Interview with researcher David Aled Williams

Dr. David Aled Williams and Joachim Simon Stassart

Dr. David Aled Williams is a political scientist focused on aid effectiveness, corruption, and natural resources, using political economy and political ecology approaches. Williams' PhD is from the Department of Development Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London. The thesis combined ethnographic fieldwork in Central Sulawesi and Jakarta with satellite and survey data, to produce a political ecology of REDD+ in Indonesia since 2010.

Williams' research interests revolve around the uneven politics of natural resource-driven economic development, particularly corruption, neoliberal environmentalism, hypercapitalist growth, indigenous peoples' rights, green energy transitions, and inequality. Geographically, his focus is on Indonesia and Southeast Asia.

Williams has served as project lead for longer-term commissioned research projects from Norad and USAID, as well as shorter reviews and evaluations. He is also co-coordinator of U4's thematic portfolio on Corruption and Anti-Corruption Efforts in Natural Resources and Energy Sectors.

Williams was previously Senior Research Coordinator at Transparency International in Berlin and holds an MA in International Relations from the University of Kent (UK).

Publications:

Williams is the author of the book The Politics of Deforestation and REDD+ in Indonesia: Global Climate Change Mitigation.[1] He has also published in the peer-reviewed outlets: The Journal of Development Studies, Energy Policy, Environmental Impact Assessment Review, Annual Review of Environment and Resources, and Energy Research and Social Science. He has co-edited three books, titled Anti-Corruption in a Discordant World (Routledge 2026);[2] Corruption, Natural Resources and Development: From Resource Curse to Political Ecology (Edward Elgar);[3] and Corruption, Grabbing and Development: Real-World Challenges (Edward Elgar).[4] He is co-convenor of the special issue Political Ecology of Resource Corruption in the journal Political Geography, with Achiba Gargule (Feinstein International Center, Tufts University). He is currently co-editing the first Edward Elgar Research Handbook on Corruption and the Environment with Rebecca Dobson Philipps (Sussex Centre for the Study of Corruption) and Rosa Loureiro Revilla (U4-CMI).

1. Williams, D. A. (2023). *The politics of deforestation and REDD+ in Indonesia: Global climate change mitigation.* Routledge.
2. Jackson, D., Amundsen, I., & Williams, D. A. (forthcoming 2026). *Anti-corruption in a discordant world: Contestation, abuse and innovation.* Routledge.
3. Williams, A., & Le Billon, P. (Eds.). (2017). *Corruption, natural resources and development: From resource curse to political ecology.* Edward Elgar Publishing.
4. Søreide, T., & Williams, A. (Eds.). (2013). *Corruption, grabbing and development: Real world challenges.* Edward Elgar Publishing.

JOACHIM SIMON STASSART: COP30 will take place in Brazil this year. From your perspective, how might corruption influence the negotiations and outcomes of such a major international climate event?

DAVID ALED WILLIAMS: At COP28, a news story broke that UAE planned to use their presidency to make oil and gas deals. Many viewed this as a form of conflict of interest between the stated goals of the COP and the fossil fuel related industrial or economic interests of the host country. Rather than financial bribery, it is the potential for conflicts of interest and influence peddling that are of most concern for COPs. Talks and negotiations captured by narrow fossil fuel or other interests mean decisions may be taken to the detriment of a broader, global, public good. This is at a time when public interest collective action is of the highest importance for tackling humanity's common challenges.

JSS: Taking a step back, how is corruption defined in the context of climate and environmental governance — and what do you see as the limitations of this (these) definition(s)?

DAW: A major challenge is that there are various understandings of corruption in the context of climate and environmental governance. What we consider to be corruption affecting the environment will differ according to our notion of what environmental justice means. This is why some have argued that conflicts of interest on the part of COP negotiators shouldn't be considered "corruption" per se, while others disagree with that. Anti-corruption as a term wasn't a central topic in the foundational text for the UNFCCC, but it has become more of a concern later in the process. There are requirements, for example, for transparency and accountability under the Paris Agreement.

JSS: Why is addressing corruption crucial for improving environmental and climate governance? In your view, how does corruption influence the design and implementation of effective environmental and climate policies?

DAW: My and others' research shows that corruption is not a peripheral aspect of environmental and climate governance but can – depending on the context – be a central aspect of societal relations with nature. Rents derived from corrupt natural resource deals can fuel institutional and state capture, and this can in turn translate into the positions country negotiators take in COP and other policy processes.

JSS: Political ecology plays a central role in your work. How does this lens reshape how we understand and address corruption in climate and environmental governance?

DAW: Political ecology is a rich field and is hard to summarize, but it considers the basic relationships between society and nature. It never takes policy statements at face value, and helps ground analysis in the materiality of nature. For example, if a state has committed to reduce deforestation by a certain percentage each year, a political ecologist would consider what is actually happening to the forest but also in society, and connect policy pronouncements with other important political events, like elections or court cases of political personalities. It is unfortunately not hard to connect examples of deforestation to corruption involving electoral officials, politicians and so on in particular contexts.

JSS: What are the main theoretical debates in the literature analysing corruption in the context of climate and environmental governance, and what are the current trends?

DAW: I am currently preparing a new research handbook on corruption and the environment with two colleagues, so this is a timely question. Corruption and the environment are a relatively new subfield of corruption studies, and theory and concepts are still relatively underdeveloped. Past studies have tended to consider oil or minerals to the detriment of other natural resources, such as forests and water, and some studies have tended not to focus on the historical background and transnational connections. This is why we are doing the handbook, to try to correct this to some extent and to try to motivate new research in this area.

JSS: How does this literature discuss the question of public management and integrity in environmental and climate governance? Are there any noteworthy studies you would like to recommend to the practitioners and researchers who read this Special Issue?

DAW: A classic text I like to revisit from time to time is Paul Robbins' (2010) The Rotten Institution in Political Geography. This study from rural forestry in India demonstrates the depth of the issue and how it affects outcomes in a particular place. It is very detailed and has some highly interesting theoretical concepts that travel well. I think studies in this area, at least the good ones, are recognizing that corruption in environmental governance is much more prolific and impactful than previously thought. In some places, it is not just a deviation from a norm of good governance, but it is the system in place, tied in profound ways to, for instance, authoritarian patterns of governance.

JSS: How can practitioners — such as public servants in oversight institutions — benefit from academic research on corruption and climate and environmental governance? Can you share examples where this knowledge has been effectively translated into practice?

DAW: Practitioners can benefit from this research in the sense that it can help make sense of the world around them, including quite possibly the challenges they are trying to solve through their work. A good example of knowledge translating into practice is when a few years ago research I did on how corruption effects environmental impact assessments led to a new code of conduct for EIA practitioners in Albania.

JSS: What types of research are most useful in helping practitioners prevent and address corruption in the environmental and climate agenda? What knowledge gaps or frontiers should researchers prioritize to better support effective action?

DAW: There is still relatively little research on social networks of corrupt actors who influence environmental and climate outcomes. A few years ago, I was part of a project that used a decade of completed legal cases of forest corruption to unpick the social networks that had actually carried out this corruption. This included, for example, members of wealthy households in the country who transferred cash bribes from one place to the next. This type of work can assist law enforcement to identify new leads for investigations. But it is important that there is a high degree of trust between research teams and practitioners, since we know that anti-corruption investigations are also sometimes targeted by corrupt actors for their own purposes.

References (Interview):

Baker, J. (2020). *Corrupt networks in the Indonesian forestry sector: Politics and pulp in Pelalawan, Riau.* U4 Issue, 12. https://www.u4.no/publications/corrupt-networks-in-the-indonesian-forestry-sector

Robbins, P. (2000). The rotten institution: Corruption in natural resource management. *Political Geography, 19*(4), 423–443. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0962-6298(99)00087-6

Williams, A., & Dupuy, K. (2017). Deciding over nature: Corruption and environmental impact assessments. *Environmental Impact Assessment Review, 65*, 118–124. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eiar.2017.05.002

David Aled Williams
aled.williams@cmi.no
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0151-4666

Institution and role: Chr. Michelsen Institute, Norway – Senior Researcher | U4 Anti-Corruption Resource Centre – Principal Adviser

Joachim Simon Stassart
stassart@student.ubc.ca
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4932-5167

Institution and role: University of British Columbia, Faculty of Forestry, Canada

Joaquim Simon Stassart is a Ph.D. student at the Faculty of Forestry. He is passionate about land conflicts and deforestation in Brazil and is analyzing those issues through a political ecology lens. His research is inspired by his experience at Transparency International Brazil, where he worked on the linkages between corruption, land grabbing and environmental crimes. He holds a M.A. from Sciences Po Paris and a B.A. from Université Catholique de Louvain in Belgium.