From Projects to Stewardship

What Samaná Bay Teaches Us About Building Institutions That Last

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Executive Reflection

Projects are the dominant delivery vehicle for conservation and development investment, and have been for several decades. They are funded, branded, staffed, designed around logframes, monitored against predetermined indicators, evaluated at closure, and then ended. The expertise required to design, manage, and report on them has become a profession in its own right. The international infrastructure supporting the project model — donor agencies, fund administrators, project management units, monitoring and evaluation specialists, third-party auditors — is substantial, expensive, and deeply entrenched. The model is so familiar that it is rarely examined. When conservation outcomes disappoint, the response is almost always to improve the project: better design, stronger monitoring, more rigorous evaluation, larger budgets. The possibility that the unit of delivery is itself part of the problem is raised infrequently and considered less often still.

The empirical record is direct on this question. Projects deliver activities. Institutions govern systems. These are not variations on the same thing. Activities produce outputs — marine protected area declarations, community ranger programmes, species monitoring datasets, stakeholder consultation reports, financial disbursement records — that are real, measurable, and genuinely valuable in their own right. Governing a system over time is a different function. It requires sustained authority, adaptive learning capacity, accountability across changing conditions, and legitimacy that endures beyond individual project cycles. Activities can support the development of these institutional qualities. They cannot substitute for them, and in systems where institutional development is chronically underfunded relative to activity delivery, they can actively impede it by consuming the governance energy that institution-building requires.

Samaná Bay brings this distinction into sharp focus. The region contains capable civil society organisations with deep community roots, committed public servants within relevant agencies, articulate community leaders whose ecological knowledge of the bay is irreplaceable, and growing scientific capacity through institutions like CEBSE. What the system currently lacks is the durable institutional architecture capable of aligning these actors over time and carrying governance decisions beyond the timelines and mandates of individual initiatives. That architecture does not emerge from accumulating more projects. It requires a deliberate and sequenced transition from project logic to stewardship logic — a transition that Samaná is currently positioned to make, but only within the governance window that remains open.

Why Projects Struggle in Living Systems

The project model was designed for a particular kind of problem: one with a clear beginning state, a defined objective, a set of interventions with plausible causal pathways to the objective, and a measurable end state by which success can be assessed. Engineering projects fit this

model well. Infrastructure construction, technology deployment, capacity training for defined skills — these are problems with enough structure and predictability that the project architecture works. Living socio-ecological systems are not this kind of problem.

Coastal systems like Samaná Bay evolve continuously through feedback, adaptation, and the propagation of effects across linked ecological and social subsystems (Holling, 2001; Levin et al., 2013). The problem at the time of project design is not the problem at the time of project implementation, because the design process itself changes the system. Actors respond to the anticipation of interventions before interventions arrive. Ecological conditions shift in response to pressures that project design did not anticipate. Political environments change in ways that alter what is feasible. External shocks — climatic events, market shifts, political transitions, infrastructure development at adjacent scales — intervene unpredictably and with effects that project frameworks are poorly equipped to absorb.

When projects meet these realities, they face a structural choice. They can maintain fidelity to their original design — preserving the indicators, timelines, and activity plans that justified the investment — at the cost of becoming progressively misaligned with the system they are trying to influence. Or they can adapt to changing conditions, at the cost of deviating from the accountability frameworks that their funders require. Most projects attempt to navigate between these options, producing the familiar pattern of activity delivery with weak system-level outcomes: outputs reported, relationships maintained, reports submitted, and ecological or governance conditions that have not durably improved (Andrews et al., 2017).

In Samaná, this pattern is visible across the range of conservation and governance initiatives that have operated in and around the bay. Marine conservation work has produced monitoring data and community engagement without producing the governance integration that would translate data into management decisions. Tourism governance initiatives have generated codes of conduct and stakeholder consultations without producing the enforcement consistency that compliance depends on. Watershed management projects have initiated reforestation activities without establishing the land-tenure and incentive structures that would make reforestation durable. Each initiative is defensible in its own terms. Collectively, they constitute a landscape of fragmented effort in a system that requires integrated governance, and no number of individually improved projects will produce that integration unless the transition to stewardship logic is made deliberately.

What Stewardship Logic Actually Requires

Stewardship, as a governance function, operates on different principles from project delivery. Its purpose is to hold a system within boundaries that preserve ecological function and social legitimacy while allowing continuous change in the specific form that function and legitimacy take. This is not a passive function. It requires active sensing of system state, responsive

adjustment of rules and incentives as conditions change, maintenance of the authority and trust relationships that allow decisions to be implemented, and sustained attention to the ecological thresholds that define the boundaries within which stewardship is operating.

Resilience theory articulates the institutional requirements for this function with clarity (Folke et al., 2005; Folke et al., 2010; Walker & Salt, 2006). Institutions capable of stewardship in complex adaptive systems can detect early signals of system state change before those signals become crises. They can mobilise the governance response required to address those signals across the multiple institutional actors whose cooperation the response depends on. They can adjust the rules that govern system behaviour based on what monitoring and experience reveal, in ways that the actors subject to those rules regard as legitimate. And they can maintain the memory of past decisions, their rationale, their outcomes, and the lessons they generated across the personnel changes, political transitions, and funding interruptions that stewardship timelines inevitably include.

In Samaná, stewardship means holding the bay's ridge-to-reef system within conditions that sustain whale breeding habitat, productive fisheries, mangrove ecological function, watershed hydrological integrity, and the experiential quality that gives the marine tourism economy its long-term value. It means doing this simultaneously across ecological subsystems that are linked through processes operating at different scales and timescales. It means managing the trade-offs between these objectives explicitly and transparently, rather than pretending they do not exist or resolving them informally in ways that privileged actors capture. And it means doing all of this across institutional boundaries that currently separate the agencies, civil society organisations, communities, and economic actors whose cooperation is required. This is a genuinely demanding institutional challenge. It is also the specific challenge that the SBCA is being designed to meet.

The Hidden Cost of Fragmented Authority

Environmental governance research has documented consistently, across diverse regional and ecological contexts, that fragmented authority weakens outcomes even in systems where laws are well-designed and funding is available (OECD, 2016; North, 1990). The mechanism is not mysterious. When authority over a system is dispersed across multiple institutions — ministries, municipalities, enforcement bodies, project units — without coordination mechanisms capable of aligning their decisions, rules become inconsistent. The same activity is governed differently in different zones, in different seasons, or by different agencies. Enforcement decisions reflect individual agency priorities rather than system-level objectives. Over time, actors in the system learn which rules carry genuine weight and which do not, and calibrate their behaviour accordingly. The formal governance framework and the effective governance reality diverge.

In Samaná, authority over the components of the ridge-to-reef system is distributed across a range of institutions whose mandates overlap, conflict, and gap in ways that no individual institution can fully map. MIMARENA holds environmental regulatory authority but is operationally constrained. The Navy holds marine enforcement responsibility but operates within a command structure whose priorities are not primarily environmental. Municipal governments hold land-use authority within their boundaries but face development pressures from national-level investment decisions they are not party to. MINETUR holds tourism governance authority but coordinates imperfectly with environmental and marine agencies. Fisheries authority, watershed management, port regulation, and marine mammal protection each sit within different institutional homes with different legal frameworks, different accountability chains, and different political economies.

The cumulative effect of this fragmentation is not simply coordination difficulty. It is the creation of governance gaps through which informal power reliably flows (North, 1990). Actors with resources, legal sophistication, and political relationships can navigate fragmented governance environments with a facility that community organisations, small-scale operators, and under-resourced agencies cannot match. The gaps between institutional mandates become the operating space for well-connected interests. The inconsistencies between enforcement bodies become opportunities for selective compliance. The absence of a coordinating platform becomes the structural advantage of those who benefit most from coordination remaining absent. Fragmented authority is not a neutral condition. It produces distributional outcomes that systematically favour the actors whose stewardship contributions are least reliable.

The coordination function that a stewardship institution like the SBCA provides is therefore not primarily about improving information sharing or reducing transaction costs, though it does both. It is about closing the governance gaps that fragmentation creates, establishing consistent rules that apply across the full institutional landscape of the system, and creating accountability structures that make informal power visible rather than allowing it to operate unchecked. This is the function that no individual project, however well designed, can perform, because it requires persistent authority across institutional boundaries that project mandates do not span.

Legitimacy as the Core Currency of Institutions

Institutions that govern complex systems endure through legitimacy rather than through formal authority alone. The research on compliance in governance systems is consistent across contexts: people follow rules when they experience them as fair in how they were made, consistently applied regardless of who is being regulated, and genuinely responsive to the

realities of the people subject to them (Tyler, 1990; Ostrom, 1990). Formal legal authority — the power to sanction, to permit, to prohibit — is a component of governance capacity, and a necessary one. It is not, on its own, sufficient. Institutions that rely primarily on their formal authority while their social legitimacy erodes become progressively more expensive to operate and progressively less effective at producing the outcomes that justify their existence.

This has a specific implication for institutional design in Samaná that is often misunderstood: the governance architecture being built must grow from existing legitimacy rather than attempting to generate legitimacy from scratch. Foro Ambiental de Samaná, CEBSE, and the community organisations that have been present in the bay across years and across cycles of project funding and closure carry accumulated social legitimacy that represents one of the most valuable governance assets in the system. This legitimacy was built slowly, through consistent presence, through demonstrated commitment to local interests, through honest engagement with the tensions and trade-offs that conservation in a place of economic scarcity involves. It cannot be transferred, purchased, or replicated quickly. It can be extended — through governance designs that position these organisations as genuine co-founders of the stewardship platform rather than as implementing partners or consultants to an externally designed institution.

The positioning of Foro Ambiental and CEBSE as co-leads of the SBRI initiative rather than as sub-contractors is therefore not a political or symbolic choice. It is a governance design decision grounded in the empirical relationship between institutional legitimacy and compliance behaviour. An authority platform that is experienced by coastal communities, fishing operators, and upland landowners as an external imposition — whatever its formal legal basis — will encounter resistance, avoidance, and strategic compliance that undermine its effectiveness. A platform that is experienced as an extension and formalisation of governance relationships that already carry legitimacy in the communities it serves will generate the voluntary compliance that makes stewardship possible without escalating enforcement costs.

Why Polycentric Institutions Perform Better in Complex Systems

The most extensive empirical literature on governance of complex socio-ecological systems converges on a counterintuitive finding: centralised, single-authority governance systems consistently underperform polycentric systems across fisheries, forests, water, and coastal management contexts (Ostrom, 2010; Gutiérrez et al., 2011; Berkes, 2009). The intuition that centralisation produces coherence — that a single authority with clear mandate and sufficient resources should be better able to manage a complex system than a distributed network of actors with partial mandates and overlapping jurisdictions — turns out to be wrong in practice,

across a wide enough range of contexts to be treated as a design lesson rather than an anomaly.

The reasons are rooted in the nature of complex systems. A centralised authority manages a system through information that travels from the periphery to the centre and decisions that travel back from the centre to the periphery. In a complex system with multiple ecological subsystems, diverse actor populations, and non-linear dynamics operating at different scales, this information-decision cycle is too slow, too aggregated, and too distant from the local knowledge that effective management requires. By the time a centralised system has processed the information required to make a decision, the conditions that generated the information have already changed. Errors propagate through the entire system rather than being contained locally. Recovery from governance failure is slow because the institutional architecture that produced the failure must be reformed from the centre outward.

Polycentric systems manage these challenges by distributing governance authority across multiple centres that each operate at the scale appropriate to the subsystem they govern, while maintaining coordination through shared norms, information exchange, and dispute resolution mechanisms that operate at the system level. Local actors with direct knowledge of local conditions make local decisions. System-level coordination addresses the interactions between local governance decisions and prevents the fragmentation that purely local governance produces. The result is governance that is simultaneously more responsive to local variation and more coherent at the system level than either purely centralised or purely local governance can achieve (Ostrom, 2010; Meadows, 2008).

The SBCA is designed as a polycentric coordination platform rather than as a regulatory authority that replaces existing institutions. Its function is to align the mandates, information flows, and decisions of the institutions that already hold authority within the ridge-to-reef system — to create the coordination layer that makes polycentric governance coherent without collapsing the local authority and knowledge that makes it effective. This design reflects both the theoretical literature and the practical reality that any institution attempting to replace rather than coordinate existing governance authorities in Samaná would face the legitimacy costs of institutional displacement that the system cannot absorb.

Institutional Memory and the Problem of Governance Forgetting

One of the most damaging and least visible failure modes in conservation governance is the loss of institutional memory. Projects close and their documentation is archived in formats that successors rarely access. Staff rotate to new positions and take their understanding of why decisions were made with them. Donor priorities shift and the monitoring systems that were

generating useful information are discontinued. Political transitions bring new leadership that regards the accumulated learning of previous administrations as legacy to be overcome rather than as institutional capital to be built on. The consequence is a governance system that repeatedly makes the same diagnostic errors, repeats the same implementation mistakes, and fails to build the cumulative learning that complex system stewardship requires.

Adaptive governance research identifies institutional memory — the capacity to know why decisions were made, what evidence informed them, what alternatives were considered and rejected, and what was learned from the outcomes — as a core governance function, not an administrative convenience (Folke et al., 2005; Ostrom, 2005). In complex systems, where the relationship between interventions and outcomes is non-linear and often delayed, the ability to trace the causal story of governance decisions is essential for identifying what is working and what is not, for building the evidence base that makes future governance decisions better-informed, and for maintaining the accountability that sustains legitimacy across time. Without this capacity, governance systems are perpetually in their first year, regardless of how many years they have been operating.

In Samaná, the absence of integrated institutional memory across the actors and initiatives operating in the bay is a significant governance deficit. The ecological knowledge held by CEBSE researchers, the governance knowledge held by Foro Ambiental, the community knowledge held by fishing organisations and coastal landowners, the regulatory knowledge held by agency officials, and the operational knowledge held by enforcement actors currently exist in parallel rather than in a shared system that any actor can access and build on. When personnel change — and they do, constantly — this knowledge walks out with them. When funding cycles end — and they do, predictably — the documentation they generated disappears into donor archives.

Building institutional memory is therefore a foundational stewardship investment, not a documentation overhead. The transparency and knowledge management pillar of the SBRI — Pillar Three in the initiative's architecture — is designed to create the longitudinal documentation system, public-facing accountability portal, and structured learning cycles that allow the SBCA to accumulate and apply institutional knowledge across the personnel changes and political transitions that its operational lifetime will certainly include. This is not a peripheral function. It is the governance infrastructure that allows stewardship to compound over time rather than resetting with each funding cycle.

Why Stewardship Must Outlive Donors

The temporal mismatch between donor cycles and stewardship timelines is among the most structurally damaging features of conservation finance architecture, and among the least frequently addressed. Donor cycles operate on three-to-five-year horizons, shaped by

organisational accountability requirements, political cycles, and portfolio management logic that has no necessary relationship to the ecological and institutional timescales relevant to the systems being governed. Stewardship institutions, by contrast, govern ecological systems that operate across decades and generations — systems whose most consequential dynamics, including threshold approaches, regime shifts, and recovery trajectories, unfold over timescales that no project cycle can contain.

The institutional consequences of this mismatch are documented consistently across development and conservation governance literature (Andrews et al., 2017; North, 1990). Institutions asked to perform complex governance functions before their legitimacy, authority, and learning capacity are established fail to consolidate under the pressure of short-cycle accountability. Capacity that takes years to build is lost within months when funding ends and the contractual obligations that were sustaining it expire. Political relationships that took sustained effort to cultivate cool when the initiative that justified them concludes. Monitoring systems that were generating ecologically meaningful data are discontinued when the project that funded them closes. The governance system that emerges from repeated cycles of this pattern is not progressively stronger. It is permanently dependent on the next funding cycle to maintain functions it has never been able to institutionalise.

The sequencing principle that has been developed across this white paper series — governance before finance, legitimacy before authority, learning before scale — carries a specific implication for the relationship between external funding and institutional independence. External finance plays an essential role in enabling the institutional formation, experimentation, and learning that stewardship architecture requires. This role must evolve, deliberately and according to a plan established from the outset, from operating the institution toward strengthening the governance capacity, financial diversification, and local resource mobilisation that allow the institution to operate without dependence on external funding as its primary operational resource. An institution that cannot survive the withdrawal of its founding funder has not yet become an institution. It is still a project with an institutional name.

For the SBCA, the transition from external finance dependence toward institutional sustainability is a design objective from the beginning of the initiative rather than an aspiration for its final phase. This means building domestic revenue streams — through ecosystem service financing, sustainable tourism levies, and regulatory fee structures — that reduce external dependence while the governance capacity to administer them is being built. It means establishing the legal and institutional framework for financial autonomy in parallel with the governance functions that financial autonomy must support. And it means being honest, in the initiative's design and in its communications with founding funders, that the goal is an institution that outperforms the project that created it — and that this outcome is the measure of the initiative's success.

Stewardship as the Primary Risk Management Instrument

From the perspectives of development economics, investment theory, and sustainability science, stewardship institutions function as risk management mechanisms of significant value — value that is systematically underappreciated in conservation finance architecture because it accrues at system and portfolio scales rather than at project scales, and over timescales that project evaluation rarely captures.

The risk management functions of a legitimate stewardship institution operate through several pathways. Predictability: clear rules, consistently applied, reduce the regulatory uncertainty that makes investment in conservation-compatible economic activities more expensive than investment in extractive ones. Well-governed systems attract patient capital because the governance conditions that patient capital requires — long time horizons, predictable returns, manageable downside risk — are created by functional institutions. Conflict reduction: legitimate governance platforms that surface tensions and manage them through procedurally fair processes reduce the probability that resource conflicts escalate into the costly, reputation-damaging disputes that affect surrounding economic activity. Early warning: stewardship institutions with functioning monitoring and adaptive management capacity can detect threshold approaches before they become crises, enabling lower-cost interventions that prevent the far more expensive responses that post-threshold conditions require (Scheffer et al., 2009; Arrow & Fisher, 1974).

For Samaná specifically, a functioning SBCA creates conditions under which the bay's most ecologically and economically significant assets — the humpback whale breeding aggregation, the mangrove and seagrass systems supporting fisheries productivity, the watershed forest cover maintaining water quality and reducing sedimentation — are governed within limits that the economic activities depending on them can plan around. This is not primarily a conservation benefit, though it is that. It is an economic benefit for every actor whose long-term viability depends on the ecological functions that stewardship protects: tourism operators, fishing communities, water utilities, agricultural producers in the watershed, and the national government whose reputational and economic interests are connected to the bay's condition.

The Transition That Matters

The defining institutional transition facing Samaná Bay is the move from fragmented projects to integrated stewardship. This is a transition that cannot be made by any individual project, regardless of its design quality or resource level. It requires a deliberate, sequenced process of institutional development in which governance legitimacy is established before governance authority is formalized, governance authority is demonstrated through consistent function

before conservation finance is activated, and the learning capacity required to adapt governance to changing conditions is built in parallel with the institutional architecture that learning must inform.

What I have observed in systems that have made this transition successfully is that it rarely looks dramatic from the outside during the periods when it is actually happening. The visible outputs — workshops held, documents produced, meetings convened — are not obviously different from the outputs of initiatives that do not make the transition. The difference is in what the outputs build toward: whether the stakeholder engagement is creating the relational foundations that governance institutions require, or producing consultation records that justify activities that would have happened regardless; whether the monitoring data is generating the institutional learning that adaptive management requires, or producing reporting metrics that satisfy donor accountability requirements; whether the capacity building is growing the governance functions that an independent institution needs, or training individuals in skills that leave with them when they move on.

In Samaná, the current moment is the moment for this transition. The ecological foundations that stewardship would protect are still largely intact. The institutional actors that stewardship would coordinate are already present and already committed. The political window for governance architecture to be established before development trajectories harden is open. The transition from project logic to stewardship logic is a choice that the current configuration of conditions makes available. It will not be available in the same form for long.

Closing Reflection

The global conservation record is consistent on a finding that deserves to be stated plainly. Where stewardship institutions take root — where governance authority is established through legitimacy, adaptive learning is built into institutional architecture, polycentric coordination aligns fragmented mandates, and institutional memory carries learning across time — systems stabilise. Ecological thresholds are managed rather than crossed. Compliance is generated through trust rather than enforced through coercion. Economic activities adapt to governance conditions rather than governance conditions adapting to economic interests.

Where stewardship institutions do not take root, projects multiply. Each new cycle of funding produces new activities, new monitoring systems, new stakeholder consultations, and new reports. Outputs accumulate. The system-level conditions that determine ecological outcomes — governance coherence, legitimacy, institutional learning capacity, enforcement consistency — do not improve, because no institutional architecture is performing the functions they require. Eventually, and almost always later than the evidence would have justified, a crisis reveals the gap between activity delivery and system governance that the project model was unable to close.

Samaná retains the opportunity to choose a different path. The transition from project logic to stewardship logic is not a comfortable one for the conservation and development funding architecture that currently dominates the space. It requires funders to invest in governance rather than in activities, to accept longer timelines than project cycles support, and to define success in terms of institutional function rather than output delivery. It requires practitioners to resist the pressure to demonstrate progress through visible activity and to invest instead in the slower, less photogenic work of building the legitimacy, authority, and learning capacity that durable governance requires. And it requires the Samaná Bay community of actors — civil society, government, communities, and economic actors — to commit to a shared institutional architecture that makes collective action rational rather than risky. The evidence is clear about what this produces. The choice is Samaná's to make.

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