

Resource Sovereignty as a Human Right: Ensuring Accountability, Value Addition and Economic Development for Africa

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Resource Sovereignty as a Human Right?: Ensuring Accountability, Value Addition and Economic Development for Africa

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Abstract

This paper critically examines how resource sovereignty can be attained in Africa. The paper defines resource sovereignty. It observes that resource sovereignty is a fundamental human right which gives states and citizens the power to manage their natural capital for human progress and development. Despite being recognised as a core human right, the paper notes that attaining resource sovereignty remains an elusive dream for Africa. The paper discusses some of the key factors undermining resource sovereignty in Africa. It argues that lack of resource sovereignty is one of the major causes of underdevelopment in Africa. Consequently, the paper posits that fostering resource sovereignty is crucial towards harnessing Africa's natural resources for

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Sustainable Development. The paper discusses how resource sovereignty can be realised in Africa by ensuring accountability, value addition and economic development.

1.0 Introduction

Natural resources are crucial in unlocking Sustainable Development across all its dimensions: economic, social and environmental. For instance, it has been observed that the abundance of natural resources provides a great advantage for a country's economic and social development, while resource shortage is associated with underdevelopment¹. If equitably and sustainably harnessed and managed, natural resources including land, oil, gas, forests, water and minerals can propel economic and social growth at all levels². Further, natural resources provide humanity with vital services including food, water, energy and medicines therefore fostering human health and well-being while also supporting fundamental human rights³. According to the United Nations *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*⁴, social and economic development all over the world depends on the sustainable use and management of the planet's natural resources⁵.

In particular, the abundance of natural resources in Africa provides immense opportunities to foster Sustainable Development for people and planet. The continent is endowed with diverse natural resources including minerals, fossil fuels (coal, oil and gas), water, forests and arable land⁶. Africa's vast natural resources have been identified as the gateway to finance the continent's development⁷. It has been argued that tapping into Africa's rich natural capital could be the key to unlocking the continent's

¹ Bridge. G., 'Natural Resources' *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography*, 2009., pp 261-268

² Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development., 'Natural Resources and Development' Available at <https://www.oecd.org/en/topics/sub-issues/natural-resources-and-development.html#:~:text=If%20well%20managed%2C%20oil%2C%20gas,economic%2C%20social%20and%20environmental%20hazards>. (Accessed on 20/01/2026)

³ Muigua. K., Wamukoya. D & Kariuki. F., 'Natural Resources and Environmental Justice in Kenya.' Glenwood Publishers Limited, 2015

⁴ 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 20/01/2026)

⁵ Ibid

⁶ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Our Work in Africa' Available at <https://www.unep.org/regions/africa/our-work-africa> (Accessed on 20/01/2026)

⁷ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Is Africa's Natural Capital the Gateway to Finance Its Development?' Available at <https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/story/africas-natural-capital-gateway-finance-its-development> (Accessed on 20/01/2026)

development potential and pulling millions out of the poverty trap⁸. With the right approaches, natural resources in Africa can be effectively harnessed to finance social amenities, infrastructure, energy, education, health, industry, and governance for enhanced development in the continent⁹. However, challenges such as poor resource governance and lack of resource sovereignty are undermining the role of natural resources as a driver of Sustainable Development in Africa¹⁰.

This paper critically examines how resource sovereignty can be attained in Africa. The paper defines resource sovereignty. It observes that resource sovereignty is a fundamental human right which gives states and citizens the power to manage their natural capital for human progress and development. Despite being recognised as a core human right, the paper notes that attaining resource sovereignty remains an elusive dream for Africa. The paper discusses some of the key factors undermining resource sovereignty in Africa. It argues that lack of resource sovereignty is one of the major causes of underdevelopment in Africa. Consequently, the paper posits that fostering resource sovereignty is crucial towards harnessing Africa's natural resources for Sustainable Development. The paper discusses how resource sovereignty can be realised in Africa by ensuring accountability, value addition and economic development.

2.0 Resource Sovereignty as a Human Right: Problems and Promises for Africa

Resource sovereignty refers the right of all states and their citizens to manage and dispose freely of their natural resources¹¹. Resource sovereignty has also been defined as the exclusive right of states to control, regulate, and manage natural resources found within their territories, including the right to profit from their sale or taxation¹². It has been observed that at its most fundamental level, resource sovereignty entails the authority that a nation, entity or people hold over their resources¹³. This concept not only entails

⁸ Ibid

⁹ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Our work in Africa' Op Cit

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights., 'Self-determination of peoples and sovereignty over natural wealth and resources' Available at <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Development/RTDBook/PartIIChapter5.pdf> (Accessed on 21/01/2026)

¹² Stilz. A., 'Resource Sovereignty and International Responsibilities' Available at <https://academic.oup.com/book/35135/chapter-abstract/299320064?redirectedFrom=fulltext> (Accessed on 21/01/2026)

¹³ Resource Sovereignty., Available at <https://pollution.sustainability-directory.com/term/resource-sovereignty/#:~:text=Fundamentals,standards%20related%20to%20resource%20extraction.> (Accessed on 21/01/2026)

physical control over resources but it also covers the right to determine the exploitation, management, and distribution of natural resources¹⁴.

It has been argued that resource sovereignty is a fundamental right belonging to all states and their citizens¹⁵. This right entails several key components. These include *legal authority* which covers formal recognition of a state's rights over its resources¹⁶; *economic control* which gives states and their citizens the power to exploit their natural resources including through taxation, revenue sharing, and investment policies for development¹⁷; and *governance autonomy* which empowers states to make independent decisions concerning resources in accordance with national principles and goals such as environmental sustainability and public participation¹⁸.

Resource sovereignty has been recognised as a fundamental human right by the United Nations General Assembly through its *Declaration on Permanent Sovereignty over Natural Resources*¹⁹. According to the Declaration, right of states and their people to permanent sovereignty over their natural wealth and resources must be exercised in the interest of their national development and well-being²⁰. Further, the Declaration states that the exploration, development and disposition of natural resources should be in accordance with national laws, principles and interests including the authorization, restriction or prohibition of activities related to such resources²¹. In addition, the Declaration requires benefits derived from the exploration of natural resources to be shared fairly and equitably with states and their citizens²². It also acknowledges that violation of the rights of peoples and nations to sovereignty over their natural wealth and resources is contrary to the spirit and principles of the Charter of the United Nations and hinders the development of international co-operation and the maintenance of international peace and security²³.

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights., 'Self-determination of peoples and sovereignty over natural wealth and resources' Op Cit

¹⁶ Resource Sovereignty., Op Cit

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ United Nations General Assembly., 'Resolution 1803 (XVII) of 14 December, 1962, "Permanent Sovereignty over Natural Resources" Available at <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/204587?ln=en&v=pdf#files> (Accessed on 21/01/2026)

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Ibid

²² Ibid

²³ Ibid

From the foregoing, it emerges that resource sovereignty is a fundamental human right. Protecting this right is crucial since it guarantees states and citizens entitlement to fully and freely manage and utilise their natural resources for economic, social and cultural development²⁴. In particular, it has been observed that upholding resource sovereignty is key for developing countries since it empowers them to harness and leverage on their natural capital for socio-economic growth and overall national development and progress²⁵. For developing countries, resource sovereignty grants them the right and freedom to pursue their own path regarding the management, use and conservation of natural resources²⁶. This is especially vital due to the legacy of colonialism where natural resources in the Global South were plundered by colonial powers at the expense of national development²⁷.

Despite being a fundamental human right that can drive Sustainable Development, achieving resource sovereignty remains a challenge for Africa. For example, it has been observed that from its colonial to post-colonial history, Africa has majorly been a supplier of resources and raw materials to the rest of the world at the expense of the continent's development²⁸. It has been argued that the history of plunder of natural resources in Africa has created a landscape where the dominance of foreign companies is immense and more pronounced than in any other part of the world²⁹. For example, Africa's rich extractive industry, comprising of oil, gas and minerals, is dominated by foreign multinational companies³⁰. It has been observed that when entering into contracts with African states, these foreign companies have high bargaining power in the negotiations due to their influential position and backing from their governments³¹. Consequently,

²⁴ Natural Resource Sovereignty and the Right to Development in Africa., Available at <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/edit/10.4324/9781003195115/natural-resource-sovereignty-right-development-africa-carol-chi-ngang-serges-djoyou-kamga?refId=5f1b428b-53a5-4116-b2a1-2d269dd8e592> (Accessed on 21/01/2026)

²⁵ Resource Sovereignty., Op Cit

²⁶ Barral. V., 'National Sovereignty over Natural Resources: Environmental Challenges and Sustainable Development' Available at <https://www.elgaronline.com/edcollchap/edcoll/9781783478323/9781783478323.00011.xml> (Accessed on 21/01/2026)

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ Resource Sovereignty: The Agenda for Africa's Exit from the State of Plunder., Available at https://thetricontinental.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/190503_Dossier-16_EN_Final_Web.pdf (Accessed on 21/01/2026)

²⁹ Ibid

³⁰ Muigua. K., 'Utilizing Africa's Natural Resources to Fight Poverty' Available at <https://kmco.co.ke/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Utilizing-Africas-Natural-Resources-to-Fight-Poverty-26th-March2014.pdf> (Accessed on 21/01/2026)

³¹ Ibid

they have been accused of violating Africa's resource sovereignty by failing to enhance benefits to states and local communities since they focus on maximising profits which are often channeled out of the continent³². Due to poor practices that fail to embrace sustainability and enhance benefits to local communities, resource extraction in Africa has been a source of resource-based conflicts, environmental degradation and human rights violations³³. It has been argued that strategies such as legitimization, transfer pricing and tax avoidance which are usually employed by multinational companies undermine Africa's resource sovereignty since they deprive African countries well-endowed in natural resources from benefiting fully from their legitimate, mandated and legal share of their natural resource endowments³⁴.

In light of the foregoing concerns, it is imperative to foster resource sovereignty in order to harness Africa's natural capital for Sustainable Development.

3.0 Upholding Resource Sovereignty for Development in Africa

Africa is endowed with natural resources including land, water, oil, natural gas, minerals, forests and wildlife³⁵. It has been observed that natural resources comprise the continent's largest form of wealth³⁶. The abundance of natural resources holds immense potential towards unlocking development, progress and prosperity in Africa. The abundance and ongoing discoveries of natural resource in Africa including oil, minerals, and gas offer a new source of revenue for advancing human development and supporting African countries on the path to self-sufficiency³⁷. However, lack of resource sovereignty affects the use of Africa's natural capital to spur development and human progress with most of Africa's resource wealth being channeled out of the continent.

Upholding resource sovereignty is therefore crucial towards harnessing Africa's natural capital for Sustainable Development. It has been observed that through resource

³² Muigua. K., 'Multinational Corporations, Investment and Natural Resource Management in Kenya.' Available at <http://kmco.co.ke/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Multinational-Corporations-Investment-and-Natural-Resource-Management-in-Kenya-Kariuki-Muigua-November-2018.pdf> (Accessed on 21/01/2026)

³³ Muigua. K., 'Exploited, Poor and Dehumanised: Overcoming the Resource Curse in Africa.' Available at <https://kmco.co.ke/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Exploited-Poor-and-Dehumanised.pdf> (Accessed on 21/01/2026)

³⁴ Henri. A., 'Natural Resources Curse: A Reality in Africa.' *Resources Policy*, Volume 63, October 2019

³⁵ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Our work in Africa' Op Cit

³⁶ Ibid

³⁷ African Development Bank Group., 'Delivering on the Promise: Leveraging Natural Resources to Accelerate Human Development in Africa' Available at <https://www.afdb.org/en/topics-and-sectors/initiatives-partnerships/african-natural-resources-centre/delivering-on-the-promise-leveraging-natural-resources-to-accelerate-human-development-in-africa> (Accessed on 21/01/2026)

sovereignty, Africa can reduce its foreign dependence by harnessing its natural resources for development³⁸. In order to achieve this goal, it is imperative to ensure transparency and accountability in the exploitation of Africa's natural resources³⁹. Consequently, African countries have been urged to renegotiate unfair resource contracts in order to give states more control over their resources and ensure that benefits are shared equitably with all parties including local communities⁴⁰. It has been argued that African countries can achieve resource sovereignty by reviewing and entering into favourable resource extraction with multinational corporations in order to uphold national principles and interests including equitable benefit-sharing, respect for human rights and sound environmental conservation⁴¹.

Further, the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) has been advocated as a policy mechanism that can ensure transparency and accountability in resource-rich developing countries especially in sub-Saharan Africa⁴². This approach notes that enhancing transparency, accountability and good governance can enable Africa countries to reap the full benefits from their abundant natural resources including minerals, oil, and gas⁴³. In order to achieve these goals, EITI obliges states to disclose information along the extractive industry value chain – from how extraction rights are awarded, to how revenues make their way through government and how they benefit the public⁴⁴. Embracing EITI can therefore ensure accountability in the extractive sector in Africa towards resource sovereignty.

Promoting value addition can also ensure resource sovereignty in Africa⁴⁵. The concept of value addition requires resource-rich countries to do more than merely export raw materials in order to maximise benefits from their natural capital⁴⁶. It requires states to

³⁸ Resource Sovereignty: Africa's Lost Birthright., Available at <https://thepanafrikanist.com/resource-sovereignty-africas-lost-birthright/#:~:text=By%20Fortune%20Madondo,fairer%2C%20more%20sustainable%20global%20economy>. (Accessed on 21/01/2026)

³⁹ Ibid

⁴⁰ Ibid

⁴¹ Muigua. K., 'Exploited, Poor and Dehumanised: Overcoming the Resource Curse in Africa.' Op Cit

⁴² Hilson. G., & Maconachie. R., 'Good Governance' and the Extractive Industries in Sub-Saharan Africa' Available at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/08827500802045511> (Accessed on 21/01/2026)

⁴³ Ibid

⁴⁴ Ibid

⁴⁵ Resource Sovereignty: The Agenda for Africa's Exit from the State of Plunder., Op Cit

⁴⁶ Natural Resource Governance Institute., 'What Does 'Value Addition' Mean Amid Surging Global Mineral Demand?' Available at <https://resourcegovernance.org/articles/what-does-value-addition-mean-amid-surging-global-mineral-demand> (Accessed on 21/01/2026)

transform raw materials into finished and high-value goods and products through processing and manufacturing⁴⁷. Through this, it is possible to build local industries, foster innovation, create jobs, reduce foreign reliance and harness maximum benefits from resources⁴⁸. In particular, it has been observed that policies to increase local content and value addition to natural resources and utilization along value chains, and in-country value creation and retention can ensure that Africa effectively harnesses its natural capital and reduces foreign reliance towards Sustainable Development⁴⁹. Bolstering value addition in Africa can therefore accelerate economic growth by ensuring that the continent fully harnesses its natural capital and avoid foreign reliance towards resource sovereignty.

Further, it has been observed that building robust natural resource governance systems, investing revenues from natural resources wisely by prioritising infrastructure, health, energy and education among other key areas, putting in place equitable national benefit-sharing arrangements and avoiding threats such as corruption and illegal extraction and use of resources can ensure Africa's economic development while reducing external pressures on the continent's resources⁵⁰.

Through the foregoing, it is possible to uphold resource sovereignty as a human right in Africa.

⁴⁷ Ibid

⁴⁸ Ibid

⁴⁹ African Development Bank Group., 'Natural Capital for Climate Finance and Green Growth in Africa' Available at https://www.afdb.org/sites/default/files/aeo_2023-chap3-en.pdf (Accessed on 21/01/2026)

⁵⁰ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Our work in Africa' Op Cit

4.0 Conclusion

There is need to protect resource sovereignty in Africa. Through this, it is possible to ensure that states and citizens of Africa have the right and freedom to manage and use their natural resources towards development. It is therefore vital to uphold resource sovereignty in Africa by ensuring transparency and accountability in the governance and use of natural resources, fostering value addition in order to maximise benefits and reduce foreign reliance and pursuing economic development through sound resource governance⁵¹. Achieving resource sovereignty as a human right is therefore necessary towards harnessing Africa's natural capital for Sustainable Development.

⁵¹ Resource Sovereignty: The Agenda for Africa's Exit from the State of Plunder., Op Cit

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