

Protecting Mother Earth through Regulation and Consensus: Exploring the Role of Multilateral Environmental Agreements in Climate Governance

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Abstract

This paper explores the role of Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs) in climate governance. The paper defines MEAs. It posits that MEAs provide an effective platform towards protecting Mother Earth through regulation and consensus. In particular, the paper notes that if well designed and implemented, MEAs can strengthen climate governance for people and planet. Despite their efficacy in strengthening climate governance, the paper notes that the current landscape of MEAs faces several challenges. The paper discusses the key challenges undermining the role of MEAs in climate governance. In addition, in order to effectively protect Mother Earth through regulation and consensus, the paper proposes how MEAs can be effectively utilised in climate governance.

1.0 Introduction

With the planet facing mounting environmental threats including the triple planetary crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution and waste, it has become increasingly necessary to protect Mother Earth in order to promote Sustainable Development for both present and future generations. In particular, it has been observed that climate change is impacting livelihoods, food security, water availability and security, human security, environmental security and economic growth with severe effects on both people and planet¹. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) notes that the world is witnessing a climate emergency, a situation that is likely to worsen in the near future unless urgent action is taken to reduce global greenhouse gas emissions².

The impacts of climate change are being witnessed all over the world. It has been observed that climate change is now affecting every country on every continent³. It is disrupting the global, regional and national economies and affecting lives and livelihoods, costing people, communities and countries dearly today and even more tomorrow⁴. The adverse effects of climate change

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¹ Koubi. V., 'Climate Change and Disasters: Sustainable development impacts, trends, interlinkages with migration and conflicts, and likely scenarios' Available at https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/wp-content/uploads/sites/45/EGM2019_3_Koubi.pdf (Accessed on 20/08/2026)

² United Nations Environment Programme., 'Climate action' Available at <https://www.unep.org/topics/climate-action> (Accessed on 20/08/2026)

³ United Nations., 'Climate Action.' Available at <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/climate-action/> (Accessed on 20/08/2026)

⁴ Ibid

including intense droughts, water scarcity, severe wildfires, rising sea levels, extreme flooding, melting polar ice, catastrophic storms and declining biodiversity are being witnessed all over the world⁵. It has been observed that the impacts of climate change are happening now, are irreversible for today's generation, and will worsen in future with grave impacts on generations to come as long as humans continue adding greenhouse gases to the atmosphere⁶.

Due to its adverse effects on people and planet, climate change has been described as the most defining challenge of our time⁷. Climate change is a major global concern that is affecting both developed and developing countries in their efforts towards realization of the Sustainable Development agenda⁸. The *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*⁹ acknowledges that climate change is one of the greatest challenges of our time and its adverse impacts undermine the ability of all countries to achieve Sustainable Development¹⁰. Consequently, sound climate governance is a global priority towards protecting Mother Earth for the benefit of both current and future generations.

This paper explores the role of Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs) in climate governance. The paper defines MEAs. It posits that MEAs provide an effective platform towards protecting Mother Earth through regulation and consensus. In particular, the paper notes that if well designed and implemented, MEAs can strengthen climate governance for people and planet. Despite their efficacy in strengthening climate governance, the paper notes that the current landscape of MEAs faces several challenges. The paper discusses the key challenges undermining the role of MEAs in climate governance. In addition, in order to effectively protect Mother Earth through regulation and consensus, the paper proposes how MEAs can be effectively utilised in climate governance.

2.0 Multilateral Environmental Agreements and Climate Governance: Opportunities and Challenges

MEAs are international agreements that address the most pressing environmental issues of global or regional concern and are therefore critical instruments of international environmental

⁵ United Nations., 'What is Climate Change?' Available at <https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/what-is-climate-change> (Accessed on 20/08/2026)

⁶ The Effects of Climate Change., Available at <https://science.nasa.gov/climate-change/effects/> (Accessed on 20/08/2026)

⁷ United Nations., 'What is Climate Change?' Op Cit

⁸ Muigua. K., 'Achieving Sustainable Development, Peace and Environmental Security.' Glenwood Publishers Limited, 2021

⁹ 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 20/08/2026)

¹⁰ Ibid

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governance and international environmental law¹¹. MEAs have also been defined as international agreements between states which can take the form of 'soft-law', by setting out non legally-binding principles which parties are encouraged to consider when taking actions to address a particular environmental issue, or 'hard-law' which specify legally-binding actions to be undertaken toward a particular environmental objective¹². In addition, it has been observed that MEAs are international agreements whose purpose is to promote international cooperation towards addressing global environmental challenges including climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution and waste¹³. These instruments are premised on the understanding that, just as the causes and effects of environmental challenges such as climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution are global in nature, so too must be the solutions to these problems¹⁴.

MEAs play a critical role in strengthening global environmental governance. For example, it has been argued that since MEAs are not merely declarations of intent but tools of international law, they are an ideal and effective means of implementing policies whose objective is environmental protection and Sustainable Development¹⁵. According to UNEP, MEAs have emerged as one of the best solutions towards institutionalizing intergovernmental cooperation and triggering national action towards sound environmental protection¹⁶. These instruments play an essential role in bringing countries together and establishing a common strategy with one goal: safeguarding the planet¹⁷. Through MEAs, it is possible to promote synergies, cooperation and collaboration towards tackling environmental challenges at the global, regional and national levels¹⁸. MEAs therefore play a crucial role towards implementing global environmental commitments for Sustainable Development¹⁹.

¹¹ 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 21/08/2026)

¹² East African Community., 'Multilateral Environmental Agreements' Available at <https://www.eac.int/environment/multilateral-environmental-agreements> (Accessed on 21/08/2026)

¹³ Multilateral Environmental Agreements., Available at <https://www.oneplanetnetwork.org/SDG-12/multilateral-environmental-agreements> (Accessed on 21/08/2026)

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ 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 21/08/2026)

¹⁶ United Nations Environment Programme., 'How Multilateral Environmental Agreements can help mend the planet' Op Cit

¹⁷ Karlsson-Vinkhuyzen. S., & Dahl. A., 'Building Effective Multilateralism for the Environment' Available at https://iefworld.org/fl/Policybrief_KarlssonVinkhuyzen_Dahl.pdf (Accessed on 21/08/2026)

¹⁸ 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 21/08/2026)

¹⁹ United Nations Environment Programme., 'How Multilateral Environmental Agreements Can Help Mend the Planet' Op Cit

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In particular, MEAs provide a suitable platform towards strengthening climate governance for sustainability. It has been argued that since climate change is a global problem, efforts to tackle this crisis at a national level may not be the most effective since its causes and effects have spillover impacts across nations, regions and the global community²⁰. Climate change not only threatens lives, livelihoods, human health and development at national and local levels, but it also raises fundamental geopolitical questions that touch upon the heart of international politics including issues on sovereignty, territorial integrity, and access to natural resources such as water, food, and energy²¹. Addressing the causes and effects of climate change therefore requires coordinated responses involving all countries through multilateralism and diplomacy²². In the context of climate governance, MEAs provide a platform for collective decision-making on climate change while also strengthening cross-border investments towards climate mitigation and adaptation and enabling capacity building in climate governance²³. In particular, MEAs provide a suitable approach towards bolstering climate governance by promoting coordinated global and regional efforts in reducing greenhouse gas emissions²⁴; enabling countries to agree on climate finance which is required in order to address the causes and effects of climate change²⁵; strengthening scientific research on climate change towards understanding its causes, effects and solutions²⁶; and supporting the capacity of developing countries to tackle climate change through the development and transfer on clean and green technologies²⁷.

There has been progress towards utilising MEAs in climate governance. For example, the *United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change*²⁸ (UNFCCC) is the primary international, intergovernmental forum for negotiating the global response to climate change²⁹. The UNFCCC entered into force on 21st March 1994 as the first international legal instrument that focuses on climate change and sets out measures towards addressing the problem³⁰. The objective of the UNFCCC is to stabilize greenhouse gas concentrations at a level that would prevent dangerous

²⁰ European Commission., 'Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs)' Available at https://environment.ec.europa.eu/international-cooperation/multilateral-environmental-agreements-meas_en (Accessed on 21/08/2026)

²¹ What is Climate Diplomacy?., Available at <https://climate-diplomacy.org/what-climate-diplomacy> (Accessed on 21/08/2026)

²² Ibid

²³ The Importance of Multilateralism for Environmental Agreements., Available at <https://www.activesustainability.com/sustainable-development/multilateralism/> (Accessed on 21/08/2026)

²⁴ Njenga. P., 'Multilateralism in Climate Change Negotiations: Progress, Pitfalls, and Prospects' *New England Journal of Public Policy*., 11-1-2025

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ United Nations General Assembly, *United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change*, A/RES/48/189, 20 January 1994

²⁹ Ibid

³⁰ Ibid

anthropogenic (human induced) interference with the climate system³¹. The UNFCCC is a major MEA in climate governance since it establishes legally-binding principles and commitments by states towards confronting climate change³².

In addition, parties to the UNFCCC adopted the *Paris Agreement*³³, a legally-binding international treaty on climate change. The objective of the Paris Agreement is to strengthen the global response to the threat of climate change, in the context of Sustainable Development and efforts to eradicate poverty through holding the increase in the global average temperature to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels and pursuing efforts to limit the temperature increase to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels; increasing the ability to adapt to the adverse impacts of climate change and foster climate resilience and low greenhouse gas emissions development, in a manner that does not threaten food production; and making finance flows consistent with a pathway towards low greenhouse gas emissions and climate resilient development³⁴. The Paris Agreement has strengthened global climate governance including through establishing Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) which embody efforts by each country to reduce national emissions and adapt to the impacts of climate change³⁵. It also stipulates commitments by states on key issues including climate finance, technology development and transfer and capacity building towards confronting the climate crisis³⁶.

MEAs play a key role in climate governance. If well implemented, MEAs can promote global and regional collaboration and cooperation towards tackling the drivers and effects of climate change³⁷. However with the climate crisis worsening, it has been argued that MEAs have not been effectively harnessed and utilised in climate governance³⁸. In particular, it has been argued that weak and ineffective implementation of and compliance with MEAs affects their role in tackling global environmental problems including climate change³⁹. In particular, when states fail to comply with MEAs and implement commitments on key issues including reduction of greenhouse gas emissions and unlocking climate finance in order to support mitigation and adaptation actions especially in developing countries, the role of MEAs in climate governance is

³¹ Ibid

³² Ibid

³³ United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change., 'Paris Agreement.' Available at https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/english_paris_agreement.pdf (Accessed on 21/08/2026)

³⁴ Ibid, article 2 (1)

³⁵ United Nations Climate Change., 'Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs)' Available at <https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/the-paris-agreement/nationally-determined-contributionsndcs> (Accessed on 21/08/2026)

³⁶ United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change., Op Cit

³⁷ United Nations Environment Programme., 'How Multilateral Environmental Agreements Can Help Mend the Planet' Op Cit

³⁸ Ibid

³⁹ Ibid

undermined⁴⁰. Consequently, there is need reinvigorate the role of MEAs in climate governance towards effectively protecting Mother Earth through regulation and consensus.

3.0 Strengthening Multilateral Environmental Agreements for Effective Climate Governance

MEAs provide an effective and appropriate strategy towards protecting Mother Earth through regulation and consensus in the context of climate governance. For example, by setting legally-binding obligations on aspects of climate governance including reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, MEAs such as the UNFCCC and the Paris Agreement bolster the role of regulation in protecting people and planet. In addition, MEAs provide a platform for collaboration and cooperation among states in addressing the causes and effects of climate change thus strengthening the role of consensus in promoting sustainability⁴¹.

It is therefore necessary to strengthen the role of MEAs in climate governance in order to achieve sustainable outcomes for people and planet. In particular, it has been correctly observed that strengthening implementation of and compliance with the MEAs is a priority action towards achieving sound environmental and climate governance for Sustainable Development⁴². Through effective compliance with MEAs, it is possible to reinvigorate national action in the environmental sector towards achieving sound environmental governance⁴³. In particular, countries have been urged to translate global commitments under MEAs into achievable national policies, goals and objectives⁴⁴. For instance, by developing achievable and appropriate NDCs, it is possible to translate commitments under the Paris Agreement into actionable national plans towards strengthening climate governance⁴⁵.

Further, it is necessary to utilise MEAs as a platform for consensus towards achieving effective climate governance for people and planet. For example, parties under the UNFCCC and the Paris Agreement can utilise meetings and decisions under the auspices of the Conference of Parties (COP) towards achieving consensus on issues such as climate finance, emission reduction targets, green technology development and transfer, and capacity building for developing countries towards sound climate governance⁴⁶. In addition, it has been observed that by building national environmental capacities including though strengthening environmental institutions, unlocking environmental finance, and utilising science, technology and indigenous knowledge in environmental governance, it is possible to ensure that countries are well-equipped to translate

⁴⁰ Njenga. P., 'Multilateralism in Climate Change Negotiations: Progress, Pitfalls, and Prospects' Op Cit

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

⁴² Ibid

⁴³ Ibid

⁴⁴ United Nations Climate Change., 'Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs)' Op Cit

⁴⁵ Ibid

⁴⁶ 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 21/08/2026)

international legal norms stipulated under MEAs into national laws and policies for effective compliance⁴⁷.

Through the foregoing interventions, it is possible to effectively utilise MEAs to achieve sound climate governance for people and planet.

4.0 Conclusion

Protecting Mother Earth is necessary for Sustainable Development especially in light of mounting global environmental problems including climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution and waste. In particular, MEAs provide a suitable approach towards protecting people and planet through regulation and consensus⁴⁸. It is therefore vital to strengthen implementation of and compliance with MEAs such as the Paris Agreement and the UNFCCC in order to bolster climate governance towards effectively protecting Mother Earth through regulation and consensus.

⁴⁷ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Backing environmental multilateralism in complex times' Available at <https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/speech/backing-environmental-multilateralism-complex-times> (Accessed on 21/08/2026)

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

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