

# Blended Indigenous Epistemology with Sustainable Development: Field Insights

Sujit Kuiry<sup>1\*</sup>, Dr. Laxmiram Gope<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar, Department of Education, Sidho-Kanho-Birsha University, Purulia, West Bengal

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of Education, Sidho-Kanho-Birsha University, Purulia, West Bengal

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\*Corresponding author: Sujit Kuiry

Research Scholar, Department of Education, Sidho-Kanho-Birsha University, Purulia, West Bengal

## Abstract

**Background:** Conventional approaches to sustainable development have been criticized for their technocratic orientation and limited engagement with the knowledge systems embedded in culture. The orientation toward relational well-being, ecological care, and ethical coexistence with nature is the foundation of indigenous epistemologies developed through long-term relationships with the environment. North India alone has thousands of communities with a rich culture of indigenous knowledge that has traditionally underpinned sustainable resource management, but is now marginalized by modern development and conservation policies. The Bhil, Gaddi, Bhotia, and Van Gujjar are only some of them. **Objective of the study:** To analyze the interrelationship and connection between indigenous epistemology and the concept of sustainable development. **Method:** The research will be conducted as a meta-analytical study grounded in anthropological and development research. It is based on secondary literature (e.g., ethnographic case studies and policy literature). It uses a comparative framework to examine indigenous knowledge practices, their interactions with formal development projects, and the institutional and ethical contexts that shape these interactions. **Findings:** The findings indicate that knowledge can be mixed in different ways, including integration, parallel use, adaptation, and co-management. Although these processes lead to synergies, e.g., improved healthcare, enhanced conservation, and community-based governance of ecosystems, they also expose tensions arising from power asymmetries, limited policies, and the loss of intergenerational knowledge. This paper concludes that context-specific, rights-based, and participatory approaches play a pivotal role in achieving culturally grounded, environmentally friendly, sustainable development.

**Keywords:** Blended, Indigenous Epistemology, Sustainable Development, Field, Insights.

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## 1. EMERGENCE OF THE STUDY

Sustainable development, as formulated by the landmark report of the Brundtland Commission, is founded on the capacity to meet present needs without jeopardizing future generations' capacity to meet their needs (World Commission on Environment and Development [WCED], 1987). Despite the high effectiveness of the definition in the international policy debate, it has faced many criticisms for being technocratic in its indicators and growth-based, and for being insufficient in addressing cultural plurality and local knowledge systems. In order to overcome these weaknesses, indigenous epistemologies, knowledge traditions that have developed over the course of place-based and long-term interactions with ecosystems, have gained increased scholarly attention because of their emphasis on relationality, collective well-being, and

ethical coexistence with nature (Berkes, 2018; Escobar, 2015).

The concept of integrating indigenous epistemologies and sustainable development is particularly applicable in North India, an ecologically diverse region with numerous indigenous groups, including the Bhil, Gaddi, Bhotia, and Van Gujjar. These communities have been known to manage forests, pastures, water resources, and biodiversity through customary institutions and practices inherent to their cultures. However, contemporary development initiatives, conservation principles, and climatic pressures have been inclined to marginalize these systems, generating socio-economic vulnerability and epistemic exclusion. Recent literature, however, reports new forms of knowledge mixing, in which indigenous practices are combined with formal development

structures. These can include incorporating traditional herbal knowledge into community health initiatives by Bhils, adaptive pastoralism among Gaddi communities in response to climate change, livelihood restructuring by Bhotia traders following border closures, and conservation alliances with Van Gujjar Forest pastoralists. (Yerramilli 2023)

The paper shall adopt an anthropological and development studies approach, using only secondary literature and published case studies, not primary fieldwork. By summarizing the existing research, the paper examines the theoretical underpinning, practical expression, and ethical-political issues of the co-production of knowledge. It assumes that not only is it possible but also necessary to integrate indigenous epistemologies with sustainable development to facilitate culturally based, environmentally sustainable, and socially just developmental trajectories. The paper

concludes with a call for policy and institutional reforms to enable equitable engagement with indigenous peoples.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Indigenous epistemologies refer to culturally-constituted systems of knowledge shaped by the interplay of a specific environment over time and transmitted across generations. The epistemologies are also holistic, relational, and experiential, and they concentrate on the interdependence of human and non-human beings, land, and spiritual forces (Berkes, 2018; Smith, 2012). Unlike the dominant Western paradigms, which make a distinction between nature and culture, native worldviews view ecosystems as living relational systems governed by reciprocal responsibilities. Practice and oral and collective memory demonstrate knowledge rather than abstract universalism, enabling indigenous people worldwide to manage forests, water systems, and biodiversity sustainably over the centuries.

**Table 1: Indigenous Epistemologies and Technocratic Sustainable Development – Core Differences**

Dimension	Indigenous Epistemologies	Mainstream Sustainable Development
<b>Knowledge validation</b>	Validated through lived experience, oral tradition, and intergenerational practice in specific ecological contexts.	Validated through scientific methods, quantitative data, and standardized indicators.
<b>Human–nature relationship</b>	Humans are inseparable from nature, bound by reciprocal and ethical relationships.	Nature is treated primarily as a resource to be managed or regulated.
<b>Well-being indicators</b>	Holistic well-being, including cultural continuity, ecological balance, and social harmony.	Economic growth, service access, and measurable development indicators.
<b>Governance approach</b>	Community-based, participatory, and guided by customary institutions.	Centralized, expert-driven, and technocratic governance structures.
<b>Temporal focus</b>	Long-term and intergenerational responsibility.	Short- to medium-term planning cycles and targets.

On the other hand, the institutionalized sustainable development in the shape of global frameworks, specifically the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), has been accused of being technocratic and quantitative-based. According to the researchers, the governance of metrics often omits indigenous principles of relational well-being, cultural continuity, and place-based ethics (Escobar, 2015; Turnhout *et al.*, 2020). Despite these criticisms, an emerging literature acknowledges significant overlap between indigenous knowledge systems and sustainability objectives. The native agroforestry, rotational agriculture, pastoralism, herbal medicine, and community-based conservation activities align with the SDGs of food security, climate resilience, health, and biodiversity safeguarding (FAO, 2019; IPBES, 2019). The empirical study confirms that integrating indigenous knowledge and scientific approaches enhances contextual usefulness, community involvement, and ecological performance (Berkes, 2018).

However, there are also enormous tensions that are generated when knowledge systems are blended. The sources of epistemological contradictions lie in the fact that indigenous knowledge is contextual, qualitative,

and, in most cases, spiritually informed, whereas scientific knowledge is generalizing and secular rational. Integration has, in other cases, led to epistemic assimilation, in which indigenous knowledge is extracted, decontextualized, or subordinated to the dominant scientific paradigm, a process also commonly known as epistemic injustice or the coloniality of knowledge (Smith, 2012; de Sousa Santos, 2014). In the Indian context, the state has built pastoral and forest-dwelling settlements as obstacles to conservation or development, leading to displacement, livelihood disruption, and loss of cultural knowledge (Agrawal & Redford, 2009).

To address these problems, scholars suggest knowledge co-production models, decolonizing methodology, and Multiple Evidence Base, which assume that indigenous, local, and scientific knowledge systems are complementary and equally valid (Tengö *et al.*, 2014). These approaches focus on the following ethical principles: prior informed consent, community ownership of knowledge, and equitable benefit-sharing. In general, the literature suggests that the combination of indigenous epistemologies and sustainable development can have a transformative potential, which must be

pursued in a reflexive, inclusive, and power-sensitive manner (Marcellus & Ezegwu, 2024).

### 3. METHODOLOGY

The proposed research will employ a qualitative meta-analytical design based solely on secondary data. The study is not based on primary ethnographic data but rather on a systematic review of peer-reviewed journal articles, ethnographic case studies, policy reports, and

other interdisciplinary literature on indigenous communities in North India and their relationships with sustainable development initiatives. Among the core search terms were indigenous knowledge, traditional ecological knowledge, and sustainable development, and community-specific names such as Bhil, Gaddi, Bhotia, and Van Gujjar. The sources were identified based on academic reliability, empirical richness, and applicability to knowledge development interfaces.



Figure 1: Methodological Flowchart

It is a comparative and case-based approach to analysis. The four indigenous communities were deliberately selected to capture ecological, cultural, and livelihood diversity in North India and to reflect the availability of high-quality secondary documentation. They were examined in both instances in three dimensions: (a) the essence of indigenous knowledge and practices (such as pastoral mobility, ethnomedicine, or transhumant trade), (b) how they interacted with formal development, conservation, or state-led interventions, and (c) what the outcome was, in terms of synergies and conflicts. Of particular concern was the role of institutional structures, such as laws, policies, and NGO programs, in shaping these encounters.

To increase analytical rigor, results were, where feasible, triangulated across sources, and competing interpretations (community-based accounts, policy analysis, and academic interpretation) were not predetermined. Ethical concerns focused on the faithful presentation of the communities to which they were serving in the literature and on the critical contextualization of the knowledge extracted. Although secondary data may limit access to current or unreported local views, it allows a comparative scope and a temporal perspective. In general, this approach is linked to an anthropological approach to knowledge, which studies the nature of indigenous epistemologies' negotiation at the border between culture, environment, and developmental institutions.

## 4. FINDINGS: CASE STUDIES FROM NORTH INDIAN INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

### 4.1 Bhil Tribe: Ethnomedicine and Sustainable Living:

Bhindil, one of the most extensive indigenous communities in India, has a much more extensive ethnomedical epistemology closely connected to sustainability. Ethnobotanical studies of the Jhabua district, Madhya Pradesh, reported about 75 species of

medicinal plants used by Bhil healers (Badwa) to treat various diseases, including, but not limited to, wounds and fevers, and chronic diseases such as diabetes and respiratory problems (Jain *et al.*, 2010; Patil & Patil, 2016). Knowledge is passed orally through the generations and is intertwined with spiritual healing practices, a holistic notion of health that binds people, forests, and cosmology.

It is also through this system that the community's health and biodiversity are conserved. Selective harvesting of forest ecosystems is done to provide medicinal plants while maintaining regeneration processes. The scientific effects of several Bhil remedies have been demonstrated, such as *Achyranthes aspera*, an anti-inflammatory and wound-healing agent (Patil & Patil, 2016). These overlaps create opportunities for integrative healthcare models in line with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 3. Deforestation, habitat loss, and generational changes in allopathic medicine threaten the continuity of knowledge. India has the Biological Diversity Act of 2002, which attempts to curb the threat of biopiracy through documentation and benefit-sharing mechanisms, but this has not been consistently enforced. The case of Bhil illustrates a high likelihood of combining ethical knowledge to enhance institutional protection and the community's rights.

### 4.2 Gaddi Community: Pressure Pastoral Knowledge:

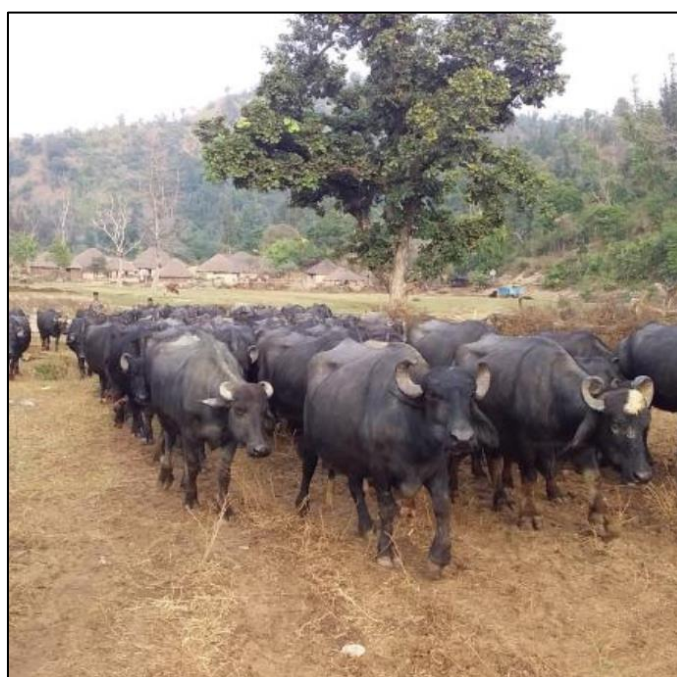
Traditionally, transhumance, the seasonal movement of the Gaddi pastoralists of Himachal Pradesh between lowland villages and high-altitude pastures, has enabled the sustainable use of rangelands and preservation of biodiversity. Diverse Gaddi knowledge on alpine grass, pasture regeneration, and ethnoveterinary medicine is reported, and over 90 plant species were used to feed the livestock and as medicine (Sharma *et al.*, 2022). Transhumance ecologically reduces overgrazing, spreads seeds, and creates open meadows, which are beneficial to wildlife.

This system, however, has been shattered by modern pressures. Climate variability has led to reduced pastoral mobility, diminished access to grazing due to the regulations on the protected lands, and policy preferences toward sedentarization (Sharma *et al.*, 2022; The Wire Science, 2021). The disappearance of transhumance means the disappearance of such ecological knowledge. Opportunities for co-production are suggested by new forms of engagement, including discussions with forest agencies, the recognition of grazing as a fire management tool, and the documentation of indigenous climate information. Nevertheless, long-term policy protection for the enforcement of the Forest Rights Act, mobile services, and livelihood incentives is important to justify Gaddi

knowledge as a modern sustainability tool rather than an obsolete practice.

#### 4.3 Bhotia Communities: Knowledge and Adaptation of Trans-Himalayan:

Another historical practice interrelated with pastoralism and trans-Himalayan trade was the Bothtia communities of Uttarakhand, which required a high level of knowledge of the land, weather, and animal husbandry. Adaptive breeding to the glacial conditions is manifested in native inventions such as hybrids of yaks and cattle (dzo) (Negi & Joshi, 2014). There are also extensive ethnobotanical records of high-altitude medicinal plants, such as *Picrorhiza kurroa* and *Cordyceps sinensis*, that are traditionally harvested in accordance with community standards. (Bhattarai, 1934)



**Figure 1: Van Gujjar pastoral life – Gojri buffalo herds grazing near a forest hamlet. The Van Gujjars’ indigenous knowledge of fodder species, seasonal grazing rotation, and animal care contributes to both their livelihood and the health of the forest**

**Source:** Mohammed Meer Hamja, *The Promise of a Sanghatan – How the Van Gujjars of Kunao Chaur is setting an example of coexistence, conservation and sustainable grassland management*, PANORAMA

The sealing of the Indo-Tibetan border since 1962 has led to immediate changes in livelihoods, forcing the Bhotias to adopt settled forms of agriculture, crafts, and wage labor. Unlike resilient communities, studies show that pastoral knowledge was lower and that generational transmission declined (Negi & Joshi, 2014). Development interventions have been a relative failure with ecological constraints. In this case, sustainable blending involves encouraging community-based medicinal plant farming, ecotourism, and co-management of alpine pastures. Disaster management, conservation planning, and livelihoods based on heritage should incorporate Bothtia voices to help prevent further erosion of mountain epistemologies.

#### 4.4 Van Gujjar Pastoralists: Knowledge Co-Production in Practice:

The Van Gujjars may be regarded as an example of rather developed institutionalized knowledge mixing. As forest pastoralists with buffaloes in Uttarakhand, they have a rich ecological and ethnoveterinary history, particularly the fodder species, grazing rotation, and livestock health (Panorama Solutions, 2020). Women are the most important carriers of knowledge. Forest rights and co-management with forest authorities have been negotiated by Van Gujjar groups since the Forest Rights Act (2006), with the Van Gujjar Tribal Yuva Sanghatan among them.

The experience of pilot projects in the Rajaji National Park demonstrates that co-production simultaneously improves the health of the ecosystem and livelihoods through rotational grazing, planting fodder trees, fire-prevention teams, and community-controlled grassland management (Panorama Solutions, 2020). Blended knowledge carriers have been developed among youths through education, para-veterinary training, and digital documentation. Despite ongoing opposition to authorities and the emergence of new threats posed by market forces, the Van Gujjar case shows that empowering indigenous governance can directly contribute to the SDGs related to biodiversity, justice, and climate action.

## 5. DISCUSSION

The ethnomedicine case studies of the four North Indian regions, Bhil ethnomedicine, Gaddi transhumant pastoralism, Bhotia high-altitude livelihood systems, and Van Gujjar forest pastoralism demonstrate that the connection between indigenous epistemologies and sustainable development is not linear. Rather, it is performed along different lines, shaped by ecological landscapes, institutional frameworks, historical disruptions, and power relations. In some cases, indigenous knowledge may be used to complement formal sustainability activities, while in others it is marginalized or modified in ways that undermine its integrity. This discussion provides cross-cutting insights to learn (1) knowledge blending mechanisms, (2) ethical, political, and institutional conditions that could influence such processes, and (3) overall theoretical implications on sustainability scholarship and practice (Baviskar & Amita, 1997).

### 5.1. Knowledge Blending and Institutional Interfaces Mechanisms:

Four major knowledge blending mechanisms are present in the cases: integration, parallel application, adaptation/substitution, and co-management/co-production. These mechanisms are not mutually exclusive; they complement and evolve with time in respect to policy environments and community agency.

The most evident form of knowledge combination is in the case of Bhil, where ethnomedical practices are coupled with public health and pharmacological research. Here, local herbal expertise is selectively incorporated into biomedical systems that offer culturally appropriate and affordable healthcare solutions and help conserve biodiversity. This blending can lead to synergy, but it will be marred by decontextualization and commodification unless benefit-sharing and community consent are strictly adhered to.

The Gaddi case is parallel, as ecological observations of pastoralists (e.g., pasture regeneration cycles, livestock behavior, and snowfall patterns) coexist with the scientific data used in climate adaptation and conservation planning. Such knowledge systems need not be fully integrated; they may coexist, each with epistemic integrity. These options are similar to the Multiple Evidence Base approach, which views indigenous, local, and scientific knowledge as complementary forms of evidence but does not prioritize one over the others (Tengö *et al.*, 2014).

The most obvious example of adaptation or substitution is the example of Bhotia. The abrupt disruption of trans-Himalayan trade due to the closure of geopolitical borders forced communities to restructure their livelihoods, relying on established agricultural, handicraft, and wage-labor activities. Even though such a change may be regarded as an indicator of resilience, it also restricted the scope of indigenous knowledge practices, including long-distance navigation, pastoral breeding, and trade ecology. Co-management and co-production are the most institutionally strong forms of blending, as in the case of Van Gujjar. Van Gujjar communities have been engaged in joint forest landscape management through rotational grazing, fodder restoration, fire management, and participatory monitoring, and have been legally recognized under the Forest Rights Act (2006). Indigenous knowledge is not merely an appendix to the already-established conservation regimes in this paradigm; rather, governance is restructured to accommodate community authority and expertise.

**Table 2: Mechanisms of Indigenous Knowledge Blending in North Indian Case Studies:**

Community	Core Indigenous Knowledge	Dominant Blending Mechanism	Institutional Interface	Key Outcomes and Challenges
Bhil (Rajasthan/Madhya Pradesh)	Ethnomedicine using diverse forest plants; spiritual healing traditions	Knowledge integration	Public health, ethnopharmacology, and biodiversity law	Synergy in healthcare and conservation; risks of biopiracy, declining transmission
Gaddi (Himachal Pradesh)	Transhumant pastoralism; alpine ecology and ethnoveterinary knowledge	Parallel application	Conservation policy, climate planning	Ecologically sustainable system under threat from access restrictions and sedentarization

Community	Core Indigenous Knowledge	Dominant Blending Mechanism	Institutional Interface	Key Outcomes and Challenges
Bhotia (Uttarakhand)	Trans-Himalayan trade ecology; pastoralism; medicinal plants	Adaptation/substitution	Development schemes, market integration	Livelihood resilience with erosion of specialized ecological knowledge
Van Gujjar (Uttarakhand)	Forest pastoralism; fodder cycles; ethnoveterinary practices	Co-management/co-production	Forest Rights Act, protected area governance	Improved ecosystem health and community empowerment; ongoing bureaucratic tensions

Table 2 summarizes these mechanisms and their outcomes across the four cases.

The existence of the state-community interface is one of the observations that Table 2 made. Integration is typically positive and sustainable when legal and institutional frameworks recognize indigenous rights and knowledge, as is the case in Van Gujjar. When policy is strict or totalitarian (as in grazing restrictions on Gaddis), it is rigid or exclusionary, blending is conflictual, and knowledge systems are destabilized. The intermediaries may also be NGOs and researchers who translate indigenous knowledge into a form policymakers can understand. Even though such mediation can strengthen communities' voices, it can also introduce alien agendas when communities are not leading the process. Communities self-organizing and making institutions work on their own terms is the best way to achieve the best results.

### 5.2 Knowledge Mixing Ethical and Political Issues:

The combination of indigenous knowledge and sustainable development is bound to be a process of moral and political action. The key issue is epistemic justice: who is a source of correct knowledge, who is in charge of using it, and who is a consumer of its stream. Previously, indigenous knowledge was deemed unscientific; its recognition today poses a new threat of over-extraction and commodification (Smith, 2012; de Sousa Santos, 2014).

Free, prior, and informed consent is one of the key ethical principles. The decision on how, when, and why indigenous communities' knowledge is shared must be made by the indigenous communities themselves. This is particularly applicable to the Bhil and Bhotia, where ethnobotanical knowledge may have market value. The Indian biodiversity management system, which includes the Biological Diversity Act (2002) and community biodiversity registers, is intended to institutionalize the principle of benefit-sharing, but ignorance and inaction undermine its success.

The concept of blending cannot be separated from the political problems of autonomy and self-determination. Life forms contain knowledge systems embedded within them; disrupting pastoral mobility or forest access also disrupts epistemic systems. The

experience of the Van Gujjars and forest rights shows that political recognition of land and resource rights can enable knowledge co-production, and the Gaddi experience shows that policies of sedentarization ruin livelihoods and ecological experience. Following Srivastava's (2022) argument, the high-modernist government is more inclined toward legibility and control. It frames mobile or non-standard livelihoods as the problem to be solved rather than the system to be examined.

The other political factor is legal pluralism. Traditional norms and regulations governing harvesting, grazing, or sacred sites that govern indigenous knowledge systems are not readily converted into legal statutes. Effective blending may therefore require the acknowledgment of native institutions as co-governing, rather than stakeholders, as tentatively reflected in legislation such as the Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas (PESA) Act, but not implemented in full.

### 5.3 Towards Convergence: Theoretical and Practical Implications:

**The cases have several implications for the sustainability theory and practice:**

First, they subvert technocratic conceptions of sustainability that rely on indicators and metrics rather than relationships. Indigenous epistemologies predetermine the concept of relational well-being (between humans, land, animals, and ancestors), and sustainability frameworks should be created to view cultural vitality, intergenerational transmission, and ecosystem reciprocity as legitimate outcomes (Escobar, 2015; Waldmuller *et al.*, 2022).

Second, the findings confirm the idea of knowledge co-production as a normative ideal rather than a methodological additive. When communities are co-creators of problems, strategies, and measures of effectiveness, the outcomes are more equitable and ecologically sustainable. This is in accordance with the principle of two eyes seeing, which holds that both indigenous and scientific knowledge should be used simultaneously, without compromising either.

Third, the cases demonstrate the need to minimize the knowledge loss. The danger of intergenerational continuity is rapid socio-economic

change, youth migration, and schooling systems that marginalize local knowledge. The necessary countermeasures are community-based documentation, culturally appropriate education, and livelihood measures that ensure knowledge practices are economically viable.

#### 5.4 Policy and Practice Implications:

These lessons are directly converted to policy. The sustainability of knowledge depends on secure land and resource tenure. Co-management committees and other forms of participatory governance should be institutionalized rather than seen as pilot projects. The development programs on health, agriculture, and climate adaptation should be very specific in identifying the entry points for indigenous knowledge, without compromising consent or the sharing of benefits. Finally, institutional resistance may be reduced by training development professionals in cultural competence and in the indigenous right to develop collaboration.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The paper has addressed the combination of indigenous epistemologies and sustainable development through fieldwork in North India. It was disclosed that indigenous knowledge systems are holistic, place-based, and relational, offering important insights for re-evaluating sustainability beyond technocratic, metric-based models. As it happened, both convergence and tension were evident among the Bhil, Gaddi, Bhotia, and Van Gujjar communities. The positive effects of blending were, on the one hand, the strengthening of local healthcare through ethnomedicine, the strengthening of pastoral knowledge through conservation, and the strengthening of community stewardship through ecosystem management. The study, on the other hand, identified unresolved problems arising from power imbalances, institutional inflexibility, and the erosion of cultural values, such as the loss of transhumance, the exclusivity of conservation policies, and the erosion of intergenerational knowledge.

The importance of context is considered a primary conclusion. Knowledge blending is not to be done according to a predetermined plan, but rather in a customized, flexible, and community-oriented manner. Nevertheless, common principles apply in cases, including respect for indigenous rights, participatory governance, mutual learning, and protection of cultural heritage. The successful partnerships are therefore not fringe matters but ethical and political issues.

The findings add to the scholarship on epistemological pluralism and decolonizing development. They argue that indigenous people should be considered co-architects of sustainable futures in policy and practice. The strength of indigenous knowledge is an asset to the world in a climate of unpredictability, and the necessity to maintain and regenerate it is pressing.

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