

Multilateralism and Environmental Governance: Incorporating International Legal Norms into National Law for Compliance

Kariuki Muigua

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Kariuki Muigua*

Abstract

This paper discusses how multilateralism can be harnessed to strengthen environmental governance. The paper observes that multilateralism is an effective approach towards bolstering global environmental governance. It discusses the specific applications of multilateralism in the environmental governance discourse. Despite its role in bolstering environmental governance at the international level, the paper notes that the global community is yet to fully utilise multilateralism to promote sound environmental protection and management. The paper examines some of the challenges facing multilateralism as a tool of environmental governance. In light of these concerns, the paper suggests how multilateralism can be effectively embraced to enhance environmental governance by incorporating international legal norms into national law for compliance.

1.0 Introduction

Environmental governance is a framework that covers the processes, laws, policies, institutions, and systems through which societies manage their interaction with the environment in order to ensure its sustainability, equitable use, and protection¹. In particular, it has been observed that environmental governance focuses on how decisions concerning the environment and natural resources are made, who participates in such decision-making processes, and how laws, policies rules are enforced regarding natural resources and environmental protection². The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) notes that environmental governance is a broad concept that encompasses laws, policy, rules and norms that govern human behavior in respect of the environment, while also addressing who makes environmental decisions, how such decisions are made and carried out, the scientific information needed for environmental decision-making and how the public and major stakeholders can participate in environmental decision-making processes³.

Environmental governance is a wide concept that extends beyond government regulations and interventions to involve other stakeholders including the private sector, non-governmental

* PhD in Law (Nrb), SC, FCI Arb (Chartered Arbitrator), OGW, LL. B (Hons) Nrb, LL.M (Environmental Law) Nrb; Dip. In Law (KSL); FCPS (K); Dip. in Arbitration (UK); MKIM; Mediator; Consultant: Lead expert EIA/EA NEMA; BSI ISO/IEC 27001:2005 ISMS Lead Auditor/ Implementer; ESG Consultant; Advocate of the High Court of Kenya; Professor of Environmental Law and Conflict Management at the University of Nairobi, Faculty of Law; Member of the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) [July, 2026].

¹ Environmental Governance., Available at https://governance.co.ke/ova_sev/environmental-governance/ (Accessed on 05/07/2026)

² Ibid

³ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Environmental Governance' Available at <https://www.unep.org/regions/west-asia/regional-initiatives/environmental-governance> (Accessed on 05/07/2026)

organizations (NGOs), and the public in environmental decision-making processes⁴. It covers several elements including legal and institutional frameworks that define how the environment is managed and protected, stakeholder and public participation in environmental decision-making processes, transparency and accountability in environmental decision-making, integrated environmental management, science and data-driven environmental decision-making, compliance and enforcement of environmental laws and policies through monitoring, penalties, and incentives, and international cooperation to address global environmental threats including climate change, pollution and biodiversity loss⁵.

Achieving sound environmental governance is vital for both people and planet. UNEP notes that by building robust environmental governance systems, it is possible to safeguard environment and human rights towards achieving Sustainable Development⁶. Environmental governance has been described as a key determinant of Sustainable Development since robust governance systems are paramount in protecting and restoring the planet and forging a sustainable tomorrow for both humanity and nature⁷. Further, it has been observed that effective environmental governance is key in maintaining and improving the ability of environmental systems to function and to produce ecosystem services through the persistence of species, habitats and biodiversity towards Sustainable Development⁸. UNEP notes that pursuing sound environmental governance will lead to a healthy, liveable and prosperous planet for both humanity and nature, now and in the future⁹.

Despite its role in the Sustainable Development discourse, achieving sound environmental governance remains a challenge for the global community. It has been observed that many countries are facing numerous legal, political, financial, capacity and technical challenges which undermine their ability to build robust environmental governance frameworks¹⁰. These shortcomings in environmental governance are contributing to challenges such as poverty, climate change, loss of biodiversity, water scarcity, environmental degradation, inequitable distribution of natural resources, loss of arable land, food insecurity, and coastal degradation and wetlands

⁴ Environmental Governance., Available at <https://www.manglai.io/en/glossary/environmental-governance> (Accessed on 05/07/2026)

⁵ Environmental Governance., Op Cit

⁶ United Nations Environment Programme., 'About environmental rights and governance' Available at <https://www.unep.org/explore-topics/environmental-governance/about-environmental-rights-and-governance> (Accessed on 05/07/2026)

⁷ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Environmental Law and Governance' Available at <https://www.unep.org/topics/environmental-law-and-governance> (Accessed on 05/07/2026)

⁸ Bennett. N., & Satterfield. T., 'Environmental governance: A practical framework to guide design, evaluation, and analysis' Available at <https://conbio.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/conl.12600> (Accessed on 05/07/2026)

⁹ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Environmental Governance' Op Cit

¹⁰ Tsoihery. M., & Zafimahova. C., 'Environmental Governance in The Division of Roles International Institutions and Government Institutions in African Countries' *Journal of Management and Administration Provision*, Volume 2, No. 2, (2022), pp 58-64

intrusion¹¹. Consequently, it has become imperative to build robust and effective environmental governance systems all over the world in order to promote Sustainable Development.

This paper discusses how multilateralism can be harnessed to strengthen environmental governance. The paper observes that multilateralism is an effective approach towards bolstering global environmental governance. It discusses the specific applications of multilateralism in the environmental governance discourse. Despite its role in bolstering environmental governance at the international level, the paper notes that the global community is yet to fully utilise multilateralism to promote sound environmental protection and management. The paper examines some of the challenges facing multilateralism as a tool of environmental governance. In light of these concerns, the paper suggests how multilateralism can be effectively embraced to enhance environmental governance by incorporating international legal norms into national law for compliance.

2.0 Role of Multilateralism in Environmental Governance

Multilateralism is a system of international relations where different countries work together to solve global challenges through cooperation, coordination and compromise¹². In addition, multilateralism has been described as a diplomatic strategy that involves multiple countries working together on shared issues and goals¹³. It has been observed that multilateralism focuses on cooperation and collective decision-making in addressing global challenges¹⁴. The concept of multilateralism is based on collaboration between several countries to achieve common objectives, involving continuous negotiation and dialogue between member states of an international or regional organization with the aim of finding consensual solutions to global challenges¹⁵.

According to the United Nations, multilateralism is not an option but a necessity in the modern era¹⁶. The United Nations points out that multilateralism is based on the fact that countries have a shared realization that it is in their interests to work together to resolve problems that are bigger than their individual efforts could tackle¹⁷. In particular, it has been observed that global challenges facing the planet including climate change, migration, poverty, inequalities among

¹¹ Environmental Governance in Africa., Available at <https://www.connect4climate.org/learn/article/environmental-governance-in-africa> (Accessed on 05/07/2026)

¹² United Nations., 'Multilateralism: What is it and why does it matter?' Available at <https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/02/1160226> (Accessed on 06/07/2026)

¹³ Multilateralism: Definition, Conceptual Context & Why it Matters., Available at https://www.google.com/search?q=what+is+multilateralism&oq=&gs_lcrp=EgZjaHJybWUqBggBEEUYOzIGCAAQRg8MgYIARBFgDsyBggCEEUYOTIGCAMQRRg7MgYIBBBFGDsyBggFEEUYPDIGCAYQRRg8MgYIBxBFGDzSAQgxNzg2ajBqN6gCALACAA&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8 (Accessed on 06/07/2026)

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Karlsson-Vinkhuyzen. S., & Dahl. A., 'Building Effective Multilateralism for the Environment' Available at https://iefworld.org/fl/Policybrief_KarlssonVinkhuyzen_Dahl.pdf (Accessed on 06/07/2026)

¹⁶ United Nations., 'Multilateral System' Available at <https://www.un.org/en/global-issues/multilateral-system> (Accessed on 06/07/2026)

¹⁷ Ibid

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nations, and opportunities and risks of new technologies such as Artificial Intelligence (AI) can only be addressed through mutual cooperation in form of multilateralism¹⁸. Multilateralism therefore helps nations to confront complex global development challenges through a universal approach that is based on dialogue, consensus, cooperation, and collective action¹⁹.

Multilateralism is a crucial approach in bolstering global environmental governance. According to UNEP, bolstering environmental multilateralism is key towards addressing environmental challenges including the triple planetary crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution in order to achieve sound environmental governance at the global level²⁰. Environmental multilateralism involves strengthening international cooperation and collaboration to address global environmental challenges including climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution and waste²¹. In the context of global environmental governance, multilateralism has been described as not only the most efficient, most effective, and most egalitarian approach to addressing global environmental issues, but also as the only approach that brings with it the authority, legitimacy, and resources required to tackle vast and complex environmental problems including climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution²².

It has been observed that most environmental problems including climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution are transboundary in nature²³. Therefore, efforts to tackle these problems at a national level may not be the most effective since their causes and effects usually have spillover impacts across nations, regions and the global community²⁴. Consequently, tackling these threats requires international cooperation in form of multilateralism²⁵. It has been correctly observed that environmental protection has become an urgent global concern and needs a joint effort from all nations in order to achieve significant changes²⁶. As a result, multilateralism plays an essential

¹⁸ Ivanov. I., 'What Are the Core Benefits of Multilateralism at the Present Stage?' Available at <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/what-are-the-core-benefits-of-multilateralism-at-the-present-stage/#:~:text=Multilateralism%20is%20a%20mechanism%20for,organizations%20easily%20and%20readily%20available> (Accessed on 06/07/2026)

¹⁹ United Nations., 'Multilateral System' Op Cit

²⁰ United Nations Environment Programme., 'UN Environment Assembly opens with calls for stronger multilateral action' Available at <https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/press-release/un-environment-assembly-opens-calls-stronger-multilateral-action> (Accessed on 06/07/2026)

²¹ Multilateral Environmental Agreements., Available at <https://www.oneplanetnetwork.org/SDG-12/multilateral-environmental-agreements> (Accessed on 06/07/2026)

²² Gomes. F. T., 'International Relations and the Environment: Practical Examples of Environmental Multilateralism' Available at <https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/document?repid=rep1&type=pdf&doi=aebc354992380e45e32cce62d433adcfba96d038> (Accessed on 06/07/2026)

²³ European Commission., 'Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs)' Available at https://environment.ec.europa.eu/international-cooperation/multilateral-environmental-agreements-meas_en (Accessed on 06/07/2026)

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ Karlsson-Vinkhuyzen. S., & Dahl. A., 'Building Effective Multilateralism for the Environment' Op Cit

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role in bringing countries together and establishing a common strategy with one goal: safeguarding the planet²⁷. By strengthening environmental multilateralism, it is possible to promote synergies, cooperation and collaboration towards tackling environmental challenges at the global, regional and national levels²⁸.

Through effective approaches, multilateralism can drive meaningful change that can bolster global environmental governance. For instance, multilateralism is enabling countries to cooperate and collaborate on a broad range of environmental challenges through international conventions and treaties on environment and natural resources also known as Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs)²⁹. It has been observed that MEAs are crucial in addressing the most pressing environmental problems of global or regional concern and are critical instruments of international environmental governance and international environmental law³⁰. Some of the key MEAs including the *United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)*³¹, the *Paris Agreement*³², and the *Convention on Biological Diversity*³³ have bolstered international cooperation towards tackling global environmental threats such as climate change and biodiversity loss.

In addition to MEAs, environmental multilateralism provides a platform for collective decision-making on global environmental issues while also strengthening cross-border investments and enabling capacity building in environmental governance³⁴. In particular, multilateralism can enable countries to unlock environmental finance to support climate action, biodiversity conservation and pollution control³⁵; strengthen scientific research on climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution towards understanding their causes, effects and solutions³⁶; and support the capacity of developing countries to bolster environmental governance through the development and transfer on green technologies³⁷.

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ Environmental multilateralism celebrated at UNEA-6., Available at <https://www.brsmeas.org/MediaHub/News/NewsFeatures/BRSSecretariatattheUNEA6/EnvironmentalmultilateralismcelebratedatUNEA6/tabid/9828/language/en-US/Default.aspx#:~:text=UNEP/EA-6/L.,Programme%20and%20multilateral%20environmental%20agreements> (Accessed on 06/07/2026)

²⁹ East African Community., 'Multilateral Environmental Agreements' Available at <https://www.eac.int/environment/multilateral-environmental-agreements> (Accessed on 06/07/2026)

³⁰ United Nations Environment Programme., 'How Multilateral Environmental Agreements Can Help Mend the Planet' Available at <https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/story/how-multilateral-environmental-agreements-can-help-mend-planet> (Accessed on 06/07/2026)

³¹ United Nations General Assembly, *United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change*, A/RES/48/189, 20 January 1994

³² United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change., 'Paris Agreement.' Available at https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/english_paris_agreement.pdf (Accessed on 06/07/2026)

³³ United Nations., 'Convention on Biological Diversity' [1993] ATS 32 / 1760 UNTS 79 / 31 ILM 818 (1992)

³⁴ The Importance of Multilateralism for Environmental Agreements., Available at <https://www.activesustainability.com/sustainable-development/multilateralism/> (Accessed on 06/07/2026)

³⁵ Njenga. P., 'Multilateralism in Climate Change Negotiations: Progress, Pitfalls, and Prospects' *New England Journal of Public Policy*, 11-1-2025

³⁶ Ibid

³⁷ Ibid

Despite its role in strengthening global environmental governance, multilateralism faces several obstacles. For example, it has been correctly observed that global environmental problems including climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution are worsening all over the world demonstrating that multilateralism is yet to be fully and effectively harnessed to bolster environmental governance³⁸. This has been attributed to several causes including ineffective implementation of MEAs, geopolitical divisions that undermine effective collaboration and cooperation among states, and failure to ensure equity, inclusivity and justice in global environmental governance³⁹.

In light of the foregoing, there is need to strengthen multilateralism as a tool of global environmental governance and Sustainable Development.

3.0 Embracing Multilateralism for Sound Environmental Governance

Multilateralism provides an effective approach towards bolstering global environmental governance. Through multilateralism, it is possible to incorporate international legal norms into national law for sound environmental governance⁴⁰. It has been correctly noted that since environmental challenges such as climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution have no boundaries and affect every person everywhere on the planet, addressing these problems can only be achieved through global cooperation⁴¹. In an increasingly hyperconnected world, with so much interdependence among states, no single country, or even region, can address the complex global environmental challenges and crises being witnessed across the globe⁴².

Strengthening multilateralism is therefore necessary towards bolstering environmental governance at all levels for Sustainable Development. In particular, through multilateralism, it is possible to tackle global environmental problems by bolstering the global response on climate change, enhancing efforts to conserve biodiversity and endangered species, limiting pollution and strengthening collective action to conserve specific natural resources including wetlands, forests, fisheries and the blue economy among others⁴³. Environmental multilateralism ensures that national efforts join up to fix global problems⁴⁴.

³⁸ United Nations Environment Programme., 'How Multilateral Environmental Agreements Can Help Mend the Planet' Op Cit

³⁹ Environmental multilateralism: unity in difficult times., Available at <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/environmental-multilateralism-unity-difficult-times-inger-andersen-5vp8f/> (Accessed on 06/07/2026)

⁴⁰ United Nations Development Programme., 'What is Multilateralism?' Available at <https://stories.undp.org/what-is-multilateralism-in-2024> (Accessed on 06/07/2026)

⁴¹ Ibid

⁴² Ibid

⁴³ United Nations Environment Programme., 'UNEA-6 shines a spotlight on environmental multilateralism' Available at <https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/story/unea-6-shines-spotlight-environmental-multilateralism> (Accessed on 06/07/2026)

⁴⁴ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Multilateral Action for a Green Post-COVID-19 Recovery' Available at <https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/speech/multilateral-action-green-post-covid-19-recovery> (Accessed on 06/07/2026)

Through multilateralism, it is possible to incorporate international legal norms into national law for compliance towards sound environmental governance and sustainability. For example, it has been observed that by strengthening implementation of and compliance with the MEAs, it is possible to incorporate international legal norms into national law and policies on key issues such as climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution for effective compliance⁴⁵. Through effective compliance with MEAs, it is possible to reinvigorate national action in the environmental sector towards sound environmental governance⁴⁶. In addition, it has been observed that it is necessary to include all voices beyond government, by embracing the participation of the youth, women, indigenous peoples and local communities, in order to ensure that the whole-of-government and whole-of-society is involved in environmental governance⁴⁷. Through this, it is possible to harness the unique contribution of different stakeholders to ensure that international legal norms are effectively incorporated into national laws and policies for compliance⁴⁸. It is also necessary to build national environmental capacities including through strengthening environmental institutions, unlocking environmental finance, and utilising science, technology and indigenous knowledge in order to ensure that countries are well-equipped to translate international legal norms into national law for compliance⁴⁹.

Through the foregoing, it is possible to effectively embrace multilateralism for sound environmental governance.

4.0 Conclusion

Due to the global nature of environmental threats including climate change, biodiversity loss and climate change, it is imperative to strengthen multilateralism towards sound environmental governance. In particular, multilateralism can enable countries to incorporate international legal norms into national laws for compliance. This can be achieved by strengthening compliance of and implementation of MEAs, embracing a whole-of-government and whole-of-society perspective to environmental governance, and building national environmental institutional, technical, financial and human capacities⁵⁰. Bolstering multilateralism is therefore possible towards incorporating international legal norms into national law for compliance in order to achieve sound environmental governance for Sustainable Development.

⁴⁵ United Nations Environment Programme., 'How Multilateral Environmental Agreements Can Help Mend the Planet' Op Cit

⁴⁶ Ibid

⁴⁷ United Nations Environment Programme., 'UN Environment Assembly opens with calls for stronger multilateral action' Op Cit

⁴⁸ Ibid

⁴⁹ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Backing environmental multilateralism in complex times' Available at <https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/speech/backing-environmental-multilateralism-complex-times> (Accessed on 06/07/2026)

⁵⁰ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Backing environmental multilateralism in complex times' Op Cit

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