline.



[Figure 11: Spider chart comparing localized indicators (colored wedges) for the five policy domains to a cross-country reference level (black points). Source: Authors' own elaboration.]

6.6 Connecting Country Evidence to Reform and Investment

These examples demonstrate how the same baseline framework can reveal different priorities for policy and investment. Peru and Colombia highlight the importance of implementation and protection under distinct tenure regimes; Nepal illustrates the need to connect established community forestry institutions with public training, finance, and economic opportunities; the DRC shows how financial exclusion interacts with insecure rights and weak institutional support; Brazil shows how a well-developed legal architecture is undermined by weak protection and enforcement; and Indonesia how limited recognition and the absence of consent standards compound a significant capacity gap.

The baseline does not prescribe reforms. It provides evidence to guide closer examination of laws, administrative procedures, institutional mandates, public budgets, and investment mechanisms. Rightsholder organizations and national partners are essential to interpreting these findings and determining which changes would meaningfully improve collective livelihoods. Repeated assessments can then help track whether those conditions improve.



In Tsarang, Upper Mustang, Nepal, a Tibetan woman works on the fields with her two cattle. Shutterstock.



Display at the Global Summit on Collective Livelihoods and Conservation. Yago Kaingang, 2026.

7 Scope, Limitations, and Priorities for Strengthening the Baseline

7.1 Scope and Interpretation

This baseline assessment has several limitations that should inform how its findings are interpreted. The six countries were selected to test the framework across different contexts and do not constitute a representative sample. The study is descriptive: it identifies patterns in enabling conditions and priorities for further investigation but does not establish the causes of observed gaps or attribute them to specific government policies.

The framework focuses primarily on the role of national governments, although conditions in forest territories are also shaped by subnational authorities, companies, civil society organizations, armed groups, and community institutions. The indicators therefore describe conditions experienced by communities rather than measuring government performance alone. Indonesia's community-managed water systems, for example, illustrate why access to a service cannot necessarily be attributed to government provision.

The baseline measures conditions expected to support collective livelihoods, rather than livelihood outcomes themselves. It therefore cannot establish whether improvements in enabling conditions lead to improvements in community well-being, or which conditions have the greatest influence on those outcomes.

7.2 Measurement Limitations

Localized estimates are based on structured judgments by key informants, not direct surveys of forest communities. Informants were shown national indicator values and asked to adjust them using predefined response cate-

gories. This approach provides a consistent basis for identifying disparities where subnational data are unavailable, but it limits precision. Showing informants the national value may also have anchored their estimates, while the response categories may partly explain the similarity of adjustments across indicators. The findings should therefore be interpreted in terms of the direction and relative magnitude of differences, rather than the precision of individual estimates. Colombia's exceptions to the general pattern indicate that informants did not simply apply a uniform adjustment.

The reference levels used in the analysis reflect informants' judgments of acceptable conditions. They are not legal standards or human-rights thresholds, and may vary according to the composition of respondents. In Indonesia, the reference-level question was interpreted as an assessment of current conditions rather than acceptable performance; the analysis therefore uses the cross-country reference level for Indonesia. Although the sample included respondents from government and other sectors alongside rightsholder and advocacy organizations, potential differences in their assessments warrant closer examination.

Several indicators are necessarily imperfect proxies. Trust in the national congress is used to approximate trust in political institutions, firms' confidence in the courts to approximate access to justice, and loan approval rates among firms to approximate access to finance. The latter excludes enterprises and communities that do not apply for credit, potentially overlooking substantial barriers to financial inclusion. Data sources also differ across countries for some indicators, requiring caution when interpreting individual cross-country comparisons. The report's principal findings rest on patterns across multiple indicators rather than any single measure.

The framework also has limitations in how it recognizes Indigenous and traditional knowledge. Several indicators rely on conventional measures of education, institutional performance, and economic participation that may not adequately reflect community-based systems of knowledge and practice.

For example, the adult and vocational training indicator does not necessarily capture traditional knowledge, intergenerational learning, or skills developed through community institutions. Low participation in formal or non-formal training should therefore not be interpreted as an absence of knowledge or capacity within communities.

Finally, estimates provided partly by external informants cannot substitute for communities' own assessments of their rights, institutions, opportunities, and well-being. The indicator framework, developed by the research team, should be reviewed with rightsholders and national partners before subsequent rounds.

7.3 Priorities for Strengthening the Baseline

Future assessments should improve both the measurement of existing conditions and the framework's coverage of collective livelihoods. Several priorities emerge from this initial study.

- **Women and youth.** The current baseline does not systematically distinguish the conditions experienced by women and young people. Future rounds should examine differences in access to rights, services, economic opportunities, and decision-making, consistent with the priorities expressed in the Brasília Declaration.

- **Cultural respect, knowledge, and food systems.** The framework captures aspects of inclusive governance but provides limited evidence on the recognition, transmission, and application of Indigenous and traditional knowledge, including customary institutions, languages, and food systems. Future rounds should develop indicators with rightsholders that better reflect these dimensions of collective livelihoods, including community-based learning and the role of traditional knowledge in territorial governance, resource management, and economic activities.

- **Community institutions and territorial governance.** The government-focused indicators could be complemented by measures of community governance capacity, including the ability of collective institutions to make decisions, manage resources, and distribute benefits equitably.

- **Markets, finance, and community economies.** Existing business and financial indicators do not adequately capture the circumstances of collective enterprises. More appropriate measures would assess access to suitable finance, markets, technical assistance, and value chains, taking account of collective ownership and governance arrangements.

- **Livelihood outcomes defined by communities.** The baseline assesses conditions expected to support collective livelihoods, not whether livelihoods themselves are improving. It therefore rests on a relationship supported by existing literature but not tested in this study: that stronger rights, services, protections, and economic opportunities contribute to improved well-being.[25] Future research should assess livelihood outcomes directly, using measures developed with communities and applied consistently over time. This would help establish whether improvements in enabling conditions are associated with changes that communities themselves consider meaningful.

Subsequent rounds would also benefit from more reliable subnational data, comparison with community survey evidence where available, finer response categories, and standardized questions on reference levels. Repeated assessments in the same territories would make it possible to examine changes over time, refine the indicators, and test whether the relationships assumed by the framework hold in practice.



A woman watches elephants in the distance in Kenya. Anthony Ochieng.

8 Conclusion



Two decades ago, systematic evidence made the collective tenure gap visible and helped build an international agenda for recognizing community rights. The next challenge is to make equally visible the conditions that shape what communities can do with those rights. This initial six-country baseline examines whether Indigenous Peoples, Afro-descendant Peoples, and local communities have the conditions needed to govern their territories, exercise their rights, participate in decisions, and pursue the livelihoods and economies they define for themselves.

The findings reveal a gap, consistent across the six countries, between the recognition of collective rights and the conditions needed to exercise them. National averages frequently mask additional disadvantages in forest territories, while many shortfalls extend beyond those territories and reflect broader weaknesses in public institutions, services, and economic opportunities. Legal recognition remains foundational, but it does not, on its own, ensure access to finance, relevant training, effective participation, territorial security, or accountable institutions. These complementary conditions are essential if recognized rights are to translate into self-determined livelihoods.

The baseline does not establish the causes of these gaps or prescribe a uniform set of reforms. Rather, it provides rightsholders, governments, and development partners with a framework for identifying where further investigation and action are needed. The country examples illustrate how this evidence can direct attention toward specific laws,

administrative procedures, institutional responsibilities, and investment arrangements. Subsequent assessments, developed with rightsholders and supported by stronger territorial data, can help determine whether changes in these conditions are producing meaningful improvements in community livelihoods.

Ultimately, progress must be judged not only by whether collective rights have been recognized, but by whether Indigenous Peoples, Afro-descendant Peoples, and local communities have the conditions and agency to exercise those rights, sustain and strengthen their livelihoods, and pursue their own development priorities. Creating these conditions is essential to realizing the promise of collective tenure recognition and to sustaining the community stewardship of forests and ecosystems on which biodiversity conservation, climate mitigation, and long-term resilience depend.



Indigenous Pygmy women in the DRC pose for a photo. EnviroNews RDC, 2024.

Notes

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