

Non-State Actors and Environmental Protection: The Growing Influence of Civil Society, Indigenous People, Multinational Corporations and International Non-Governmental Organizations

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ABSTRACT: The escalating environmental crises confronting the global community necessitated a paradigm shift in environmental governance, moving beyond state-centric approaches to recognize the growing influence of non-state actors. This study comprehensively examined the roles and impacts of four key categories of non-state actors, civil society organizations, Indigenous peoples, multinational corporations, and international non-governmental organizations, in shaping environmental protection outcomes across multiple levels of governance. Using a qualitative case study methodology and thematic analysis of secondary data from 45 peer-reviewed journal articles, institutional reports, and policy documents published between 2020 and 2026, the study analyzed the strategic engagement of these actors within international environmental frameworks and national policy contexts. The findings revealed that civil society organizations (CSOs) increasingly functioned as co-governance partners, contributing technical expertise to policy formulation, implementation, and oversight while navigating restrictive political environments through pragmatic engagement strategies. Indigenous peoples demonstrated that knowledge bridging across cultural contexts fostered solidarity and strengthened ecological stewardship practices while supporting self-determination through traditional governance systems. Multinational corporations exhibited heterogeneous environmental strategies, transitioning from reactive compliance toward proactive sustainability integration driven by reputational pressures, regulatory imperatives, and stakeholder expectations. International non-governmental organizations (INGOs) deployed sophisticated advocacy mechanisms by aggregating community concerns, exchanging technical knowledge, and mobilizing dispersed interests to influence environmental governance networks. The study concluded that synergistic collaboration among these non-state actors, rather than isolated actions, offered a promising pathway toward transformative environmental governance, with important implications for policy design, institutional reform, and multi-stakeholder partnership frameworks.

KEYWORDS: Non-state actors; environmental governance; civil society; Indigenous knowledge; corporate social responsibility; transnational advocacy

1. Introduction

The contemporary environmental predicament, characterized by accelerating climate change, unprecedented biodiversity loss, pervasive pollution, and resource depletion, represented one of the most formidable challenges confronting humanity in the twenty-first century [1, 2]. Traditional state-centric approaches to environmental governance, predicated on intergovernmental cooperation and sovereign regulatory authority, had proven insufficient to address the scale, complexity, and urgency of these interconnected crises [3, 4]. This recognition catalyzed a fundamental reconfiguration of environmental governance architectures, in which non-state actors emerged as increasingly influential participants in shaping environmental policies, practices, and outcomes across local, national, and transnational scales [5, 6].

The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) process exemplified this transformation, with Conferences of the Parties evolving into “mega-events” that attracted unprecedented levels of non-state actor participation. The 2025 Yearbook of Global Climate Action documented that the number of individual actors involved in climate action more than doubled from 18,000 in 2020 to over 43,000 in 2025, while the number of registered climate initiatives increased from 149 to 243 during the same period [7]. This remarkable expansion reflected growing recognition that government actions alone were insufficient to achieve the ambitious goals articulated in international environmental agreements [8]. Non-state actors, including civil society organizations, Indigenous peoples, multinational corporations, and international non-governmental organizations, became important contributors to environmental governance by providing diverse resources, expertise, perspectives, and capacities that complemented and extended state-based regulatory frameworks [9, 10].

CSOs assumed increasingly prominent roles in environmental governance, particularly within Global South contexts. These organizations navigated complex political landscapes to collaborate with government entities and participated in multiple stages of policy processes, including formulation, implementation, and supervision [1]. Their engagement responded to growing governmental demand for technical expertise, localized knowledge, and operational capacity to address environmental challenges that exceeded existing institutional capabilities. The expansion of environmental CSOs in developing countries reflected both increasing societal concern regarding environmental degradation and recognition that meaningful environmental protection required active citizen participation beyond formal state mechanisms [11].

Indigenous peoples constituted another category of non-state actors whose contributions to environmental protection gained significant recognition. Indigenous communities worldwide possessed sophisticated ecological knowledge systems developed through generations of place-based stewardship and reciprocal relationships with their environments [12]. These knowledge systems, embedded within distinct cultural frameworks, offered valuable insights into sustainable resource management, biodiversity conservation, and climate adaptation. The assertion of Indigenous self-determination and resource governance rights emerged as a crucial dimension of environmental protection, particularly in contexts where

Indigenous territories encompassed areas of significant biodiversity and carbon storage capacity [13]. Cross-cultural knowledge bridging among Indigenous communities fostered solidarity and strengthened approaches to land stewardship, demonstrating the ecological relevance of maintaining cultural teachings that promoted sustainability [12, 14].

Multinational corporations represented a more complex and contested dimension of non-state actor engagement in environmental protection. These entities simultaneously constituted major contributors to environmental degradation through their extraction, production, and distribution activities and potential drivers of environmental improvement through technological innovation, operational efficiency, and sustainable investment [15]. Corporate social responsibility (CSR) frameworks expanded to encompass environmental considerations, with many multinational corporations implementing measures to reduce their carbon footprints, promote sustainable practices, and support environmental initiatives [16]. However, previous research revealed heterogeneous environmental strategies among corporations, with active engagement often driven more by reputational and financial considerations than by ethical commitments [17]. This duality underscored the need to understand corporate environmental behavior as being shaped by regulatory pressures, market dynamics, stakeholder expectations, and strategic considerations rather than assuming inherent corporate environmentalism [18].

INGOs had long operated as transnational advocates for environmental protection, deploying various strategies to influence policies and practices across national boundaries. Recent research demonstrated how INGOs functioned as “policy entrepreneurs” within complex governance networks, employing modular advocacy mechanisms that included aggregating and communicating community concerns, exchanging and framing technical knowledge into feasible policy proposals, and mobilizing and balancing interests among dispersed actors [19]. Their effectiveness depended on coordination across these mechanisms, strategic positioning within governance networks, and the cultivation of collaborative relationships with state actors and other non-state stakeholders [20]. The case of greening the Belt and Road Initiative demonstrated how INGOs and Chinese government-organized non-governmental organizations (GONGOs) collaborated as policy entrepreneurs to influence environmental governance within an authoritarian context, navigating institutional and political constraints through pragmatic advocacy strategies [19].

This study addressed a significant gap in the existing literature by examining the collective and interactive influences of diverse non-state actors on environmental protection outcomes. Although substantial research had focused on individual categories of non-state actors, comparative analyses of their differentiated roles, strategies, and impacts remained limited [21, 22]. Furthermore, the growing recognition of non-state actors’ contributions to environmental governance had not been accompanied by systematic theoretical and empirical examinations of how these actors interacted with one another and with state institutions to shape environmental outcomes [23, 24]. Therefore, this study examined how civil society organizations, Indigenous peoples, multinational corporations, and INGOs influenced environmental protection across different governance levels and explored the implications of their engagement for transformative environmental governance.

The study contributed to environmental governance scholarship by providing a comprehensive analysis of non-state actors’ engagement in environmental protection and identifying common patterns and distinctive characteristics across actor categories [25]. It

advanced understanding of the mechanisms through which non-state actors exerted influence, the conditions under which their engagement proved most effective, and the challenges they confronted in promoting environmental sustainability [26]. The findings provided practical implications for policymakers, practitioners, and advocates seeking to harness the potential contributions of non-state actors while addressing the limitations and risks associated with their increasing influence on environmental governance [27, 28].

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Research Design.

This study employed a qualitative research design to examine the influence of non-state actors on environmental protection across multiple levels of governance. The qualitative approach was appropriate because the research questions focused on understanding the mechanisms, strategies, and contextual factors that shaped non-state actor engagement in environmental governance. Qualitative methods enabled an in-depth examination of complex social phenomena by capturing the perspectives of diverse actors and the nuances of their interactions within specific political and institutional contexts. The study was grounded in an interpretive epistemological perspective, recognizing that social reality was constructed through meaning-making practices and that understanding the influence of non-state actors required consideration of participants' interpretations of their experiences and contexts.

2.2. Data Sources and Literature Search Strategy.

The research drew on secondary data from multiple sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, institutional reports, policy documents, and case studies published between 2020 and 2026. The 2020–2026 period was purposefully selected to capture recent developments in non-state actor engagement in environmental protection, particularly during the post-COVID-19 period, which witnessed increased non-state actor mobilization in environmental governance, the maturation of the UNFCCC framework for non-state actor participation, and emerging patterns in corporate environmental strategies following the implementation of the Paris Agreement. This timeframe also enabled the analysis of contemporary trends and innovations in environmental governance that might not have been adequately represented in earlier literature.

The literature search was conducted between January and March 2026 using Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and the UNFCCC online repository. The search strategy employed combinations of keywords organized into three thematic clusters. The first cluster focused on actor categories and included terms such as “non-state actors,” “civil society organizations,” “environmental NGOs,” “Indigenous peoples,” “multinational corporations,” “transnational corporations,” “business,” and “international non-governmental organizations.” The second cluster addressed governance processes and included “environmental governance,” “climate governance,” “environmental protection,” “policy influence,” “advocacy,” and “participation.” The third cluster addressed mechanisms and outcomes and included “co-governance,” “knowledge exchange,” “corporate social responsibility,” “stakeholder engagement,” “partnership,” and “sustainability.” These keyword clusters were combined using Boolean operators (AND/OR) to identify literature addressing the intersections between non-state actor categories and environmental governance processes. Additional searches were

conducted by examining the reference lists of retrieved articles to identify relevant publications that were not captured through the database searches, following a snowballing approach.

2.3. Document Selection and Screening Process.

The document selection process followed a systematic approach designed to ensure the inclusion of relevant, high-quality sources while maintaining a manageable scope for detailed analysis. The initial database searches yielded 847 potentially relevant documents. Following the removal of duplicates, 623 unique records remained. These records were screened according to the following inclusion criteria: (a) publication between 2020 and 2026 to ensure contemporary relevance; (b) direct relevance to non-state actor engagement in environmental protection; (c) empirical or theoretical contributions to understanding the influence of non-state actors; (d) representation of diverse geographical contexts and actor categories; and (e) publication in peer-reviewed journals or by recognized institutional sources, such as the UNFCCC, UNEP, and the World Bank. The exclusion criteria included: (a) documents that did not directly address environmental governance; (b) documents focusing exclusively on state actors or intergovernmental processes without consideration of non-state engagement; (c) documents published before 2020; and (d) documents that were not available in English or Chinese.

The screening process was conducted in two stages. The first stage involved title and abstract screening, which reduced the 623 records to 147 potentially relevant documents. The second stage involved full-text screening, during which 62 additional documents were excluded because they did not meet the inclusion criteria upon closer examination or duplicated findings already covered by other sources. The final selection comprised 85 documents that were reviewed in detail for data extraction. Of these 85 documents, 45 were selected for detailed thematic analysis based on their direct relevance to the research questions, quality of empirical evidence, theoretical contributions, and representation of different actor categories and geographical contexts. The selection of 45 documents from the 85 reviewed documents was guided by the principle of theoretical saturation, whereby the inclusion of additional documents no longer generated substantial new insights for the emerging thematic framework. Figure 1 presents a flowchart of the study process, from literature identification and screening to final selection and data analysis.

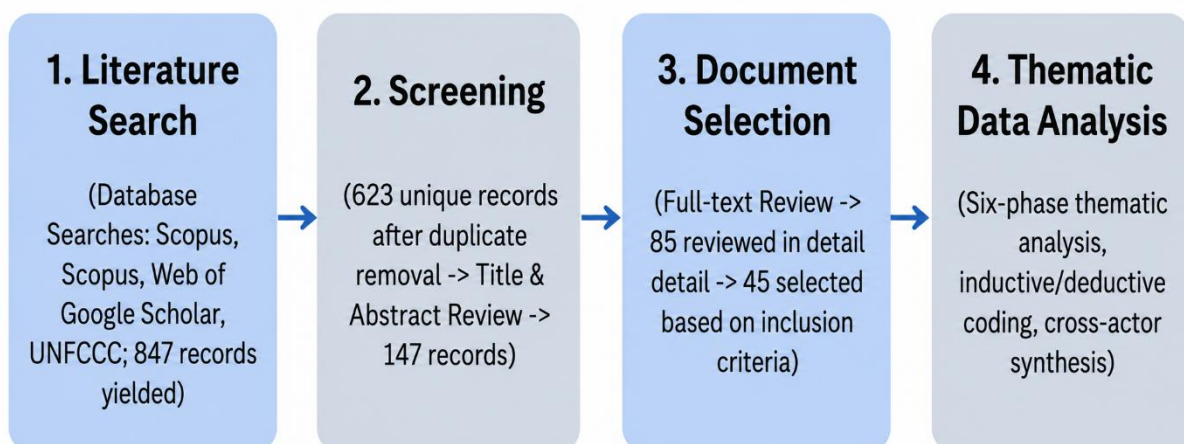


Figure 1. Study Process Flowchart.

2.4. Analytical Framework and Thematic Analysis.

Data analysis employed thematic analysis following the six-phase framework developed by Braun and Clarke [29]. This approach involved familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, identification of potential themes, review of themes, definition and naming of themes, and preparation of the final report. The analysis identified recurring patterns and themes related to non-state actor engagement in environmental protection and organized them into broad categories corresponding to different actor types.

The analytical framework was developed through an iterative process that combined deductive and inductive approaches. Deductive elements were derived from the theoretical literature on non-state actor engagement in environmental governance, including transnational advocacy network theory [30], policy entrepreneurship theory [31], and social movement theory [32]. Inductive elements emerged from preliminary examination of the selected literature and captured recurrent patterns and themes that were not fully explained by the existing theoretical frameworks. The final analytical framework organized the findings into four actor categories—civil society organizations, Indigenous peoples, multinational corporations, and international non-governmental organizations—with particular attention to their distinctive roles, strategies, mechanisms, and impacts on environmental protection.

The thematic analysis involved systematic coding of the 45 selected documents. Initial open coding generated a comprehensive set of codes capturing descriptive and conceptual dimensions of non-state actor engagement, including actor characteristics, strategies, mechanisms, contextual factors, and environmental outcomes. These initial codes were subsequently organized into higher-order themes through axial coding, which involved identifying relationships among codes and grouping related concepts into thematic categories. The thematic categories were further refined through selective coding to improve their coherence, relevance, and distinctiveness. The themes presented in Tables 1–5 were generated through this analytical process, with each table organized according to thematic categories that emerged from the coding rather than being directly adopted from any individual study. However, the structure and content of the tables were informed by and cross-referenced with existing typologies in the literature to ensure that the emerging themes were situated within the broader scholarly context.

2.5. Validity and Reliability.

Several strategies were employed to enhance the validity, reliability, and methodological rigor of the findings. Data triangulation was conducted by cross-checking findings across multiple sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, institutional reports, policy documents, and case studies, to assess consistency and minimize potential source bias. The thematic analysis was independently conducted by two researchers (Y.W. and H.L.) for a subset of the selected documents to assess intercoder agreement. Differences in coding and interpretation were resolved through discussion and consensus. This procedure helped minimize potential researcher bias and ensured that the coding framework was applied consistently across the

analyzed documents. The involvement of multiple coders also facilitated systematic comparison of interpretations and reduced the likelihood of idiosyncratic coding decisions.

Expert validation was conducted through consultation with five experts in environmental governance who were familiar with the research contexts and actor categories examined in the study. The experts reviewed the preliminary findings and provided feedback regarding their relevance, accuracy, and completeness. In the context of this secondary-data study, expert validation was used to assess whether the interpretations, thematic categories, and conclusions were consistent with established knowledge and practical experience in environmental governance. In addition, thick description was employed to provide detailed accounts of the contexts, processes, and mechanisms through which non-state actors influenced environmental protection, thereby enabling readers to assess the transferability of the findings to other contexts. An audit trail was also maintained to document key stages of the research process, including literature identification and selection, data extraction, coding, theme development, and interpretative decisions, thereby enhancing the transparency and reproducibility of the analytical process.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. The Emerging Architecture of Non-State Actor Environmental Governance.

The analysis revealed that non-state actors had become integral components of contemporary environmental governance architectures, functioning not merely as peripheral participants but as important contributors to environmental protection across multiple governance levels. The UNFCCC process exemplified this transformation, with non-state actor participation more than doubling between 2020 and 2025 [7]. This expansion reflected growing recognition that effective environmental governance required engagement beyond state institutions by leveraging diverse resources, expertise, and perspectives that governments alone could not provide. The evolution of global climate action from a platform primarily focused on mobilization toward an instrument supporting implementation further demonstrated the increasing integration of non-state actors into environmental governance frameworks [7].

Table 1 summarizes the key environmental governance mechanisms involving non-state actors identified through the thematic analysis. Five major mechanisms were identified: policy formulation, policy implementation, policy monitoring and accountability, norm entrepreneurship, and market-based mechanisms. Policy formulation involved CSOs, INGOs, and scientific actors that provided evidence, technical expertise, and consultation to support environmental policy development (Table 1). These contributions responded to governmental demand for specialized expertise while utilizing the technical knowledge and community connections of non-state actors [1, 7, 19]. Policy implementation involved CSOs, multinational corporations (MNCs), and Indigenous communities in program delivery, operational support, and on-the-ground activities that translated policy commitments into tangible environmental actions (Table 1). The involvement of these actors extended state capacity and facilitated engagement with communities and contexts that government institutions might otherwise have had difficulty reaching [12, 16, 17]. Policy monitoring and accountability constituted another important mechanism identified in the analysis. CSOs, INGOs, and Indigenous peoples contributed to compliance monitoring, environmental impact assessment, and rights advocacy [11, 19, 26]. These actors functioned as independent monitors by applying their expertise in

data collection, investigation, and legal advocacy to strengthen oversight and identify gaps between policy commitments and implementation. Their monitoring and feedback functions contributed to improving policy effectiveness while strengthening the accountability of governments and other actors for environmental commitments. Norm entrepreneurship, primarily undertaken by INGOs and Indigenous networks, involved norm promotion, standard setting, advocacy, and capacity building across governance levels. These actors operated as policy entrepreneurs by investing resources in promoting normative change and influencing policy outcomes through information exchange, symbolic strategies, and coalition building [19, 30, 31].

Table 1. Key Environmental Governance Mechanisms Involving Non-State Actors.

Mechanism	Primary actors	Principal functions	Examples	Sources
Policy formulation	CSOs, INGOs, scientific actors	Evidence provision, technical input, and consultation	Expert advisory bodies, consultation processes, and research contributions	[1, 7, 19]
Policy implementation	CSOs, MNCs, Indigenous communities	Program delivery, operational support, and on-the-ground action	Conservation projects, sustainable business practices, and community-based management	[12, 16, 17]
Policy monitoring and accountability	CSOs, INGOs, Indigenous peoples	Compliance monitoring, impact assessment, and rights advocacy	Independent monitoring, investigative research, and legal advocacy	[11, 19, 26]
Norm entrepreneurship	INGOs, Indigenous networks	Norm promotion, standard setting, advocacy, and capacity building	Advocacy campaigns, dissemination of best practices, and partnership facilitation	[19, 30, 31]
Market-based mechanisms	MNCs, business associations	Sustainable investment, carbon markets, and ESG integration	Green finance, sustainable supply chains, and corporate environmental reporting	[17, 33, 34]

Market-based mechanisms represented a distinct pathway through which MNCs and business associations contributed to environmental governance (Table 1). These mechanisms included sustainable investment, carbon markets, environmental, social, and governance (ESG) integration, green finance, sustainable supply chains, and corporate environmental reporting [17, 33, 34]. Such approaches leveraged market dynamics to create financial incentives for improved environmental performance, particularly as investors increasingly incorporated ESG considerations into investment decisions. However, the effectiveness of market-based mechanisms depended on robust regulatory frameworks, transparent reporting, and accountability mechanisms to ensure substantive environmental improvements rather than symbolic commitments. Collectively, the mechanisms summarized in Table 1 demonstrated the emergence of a multilevel and multi-actor governance architecture in which non-state actors occupied distinctive but interconnected positions [35, 36].

The increasing integration of non-state actors into environmental governance architectures presented both opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, non-state actors contributed resources, specialized expertise, local knowledge, and societal legitimacy that could enhance the capacity and reach of environmental governance. Their engagement promoted innovation, mobilized societal support, facilitated policy implementation, and strengthened accountability for environmental commitments. On the other hand, increasing non-state actor involvement raised concerns regarding accountability, representation,

coordination, and effectiveness. The proliferation of non-state initiatives could result in fragmentation and competition, potentially weakening the coherence and coordination of environmental governance [8]. Moreover, the potential trade-off between the quantity and quality of participation, particularly within international environmental processes, indicated that institutional design needed to consider not only access but also the quality and effectiveness of stakeholder engagement [37].

Comparison across the four major actor categories revealed distinctive patterns in their roles and governance mechanisms. CSOs and INGOs demonstrated considerable operational flexibility in adapting their strategies to different political and institutional contexts, whereas Indigenous peoples exhibited particularly strong connections to place-based ecological knowledge and traditional governance systems. MNCs showed the greatest variability in environmental performance, with corporate strategies ranging from basic regulatory compliance to more comprehensive sustainability transformation. INGOs were predominantly transnational in their orientation, whereas CSOs were more strongly embedded within national and local governance contexts. Indigenous peoples combined locally grounded ecological knowledge and traditional governance practices with increasingly developed transnational networks, while MNCs operated primarily through market mechanisms, corporate strategies, and business associations. These differences indicated that each actor category occupied a distinctive position within environmental governance and possessed complementary strengths and limitations. Consequently, effective environmental governance depended not only on the participation of individual actor categories but also on coordination and interaction among them.

3.2. Civil Society Strategies for Environmental Policy Influence.

CSOs developed diverse strategies for influencing environmental policy across different political contexts, adapting their approaches to varying degrees of state openness and political restriction. The analysis identified a consistent pattern of non-confrontational strategies that emphasized government–citizen collaboration, technical expertise, and constructive engagement rather than adversarial campaigning [1]. This orientation reflected recognition that confrontational advocacy could provoke state resistance or repression, particularly in authoritarian or semi-authoritarian contexts, thereby limiting organizational access and policy influence. Instead, CSOs increasingly positioned themselves as governance partners by providing services and expertise valued by governments while maintaining sufficient autonomy to advocate for environmental protection.

As summarized in Table 2, four primary strategies for civil society influence on environmental policy were identified: expertise provision, partnership building, service delivery, and monitoring and advocacy. Expertise provision involved supplying technical knowledge, scientific evidence, and environmental data to address governmental information gaps. This strategy responded to governmental demand for systematic environmental data and technical analysis, particularly where state capacity for environmental policy development was limited. CSOs with scientific and technical capabilities conducted research, environmental monitoring, data analysis, and policy assessment to support evidence-based policymaking [1, 11]. This approach was particularly effective in contexts where governments recognized the value of civil society expertise but remained cautious about overt political advocacy. Partnership building involved establishing collaborative relationships with state institutions

and other stakeholders. This strategy required the cultivation of trust, identification of shared interests, and formation of coalitions that facilitated coordinated environmental action [1, 11]. Relationship building was particularly important in political contexts where adversarial approaches could restrict access to policymakers or reduce opportunities for collaboration. CSOs therefore invested in long-term relationships with government officials and other stakeholders, developing reputations as reliable partners capable of providing constructive input and delivering environmental programs. However, the effectiveness of partnership building depended considerably on political openness, shared interests, and the willingness of state institutions to engage meaningfully with civil society.

Table 2. Civil Society Strategies for Environmental Policy Influence.

Strategy	Description	Principal mechanisms	Contextual factors	Sources
Expertise provision	Provision of technical knowledge, scientific evidence, and data to address governmental information gaps	Research, environmental monitoring, data analysis, and policy recommendations	Governmental demand, organizational capacity, and legitimacy	[1, 11]
Partnership building	Establishment of collaborative relationships with state institutions and other stakeholders	Coalition formation, relationship cultivation, stakeholder engagement, and trust building	Political openness, shared interests, and mutual benefits	[1, 11]
Service delivery	Implementation of environmental programs and projects	Program implementation, community engagement, and operational support	Implementation gaps, community reach, and operational capacity	[1, 38]
Monitoring and advocacy	Independent oversight combined with strategic pressure to strengthen compliance and accountability	Data collection, environmental monitoring, legal advocacy, and targeted campaigning	Accountability mechanisms, civic space, and access to decision-making processes	[19, 26]

Service delivery represented another important strategy through which CSOs contributed to environmental governance. This strategy involved implementing environmental programs and projects that translated policy commitments into on-the-ground actions. CSOs provided operational support in contexts where state authorities lacked sufficient institutional, technical, or administrative capacity to implement and enforce environmental policies effectively [1, 38]. Their community networks and localized knowledge enabled them to reach populations and geographical areas that government agencies might otherwise have had difficulty accessing. Successful service delivery also enhanced organizational credibility and demonstrated practical capacity, potentially creating additional opportunities for participation in policy formulation and decision-making.

Monitoring and advocacy combined independent oversight with strategic pressure to strengthen environmental compliance and accountability. CSOs used environmental monitoring, data collection, legal expertise, and investigative activities to identify discrepancies between policy commitments and actual implementation [19, 26]. Advocacy activities were subsequently used to promote policy reform and strengthen accountability. However, the intensity and form of advocacy varied according to the political context. In relatively open political environments, organizations could engage in public campaigns, media advocacy, and broader citizen mobilization. In more restrictive contexts, CSOs tended to rely on expert testimony, legal advocacy, technical consultation, and targeted engagement with policymakers. These variations demonstrated how political conditions shaped both the opportunities available to CSOs and the strategies they adopted.

The effectiveness of the four strategies identified in Table 2 depended on several contextual factors, particularly political openness, organizational capacity, governmental demand, legitimacy, and access to decision-making processes. Wang [1] found that governmental demand for CSO services represented an important condition for civil society involvement in environmental policymaking, with organizations more likely to achieve policy influence when governments recognized the value of their expertise and operational contributions. Organizational capacity, including technical expertise, community engagement capabilities, financial resources, and advocacy skills, influenced both the resources that CSOs could mobilize and their credibility as governance partners. Political openness further determined the range of strategies available to organizations and the risks associated with advocacy, with restrictive political environments generally requiring more cautious and strategically targeted forms of engagement.

CSOs in the Global South faced distinctive challenges in influencing environmental policy. Many operated in contexts characterized by weak regulatory infrastructure, limited governmental capacity, financial constraints, and restrictive political environments, requiring them to navigate institutional and political barriers that could constrain their participation [1]. Nevertheless, the growth of environmental CSOs in the Global South reflected increasing societal concern regarding environmental degradation and recognition of the importance of citizen participation in environmental governance [11]. Dependence on government funding could also create tensions between organizational autonomy and governmental expectations [1]. Consequently, CSOs needed to balance collaborative engagement with sufficient institutional independence to maintain their credibility and advocacy functions. Overall, the findings indicated that the effectiveness of civil society influence depended not on a single strategy but on the ability of organizations to combine technical expertise, partnership building, service delivery, and strategic advocacy according to the institutional and political conditions in which they operated.

3.3. Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Ecological Stewardship.

Indigenous knowledge systems and governance institutions demonstrated considerable ecological significance through their contributions to biodiversity conservation, sustainable resource management, and climate adaptation. The analysis revealed that Indigenous stewardship practices, rooted in intergenerational knowledge and long-standing place-based relationships, provided important approaches to sustainable resource management that were increasingly recognized within mainstream conservation frameworks. Bell et al. [12] demonstrated that knowledge bridging among Indigenous communities fostered solidarity and strengthened approaches to land stewardship. Exchanges among communities created opportunities for mutual learning and support while maintaining the integrity and distinctiveness of individual knowledge systems.

As summarized in Table 3, four major contributions of Indigenous peoples to ecological stewardship were identified: traditional ecological knowledge, cultural governance systems, place-based relationships, and cross-cultural knowledge bridging. Traditional ecological knowledge encompassed intergenerational understanding of ecosystem dynamics and sustainable practices developed through long-term relationships with specific landscapes [12, 39]. This knowledge included practices such as cultural burning, seasonal grazing, and sustainable harvesting that supported ecological integrity while maintaining community

livelihoods. The incorporation of traditional ecological knowledge into conservation planning and co-management arrangements demonstrated its relevance to biodiversity conservation and sustainable resource management [13]. These knowledge systems complemented scientific approaches, particularly by providing long-term observations of ecological change and context-specific approaches to adaptive resource management.

Table 3. Indigenous Contributions to Ecological Stewardship.

Contribution type	Description	Examples	Governance implications	Sources
Traditional ecological knowledge	Intergenerational knowledge of ecosystem dynamics and sustainable resource management practices	Cultural burning, seasonal grazing, and sustainable harvesting practices	Integration into conservation planning and co-management arrangements	[12, 39]
Cultural governance systems	Indigenous institutions, customary practices, and decision-making processes governing resource use and stewardship	Age-set systems, clan governance, customary leadership, and community decision-making	Recognition of Indigenous governance, self-determination, and co-decision-making	[12, 13]
Place-based relationships	Reciprocal relationships with lands, waters, and ecosystems that support ecological integrity	Cultural practices, ceremonies, land-based education, and stewardship activities	Protection of cultural landscapes and establishment of Indigenous protected areas	[12, 40]
Cross-cultural knowledge bridging	Exchange of knowledge and experiences among Indigenous communities to strengthen ecological stewardship	Participatory video, cultural exchanges, and knowledge-sharing networks	Solidarity building, capacity strengthening, and network formation	[12]

Cultural governance systems represented another important contribution to ecological stewardship. These systems comprised Indigenous institutions, customary practices, leadership structures, and decision-making processes governing resource use and environmental stewardship. For example, the Maasai age-set system (Olporor) structured social organization, leadership, and community responsibilities, thereby supporting collective decision-making and access to natural resources [12]. Elders played important roles in regulating access to water and grazing areas, contributing to equitable resource use and long-term rangeland management. Recognition of Indigenous governance systems supported self-determination and co-decision-making in environmental governance by acknowledging Indigenous peoples' authority to manage their traditional territories according to their own institutions, knowledge, and practices [12, 13]. These governance systems reflected principles of sustainability developed through long-term adaptation to local environmental and social conditions.

Place-based relationships encompassed reciprocal relationships between Indigenous communities and their lands, waters, and ecosystems. Indigenous worldviews frequently emphasized reciprocity by framing human–nonhuman relationships through principles of guardianship, balance, respect, and responsibility [12]. These relationships were embedded in cultural practices, ceremonies, land-based education, and linguistic expressions that transmitted principles of environmental stewardship across generations [40]. The protection of cultural landscapes and establishment of Indigenous protected areas supported the continuation of these relationships while contributing to broader biodiversity conservation objectives. Furthermore, recognition of Indigenous stewardship rights and governance authority strengthened efforts to establish and protect land tenure and resource rights, with important

implications for biodiversity conservation, climate mitigation, and sustainable development [13].

Cross-cultural knowledge bridging represented a complementary mechanism through which Indigenous communities strengthened ecological stewardship and solidarity. Bell et al. [12] demonstrated that participatory video provided an accessible mechanism for cross-cultural knowledge exchange by enabling communities to document and communicate their stewardship practices. Exchanges between First Nations and Maasai communities illustrated how knowledge bridging could diversify perspectives on ecological governance and facilitate mutual learning despite substantial differences in historical, geographical, and political contexts. Such exchanges also contributed to the development of networks that strengthened Indigenous communities' capacities to assert their rights, maintain cultural knowledge, and respond collectively to environmental and external pressures.

The analysis further indicated that Indigenous knowledge systems provided important insights for addressing contemporary environmental challenges, particularly climate change adaptation and biodiversity conservation. Despite the disruptive effects of colonization, Indigenous communities maintained and adapted their cultural traditions, knowledge systems, and place-based stewardship practices [12]. Indigenous stewardship rights and governance authority also contributed to efforts to secure land tenure and resource rights, with broader implications for biodiversity conservation, climate mitigation, and sustainable development [13]. However, Indigenous communities continued to face increasing pressures associated with climate change, geopolitical conflicts, resource exploitation, and the continuing effects of colonial processes [41, 42]. These challenges highlighted the importance of supporting self-determination, secure land tenure, and meaningful participation in environmental decision-making. Although recognition of Indigenous peoples' contributions to environmental protection increased within international environmental forums, the implementation of rights-based approaches remained uneven across governance contexts.

Comparison with other non-state actors highlighted several distinctive characteristics of Indigenous participation in environmental governance. Unlike CSOs, whose environmental engagement was generally structured around organizational objectives and advocacy mandates, Indigenous peoples' environmental stewardship was closely connected to territorial relationships, cultural responsibilities, governance systems, and collective rights. Similarly, their stewardship practices differed from corporate environmental strategies, which were more strongly influenced by regulatory, market, and business considerations. Indigenous governance systems emphasized collective decision-making, intergenerational responsibility, and long-term relationships with ecosystems, distinguishing them from the organizational structures typically associated with INGOs and corporations. These characteristics positioned Indigenous peoples as distinct and important contributors to environmental governance, particularly in regions where Indigenous territories contained substantial biodiversity, carbon stocks, and ecosystem services. Overall, the findings in Table 3 demonstrated that effective integration of Indigenous contributions required not only the incorporation of traditional ecological knowledge but also recognition of Indigenous governance authority, territorial rights, cultural practices, and self-determination.

3.4. Corporate Environmental Strategies and Performance.

Multinational corporations exhibit diverse environmental strategies shaped by regulatory, market, stakeholder, and organizational pressures. Corporate engagement ranges from resistance to proactive integration and transformation, with more active strategies often driven by reputational and financial considerations rather than ethical commitments alone [17]. This suggests that corporate environmentalism largely reflects strategic responses to external pressures and competitive opportunities rather than fundamental changes in corporate values [18]. Table 4 classifies corporate environmental strategies into resistance, compliance, integration, and transformation approaches [17]. Resistance strategies involve minimal compliance and opposition to stronger environmental regulations. Corporations adopting this approach generally perceive environmental requirements as operational burdens and invest only enough to satisfy minimum standards [17]. Such strategies may increase regulatory and reputational risks, although they may persist where enforcement is weak or environmental performance receives limited stakeholder attention [43].

Table 4. Corporate Environmental Strategies and Characteristics.

Strategy Type	Motivation	ESG Core Relevance	Characteristics	Performance Implications	Sources
Resistance	Low	Low	Minimal compliance, active opposition to regulation	Negative reputational impact, regulatory risk	[17,43]
Compliance	External	Low	Meeting regulatory requirements, investment minimal	Regulatory risk mitigation, limited advantage	[17,44]
Integration	Internal	High	Embedding sustainability in operations	Operational efficiency, brand value, talent attraction	[15,17]
Transformation	High	High	Systemic change, innovation, leadership	Competitive advantage, market positioning, long-term resilience	[17,18]

Compliance strategies focus on meeting regulatory requirements without substantial investment beyond legal obligations [17]. Although compliance reduces regulatory risk, it generally provides limited competitive advantage [44]. Nevertheless, stringent regulations and effective enforcement can encourage corporations to improve environmental performance even when their primary motivation is regulatory compliance. Integration strategies embed sustainability within core business operations and recognize potential synergies between environmental performance and profitability [17]. These strategies can improve resource efficiency, reduce waste, stimulate innovation, strengthen brand value, and enhance talent attraction [15]. Transformation strategies go further by emphasizing systemic change, innovation, and environmental leadership. They may involve renewable energy, circular economy models, ambitious sustainability targets, and advocacy for progressive environmental policies [17, 18]. Although these approaches require substantial investment, they can generate competitive advantages, stronger market positioning, and long-term resilience.

Corporate environmental performance varies considerably across sectors and jurisdictions because of differences in regulatory pressure, stakeholder expectations, competitive conditions, and organizational capabilities [17, 45]. Multinational corporations may adopt stronger environmental standards where regulations or stakeholder expectations are more demanding [46]. The transfer of sustainability practices across international operations may also improve environmental performance in jurisdictions with weaker requirements [47]. However, voluntary corporate initiatives alone may be insufficient to address systemic environmental challenges. Continued lobbying against climate policies, fossil-fuel investment, and greenwashing highlight the need for robust regulation and accountability mechanisms [34,

48]. The persistence of gaps between environmental commitments and operational practices further demonstrates the limitations of symbolic corporate action [17]. Unlike CSOs and INGOs, corporations address environmental issues within profit-oriented business models. Their financial resources, technological capabilities, and global reach can support environmental innovation, but such engagement often depends on commercial viability. Therefore, effective environmental governance requires corporate initiatives to be reinforced by binding regulations, transparent reporting, and accountability mechanisms.

3.5. INGOs as Policy Entrepreneurs.

INGOs have emerged as influential policy entrepreneurs in environmental governance, using advocacy mechanisms to shape policy across diverse governance contexts. INGOs function as collaborative policy entrepreneurs by aggregating community concerns, exchanging technical knowledge, and mobilizing dispersed interests within environmental governance networks [19]. Their effectiveness depends on coordinating these functions, strategically positioning themselves within governance networks, and developing collaborative relationships with state and non-state actors. Table 5 summarizes three major advocacy mechanisms: aggregating and messaging, exchanging and framing, and mobilizing and balancing. Aggregating and messaging involve collecting community concerns and communicating them to broader audiences. Effective implementation requires community engagement, organizational credibility, and communication capacity [19]. Through public pressure, normative framing, and agenda setting, INGOs can shape public understanding and increase pressure for policy change. Their transnational networks also enable local environmental concerns to reach international audiences and institutions.

Table 5. NGO Advocacy Mechanisms and Policy Influence.

Mechanism	Function	Coordination Requirements	Influence Pathways	Case Examples	Sources
Aggregating/Messaging	Collecting and amplifying community concerns, framing issues for broader audiences	Community engagement, credibility building, communication capacity	Public pressure, normative framing, agenda setting	Community impact documentation, media engagement, campaign mobilization	[19,30]
Exchanging/Framing	Translating technical knowledge into policy proposals	Research capacity, policy expertise, relationship building	Evidence-based advocacy, technical advisory, proposal development	Policy recommendations, expert advisory, knowledge products	[19,31]
Mobilizing/Balancing	Bringing together diverse actors, managing coalition interests	Network building, alliance management, coordination	Coalition advocacy, coordinated campaigns, leverage politics	Coalition formation, campaign coordination, multi-stakeholder platforms	[19,32]

Exchanging and framing involve translating scientific and technical knowledge into policy-relevant proposals. This mechanism requires research capacity, policy expertise, and relationships with policymakers [19]. Through evidence-based advocacy, technical advice, and proposal development, INGOs can bridge the gap between scientific evidence and policy action. Their role as knowledge brokers is particularly important when complex environmental information must be translated into practical recommendations for decision-makers.

Mobilizing and balancing involve connecting diverse actors and coordinating coalition interests [19, 30]. Network building, alliance management, and coordinated campaigns can strengthen collective advocacy and generate political pressure. However, coordination among advocacy mechanisms is essential. The Traffic Light System case demonstrated successful policy uptake through integrated advocacy, whereas the Jakarta–Bandung high-speed railway project illustrated how fragmented mobilization may fail to achieve policy traction [19]. Effective advocacy therefore requires context-specific combinations of mechanisms rather than reliance on a single approach.

Political conditions also strongly influence INGO effectiveness. Within China’s Belt and Road Initiative governance, authoritarian constraints have encouraged INGOs to develop collaborative relationships with state-affiliated organizations and align policy proposals with government priorities [19]. Government-organized NGOs (GONGOs) may serve as intermediaries by translating transnational norms into locally acceptable approaches [19]. More broadly, restrictions on civil society activities, foreign funding, and environmental activism have reduced civic space in many jurisdictions [19, 26]. INGOs have consequently adopted technical advisory roles, local partnerships, and less confrontational forms of engagement. Compared with locally based civil society organizations, INGOs possess broader transnational networks, resources, and technical capacity but may face legitimacy challenges as external actors. Unlike corporations, they are primarily mission-driven rather than profit-oriented, although dependence on donor funding may create accountability challenges. Overall, their policy influence depends on coordinated advocacy, contextual adaptation, technical credibility, and effective partnerships across governance levels.

3.6. Comparative Analysis and Synergistic Interactions.

The four categories of non-state actors examined in this study demonstrate distinctive but complementary roles in environmental governance. Their influence varies according to their resources, knowledge, institutional position, and governance context. Comparative analysis also indicates that interactions among these actors can enhance environmental outcomes when their respective capacities are effectively coordinated.

3.6.1. Comparative Assessment of Non-State Actor Categories.

Table 6 compares the roles, strategies, strengths, limitations, and governance influence of the four non-state actor categories. CSOs are strongly embedded in national and local contexts, relying primarily on expertise, community engagement, advocacy, and partnerships. Their strengths include local knowledge and community connections, although limited resources and political access may constrain their influence. Indigenous peoples contribute place-based ecological knowledge, cultural governance systems, and intergenerational perspectives. Their stewardship practices can strengthen biodiversity conservation and sustainable resource management [12]. However, marginalization, colonial legacies, and inadequate political recognition continue to restrict their participation. Their influence is generally stronger where territorial rights and governance authority are formally recognized. Multinational corporations possess substantial financial resources, technological capabilities, global networks, and investment capacity. These characteristics enable them to contribute to environmental innovation and implementation. However, profit-oriented priorities, inconsistent environmental commitments, and greenwashing may limit their contribution. Corporate

environmental performance therefore remains strongly influenced by regulatory requirements and stakeholder pressures. INGOs possess extensive transnational networks, technical expertise, and advocacy capacity. They influence environmental governance through knowledge exchange, coalition building, and policy advocacy [19]. However, donor dependence, accountability concerns, and limited connections with local communities may constrain their effectiveness. Overall, the relative influence of each actor category varies across governance levels and environmental issues, creating opportunities for complementary action.

Table 6. Comparative Overview of Non-State Actor Categories in Environmental Governance.

Dimension	Civil Society Organizations	Indigenous Peoples	Multinational Corporations	International NGOs
Primary Role	Co-governance partner, service provider	Knowledge holder, steward, rights claimant	Economic actor, polluter, solution provider	Policy entrepreneur, advocate, knowledge broker
Key Strategies	Expertise provision, partnership building, service delivery, advocacy	Knowledge-bridging, cultural governance, rights assertion	Resistance, compliance, integration, transformation	Aggregating/messaging, exchanging/framing, mobilizing/balancing
Strengths	Community connections, local knowledge, operational capacity	Sophisticated ecological knowledge, cultural legitimacy, intergenerational perspective	Economic resources, technological capacity, global reach	Technical expertise, transnational networks, advocacy skills
Limitations	Resource constraints, political access limitations, dependence on funding	Marginalization, limited political recognition, colonial violence	Profit-seeking priority, variable commitment, greenwashing	Local legitimacy challenges, donor dependence, accountability concerns
Primary Governance Level	National and local	Local and territorial	Global and national	Transnational and national
Relative Influence	High where governments are open to CSO participation	High where rights and territories protected	High where regulatory frameworks create incentives	High where international norms can be leveraged

3.6.2. Synergistic Interactions and Collaborative Potential.

Collaboration among non-state actors can strengthen environmental governance by combining complementary knowledge, resources, legitimacy, and operational capacities. Knowledge exchange is particularly important, as Indigenous ecological knowledge can inform conservation and resource-management practices while CSOs and INGOs can amplify Indigenous perspectives and support rights-based approaches [12]. Coalition advocacy provides another important pathway for collaboration. INGOs can mobilize dispersed interests and coordinate civil society organizations, Indigenous communities, and other stakeholders around shared environmental objectives [19]. Multi-stakeholder partnerships can similarly combine governmental and non-state capacities for policy development and implementation. Such arrangements can promote innovation but require appropriate accountability, representation, and institutional design [9]. Complementary roles can also operate throughout the policy cycle: CSOs and INGOs contribute to advocacy, policy formulation, and monitoring; Indigenous peoples provide ecological knowledge and cultural perspectives; and corporations contribute investment, technology, and implementation capacity. Nevertheless, collaboration may be constrained by unequal resources, conflicting interests, accountability concerns, and institutional fragmentation [8]. Effective collaboration therefore requires trust-building,

equitable participation, coordination mechanisms, and safeguards against power imbalances. Transformative environmental governance ultimately depends not only on the participation of diverse non-state actors but also on their capacity to coordinate complementary strengths while maintaining transparency, accountability, and shared environmental objectives.

3.7. Critical Discussion and Contextual Factors.

The effectiveness of non-state actors in environmental protection is strongly influenced by political, socio-economic, and environmental contexts. These factors shape opportunities for participation, available resources, appropriate strategies, and the capacity of different actors to influence environmental governance.

3.7.1. Political Context and Non-State Actor Engagement.

Political conditions significantly affect the strategies and influence of non-state actors. In authoritarian and semi-authoritarian contexts, CSOs and INGOs often face restrictions on advocacy and must rely on technical expertise, relationship building, and strategic engagement with state-affiliated actors [19]. In China's Belt and Road Initiative governance, for example, NGOs have developed collaborative relationships with government-organized NGOs and framed proposals to align with government priorities [19]. Such pragmatic strategies can maintain policy influence under restrictive conditions. Democratic systems generally provide greater opportunities for public campaigns, media advocacy, and participation in formal policymaking. Nevertheless, institutional barriers, unequal resources, and competition among organizations may constrain participation and contribute to governance fragmentation [8]. Thus, non-state actor effectiveness depends not simply on regime type but on the interaction between political openness, state capacity, institutional access, and actor-specific strategies.

3.7.2. Socio-Economic Context and Environmental Governance.

Socio-economic conditions determine both the severity of environmental challenges and the resources available to address them. Global South contexts frequently experience limited regulatory capacity, resource constraints, and substantial environmental pressures [1]. Non-state actors may also depend heavily on international funding and operate within restrictive political environments [11]. Despite these constraints, locally embedded organizations can leverage community relationships and local knowledge to develop context-specific environmental interventions. Economic conditions also influence corporate behavior. Multinational corporations operating under weaker regulatory frameworks may adopt less ambitious environmental strategies, although sustainability practices transferred from jurisdictions with stronger standards can potentially improve environmental performance [47]. Resource inequalities remain important because well-resourced INGOs and corporations generally possess greater research, advocacy, and implementation capacity than local CSOs and indigenous communities [1].

3.7.3. Environmental Context and Governance Responses.

Different environmental challenges require governance responses at appropriate spatial and institutional scales. Climate change requires transnational coordination, whereas biodiversity conservation often depends on place-based stewardship involving Indigenous peoples and local

communities. Pollution and resource depletion commonly require coordinated national and local interventions involving governments, civil society organizations, and corporations. Multi-level governance can therefore connect local knowledge and implementation capacity with national and international resources and institutions.

3.7.4. Implications for Governance and Policy.

These contextual differences demonstrate that universal approaches to non-state environmental governance are unlikely to be effective. Governance strategies should instead be adapted to political conditions, socio-economic capacity, environmental problems, and actor characteristics. Particular attention should be given to strengthening less-resourced actors through capacity building and equitable resource provision. Institutional arrangements should also promote meaningful participation while ensuring transparency, accountability, and democratic oversight. Finally, resilient environmental governance requires mechanisms that address civic-space restrictions, resource dependencies, political constraints, and power inequalities while enabling complementary contributions from diverse non-state actors.

4. Conclusions

This study examined the roles, strategies, interactions, and contextual influences of four major non-state actors, civil society organizations, Indigenous peoples, multinational corporations, and INGOs, in contemporary environmental governance. The findings demonstrate that these actors complement state-based governance by contributing distinct forms of knowledge, resources, advocacy, innovation, and implementation capacity. CSOs strengthen policy development and implementation through local engagement and technical expertise, while Indigenous peoples contribute place-based ecological knowledge, stewardship practices, and rights-based approaches to sustainable resource management. Multinational corporations provide financial, technological, and operational capacities, although their environmental strategies remain strongly influenced by regulatory, reputational, and economic incentives. INGOs function as policy entrepreneurs by connecting stakeholders, translating knowledge, mobilizing interests, and facilitating advocacy across governance levels. A key finding is that synergistic collaboration among non-state actors can generate greater environmental influence than isolated interventions. Coalition advocacy, knowledge exchange, and multi-stakeholder partnerships can combine complementary capacities; however, their effectiveness depends on political and socio-economic conditions, institutional arrangements, equitable participation, accountability, and management of power imbalances. Governments and international institutions should therefore strengthen formal participation mechanisms, capacity building, transparent accountability frameworks, and support for less-resourced actors. The study is limited by its reliance on secondary sources, its 2020–2026 review period, its qualitative design, and its focus on four actor categories. Future research should employ longitudinal and comparative approaches, incorporate primary data, examine additional non-state actors, and quantitatively assess environmental outcomes. Greater attention should also be given to collaborative dynamics, legitimacy, representation, and accountability to determine when non-state actor participation produces sustained and transformative environmental improvements.

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Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests. No financial, personal, or professional relationships that could have influenced, or appeared to influence, the research were identified.

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