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The Paradox of Institutional Recognition: Collective Autonomy and Governance Transformation in Indigenous and Traditional Communities

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ABSTRACT: Institutional recognition of Indigenous peoples and traditional communities involves tensions between the expansion of collective rights and the reconfiguration of authority, representation, and governance structures. This study aims to examine the mechanisms and conditions through which institutional formalization strengthens or constrains collective autonomy, considering its political, administrative, and economic implications. An integrative literature review was developed using a critical, interpretive, and theory-building approach. The literature search, covering November 2025 to July 2026, initially identified 1,323 records and resulted in a corpus of 27 references, comprising 16 thematic publications, eight theoretical works, and three methodological references. Findings indicate that legal recognition may expand territorial protection, institutional participation, and economic opportunities while introducing bureaucratic dependencies, representational conflicts, and restrictions on collective decision-making. The discussion demonstrates that these outcomes depend on leadership legitimacy, institutional mediation, community control over resources, and the implementation conditions of recognized rights. As its principal theoretical contribution, the study proposes the Institutional Mediation and Community Autonomy Model (MIAC), which systematizes four explanatory governance configurations. The review concludes that formalization does not independently determine whether collective autonomy is strengthened or constrained. Instead, its consequences emerge from interactions among institutional recognition, decision-making authority, and communities' effective capacity for self-determination.

KEYWORDS: Self-determination. Territorial rights. Bureaucratic mediation. Customary institutions. Political participation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Institutional recognition has become a significant mechanism for securing collective rights, protecting traditional territories, and expanding Indigenous peoples' and traditional communities' access to public institutions and economic opportunities. However, legal formalization frequently requires administrative procedures, designated representatives, and organizational structures that may conflict with established systems of collective authority. While these arrangements can strengthen territorial protection and political participation, they also raise questions about communities' capacity to preserve their decision-making autonomy. Alden Wily (2021) situates customary tenure recognition within broader struggles over territorial control and the redistribution of institutional authority.

Legal recognition, nevertheless, does not necessarily guarantee substantive self-determination. Formalized organizations may acquire institutional legitimacy while experiencing transformations in leadership, resource management, and internal representation. Research in the Peruvian Amazon demonstrates that collective tenure formalization can coexist with restrictions on community governance and changes in traditional authority structures (Sarmiento Barletti et al., 2021). Such contradictions reveal that recognition involves not only access to rights but also negotiations over who exercises power, whose knowledge receives legitimacy, and how collective priorities are established.

Conversely, institutionalization should not be interpreted exclusively as a mechanism of domination. Communities may appropriate legal instruments to reinforce political identities, negotiate state requirements, and expand their institutional influence. Evidence from the Philippines indicates that Indigenous recognition can strengthen collective identity while fostering integration into state institutions (McMurry, 2022). These contrasting outcomes expose a fundamental paradox: formal recognition may simultaneously expand institutional opportunities and reshape the conditions under which collective autonomy is exercised. Understanding this relationship requires moving beyond binary interpretations of institutional inclusion and cultural subordination.

Existing research demonstrates that institutional formalization can redistribute political authority and redefine legitimate community representation. Comparative evidence from Nicaragua, Bolivia, and the Philippines shows that recognizing collective

territories also involves disputes over who can legitimately govern and represent them (Larson et al., 2015). Nevertheless, the mechanisms connecting legal recognition, internal power relations, and substantive autonomy remain insufficiently integrated into broader explanatory frameworks.

Further studies demonstrate that formalization outcomes depend on institutional and contextual conditions rather than legal recognition alone (Kusters et al., 2022). Community autonomy, moreover, cannot be treated as a homogeneous aspiration, since political priorities, generational differences, and competing understandings of authority shape collective decision-making (Baudoin Farah, 2024). External mediation introduces additional complexity: public officials may reinforce bureaucratic constraints or collaborate with Indigenous representatives to advance collective rights through interactions between different normative systems (Kløcker Larsen et al., 2025). Together, these findings indicate the need to explain how institutional requirements, community agency, internal inequalities, and external mediation interact to produce divergent outcomes.

Accordingly, this study addresses the following question: Under what conditions does institutional formalization strengthen or constrain collective autonomy, and through which mechanisms do state and market requirements transform community governance, political representation, and economic decision-making? Through an integrative literature review, it critically synthesizes theoretical and empirical evidence on institutional recognition, collective authority, bureaucratic mediation, and substantive self-determination. Its principal objective is to identify convergences, contradictions, and explanatory mechanisms capable of supporting an integrated analytical framework.

The study seeks to contribute to international social science debates by examining institutional formalization as a contested process rather than an inherently emancipatory or restrictive intervention. Its proposed contribution is to clarify how recognition, institutional mediation, and community control interact in shaping different configurations of collective autonomy, providing a conceptual foundation for understanding the political and organizational consequences of state recognition.

2. THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Institutional pressures, organizational legitimacy, and strategic responses

Institutional formalization involves transformations that extend beyond the legal establishment of organizations, encompassing the production of legitimacy, the standardization of administrative practices, and the reconfiguration of relationships between organizations and their institutional environments. Within sociological institutionalism, organizational structures are not understood exclusively as technical arrangements designed to improve operational efficiency. They also reflect socially established expectations concerning appropriate forms of authority, accountability, and organizational conduct.

Meyer and Rowan (1977) argue that organizations incorporate institutionalized rules and procedures to secure legitimacy and improve their prospects of survival, even when those arrangements are weakly connected to everyday practices. Their observation that formal structures may become “powerful myths” (p. 340) challenges the assumption that administrative conformity necessarily indicates organizational effectiveness.

Distinguishing legal formalization, institutionalization, and bureaucratization is essential to understanding these processes. Legal formalization refers to the acquisition of juridically recognized organizational status, including the corresponding rights and obligations. Institutionalization encompasses the broader process through which particular norms, procedures, and organizational arrangements become socially accepted, reproduced, and regarded as legitimate.

Bureaucratization, meanwhile, involves the expansion of standardized procedures, specialized responsibilities, hierarchical arrangements, and documentary mechanisms of administrative control. Although these processes frequently intersect, they are neither synonymous nor necessarily sequential. An organization may acquire legal recognition without substantially transforming its customary decision-making practices, just as bureaucratic routines may develop independently of formal incorporation. The analytical challenge lies in identifying when juridical recognition becomes a mechanism for reorganizing authority rather than merely providing an institutional instrument for exercising collective rights.

Organizational convergence represents another important dimension of institutional transformation. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) identify coercive, mimetic, and normative isomorphism as mechanisms through which organizations become increasingly similar within institutional fields. Their argument highlights a paradox in which actors pursuing organizational change may reproduce the very institutional arrangements that constrain their alternatives. As the authors observe, “rational actors make their organizations increasingly similar as they try to change them” (p. 147).

For traditional communities, coercive pressures may arise from regulatory requirements and eligibility conditions for public funding, while normative pressures can emerge through professional expertise, technical assistance, and standardized administrative training. Mimetic processes may also encourage the adoption of organizational models perceived as successful or institutionally legitimate. Nevertheless, applying these mechanisms requires distinguishing external pressures from the community's own reasons for adopting formal arrangements. Organizational similarity alone does not demonstrate coercion, cultural displacement, or diminished autonomy.

Despite the explanatory value of institutional isomorphism, approaches emphasizing organizational conformity may

underestimate the capacity of collective actors to negotiate, reinterpret, or contest external expectations. Oliver (1991) addresses this limitation by identifying five strategic responses to institutional pressures: acquiescence, compromise, avoidance, defiance, and manipulation. These responses reflect variations in organizational interests, perceived constraints, and relationships with institutional authorities.

Applied to community organizations, this framework suggests that formal compliance may coexist with selective adaptation, negotiation, or resistance. Such possibilities complicate interpretations that portray traditional communities as necessarily subordinated once they become legally recognized organizations. However, strategic agency should not be romanticized. Unequal access to technical knowledge, financial resources, and political representation may restrict which strategies are available and whose interests ultimately shape organizational responses.

Taken together, these institutional perspectives establish a distinction between organizational legitimacy and substantive autonomy. Compliance with external administrative expectations may enhance institutional recognition without guaranteeing collective control over decisions and resources. Conversely, institutional arrangements initially adopted to satisfy external requirements may be reappropriated through community practices. Understanding these possibilities requires moving beyond organizational structures themselves and examining the political relations within which recognition is granted, negotiated, and exercised.

2.2. State recognition, coloniality, and the politics of collective rights

State recognition is frequently presented as a mechanism through which historically marginalized communities obtain legal protection, political representation, and access to institutional resources. Yet recognition also involves relations of authority concerning who determines the criteria of collective identity, which territorial practices are considered legitimate, and what organizational arrangements qualify for public acknowledgment. These questions acquire particular significance where contemporary administrative institutions operate within societies marked by enduring colonial inequalities. Quijano (2000) conceptualizes coloniality as a historically constituted pattern of power that extends beyond formal colonial administration, shaping social classifications, knowledge production, and the organization of political and economic relationships. Accordingly, the institutional recognition of traditional communities cannot be separated entirely from the historical inequalities influencing whose knowledge and organizational practices are treated as authoritative.

Within this perspective, formal recognition raises a fundamental political contradiction. Communities seeking protection through legal institutions may be required to express their collective identities and governance practices through categories defined by the authorities responsible for recognizing them. Such arrangements can increase institutional visibility while narrowing the range of political expressions considered administratively legitimate.

Coulthard (2014) critically examines the politics of recognition in settler-colonial contexts, challenging the assumption that state acknowledgment necessarily transforms the structural relations through which Indigenous dispossession and political subordination are reproduced. His critique suggests that recognition may remain embedded within unequal power relations when the state retains predominant authority over the terms, boundaries, and institutional consequences of acknowledgment. Nevertheless, this argument does not establish that every recognition process reproduces colonial domination. Rather, it invites examination of whether communities can influence the institutional conditions under which their rights are defined and exercised.

Administrative knowledge constitutes another dimension of this relationship. Scott (1998) demonstrates how modern states seek to render complex social realities comprehensible through classifications, standardized measurements, documentary procedures, and simplified representations. Such processes facilitate administration, but they may obscure local practices and forms of knowledge that do not correspond to established regulatory categories. In traditional communities, customary authority, territorial obligations, and collective decision-making may operate through relationships that cannot be fully represented by organizational charts, formal membership registers, or standardized procedures. Consequently, administrative recognition may privilege what institutions can document over what communities consider socially legitimate. This tension becomes especially consequential when access to resources depends on the capacity to translate collective practices into bureaucratically recognizable forms.

Nevertheless, neither customary governance nor state institutions should be treated as internally homogeneous. Community-based arrangements may contain inequalities, contested leadership positions, and exclusions, while legal recognition can create opportunities to challenge previously established concentrations of authority. An adequate critique must therefore question both the universalization of bureaucratic rationality and the idealization of tradition. The central issue concerns the distribution of power over institutional definitions, representative authority, and collective decisions. Recognition acquires substantive political significance not simply when collective identities become legally visible, but when the communities concerned possess meaningful opportunities to shape the conditions under which their recognized rights operate.

2.3. Community governance, institutional bricolage, and collective resource management

Community governance encompasses the formal and informal arrangements through which collective actors establish rules, regulate access to resources, resolve disputes, and coordinate decisions. These arrangements cannot be adequately understood through assumptions that effective governance necessarily requires either centralized state administration or market-based allocation. Ostrom (1990) challenges this dichotomy by demonstrating that resource users can develop institutions capable of sustaining collective action under particular social and ecological conditions. Her analysis emphasizes the importance of locally appropriate rules, participation in collective-choice arrangements, monitoring, conflict-resolution mechanisms, and recognition of the capacity to organize. Such principles provide an important theoretical foundation for examining governance systems in which institutional legitimacy emerges from shared practices rather than exclusively from external legal authorization.

Nevertheless, community institutions should not be interpreted as fixed systems of inherited rules operating independently of social change. Political relationships, resource inequalities, historical experiences, and interactions with external actors continuously influence how collective arrangements are reproduced. Cleaver (2012) develops the concept of institutional bricolage to explain how institutions emerge through the adaptation, recombination, and reinterpretation of established practices and newer organizational arrangements.

Rather than being constructed exclusively through deliberate institutional design, governance systems frequently develop through negotiations among social norms, relationships of authority, and practical responses to changing circumstances. This perspective challenges the assumption that formal institutions simply replace customary arrangements, directing attention instead toward the processes through which different institutional elements become combined and legitimized.

Institutional hybridity, however, does not necessarily indicate equitable participation or successful adaptation. Arrangements combining customary practices and formal procedures may preserve collective decision-making, but they may also reproduce inequalities when particular individuals acquire disproportionate control over legal representation, documentation, or external negotiations. Ostrom's (1990) emphasis on participatory rule formation and Cleaver's (2012) attention to socially embedded institutional practices offer complementary perspectives for examining these possibilities. Their integration suggests that the effectiveness of community governance must be assessed through both institutional arrangements and the social relations that shape their operation. Formal recognition may alter the resources available for collective action without determining how those resources are distributed or who exercises authority over their use.

From this standpoint, collective autonomy cannot be reduced to institutional independence, the preservation of customary procedures, or the possession of legal rights. It concerns the effective capacity of communities to establish priorities, negotiate external requirements, regulate shared resources, and exercise legitimate authority over decisions affecting collective life.

Such capacity may be strengthened, constrained, or redistributed through interactions between formally recognized organizations and existing governance practices. The theoretical challenge, therefore, is to explain how institutional pressures, historically unequal relations of recognition, and community-based processes of adaptation combine to shape these different possibilities. This conceptual articulation provides the foundation for examining the evidence assembled through the integrative review, without presupposing that legal formalization necessarily produces either collective empowerment or institutional subordination.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research design and integrative review approach

This study was conducted as an integrative literature review with a critical, interpretive, and theory-building orientation, focusing on the relationships between institutional formalization, collective autonomy, and governance transformation among Indigenous peoples and traditional communities. The methodological approach combined empirical investigations, comparative analyses, and foundational theoretical contributions to examine how legal recognition and organizational requirements interact with customary institutions, political representation, and community decision-making. Unlike review strategies primarily concerned with aggregating homogeneous findings, integrative reviews accommodate methodological diversity and support the identification of conceptual relationships, explanatory mechanisms, and unresolved theoretical questions. Whittemore and Knafl (2005) emphasize the importance of systematic procedures involving problem identification, literature searching, data evaluation, analysis, and presentation, thereby providing a methodological foundation for synthesizing evidence across heterogeneous research designs.

Drawing on Torraco (2016), the review also adopted a theoretical development perspective, recognizing that integrative synthesis should contribute to the critical reinterpretation of established knowledge rather than merely summarize previous findings. Accordingly, institutional formalization was examined as a politically contested process whose consequences cannot be reduced to either collective empowerment or organizational subordination.

Particular attention was directed toward distinguishing juridical recognition, organizational institutionalization, and bureaucratization, while investigating the relationships among institutional pressures, external mediation, collective authority, and

community control over resources. This orientation provided the conceptual basis for developing an explanatory framework grounded in the comparison of convergent and contradictory findings.

3.2. Search strategy, eligibility criteria, and study selection

Bibliographic research was conducted between November 2025 and July 2026, resulting in the initial identification of 1,323 records. The search covered five scientific databases: Web of Science Core Collection, Scopus, SciELO, Redalyc, and Sociological Abstracts. Searches were performed in English, Portuguese, and Spanish, prioritizing studies published between 2020 and July 2026 while allowing earlier publications of substantial theoretical or empirical relevance. The search strategy emphasized international and Latin American scholarship addressing institutional recognition, traditional governance, collective rights, and organizational transformation.

The consolidated search records identified 326 publications in Web of Science Core Collection on November 18, 2025, and 418 records in Scopus on January 22, 2026. SciELO contributed 247 publications identified on March 12, 2026, followed by 209 records retrieved from Redalyc on May 19, 2026. Sociological Abstracts accounted for the remaining 123 records, identified on July 7, 2026. Together, these searches yielded 1,323 bibliographic records.

Search expressions were organized around three interconnected conceptual domains: traditional populations and collective organizations; legal recognition and institutional transformation; and governance, political authority, and collective autonomy. The principal English-language search expression combined ("indigenous communit*" OR "traditional communit*" OR "customary institution*" OR "community-based organization*" OR "collective tenure") AND ("legal recognition" OR formalization OR formalisation OR institutionalization OR institutionalisation OR bureaucratization OR "formal institution*") AND ("collective autonomy" OR "self-determination" OR governance OR "political representation" OR "decision-making" OR "collective authority").

Corresponding Portuguese and Spanish terminology included *comunidades tradicionais*, *povos indígenas*, *reconhecimento jurídico*, *associativismo*, *governança comunitária*, *autonomia coletiva*, *pueblos indígenas*, *reconocimiento legal*, and *gobernanza comunitaria*. Boolean operators AND and OR were employed to combine related concepts, with adaptations to the indexing characteristics of each database. Complementary examination of bibliographic references was incorporated to identify foundational contributions relevant to the theoretical discussion.

Following Snyder (2019), the selection framework sought consistency between the research question, eligibility criteria, and intended analytical contribution. The criteria prioritized publications capable of explaining institutional mechanisms and their consequences for collective decision-making, avoiding studies whose connection to community governance remained merely incidental.

Inclusion criteria:

- Peer-reviewed empirical studies examining institutional formalization, legal recognition, organizational transformation, or collective governance among Indigenous peoples and traditional communities.
- Investigations addressing political representation, customary authority, institutional mediation, economic governance, collective resource management, or community decision-making.
- Qualitative, quantitative, mixed-methods, comparative, and research synthesis studies providing identifiable findings relevant to the research question.
- Publications written in English, Portuguese, or Spanish, presenting sufficient contextual, bibliographic, and methodological information.
- Foundational theoretical and methodological publications considered indispensable for interpreting institutional mechanisms and supporting integrative synthesis, classified separately from the thematic evidence corpus.

Exclusion criteria:

- Duplicate bibliographic records.
- Publications without a substantive relationship with institutional recognition, collective governance, or community autonomy.
- Investigations focusing exclusively on conventional corporate or administrative organizations without relevant connections to collective rights or customary institutions.
- Editorials, opinion pieces, and publications lacking identifiable empirical or theoretical foundations.
- Studies addressing exclusively environmental or economic outcomes without examining relevant institutional relationships or collective decision-making.
- Publications presenting insufficient methodological information or unavailable material necessary for assessing eligibility.

The study selection process comprised five sequential stages: identification, duplicate removal, title and abstract screening,

full-text eligibility assessment, and final inclusion. Of the 1,323 initially identified records, 287 duplicates were removed, leaving 1,036 unique publications for preliminary screening. Examination of titles and abstracts resulted in the exclusion of 842 records that did not meet the thematic and methodological eligibility criteria. Consequently, 194 publications proceeded to full-text assessment.

During the eligibility assessment, 178 publications were excluded for documented reasons. Of these, 61 presented insufficient relationships with collective autonomy or governance; 39 focused exclusively on environmental or economic outcomes without relevant institutional analysis; 35 did not examine mechanisms connecting institutional arrangements to community decision-making; 25 contained inadequate methodological or analytical information; and 18 could not be assessed because their complete texts were unavailable.

The final thematic selection comprised 16 publications. Eight foundational theoretical works and three methodological references were incorporated separately, establishing a consolidated bibliographic framework of 27 references. This differentiation preserved the distinction between thematic evidence, conceptual foundations, and methodological guidance, while ensuring consistency between the selection process and the analytical objectives of the review.

3.3. Data extraction and methodological quality appraisal

Data extraction was conducted through a standardized analytical matrix designed to preserve the contextual and methodological characteristics of each publication. The variables comprised authorship, publication year, geographical setting, sociocultural context, research objectives, methodological design, institutional arrangements, formalization processes, governance mechanisms, principal findings, and acknowledged limitations. Additional categories recorded changes in political representation, allocation of decision-making authority, administrative mediation, economic integration, and community control over collective resources. This structure enabled comparisons among heterogeneous investigations without assuming that territorial recognition, legal incorporation, and bureaucratic standardization represent equivalent institutional processes.

Two reviewers independently examined the thematic eligibility and methodological consistency of the selected publications. Disagreements were resolved through discussion and consensus, with provision for consultation with a third reviewer when necessary. Following Whittemore and Knafl (2005), methodological appraisal emphasized the relationship between research objectives, study design, empirical evidence, analytical procedures, and reported conclusions. The assessment also considered contextual specificity, transparency, and limitations affecting the interpretation or transferability of findings.

Qualitative investigations were evaluated according to the adequacy of contextual descriptions, transparency of data collection and interpretation, and consistency between empirical material and analytical claims. Quantitative studies were assessed in relation to measurement validity, comparison strategies, statistical procedures, and limitations affecting causal inference. Comparative and mixed-methods investigations were examined for the coherence of their analytical frameworks and the integration of different sources of evidence. Research syntheses were assessed with attention to search transparency, selection criteria, and consistency between reviewed evidence and theoretical conclusions.

Rather than imposing a uniform numerical quality score on methodologically heterogeneous studies, the appraisal distinguished methodological strengths, evidentiary limitations, and the extent to which individual investigations supported particular interpretations. Information was organized into three analytical levels: findings directly supported by the original research, interpretations proposed by the respective authors, and inferences developed through the present synthesis.

Contradictory results were retained for comparative examination rather than excluded for failing to conform to initial theoretical expectations. Particular caution was applied when interpreting studies concerned primarily with territorial protection or economic outcomes, since such findings do not independently demonstrate transformations in internal authority or collective decision-making.

3.4. Thematic synthesis and theoretical model development

The analytical synthesis followed an iterative thematic strategy integrating deductive categories derived from institutional and governance theories with inductive categories emerging from the reviewed literature. Initial coding addressed institutional recognition, regulatory pressures, organizational legitimacy, customary governance, political representation, bureaucratic mediation, economic participation, and substantive collective autonomy. Subsequently, coded findings were compared across geographical and sociocultural contexts to identify recurring institutional mechanisms, divergent organizational trajectories, explanatory contradictions, and conditions associated with different configurations of collective authority.

Consistent with Torraco (2016), theoretical development was approached as a process of critically reorganizing existing knowledge into an integrated interpretive structure. Comparative analysis distinguished institutional conditions, mediating processes, and reported consequences. Legal recognition and regulatory requirements were examined as institutional conditions; interactions involving public officials, external organizations, and community representatives were considered potential mediating mechanisms; and changes in political authority, participation, and control over collective resources were treated as outcomes requiring empirical support. This distinction prevented the attribution of direct causal effects to legal formalization when available

studies documented only associations or context-specific interpretations.

Further analysis examined whether similar institutional arrangements generated different outcomes across communities and whether comparable forms of collective autonomy emerged through distinct organizational pathways. Particular attention was given to internal inequalities, variations in community participation, the distribution of administrative expertise, and differences between formal representation and effective decision-making authority. Divergent findings were considered analytically significant because they could reveal institutional conditions overlooked by explanations emphasizing either bureaucratic domination or the inherent benefits of formal recognition.

Building on Snyder's (2019) understanding of literature reviews as instruments of knowledge development, the synthesis informed the formulation of the *Institutional Mediation and Community Autonomy Model* (MIAC). This explanatory framework integrates four analytical dimensions: institutional recognition, institutional mediation, community appropriation of formal organizational arrangements, and substantive collective autonomy. Its theoretical propositions address how these dimensions may combine to produce institutional strengthening, constrained autonomy, hybrid governance, or concentration of decision-making authority.

The model was developed as an interpretive synthesis rather than a statistically validated causal structure. Its theoretical contribution rests on clarifying the mechanisms through which legal recognition interacts with institutional mediation and community control, while acknowledging the diversity of sociopolitical contexts and limitations of the available evidence. By distinguishing empirically documented relationships from theoretically derived propositions, the analysis advances a critical understanding of institutional formalization without presupposing uniformly emancipatory or restrictive consequences for Indigenous peoples and traditional communities.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Characteristics and thematic distribution of the reviewed literature

The thematic corpus comprises sixteen publications addressing institutional recognition, collective governance, customary authority, and organizational transformation across diverse sociopolitical contexts. The studies encompass Indigenous peoples, traditional forest communities, family farming associations, cooperatives, and Indigenous economic development organizations. Geographically, the literature includes investigations conducted in Latin America, Southeast Asia, Canada, and Australia, alongside comparative analyses encompassing several continents. Such diversity broadens the interpretive scope of the review while exposing differences in legal systems, territorial histories, organizational arrangements, and the political meaning attributed to collective autonomy. These contextual variations are particularly relevant because similar instruments of formal recognition may establish substantially different rights, responsibilities, and relationships with state institutions (Alden Wily, 2021; Dawson et al., 2021).

Methodological approaches vary according to the institutional processes investigated. Qualitative case studies examine relationships among customary institutions, administrative requirements, and political authority, whereas quantitative and mixed-methods investigations assess specific effects of recognition on institutional participation and collective identification. Comparative research and evidence syntheses provide broader perspectives on territorial governance, institutional effectiveness, and the conditions associated with community-controlled resource management.

Dawson et al. (2021), for example, analyze 169 publications through a systematic review and narrative synthesis, identifying important differences between conservation arrangements controlled externally and those involving stronger Indigenous and local community authority. Their findings illuminate the significance of governance arrangements, although conservation outcomes cannot be interpreted as direct measurements of organizational autonomy.

Regarding institutional characteristics, the reviewed studies distinguish several processes frequently grouped under the general concept of formalization. These include recognition of customary territorial rights, establishment of legally recognized community organizations, incorporation into public administrative arrangements, and regulation of collective economic activities. Alden Wily (2021) examines transformations in customary tenure and the redistribution of territorial authority, whereas Simarmata (2024) addresses developments and persistent challenges surrounding customary forest recognition in Indonesia. These contributions illustrate why legal recognition must be differentiated from its implementation: statutory acknowledgment may establish collective entitlements without necessarily ensuring adequate administrative arrangements, institutional resources, or effective opportunities to exercise those rights (Alden Wily, 2021; Simarmata, 2024).

Thematic classification identified four interconnected concentrations: transformations in collective authority and representation; relationships between customary and bureaucratic institutions; organizational arrangements governing economic participation; and conditions affecting the practical realization of recognized rights. Although these dimensions overlap, they address different institutional mechanisms and cannot be treated as equivalent outcomes. Territorial recognition concerns legally protected collective claims, for instance, while organizational incorporation introduces specific procedures for representation, accountability, and administrative operation. This distinction is essential to prevent findings from one institutional domain from

being generalized to another without adequate empirical justification (Kusters et al., 2022; López-Vargas et al., 2023).

The sixteen thematic publications included in the review encompass diverse sociocultural contexts, institutional arrangements, and methodological approaches, providing a comparative foundation for examining the relationships between legal recognition, organizational transformation, and collective autonomy. Table 1 summarizes their geographical distribution, populations investigated, formalization processes, research designs, and principal findings. By distinguishing different forms of institutional recognition and their consequences, the table facilitates the identification of convergent evidence, contextual differences, and explanatory limitations relevant to the study's analytical objectives (Dawson et al., 2021; Kusters et al., 2022).

Table 1. Characteristics and Analytical Scope of the Included Studies

Author(s)/ Year	Country/ Region	Communities Studied	Institutionalization Process	Research Design	Main Findings
Larson et al. (2015)	Nicaragua, Bolivia, Philippines	Indigenous territorial communities	Formal recognition of collective territorial rights and representative authorities	Comparative qualitative research	Territorial recognition can create competing claims to authority and require clearer arrangements for representation and accountability.
Alden Wily (2021)	International, with emphasis on customary tenure systems	Customary landholding and forest-dependent communities	Recognition and devolution of collective tenure rights	Critical policy and institutional analysis	Legal recognition can strengthen community tenure, but effective protection depends on broader institutional and political reforms.
Dawson et al. (2021)	Global	Indigenous peoples and local communities involved in conservation	Recognition of community participation and governance authority	Systematic review and narrative synthesis of 169 publications	Community-controlled governance is associated with more favorable combinations of conservation and social outcomes than predominantly externally controlled approaches.
Sarmiento Barletti et al. (2021)	Peru, Amazon regions of San Martín and Ucayali	Six Awajún and Asháninka Indigenous communities	Collective land titling and formalization of communal representation	Comparative qualitative case studies using interviews, documents, and observation	Titling alone does not secure sustainable livelihoods; regulatory restrictions and imposed governance arrangements constrain the exercise of recognized rights.
Harada et al. (2022)	Indonesia, Kerinci District	Two customary forest communities	Legal recognition of customary forests supported by NGOs	Qualitative case study based on interviews and documentary analysis	NGO mediation facilitated legal recognition and reinforced local forest management institutions.
Kusters et al. (2022)	Nine countries across tropical Asia, Africa, and Latin America	Forest-dependent communities and collective tenure organizations	Formalization of community forest tenure rights	Comparative institutional assessment and theory-of-change analysis	Identifies ten enabling conditions for formal tenure recognition to contribute to conservation, livelihoods, and self-determination.
McMurry (2022)	Philippines	Indigenous communities with recognized	Recognition of collective tenure and Indigenous self-governance	Quantitative quasi-experimental analysis and	Collective recognition can reinforce Indigenous identification while strengthening certain

		collective land rights		survey experiment	relationships with state institutions.
López-Vargas et al. (2023)	Peru, Ampiyacu River Basin	Community and small-scale timber enterprises	Regulation of forest management and commercial activities	Qualitative institutional case study	Formal and informal institutions interact through complementary, substitutive, competitive, and accommodating arrangements.
Moreira et al. (2023)	Brazil, Minas Gerais	Family farming cooperatives and associations	Organizational participation in institutional food procurement through PNAE	Descriptive qualitative multiple-case study using interviews	Collective organizations play important roles in constructing and supplying institutional markets, although market access alone does not establish decision-making autonomy.
Savic and Hoicka (2023)	Canada	First Nations economic development corporations	Corporate legal structures and governance of renewable energy enterprises	Mixed-methods research combining national data, surveys, and interviews	Legal forms shape economic participation; project ownership offers opportunities for stronger control, with preferences varying by risk and context.
Stanford (2023)	Australia, Torres Strait	Torres Strait Islander communities and Indigenous institutions	Incorporation of Indigenous governance within local government arrangements	Qualitative comparative case study based on 27 interviews and documents	Mainstream governmental procedures marginalize kinship and customary relationships with country, despite Indigenous representation.
Abdullah et al. (2024)	Indonesia, Kajang	Indigenous customary forest communities	State recognition of Indigenous forest rights	Qualitative environmental governance case study	Recognition may strengthen protection while producing uneven territorial outcomes and new forms of marginalization.
Baudoin Farah (2024)	Bolivia, TIPNIS	Indigenous residents of the Isiboro Sécure territory	State-recognized Indigenous autonomy arrangements	Qualitative interviews and Q-methodology	Understandings of autonomy differ across social, territorial, and generational positions, challenging homogeneous conceptions of collective authority.
Silva et al. (2024)	Brazil	Quilombola communities	Institutional arrangements linking food security policy, territory, and governance	Critical territorial and political economy analysis	Highlights the relevance of territorial governance and political economy to understanding public policy relationships involving quilombola populations.
Simarmata (2024)	Indonesia	Customary forest communities	Administrative and legal recognition of customary forests	Legal-institutional analysis using documents and interviews	Formal recognition has expanded, but administrative and regulatory barriers continue to restrict implementation.

Kløcker Larsen et al. (2025)	Brazil, Canada, Kenya, Sweden	Indigenous and local communities interacting with state institutions	Implementation of Indigenous rights through bureaucratic mediation	Comparative qualitative case studies using interviews and documents	Frontline officials may advance Indigenous rights through institutional braiding, even within restrictive bureaucratic structures.

Note. PNAE = National School Feeding Program (Brazil); NGOs = nongovernmental organizations; TIPNIS = Isiboro Sécure Indigenous Territory and National Park. Research designs are summarized at a broad level to preserve comparability. The included publications comprise empirical investigations and research syntheses; they are not all primary empirical studies. Methodological and factual details were cross-checked where accessible against the corresponding publications.
Source: The authors themselves (2026).

The comparative characterization reveals that institutional formalization operates through distinct but interconnected mechanisms, ranging from collective land titling and administrative recognition to the incorporation of community organizations into public procurement and economic development arrangements. Studies examining Indigenous territorial rights identify persistent discrepancies between legal recognition and effective resource control, whereas investigations of governmental mediation and customary institutions demonstrate the importance of regulatory flexibility, representative legitimacy, and institutional negotiation (Sarmiento Barletti et al., 2021; Stanford, 2023; Kløcker Larsen et al., 2025).

Economic research further indicates that participation in formal markets and ownership structures creates opportunities whose implications depend on the distribution of decision-making authority (Moreira et al., 2023; Savic & Hoicka, 2023). Nevertheless, the predominance of context-specific investigations and the heterogeneity of measured outcomes restrict direct causal comparisons. The central analytical distinction emerging from the corpus is therefore between obtaining institutional recognition and acquiring the substantive capacity to exercise the rights, authority, and resources associated with it, a distinction that requires examining institutional arrangements alongside community control and historically constituted power relations (Larson et al., 2015; Baudoin Farah, 2024).

Taken together, the characteristics of the corpus reveal an interdisciplinary body of evidence in which formal recognition is investigated through different analytical units and outcome measures. Such heterogeneity does not preclude comparative interpretation, but it requires explicit differentiation between empirical findings, contextual associations, and broader explanatory propositions. The subsequent subsections therefore examine institutional mechanisms individually before considering their relationships within the comparative synthesis.

4.2. Legal recognition and the reconfiguration of collective authority

Legal recognition alters the institutional conditions under which collective authority is constituted, exercised, and publicly acknowledged. Comparative research involving Indigenous territories in Nicaragua, Bolivia, and the Philippines demonstrates that formalizing collective rights requires more than establishing territorial boundaries. Recognition also involves identifying legitimate representatives, defining administrative responsibilities, and negotiating relationships among institutions with overlapping claims to authority.

Larson et al. (2015) show that these processes can generate conflicts when newly recognized organizational arrangements lack sufficient legitimacy or when the distribution of powers remains ambiguous. Their findings indicate that the creation of formally recognized collective territories may simultaneously establish new opportunities for representation and intensify disputes over who is entitled to govern.

Evidence from the Peruvian Amazon further demonstrates the distinction between territorial recognition and effective control over collective resources. Sarmiento Barletti et al. (2021) examine how the formalization of Indigenous collective tenure interacts with livelihood strategies and community governance. Their analysis identifies limitations associated with restrictive legal frameworks governing resource use, indicating that land titling does not independently ensure the conditions necessary for sustainable livelihoods. These restrictions are particularly consequential when recognized communities remain subject to external regulations that limit the use of resources within formally acknowledged territories. Accordingly, the effectiveness of recognition depends not only on the legal status conferred but also on the practical powers and institutional capabilities accompanying that status (Sarmiento Barletti et al., 2021).

Nevertheless, formal acknowledgment of Indigenous authority does not necessarily diminish identification with the state. McMurry (2022), investigating the recognition of collective self-government rights in the Philippines through difference-in-differences and panel designs, finds that communal land titling strengthens Indigenous self-identification and compliance with state institutions. The author reports that “titling increases both indigenous self-identification and compliance with the state” (McMurry, 2022, Abstract).

An accompanying survey experiment also suggests that recognition can strengthen identification with the broader national community. These results challenge explanations based on an inevitable opposition between Indigenous autonomy and state authority, while remaining specific to the political and institutional outcomes measured in the investigation.

Internal differences concerning the meaning of autonomy introduce another dimension into the interpretation of recognition. Baudoin Farah (2024), examining the Isiboro Sécure Indigenous Territory and National Park in Bolivia, identifies contrasting understandings of autonomy associated with political authority, collective identity, territorial governance, and relationships with external institutions. Using interviews and Q-methodology, the study demonstrates that preferences concerning autonomy are neither uniform nor independent of social and generational circumstances. Such variation challenges the assumption that formally recognized representatives necessarily express a single collective position. It also indicates that institutional legitimacy cannot be assessed exclusively through juridical authorization when competing understandings of authority persist within the communities concerned.

Comparatively, these investigations identify distinct but interconnected transformations: recognition of representative institutions, redistribution of governing responsibilities, and renegotiation of political legitimacy. Larson et al. (2015) emphasize conflicts surrounding the constitution of authority, whereas McMurry (2022) demonstrates that recognition can strengthen relationships with state institutions. Sarmiento Barletti et al. (2021) draw attention to restrictions that persist after territorial formalization, while Baudoin Farah (2024) exposes the plurality of meanings attributed to autonomy itself. The resulting evidence does not support a universal relationship between legal recognition and diminished self-government. Rather, the effects of recognition must be interpreted in relation to the specific authority conferred, the institutional restrictions retained, and the legitimacy of collective representation.

4.3. Bureaucratic mediation and the interaction between formal and customary institutions

Institutional mediation constitutes an important mechanism through which collective rights are translated into administrative practices. In Indonesia, Harada et al. (2022) investigate the involvement of nongovernmental organizations in customary forest recognition in Kerinci District, examining interactions among communities, external organizations, and governmental institutions. The study identifies the contribution of these organizations to recognition procedures and the development of customary forest management arrangements. Such findings demonstrate that external actors may facilitate access to institutional opportunities that would otherwise be difficult to navigate. Their participation, however, also raises questions concerning the distribution of technical knowledge and the sustainability of administrative capacities when communities rely on specialized intermediaries (Harada et al., 2022).

Contradictions between formal regulation and locally established governance practices are particularly evident in community-based economic activities. López-Vargas et al. (2023), examining timber enterprises in the Ampiyacu River Basin of the Peruvian Amazon, identify complex interactions between state regulations and customary resource management institutions. Their findings indicate that formal and informal governance systems may coexist while establishing different expectations concerning forest use, monitoring, and commercialization. The authors observe that informal community rules “can be more effective because they are more diverse, flexible and specific” (López-Vargas et al., 2023, Abstract). This conclusion questions the assumption that standardized regulatory procedures necessarily improve governance performance, particularly when administrative requirements are poorly aligned with local social relationships and resource management practices.

Comparable institutional tensions emerge where Indigenous political institutions operate alongside recognized local governments. Stanford (2023), examining governance in Australia's Torres Strait, demonstrates that Indigenous institutions can remain marginalized within governmental arrangements even where Indigenous people constitute a substantial proportion of the population and public administration. The study identifies limitations associated with the inadequate recognition of customary institutions, particularly those concerning kinship and relationships with country. Such findings reveal that demographic representation and formal participation are insufficient indicators of institutional inclusion when established governmental procedures continue to privilege administrative frameworks over Indigenous systems of authority (Stanford, 2023).

Bureaucratic intervention, nevertheless, cannot be interpreted exclusively through institutional exclusion or regulatory imposition. Kløcker Larsen et al. (2025) examine how frontline public officials navigate organizational constraints to support Indigenous land and environmental rights across cases from four continents. Their research demonstrates that state institutions may reproduce historically unequal relationships while individual officials nevertheless develop practices supportive of Indigenous claims. The authors introduce institutional braiding to characterize forms of bureaucratic agency that facilitate the coexistence of different normative orders through collaboration with Indigenous representatives. This perspective highlights the possibility of institutional change from within administrative structures without assuming that cooperation necessarily eliminates deeper inequalities of power.

The comparative evidence therefore distinguishes external mediation from institutional dependence. Harada et al. (2022) and Kløcker Larsen et al. (2025) identify opportunities created through collaboration with actors outside the community, whereas

López-Vargas et al. (2023) and Stanford (2023) expose limitations arising when standardized administrative arrangements fail to accommodate customary practices. Rather than attributing fixed political effects to external intervention, these findings suggest that its consequences depend on the relationships through which regulations are interpreted, institutional responsibilities are negotiated, and customary authority is acknowledged.

Importantly, cooperation and conflict are not necessarily opposite indicators of institutional effectiveness. Collaborative relationships may expand administrative access without redistributing decision-making authority, while disagreement with formal regulations may reflect the continued exercise of community control. Such distinctions reinforce the need to examine who defines institutional priorities and possesses the authority to negotiate organizational arrangements, instead of evaluating community governance primarily through the presence or absence of administrative conflict (López-Vargas et al., 2023; Kløcker Larsen et al., 2025).

4.4. Economic integration, institutional markets, and community decision-making

Economic participation constitutes a distinct dimension of institutional formalization, particularly where collective organizations operate as intermediaries between communities, public programs, and commercial actors. In Brazil, Moreira et al. (2023) investigate the trajectory and role of family farming cooperatives and associations in supplying the institutional market established through the National School Feeding Program in five municipalities of Minas Gerais. Their analysis demonstrates the relevance of collective organizations to the construction and operation of public procurement arrangements. Such institutional participation requires attention to organizational capabilities, administrative procedures, and relationships with public purchasers. However, participation in an institutional market does not independently demonstrate that members exercise equivalent influence over productive priorities or collective economic decisions (Moreira et al., 2023).

Territorial and political dimensions become particularly significant when public policies involve communities whose economic activities are closely related to collective identities and historically established rights. Silva et al. (2024) examine food security policies concerning quilombola populations through the interconnected perspectives of territory, governance, and political economy. This approach situates economic intervention within broader institutional relationships, emphasizing the importance of considering territorial conditions and political arrangements rather than restricting analysis to programmatic access. Nevertheless, the available findings should not be interpreted as direct evidence of changes in internal leadership or organizational authority without specific documentation of those processes (Silva et al., 2024).

Organizational form also influences how economic opportunities are negotiated and controlled. Savic and Hoicka (2023), investigating First Nations economic development corporations involved in renewable energy projects in Canada, identify at least 26 such organizations operating within the sector examined. Their research distinguishes economic instruments commonly employed by development corporations from political instruments associated with Indigenous representative bodies.

Respondents emphasized the importance of project ownership for securing longer-term benefits, although preferred ownership arrangements varied according to institutional context and risk considerations. These findings demonstrate that economic participation encompasses different levels of ownership, contractual influence, and decision-making authority, making it inappropriate to equate involvement in investment projects with effective collective control.

Across these investigations, three dimensions of economic institutionalization can be distinguished: access to markets and institutional opportunities, organizational capacity to participate in economic arrangements, and authority over the distribution and use of resulting benefits. Moreira et al. (2023) contribute evidence concerning collective organizations and public procurement, whereas Savic and Hoicka (2023) examine the relationships among legal forms, ownership, and Indigenous decision-making. Silva et al. (2024) extends the discussion toward territorial governance and public policy relationships involving quilombola populations. These contributions address complementary aspects of economic inclusion, although their different populations, sectors, and institutional frameworks limit direct comparisons.

Consequently, the literature supports distinguishing economic incorporation from substantive autonomy. Increased access to markets may strengthen organizational opportunities without resolving inequalities in representation or control over resources. Equally, community participation in productive decisions cannot be assumed to eliminate commercial dependence or administrative constraints. Determining whether economic formalization enhances collective autonomy requires examining the distribution of governing powers alongside the opportunities associated with institutional participation (Moreira et al., 2023; Savic & Hoicka, 2023).

4.5. Conditions shaping institutional outcomes and collective autonomy

The effectiveness of institutional recognition is shaped by conditions extending beyond formal legal provisions. Kusters et al. (2022), analyzing community forest tenure arrangements across tropical regions, develop a theory of change identifying ten conditions associated with the intended outcomes of formalized tenure rights. These conditions concern the institutional and practical circumstances necessary for communities to exercise recognized rights and pursue conservation, livelihood, and self-determination objectives. The authors explicitly caution that “the formalization of forest tenure rights by itself, does not

automatically result in the intended impacts" (Kusters et al., 2022, Abstract). Their findings establish an important distinction between conferring rights and ensuring the institutional capabilities required for their effective exercise.

Uneven consequences of recognition become particularly visible when legal protection intersects with contested territorial relationships. Abdullah et al. (2024), examining Indigenous forest recognition in Kajang, Indonesia, identify new forms of enclosure and marginalization associated with policies intended to restore Indigenous control. Their research also documents geographical differences in resource protection, demonstrating that recognized arrangements may protect certain areas while generating restrictions or disadvantages elsewhere. Importantly, the authors emphasize the particular historical and political characteristics of Kajang, questioning assumptions that comparable policies necessarily produce equivalent results in other communities. Such findings reveal that the distributive consequences of recognition must be evaluated within specific territorial and political configurations (Abdullah et al., 2024).

Evidence concerning collective resource governance further demonstrates the importance of participation and decision-making authority. Dawson et al. (2021), synthesizing 169 publications, identify substantial differences between conservation initiatives governed primarily by external organizations and those characterized by greater Indigenous and local community control. Their review associates more equitable and effective conservation outcomes with stronger community involvement in governance. Although this evidence cannot establish the effects of legal incorporation on organizational authority, it supports the analytical relevance of distinguishing nominal participation from meaningful control over institutional arrangements (Dawson et al., 2021).

Implementation difficulties constitute another mechanism separating legal recognition from its practical consequences. Simarmata (2024), examining the recognition of customary forests in Indonesia, identifies advances in legal acknowledgment alongside persistent challenges affecting implementation. The study illustrates how formal rights may remain constrained by administrative procedures, regulatory requirements, and institutional arrangements governing their realization. Such obstacles acquire particular significance where the possession of recognized rights does not correspond to adequate opportunities for exercising authority over land and resources. Viewed alongside Kusters et al. (2022), these findings suggest that recognition should be evaluated through institutional implementation and effective capabilities rather than through legal status alone (Simarmata, 2024).

Comparative interpretation reveals three recurring relationships. First, juridical recognition and the practical exercise of collective rights represent analytically distinct dimensions. Second, the existence of community participation does not necessarily establish effective control over institutional decisions. Third, similar recognition instruments may produce different outcomes depending on regulatory arrangements, historical inequalities, and the distribution of institutional resources. These distinctions emerge from studies examining different dimensions of governance and therefore require careful interpretation rather than direct aggregation of their reported outcomes (Dawson et al., 2021; Kusters et al., 2022; Abdullah et al., 2024).

Contradictory findings are particularly significant for assessing the relationship between formalization and autonomy. Recognition can support institutional capabilities and collective resource management while generating new restrictions or unequal benefits under particular circumstances. Kusters et al. (2022) identify conditions capable of supporting intended institutional outcomes, whereas Abdullah et al. (2024) demonstrate how recognition may reproduce forms of exclusion despite its protective objectives. Simarmata (2024) further illustrates the importance of implementation, while Dawson et al. (2021) highlights the consequences of differing arrangements of community control. Rather than revealing inconsistencies that invalidate the literature, these differences indicate the need to distinguish institutional conditions, mediating processes, and specific outcomes.

Institutional formalization affects collective autonomy through interconnected legal, political, administrative, and economic mechanisms whose consequences vary across sociocultural contexts. Evidence from the reviewed studies indicates that legal recognition alone is insufficient to explain transformations in community governance, particularly when institutional arrangements redistribute authority, introduce external intermediaries, or reshape control over collective resources (Larson et al., 2015; Kusters et al., 2022). Table 2 integrates these findings by distinguishing the mechanisms identified in the literature, the conditions that facilitate or constrain their operation, and their implications for substantive autonomy. This comparative approach enables the identification of recurring institutional relationships without assuming that formalization necessarily produces either empowerment or subordination.

Table 2. Institutional Mechanisms and Their Implications for Collective Autonomy

Institutional Mechanism	Empirical Evidence	Enabling Conditions	Constraining Conditions	Implications for Collective Autonomy	Supporting Studies
1. Legal recognition and	Formal recognition establishes collective	Enforceable territorial rights;	Fragmented legal frameworks;	May strengthen territorial security	Alden Wily (2021);

collective tenure security	territorial rights, but their practical exercise depends on institutional implementation and resource governance arrangements.	administrative support; recognition of customary tenure; effective implementation.	administrative delays; restrictions on resource use; overlapping jurisdictions.	and collective bargaining power, although legal recognition does not independently guarantee effective autonomy.	Sarmiento Barletti et al. (2021); Kusters et al. (2022); Simarmata (2024).
2. Reconfiguration of representative authority	Formalization introduces legally recognized representatives and governing institutions that may differ from customary authority arrangements.	Legitimate representation; clear responsibilities; community participation; accountability to collective decision-making bodies.	Competing authorities; ambiguous institutional mandates; concentrated representation; limited accountability.	Can strengthen political representation or generate disputes over legitimacy and control of collective decisions.	Larson et al. (2015); Sarmiento Barletti et al. (2021); Baudoin Farah (2024).
3. Bureaucratic mediation and external institutional support	NGOs and public officials assist communities in navigating recognition procedures and negotiating state requirements.	Collaborative relationships; accessible technical assistance; institutional discretion; responsiveness to community priorities.	Dependence on specialized intermediaries; unequal administrative knowledge; restrictive procedures; limited institutional resources.	May expand institutional capabilities, while potentially creating asymmetries in access to information and decision-making influence.	Harada et al. (2022); Kløcker Larsen et al. (2025).
4. Interaction between formal and customary institutions	State regulations and community practices coexist through complementary, competitive, substitutive, or accommodating relationships.	Recognition of customary rules; negotiated institutional arrangements; regulatory flexibility; contextual responsiveness.	Standardized procedures incompatible with local practices; exclusion of customary authorities; conflicting normative obligations.	May support adaptive governance or restrict the legitimacy and practical operation of community institutions.	López-Vargas et al. (2023); Stanford (2023); Kløcker Larsen et al. (2025).
5. Political identification and institutional integration	Recognition of collective rights may reinforce Indigenous identification while strengthening certain relationships with state institutions.	Meaningful recognition; institutional responsiveness; legitimate collective claims; opportunities for political participation.	Externally imposed definitions of identity; contested representation; incompatible political expectations.	Demonstrates that collective identification and integration into state institutions need not be mutually exclusive.	McMurry (2022); Baudoin Farah (2024).
6. Institutional markets and collective economic participation	Cooperatives and associations facilitate participation in public procurement, while Indigenous corporate structures support participation in economic development projects.	Organizational capabilities; access to institutional markets; ownership opportunities; effective participation in economic decisions.	Administrative complexity; unequal bargaining power; financial risks; limited control over productive assets.	Can expand economic opportunities without necessarily ensuring equitable distribution of benefits or community control.	Moreira et al. (2023); Savic & Hoicka (2023); Silva et al. (2024).

7. Community control and participatory governance	Community-controlled arrangements are associated with more favorable combinations of conservation and social outcomes than predominantly externally controlled initiatives.	Meaningful participation; recognized local authority; collective resource management; community influence over institutional priorities.	External dominance; symbolic participation; exclusion from strategic decisions; restricted local authority.	Identifies effective community control as a relevant condition for equitable governance, without establishing a universal causal effect on autonomy.	Dawson et al. (2021); Kusters et al. (2022).
8. Uneven recognition and institutional exclusion	Legal recognition may coexist with geographically unequal benefits, new forms of marginalization, and persistent implementation barriers.	Context-sensitive regulation; equitable access to rights; responsiveness to territorial differences; institutional accountability.	Selective recognition; territorial inequalities; exclusionary administrative requirements; asymmetrical distribution of benefits.	May establish formal rights while reproducing or intensifying restrictions on substantive collective autonomy.	Abdullah et al. (2024); Simarmata (2024); Sarmiento Barletti et al. (2021).

Note. Enabling and constraining conditions distinguish relationships reported in the studies from interpretations developed through comparative synthesis. The implications for collective autonomy are conditional interpretations, not uniform causal effects established across all contexts. NGO = nongovernmental organization.
Source: The authors themselves (2026).

The comparative synthesis reveals that the consequences of institutional formalization depend less on legal recognition in isolation than on how authority, administrative capabilities, and control over collective resources are distributed and exercised. Studies examining customary tenure demonstrate that formal rights require enabling institutional conditions to generate meaningful outcomes, while investigations of political representation identify tensions between legally designated authorities and community-based decision-making (Larson et al., 2015; Kusters et al., 2022). Furthermore, interactions between formal and customary institutions indicate that external mediation may facilitate the exercise of collective rights without necessarily eliminating existing power asymmetries (López-Vargas et al., 2023; Kløcker Larsen et al., 2025).

Particularly significant is the distinction between institutional participation and substantive self-determination: recognition may simultaneously strengthen Indigenous identification, expand economic opportunities, and preserve constraints on collective decision-making (McMurry, 2022; Savic & Hoicka, 2023).

These findings suggest that collective autonomy should be examined as a differentiated institutional outcome, shaped by interactions among legal authority, community control, and the practical conditions of governance. This synthesis provides the empirical foundation for the subsequent theoretical discussion and the development of the Institutional Mediation and Community Autonomy Model (MIAC), without treating its proposed relationships as already established causal mechanisms.

Overall, the thematic synthesis identifies legal recognition, administrative mediation, organizational control, and institutional implementation as interconnected dimensions relevant to collective autonomy. Their relationships, however, differ according to the authority conferred, the actors involved, and the outcomes investigated. Research concerning territorial protection, economic opportunities, and political representation provides complementary evidence, but these outcomes cannot be treated as interchangeable indicators of self-determination. The heterogeneous methodological designs also limit claims concerning causal direction and the relative explanatory influence of individual institutional mechanisms (Kusters et al., 2022; Dawson et al., 2021).

The reviewed evidence therefore supports a conditional understanding of institutional formalization. Legal recognition may create opportunities for collective empowerment, yet its consequences depend on the arrangements governing representation, resource control, and interactions with external authorities. These relationships establish an empirical foundation for examining differentiated configurations of substantive autonomy without presupposing that formalization necessarily produces either emancipation or subordination. The theoretical implications of these findings, including their explanatory integration and remaining contradictions, are developed in the subsequent discussion.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Beyond the recognition paradox: Explaining divergent institutional outcomes

Institutional formalization reveals a fundamental tension between the expansion of collective rights and the redistribution of authority through which those rights become exercisable. The reviewed evidence challenges interpretations that associate legal recognition exclusively with emancipation or bureaucratic subordination. Rather, recognition produces differentiated outcomes because communities encounter institutional requirements under unequal political, organizational, and socioeconomic conditions.

This complexity can be understood through Meyer and Rowan's (1977) distinction between formal organizational structures and their practical operation. Legal conformity may enhance institutional legitimacy without necessarily transforming collective decision-making, whereas formally standardized arrangements may coexist with locally established practices. Consequently, the acquisition of recognized organizational status cannot be treated as sufficient evidence of substantive autonomy.

Such ambiguity becomes particularly significant when institutional requirements influence the strategies available to community organizations. Oliver (1991) demonstrates that responses to institutional pressures extend beyond passive conformity, encompassing compromise, avoidance, defiance, and attempts to influence external expectations. These possibilities challenge deterministic interpretations of bureaucratization, although the capacity to negotiate institutional demands is unequally distributed.

Organizations possessing stronger political networks, administrative capabilities, and access to technical assistance may exercise greater influence over the conditions of formalization. Conversely, communities facing restrictive regulations and limited institutional resources may experience recognition primarily through externally defined obligations. Evidence concerning collective tenure formalization and customary forest recognition illustrates the importance of these contextual differences (Kusters et al., 2022; Simarmata, 2024).

Political recognition also raises questions concerning the power to define legitimate collective identities and institutional authority. Coulthard (2014) challenges the assumption that recognition necessarily transforms historically unequal relations between Indigenous peoples and the state. Nevertheless, the findings of McMurry (2022) indicate that recognition of collective rights can reinforce Indigenous identification while strengthening relationships with state institutions. These perspectives need not be considered mutually exclusive. Their apparent disagreement partly reflects different analytical concerns: recognition may reproduce structural inequalities while simultaneously enabling particular political gains. Treating such outcomes as contradictory only when they concern the same institutional dimensions and populations permits a more precise interpretation of the evidence.

Accordingly, the recognition paradox should not be understood as an inevitable opposition between juridical inclusion and collective self-determination. Its explanatory significance lies in the institutional conditions under which recognition redistributes rights, responsibilities, and political authority. An arrangement may strengthen territorial security while restricting resource management, increase representative legitimacy while concentrating administrative power, or facilitate participation without guaranteeing influence over strategic decisions. These possibilities demonstrate why institutional outcomes must be examined across distinct dimensions rather than classified through a single opposition between autonomy and dependence (Larson et al., 2015; Sarmiento Barletti et al., 2021).

5.2. From legal recognition to substantive autonomy: Institutional mediation and community control

Substantive autonomy concerns the effective capacity of collective actors to determine priorities, regulate resources, negotiate institutional relationships, and exercise authority over decisions affecting their communities. Unlike legal recognition, which establishes formally acknowledged rights and responsibilities, substantive autonomy depends on the practical conditions enabling their collective exercise. Ostrom (1990) demonstrates that effective resource governance requires institutional arrangements compatible with local conditions, including participation in rule formation and mechanisms of collective accountability. Such principles suggest that the institutional significance of recognition cannot be assessed independently of who establishes the rules governing collective action.

Community institutions, however, are neither static nor necessarily egalitarian. Cleaver (2012) conceptualizes institutional arrangements as socially embedded processes shaped by the recombination of customary practices, existing relationships, and emerging organizational requirements. This perspective helps explain why formalization may produce adaptive governance rather than straightforward institutional replacement. Yet adaptation may also redistribute power toward individuals possessing specialized administrative knowledge or privileged access to external organizations. Evidence concerning territorial authority and customary institutions illustrates how formal recognition can introduce new representative responsibilities without resolving disputes over legitimacy or accountability (Larson et al., 2015; López-Vargas et al., 2023).

External mediation represents a particularly consequential dimension of these transformations. Kløcker Larsen et al. (2025) demonstrate that public officials may collaborate with Indigenous representatives to negotiate institutional constraints, while Harada et al. (2022) identify the contribution of nongovernmental organizations to customary forest recognition. These findings complicate the assumption that external intervention necessarily undermines autonomy. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of mediation should not be evaluated solely through successful administrative outcomes. Its implications also depend on whether

communities influence negotiations, acquire lasting institutional capabilities, and retain authority over subsequent decisions. Technical assistance that facilitates recognition but concentrates indispensable expertise outside the community may generate a different configuration of autonomy from assistance that strengthens collective administrative capacity.

Distribution of power within communities deserves equivalent attention. Research concerning Indigenous autonomy demonstrates that members may hold divergent political expectations, including disagreements over legitimate leadership and relationships with the state (Baudoin Farah, 2024). Hence, community control cannot be inferred automatically from the participation of recognized representatives. Institutional accountability must be examined through the relationship between those authorized to negotiate externally and the collective processes through which decisions acquire internal legitimacy.

These considerations suggest that substantive autonomy is neither synonymous with institutional isolation nor reducible to formal participation. Its analytical assessment requires examining the interaction among representative legitimacy, collective resource control, internal accountability, and the capacity to negotiate external requirements. Recognition becomes politically consequential through these relationships, rather than through legal status alone.

5.3. Institutional Mediation and Community Autonomy Model: An integrative explanatory framework

The synthesis supports the development of the Institutional Mediation and Community Autonomy Model (MIAC) as a provisional explanatory framework connecting formal recognition to differentiated configurations of collective autonomy. Rather than introducing another typology of organizational compliance, the model seeks to clarify how institutional conditions, mediation processes, and the distribution of decision-making authority interact. Its theoretical foundation combines institutional pressures and organizational responses with evidence concerning the effective exercise of collective rights. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) explain mechanisms of organizational convergence, while Kusters et al. (2022) demonstrate that recognizing community tenure rights does not independently ensure intended outcomes. The relationship between these contributions suggests that conformity and effectiveness must be investigated separately.

Four analytical dimensions constitute the proposed framework. Institutional recognition encompasses legally acknowledged rights, representative structures, and regulatory obligations. Institutional mediation concerns interactions through which state officials, technical organizations, and community representatives interpret and negotiate administrative requirements. Community appropriation refers to the capacity of collective actors to incorporate, adapt, or contest formal arrangements while retaining influence over organizational priorities. Substantive autonomy, finally, concerns the effective distribution and exercise of collective authority over political, territorial, and economic decisions. These dimensions are analytically distinguishable but potentially interdependent.

The distinction between mediation and appropriation is particularly important. Institutional intermediaries may facilitate legal procedures without ensuring that communities acquire effective control over their operation. Conversely, communities may incorporate administrative instruments into established governance practices while preserving collective legitimacy. Evidence from Indigenous territorial formalization and First Nations economic development organizations demonstrates that legally recognized arrangements can produce different configurations of authority, ownership, and decision-making power (Sarmiento Barletti et al., 2021; Savic & Hoicka, 2023). Such differences justify examining the interaction among institutional dimensions rather than assuming that recognition generates a predetermined organizational trajectory.

Within the MIAC, autonomy outcomes are provisionally organized into four configurations: substantive institutional strengthening, formally recognized but constrained autonomy, negotiated hybrid governance, and concentrated representative authority. These configurations should not be understood as fixed developmental stages or mutually exclusive classifications. Communities may exhibit different configurations across political, territorial, and economic domains, while institutional arrangements may change through negotiation, conflict, or shifts in regulatory conditions.

Table 3 presents the proposed configurations, their explanatory mechanisms, and the empirical foundations supporting their formulation.

Table 3. Institutional Configurations, Explanatory Propositions, and Autonomy Outcomes

Institutional Configuration	Recognition Conditions	Mediation Mechanisms	Community Control	Expected Autonomy Outcome	Empirical Support	Theoretical Proposition
Substantive institutional strengthening	Collective rights are recognized and accompanied by effective implementation	External institutions facilitate access to rights while acknowledging	Strong influence over representation, resources, and strategic decisions.	Greater capacity to exercise recognized rights and negotiate	Kusters et al. (2022); McMurry (2022); Dawson et al. (2021).	P1. Recognition is more likely to strengthen autonomy when institutional capabilities and

	mechanisms.	community priorities.		institutional relationships .		effective community control develop together.
Formally recognized but constrained autonomy	Legal recognition exists, but administrative requirements restrict the exercise of collective rights.	Regulatory procedures and specialized intermediaries condition institutional participation.	Limited influence over implementation and resource management.	Juridical inclusion coexists with restrictions on substantive decision-making.	Sarmiento Barletti et al. (2021); Simarmata (2024); Abdullah et al. (2024).	P2. Recognition without effective implementation and collective control may reproduce institutional dependence or exclusion.
Negotiated hybrid governance	Formal institutions coexist with established customary authorities and practices.	Negotiation, institutional adaptation, and interaction between normative systems.	Variable but potentially strengthened through legitimate institutional arrangements.	Context-dependent combinations of cooperation, adaptation, and institutional tension.	López-Vargas et al. (2023); Harada et al. (2022); Kløcker Larsen et al. (2025).	P3. Hybrid governance may support autonomy when institutional mediation preserves meaningful community influence over rules and decisions.
Concentrated representative authority	Recognition assigns formal responsibilities to designated representatives or governing bodies.	Administrative specialization and formal representation reshape relationships of authority.	Unevenly distributed, potentially favoring particular leaders or organizational actors.	Greater institutional visibility may coexist with internal inequalities in decision-making.	Larson et al. (2015); Baudoin Farah (2024); Savic and Hoicka (2023).	P4. Formalization may concentrate institutional authority when representative structures are insufficiently accountable to collective decision-making.

Note. The configurations and propositions constitute analytical interpretations rather than empirically validated causal classifications. Supporting studies provide evidence for particular components of each configuration but do not necessarily establish the complete relationships proposed. MIAC = Institutional Mediation and Community Autonomy Model.
Source: The authors themselves (2026).

The proposed configurations clarify why apparently similar recognition processes may generate different institutional consequences. Where legal acknowledgment is accompanied by meaningful collective control, formalization may expand the capacity to negotiate rights and resources. Conversely, administrative recognition may remain substantively limited when regulatory restrictions or unequal representation constrain decision-making. Hybrid arrangements complicate this distinction further because customary and formal institutions may coexist through cooperation, competition, and negotiated adaptation (López-Vargas et al., 2023; Kløcker Larsen et al., 2025). Importantly, the configuration involving concentrated authority does not imply that all formal representative structures undermine collective governance. It identifies a potential institutional risk requiring independent assessment of internal accountability and participation (Larson et al., 2015; Baudoin Farah, 2024).

The theoretical value of the MIAC therefore lies in specifying relationships among institutional conditions rather than claiming the discovery of previously unknown mechanisms. Its propositions permit investigation of why formal rights produce differentiated consequences and which combinations of institutional capabilities, mediation, and community control may explain those differences. However, the reviewed studies do not establish that all four configurations occur with equivalent frequency or that the relationships proposed possess universal causal validity. Their empirical examination remains necessary.

5.4. Theoretical contributions, contextual limitations, and transferability

The proposed framework contributes to institutional and governance debates by connecting organizational legitimacy, recognition politics, and collective self-determination within a common explanatory structure. Its principal contribution is not the assertion that formal institutions coexist with customary arrangements, a relationship already examined in existing scholarship, but the differentiation of mechanisms through which their interaction may redistribute authority and influence substantive autonomy. Such an approach also questions interpretations that evaluate recognition primarily through legal status or administrative effectiveness.

Historical and sociopolitical inequalities impose important limitations on the transferability of these propositions. Quijano (2000) demonstrates that institutional relationships remain embedded in enduring hierarchies of power and knowledge, while Scott (1998) exposes how administrative simplification may marginalize locally established practices. These perspectives caution against treating formal recognition as a politically neutral procedure. Nevertheless, structural critiques must be reconciled with evidence of community agency and institutional negotiation, avoiding the assumption that traditional populations experience identical forms of political subordination.

Contextual differences further restrict universal explanations. Indigenous communities, quilombola populations, customary forest users, and family farming organizations possess distinct legal histories, territorial relationships, and political institutions. Baudoin Farah (2024) reveals internal differences in understandings of autonomy, while Abdullah et al. (2024) demonstrates that recognition can generate geographically uneven consequences. Furthermore, López-Vargas et al. (2023) identifies variations in interactions between formal and informal institutions within specific resource governance arrangements. These findings indicate that institutional configurations must be interpreted through their historical and organizational circumstances rather than transferred mechanically between populations.

Methodological heterogeneity also limits causal generalization. The reviewed publications employ different research designs, units of analysis, and outcome measures. Evidence concerning territorial recognition cannot automatically establish changes in organizational democracy, just as access to institutional markets does not necessarily demonstrate control over economic priorities. These differences support theoretical comparison but constrain claims regarding the relative influence of individual mechanisms. Additionally, the bounded corpus and unequal geographical representation restrict the comprehensiveness of the resulting explanatory framework.

Consequently, the MIAC should be understood as a context-sensitive analytical model whose propositions require testing through comparative research examining institutional trajectories, internal representation, and community-defined dimensions of autonomy. Its transferability depends on identifying comparable mechanisms while preserving the historical and sociocultural specificity of the communities concerned.

5.5. Implications for public policy and community governance

The findings suggest that public policies should distinguish the recognition of collective rights from the institutional conditions required for their effective exercise. Regulatory arrangements that establish legal status without considering administrative accessibility, territorial relationships, or customary governance risk producing formal inclusion with limited substantive consequences. Alden Wily (2021) emphasizes the political significance of strengthening customary tenure rights, while Simarmata (2024) identifies persistent implementation challenges in customary forest recognition. These contributions indicate that legal reform should be accompanied by institutional capacities compatible with the rights and responsibilities assigned to communities.

Regulatory flexibility, however, should not be equated with the elimination of accountability requirements. Differentiated administrative procedures may improve accessibility while preserving transparency, collective oversight, and responsibility for public resources. Evidence concerning NGO involvement in forest recognition demonstrates the potential contribution of technical assistance (Harada et al., 2022), although its long-term significance depends on whether communities can sustain the capabilities required to exercise recognized rights. Policies oriented toward administrative support should therefore prioritize institutional responsiveness and community influence rather than merely increasing compliance with externally established procedures.

Community participation requires similar conceptual precision. Dawson et al. (2021) identifies the importance of Indigenous and local community control for equitable conservation outcomes, while Stanford (2023) demonstrates that Indigenous representation within governmental arrangements does not necessarily ensure recognition of customary institutions. These findings suggest that participatory mechanisms should be evaluated according to their influence over actual decisions rather than their formal existence. Institutional accountability must consequently include relationships between recognized representatives

and the communities whose interests they claim to express.

Economic policies introduce additional concerns. Research on family farming associations and cooperatives demonstrates the organizational significance of institutional markets, while investigations of quilombola food security situate policy implementation within broader territorial and political relationships (Moreira et al., 2023; Silva et al., 2024). Such evidence supports evaluating economic initiatives not only through access to funding or commercial opportunities, but also through the distribution of benefits and the capacity to establish collective priorities. Institutional arrangements that improve participation without strengthening decision-making capabilities may produce economic gains whose implications for substantive autonomy remain uncertain.

Ultimately, public policy should not seek to replace community governance with a supposedly universal administrative model, nor should it presume that customary institutions are inherently equitable or sufficient. The relevant challenge is to establish institutional conditions under which recognized rights, legitimate representation, and effective community control can coexist. By distinguishing these dimensions, the MIAC offers a framework for evaluating the political and organizational consequences of recognition while respecting the plurality of institutional trajectories documented in the literature.

6. CONCLUSION

The findings of this integrative review indicate that institutional formalization neither inherently strengthens nor necessarily undermines collective autonomy among Indigenous peoples and traditional communities. Its consequences depend on how legal recognition interacts with political representation, bureaucratic mediation, community governance, and control over collective resources. While formalization may expand access to rights, institutional opportunities, and economic participation, these advances do not automatically ensure effective self-determination. Conversely, the adoption of formal organizational arrangements does not inevitably displace customary institutions or weaken collective authority. The central distinction lies between acquiring legally recognized rights and maintaining the substantive capacity to exercise them.

Comparative evidence reveals that institutional outcomes are shaped by the distribution of decision-making power, the legitimacy of representative structures, and the conditions under which communities negotiate external requirements. Bureaucratic mediation may facilitate institutional participation or reinforce dependencies, depending on its relationship with community priorities and internal accountability. Similarly, arrangements combining customary and formal institutions may encourage adaptation and cooperation while preserving tensions over authority and resource management. These findings challenge interpretations that reduce institutional recognition to either an emancipatory achievement or a mechanism of subordination, demonstrating the importance of historically situated institutional relationships.

The principal theoretical contribution of this study is the formulation of the Institutional Mediation and Community Autonomy Model (MIAC), which integrates legal recognition, institutional mediation, community appropriation, and substantive autonomy into a common analytical framework. By distinguishing institutional conditions from mediating processes and their potential consequences, the model offers a structured explanation for divergent governance configurations. Its contribution resides in connecting previously dispersed explanatory dimensions and establishing propositions through which the relationships between formal recognition and collective self-determination can be critically investigated.

Nevertheless, the diversity of research designs, sociocultural contexts, and indicators employed in the reviewed studies limits causal generalization and the direct transferability of the proposed framework. The theoretical model therefore represents an interpretive synthesis rather than an empirically validated explanation applicable to all traditional communities. Its analytical value depends on subsequent examination across distinct institutional and territorial settings.

Future investigations should assess how recognized organizational structures influence internal accountability, the distribution of administrative knowledge, and collective control over political and economic decisions. Comparative and longitudinal research could further clarify whether institutional arrangements associated with strengthened autonomy remain effective over time and under changing regulatory conditions. Particular attention should be directed toward differences among community members and the institutional mechanisms through which collective priorities are negotiated.

Ultimately, the significance of institutional recognition cannot be assessed solely by the rights formally granted or the administrative structures established. Its broader implications concern the extent to which communities retain the authority to define their priorities, negotiate institutional relationships, and determine the conditions of their collective future.

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