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PROTECTED AREAS FOR NATURE AND PEOPLE

Examining Equitable Protected Area Governance in Armenia



Abstract

Armenia's chairmanship of the 17th Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD COP17) and commitments to advance the implementation of the Kunming–Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (KMGBF) create a timely opportunity to examine how well the country's protected area governance framework reflects the growing international emphasis on community participation and rights. Examining legal documents across governance levels, this study asks how well Armenia's legal and policy framework supports equitable protected area governance. Lake Arpi National Park served as a case study to explore how national provisions translate into management and institutional arrangements.

The four dimensions of good governance are unevenly developed across the framework. Administrative responsibilities, monitoring requirements, financial control and access to information are comparatively well established, while meaningful influence on decision-making, public accountability, procedural and distributive safeguards, and adaptive governance remain less consistently institutionalized. Recent legal reforms and the updated National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan introduce stronger commitments to participation, inclusion and community rights. However, these advances are not yet uniformly embedded across legislation and site-level governance arrangements.

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List of Abbreviations

CBD: Convention on Biological Diversity
COP: Conference of the Parties
IUCN: International Union for Conservation of Nature
KfW: Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau
KMGBF: Kunming–Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework
NGO: Non-governmental organization
NBSAP: National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan
LANP: Lake Arpi National Park
OECM: Other effective area-based conservation measures
PA: Protected area
PoWPA: Programme of Work on Protected Areas
SNCO: State Non-Commercial Organization
SAGE: Site-level Assessment of Governance and Equity
WCPA: World Commission on Protected Areas
WWF: World Wildlife Fund

Protected Areas for Nature and People. Examining Equitable Protected Area Governance in Armenia

1. Introduction

How can a protected area conserve biodiversity while also enabling local communities to thrive alongside conservation? With Armenia chairing the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD COP17) [1] in October 2026, this question has become increasingly relevant. CBD COP17 comes at a key stage in implementing the Kunming–Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (KMGBF), as Parties move from adopting global biodiversity targets to translating them into national policies and practices.

International biodiversity commitments increasingly concern not only conservation outcomes but also how protected areas (PAs) are governed, particularly who has a voice, whose rights are recognised, how clearly institutional responsibilities are defined, and how conservation costs and benefits are shared. The KMGBF does not frame PA expansion solely in terms of geographical coverage or conservation effectiveness. Through Target 3 [2] and Target 22 [3], it places social well-being alongside ecological objectives. For Armenia, hosting COP17 represents both a major international responsibility and an opportunity to examine how its evolving biodiversity governance framework supports these commitments.

This study examines how well Armenia's legal and policy framework supports equitable PA governance, how recent reforms have advanced in it ahead of COP17, and where further institutional development may be needed as international biodiversity commitments translate into national practice. A recent publication has examined the legal and practical dimensions of local community participation in the PA governance system [4]. This study takes a complementary approach, extending the analysis beyond participation to examine the broader institutional foundations of equitable governance. Building on the good governance principles of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) [5] and complementary provisions of the CBD and Aarhus Convention [6], the analysis is organized around four dimensions: legitimacy and participation; transparency and accountability; fairness and rights; and governance arrangements. It examines these dimensions through national PA legislation and policy, along with PA-level governance instruments.

Lake Arpi National Park (LANP) offers a strong case for examining the relationship between national rules and site-level governance in detail. Its Management Plan [16] contains explicit provisions on community representation, co-management and

stakeholder engagement. In addition, the availability of successive governance instruments adds a temporal dimension to the study and allows examination of how participatory arrangements have evolved under the national legal framework. Finally, the park's remoteness and surrounding communities' dependence on land and natural resources make questions of rights, participation, and conservation-related livelihood impacts particularly relevant.

2. What Does Equitable Governance Require?

Equitable governance principles are strongly embedded in international biodiversity policy. Element 2 of the CBD Programme of Work on PAs (PoWPA) [7], adopted in 2004, set expectations for PA governance. It aimed to address lagging progress in participation, equity, and benefit-sharing in governance. These goals were formalized in the KMGBF, adopted under the CBD in 2022. The KMGBF provides the principal international policy framework for biodiversity conservation by 2030, including commitments to effective and equitable PA governance. Particularly, Target 3 calls for conserving at least 30% of terrestrial, inland water, and of coastal and marine areas by 2030 through “effectively managed and equitably governed systems,” while respecting indigenous rights over traditional territories. Complementing this, Target 22 requires ensuring full, inclusive, and gender-responsive participation in biodiversity decision-making, access to justice and environmental information, and the complete protection of environmental human rights defenders.

IUCN, in turn, provides a complementary governance framework by outlining five core good governance principles for PAs: a) Legitimacy and voice to ensure that stakeholders have a say, promoting consensus, and applying subsidiarity; b) Direction to establish a long-term strategic vision grounded in ecological, historical, and cultural complexities; c) Performance to meet conservation goals effectively and responsively; d) Accountability to achieve transparency, clear sharing of roles, and independent oversight; and e) Fairness and rights to enforce the rule of law, protecting livelihoods, and respecting human rights [5].

IUCN WCPA's equitable governance framework connects directly to “fairness and rights” by expanding the equity and participation concepts developed in KMGBF Targets 3 and 22 and dividing equity into three dimensions: recognition, procedure, and distribution [8]. Recognition involves acknowledging and respecting diverse identities, traditional knowledge, values, and pre-existing customary or statutory rights. Procedure requires inclusive rule-making and decision-making, accountability, and access to information and justice. Distribution focuses on fair sharing of conservation costs and benefits among actors. Focusing on these dimensions helps prevent human rights

violations, such as historic evictions or resource exclusion, and upholds a “do no harm” principle.

The Aarhus Convention reinforces these governance and equity principles by guaranteeing the public’s right to access environmental information, participate in decision-making, and access justice. In the context of good governance, the Aarhus Convention provides a legal framework for transparency and public oversight, ensuring public authorities act in the public interest and that decision-making is open to scrutiny [6]. Crucially, while other guidelines, such as those of the IUCN, are voluntary, the Aarhus Convention is a legally binding international treaty for its Parties.

At the national level, Parties implement these frameworks through National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans (NBSAPs). NBSAPs must contain national targets aligned with global goals, national actions integrated with implementation and financing arrangements, and monitoring systems utilizing headline and other relevant indicators. In the context of equity, CBD guidance emphasizes that NBSAP development must involve full and effective participation of indigenous peoples and local communities, women, youth and other relevant stakeholders [9]. It further requires consultations to obtain free, prior informed consent, approval, and involvement of indigenous peoples and local communities for measures that may affect them.

At the PA level, IUCN guidelines on management planning emphasize that plans are essential to make communities genuine partners in conservation [10]. The planning process must be open and collaborative and integrate local and traditional knowledge. Plans must describe community needs, undergo public consultation on drafts, and ensure public participation in area governance. The guidelines emphasize wide stakeholder consultation and the development of objectives that can be agreed upon by those with an interest in the use and long-term conservation of PAs.

This approach reflects what the IUCN management planning guidelines describe as a “new paradigm” for PAs, marking a historic transition in how conservation is practiced. Historically, PAs were planned and managed “against people,” often established as isolated “islands” of wilderness without regard for local rights or traditional land tenure. In contrast, the modern paradigm recognizes PAs as both community and international assets that must be run “with, for, and in some cases by local people.” [5] Governance shifts from exclusive central government control to a collaborative structure involving relevant stakeholders. By prioritizing the needs of local communities and integrating socio-economic objectives alongside ecological restoration, this new paradigm seeks to ensure that conservation is no longer an imposition of state power, but a shared responsibility in which stakeholders become genuine, respected partners.

3. The Legal Framework Behind Protected Areas Governance in Armenia

Armenia's PA governance framework operates within national legislation and international environmental commitments. The country has been a Party to the CBD since 29 December 1993 [11] and ratified the Aarhus Convention in 2001. These instruments provide an important international reference point for examining how Armenia's PA governance framework reflects participation, transparency, rights, and equitable governance.

The documents considered in this study operate at different levels and perform different governance functions. The original Law on Specially Protected Nature Areas of 27 November 2006 (HO-211-N; hereafter, the *2006 PA Law*) establishes the principal statutory framework for establishing, managing, using, and protecting PAs [12]. Armenia's NBSAP instruments translate international biodiversity commitments into national targets, actions, and institutional responsibilities. At the individual PA level, management plans and statutes define operational priorities, governance arrangements, and institutional responsibilities. Considering these different functions matters because the absence of a provision in one instrument does not necessarily mean it is absent from the broader national governance framework.

Armenia substantially revised its PA legislation in 2026. On 18 June 2026, the National Assembly adopted a law restating the 2006 Law; it entered into force on 24 July 2026 (HO-299-N; hereafter, the *2026 revised PA Law*) [13]. Examining both versions of the law is crucial to this analysis. The 2006 law provides the statutory framework under which Lake Arpi National Park was established, and most of the governance arrangements examined in this case study developed under it. The 2026 revision, in turn, allows assessment of whether recent reform addresses limitations in the earlier framework.

The reform coincided with Armenia's implementation of the KMGBF and preparations for hosting CBD COP17 in Yerevan. When the Government approved the draft reform package on 18 April 2026, the Ministry of Environment emphasized several new mechanisms, including community-based PAs, opportunities for non-state management of certain natural monuments, OECMs, and ecological networks. The Minister also identified alignment with international standards as one of the objectives of the reform and linked this to Armenia's COP17 chairmanship [14].

At the policy level, Armenia also updated its national biodiversity planning framework, which serves as a strategic instrument. The 2026–2030 action plan, adopted on 3 April 2026 and approved by Ministerial Order No. 100-L of 3 April 2026 (hereafter, the *NBSAP*), establishes national biodiversity conservation targets and specifies actions, responsibilities, implementation periods, financing sources and indicators [15].

At the site level, the study examines the Lake Arpi National Park Management Plan approved by Government Decision No. 1854-A on 22 December 2011 and covers the period 2011–2015 (hereafter, the *Management Plan*) [16] and the organizational Statute approved by Ministerial Order No. 443-L of 18 November 2020 (hereafter, the *Statute*) [17]¹. Unlike the Statute, the Management Plan has not been updated since the end of the planning period. Although its original planning period has ended, the current PA Law provides continuity of existing management plans until a new plan enters into force. The plan was developed by the Ministry of Nature Protection of the Republic of Armenia and WWF with support from the German Government through KfW. The Plan shows how national conservation and governance requirements translate into institutional and management arrangements at the park level. Examining these instruments alongside the former and current PA laws allows comparison between the national statutory framework, site-specific governance model envisaged for LANP, and subsequent institutional changes.

The following sections assess these instruments using the four equitable governance principles mentioned above.

4. Equitable Governance Principles in Law

4.1 Recognition is Growing, but Rights and Safeguards Remain Uneven

Fairness and rights concern recognition of affected rightsholders and their substantive rights in PA governance; fair procedures and access to remedies; and the equitable distribution of conservation costs and benefits.

Recognition of communities as rightsholders and of their traditional knowledge remains less developed than recognition of their formal property and resource-use interests. The 2006 Law recognizes communities, individuals and legal persons as PA users and regulates their rights and obligations [12, Arts. 25–27]. The revised law strengthens stakeholder identification by acknowledging state, territorial, and local-government bodies, as well as physical and legal persons as stakeholders [13, Article 3(23)]. Nevertheless, it still does not recognize communities as rightsholders. Further, while the legal provisions establish substantive protection for formal ownership and statutory use rights, neither of them expressly recognizes customary tenure or collective community rights over land and natural resources.

In terms of traditional knowledge recognition, the PA legislation acknowledges traditional land-use practices through the revised law's provisions without establishing a

¹ The link to Statute seems to no longer be available after the performed update of the website of the Ministry of Environment of the RA.

requirement to recognize, preserve, or incorporate traditional knowledge into PA decision-making [13, Art. 28(2)(10)]. The Management Plan similarly acknowledges existing land and resource-use relationships without converting them into customary or collective legal rights and documents traditional and local resource-use practices by describing edible, medicinal, and other useful plants, historical forms of use, and traditional use opportunities in the park's economic zone [16, pp. 25–26, 65–66, 69–70]. It provides contextual acknowledgement of locally embedded knowledge and practices, without a normative requirement to recognize, preserve or use traditional knowledge in decision-making. The NBSAP is the only exception that explicitly acknowledges local communities' rights and the importance of traditional knowledge. It not only calls for recognition and respect for local community rights in establishing PAs [15, Annex II, T29], but also explicitly promotes the preservation and dissemination of traditional biodiversity knowledge and identifies women as key knowledge holders [15, Action 30.3]. At the same time, it still does not explicitly define customary land, water, or natural-resource tenure rights. By recognizing communities' rights, the NBSAP shifts the policy language from simply identifying communities as stakeholders to acknowledging that PA establishment can affect their rights.

Recognition of human rights, vulnerable groups, and gender equity is also uneven. None of the instruments establishes an explicit human rights framework for PA governance. The Management Plan documents poverty, remoteness, weak infrastructure, dependence on agriculture and natural resources, and other socioeconomic constraints in buffer-zone communities [16, pp. 48–51]. However, it does not identify particularly marginalized households, women, or minorities, nor does it connect vulnerability to conservation costs. Importantly, these socioeconomic conditions and patterns of resource dependence are not disaggregated by gender, so the Management Plan does not allow assessment of whether conservation restrictions, livelihood impacts or access to benefits may affect women and men differently. This gap may limit site-level governance's ability to identify and respond to possible gender-differentiated costs. Herein, vulnerability is attributed to entire communities and more often described as a socioeconomic condition than operationalized as a fairness principle. The NBSAP provides the clearest advancement; Target 30 promotes gender-balanced decision-making, women's leadership and representation, and measures to address barriers to women's participation [15]. However, it still does not systematically identify groups potentially vulnerable to conservation restrictions or costs.

Procedural fairness is weak across the examined instruments. None establishes a requirement that PA decisions, restrictions, permits or enforcement measures be applied fairly, consistently, impartially and without discrimination. The NBSAP's gender-related provisions strengthen inclusion but do not constitute a general

procedural rule governing how PA authorities exercise or enforce their powers [15]. This demonstrates that inclusive participation is more developed than procedural fairness.

Grievance and conflict resolution mechanisms are comparably poorly institutionalized across national law and policy. The main exception is the Management Plan, which requires that buffer zone representatives' and other stakeholders' complaints be submitted to the Management Council and gives the Council a role in resolving disputes, with Ministry involvement where necessary [16, p. 71]. However, the revised Statute does not reproduce this stakeholder grievance function [17, Art. 16]. Further, none of the PA-specific instruments establishes an explicit right to administrative or judicial appeal. This creates a gap between the regulation of PA authority and the explicit recognition of remedies available to those affected by its exercise. Nevertheless, this gap does not imply that other legal instruments provide no remedies; rather, it shows that the PA governance instruments themselves do not articulate them.

Distributional fairness is only partially developed throughout the legal and policy framework. Livelihood impacts receive greater attention than distributive equity, although explicit safeguards remain limited. The PA Laws do not require authorities to avoid or mitigate disproportionate livelihood harm or establish a principle governing how the costs and benefits of PA establishment and management should be distributed. The NBSAP contains measures with potential distributional relevance, most notably the proposed Paid Ecosystem Services mechanism in areas adjacent to PAs [15, Target 23.4]. However, these measures do not establish a principle requiring PA authorities to identify who bears conservation costs and receives benefits, or how equity in benefit-sharing should be ensured. Overall, none of the examined instruments establishes social safeguards requiring the avoidance, mitigation, or remedy of adverse impacts on affected or particularly vulnerable households. Material compensation and redress for conservation-related losses remain particularly limited; no broader principle links conservation restrictions to an entitlement to redress or compensation. While the NBSAP's human–wildlife conflict indicator counts residents receiving compensation or benefiting from preventive measures, this is a sector-specific intervention rather than a cost-sharing safeguard [15, Target 5.8].

Overall, the framework recognizes formal ownership and regulated resource use more clearly than customary or collective rights, procedural safeguards, and distributive equity. Certain policy and site-level instruments include important provisions on community rights, gender, traditional knowledge, livelihoods, and grievance resolution, but they remain uneven and do not consistently translate into legal guarantees to ensure social safeguards.

4.2 Information is Accessible, but Public Accountability Lags Behind

Transparency and accountability concern whether affected stakeholders and rightsholders have access to relevant information, understand how decisions are made and who is responsible for them, scrutinize the use of resources and management performance, and rely on mechanisms of public and independent oversight.

Access to information is one of the more developed elements of the PA legal framework. The 2006 PA Law gives every person the right to request information on PA conservation, use, and ecological condition; it identifies mass media, electronic communication, public hearings, and responses to requests as information channels [12, Arts. 29–30]. The 2026 Law retains this approach and explicitly links access to information to the Constitution, the Freedom of Information Law, and the Aarhus Convention [13, Arts. 36–37]. However, information disclosure focuses predominantly on biodiversity and conservation information rather than governance performance. The NBSAP provides for a unified biodiversity database, public presentation of biodiversity research and conservation results, an online Red Book platform and publication of implementation information [15, Annex I, para. 6(23.2); Annex II, T27]. By contrast, systematic public disclosure of governance performance is not established. PA laws and site-level instruments do not require publishing governing body decisions, management implementation reports, management effectiveness results, decision explanations, or other records showing how governing institutions perform. The Statute's requirement to publish the organization's annual financial report [17, Art. 69] is a limited exception. Thus, the framework makes biodiversity status comparably more visible than the performance of the institutions responsible for governing PAs.

On a similar note, administrative responsibility and financial control are better formalized than transparency of decision-making and public answerability. Both PA laws allocate responsibilities among the Government, authorized body, territorial administration, and local self-government [12, Arts. 9–11; 13, Arts. 12–13]. The NBSAP similarly identifies executors, co-executors, deadlines, financing sources, and indicators for individual actions. At LANP, the Management Plan provides the clearest picture of how site-level decisions are organized; it specifies the composition and functions of the Management Council and allocates planning, budgeting, implementation and monitoring responsibilities among the Council, director and management units [16, pp. 71–72]. The Statute further specifies internal decision-making procedures, including meetings, quorum, voting, minutes and reporting to the authorized body [17, Arts. 22–30, 40]. Financial administration follows the same pattern. The NBSAP includes biodiversity expenditure assessment and financing arrangements under Target 23 [15]; and the LANP instruments regulate revenues, budgets, accounting, property, leases and major transactions required by the PA Law [12, Arts. 6, 22; 13, Art. 9; 16, pp. 12, 91; 17, Arts.

47, 49]. While these provisions create strong internal accountability, they offer less clarity on why a particular substantive decision was made and how management priorities justify expenditure choices. Across the instruments, authorities rarely need to provide affected communities or other stakeholders with reasons for their decisions or explain how evidence and stakeholder concerns shaped the outcome.

Formal performance evaluation is much less developed. Neither the PA Law nor the local Statute establishes systematic evaluation of governing bodies or managers linked to corrective measures, rewards or sanctions. The NBSAP does not clearly connect assessment results to consequences for responsible institutions or managers [15, Target 4]. The Management Plan, in turn, states that an incentive system based on employees' effective work should be developed [16, p. 73], yet it does not define how performance is assessed or how assessment determines incentives; its annual evaluation provision concerns training effectiveness rather than staff performance.

Public scrutiny and independent oversight are the weakest elements within the set of transparency- and accountability-related principles. No instrument establishes a PA-specific mechanism, such as an independent review or oversight body, through which civil society or media can systematically scrutinize governance performance and provide feedback. The NBSAP envisages civil society participation in governance, but advisory participation should not be equated with external scrutiny of performance [15]. In general, oversight is predominantly state-centered; environmental authorities exercise state control, the Statute establishes internal supervision, and the Management Plan allows management failures to be reported to the Ministry [12, Arts. 9, 24; 16, p. 71].

Overall, the framework is considerably stronger in administrative accountability than in public accountability. Information is generally accessible, institutional responsibilities and financial control are relatively clear, and monitoring is well established. The larger gaps concern proactive publication, reason-giving, public access to performance evaluation, consequences linked to performance, external feedback, and independent oversight.

4.3 Participation is in Place, but Influence Remains Limited

Legitimacy and voice concern whether rightsholders, stakeholders, and other relevant social actors can participate in PA governance, through what mechanisms and at which stages, whether they are formally represented and able to influence decisions, whether participation is inclusive, and whether authority is exercised at a local level.

Participation mechanisms and procedures remain uneven across Armenia's PA governance framework. The main weakness of PA legislation is the lack of clear

procedures for affected actors to influence decision-making. Although Chapter 7 of the 2006 law is entitled “Public participation in the management process,” Articles 29–30 primarily regulate access to information [12]. The revised title of the same provision in the 2026 law guarantees public awareness rather than participation, which more accurately reflects that the current law primarily regulates information rather than participatory decision-making [13, Arts. 36–37]. While absent in the 2006 PA Law, the 2026 revised law introduces such a provision by authorizing a stakeholder advisory body for buffer zones, ecological networks and corridors, valuable natural ecosystems and biosphere reserves and by calling for active stakeholder involvement in their functioning [13, Art. 11(1)(16); Art. 33]. Yet it still leaves selection, notification, timing and treatment of stakeholders’ input largely unspecified. At the policy level, the NBSAP requires a procedure for establishing and forming advisory bodies attached to PA directors [15, T29; Action 29.1]. The Management Plan provides more operational participation procedures than the national legislation. The Council uses stakeholder working groups during preparation and supports ongoing engagement through annual meetings, prior circulation of agendas, and additional meetings when necessary [16, pp. 6–7; pp. 71–72]. The later Statute, however, transforms the Council’s functions; external stakeholders, while being non-members, may attend only with the Council’s consent [17, Arts. 22–28].

Formal representation of communities is more clearly institutionalized in policy and in the earlier site-level arrangement of LANP compared to the PA laws. Neither the 2006 law nor the 2020 Statute guarantees seats for affected communities, NGOs, or local government in PA governing bodies. The 2026 law is only a partial advance because Article 11(1)(16) requires stakeholder involvement in an advisory body but does not define which groups must be represented or require such a body for every PA [13]. The NBSAP is considerably more explicit; Action 29.2 requires advisory bodies attached to PA directors to include representatives of civil society, communities, regional administration, and youth and women’s initiatives [15]. In the Management Plan, the multi-stakeholder Management Council comprises park administration, relevant ministries, Shirak regional administration, a local NGO forum and buffer-zone communities, with community representatives nominated by the communities themselves [16, pp. 71–72].

Inclusive and gender-responsive participation is concentrated mainly in the NBSAP. The PA laws, Management Plan and Statute do not establish targeted safeguards or support measures for vulnerable or potentially marginalized groups, women or youth. Although the Management Plan guarantees representation of buffer-zone communities and other stakeholder groups in the Management Council, it does not require gender balance or minimum representation for women, nor does it provide gender-disaggregated information on Council membership [16]. By contrast, NBSAP’s Action 29.2 explicitly

includes youth and women's initiatives in PA advisory bodies, and Target 30 calls for gender-balanced decision-making and stronger women's leadership and representation in biodiversity conservation [15, T29; T30]. This is a policy advance, although it is not a general legal requirement for PA governance.

Regarding decision-making influence, across the PA laws, NBSAP, and Statute, no general requirement obliges authorities to accept, formally respond to, or explain how stakeholder recommendations affected final decisions. This shows that the 2026 law and NBSAP establish participation mechanisms and representation rules that create channels for voice without clearly defining the weight of that voice. The Management Plan provides the strongest evidence of influence; as noted, it expressly took community and stakeholder interests into account during preparation. Moreover, the Management Council must maintain feedback between the park and buffer-zone communities, discuss problems and development plans, and approve annual work plans [16, p. 71]. These provisions do not make recommendations binding, but they give stakeholder representatives an institutional route through which concerns can influence management.

Finally, subsidiarity is more developed as an administrative decentralization than as community-level authority. The PA laws assign responsibilities to local self-government, especially for locally designated PAs, and the 2026 revision expands local roles in establishment, planning and management [13, Art. 13]. For republican-level PAs, however, core authority remains predominantly state-centered. By contrast, the Management Plan reflects equity in decision-making by envisaging co-management between park administration and buffer-zone communities through the Management Council [16, p. 71]. The 2020 Statute retains operational management at park level but places formal governing authority within a centrally structured organization.

Overall, the framework provides channels for participation and representation, but these are unevenly institutionalized. The strongest advances appear in the NBSAP and the Management Plan; however, they do not guarantee influence, inclusion, and community-level authority.

4.4 Coordination and Capacity are Stronger than Adaptive Governance

Governance arrangements concern whether PA institutions are coordinated across sectors and levels of government, whether management can respond to monitoring results and changing conditions, and whether the actors involved have the knowledge and capacities needed to perform their roles. These criteria can be viewed as enabling conditions for equitable governance.

The legal framework and site-level instruments partially reflect inter-institutional coordination and policy coherence. PA regimes must be reflected in socioeconomic, spatial, and land-use planning, and the revised PA Law also requires coordination with competent heritage and urban-planning authorities where relevant [12, Arts. 5–6, 8–11; 13, Arts. 7, 10–13]. At the national level, the NBSAP requires the inter-agency commission responsible for implementing Armenia’s CBD commitments to operate and be accountable [15, Annex II, T16, Action 16.1]. At the site level, the Management Plan translates coordination into joint action by requiring cooperation among park management, public authorities, resource users and other stakeholders, as well as continued cooperation with Georgia’s Javakheti National Park, including joint conservation activities and projects [16, p. 72]. The Management Plan arrangements also link site-level management to national biodiversity priorities and international commitments, including the CBD and Ramsar Convention. From an equity perspective, such coordination can help prevent fragmented decisions and ensure that conservation objectives are considered alongside socioeconomic, land-use and community concerns. However, coordination itself does not guarantee equitable outcomes.

Adaptive management, particularly management evaluation and changing socioeconomic conditions, is only partly institutionalized. The strongest legal provision appears in the 2026 revised PA Law. Management plans must include annual measures based on monitoring data, describe socioeconomic problems in buffer zones and operate within a five-to-ten-year planning cycle, with preparation of a successor plan beginning before the existing plan expires [13, Art. 8(3)–(4)]. The NBSAP emphasizes evaluating PA management effectiveness; however, it does not explicitly establish governance effectiveness [15]. The Management Plan also shows a gap between planning continuity and renewal. It envisaged review every five years, as well as revision when problems emerged, while annual work plans were intended to operationalize its long-term objectives [16, pp. 7, 71]. This would allow management to respond to implementation problems rather than relying only on ecological monitoring. However, systematic adjustment to socioeconomic change, livelihood impacts and stakeholder concerns remain weakly institutionalized as part of adaptive management.

Capacity development is addressed most strongly in the NBSAP and the Management Plan. Policy and management instruments are also more naturally expected to include detailed operational provisions than legislation. NBSAP Target 25 promotes research, technical cooperation, and institutional capacity development, including professional capacity-building courses under Action 25.4. Capacity is also linked directly to participatory governance. In addition, Action 29.2 requires educational and capacity-building activities for representatives of civil society, communities, regional administration, youth, and women’s initiatives participating in PA advisory bodies [15, T25; T29, Action 29.2]. The Management Plan, in turn, translates capacity development

into concrete site-level measures. It provides for staff training expenditure, short- and long-term professional training, opportunities for qualification improvement and specialized training in biodiversity monitoring [16, p. 73].

Overall, governance arrangements are one of the more developed parts of the framework. Coordination mechanisms, monitoring systems and capacity-building provisions are clearly identifiable, particularly in the NBSAP and the Management Plan. The main weakness is ensuring that ecological findings, social developments, and stakeholder concerns systematically feed back into the management cycle.

5. From Small Steps to Durable Governance Guarantees

Armenia's PA governance framework combines relatively developed administrative arrangements with much weaker rights-based and public accountability safeguards and opportunities to influence decisions. The imbalance is visible across all four dimensions of the assessment.

Fairness and rights are strongest at the recognition level and weakest in their procedural and distributional dimensions. Formal ownership and regulated resource-use interests receive comparatively better protection, and more recent policy instruments increasingly acknowledge community rights, gender, traditional knowledge, and livelihood concerns. Yet these advances do not amount to a coherent rights-based framework. Customary and collective rights remain weakly articulated, while general guarantees of non-discrimination, accessible grievance and appeal mechanisms, social safeguards, compensation and equitable sharing of conservation costs and benefits are largely absent.

Transparency and accountability show a similar discrepancy. Access to environmental information, responsibility allocation, internal reporting, and financial control are comparatively well developed. By contrast, proactive disclosure, justification, public access to governance and performance records, accountability for performance, and independent scrutiny remain limited. The framework is considerably clearer about who is responsible and to whom institutions report internally than about how decisions are justified to affected stakeholders or how management performance can be scrutinized externally.

The legitimacy and voice principle is better developed in terms of participation opportunities than in guaranteed influence. Participation mechanisms and representation have expanded, particularly in newer policy and site-level arrangements, but this does not consistently translate into a requirement that stakeholder views affect final decisions. Subsidiarity is also stronger as administrative decentralization than as community-level authority. Thus, the central issue is not whether participation exists, but

whether it becomes a durable governance right linked to representation, influence and decision-making power.

Nevertheless, the enabling conditions for equitable governance advancement are comparatively stronger. Governance arrangements like inter-institutional coordination and capacity development are identifiable across the framework. The weaker element is adaptive management; ecological monitoring is more consistently institutionalized than the systematic use of social conditions, stakeholder concerns and management-performance evidence to revise governance and management.

The legal instrument evaluation shows that these differences reflect each instrument's role in the governance system. The 2006 PA Law provides the administrative and information access foundations of the system but remains strongly state-centered. The 2026 revision creates space for stakeholder involvement, local governance, and adaptive planning, but does not translate these into comprehensive participatory or rights-based guarantees. The NBSAP articulates the most ambitious national policy direction on community rights, inclusion, participation, public information, and capacity building. At the site level, the Management Plan demonstrates how community representation, co-management, grievance handling, livelihood recognition and adaptive planning can be operationalized. The 2020 Statute, however, is oriented more strongly toward internal organizational governance and does not retain these participatory arrangements.

6. Conclusion

This study examined how well Armenia's PA-related legal and policy framework provides foundations for equitable governance, using LANP as a case study. The findings point to three broader patterns. First, administrative governance has advanced further than rights-based governance; responsibilities, monitoring, and financial control are more firmly established than participatory rights, remedies, influence, and distributive safeguards. Second, policy ambition is ahead of legal institutionalization. The NBSAP articulates participatory, inclusive, and rights-sensitive commitments that PA legislation does not yet consistently reflect. Third, site-level innovation is not always institutionally durable. The case of LANP demonstrates that comparatively strong participatory arrangements can be established through a management plan but may not be reproduced in subsequent organizational rules.

Armenia's legal and policy framework is gradually becoming more open to participation and community concerns, but progress remains uneven. Equitable governance principles have become more visible, particularly in the updated policy framework and its connection to the KMGBF. As Armenia translates its KMGBF commitments into

national implementation while preparing to host and chair COP17, its main challenge remains making participation, accountability, rights safeguards, and adaptive governance consistent and durable across legislation, policy, and PA-level instruments. Because the remaining gaps occur at different governance levels, addressing them requires complementary action by legislators, the Government and Ministry of Environment, PA governing bodies and administrations, with civil society, researchers and development partners playing supporting roles.

7. Recommendations

A few priority actions can make equitable governance more consistent across Armenia's PA framework.

- Strengthening participation through both legal guarantees and site-level practice. The Ministry of Environment and National Assembly, through future refinement of the PA Law, can move participation beyond consultation and advisory opportunities by establishing stronger guarantees of representation and requirements to consider stakeholder input. These guarantees should also translate into operational procedures for selecting stakeholders, consulting, gathering feedback, and communicating how input was addressed.
- Moving from information access toward proactive transparency and public accountability. Statutory disclosure requirements for governance and performance information would require legislative and regulatory action. The Ministry of Environment and PA administrations can strengthen routine publication practices regardless of legal reforms, for example, by making governance decisions and performance information publicly accessible, along with sufficient explanation of the basis for important decisions.
- Recognizing communities and vulnerable groups in procedural and distributional safeguards. Again, the National Assembly and the Ministry of Environment play a principal role in ensuring stronger legal safeguards, including clearer recognition of rightsholders, accessible grievance and remedy mechanisms, livelihood protection, and explicit consideration of conservation costs and benefits. Site-level management instruments can specify how these safeguards should operate in each protected area.
- Strengthening adaptive management at the PA level. For LANP, the Ministry of Environment should lead the preparation of an updated Management Plan, with Government approval as required under the current PA Law. The updated framework should retain the distinction between longer-term strategic objectives and a more flexible operational layer of action programs and annual work plans. These operational instruments should respond not only to biodiversity monitoring and assessments of management effectiveness, but also to socioeconomic

conditions, livelihood impacts, and stakeholder feedback. Governance and equity assessment tools such as the Site-level Assessment of Governance and Equity (SAGE), or an equivalent tool, could provide a structured way to identify governance and equity weaknesses and ensure that the findings inform subsequent revisions.

- Reducing inconsistencies between law, policy, and site-level instruments. The Ministry of Environment and Government should ensure that relevant NBSAP commitments translate into durable PA-level arrangements when updating the Management Plan, while preserving the participatory mechanisms already demonstrated in LANP.

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