Effective Environmental Governance in Africa: Incorporating Dialogue, Ubuntu, and Democracy for Sustainability

Kariuki Muigua

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Abstract

This paper explores how the ideal of effective environmental governance can be attained in Africa. The paper observes that Africa is yet to achieve sound environmental governance, a situation that has grave impacts on people and planet. It examines some of the factors undermining effective environmental governance in Africa. The paper notes that shortcomings in environmental governance frameworks in Africa are a major threat to sustainability. Consequently, the discussion argues that building effective environmental governance frameworks in Africa is vital in protecting people and planet towards Sustainable Development. It discusses how dialogue, Ubuntu and democracy can be harnessed towards strengthening environmental governance in Africa for sustainability.

1.0 Introduction

Environmental governance is a framework that covers rules, policies and institutions that shape how humans interact with the environment[1]. Environmental governance has also been described as the set of rules, policies, practices, principles, and processes through which public institutions, private organizations, and civil society make decisions related to the environment[2]. It has been observed that environmental governance covers a wide range of legal and other tools employed in both the public and private spheres to foster

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[1] 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 04/03/2026)
[2] Environmental Governance., Available at https://www.manglai.io/en/glossary/environmental-governance (Accessed on 04/03/2026)

environmental protection[3]. According to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), environmental governance includes policy, rules and norms that govern human behavior in respect of the environment[4]. UNEP notes that environmental governance addresses who makes environmental decisions, how decisions relating to the environment are made and carried out, the scientific information needed for environmental decision-making and how the public and major stakeholders can participate in such decision-making processes[5].

Sound environmental governance is necessary towards fostering sustainability. For instance, it has been observed that effective environmental governance frameworks ensure inclusive, participatory, just and fair approaches in managing the environment and natural resources for Sustainable Development[6]. By embracing sound environmental governance approaches, it is possible to maintain and improve the ability of environmental systems to function appropriately and provide ecosystem services such as clean air, water, food, energy and climate regulation on an ongoing basis[7]. According to UNEP, by building robust and effective environmental governance systems, it is possible to safeguard environmental and human rights and accelerate progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)[8].

Despite its role in ensuring sustainability, achieving effective environmental governance remains an elusive dream for most countries. For instance, it has been observed that challenges such as poor enforcement of laws and regulations, weak institutions,

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[3] Environmental Law Institute., 'Environmental Governance' Available at https://www.eli.org/environmental-governance (Accessed on 04/03/2026)

[4] United Nations Environment Programme., 'Environmental Governance' Available at https://www.unep.org/regions/west-asia/regional-initiatives/environmental-governance (Accessed on 04/03/2026)

[5] Ibid

[6] Bennett. N.J., & 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 04/03/2026)

[7] Ibid

[8] United Nations Environment Programme., 'About environmental rights and governance' Op Cit

inadequate investments in environmental protection, and lack of diversity and inclusivity in decision-making processes undermine the quest towards sound environmental governance[9]. Failure to put in place effective environmental governance frameworks adds adverse impacts on people and planet by fuelling environmental threats including biodiversity loss, environmental degradation, pollution and climate change[10]. Consequently, it is imperative to strengthen environmental governance at all levels in order to foster sustainability for people and planet, now and in the future.

This paper explores how the ideal of effective environmental governance can be attained in Africa. The paper observes that Africa is yet to achieve sound environmental governance, a situation that has grave impacts on people and planet. It examines some of the factors undermining effective environmental governance in Africa. The paper notes that shortcomings in environmental governance frameworks in Africa are a major threat to sustainability. Consequently, the discussion argues that building effective environmental governance frameworks in Africa is vital in protecting people and planet towards Sustainable Development. It discusses how dialogue, Ubuntu and democracy can be harnessed towards strengthening environmental governance in Africa for sustainability.

2.0 The Need for Effective Environmental Governance in Africa

Achieving sound environmental governance in Africa has been identified as a key priority towards ensuring effective management of the continent's abundant resources for Sustainable Development, peace and prosperity[11]. Africa is endowed with natural resources including vast arable land, forests, freshwater resources including major rivers

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[9] United Nations Development Programme., 'Environmental Governance: Bolstering inclusive and effective governance systems that champion environmental justice and sustainability' Available at https://www.undp.org/nature/our-work-areas/environmental-governance (Accessed on 04/03/2026)
[10] Ibid
[11] World Resources Institute., 'Environmental Governance in Africa Working Paper Series' Available at https://www.wri.org/research/environmental-governance-africa-working-paper-series (Accessed on 05/03/2026)

and lakes, minerals, oil and gas, wildlife and renewable sources of energy[12]. Consequently, it has been argued that effective environmental governance is key towards ensuring sustainable management of the continent's natural capital towards development[13]. Putting in place effective environmental governance systems at the regional, national and local levels can lead to job creation, revenue generation, food security, social equity and a healthy environment in Africa[14].

Strengthening environmental governance is therefore necessary in promoting Sustainable Development in Africa. It has been observed that designing and implementing effective environmental governance systems is vital for Africa where the dependence on natural resources for livelihoods and economic development is high, yet the resilience of ecosystems is constantly threatened by factors such as overexploitation of resources, unsustainable resource extraction, environmental degradation and climate change[15]. African economies are heavily dependent on natural resources to fuel economic growth and development[16]. For example, agriculture, forestry, fisheries, tourism, mining and quarrying, and oil and natural gas extraction are crucial contributors to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of many African economies[17]. Ensuring effective environmental governance is thus necessary towards nurturing Africa's natural resources for development.

However, realising effective environmental governance in Africa remains a challenge. It has been observed that environmental governance in Africa has not been as successful

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[12] United Nations Environment Programme., 'Our Work in Africa' Available at https://www.unep.org/regions/africa/our-work-africa (Accessed on 05/03/2026)

[13] Ibid

[14] Ibid

[15] Abdulrahman. A., 'Environmental Governance and Sustainable Development in Africa' Available at https://www.quaestus.ro/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Abubakar-ABDULRAHMAN.pdf (Accessed on 05/03/2026)

[16] African Union., 'Africa Environment and Wangari Maathai Day.' Available at https://au.int/en/wangari-maathai-day (Accessed on 05/03/2026)

[17] Ibid

when compared to other regions[18]. This is evidenced by mounting environmental threats in the continent including water scarcity, pollution, climate change, biodiversity loss, deforestation and environmental degradation[19]. It has been pointed out that poor environmental governance leads to unsustainable use and extraction of Africa's vast natural resources, a situation that worsens the triple planetary crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution and waste[20]. Failure to achieve sound environmental governance has been attributed to factors such as inadequate investments in environmental protection, weak institutions, poor enforcement of environmental laws and policies, inadequate technical capacity and inadequate political will to prioritize environmental conservation[21]. In addition, failure to embrace the principles of inclusivity and participation undermines the quest towards effective environmental governance in Africa. For instance, it has been observed that marginalized and vulnerable groups including indigenous peoples, local communities, the youth and women suffer persistently low levels of representation and participation in public institutions and environmental decision-making processes[22]. This undermines the vital contribution of key stakeholders such as indigenous peoples and local communities who are custodians of vital Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) that can play a key role in bolstering environmental governance[23].

In light of the foregoing concerns, it is imperative to strengthen environmental governance in Africa for sustainability.

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[18] Environmental Governance in Africa., Available at https://www.connect4climate.org/learn/article/environmental-governance-in-africa (Accessed on 05/03/2026)

[19] Dawo. K.A., & Khalifa. W.M., 'Do Green Innovation, Environmental Governance, and Renewable Energy Transition Drive Trade-Adjusted Resource Footprints in Top Sub-Saharan African Countries?' Available at https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/17/11/4907 (Accessed on 05/03/2026)

[20] Ibid

[21] Tsitohery. 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

[22] United Nations Development Programme., 'Strengthening Environmental Governance' Available at https://www.undp.org/nature/our-work-areas/environmental-governance (Accessed on 05/03/2026)

[23] Ibid

3.0 Incorporating Dialogue, Ubuntu and Democracy into Environmental Governance in Africa for Sustainability

Achieving effective environmental governance in Africa is vital in the pursuit of Sustainable Development. Sound environmental governance provides Africa with an opportunity to harness its rich natural capital for development and prosperity. With most African countries struggling to put in place robust environmental governance systems, there is need for viable approaches towards strengthening environmental governance in Africa.

In particular, there is need to embrace dialogue for sound environmental governance in Africa. It has been observed that dialogue is key towards strengthening environmental governance systems since it brings various stakeholders on board to identify challenges and design appropriate responses to environmental threats[24]. Dialogue fosters inclusive, participatory and collaborative approaches for sound environmental governance[25]. In particular, it has been observed that dialogue is vital in utilising a whole-of-government, whole-of-society approach for effective environmental governance[26]. It has been correctly noted that sound environmental governance cannot be achieved by one sector alone and requires horizontal and vertical policy coherence and collaboration involving all levels of government and the society at large including individuals, communities and the private sector[27]. Dialogue is at the heart of a whole-of-government, whole-of-society perspective by ensuring co-operation and co-ordination involving all levels of government and all

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[24] International Union for Conservation of Nature., 'Dialogue on Environmental Governance Issues in Craft Villages in Bac Ninh Province, Viet Nam: A Summary Report' Available at https://iucn.org/sites/default/files/import/downloads/mwd_warecod_craft_village_en_final_21_feb11.pdf (Accessed on 05/03/2026)

[25] Nakamura. H et al., 'Toward Citizen Dialogue-led Environmental Governance: An Exploratory Case Study in Post-Fukushima Japan' Available at https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/33569609/ (Accessed on 05/03/2026)

[26] United Nations., 'Whole-Of-Government and Whole-of Society Approaches' Available at https://migrationnetwork.un.org/system/files/resources_files/ATD_Whole-Of-Government%20and%20Who-of%20Society%20Approaches.pdf (Accessed on 05/03/2026)

[27] Ibid

sectors of the society in the quest towards sustainability[28]. It is therefore necessary to embrace dialogue in order to harness the contribution of all stakeholders including governments at national and local levels, the whole of society including women, indigenous peoples, local communities and the youth for sound environmental governance in Africa.

Harnessing Ubuntu is also vital towards sound environmental governance in Africa. Ubuntu is an African philosophy that places emphasis on '*being self through others*'[29]. It is a form of humanism which can be expressed in the phrases '*I am because of who we all are*'[30]*(Emphasis added).* Ubuntu is described as '*I am because we are*' (a person is a person through other persons)[31]. The African philosophy of Ubuntu emphasises harmony/togetherness over individual interests[32]. Ubuntu/Utu urges Africans to uphold values that promote the greater good of the community including sympathy, compassion, benevolence, solidarity, hospitality, generosity, sharing, openness, affirming, being available, kindness, caring, harmony, interdependence, obedience, collectivity and consensus[33].In particular, it has been observed that the philosophy of Ubuntu is relevant in environmental governance[34]. For example, Ubuntu emphasizes

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[28] United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs., 'Introduction to the Whole-of-Government Approach' Available at https://unosd.un.org/sites/unosd.un.org/files/session_10-2_mr._samuel_danaa.pdf (Accessed on 05/03/2026)

[29] Mugumbate. J., & Nyanguru. A., 'Exploring African Philosophy: The Value of Ubuntu in Social Work.' Available at https://ro.uow.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=4272&context=sspapers&httpsredir=1&referer#:~:text=Ubuntu%20can%20best%20be%20described,ngumuntu%20ngabantu%20in%20Zulu%20language. (Accessed on 05/03/2026)

[30] Ibid

[31] Van Norren. D., 'African Ubuntu and Sustainable Development Goals: seeking human mutual relations and service in development' Available at https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01436597.2022.2109458#abstract (Accessed on 05/03/2026)

[32] Mugumbate. J., & Nyanguru. A., 'Exploring African Philosophy: The Value of Ubuntu in Social Work.' Op Cit

[33] Ibid

[34] Etieyibo. E., 'Ubuntu and the Environment' Available at https://www.researchgate.net/publication/321157342_Ubuntu_and_the_Environment (Accessed on 05/03/2026)

caring for the natural world and requires human beings to use natural resources responsibly and non-exploitatively for the greater good of humanity[35]. In addition, Ubuntu requires humans to take their fellow humans into account in the way they relate to the environment and use resources by emphasizing the values of sharing and caring[36]. It has been observed that in the quest towards Sustainable Development, Ubuntu provides a pathway towards promoting peaceful coexistence between humanity and nature[37]. Incorporating Ubuntu is therefore a practical Afrocentric approach towards ensuring effective environmental governance in Africa.

Further, there is need to foster democracy for sound environmental governance in Africa. The idea of democracy in environmental governance is based on the ability of all people to freely access environmental information[38]; to participate meaningfully in decision-making relating to the environment[39]; and to seek enforcement of environmental laws or compensation in respect of environmental harms[40]. Democracy in the context of environmental governance asserts that meaningful participation by all stakeholders including the public is critical in ensuring that decisions related to the environment and natural resources adequately and equitably address the needs and interests of all citizens towards sound environmental governance and Sustainable Development[41]. It is therefore necessary to foster democracy including through enhancing access to environmental information, ensuring meaningful participation by all stakeholders in decision-making

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[35] Ibid

[36] Ibid

[37] Kyei-Nuamah. D., & Peng. Z., 'Ubuntu philosophy for ecological education and environmental policy formulation' *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, Volume 58, Issue 4 (2024), pp 540-561

[38] Center for International Environmental Law., 'Environmental Democracy and Access Rights' Available at https://www.ciel.org/issue/environmental-democracy-access-rights/ (Accessed on 05/03/2026)

[39] Ibid

[40] Ibid

[41] Worker. J., & Ratte. S., 'What Does Environmental Democracy Look Like?' Available at https://www.wri.org/insights/what-does-environmental-democracy-look (Accessed on 05/03/2026)

processes and strengthening access to justice in environmental matters in order to build robust environmental governance systems in Africa[42].

Through the foregoing approaches, it is possible to incorporate dialogue, Ubuntu and democracy for sound environmental governance in Africa.

4.0 Conclusion

Strengthening environmental governance in Africa is vital in the pursuit of Sustainable Development. Failure to build robust environmental governance systems in the continent undermines sustainability by fuelling environmental threats including water scarcity, pollution, climate change, biodiversity loss, deforestation and environmental degradation[43]. Africa has immense potential to ensure effective environmental governance by harnessing Afrocentric solutions[44]. This can be achieved by incorporating dialogue, Ubuntu and democracy into the environmental governance discourse. Ensuring effective environmental governance in Africa is therefore an achievable dream that needs to be realised for sustainability.

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[42] Building momentum towards the realisation of environmental rights in Africa., Available at https://www.universal-rights.org/building-momentum-towards-the-realisation-of-environmental-rights-in-africa/#:~:text=Recognising%20the%20need%20to%20strengthen,continent%20in%20the%20coming%20decades. (Accessed on 05/03/2026)

[43] Dawo. K.A., & Khalifa. W.M., 'Do Green Innovation, Environmental Governance, and Renewable Energy Transition Drive Trade-Adjusted Resource Footprints in Top Sub-Saharan African Countries?' Op Cit

[44] Ikeke. M.O., & Ukutsemuya. J.I., 'The Afrocentric Imperative in Tackling African Environmental Challenges: Afroecosolidarity Perspectives' *East African Journal of Environment and Natural Resources*, Volume 7, Issue 1, 2024

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