

Role and Functions of Traditional Institutions in Kamporijo Circle of Kamle District in Arunachal Pradesh: An Analytical Study

Ms. Bar Yakar^{1*} 

¹Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Dera Natung Govt. College, Itanagar, Arunachal Pradesh, India

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*Corresponding author: Ms. Bar Yakar

Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Dera Natung Govt. College, Itanagar, Arunachal Pradesh, India

Abstract

Traditional Institutions (TIs) in Kamporijo Circle of Kamle District, Arunachal Pradesh are fundamental to the governance, culture and livelihood of indigenous communities, especially the Nyishi people. In terms of economy, Traditional Institutions play an important role in facilitating dispute resolutions, resource management and the sustenance of livelihoods. Traditional Institutions promote traditional land-use systems including jhum cultivation and the simultaneous use of community forests according to principles of reciprocity and balance in nature. **Objective:** The study aims to examine the role and functions of Traditional Institutions (TIs) in Kamporijo Circle of Kamle District of Arunachal Pradesh. **Research Methodology:** The study utilises a qualitative analytical research design to characterize the role and functions of Traditional Institutions (TIs) in Kamle district of Arunachal Pradesh. Adopting qualitative protocol allows for a more comprehensive and situated understanding of TIs within local cultural implications. **Results and Discussions:** The conceptual framework provides insight into how traditional institutions operate within the context of Nyishi tribal society in Kamporijo and explains the role of these institutions within the framework of greater socio-cultural issues, rather than viewing them in isolation. It bridges between indigenous knowledge systems and modern institutional frameworks, thus providing a culturally grounded approach to studying development, governance, and social transformation in tribal areas of Arunachal Pradesh. **Conclusion:** Their main functions as dispute resolution, the gatekeeper of customary land rights, and moral arbiter are legitimised by social consent and the familiarity of the villagers. TIs operate as harmonising conflict resolution mechanisms, emphasising reconciliation, restorative justice, conventional significance and a legitimate basis to redress grievances that preserve community harmony.

Keywords: Culture, Livelihood, Indigenous Communities, Conventional Significance, Harmony.

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INTRODUCTION

Traditional Institutions (TIs) in Kamporijo Circle of Kamle District, Arunachal Pradesh are fundamental to the governance, culture and livelihood of indigenous communities, especially the Nyishi people. In their role in tribal society, TIs are repositories of oral tradition, collective memory and expression of a historical understanding of tribal society which has sustained, and continues to sustain, institutions of governance, social regulation, cultural continuity, and conflict resolution (Bordoloi, Sharma Thakur & Saikia, 1980; Elwin, 1959). Central to TIs are village councils often referred to locally as (*Mel/Nyell Nyele*), which bring together respected elders and traditional leaders recognized by their social legitimacy, to carry out communal decision-making. Local councils adjudicate disputes, provide mediation in land disputes and customary trials, enforce approaches to customary laws,

and provide direction on community values through consensual decision making (Nikam & Chaudhuri, 2003). They exercise authority and people legally respond and respect them as they operate on customary law, often (but not exclusively) over and above state adjudicated justice. In this role, TIs are caretakers of cultural heritage (Alsagoff *et al.*, 2023). It is where knowledge is passed verbally from the old, to the youth, of things like ritual practice, clan history, localised near-term naturalism - how to survive (Das & Tamo, 2011). Nyokum or other agriculture festivals provide traditional authorities with an opportunity to return community religious practice and its many names for many generations of social practice and processes.

In terms of economy, Traditional Institutions play an important role in facilitating resource management and the sustenance of livelihoods.

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Traditional Institutions promote traditional land-use systems including jhum cultivation and the simultaneous use of communal forests according to principles of reciprocity and balance in nature (Singh, 2008). In the past decades, Traditional Institutions have recognized changes in rural economies and expanded their meaning, structure and practices, to support Self-Help Groups (SHGs), Farmer Interest Groups (FIGs), and enable women's participation and livelihood activities such as weaving, poultry rearing, and traditional healing, using indigenous trust mechanisms (Arunachal Times, 2008; Astha Bharati, n.d.). Overall, the Traditional Institutions in Kamporijo are not desiccated formal structures, but live, adaptive systems, that continue to exert authority and influence even under modern governance structures. The relationship of Traditional Institutions and modern governance, particularly in the case of the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), has been characterized by collaboration and contestation surrounding the legitimacy of authority to resolve disputes and control resources (Tamo & Lego, 2011). But the enduring nature of cultural legitimacy and the grassroots nature of these Traditional Institutions make them a vital resource for contributing to local inclusive and sustainable development in this tribal region. In the Kamporijo Circle of the present Kamle District of Arunachal Pradesh, traditional institutions - particularly community-led organizations including village councils like *Mel/Nyel/ Nyele* hold pivotal role in facilitating socio-economic development, cultural preservation, and participatory governance at the local level. These examples distinguish how traditional institutions in Kamporijo circle fostered pathways to empowerment (education, health, savings, cultural revitalization) by reinstating elements of indigenous governance and community trust.

The quintessential institutions of the Kamporijo Circle hold the potential to attain indigenous governance, social cohesion, customary law, and rural development. The institutions of the tribal already are sources of continuing reference to dispute i.e., issues of injustice, generate community transmit norms of morality, social construction of agriculture and rituals. For being relevant there must be interacting limits on modern bureaucratic systems and indigenous practices, needs and intentions process.

OBJECTIVE

The study aims to examine the role and functions of Traditional Institutions (TIs) in Kamporijo Circle of Kamle District in Arunachal Pradesh.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study utilizes a qualitative analytical research design to characterize the role and functions of Traditional Institutions (TIs) in the Kamporijo Circle of Kamle district in Arunachal Pradesh. The literature review has identified expressions of TIs i.e., *Mel/Nyel/*

Nyele as traditional tribal institution deeply embedded in and dynamic as they relate to indigenous people's governance, conflict resolution, resource management, and social processes. Adopting qualitative protocol allows for a more comprehensive and situated understanding of TIs within local cultural implications.

Research Design:

The study adopts a descriptive and interpretive design through an ethnographic rationale, providing space and opportunity to engage closely with oral traditions, cultural practices, and descriptive frameworks as they relate to symbolic-cultural variables inherent to the functioning of Traditional Institutions. The research is ultimately seeking to understand the relationship between evolving cultural legitimacy, indigenous governance systems, and developmental outcomes.

The study area and sampling:

The geographical area of research is limited in Kamporijo Circle of Kamle district, including the Nyishi indigenous people's tribal area, where traditional governance still influences the social setting. A purposive sampling protocol was adopted when selecting our key informants and focus groups, with individuals who possessed lived experiences and deep explicit knowledge of Traditional Institutions.

Participants included:

Village elders and council members (Gaon Burahs) or members from SHGs and youth or female leaders (participants) of IDEA training programmes or local NGO representatives and PRI agents are considered for interview. A total of 40 semi-structured interviews and six focus group discussions were held in 5 villages of Kamporijo from January to April 2026.

Data collection methods

1. Primary Data: The data collection process included both in-depth interviews on traditional dispute resolution mechanisms, resource access and control, education, ritual management, and community-organizing meeting. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) involved elders, SHGs, and youth to elicit community views on 'hybrid' governance with the coexistence of traditional and modern systems. Participants' observations at local festivals (e.g. Nyokum) and community rituals and non-ritual leadership role in addition to cultural transmission and social cohesion are given importance.

2. Secondary Data: Archival documents, government report's, ethnographic monographs and scholarly papers were used to trace the origin, development, normative structures (e.g., laws, policies, and frameworks) and the various social, contextual transitions along the continuum of traditional institutions (TI) within the region. Important documents are included Elwin 's (1959) ethnography, Bordoloi et al. (1980), Das & Tamo (2011), and studies and policy documents offered by the

Government of Arunachal Pradesh and NABARD supported programmes.

Analytical Framework:

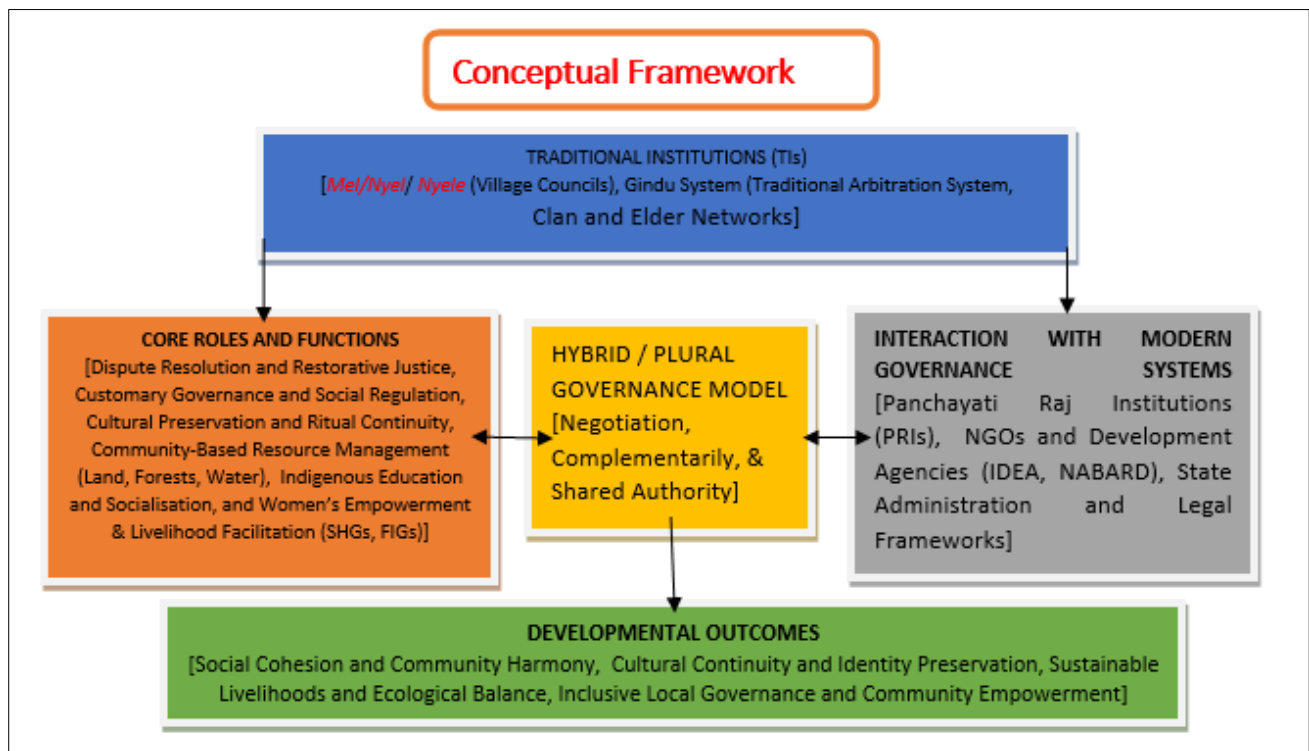
An inductive thematic content analysis was used to point out the key themes (i.e. ordinary resources framework - customary or informal law, dispute resolution engagement, indigenous education methodology, women's empowerment, livelihood facilitation, and traditional or historical continuity of rituals) and coded findings under these broad categories of institutional pluralism and tribal epistemology. The study will also reference frameworks for cultural resilience and hybrid governance to reflect on how traditional and modern institution negotiate authority,

synergize effects and govern social change within the region.

Ethical Considerations:

The informed consent was verbal because this is consistent with the oral tradition of the local culture. Participation was voluntary. Confidentiality was maintained in both data collection and reporting. Cultural sensitivity and respect for local community norms were maintained, particularly in relation to ritual observations and the protocol for engaging elders.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS



EXPLANATION OF THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework provides insight into how traditional institutions operate within the context of Nyishi tribal society in Kamporijo Circle and explains the role of these institutions within the framework of greater socio-cultural issues, rather than viewing them in isolation. Furthermore, the framework illustrates that traditional institutions are not simply separate entities but rather are intrinsically linked to and built upon Indigenous Social Structures as defined through Oral Tradition, Customary Law, Collective Norms, and Indigenous Value Systems. Scholars who study tribal governance consistently assert that the "legitimacy" of traditional institutions is derived through a consensus of the people who agree that such institutions have the authority to govern their society, rather than being granted authority through Constitutional means; thus,

traditional institutions are able to maintain a level of resilience and efficacy in the Tribal Regions of Northeast India (Elwin, 1959; Bordoloi, Sharma, and Sikika, 1980).

Traditional Institutions (TIs) form the basis of the Indigenous governance system for Kamporijo Circle. Traditional Institutions consist of Village Councils (*Mel/Nyel/Nyele*), Sacred/Ritual Institutions of the Donyi-Polo belief system and Clan/Elder Networks. The TIs serve as the main governing body for decision making and adjudication at the village level, as it provides a means for socialization, learn discipline, and transmit cultural values. Sacred Institutions uphold the moral order of the community and the cosmological beliefs by maintaining a continuing cultural connection and a spiritual bond within the community (Elwin, 1964; Singh, 2008).

The study identifies the core roles and activities of traditional institutions. Of these roles, dispute resolution is one of the most important in that it provides an opportunity to resolve disputes using customary-based methods (e.g., restitution, reconciliation and collective harmony), instead of imposing punitive measures. Traditional justice systems are culturally and financially viable (i.e., cost-effective) alternatives to formal judicial systems, both of which support community stability and minimize the reliance on the formal legal system (Nikam & Chaudhuri, 2003; Beteille, 1998). Another primary role of traditional institutions is establishing the norms of social interaction through the application of customary laws regarding marriage, inheritance, and kinship obligations, as well as creating and maintaining social order and regulating morality. This particular role of traditional institutions becomes even more pronounced when there is rapid socio-economic change that may threaten cultural identity; thus, they serve as stabilizing forces between tradition and modernity (Barth, 1969; Das & Tamo, 2011). The framework also identifies traditional institutions' role in community-based natural resource management, particularly concerning land, forests, and water. By adhering to customary land tenure systems and indigenous ecological knowledge, traditional institutions regulate how and when to use agricultural lands and forests as well as what conservation standards to follow, thereby helping to sustain the environment and provide for the long-term viability of communities. The traditional governance arrangement mirrors theoretical perspectives on common property management, wherein community-created institutions are generally considered to be more successful than imposed systems (Ostrom, 1990; Dutta, 2019).

The framework's analytical lens includes the interaction between traditional institutions and modern governance systems, notably, the Panchayati Raj Institutions, the state administrative structures and NGOs. The framework does not see both as opposing forces, rather, it takes the stance that both types can negotiate with one another, are complementary to each other, and share authority. Empirical evidence collected in the state of Arunachal Pradesh provides clear examples of how hybrid governance systems that combine traditional institutions with modern governance systems enhance participation in making decisions and result in improved developmental achievements so long as the roles of the participating institutions are clearly defined and respected by all parties (Tamo & Lego, 2011; Xaxa, 2008). The outcome of the interaction, then, is a hybrid or plural governance model that is characterized by the combination of Customary Authority with "Constitutional" governance processes. The framework illustrates very clearly how this plural institutional arrangement creates important developmental outcomes, including social cohesion, community harmony, Cultural Continuity, Sustainable

Livelihood, Ecological Sustainability, and Inclusive Local Governance. These outcomes point to the continued importance of Traditional Institutions and their ability to serve as partners in Grassroots Development as opposed to being seen as impediments to modern governance (Putnam, 1993; Sen, 1999). The conceptual framework, therefore, provides a broad view of how traditional institutions have existed in Kamporijo Circle as dynamic, adaptive systems of Governance in the context of Arunachal Pradesh. It bridges Indigenous Knowledge Systems to Modern Institutional Frameworks, thus providing a culturally grounded approach to studying Development, Governance, and Social Transformation in Tribal Areas of Arunachal Pradesh.

DISCUSSIONS IN DETAIL

Social & Civic Construction:

Nyishi Traditional Village Council is a top institution for settlement of local disputes. It functions as legislative, executive, and judicial body in concerned with each own clan and each territory in particular with resolution through consensus in addition to the wisdom of elders for issues like resolving issues of disputes and injustice, managing land, managing common wealth and applying customary law.

Catalysts for Development:

Some years back, approximately in 2006 in Kamporijo, women were given training through a community led initiative by the Itanagar Diocesan Empowerment Association (IDEA). These women became 'barefoot leaders' and employed their local normative values of collective responsibility in initiating self help groups (SHGs) and Farmers' Clubs, informal groups that enable microfinance, education in villages, health campaigns, and livelihoods. Currently, in Kamporijo there are 45 self help groups and 42 farmers clubs - a remarkable impact from social mobilization at roots (See: Arunachal Times).

Traditional governance, through this institution, provides legitimacy and social cohesion to these efforts, and also accountability mechanisms. Loans, SHG savings and development projects were shared responsibilities, creating trust and peer regulation. Eventually NABARD's support included recognition of the reputation and development of these community processes (Studocu).

Integration with modern governance:

As time has advanced, traditional institutions have played a larger role as intermediaries between tribal communities and external development agencies. Traditional institutions help facilitate the pace of the development programs' acceptance and effectiveness from NGOs and government by using local authority structures. Traditional institutions make sure that development efforts by development organizations are

congruent with local norms and which provide for shared ownership of the initiatives (Tamin, 2017; North East Network, 2019). There is legal recognition and integration of traditional institutions into modern Panchayati Raj systems these days. Even though TIs may not be recognized structures, they are functioning with local government structures, employing customary norms and consultations with elders to influence decisions (Studocu).

Restorative justice and policy:

In Kamporijo Circle of Arunachal Pradesh, local governance is administered by traditional institutions, which play an essential role in traditional governance, community and dispute resolution. Traditional village councils (*Mel/Nyel/ Nyele*) having community members can solve civil dispute, criminal or moral misdeeds, and the council develops a decision using oral forms of traditions and consensus-based decision making. Village Councils, keep track of land rights and customary norms, but also adjudicate conflicts, often finding resolution in a way that creates harmony and restores social order without the need to engage judicial options (Elwin, 1959; Singh, 1993; Srivastava, 2005). One of the most important functions of traditional institutions, like the *Mel/Nyel/ Nyele* (village council) is as a peaceful dispute resolution mechanism. Traditional councils resolve disputes in relation to a wide range of family including land disputes, effecting resolution to marriage, theft, and moral violations in accordance to oral procedures and consensus not on written laws. The elders of the council discuss the cases raised by community members in relation to accepted customary laws and rely on shared or collective memory and utilise compensatory restorative justice that comes from tribal ethics (Bordoloi *et al.*, 1980). In Kamporijo, this practice was found to reinforce social cohesion and discourage over-reliance on formal court systems, especially in villages that are interior to Arunachal Pradesh. TIs continue to perform the initial adjudicative role in a settlement process and its decision is accepted by the local community (Elwin, 1959).

Community Mobilization and Resource Management:

Resource management in tribal society occurs collectively through traditional institutions. Various activities like jhum cultivation, irrigation, household distribution, use of forest resources, etc. are organized by elders and councils, who make decisions collectively, in a participatory manner. Participatory decisions based on practices that are ecologically sustainable as well as socially equitable (Bordoloi, 1987; Karlsson, 2004). Traditional institutions in the area organize circulation of community work parties and agricultural activities such as community jhum cultivation (i.e., *Rig-Henam/Rig-Dagnam or Rig-Heming Sunam*) and maintenance of clan forest and irrigation system, etc. In Kamporijo,

elders and leaders organize the youth for voluntary work, for house construction, bridge repairs or agricultural work, etc. They also regularize access to forest, river and shifting cultivation areas using communally accepted customary rules to regulate resources in an ecologically sustainable manner.

Promotion of Indigenous Education and Socialisation:

Role of socialisation and moral education is done by traditional institutions. Participations in TIs serve as platform, where the community elders socialise and communicate values, local tribe's history and the community's collective memory to the younger generations. These contexts reinforce community identity and provide informal education through ritual and storytelling. The cultural values are basically transferred in festivals and rites of passage, thereby developing sense of identity, belongingness and shared heritages (Mibang & Chaudhuri, 2004; Das, 2011; Nani, 2016).

In Kamporijo, older men and women are involved to educate youth about kinship rules and norms; cultural myths and taboos; marriage customs; and work ethics at festivals and gatherings. Elders also play the role of moral educators with advice in family and community matters. "Customary values are still transmitted today not in educational institutions, but by way of oral conversations with the assistance of the clan heads who act as landowners, and are perceived to have divine wisdom" (Elwin, 1959).

Spiritual, Ritual Coordination, and Cultural Continuity:

Traditional institutions continue to be custodians of cultural and spiritual continuity. Ritual institutionalization and centres maintain indigenous belief and faith systems (nature worship, agricultural ceremonies, religious prayers and harvest festivals). Rituals become like social trips aspects or ethics of ecosystems, belief systems of tribal cosmology, develop a spiritual perspective that merges cultural identity with developmental agendas. Through rituals, traditional belief practices make present, their ethical and normative behaviours (Mibang & Chaudhuri, 2004; Dutta, 2008).

Traditional institutions in the state supervise and lead different tribal community rituals and religious festivals (like Solung, Nyokum, and Dree) that mark and support agrarian calendar; veneration of deities; and communal identity of members. In Kamporijo, through indigenous renewal of spirituality enacting seasonal rituals, animal sacrifices, nature worship, and purifications the ITs play vital role. Commitments for events also provide means of intergenerational transfer learning, as well as healing ceremonies; and reaffirmation of community membership values and norms. "Religion and culture are intricately woven into

agricultural systems in these tribes, and community rituals are conducted and supervised through traditional structures" (Donyi Polo Yelam Kebang, 2005).

Facilitation of Livelihood and Empowerment of Women:

Traditional institutions also play an important role in economic empowerment. Indigenous social systems are approved facilitators for Self-Help Groups (SHGs), Farmers' Clubs (FCs) and collectives for women, which often operate through mutual trust and commitment to social solidarity. These groups facilitate access to credit, savings and local livelihood programs based on local knowledge and desire for ecological sustainability. Traditional leadership adds legitimacy and stability to such groups making them less vulnerable (GoAP, 2020; Sharma, 2014). Traditional institutions have endorsed the sustainable advance of grassroots development in Kamporijo by adding endorsement for women's participation in Self-Help Groups (SHGs), farmers' clubs and village savings groups.

The Itanagar Diocesan Empowerment Association (IDEA) trained women leaders in the township of Kamporijo, who used their traditional trust networks to shape SHGs. These groups facilitated micro-loans, livelihood development activities and education drives (IDEA, 2008). Traditional councils facilitated the settlement of financial disputes and monitored group savings, blending customary trust with contemporary micro-finance. SHG leadership possessed credibility, because, it operated within legacy traditional institutions and was recognised by elders (IDEA, 2008, p. 3).

CONCLUSION

In the Kamporijo Circle of Arunachal Pradesh, Traditional Institutions (TIs) are a legacy, longstanding form of indigenous self-governance, which continue to underpin the social, political, cultural, and economic domains of many tribal communities. They are rooted in oral traditions, customary laws, and consensus, and operate through the village councils (*Mel/Nyell Nyele*), and sacred traditions to uphold tribal identity and enculturation. Their main functions as dispute resolution, the gatekeeper of customary land rights, and moral arbiter are legitimised by social consent and the familiarity of the villagers. TIs operate as harmonising conflict resolution mechanisms, emphasising reconciliation, restorative justice, conventional significance and a legitimate basis to redress grievances that preserve community harmony, while they also play an important role in the governance of natural resources, managing the use of forests, water access and agricultural interventions with the incorporation of indigenous ecological knowledge and sustainability ethics.

Most importantly, TIs have not been stagnant. In the context of socio-economic changes and with the

arrival of modern governance frameworks such as the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), TIs have evolved and co-existed, and sometimes co-contradicted PRIs. For example, in Kamporijo, TIs are reconciling with Self-Help Groups (SHGs) or community-based organisations with an aim of livelihood activities especially among women and thus reconciling the divide between traditional-modern governance structures. It is clear that Traditional Institutions have transitioned into predominating inter-institutional sheens with PRIs, yet one must acknowledge that Traditional Institutions continue to earn faith, trust and cultural legitimacy within the community and thus remain an important element of local governance particularly given the context of the weak state machinery in some of the tribal belts in Arunachal Pradesh. In order for any meaningful and inclusive development in tribal Arunachal Pradesh, in locations such as Kamporijo, pluralist governance that embraces the complementarity between TIs and PRIs is crucial.

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