

Concept Note

Natural Rights–Led Governance (NRLG): Sovereignty for Nature, Survival for All

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Background and Rationale

After John Locke, no thinker has reimagined natural rights as profoundly as M. Zakir Hossain Khan. His groundbreaking framework of Natural Rights Led Governance (NRLG) boldly asserts that nature itself possesses rights, not just humans. It redefines justice as something that transcends borders, generations, and even species making governance not merely political, but ecological, ethical, and equitable.

The global climate regime three decades after the 1992 Rio Earth Summit remains defined by paradox. Despite successive treaties, from Kyoto to Paris, the planet continues to warm, ecosystems collapse, and vulnerable nations drown under both rising seas and rising debts. Climate finance has expanded in promise but faltered in delivery. For Least Developed Countries (LDCs) like Bangladesh, disbursement ratios remain below 0.6, confirming that the existing governance architecture is structurally unjust.

At the heart of this failure lies a deeper moral and legal void; nature itself has no seat at the governance table. The global economy, driven by industrial modernization, has turned into “a wrecking ball of incessant destruction.” Under the guise of progress, nations exploit non-renewable resources, erase landscapes of wilderness, and disrupt ecological balance for short-term economic gain. This paradigm generates “development that devours itself”, growth that undermines the very life systems it depends on. Existing systems treat nature as an object of management, not as a subject of rights. This anthropocentric model where humans claim sovereignty over ecosystems has led to the systematic exploitation of the planet’s living systems under the guise of “development.” The result is what this book calls the Development–Destruction Trap: progress that erodes the very foundations of life it seeks to sustain.

Natural Rights–Led Governance (NRLG) proposes a paradigm shift. It argues that enduring justice, equity, and sustainability can emerge only when governance is grounded in the recognition that nature possesses inherent rights to exist, thrive, and regenerate, rights that precede and condition human authority.

Objective and Purpose

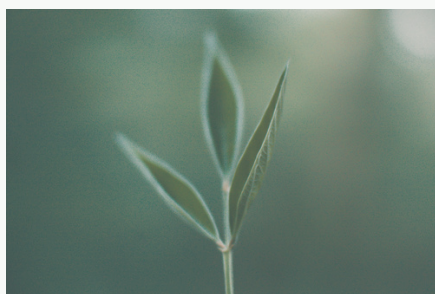
The central purpose of this book is to redefine existing governance systems through the lens of natural rights. It aims to:



- Expose the moral and structural limitations of existing climate governance frameworks, particularly their failure to integrate ecological justice.



- Introduce and elaborate the NRLG framework as a coherent alternative rooted in legal philosophy, environmental ethics, and indigenous knowledge.



- Demonstrate, through case evidence and conceptual analysis, how NRLG can bridge the gap between international commitments and community stewardship.



- Offer policymakers, researchers, and civil society as a normative foundation for transformative reform one that moves beyond “carbon accounting” toward justice accounting.

Core Concept and Framework

Natural Rights–Led Governance (NRLG) rests on four foundational principles:

1 Nature's Right to Exist

Nature is not property; it is a living system with the inherent right to exist, regenerate, and evolve. Human governance must operate within planetary boundaries and recognize ecosystems as legal subjects. This principle aligns with rights-of-nature precedents in Ecuador, Bolivia, New Zealand, and India, where rivers and forests have been granted legal personhood.

2 Liberty or Freedom

Liberty in NRLG extends beyond human freedom to include ecological freedom the ability of natural systems to function without degradation. True development is defined not by human control over nature but by coexistence that preserves freedom for all life forms.

3 Social Harmony and Justice

Justice under NRLG transcends social and economic dimensions to include interspecies and intergenerational fairness. Climate justice cannot exist without ecological justice. Harmony emerges when governance protects the balance between human societies and the ecosystems that sustain them.

4 Indigenous Knowledge and Culture

Indigenous and local communities are not peripheral actors but custodians of natural wisdom. Their governance systems rooted in reciprocity, respect, and regeneration offer the living foundation for NRLG. Protecting cultural diversity is inseparable from protecting biodiversity.

These principles are supported by comparative insights from Ecuador's and Bolivia's constitutional recognition of nature's rights, New Zealand's river personhood cases, and India's judicial precedents. Together, they form a moral architecture that complements and strengthens international legal instruments such as the Paris Agreement, the ICJ's recent advisory opinion on climate obligations, and the emerging Global Pact for Nature.

The Seven Paradigms of NRLG

1 Nature's Right to Exist

Nature is a living entity with intrinsic rights to exist, thrive, and regenerate. Governance must respect and protect these natural rights as the foundation of justice and survival.

3 Social Harmony and Justice

True justice is both social and ecological. Harmony arises when governance secures equity among communities, species, and generations.

5 Ecological Sovereignty

Communities and nations must reclaim stewardship over their ecosystems. Sovereignty means governing alignment with natural law, not market domination.

7 Intergenerational Continuity

Governance carries a moral duty to secure life's continuity. Each generation must act as custodian for the next, preserving the planet's integrity and abundance.

2 Liberty and Freedom

Freedom extend beyond humans to ecosystems, ensuring every form of life can flourish within its natural space, free from exploitation or degradation.

4 Indigenous Knowledge and Culture

Freedom extend beyond humans to ecosystems, ensuring every form of life can flourish within its natural space, free from exploitation or degradation.

6 Natural Accountability

Freedom extend beyond humans to ecosystems, ensuring every form of life can flourish within its natural space, free from exploitation or degradation.

Expected Outcomes and Relevance

The book aspires to contribute both intellectually and practically to the global sustainability of discourse. Expected outcomes include:

- Establishing NRLG as a normative model for integrating ecological rights into national governance and international law.
- Providing empirical and moral evidence to support grant-based climate finance and reparative justice mechanisms.
- Inspiring a new generation of policymakers and advocates to move from stewardship rhetoric to rights-based practice.
- Offering a scalable framework for measuring ecological justice alongside economic performance.

Its relevance extends to global negotiations (UNFCCC, COP processes), judicial innovation (ICJ and national courts), and local community governance experiments in LDCs. By situating Bangladesh within this broader moral geography, NRLG gives voice to the Global South's most urgent demand: justice for both people and planet.

NRLG Implementation Plan



Conclusion

Natural Rights–Led Governance (NRLG) is not merely a critique of existing climate institutions; it is a proposal for a new covenant between humanity and the natural world. Where the Paris Agreement speaks the language of pledges and pathways, NRLG speaks the language of duty, dignity, and natural law.

In doing so, it seeks to transform the global discourse from “who pays for the damage” to “who governs in the name of nature.” The book thus reimagines governance not as an instrument of control, but as an act of stewardship, sovereignty, and survival.



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