Environmental Democracy: Involving Multiple Stakeholders in Climate Governance for Sustainability

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Abstract

This paper explores ways through which environmental democracy can be achieved in climate governance for sustainability. The paper conceptualizes environmental democracy. It argues that strengthening environmental democracy is key in ensuring that all stakeholders are involved in efforts to confront climate change for sustainability. The paper posits that the multidimensional nature of the climate crisis means that the problem cannot be addressed by one sector alone. Consequently, it argues that involving multiple stakeholders including all levels of government and all sectors of the society is key towards strengthening climate governance for sustainability. The paper proposes interventions towards involving multiple stakeholders in climate governance towards fostering environmental governance for sustainability.

1.0 Introduction

Achieving sustainability remains an elusive goal for the global community. The United Nations *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development[1]* acknowledges that the world is facing mounting challenges including poverty, rising inequalities within and among nations, gender inequalities, unemployment, global health threats, conflicts, and more frequent and intense natural disasters[2]. These challenges are worsened by environmental threats including depletion of natural resources, environmental degradation, desertification, drought, freshwater scarcity, pollution, loss of biodiversity, and climate change[3]. According to the United Nations, the increasing threat of climate change in addition to

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[1] 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 09/10/2025)

[2] Ibid

[3] Ibid

other environmental, economic and social challenges requires concrete efforts to be made to ensure development today does not negatively affect future generations[4].

Fostering sustainability involves creating and maintaining the conditions under which humanity and nature can exist in productive harmony to support present and future generations[5]. It has been argued that sustainability aims at finding a balance between economic, social, and environmental factors to ensure that resources are used in a way that is not only environmentally sustainable but also socially equitable and economically viable in the long term[6]. This ideal requires an integrated approach on development that takes into account environmental concerns along with economic development and social equity[7]. The concept of Sustainable Development has been embraced by the global community as a pathway towards achieving sustainability[8]. Sustainable Development refers to development that meets the needs of the present generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs[9]. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development envisions attainment of the ideal of sustainability through 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which seek to strike a balance between social, economic and environmental facets of sustainability[10].

In has been argued that in order to achieve sustainability, it is imperative to embrace the participation of multiple stakeholders across all dimensions of Sustainable Development including environmental governance. For instance, it has been observed that the

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[4] United Nations., 'Sustainability' Available at https://www.un.org/en/academic-impact/sustainability (Accessed on 09/10/2025)

[5] United States Environmental Protection Agency., 'What is Sustainability.' Available at https://www.epa.gov/sustainability/learn-about-sustainability (Accessed on 09/10/2025)

[6] Sustainability: A Better Tomorrow, But How?., Available at https://www.green.earth/sustainability (Accessed on 09/10/2025)

[7] United Nations., 'Sustainability' Op Cit

[8] Giovannoni. E., & Fabietti. G., 'What Is Sustainability? A Review of the Concept and Its Applications.' In: Busco, C., Frigo, M., Riccaboni, A., Quattrone, P. (eds) Integrated Reporting. Springer, Cham. Available at https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-02168-3_2 (Accessed on 09/10/2025)

[9] World Commission on Environment and Development., 'Our Common Future.' Oxford, (Oxford University Press, 1987)

[10] United Nations General Assembly., 'Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.' Op Cit

multidimensional nature of environmental challenges facing the planet including climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution cannot be addressed by one sector alone[11]. Consequently, 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[12]. Involving multiple stakeholders is therefore key in ensuring sound environmental governance for sustainability.

This paper explores ways through which environmental democracy can be achieved in climate governance for sustainability. The paper conceptualizes environmental democracy. It argues that strengthening environmental democracy is key in ensuring that all stakeholders are involved in efforts to confront climate change for sustainability. The paper posits that the multidimensional nature of the climate crisis means that the problem cannot be addressed by one sector alone. Consequently, it argues that involving multiple stakeholders including all levels of government and all sectors of the society is key towards strengthening climate governance for sustainability. The paper proposes interventions towards involving multiple stakeholders in climate governance towards fostering environmental governance for sustainability.

2.0 Environmental Democracy and Climate Governance: Promises and Pitfalls

The concept of environmental democracy 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 interests of all citizens towards sound environmental governance and Sustainable Development[13]. It has been argued that environmental democracy captures the principle of equal rights for all stakeholders including the public, community groups, advocates, industrial leaders,

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[11] 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 09/10/2025)
[12] Ibid
[13] Worker. J., & Ratte. S., 'What Does Environmental Democracy Look Like?' Available at https://www.wri.org/insights/what-does-environmental-democracy-look (Accessed on 09/08/2025)

workers, governments, academics and other professionals to be involved in environmental governance[14]. Environmental democracy gives an opportunity to every individual to participate in environmental decision-making as freely as they do in other public interest matters like health care, education, finance and governance in general[15].

Environmental democracy is therefore based on the idea that environmental and natural resource decisions must involve all citizens and should adequately and equitably address the needs and interests of all stakeholders[16]. It has been argued that rather than setting a standard for what determines a good environmental outcome, the idea of environmental democracy sets a standard for how decisions should be made[17]. This includes the ability of all citizens to freely access environmental information[18]; to participate meaningfully in decision-making relating to the environment[19]; and to seek enforcement of environmental laws or compensation in respect of environmental harms[20].

The idea of environmental democracy is therefore founded on three fundamental rights in respect of the environment: access to information; public participation; and access to justice in environmental matters[21]. These tenets are set out under principle 10 of the *Rio Declaration on Environment and Development*[22] which stipulates as follows:

> *'Environmental issues are best handled with <u>the participation of all concerned citizens</u>, at the relevant level. At the national level, each individual shall have appropriate <u>access to information</u> concerning the environment that is held by public authorities, including information on hazardous materials and activities in their communities, and the*

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[14] Ibid

[15] Lewa. S.K et al., 'Actors in Managing Human-Wildlife Conflict: The Case of Arabuko-Sokoke Forest, Kenya' *International Academic Journal of Arts and Humanities.*, Volume 1, Issue 2 (2017), pp 37-50

[16] Center for International Environmental Law., 'Environmental Democracy and Access Rights' Available at https://www.ciel.org/issue/environmental-democracy-access-rights/ (Accessed on 09/10/2025)

[17] Ibid

[18] Ibid

[19] Ibid

[20] Ibid

[21] Worker. J., & Ratte. S., 'What Does Environmental Democracy Look Like?' Op Cit

[22] United Nations General Assembly., 'Report of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development: Rio Declaration on Environment and Development.' A/CONF. 151/26 (Vol.1)

opportunity to <u>participate in decision-making processes</u>. States shall facilitate and encourage <u>public awareness and participation</u> by making information widely available. <u>Effective access to judicial and administrative proceedings</u>, including <u>redress and remedy</u>, shall be provided (Emphasis Added)[23].

The Rio Declaration on Environment and Development therefore captures the core elements of environmental democracy including public participation, access to information and access to justice in environmental matters.

Fostering environmental democracy is key in ensuring sound environmental governance. For example, it has been argued that realising environmental democracy through enhanced access to information, meaningful involvement of the public in environmental decision-making processes, and access to adequate remedies is vital in bolstering environmental governance and addressing global environmental challenges including the triple planetary crisis of climate change, pollution, and biodiversity loss[24]. Environmental democracy is key in ensuring equity, fairness and human rights in the quest towards Sustainable Development including through recognising and upholding the rights of vulnerable and marginalized individuals and communities in environmental governance[25].

Bolstering environmental democracy is therefore important in the quest towards sustainability. In particular, environmental democracy is a viable and effective tool that can strengthen climate governance for Sustainable Development. For example, it has been argued that environmental democracy can drive inclusive, responsive, equitable and fact-based climate action by opening space to the public, civil society organisations,

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[23] Ibid, Principle 10

[24] WFD's approach to environmental democracy., Available at https://www.wfd.org/sites/default/files/2021-11/Global-environmental-crises-a-democratic-response_WFD_2020-updated.pdf (Accessed on 09/10/2025)

[25] Environmental Democracy Index., Available at https://environmentaldemocracyindex.org/node/2728.html#:~:text=Environmental%20Democracy%20Background,Development%2C%20which%20178%20governments%20signed. (Accessed on 09/10/2025)

independent experts, local communities, and businesses whose knowledge, experiences and resources are indispensable in confronting climate change[26]. Increased involvement and participation of all people in decision-making processes is key in delivering effective solutions that can foster sound climate action at all levels[27].

Upholding the tenets of environmental democracy is therefore vital in strengthening climate governance. For instance, enhancing access to information increases public awareness of the climate crisis and its impacts therefore fostering public accountability by ensuring that the public stays informed and is able to challenge activities that can contribute to or worsen climate change[28]. Access to environmental information empowers citizens and incentivises them to participate in environmental decision and policy-making processes in an informed manner thus enabling them to make meaningful contribution towards tackling environmental crises including climate change[29]. In addition, fostering public participation in environmental governance including climate action can build trust and increase effectiveness of decision-making processes by allowing the public to shape priorities and contribute to monitoring efforts, including through participating in environmental impact assessments, climate mitigation and adaptation projects and protesting against harmful projects[30]. It has been argued that public participation can improve the quality of environmental decision-making by providing decision-makers with additional, unique information on local conditions in the

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[26] Parliamentary oversight: The key to effective climate action., Available at https://www.wfd.org/commentary/parliamentary-oversight-key-effective-climate-action#:~:text=Effective%20climate%20action%20needs%20effective,shifting%20development%20pathways%20towards%20sustainability.%22 (Accessed on 10/10/2025)

[27] Environmental Democracy., Available at https://www.wfd.org/environmental-democracy (Accessed on 10/10/2025)

[28] Climate and Environment: Environmental Democracy., Available at https://www.opengovpartnership.org/open-gov-guide/climate-and-environment-environmental-democracy/ (Accessed on 10/10/2025)

[29] United Nations Environment Programme., 'Principle 10' Available at https://www.unep.org/civil-society-engagement/partnerships/principle-10 (Accessed on 10/10/2025)

[30] Climate and Environment: Environmental Democracy., Op Cit

context of social, environmental and economic decision making[31]. Further, access to justice empowers citizens to seek climate justice by holding governments accountable for their climate commitments and seeking redress including compensation for climate injustices[32]. It has been argued that strengthening access to justice in environmental matters provides the foundation for realising the tenets of environmental democracy since it facilitates the public's ability to enforce their right to participate, to be informed, and to hold regulators and polluters accountable for environmental harm[33].

Achieving environmental democracy is therefore necessary in bolstering climate governance for sustainability. Environmental democracy is crucial in ensuring the inclusion of multiple stakeholders including governments at local levels, the civil society, the private sector, indigenous and local communities, women and the youth in environmental and development decisions that deliver effective responses on climate change among other environmental threats[34]. However, the ideal of environmental democracy in climate governance is yet be realised. For example, it has been pointed out that individuals and groups who are disproportionately affected by climate change including the poor, subsistence farmers, rural women, minorities, indigenous groups, local communities and the youth are usually excluded from decision-making processes undermining effective climate governance[35]. It has been argued that environmental governance systems in most countries are strained, with marginalized groups often

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[31] Cerezo. L, & Garcia. G., 'Lay Knowledge and Public Participation in Technological and Environmental Policy.' Available at https://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/SPT/v2n1/pdf/CEREZO.PDF (Accessed on 10/10/2025)

[32] Principles of Climate Justice., Available at https://www.mrfcj.org/principles-of-climate-justice/ (Accessed on 10/10/2025)

[33] United Nations Environment Programme., 'Principle 10' Op Cit

[34] Burke. J., & Ooko. T. B., '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,momentum%20for%20the%20negotiation%20and (Accessed on 10/10/2025)

[35] Environmental Democracy., Op Cit

excluded from decision-making processes[36]. Marginalized and vulnerable groups including women, the youth, indigenous peoples and local communities suffer persistently low levels of representation and participation in environmental decision-making processes including climate governance[37]. In light of these concerns, it is imperative to strengthen environmental democracy by involving multiple stakeholders in climate governance for sustainability.

3.0 Involving Multiple Stakeholders in Climate Governance for Sustainability

Strengthening environmental democracy is crucial in tackling the climate crisis. This approach is key in involving multiple stakeholders including governments at all levels, the private sector, civil society and the public for effective and meaningful responses towards confronting climate change[38]. Environmental democracy has been recognised as a viable tool that bolster the global response on climate change[39]. For instance, it has been argued that strengthening climate action requires the involvement of multiple stakeholders by developing a whole of government, whole of society approach that rallies all government, private and civil society actors and resources in the global climate response[40].

By involving multiple stakeholders, it is possible to strengthen environmental democracy and climate governance for sustainability. For example, the role of national governments is key in climate governance through the development and implementation of climate resilience and net zero policies and programmes including Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) and National Adaptation Plans (NAPs)[41]. National governments

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[36] 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 10/10/2025)

[37] Ibid

[38] Environmental Democracy., Op Cit

[39] World Bank Group., 'How can governments develop a whole-of-society approach to address the climate crisis' Available at https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/arabvoices/how-can-governments-develop-a-whole-of-society-approach-to-address-the-climate-crisis (Accessed on 10/10/2025)

[40] Ibid

[41] Ibid

can drive climate action by formulating and implementing laws and policies on climate change, transitioning economies to low-carbon and green growth, and protecting vulnerable groups and communities against the adverse impacts of climate change[42]. In addition, involving governments at local levels is also key in strengthening climate governance. It has been argued that by being close to people, local governments have contextual knowledge about their territories and the climate change challenges affecting individuals and communities at local levels[43]. Consequently, local governments are appropriately designed to develop and implement effective climate solutions that take into account the specific geographic, climatic, economic, and cultural conditions of local populations[44]. Involving local systems of governance is thus pertinent in strengthening climate governance.

In addition, the role of the private sector is key in strengthening climate governance. It has been argued that the private sector can enhance climate action by greening supply chains, investing in climate-resilient and green goods and services, and financing climate action[45]. Involving the public including vulnerable groups such as the youth, women, indigenous peoples and local communities is also necessary in upholding environmental democracy and strengthening climate action. For example, the youths have been described as agents of change who are driving climate governance globally by mobilizing grassroots initiatives, holding decision-makers accountable through climate protests, designing innovative and green solutions to tackle the climate crisis, and participating in climate negotiations in order to secure their future[46]. In addition, given their role as environmental stewards, the involvement of women is key in strengthening climate

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[42] Ibid

[43] UN-Habitat., 'Multi-Level Governance for Effective Urban Climate Action in the Global South' Available at Available at https://unhabitat.org/multi-level-governance-for-effective-urban-climate-action-in-the-global-south (Accessed on 10/10/2025)

[44] Ibid

[45] United Nations Development Programme., 'Private Sector Engagement in Climate Plans' Available at https://www.adaptation-undp.org/private-sector-engagement-climate-plans (Accessed on 10/10/2025)

[46] United Nations., 'Youth in Action' Available at https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/youth-in-action (Accessed on 10/10/2025)

governance[47]. For example, it has been argued that rural, agricultural and indigenous women have been at the forefront of environmental conservation for many centuries and possess invaluable ancestral knowledge and practices that can enhance climate governance, for example, by preserving crop biodiversity and seed varieties, protecting pollinators and local bee populations, using natural soil building and fertilization methods, or leaving ecosystems such as forests in an intact manner[48]. Further, due to their close proximity to nature, and ecologically-sound indigenous knowledge and practices, involving indigenous peoples and local communities can strengthen climate action[49].

From the foregoing, it is evident that environmental democracy is crucial in strengthening climate governance. By involving multiple stakeholders including governments at the national and local levels, the private sector, and the public including women, the youth, indigenous peoples and local communities, it is possible to effectively confront climate change due to the unique roles, responsibilities, knowledge and resources that each stakeholder brings on board. It is therefore imperative to ensure broad access to climate information that is held by both public and private authorities in order to enable all stakeholders including the public to effectively participate in climate governance[50]. It is also imperative to strengthen public participation in climate governance by involving multiple stakeholders including the youth, women and girls, indigenous peoples and local communities for sound and effective climate action[51]. Further, there is need to strengthen access to justice in climate matters including through both court processes and Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) mechanisms such as

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[47] United Nations., 'Why women are key to climate action' Available at https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/science/climate-issues/women (Accessed on 10/10/2025)
[48] Ibid
[49] United Nations., 'Climate Change' Available at https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/climate-change.html (Accessed on 10/10/2025)
[50] United Nations General Assembly., 'Report of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development: Rio Declaration on Environment and Development.' Op Cit
[51] UN-Habitat., 'Multi-Level Governance for Effective Urban Climate Action in the Global South' Op Cit

arbitration, mediation, conciliation and negotiation in order to achieve climate justice for sustainability[52].

4.0 Conclusion

Environmental democracy is at the heart of sound climate governance towards sustainability. It is therefore necessary to involve multiple stakeholders including governments at the national and local levels, the private sector, and the public including women, the youth, indigenous peoples and local communities in order to ensure effective, viable and responsive solutions that can tackle the climate crisis. Further, empowering all citizens through enhanced access to information, meaningful pubic participation and appropriate channels of accessing justice is key in upholding the tenets of environmental democracy while ensuring sound environmental and climate governance[53]. Involving multiple stakeholders in climate governance is an effective and crucial approach towards realising environmental democracy for sustainability.

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[52] Muigua. K., 'Attaining Environmental Justice through Alternative Dispute Resolution' Available at https://kmco.co.ke/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Attaining-Environmental-Justice-through-Alternative-Dispute-Resolution.pdf (Accessed on 10/10/2025)

[53] United Nations General Assembly., 'Report of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development: Rio Declaration on Environment and Development.' Op Cit

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