

**Collaboration for People and Planet:
Examining Multilateralism as a tool for
Dealing with Global Environmental Problems**

Kariuki Muigua

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Collaboration for People and Planet?: Examining Multilateralism as a tool for Dealing with Global Environmental Problems

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Abstract

This paper examines how multilateralism can be harnessed to address global environmental problems including the triple planetary crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution. The paper defines multilateralism. It argues that multilateralism is an appropriate tool in dealing with global environmental problems. It discusses how this approach can be used to tackle global environmental threats towards safeguarding people and planet. The paper also appraises the progress made towards embracing environmental multilateralism and challenges thereof. Further, the paper suggests how multilateralism can be revitalized in order to effectively tackle global environmental problems towards Sustainable Development.

1.0 Introduction

The environment is at the heart of the global pursuit for Sustainable Development providing vital resources and ecosystem services that sustain both people and planet. For example, it has been observed that the environment provides direct sources of food, water and energy and supplies ecosystem goods and services supporting human health and well-being, incomes, job creation, poverty alleviation, safety nets and inequity reduction¹. It is estimated that over half of the global Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is

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¹ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Frequently Asked Questions' Available at <https://www.unep.org/frequently-asked-questions#:~:text=Environment%20constitutes%20one%20of%20the,each%20of%20the%2017%20SDGs.> (Accessed on 14/03/2026)

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dependent on nature². Further, the environment supports vital ecosystem processes including pollination, natural filtration of water and climate regulation which are key for human and ecosystem health³. Consequently, it has been correctly noted that a clean, safe and healthy environment is required to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)⁴.

Despite playing a pertinent role in the Sustainable Development agenda, global environment problems are undermining environmental sustainability with grave impacts on people and planet. For example, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development acknowledges that the global community is facing worsening environmental threats including depletion of natural resources, environmental degradation, desertification, drought, freshwater scarcity, pollution, loss of biodiversity, and climate change which are undermining harmony between humanity and nature⁵.

In particular, it has been observed that the triple planetary crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution represents the three main interlinked global environmental problems that humanity currently faces⁶. Climate change has been described as one of the greatest challenges of our time whose adverse impacts undermine

² United Nations., 'Biodiversity - our strongest natural defense against climate change' Available at <https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/science/climate-issues/biodiversity> (Accessed on 14/03/2026)

³ Smith. M., 'Biodiversity as the Foundation of Healthy Communities' Available at <https://edenthiving.org/biodiversity-as-the-foundation-of-healthy-communities/> (Accessed on 14/03/2026)

⁴ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Sustainable Development Goals' Available at <https://www.unep.org/#:~:text=A%20clean%20and%20healthy%20environment,and%20economies%20for%20everyone%2C%20everywhere.> (Accessed on 14/03/2026)

⁵ United Nations General Assembly., 'Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.' 21 October 2015, A/RES/70/1., Available at <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/21252030%20Agenda%20for%20Sustainable%20Development%20web.pdf> (Accessed on 14/03/2026)

⁶ United Nations Climate Change., 'What is the Triple Planetary Crisis?' Available at <https://unfccc.int/news/what-is-the-triple-planetary-crisis> (Accessed on 14/03/2026)

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the ability of all countries to achieve Sustainable Development⁷. The impacts of climate change include droughts, floods, heatwaves and rising sea levels are being witnessed globally with severe impacts on people and planet⁸.

Further, the world is witnessing an alarming rate of biodiversity loss with nearly 1 million species facing the threat of extinction⁹. Global biodiversity loss affects the availability and quality of vital ecosystem goods and services including food, clean water, clean air, medicines, pollination, nutrient cycling, erosion control and climate regulation thus impacting livelihoods and human and ecosystem health¹⁰.

In addition, pollution in all its forms is a major global environmental problem that affects the health of both people and planet. For example, air pollution has been identified as the largest cause of disease and premature death in the world¹¹. It is estimated that more than seven million people die prematurely each year due to air pollution¹². In addition, it has been pointed out that every year, millions of tonnes of plastic waste leaks into aquatic ecosystems, polluting lakes, rivers and seas¹³. Plastic pollution affects both humanity and nature by altering habitats and natural processes directly impacting livelihoods, health and biodiversity especially marine life¹⁴.

⁷ United Nations General Assembly., 'Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.' 21 October 2015, A/RES/70/1., Op Cit

⁸ United Nations Environment Programme., 'The Triple Planetary Crisis and Public Health' Available at <https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/speech/triple-planetary-crisis-and-public-health> (Accessed on 14/03/2026)

⁹ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Five drivers of the nature crisis' Available at <https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/story/five-drivers-nature-crisis> (Accessed on 14/03/2026)

¹⁰ World Health Organization., 'Biodiversity' Available at <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/biodiversity#:~:text=Biodiversity%20loss%20is%20occurring%20at,healthier%2C%20more%20resilient%20food%20production> (Accessed on 14/03/2026)

¹¹ United Nations Climate Change., 'What is the Triple Planetary Crisis?' Op Cit

¹² Ibid

¹³ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Plastic Pollution' Available at <https://www.unep.org/plastic-pollution> (Accessed on 14/03/2026)

¹⁴ Ibid

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Global environmental problems including the triple planetary crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution are therefore undermining progress towards Sustainable Development. Addressing these problems is necessary towards protecting people and planet and achieving the SDGs.

This paper examines how multilateralism can be harnessed to address global environmental problems including the triple planetary crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution. The paper defines multilateralism. It argues that multilateralism is an appropriate tool in dealing with global environmental problems. It discusses how this approach can be used to tackle global environmental threats towards safeguarding people and planet. The paper also appraises the progress made towards embracing environmental multilateralism and challenges thereof. Further, the paper suggests how multilateralism can be revitalized in order to effectively tackle global environmental problems towards Sustainable Development.

2.0 Role of Multilateralism in Addressing Global Environmental Problems

Multilateralism is a fundamental concept in international relations. The United Nations observes that multilateralism is both a method of cooperation and a form of organization of the international system¹⁵. The idea of multilateralism refers to a situation in which different countries collaborate with the main aim of achieving solutions for common problems facing them¹⁶. Multilateralism has also been described as a system of international politics and diplomacy, where many countries with different views and goals work together¹⁷. This concept is based on collaboration between several countries to achieve common objectives, involving continuous negotiation and dialogue between

¹⁵ United Nations., 'The Virtues of Multilateralism and Diplomacy' Available at <https://www.un.org/en/observances/multilateralism-for-peace-day> (Accessed on 14/03/2026)

¹⁶ Karlsson-Vinkhuyzen. S., & Dahl. A., 'Building Effective Multilateralism for the Environment' Available at https://iefworld.org/fl/Policybrief_KarlssonVinkhuyzen_Dahl.pdf (Accessed on 14/03/2026)

¹⁷ United Nations., 'Multilateralism: What is it and why does it matter?' Available at <https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/02/1160226> (Accessed on 14/03/2026)

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member states of an international or regional organization with the aim of finding consensual solutions to global challenges¹⁸.

The premise of multilateralism is that countries have a shared realization that it is in their best interest to work together to resolve problems that are bigger than their individual efforts could tackle¹⁹. It has been argued that in an increasingly interconnected world, multilateralism has become a key factor in dealing with transnational problems and guaranteeing global stability for Sustainable Development²⁰. According to the United Nations, multilateralism is helping the international community to confront complex global challenges through a universal and unified approach²¹. Consequently, it has been observed that multilateralism is not an option but a necessity in the pursuit of Sustainable Development²².

Multilateralism is relevant in the environmental context. It plays an essential role in bringing countries together and establishing a common strategy with one goal: safeguarding the planet²³. As a result, environmental multilateralism has developed as a strategy through which countries can collaborate towards tackling global environmental problems and ensuring a safe and sustainable future. Environmental multilateralism involves strengthening international cooperation and collaboration to address global environmental challenges including climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution and

¹⁸ Karlsson-Vinkhuyzen, S., & Dahl, A., 'Building Effective Multilateralism for the Environment' Op Cit

¹⁹ United Nations., 'Multilateral System' Available at <https://www.un.org/en/global-issues/multilateral-system> (Accessed on 14/03/2026)

²⁰ Morgera, E., 'The EU and Environmental Multilateralism: The Case of Access and Benefit-Sharing and the Need for a Good-Faith Test' Available at https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Elisa-Morgera/publication/267926423_The_EU_and_Environmental_Multilateralism_The_Case_of_Access_and_Benefit-Sharing_and_the_Need_for_a_Good-Faith_Test/links/545d0f690cf27487b44d492d/The-EU-and-Environmental-Multilateralism-The-Case-of-Access-and-Benefit-Sharing-and-the-Need-for-a-Good-Faith-Test.pdf (Accessed on 14/03/2026)

²¹ United Nations., 'Multilateral System' Op Cit

²² Ibid

²³ Karlsson-Vinkhuyzen, S., & Dahl, A., 'Building Effective Multilateralism for the Environment' Op Cit

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waste²⁴. According to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), environmental multilateralism is an effective approach that can unite forces at all levels to address the impacts and drivers of global environmental challenges including climate change, nature and biodiversity loss, and pollution and waste²⁵. Environmental multilateralism ensures effective, inclusive and sustainable approaches to address global environmental threats²⁶. By strengthening environmental multilateralism, it is possible to promote synergies, cooperation and collaboration towards tackling environmental challenges at the global, regional and national levels²⁷. Due to its role in tackling global environmental problems, it has been argued that environmental multilateralism is the most effective approach that brings with it the authority, legitimacy, and resources required to tackle so vast and complex environmental threats including climate change, pollution and biodiversity loss²⁸.

Strengthening environmental multilateralism is therefore necessary towards dealing with global environmental problems. For example, multilateralism is vital in addressing climate change since it ensures coordinated efforts in reducing greenhouse gas emissions²⁹; enables countries to negotiate and agree on climate finance³⁰; strengthens scientific research on climate change towards understanding its causes, effects and

²⁴ Multilateral Environmental Agreements., Available at <https://www.oneplanetnetwork.org/SDG-12/multilateral-environmental-agreements> (Accessed on 14/03/2026)

²⁵ 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 14/03/2026)

²⁶ 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 14/03/2026)

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ 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 14/03/2026)

²⁹ Njenga. P., 'Multilateralism in Climate Change Negotiations: Progress, Pitfalls, and Prospects' *New England Journal of Public Policy.*, 11-1-2025

³⁰ Ibid

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solutions³¹; and supports the capacity of developing countries to tackle the climate crisis through the development and transfer on green technologies³².

Further, multilateralism is necessary in addressing global biodiversity loss. It has been observed that multilateralism is an important tool towards ensuring sound biodiversity conservation including through international treaties and coordinated policies to protect nature³³. Through multilateralism, it is possible to unlock biodiversity finance, ensure the development and implementation of sound and effective National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans (NBSAPs) that adhere to international standards, and foster international cooperation towards protecting endangered species³⁴. In addition, multilateralism can help tackle the pollution crisis by regulating hazardous waste and bolstering cooperation among states in tackling air and plastic pollution³⁵.

There has been progress towards harnessing multilateralism to deal with global environmental problems. For example the adoption of global instruments such as the *United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)*³⁶ and the *Paris Agreement*³⁷ provides a platform for utilising multilateralism to tackle climate change through meetings and decisions by the Conference of Parties (COP)³⁸. In addition, adoption of Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs) such as the *Convention on*

³¹ Ibid

³² Ibid

³³ Burgass. M.J., 'Three Key considerations for biodiversity conservation in multilateral agreements' Available at <https://conbio.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/conl.12764> (Accessed on 14/03/2026)

³⁴ Ibid

³⁵ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Environmental multilateralism: unity in difficult times' Available at <https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/speech/environmental-multilateralism-unity-difficult-times> (Accessed on 14/03/2026)

³⁶ United Nations General Assembly, *United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change*, A/RES/48/189, 20 January 1994

³⁷ United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change., 'Paris Agreement.' Available at https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/english_paris_agreement.pdf (Accessed on 14/03/2026)

³⁸ United Nations Climate Change., 'Conference of the Parties (COP)' Available at <https://unfccc.int/process/bodies/supreme-bodies/conference-of-the-parties-cop> (Accessed on 14/03/2026)

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*Biological Diversity*³⁹; and the *Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES)*⁴⁰ are strengthening efforts to tackle biodiversity loss through multilateralism. According to UNEP, 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 law⁴¹.

Despite some notable progress, global environmental problems including climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution are worsening demonstrating that multilateralism is yet to be fully and effectively harnessed for Sustainable Development. It has been observed that weak and ineffective implementation of and compliance with MEAs affects the efficacy of multilateralism in addressing global environmental problems⁴². Failure to ensure equity, inclusivity and justice in global environmental governance also undermines the role of multilateralism in addressing global environmental problems. For example, it has been pointed out that the voice of developing countries is often ignored in global environmental governance undermining effective international cooperation and multilateralism⁴³. Addressing these challenges is necessary towards revitalizing multilateralism in order to effectively deal with global environmental problems for people and planet.

3.0 Bolstering Multilateralism to address Global Environmental Problems

Multilateralism is an effective and practical tool for dealing with global environmental problems including the triple planetary crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution. Environmental multilateralism provides a platform for collective decision-

³⁹ United Nations., 'Convention on Biological Diversity' [1993] ATS 32 / 1760 UNTS 79 / 31 ILM 818 (1992)

⁴⁰ Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora., Available at <https://cites.org/sites/default/files/eng/disc/CITES-Convention-EN.pdf> (Accessed on 14/03/2026)

⁴¹ United Nations Environment Programme., 'How Multilateral Environmental Agreements Can Help Mend the Planet' Op Cit

⁴² Ibid

⁴³ Ramutsindela. M., & Buscher. B., 'Environmental Governance and the (Re-)Making of the African State' Available at <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.903> (Accessed on 14/03/2026)

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making on global environmental threats while also strengthening cross-border investments in environmental governance⁴⁴. It has been correctly opined that environmental protection has become an urgent global concern and needs joint efforts from all nations in form of multilateralism in order to achieve significant changes⁴⁵. Multilateralism has the potential 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 others⁴⁶. Despite its efficacy, global environmental threats including climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution and waste are worsening hence the need to reinvigorate multilateralism towards protecting people and planet for Sustainable Development⁴⁷.

In order to effectively utilise multilateralism to deal with global environmental problems, there is need to strengthen implementation of and compliance with MEAs⁴⁸. Through this, it is possible for all countries to pursue collective action towards tackling global environmental problems such as climate change and biodiversity loss. Putting in place global agreements on environmental problems including plastic pollution can also strengthen collaboration in tackling such threats⁴⁹. Lack of binding agreements on some environmental problems such as plastic pollution means that addressing these threats

⁴⁴ The Importance of Multilateralism for Environmental Agreements., Available at <https://www.activesustainability.com/sustainable-development/multilateralism/> (Accessed on 14/03/2026)

⁴⁵ Karlsson-Vinkhuyzen. S., & Dahl. A., 'Building Effective Multilateralism for the Environment' Op Cit

⁴⁶ 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 14/03/2026)

⁴⁷ Ibid

⁴⁸ United Nations Environment Programme., 'How Multilateral Environmental Agreements Can Help Mend the Planet' Op Cit

⁴⁹ United Nations Development Programme., 'The Beginning of the End for Plastics Pollution?' Available at <https://www.undp.org/blog/beginning-end-plastics-pollution> (Accessed on 14/03/2026)

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depends on voluntary actions by states. However, in the context of plastic pollution, it has been argued that voluntary action and commitments towards curbing this threat are important but are not sufficient by themselves⁵⁰. Consequently, a global binding treaty geared towards curbing plastic pollution is crucial to creating a level-playing field and driving change, including stimulating cooperation, investments and innovation⁵¹.

It is also important to embrace the Global South as an equal partner in environmental multilateral processes. It has been observed that developing countries participate in global environmental governance as unequal partners since most environmental agendas are set in the Global North⁵². This fuels inequalities and injustices since the unique environmental perspectives and needs of the Global South are ignored in policy making. Consequently, it has been observed that in order to effectively tackle global environmental problems, there is need to ensure inclusivity, justice and equity in environmental decision-making processes at all levels⁵³. Recognising and upholding the participation of developing countries is therefore key in harnessing multilateralism to deal with global environmental problems.

⁵⁰ Ellen Macarthur Foundation., 'A Circular Economy for Plastic' Available at [https://www.ellenmacarthurfoundation.org/topics/plastics/overview#:~:text=A%20circular%20economy%20for%20plastic&text=It%20is%20based%20on%20three,value\)%2C%20and%20regenerate%20nature](https://www.ellenmacarthurfoundation.org/topics/plastics/overview#:~:text=A%20circular%20economy%20for%20plastic&text=It%20is%20based%20on%20three,value)%2C%20and%20regenerate%20nature) (Accessed on 14/03/2026)

⁵¹Ibid

⁵² Ramutsindela. M., & Buscher. B., 'Environmental Governance and the (Re-)Making of the African State' Op Cit

⁵³ Ibid

4.0 Conclusion

With the world facing mounting environmental problems including climate change, pollution and biodiversity loss, there is need for effective strategies to address these threats for Sustainable Development. Multilateralism is a suitable tool for dealing with global environmental problems through collaboration and cooperation among states. It is therefore necessary to revitalize multilateralism including through ensuring compliance with and enforcement of MEAs⁵⁴. Putting in place binding international agreements on environmental problems such as plastic pollution can also enhance efforts to tackle these threats through multilateralism⁵⁵. It is also imperative to strengthen the participation of developing countries in environmental multilateral processes for justice and equity⁵⁶. Revitalizing multilateralism is necessary towards harnessing collaboration among states in order to effectively deal with global environmental problems for people and planet.

⁵⁴ United Nations Environment Programme., 'How Multilateral Environmental Agreements Can Help Mend the Planet' Op Cit

⁵⁵ United Nations Development Programme., 'The Beginning of the End for Plastics Pollution?' Op Cit

⁵⁶ Ramutsindela. M., & Buscher. B., 'Environmental Governance and the (Re-)Making of the African State' Op Cit

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