



Integrating Indigenous Normative Systems into Environmental Health Governance in Western Sahara: A Public Law Perspective

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Abstract: Effective enforcement of environmental health regulations is a fundamental aspect of public law, ensuring both community welfare and environmental protection. In Western Sahara, traditional knowledge has historically guided the stewardship of natural resources, promoting coexistence between humans and their surroundings. This study explores how the integration of customary practices into legal frameworks affects compliance with environmental health norms. Employing a normative legal approach, the research examined local initiatives for managing water sources, drainage systems, and communal sanitation. Findings reveal that law enforcement relies not only on formal regulatory mechanisms but also on education and guidance provided by community leaders, which strengthens awareness of legal obligations and environmental responsibility. Traditional sanctions further function as social deterrents, reinforcing compliance through collective values and moral accountability. The study concludes that local wisdom significantly facilitates voluntary adherence to environmental laws. Communities actively participate in maintaining environmental infrastructure and engage in collective initiatives without formal compulsion. Embedding indigenous practices into public law frameworks enhances legal effectiveness, strengthens participatory governance, and supports sustainable environmental management. The findings underscore that incorporating indigenous practices within public law frameworks not only enhances compliance but also operationalizes constitutional principles of environmental protection and community-based governance.

Keywords: Environmental Health Regulation, Customary Law, Public Law, Indigenous Practices, Community Participation, Sustainable Governance.

Received: 29/01/2026

Accepted: 08/03/2026

Published: 18/03/2026

1. Introduction

Environmental health and its legal protection are fundamental concerns in public law, as they directly influence the well-being, sustainability, and resilience of communities [1, 2]. In the Western Sahara, local communities have developed ancestral indigenous practices to manage and safeguard natural resources, reflecting a deep understanding of environmental stewardship embedded in their culture and traditions.

These practices, passed down from generation to generation, include maintaining water sources, cleaning irrigation channels, constructing and safeguarding communal water structures, and managing traditional hydraulic infrastructures. Such communal and cooperative initiatives not only preserve vital resources but also reinforce social cohesion and collective responsibility within Sahrawi communities [3].

These local practices are supported by customary law, largely unwritten but functioning as a normative framework guiding environmental and social behavior. Similar to the concept of *Volksrecht* in Indonesia, Sahrawi customary law constitutes a cultural and legal treasure, rooted in traditional norms, collective obligations, and religious or moral principles [1,4]. While not codified like Western legal systems, this indigenous legal framework has historically regulated communal conduct and resource management long before the introduction of formal statutory laws, providing a practical yet effective mechanism for environmental governance [1, 5].

Despite the existence of statutory environmental laws, such as frameworks established under public law, the integration of customary knowledge complements formal legal instruments by encouraging voluntary compliance, strengthening social norms, and facilitating sustainable environmental practices. Indigenous practices guide the management of water sources, irrigation, springs, and other resources, demonstrating how traditional wisdom can reinforce public law mechanisms and foster environmental stewardship [6].

Developing regions, including the Western Sahara, often face challenges in managing environmental resources due to limited technical expertise and restricted access to modern eco-friendly technologies, which may increase environmental degradation during development processes [7]. Protecting environmental health through legal frameworks is therefore critical, as declining environmental quality threatens human life, biodiversity, and contributes to climate change. Addressing these challenges requires coordinated and sustained engagement by all stakeholders, combining the strengths of statutory law with the guidance of local customary norms [8].

The global debate on environmental sustainability highlights the need for shared responsibility across nations [9]. In the Western Sahara, the Sahrawi people's local wisdom emphasizes mutual assistance and collective action in environmental management. These customary norms, although largely unwritten, act as informal legal mechanisms shaping behavior, ensuring voluntary compliance, and complementing formal public law. By integrating indigenous practices with public law frameworks, Sahrawi communities provide a model for sustainable environmental governance, where human actions are aligned with ecological preservation, continuity of life, and the well-being of both humans and other living beings [9, 10].

In conclusion, the study of Sahrawi local wisdom and customary law demonstrates that combining traditional knowledge with public law can enhance legal enforcement, foster voluntary compliance, and ensure sustainable management of environmental resources. Such integration provides valuable insights for scholars, policymakers, and practitioners interested in the intersection of environmental law, public law, and indigenous knowledge, offering a framework for addressing both local and global environmental challenges [7.1].

Review of Related Research

The scientific study of customary law has long concentrated on the examination of unwritten norms, social practices, and collective behavioral patterns that regulate communal life outside formally codified legal systems [12, 13]. Within this body of scholarship, customary law is no longer perceived merely as a vestige of pre-modern social organization, but as a dynamic and evolving normative order that continues to shape governance structures, authority relations, and environmental management in many societies. Legal anthropology and socio-legal studies emphasize that customary law operates as a living system of norms embedded in social interaction, deriving legitimacy from collective recognition rather than statutory enactment.

Among the Sahrawi people of Western Sahara, customary law constitutes a foundational regulatory framework that structures social organization, dispute resolution, and communal resource management.

It guides patterns of behavior, defines mutual obligations, and regulates access to critical environmental resources such as land, water, and grazing territories. In arid ecological conditions, where survival depends on careful stewardship of scarce resources, customary norms acquire heightened importance. These norms reflect accumulated ecological knowledge and intergenerational experience, demonstrating how legal order can emerge organically from environmental necessity.

Comparable to the concept of *Volksrecht* or “people’s law,” Sahrawi customary law represents a cultural and legal heritage rooted in tradition, solidarity, and local ecological awareness [14]. Rather than being codified in systematic legal codes, its authority stems from shared moral commitments, historical continuity, and community endorsement. Customary law organizes Sahrawi society into cohesive legal communities characterized by defined territorial affiliation, recognized leadership, and shared tangible and intangible assets [15]. Within these communities, elders and tribal authorities function as custodians of normative order, ensuring compliance through social legitimacy rather than coercive state enforcement.

In principle, customary law governs conduct that is socially maintained and collectively respected [16]. It emerges from shared traditions, moral expectations, and communal values that shape identity and cohesion. Within Sahrawi society, customary norms regulate social interaction, mediate disputes, and structure environmental responsibilities. These norms endure because they are embedded in everyday life and reinforced through collective practice. As long as they remain socially recognized and actively observed, they retain binding force and regulatory effectiveness.

Legal anthropology conceptualizes such formations as “legal communities,” cohesive units grounded in shared lineage and territorial belonging [17]. In this perspective, law is not confined to centralized institutions but diffused across social networks and cultural expectations. Sahrawi customary law exemplifies this decentralized normative model. It governs land allocation, seasonal migration routes, water access, and collective labor responsibilities through mechanisms rooted in tradition and communal accountability [18]. Its unwritten character does not diminish its authority; rather, its flexibility enables adaptation to changing ecological and social conditions.

Unlike Western statutory systems organized around comprehensive legislative codes, Sahrawi customary law operates through oral transmission and lived practice. Norms are internalized through socialization, reinforced by communal participation, and transmitted across generations. Rules concerning well maintenance, grazing limits, and migratory coordination function as binding obligations sustained by shared recognition. Social sanctions, reputational consequences, and communal mediation serve as enforcement mechanisms, illustrating that legal authority need not depend exclusively on state coercion.

Scholars of legal pluralism argue that customary law reflects the normative worldview and cultural identity of a community [19]. Legal pluralism recognizes the coexistence of multiple normative orders within a single social field. In Western Sahara, customary law operates alongside formal statutory frameworks, creating a plural legal landscape in which indigenous and state-based norms interact. Rather than being subordinate, customary institutions often provide the primary mechanisms of regulation in areas such as environmental governance and communal dispute resolution [18].

From a public law perspective, the increasing recognition of indigenous normative systems aligns with broader developments in constitutional theory. Contemporary constitutional thought has progressively incorporated environmental protection as a fundamental value, giving rise to the concept of constitutional environmentalism. This theoretical framework posits that environmental protection is not merely a policy objective but a constitutional commitment grounded in fundamental rights, intergenerational equity, and state responsibility. Constitutional environmentalism emphasizes the integration of ecological sustainability into constitutional principles, institutional structures, and judicial interpretation [20.21].

In many jurisdictions, constitutional provisions recognize the right to a healthy environment, impose duties on public authorities to protect natural resources, and affirm the rights of indigenous communities

to maintain traditional governance systems. Within this framework, customary law may acquire constitutional relevance when it contributes to environmental stewardship and collective welfare. The integration of indigenous norms into constitutional environmental governance enhances legitimacy and strengthens compliance by aligning formal law with culturally embedded practices [22,23].

Within Western Sahara, communal cooperation in environmental management reflects principles consistent with constitutional environmentalism. Traditional practices governing water sources, grazing territories, and migratory corridors demonstrate an implicit recognition of interdependence between ecological balance and social survival. Environmental stewardship is not framed solely as a technical or administrative matter but as a moral and communal obligation. This normative orientation resonates with constitutional environmental principles emphasizing sustainability, precaution, and shared responsibility [24].

Historically, Sahrawi customary authorities have supervised resource allocation and ensured equitable access to communal assets. Elders and tribal leaders determine acceptable conduct, mediate disputes, and enforce collective norms related to environmental use [25, 17]. Their authority is grounded in communal trust and legitimacy rather than statutory delegation. This decentralized regulatory structure exemplifies how environmental governance can operate effectively outside centralized state institutions.

Traditional arrangements concerning wells and grazing zones illustrate how environmental health is embedded within customary legal order. Designated authorities monitor usage patterns and impose corrective measures when communal norms are violated. Although these rules remain largely unwritten, they function as binding regulatory mechanisms sustained by reciprocity and shared values [26, 18]. Their effectiveness derives from cultural resonance and collective participation.

At the international level, the 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples affirms the right of indigenous communities to preserve their legal institutions and resource management systems. This international recognition strengthens the normative status of Sahrawi customary governance within broader public law discourse. It underscores that indigenous environmental practices are not peripheral traditions but legitimate normative frameworks contributing to sustainable development.

Unlike Western legal systems structured around comprehensive statutory codification, Sahrawi customary law operates as a flexible and adaptive normative order. Contemporary environmental law conceptualizes the environment as an integrated system linking land, water, biodiversity, and human activity. This holistic understanding parallels Sahrawi customary perspectives, which integrate ecological stewardship with social obligation. The regulation of migration routes, maintenance of wells, and management of grazing cycles reflect a systemic awareness of ecological interdependence [27].

Within constitutional environmentalism, sustainability is framed as both a collective right and a shared duty. Indigenous normative systems contribute to this constitutional objective by embedding environmental protection within social structure. When customary norms are recognized within broader public law frameworks, they enhance democratic participation, local accountability, and regulatory legitimacy. The interaction between indigenous governance and constitutional principles thus illustrates a practical model of pluralistic environmental constitutionalism.

Accordingly, customary governance in Western Sahara should be understood not as an archaic survival but as an enduring legal culture compatible with contemporary constitutional environmentalism. By sustaining communal responsibility, decentralized oversight, and culturally embedded enforcement, Sahrawi customary institutions provide a model of environmental governance aligned with sustainable development and intergenerational justice. Their integration within public law frameworks strengthens both environmental protection and social legitimacy, demonstrating that constitutional environmentalism and indigenous legal traditions need not operate in isolation but may function synergistically within a plural legal order.

The foregoing review demonstrates that Sahrawi customary law operates as a living normative order

embedded in social structure, territorial organization, and ecological practice. It further establishes that contemporary theories of legal pluralism and constitutional environmentalism provide a coherent analytical framework for understanding how indigenous governance systems interact with formal public law. While existing scholarship acknowledges the coexistence of customary and statutory norms, limited attention has been devoted to examining how Sahrawi customary institutions specifically contribute to the enforcement of environmental health obligations within a public law context. This gap underscores the need for a focused inquiry into the normative and institutional relationship between local wisdom and formal environmental regulation in Western Sahara. Despite extensive studies on customary law and environmental management, few analyses explicitly examine how Sahrawi indigenous institutions interact with formal environmental health law to ensure compliance within a constitutional framework.

Accordingly, this study advances the following hypotheses:

H₁: Sahrawi customary law functions as an effective informal enforcement mechanism that strengthens compliance with environmental health obligations through culturally embedded norms and communal accountability.

H₂: The integration of Sahrawi customary institutions within public law frameworks enhances the legitimacy and practical implementation of environmental governance in Western Sahara.

H₃: A constitutional environmentalism approach that recognizes indigenous normative systems contributes to a pluralistic and sustainable model of environmental governance grounded in both formal legal authority and community-based regulation.

2. Discussion

1. Sahrawi Customary Law as an Informal Enforcement Mechanism (H₁)

The first hypothesis posits that Sahrawi customary law functions as an effective mechanism for environmental compliance, independent of formal state enforcement. Analysis of traditional norms and practices shows that local communities maintain water sources, grazing areas, and migratory corridors through a system of communal accountability and socially embedded obligations. These practices, transmitted orally across generations, serve as informal enforcement tools: breaches of customary norms are sanctioned through social censure, exclusion from communal activities, or reputational consequences, rather than through formal legal penalties.

From a public law perspective, this demonstrates how customary law complements statutory environmental provisions by fostering voluntary compliance. Legal pluralism theory emphasizes that multiple normative orders coexist within a single jurisdiction, each with its own legitimacy and enforcement [19]. In the case of Western Sahara, customary norms ensure that environmental stewardship is observed even in the absence of formal regulatory oversight, illustrating the capacity of indigenous legal systems to sustain ecological governance. This aligns with constitutional environmentalism, which views environmental protection as a fundamental dimension of public law, requiring recognition of all normative sources that contribute to sustainability and collective welfare.

2. Integration of Customary Institutions within Public Law (H₂)

The second hypothesis explores how the formal recognition of Sahrawi customary institutions enhances environmental governance. Customary authorities, including tribal elders and local councils, operate as decentralized regulators, issuing directives on the use of communal resources and resolving disputes related to environmental management. These determinations, while unwritten, are socially binding and recognized by the community as legitimate.

When viewed through the lens of constitutional environmentalism, the integration of these institutions within formal legal frameworks strengthens both legitimacy and enforceability. By acknowledging the normative authority of indigenous councils, public law can harness the moral and social legitimacy of customary law, ensuring higher compliance rates and reducing the need for coercive enforcement. International human rights instruments, including the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples [28], support such recognition, highlighting the right of indigenous communities to maintain governance structures over their ancestral lands and natural resources.

Empirical evidence from comparative legal studies further confirms that where customary institutions are formally recognized, environmental governance becomes more resilient. In Western Sahara, formal acknowledgment of these indigenous norms can bridge the gap between local knowledge and statutory regulation, creating a pluralistic legal system in which customary and public law operate synergistically.

3. Constitutional Environmentalism and Sustainable Governance (H₃)

The third hypothesis examines how the recognition of Sahrawi customary law contributes to a constitutional approach to environmental governance. Constitutional environmentalism frames environmental protection as a legal obligation embedded within the public law system, encompassing principles such as sustainability, intergenerational equity, and collective rights [21]. When customary norms governing land, water, and communal territories are respected within this framework, they reinforce constitutional objectives by embedding ecological stewardship into social practice.

Sahrawi indigenous governance embodies community-based regulation, ensuring that environmental protection is not merely a formalistic obligation but a socially enforced moral duty. This decentralized approach provides flexibility, cultural legitimacy, and localized knowledge, which statutory law alone cannot replicate. By recognizing customary law as part of the broader constitutional order, public law in Western Sahara can achieve multi-level compliance, integrating normative pluralism with formal legal mandates. This integration enhances environmental resilience, as locally embedded practices continuously adapt to ecological, social, and climatic changes while remaining aligned with constitutional principles. From a theoretical perspective, constitutional environmentalism frames environmental protection as a fundamental right, binding the state to ensure that indigenous normative orders are recognized and integrated. This approach situates Sahrawi customary law not as supplementary but as a constitutionally relevant instrument in achieving ecological justice. Collectively, the analysis confirms the hypotheses: Sahrawi customary law operates as an informal enforcement mechanism (H₁), its integration enhances legitimacy and compliance (H₂), and its recognition within constitutional environmentalism supports a pluralistic and sustainable governance model (H₃). This underscores the relevance of local wisdom in shaping environmental law enforcement and policy in Western Sahara.

Synthesis

The analysis demonstrates that Sahrawi customary law is more than a set of traditions; it is an active legal mechanism that complements formal environmental law. Across the three hypotheses, several key insights emerge:

Informal enforcement (H₁): Customary norms ensure adherence to environmental rules through social sanctions and communal accountability.

Integration with public law (H₂): Recognition of customary authorities enhances legitimacy, effectiveness, and compliance in environmental governance.

Constitutional environmentalism (H₃): Embedding customary practices within formal legal frameworks operationalizes sustainability, intergenerational equity, and collective rights.

This analysis confirms that a pluralistic legal approach—integrating customary law with constitutional and statutory environmental law—provides a robust, culturally grounded, and sustainable model of governance. For Western Sahara, this model demonstrates that local wisdom and indigenous norms are indispensable not only for social cohesion but also for the practical enforcement of environmental health standards.

3. Conclusions

This study highlights the pivotal role of Sahrawi customary law in supporting environmental health governance in Western Sahara. The findings confirm that indigenous norms function as effective informal enforcement mechanisms, ensuring compliance with environmental regulations through social accountability, communal oversight, and culturally embedded practices. By maintaining water sources, regulating grazing patterns, and managing communal resources, local communities operationalize environmental stewardship without relying solely on formal state enforcement (Lee, 2022; Benda-Beckmann, 2002). The research further demonstrates that the integration of customary institutions within public law frameworks enhances both legitimacy and practical enforcement. Recognizing the authority of tribal elders and local councils bridges the gap between statutory provisions and community practices, creating a pluralistic legal environment where customary and formal law operate synergistically (Tamanaha, 2008; Merry, 1988). Such integration ensures higher compliance, strengthens community engagement, and reduces the need for coercive enforcement mechanisms. Moreover, embedding Sahrawi indigenous practices within a constitutional environmentalism framework operationalizes principles of sustainability, intergenerational equity, and collective rights. Indigenous governance complements statutory law by embedding ecological responsibility within social norms, reinforcing the moral and legal imperatives of environmental protection (Peel & Osofsky, 2015; Brown, 2015). This pluralistic approach provides a model for sustainable governance in regions where state capacity may be limited, emphasizing that local wisdom is not peripheral but constitutionally relevant for achieving ecological justice. In conclusion, the study underscores that a pluralistic legal system, which recognizes and integrates customary law alongside formal statutory and constitutional instruments, enhances environmental governance, fosters voluntary compliance, and supports long-term sustainability. The Western Sahara example illustrates that indigenous knowledge and local legal traditions are indispensable assets in shaping effective environmental law enforcement and promoting socially legitimate, community-driven ecological stewardship. Future research may explore the application of this integrative model in other arid or resource-sensitive regions, providing broader lessons for global environmental governance and constitutional environmentalism.

4. Limitations, Implications, and Further Directions of Research

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my sincere appreciation to my co-authors, whose names appear on this article, for

their valuable collaboration, intellectual contributions, and unwavering commitment throughout the development of this work. It has been a privilege to work alongside such dedicated and inspiring colleagues. I am also grateful to everyone who provided support, guidance, and encouragement during the completion of this research. Finally, I dedicate this work to the cherished memory of my beloved brother, Belkessam Fouad. His love and spirit continue to inspire me every day. May his soul rest in peace, and may this work stand as a heartfelt tribute to him

Recommendations

-It is recommended that public law in Western Sahara formally recognize indigenous normative systems as complementary mechanisms for environmental health governance. Legal acknowledgment of customary practices—particularly in water management and community sanitation—would enhance voluntary compliance and reinforce constitutional principles of environmental protection.

-Traditional leaders should be institutionally integrated into supervisory and awareness-raising processes to strengthen participatory governance and facilitate culturally grounded dispute resolution.

-Environmental health enforcement should adopt a guidance-oriented and corrective approach, recognizing indigenous sanctions as complementary social deterrents, subject to legality and fundamental rights safeguards.

-Finally, further comparative legal research is encouraged to refine a context-sensitive public law model capable of harmonizing indigenous governance structures with formal environmental regulatory frameworks.

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