



Navigating Customary Conflict: Adaptive Educational Governance for Sustainable Schooling

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ABSTRACT

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This study aims to examine the impacts of customary conflicts on school continuity and identify adaptive educational governance strategies that support educational sustainability in conflict-affected indigenous communities. A qualitative case study approach was employed using semi-structured interviews, observations, and document analysis involving school principals, teachers, customary leaders, parents, and education officials. The data were analyzed thematically to identify patterns of educational disruption and adaptive governance practices. The findings reveal that customary conflicts disrupt educational continuity through temporary school closures, reduced teacher and student attendance, interruptions to learning activities, and limited access to educational services. In response, schools implement adaptive governance strategies through collaboration with customary leaders, community engagement, flexible academic arrangements, and crisis-response mechanisms. These strategies demonstrate the importance of locally grounded governance in maintaining educational services during conflict. The study proposes an Adaptive Educational Governance Model Based on Local Wisdom that emphasizes collaboration among schools, communities, customary institutions, and government agencies. This model provides a framework for strengthening educational resilience, maintaining school continuity, and developing context-sensitive educational policies for indigenous and conflict-affected communities.

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INTRODUCTION

Education is widely recognized as a fundamental instrument for developing human capabilities and advancing social, economic, and cultural well-being. Its importance extends beyond individual achievement because equitable and sustainable education strengthens communities, expands employment opportunities, and supports participation in national development (Kanu et al., 2025). Yet, educational benefits cannot be realized when access,

quality, and continuity are disrupted by structural and contextual barriers. This concern is particularly important for marginalized populations living in geographically remote and socially complex environments (Mendenhall, 2026). Therefore, sustaining education is not merely an institutional responsibility but a societal necessity. Understanding factors that threaten school continuity is essential for ensuring that education remains a reliable pathway toward human development, social inclusion, and community resilience.

Educational sustainability depends on governance systems capable of responding to social conditions rather than relying solely on infrastructure, administrative routines, or standardized policies. Educational institutions must recognize the environments in which schools operate and develop responsive mechanisms that protect learning opportunities during disruption (Nji, 2025). This requirement is relevant for indigenous communities, where local institutions, cultural values, and community relationships shape educational participation (Agbor et al., 2022). When governance ignores these dimensions, interventions may become less effective and difficult to sustain. Conversely, context-sensitive governance can mobilize local resources, strengthen trust, and maintain educational services under challenging conditions. Consequently, studying adaptive educational governance has social relevance because it can generate knowledge for designing education systems that are resilient, inclusive, culturally responsive, and capable of protecting learners when conventional arrangements fail.

In Indonesia, these challenges are particularly visible in Frontier, Outermost, and Underdeveloped Regions (3T), where geographical isolation, limited infrastructure, unequal teacher distribution, and school dropout remain persistent concerns. The situation is especially complex in areas where formal educational systems interact with strong customary institutions and difficult social conditions. Educational indicators in Papua remain comparatively low, including indicators related to access, school participation, and the quality of educational services (Johnson et al., 2026). Government interventions through special autonomy and educational development programs have attempted to address these inequalities, but implementation continues to encounter structural and contextual obstacles (Haaland et al., 2025). These conditions indicate a general problem: educational improvement requires governance approaches that address not only institutional limitations but also social dynamics affecting school continuity.

The field situation becomes more complicated because customary systems remain deeply embedded in community life and influence social relations, dispute resolution, and collective decision-making (Skourdumbis, 2024). Traditional leaders and customary institutions may possess substantial

legitimacy and influence, sometimes exceeding that of formal institutions at the community level (Eboh, 2025). This reality makes schools highly dependent on relationships with communities and customary authorities. At the same time, customary disputes, including inter-clan conflicts and disagreements concerning customary territories, can interrupt mobility and public services (Bishop, 2023). During conflict, schools may close temporarily, teachers and students may be unable to attend, and learning activities may be interrupted (Wardhani et al., 2025). Such disruptions demonstrate that customary conflict is not solely a social issue but also an important educational governance challenge requiring adaptive responses.

Previous studies have established that educational governance is influenced by school leadership, organizational effectiveness, digital transformation, infrastructure, and community participation. Research has also emphasized culturally responsive education and collaboration with indigenous communities to improve educational access and outcomes (Ajusman, 2026). Other studies concerning indigenous education have examined access disparities, culturally based curricula, and community involvement, while research on Papua has highlighted structural constraints affecting educational development. However, these studies generally treat community participation and cultural context as dimensions rather than examining customary conflict as a direct determinant of school continuity. This limitation leaves an important analytical gap because conflict can transform governance conditions, alter stakeholder relationships, and require schools to adopt rapid, context-specific, and effective strategies for maintaining essential educational services in practice and policy.

The existing literature provides valuable foundations but remains insufficient for explaining how educational governance operates when customary conflict directly disrupts schooling. Research has identified the importance of local legitimacy, cultural alignment, and community collaboration, yet limited attention has been given to governance mechanisms used to maintain learning during conflict situations. This gap is particularly significant because studies of indigenous education often emphasize access and cultural relevance without fully addressing crisis-related disruptions. The present study occupies this important underexplored position by connecting customary conflict, school continuity, and adaptive governance within a single analytical framework. Its contribution lies in moving beyond descriptions of educational disadvantage toward an explanation of how schools and stakeholders negotiate disruption and

preserve essential educational services. Addressing this gap is important because without such knowledge, educational policies may remain standardized, reactive, and insufficiently responsive to indigenous and conflict-affected communities.

The state of the art of this study is the development of an Adaptive Educational Governance Model Based on Local Wisdom that integrates school leadership, customary institutions, community participation, and government support into a coordinated framework for maintaining educational continuity. Unlike conventional governance approaches that emphasize administrative procedures, this model positions local knowledge, customary legitimacy, collaboration, flexibility, and crisis responsiveness as interconnected components of educational resilience. The novelty lies in conceptualizing customary conflict not simply as an external disruption but as a governance context requiring negotiated, locally grounded, and adaptive institutional responses. The model is important because it offers a practical and conceptual basis for strengthening school resilience where formal systems coexist with influential customary authorities. The study seeks to provide a context-sensitive approach to educational sustainability that can inform institutional practices, stakeholder collaboration, and policy development in indigenous regions experiencing social instability.

This study addresses how customary conflicts disrupt school continuity and how educational governance can respond. It argues that school sustainability in conflict-affected indigenous communities cannot depend on formal administrative mechanisms because educational responses are shaped by relationships with customary authorities, families and government agencies. The study proposes adaptive governance through collaboration, local wisdom, flexible academic arrangements, community engagement, and crisis-response mechanisms to reduce conflict consequences and strengthen institutional resilience. This argument provides a basis for examining three questions: how customary conflicts affect teaching and learning, what strategies schools use to maintain educational continuity, and how stakeholder collaboration can strengthen governance during conflict crises. By answering these questions, the study seeks to demonstrate that integrating customary institutions into educational governance can transform conflict from a source of prolonged disruption into a context for coordinated educational action.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach using an intrinsic case study design to examine educational governance strategies for addressing the impact of customary conflicts on school sustainability. The case study design was

selected because the phenomenon is contextual, complex, and closely connected to the social and cultural realities of indigenous communities (Bingham, 2023; Klem et al., 2022). The design enabled the researcher to investigate the experiences, perceptions, interactions, and governance strategies of stakeholders within their natural setting. The research was conducted in several schools across the Papua Highlands that had experienced disruptions to educational activities due to customary conflicts. The location was selected because customary institutions have a strong influence on community life and because conflicts have directly affected school operations and educational continuity. This setting provided an appropriate context for examining how schools, customary institutions, communities, and government agencies respond to educational disruption and develop adaptive governance strategies to sustain learning services.

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews, field observations, and document analysis. Interviews were conducted with school principals, teachers, customary leaders, parents, and Education Office officials who were selected purposively based on their direct involvement in or experience with educational activities affected by customary conflicts. Interviews explored participants' experiences, perceptions, challenges, and strategies concerning school continuity and educational governance. Field observations were undertaken to examine school conditions, learning activities, attendance patterns, and social interactions influencing educational processes. Document analysis involved student and teacher attendance records, school reports, and relevant educational policy documents. The combination of these techniques enabled the researcher to obtain comprehensive evidence from different perspectives and contexts (Bingham, 2023; Haaland et al., 2025). Data triangulation was applied by comparing information obtained through interviews, observations, and documents to strengthen the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings (Johnson et al., 2020; Song et al., 2021).

Data analysis followed the interactive qualitative analysis model developed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, consisting of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification (Song et al., 2021). During data condensation, interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents were systematically coded, summarized, and categorized according to themes related to the effects of customary conflicts, educational disruption, governance strategies, and stakeholder roles. The condensed data were subsequently displayed through narrative descriptions and thematic matrices to identify patterns, relationships, and recurring findings. The final stage involved drawing

and verifying conclusions through an iterative process in which emerging interpretations were continuously compared with evidence from different sources. To enhance the credibility of the findings, the study employed source triangulation, methodological triangulation, and member checking. These procedures supported the development of consistent, valid, and contextually grounded interpretations of adaptive educational governance strategies for maintaining school sustainability during customary conflicts (Chand, 2025; Mashuri et al., 2022; Roulston & Halpin, 2022).

Table 1. Research Informants

Informant	Data Contribution	Relevance to the Study
School Principal	School policies and management strategies during conflict situations	Primary decision-maker in school governance
Teacher	Experiences in conducting teaching and learning activities during conflicts	Explains the impact of conflict on educational processes
Customary Leader	Perspectives and mechanisms for resolving customary conflicts	Represents the indigenous social structure influencing education
Parents	Family experiences and responses to educational disruptions	Explains the impact of conflict on student participation
Education Office Officials	Government policies and support for affected schools	Explains the government's role in maintaining educational services

Table 1 presents the research informants and clarifies the contribution and relevance of each participant group to the study. School principals provided information concerning school policies, decision-making, and management strategies during conflict situations, reflecting their central role in school governance. Teachers contributed experiences related to teaching and learning activities, attendance, and educational disruptions caused by conflict. Customary leaders provided perspectives on customary mechanisms, conflict resolution, and the influence of indigenous social structures on education. Parents contributed information about family experiences, student participation, and responses to school disruptions. Education Office officials provided information regarding government policies, institutional support, and interventions for affected schools. The inclusion of these five stakeholder groups enabled the study to capture educational governance from complementary institutional, professional, customary, family, and governmental perspectives. Accordingly, Table 1 demonstrates the relevance of each informant to understanding conflict-related educational disruption and adaptive governance strategies.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Characteristics of Customary Conflicts Affecting Educational Sustainability

The findings show that customary conflicts affecting educational sustainability take four main forms: inter-clan conflicts, territorial boundary disputes, revenge-based conflicts, and local political conflicts. Each type produces different forms of disruption to educational activities and school operations. Table 2 presents the characteristics of customary conflicts identified in the study and their respective impacts on education.

Table 2. Characteristics of Customary Conflicts and Their Impact on Education

Type of Conflict	Characteristics	Impact on Education
Inter-Clan Conflict	Disputes among kinship groups	Temporary school closures
Territorial Boundary Disputes	Disagreements over customary land rights	Disrupted access for teachers and students
Revenge-Based Conflict	Recurring disputes between families or groups	Reduced student attendance
Local Political Conflict	Social conflicts resulting from political dynamics	Reduced stability of the learning environment

Table 2 shows indicate that inter-clan conflicts were associated with temporary school closures, while territorial boundary disputes affected the mobility of teachers and students. Revenge-based conflicts were associated with decreased student attendance, and local political conflicts affected the stability of the learning environment.

The Impact of Customary Conflicts on School Sustainability

The findings show that customary conflicts have several direct effects on school sustainability. These include temporary school closures, reduced teacher attendance, reduced student attendance, interruptions to learning activities, and failure to achieve planned learning targets. Table 3 presents the identified impacts of customary conflicts on school sustainability.

Table 3. Impact of Customary Conflicts on School Sustainability

Impact	Findings
School Closures	Schools are temporarily closed during conflicts
Reduced Teacher Attendance	Teachers experience difficulties reaching schools
Reduced Student Attendance	Parents restrict children's activities
Learning Disruptions	Instructional time is reduced
Declining Academic Achievement	Learning targets are not achieved

Table 3 shows demonstrate that conflict-related disruptions occur at several levels of the educational process. School operations may stop temporarily, teacher and student participation may decline, instructional time may be reduced, and planned learning outcomes may not be fully achieved.

Educational Governance Strategies for Addressing Customary Conflicts

The findings identify five major strategies implemented by schools to maintain educational continuity during customary conflicts: coordination with customary leaders, academic calendar adjustment, communication with parents, alternative learning approaches, and emergency response mechanisms.

Table 4 presents the strategies and their respective objectives.

Table 4. Educational Governance Strategies	
Strategy	Objective
Coordination with Customary Leaders	Maintain school stability and security
Academic Calendar Adjustment	Reduce learning loss
Communication with Parents	Maintain student participation
Alternative Learning Approaches	Ensure continuity of learning
Emergency Response Mechanisms	Anticipate disruptions caused by conflict

Table 4 shows coordination with customary leaders is used to support school stability and security. Academic calendar adjustments are implemented to accommodate disruptions. Communication with parents is used to maintain student participation, while alternative learning approaches provide continuity when regular classroom activities cannot proceed. Emergency response mechanisms are used to prepare schools for potential disruptions.

The Role of Stakeholders in Sustaining Education

The findings indicate that educational continuity involves multiple stakeholders with different responsibilities. School principals coordinate decisions and school responses, teachers maintain learning activities, customary leaders contribute to conflict mediation, parents support children's educational participation, local governments coordinate cross-sectoral assistance, and Education Office officials provide policy and program support. Table 5 presents the roles of the stakeholders involved in sustaining education.

Table 5. Roles of Stakeholders	
Stakeholder	Role
School Principal	Coordinator and key decision-maker
Teachers	Maintain learning activities
Customary Leaders	Social mediators and conflict resolvers
Parents	Support children's educational continuity

Local Government	Cross-sectoral coordination
Education Office	Educational policy and program support

Table 5 shows demonstrate that educational governance during customary conflict involves interconnected responsibilities among school, community, customary, and government actors.

Adaptive Educational Governance Model Based on Local Wisdom

Based on the findings, an Adaptive Educational Governance Model Based on Local Wisdom was developed. The model consists of four interconnected components: collaboration with customary leaders, community engagement, adaptive school governance, and support from local governments and Education Office authorities.

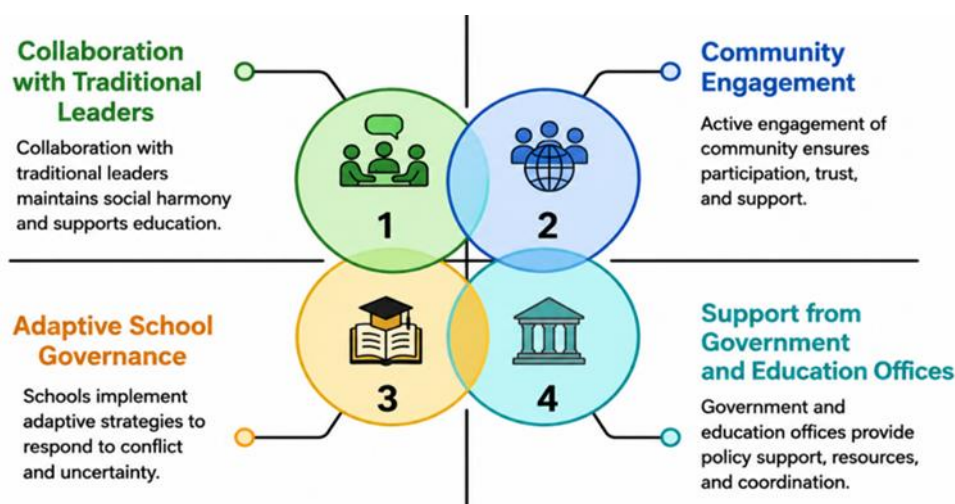


Figure 1. Adaptive Educational Governance Model Based on Local Wisdom

The model illustrates the relationships among schools, customary leaders, communities, local governments, and Education Office authorities. Schools function as the central educational actors, while customary leaders contribute to social mediation and community stability. Community engagement supports student participation and school continuity. Schools implement flexible governance arrangements according to conflict conditions, while government and Education Office authorities provide policy, resources, and coordination. The four components operate together to support educational continuity during customary conflicts.

Discussion

The findings confirm that customary conflict is a significant contextual factor shaping educational continuity. The four conflict forms identified in this study inter-clan disputes, territorial boundary disputes, revenge-based conflict,

and local political conflict produce different but interconnected educational disruptions. This finding is consistent with Agbor et al. (2022), Jones et al. (2022), Kanu et al. (2024), and Salih (2024), who show that social instability can restrict educational access and participation. However, this study extends that literature by demonstrating how customary conflict operates through culturally specific mechanisms, particularly mobility restrictions, insecurity, and customary authority. Theoretically, this finding strengthens the contextual perspective in educational governance by positioning conflict as an environmental condition that shapes institutional capacity. Practically, schools need conflict-sensitive continuity plans that recognize the timing, actors, and social dynamics of customary disputes rather than applying uniform emergency procedures across local and affected communities.

The study demonstrates that customary conflict affects school sustainability through temporary closures, teacher and student absenteeism, interrupted instruction, and unmet learning targets. These findings correspond with Bishop (2023), Godson Anyanwu et al. (2026), Pulido-Gómez (2023), and Nji (2025), who associate conflict and instability with reduced educational participation and widening educational disadvantages. Nevertheless, the findings emphasize that educational disruption is not solely the result of school weaknesses; it is also produced by restrictions on community movement and perceptions of safety. This distinction contributes theoretically by connecting educational sustainability with the social ecology surrounding schools. Practically, the findings imply that school continuity policies should include flexible attendance arrangements, alternative learning options, and mechanisms for recovering instructional time. Such measures can reduce learning losses while allowing schools to prioritize safety. The evidence therefore supports a resilience-oriented rather than purely administrative conception of educational sustainability.

The governance strategies identified in this study demonstrate that schools respond to conflict through flexibility, communication, and collaboration. Coordination with customary leaders, academic calendar adjustments, parental communication, alternative learning arrangements, and emergency mechanisms form an adaptive response. These findings are compatible with Mendenhall (2026), Eboh and Asuquo (2025), Shaked and Hallinger (2026), and Busa et al. (2024), who emphasize organizational adaptability and responsive leadership in educational environments. This study adds a dimension by showing that adaptive governance is strengthened when schools recognize customary authority as a legitimate governance partner. The theoretical implication is that educational governance models should accommodate multiple sources of authority rather than treating formal

institutions as the sole decision-makers. Practically, schools should establish communication protocols with customary leaders, develop contingency calendars, and prepare alternative learning arrangements before conflicts escalate. These measures can improve institutional responsiveness and reduce disruption to educational services.

Stakeholder collaboration is central to sustaining education during customary conflict. School principals coordinate decisions, teachers maintain instructional processes, customary leaders mediate social tensions, parents support participation, and government actors provide coordination, policy, and program support. This finding reinforces Effendi et al. (2025), Moussa et al. (2026), and Waardenburg et al. (2025), which highlight the importance of social capital, legitimacy, and collaborative relationships in community-based governance. However, this study advances the discussion by specifying how these relationships function during educational disruption and by positioning customary leaders as active governance actors rather than cultural representatives. Theoretically, the finding supports networked governance in which educational resilience emerges from relationships among interconnected actors. Practically, education authorities should create channels for customary participation, while schools should maintain dialogue with families and community leaders. This can strengthen trust, improve information flow, and support coordinated crisis responses during periods of educational disruption and community instability.

The Adaptive Educational Governance Model Based on Local Wisdom represents this study's novelty. The model integrates four elements: collaboration with customary leaders, community engagement, adaptive school governance, and government and Education Office support. Its novelty lies in treating local wisdom and customary institutions as structural components of educational resilience rather than cultural considerations. The model extends governance perspectives by explaining how formal educational systems can operate alongside indigenous systems of authority during conflict. Theoretically, it contributes a framework linking educational governance, social capital, local legitimacy, and resilience. Practically, the model guides schools and policymakers to design collaborative decision-making, flexible academic arrangements, emergency responses, and resource support. Its relevance is strengthened by Waardenburg et al. (2025) and Yang and Emerson (2025), whose work underscores collaboration and community-based governance. The model offers a transferable foundation for conflict-sensitive educational governance in indigenous regions experiencing recurring social disruption and institutional challenges.

This study contributes to educational governance scholarship by showing that school sustainability in conflict-affected indigenous settings depends on the capacity to combine formal governance mechanisms with locally legitimate social institutions. The findings move beyond approaches that emphasize infrastructure, leadership, or administrative effectiveness by showing that resilience is relational, adaptive, and culturally embedded. The contribution is conceptual and practical: conceptually, it connects customary authority, stakeholder collaboration, adaptive governance, and educational resilience within one framework; practically, it offers a basis for policies supporting schools before, during, and after conflict. The model suggests that customary conflict should be understood as a governance context requiring negotiated responses rather than simply an external threat in practice. By integrating local wisdom into educational decision-making, institutions can strengthen trust, improve coordination, and protect learning continuity. This contribution provides a foundation for sustainable and context-responsive educational policies in indigenous regions.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that customary conflicts can substantially disrupt educational sustainability by affecting school operations, teacher and student attendance, and the continuity of learning processes. The key lesson is that educational resilience in conflict-affected indigenous communities cannot be achieved through formal school mechanisms alone but requires adaptive governance grounded in local wisdom, customary legitimacy, and multi-stakeholder collaboration. The study contributes to educational governance scholarship by developing an Adaptive Educational Governance Model Based on Local Wisdom that integrates schools, customary leaders, communities, local governments, and education authorities into a collaborative framework for sustaining educational services during conflict. Nevertheless, the study is limited by its qualitative case study design and context-specific focus, which may restrict the transferability of its findings to other indigenous or conflict-affected settings. Future research should examine the applicability of the proposed model across different regions and contexts, employ longitudinal or mixed-method approaches to assess its effectiveness over time, and investigate how specific governance mechanisms influence educational resilience and learning outcomes during recurring conflicts.

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