

Case Study E: Justice and Equity in Conservation – Understanding trade-offs in a Protected Area in Laos

What is equality? What is equity? What is justice?

The terms equity and justice are often used to indicate concern for fairness, but they are not synonyms. Justice is linked to rights and fairness in terms of ‘what is morally right’. Equity focuses on fairness in a comparative sense – it highlights the relationships between different people / groups of people. Figure 1 demonstrates a visual depiction of the differences between equality (where resources are distributed equally), equity (where everyone is given enough support to access the resource) and justice (where the systemic barriers to participation are removed).

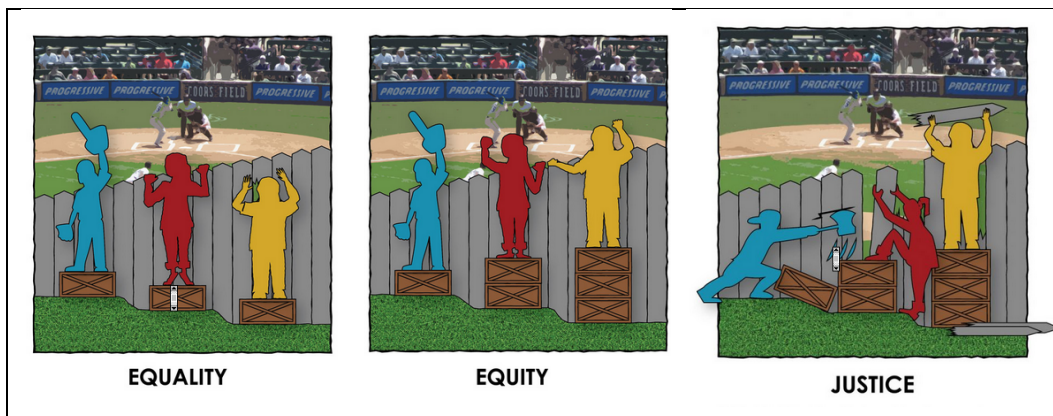


Figure 1 Differences between Equality, Equity and Justice, fig by Paul Kuttner <http://culturalorganizing.org/the-problem-with-that-equity-vs-equality-graphic/>

Recognition, Procedure and Distribution

Both equity and justice in conservation are argued to have three main dimensions: recognition, procedure and distribution. In the context of protected areas, Schreckenberg *et al.* (2016) define three dimensions of equity as follows:

- *Recognition* means acknowledging and accepting the legitimacy of rights, values, interests and priorities of different actors and respecting their human dignity.
- *Procedural equity* means the inclusive and effective participation of all relevant actors in affairs that concern them.
- *Distributive equity* is about how benefits, costs and risks are shared between different actors – such as communities, protected area management, local and national governments, and global stakeholders.

Not all factors are in the immediate control of protected area stakeholders. Therefore, Schreckenberg *et al.* (2016) embed the three equity dimensions within a set of *enabling conditions*, which comprise the wider social and political processes that influence how equity is operationalised at local level.

How does it work in the case of Nam Et-Phou Louey National Protected Area in Laos?

Dawson et al. (2018) used key informant interviews, focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews to explore the impacts of the Nam Et-Phou Louey National Protected Area (PA) in Laos on three adjacent villages. The villages differed in their ability to access the PA:

- Phon Song bordered the park's 'total protection zone', allowing no entry or resource use;
- Khorn Ngua bordered a 'controlled use zone', allowing regulated resource use;
- Son Khua bordered a 'controlled use zone', and also benefited from an ecotourism scheme.

Dawson *et al.* (2018) found that understanding of the impacts of the PA on local people were enhanced by research that took local peoples' perceptions of equity into account. Assessments that relied only on standardised indicators and measurements of distributive equity (e.g. how resources were shared among affected communities) failed to capture the full picture of what local people considered equitable. For example, although economic processes in the area led to poverty being halved in all three villages between 2004 and 2014, the constraints imposed by the PA meant that farmers in Phon Song had smaller plots and lower incomes.

To overcome the land scarcity, Phon Song villagers encroached into the PA. This process revealed procedural inequity within the village as wealthier households were more able to negotiate informal permission to cultivate in the PA. Another procedural equity issue was the dissatisfaction reported in all the villages with the failure of PA staff to fulfil promises of livelihood support activities which had been instrumental in getting villagers to agree to the PA borders.

Dawson *et al.* (2018) also found that a failure to recognise the dynamic nature of the local economy meant that villagers did not have access to the type of land they needed to meet their aspirations of switching from shifting cultivation to permanent pasture, paddy and fruit trees. These results highlight the importance of continual dialogue with local populations to account for the dynamic nature of local needs and identities and thereby ensure recognition and procedural equity which enhances the potential for both equitable and effective conservation.

Questions for discussion

1. What is the difference between equity and justice? Why are they important concepts for conservation and protected areas?
2. Why do we need to think about more than 'distributive' justice and equity?
3. How does a justice perspective add to our understanding of the interactions between local communities and protected areas?

Further reading

- Dawson, N., Martin, A. and Danielsen, F. (2018) Assessing equity in protected area governance: Approaches to promote just and effective conservation. *Conservation Letters* **11**: 1-8.
- Martin, A., Akol, A. and Gross-Camp, N. (2015) Towards an explicit justice framing of the social impacts of conservation. *Conservation and Society* **13**: 166-178.
- Schreckenberg, K. *et al.* (2016) Unpacking equity for protected area conservation. *Parks* **22**: 11-26.
- Sikor T, ed. (2013) *The justices and injustices of ecosystem services*. Routledge.