

*Environmental Governance in the next Decade: Bolstering International Cooperation and  
Multilateralism for Sustainability*

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**Kariuki Muigua**

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## **Environmental Governance in the next Decade: Bolstering International Cooperation and Multilateralism for Sustainability**

**Kariuki Muigua\***

### **Abstract**

*This paper critically examines how global environmental governance can be strengthened through international cooperation and multilateralism. The paper argues that in light of mounting environmental challenges including depletion of natural resources, environmental degradation, desertification, drought, freshwater scarcity, environmental pollution, loss of biodiversity, and climate change whose impacts are felt globally, it is imperative to embrace international cooperation and multilateralism in order to achieve effective environmental governance. The paper discusses how international cooperation and multilateralism can strengthen environmental governance for sustainability. It also explores some of the key factors hindering the quest towards international cooperation and multilateralism for sound environmental governance. In light of such challenges, the paper offers proposals towards bolstering international cooperation and multilateralism in order to achieve sound environmental governance for sustainability.*

### **1.0 Introduction**

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 decision-making processes<sup>1</sup>. Environmental governance can thus be described as a set of regulatory processes, mechanisms and

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations Environment Programme., 'Environmental Governance' Available at <https://www.unep.org/regions/west-asia/regional-initiatives/environmental-governance> (Accessed on 20/06/2025)

organizations that influence environmental actions and outcomes<sup>2</sup>. It focuses on who makes environmental decisions, how such decisions are made and whether resultant policies and processes lead to environmentally and socially sustainable outcomes<sup>3</sup>. This concept links and harmonizes policies, institutions, procedures, tools and information related to the environment in order to allow all participants including the public and private sectors, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), women, the youth, indigenous peoples and local communities to protect the environment and natural resources, manage environmental and natural resource conflicts, seek points of consensus, make fundamental decisions, and be accountable for their actions related to the environment<sup>4</sup>.

Sound environmental governance is vital towards achieving sustainability. For example, effective environmental governance maintains and improves the ability of environmental systems to function and to produce ecosystem services through the protection of species, habitats and biodiversity<sup>5</sup>. Further, by fostering sound environmental governance, it is possible to achieve effective management of the environment and natural resources in a sustainable and transparent manner for Sustainable Development, peace and justice<sup>6</sup>. Strong environmental governance regimes including effective legal, institutional, and policy frameworks are crucial in protecting and restoring our planet and forging a sustainable tomorrow<sup>7</sup>. According to the United Nation's Environment Programme

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<sup>2</sup> Lemos. M.C., & Agrawal. A., 'Environmental Governance' *Annual Review of Environmental Resources.*, Volume 31, 2006, pp 297-325

<sup>3</sup> 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 20/06/2025)

<sup>4</sup> Haque. M., 'Environmental Governance.' Available at [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/318166768\\_Environmental\\_Governance](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/318166768_Environmental_Governance) (Accessed on 20/06/2025)

<sup>5</sup> Bennett. N., & Satterfield. T., 'Environmental governance: A Practical Framework to Guide Design, Evaluation, and Analysis' Op Cit

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> United Nations Environment Programme., 'Environmental Law and Governance' Available at <https://www.unep.org/topics/environmental-law-and-governance> (Accessed on 20/06/2025)

(UNEP), pursuing good environmental governance through appropriate legal, policy, and institutional frameworks at the global, regional, national and local levels can lead to a healthy and prosperous planet for all living creatures, now and in the future<sup>8</sup>.

The United Nations *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*<sup>9</sup> identifies good governance as one of the key measures towards realizing Sustainable Development in all its three dimensions including economic development, social progress, and environmental conservation<sup>10</sup>. It has been argued that by building robust governance systems across all dimensions including in the environmental context, we can safeguard the environment and human rights and work toward all the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)<sup>11</sup>. Sound environmental governance has been identified as an overarching means to address national, regional, and global environmental problems towards Sustainable Development<sup>12</sup>. Bolstering environmental governance is therefore vital towards attaining the Sustainable Development agenda.

Despite its role in fostering sustainability, the quest towards effective environmental governance is hindered by several challenges. It has been observed that environmental governance systems in most countries are strained, with marginalized groups including indigenous peoples, local communities, women and the youth being excluded from environmental decision-making processes<sup>13</sup>. Further, while environmental governance systems can work relatively well at the national level, they are often not effective in

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<sup>8</sup> United Nations Environment Programme., 'Environmental Governance' Op Cit

<sup>9</sup> 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 20/06/2025)

<sup>10</sup> Ibid

<sup>11</sup> United Nations Environment Programme., 'Environmental Law and Governance' Op Cit

<sup>12</sup> Bennett. N., & Satterfield. T., 'Environmental Governance: A Practical Framework to Guide Design, Evaluation, and Analysis' Op Cit

<sup>13</sup> 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 20/06/2025)

regional, transnational, and global contexts<sup>14</sup>. As a result of poor environmental governance, the global community is facing mounting environmental threats including the triple planetary crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution<sup>15</sup>. Strengthening environmental governance at all levels including at the global level is therefore necessary for sustainability.

This paper critically examines how global environmental governance can be strengthened through international cooperation and multilateralism. The paper argues that in light of mounting environmental challenges including depletion of natural resources, environmental degradation, desertification, drought, freshwater scarcity, environmental pollution, loss of biodiversity, and climate change whose impacts are felt globally, it is imperative to embrace international cooperation and multilateralism in order to achieve effective environmental governance. The paper discusses how international cooperation and multilateralism can strengthen environmental governance for sustainability. It also explores some of the key factors hindering the quest towards international cooperation and multilateralism for sound environmental governance. In light of such challenges, the paper offers proposals towards bolstering international cooperation and multilateralism in order to achieve sound environmental governance for sustainability.

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<sup>14</sup> Young, O., 'Effectiveness of international environmental regimes: Existing knowledge, cutting-edge themes, and research strategies' Available at <https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.1111690108#:~:text=Arrangements%20widely%20regarded%20as%20effective,clean%20up%20the%20Rhine%20River> (Accessed on 20/06/2025)

<sup>15</sup> United Nations Development Programme., 'Environmental Governance: Bolstering Inclusive and Effective Governance Systems that Champion Environmental Justice and Sustainability' Op Cit

## **2.0 The Role of International Cooperation and Multilateralism in Environmental Governance**

International cooperation is vital in strengthening global environmental governance. For example, international cooperation is vital in establishing a framework of environmental policies and actions to guide governments, businesses and the society at large<sup>16</sup>. It has been argued that international cooperation facilitates the translation of global environmental objectives into actionable national policies<sup>17</sup>. International cooperation is vital in bolstering global efforts to protect the environment for sustainability.

It has been pointed out that environmental protection has become an urgent global concern and needs a joint effort from all nations to achieve significant outcomes for sustainability<sup>18</sup>. According to UNEP, addressing the triple planetary crisis of climate change, nature and biodiversity loss, and waste and pollution, as well as other global environmental challenges, requires efficient international cooperation<sup>19</sup>. Through international cooperation, it is possible to strengthen environmental governance by enhancing access to financial resources, capacity development, and technology transfer, while also building robust mechanisms for environmental monitoring and compliance<sup>20</sup>.

Environmental challenges including climate change, pollution, environmental degradation and biodiversity loss transcend national borders and affect all countries<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> International Environmental Governance in Action: What is happening in Nairobi?., Available at <https://www.switch-asia.eu/news/international-environmental-governance-in-action/> (Accessed on 21/06/2025)

<sup>17</sup> Ibid

<sup>18</sup> Karlsson-Vinkhuyzen. S., & Dahl. A., 'Building Effective Multilateralism for the Environment' Available at [https://iefworld.org/fl/Policybrief\\_KarlssonVinkhuyzen\\_Dahl.pdf](https://iefworld.org/fl/Policybrief_KarlssonVinkhuyzen_Dahl.pdf) (Accessed on 21/06/2025)

<sup>19</sup> 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 21/06/2025)

<sup>20</sup> International Environmental Governance in Action: What is happening in Nairobi?., Op Cit

<sup>21</sup> United Nations Institute for Training and Research., 'Introduction to Environmental Governance' Available at <https://globalpact.informea.org/sites/default/files/documents/International%20Environmental%20Governance.pdf> (Accessed on 21/06/2025)

Consequently, it has been pointed out that these challenges cannot be managed effectively by a single country<sup>22</sup>. International cooperation is therefore key towards embracing collaborative efforts in order to achieve common solutions for global environmental challenges<sup>23</sup>.

Multilateralism is also an effective tool in strengthening global environmental governance. The idea of multilateralism refers to a situation in which different countries collaborate with the main aim of achieving common solutions for problems facing them<sup>24</sup>. It has also been defined as collaboration between several countries in pursuit of a common goal, where other parties such as civil society or the private sector may also be involved<sup>25</sup>. According to the United Nations, multilateralism refers to a collective action coordinated by at least three actors<sup>26</sup>. Multilateralism implies that the actors have a shared realization that it is in their interests to work together to resolve problems that are bigger than their individual efforts can manage<sup>27</sup>. The United Nations points out that multilateralism helps nations to confront complex global challenges through a universal and coordinated approach<sup>28</sup>.

It has been pointed out that multilateralism is a vital tool for ensuring that national efforts join up to fix global problems<sup>29</sup>. 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

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid

<sup>23</sup> Ibid

<sup>24</sup> Karlsson-Vinkhuyzen. S., & Dahl. A., 'Building Effective Multilateralism for the Environment' Op Cit

<sup>25</sup> Ibid

<sup>26</sup> United Nations., 'Multilateral System' Available at <https://www.un.org/en/global-issues/multilateral-system> (Accessed on 21/06/2025)

<sup>27</sup> Ibid

<sup>28</sup> Ibid

<sup>29</sup> 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 21/06/2025)

vast and complex environmental problems including climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution<sup>30</sup>. In an increasingly interconnected world, multilateralism has emerged as a powerful tool in dealing with transnational environmental problems towards fostering Sustainable Development<sup>31</sup>. Environmental multilateralism provides a platform for collective decision-making on global environmental issues while also strengthening cross-border investments in environmental governance<sup>32</sup>.

There has been some progress towards embracing international cooperation and multilateralism in global environmental governance. For example, these efforts have led to the adoption of several key international conventions and treaties on environment and natural resources also known as Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs)<sup>33</sup>. These are agreements between states which may take the form of “soft-law”, setting out non-legally binding principles which parties are obligated to consider when taking actions to address a particular environmental issue, or “hard-law” which specify legally binding actions to be undertaken toward an environmental objective<sup>34</sup>. UNEP points out that MEAs have played a vital role in strengthening global environmental governance by fostering climate action, bolstering efforts to conserve biodiversity and endangered species, limiting pollution and enhancing actions to conserve specific natural resources including wetlands, forests, fisheries and the blue economy among others<sup>35</sup>.

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<sup>30</sup> 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 21/06/2025)

<sup>31</sup> The Importance of Multilateralism for Environmental Agreements., Available at <https://www.activesustainability.com/sustainable-development/multilateralism/> (Accessed on 21/06/2025)

<sup>32</sup> Ibid

<sup>33</sup> East African Community., ‘Multilateral Environmental Agreements’ Available at <https://www.eac.int/environment/multilateral-environmental-agreements> (Accessed on 21/06/2025)

<sup>34</sup> Ibid

<sup>35</sup> 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 21/06/2025)

It has been pointed out that MEAs are all founded on the idea that the world's most-pressing environmental challenges transcend borders<sup>36</sup>. Therefore, in order to effectively tackle environmental challenges including climate change, nature and biodiversity loss and pollution and waste, MEAs provide a platform for international cooperation and multilateralism towards sustainability<sup>37</sup>. Among the global environmental challenges that MEAs are designed to respond to include: loss of biological diversity, adverse impacts of climate change, depletion of the ozone layer, hazardous waste, organic pollutants, marine pollution, trade in endangered species, destruction of wetlands among others<sup>38</sup>. Among the key MEAs include the *United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change*<sup>39</sup> (UNFCCC) which focuses on strengthening the global response on climate change, the *Convention on Biological Diversity*<sup>40</sup> which aims to foster sound biodiversity conservation, the *Convention on Wetlands of International Importance especially as Waterfowl Habitat (Ramsar Convention)*<sup>41</sup> which seeks to bolster efforts towards conserving wetlands, the *Paris Agreement*<sup>42</sup>, a legally binding international treaty on climate change, and the *Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora*<sup>43</sup> (CITES) which aims to protect endangered species against over-exploitation through international trade.

Despite the foregoing efforts, effective international cooperation and multilateralism is yet to be realised, undermining global environmental governance. For example,

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid

<sup>37</sup> Ibid

<sup>38</sup> East African Community., 'Multilateral Environmental Agreements' Op Cit

<sup>39</sup> United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change., United Nations, 1992., Available at <https://unfccc.int/resource/docs/convkp/conveng.pdf> (Accessed on 21/06/2025)

<sup>40</sup> United Nations., 'Convention on Biological Diversity' [1993] ATS 32 / 1760 UNTS 79 / 31 ILM 818 (1992)

<sup>41</sup> Convention on Wetlands of International Importance especially as Waterfowl Habitat., Available at [https://www.ramsar.org/sites/default/files/documents/library/current\\_convention\\_text\\_e.pdf](https://www.ramsar.org/sites/default/files/documents/library/current_convention_text_e.pdf) (Accessed on 21/06/2025)

<sup>42</sup> United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change., 'Paris Agreement.' Available at [https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/english\\_paris\\_agreement.pdf](https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/english_paris_agreement.pdf) (Accessed on 21/06/2025)

<sup>43</sup> 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 21/06/2025)

implementation of and compliance with MEAs remains a key global problem undermining the quest towards sustainability<sup>44</sup>. In addition, international commitments on key aspects of environmental governance such as environment and climate finance are usually neglected thus weakening efforts to tackle climate change among other environmental challenges<sup>45</sup>. Further, the voice of developing countries is often ignored in global environmental governance undermining effective international cooperation and multilateralism<sup>46</sup>. It has been pointed out that African states and other states in the Global South participate in global environmental governance as unequal partners<sup>47</sup>.

In light of the foregoing challenges, it is imperative to strengthen international cooperation and multilateralism in order to foster sound global environmental governance for sustainability.

### **3.0 Bolstering International Cooperation and Multilateralism for Sustainability**

It is vital to enhance international cooperation and multilateralism in order to improve environmental governance and effectively tackle transboundary environmental threats including climate change, pollution and biodiversity loss for sustainability. In order to achieve this goal, it is important to strengthen implementation of and compliance with the MEAs<sup>48</sup>. It has been correctly noted that MEAs are vital instruments in global environmental governance designed to foster international cooperation in order to effectively tackle environmental challenges through uniform and harmonised approaches<sup>49</sup>. They are well designed to address global and regional environmental challenges such as loss of biological diversity, adverse impacts of climate change,

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<sup>44</sup> United Nations Environment Programme., 'How Multilateral Environmental Agreements Can Help Mend the Planet' Op Cit

<sup>45</sup> Emerging trends, challenges, and opportunities in climate finance., Available <https://www.climatefinancelab.org/news/trends-in-climate-finance/> (Accessed on 21/06/2025)

<sup>46</sup> 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 21/06/2025)

<sup>47</sup> Ibid

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

<sup>49</sup> United Nations Environment Programme., 'Secretariats and Conventions' Available at <https://www.unep.org/about-un-environment/why-does-un-environment-matter/secretariats-and-conventions> (Accessed on 22/06/2025)

depletion of the ozone layer, hazardous waste, organic pollutants, marine pollution, trade in endangered species, destruction of wetlands among others<sup>50</sup>. Consequently, it is imperative for all countries to comply with and strengthen implementation of MEAs in order to achieve international cooperation and multilateralism for sustainability.

Further, there is need for the global community to work together towards unlocking the means of implementing environmental governance and the wider Sustainable Development agenda<sup>51</sup>. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development identifies the vital means of implementing sustainability efforts globally including finance, technology, capacity building and trade<sup>52</sup>. For example, access to finance is key towards improving environmental governance by unlocking investments in climate mitigation and adaptation, water treatment, waste management, renewable energy, biodiversity conservation, pollution control and ecosystem restoration among other environmental sustainability goals<sup>53</sup>. Technology is also key in improving environmental governance providing appropriate tools for enhanced data collection, policy enforcement, and environmental monitoring<sup>54</sup>. Further, capacity building is crucial for effective environmental governance especially by supporting developing countries to implement the SDGs through North-South cooperation<sup>55</sup>. Trade is also key in bolstering environmental governance by enabling countries to acquire clean technologies that can foster environmental and climate goals<sup>56</sup>. Therefore, it is vital to enhance international

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<sup>50</sup> East African Community., 'Multilateral Environmental Agreements' Op Cit

<sup>51</sup> United Nations General Assembly., 'Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.' 21 October 2015, A/RES/70/1., Op Cit

<sup>52</sup> Ibid

<sup>53</sup> Anderson. J., 'Environmental Finance' Available at <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/B9780128036150000157> (Accessed on 22/06/2025)

<sup>54</sup> The Role of Technology in Environmental Governance., Available at <https://www.igi-global.com/chapter/the-role-of-technology-in-environmental-governance/363225> (Accessed on 22/06/2025)

<sup>55</sup> United Nations General Assembly., 'Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.' 21 October 2015, A/RES/70/1., Op Cit

<sup>56</sup> Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency., 'The Role of International Trade for Environment and Climate Change - an Evidence-based Technical Note' Available at

cooperation by unlocking environment and climate finance, fostering the development, transfer, dissemination and diffusion of environmentally sound technologies, enhancing capacity-building efforts especially in developing countries and strengthening international and regional trade<sup>57</sup>.

It is also vital to give developing countries a voice in global environmental governance<sup>58</sup>. By embracing the effective participation of developing countries, it is possible to bolster international cooperation towards tackling global environmental challenges<sup>59</sup>. It is therefore necessary to adopt fully open, transparent and inclusive global environmental negotiation and governance processes in which all nations are equal and have an equal voice<sup>60</sup>.

#### **4.0 Conclusion**

Fostering international cooperation and multilateralism is vital towards improving global environmental governance for sustainability. Achieving this ideal involves strengthening implementation of and compliance with the MEAs<sup>61</sup>; enhancing global partnerships on means of implementing environmental governance and Sustainable Development including environment and climate finance, technology, trade and capacity building<sup>62</sup>; and giving developing countries a voice in global environmental

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[https://cdn.sida.se/app/uploads/2022/12/05082805/10206848\\_Sida\\_TN\\_Trade\\_Environment\\_and\\_Climate\\_Change\\_web.pdf](https://cdn.sida.se/app/uploads/2022/12/05082805/10206848_Sida_TN_Trade_Environment_and_Climate_Change_web.pdf) (Accessed on 22/06/2025)

<sup>57</sup> United Nations General Assembly., 'Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.' 21 October 2015, A/RES/70/1., Op Cit

<sup>58</sup> Ramutsindela. M., & Buscher. B., 'Environmental Governance and the (Re-)Making of the African State' Op Cit

<sup>59</sup> United Nations Environment Programme., 'Facing Our Global Environmental Challenges Requires Efficient International Cooperation' Available at <https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/editorial/facing-our-global-environmental-challenges-requires-efficient> (Accessed on 22/06/2025)

<sup>60</sup> African Union., 'Common African Position' Available at Available at [https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/32848-doc-common\\_african\\_position.pdf](https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/32848-doc-common_african_position.pdf) (Accessed on 22/06/2025)

<sup>61</sup> United Nations Environment Programme., 'How Multilateral Environmental Agreements Can Help Mend the Planet' Op Cit

<sup>62</sup> United Nations General Assembly., 'Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.' 21 October 2015, A/RES/70/1., Op Cit

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governance<sup>63</sup>. Bolstering international cooperation and multilateralism is therefore necessary towards improving environmental governance in the next decade and beyond for sustainability.

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<sup>63</sup> Ramutsindela. M., & Buscher. B., 'Environmental Governance and the (Re-)Making of the African State'  
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