

Sustainability and Environmental Justice in Africa: Changing Narratives, Decolonizing Governance and Empowering Communities

Kariuki Muigua

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Kariuki Muigua*

Abstract

This paper critically examines how the ideal of environmental justice can be attained in Africa for sustainability. The paper argues that fostering environmental justice is a key agenda in Africa due to the disproportionate impacts the continent faces from environmental hazards including the triple planetary crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution. The paper notes that the prevalence of environmental injustices in Africa undermines the continent's progress towards sustainability. Consequently, it argues that there is need to redefine Africa's position in the environmental justice discourse in order to unlock Sustainable Development. The paper suggests how the ideal of environmental justice can be achieved in Africa by changing narratives, decolonizing governance and empowering communities.

1.0 Introduction

Promoting environmental justice is a vital solution in the global pursuit of sustainability. In light of mounting global environmental threats such as climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution, environmental justice involves protecting people and planet from disproportionate exposure to environmental hazards, addressing unequal access to environmental benefits, and tackling concerns about the uneven implications of environmental laws and policies¹. In particular, it has been observed that environmental justice recognises the disproportionate impacts of environmental hazards including the triple planetary crisis of climate change, pollution, and biodiversity loss². The concept of environmental justice focuses on protecting vulnerable people and communities, including people of colour, indigenous and local communities, women and the youth who are disproportionately impacted by environmental crises such as climate change, pollution and biodiversity loss³. At its core, environmental justice means that every person

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¹ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development., 'Environmental Justice: Context, Challenges and National Approaches' Available at https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2024/05/environmental-justice_466cb9e2/57616eb4-en.pdf (Accessed on 31/07/2026)

² United Nations Development Programme., 'Five steps to environmental justice' Available at <https://www.undp.org/blog/five-steps-environmental-justice> (Accessed on 31/07/2026)

³ Ibid

regardless of race, colour, nationality, origin, or income has the right to the same environmental protection and benefits, as well as meaningful involvement in environmental policy making⁴.

By protecting vulnerable people and communities from the disproportionate impacts of environmental hazards, environmental justice plays a key role towards sustainability. For instance, it has been observed that environmental justice highlights the plight of vulnerable people and communities who bear the most burden when it comes to environmental damage and seeks to give them a voice through access to environmental information, participation in environmental decision-making processes and access to justice in order to ensure sustainable and equitable development⁵. Environmental justice plays a key role towards sustainability since it provides a framework for addressing environmental inequities, disparate impact of environmental crises, and unequal protection in environmental matters⁶. It has been correctly observed that by fostering environmental justice, it is possible to tackle environmental threats including climate change, pollution and biodiversity loss while ensuring equity, justice, fairness and human rights for every person⁷. Environmental justice entails equitable and fair distribution of environmental benefits and burdens, ensuring that every person and all communities, particularly those historically marginalised, have the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment⁸. Securing environmental justice is therefore necessary for both people and planet towards Sustainable Development.

This paper critically examines how the ideal of environmental justice can be attained in Africa for sustainability. The paper argues that fostering environmental justice is a key agenda in Africa due to the disproportionate impacts the continent faces from environmental hazards including the triple planetary crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution. The paper notes that the prevalence of environmental injustices in Africa undermines the continent's progress towards sustainability. Consequently, it argues that there is need to redefine Africa's position in the environmental justice discourse in order to unlock Sustainable Development. The paper suggests how the ideal of environmental justice can be achieved in Africa by changing narratives, decolonizing governance and empowering communities.

⁴ The Environmental Justice Movement., Available at <https://www.nrdc.org/stories/environmental-justice-movement> (Accessed on 31/07/2026)

⁵ Muigua. K., Wamukoya. D., & Kariuki. F., 'Natural Resources and Environmental Justice in Kenya.' Glenwood Publishers Limited, 2015

⁶ Ekhatior. E., & Agbaitoro. G., 'The Role of Environmental Justice in Promoting the Rule of Law in Natural Resource Conflict Resolution in Africa: A Case Study of Nigeria' Available at https://www.researchgate.net/publication/366640118_The_Role_of_Environmental_Justice_in_Promoting_the_Rule_of_Law_in_Natural_Resource_Conflict_Resolution_in_Africa_A_Case_Study_of_Nigeria (Accessed on 31/07/2026)

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Environmental Justice – Definition and Explanation., Available at <https://oxford-review.com/the-oxford-review-diversity-equity-and-inclusion-dictionary/environmental-justice-definition-and-explanation/> (Accessed on 31/07/2026)

2.0 Environmental Justice as a Driver of Sustainability in Africa

Attaining environmental justice in Africa is a crucial agenda towards sustainability. It has been observed that mounting environmental threats in Africa including climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution and unsustainable resource extraction undermine human rights including the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment with disproportionate impacts on vulnerable individuals and communities in the continent⁹. For example, despite having contributed the least to climate change, Africa stands out disproportionately as the most vulnerable region in the world to climate change and its impacts¹⁰. It has been observed that African countries are among the lowest producers of global greenhouse gas emissions, yet they are the most vulnerable to adverse climatic events¹¹. Climate change is causing food insecurity, stressing water resources, affecting human health, displacing populations and impeding socio-economic development across Africa with disproportionate impacts on the continent's vulnerable populations including indigenous and local communities, women and girls and the youth¹².

Biodiversity loss also fuels environmental injustices in Africa. The continent has been identified as one of the most biodiverse regions on Earth, hosting nearly a quarter of global biodiversity¹³. Africa is home to unique, diverse and rich plant and animal species and critical ecosystems making the continent a global biodiversity hotspot¹⁴. However, it has been observed that Africa's biodiversity is declining with ongoing losses of species and habitats undermining the continent's Sustainable Development efforts¹⁵. Biodiversity loss in Africa raises environmental injustices since it affects millions of livelihoods in the continent especially in rural areas, increases food and water insecurity, fuels conflicts over land and dwindling natural resources, and can lead to the transmission of zoonotic diseases undermining human health and well-being¹⁶.

⁹ Bassey. N., 'The Struggle for Environmental Justice in Africa' Available at <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/africa/the-struggle-for-environmental-justice-in-africa-90314#:~:text=The%20struggle%20for%20environmental%20justice%20in%20Africa%20is%20complex%20and%20not%20inanimate%20or%20lifeless%20entities> (Accessed on 31/07/2026)

¹⁰ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Responding to Climate Change' Available at <https://www.unep.org/regions/africa/regional-initiatives/responding-climate-change> (Accessed on 31/07/2026)

¹¹ Fonjong. L., Matose. F., & Sonnenfeld. D., 'Climate change in Africa: Impacts, adaptation, and policy responses' Available at <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S095937802400116X> (Accessed on 31/07/2026)

¹² Rao. V., & Yadav. P., 'Confronting Climate Change in Africa.' Available at <https://knowledge.insead.edu/responsibility/confronting-climate-change-africa> (Accessed on 31/07/2026)

¹³ Biodiversity loss in Africa: A critical risk and opportunity for impact., Available at https://www.controlrisks.com/our-thinking/insights/biodiversity-loss-in-africa-a-critical-risk-and-opportunity-for-impact?utm_referrer=https://www.google.com (Accessed on 31/07/2026)

¹⁴ African Development Bank Group., 'Biodiversity' Available at <https://www.afdb.org/en/topics-and-sectors/topics/biodiversity#:~:text=Africa%20is%20one%20of%20the.%2C%20savannas%2C%20and%20coral%20reefs> (Accessed on 31/07/2026)

¹⁵ UNEP-WCMC (2016) The State of Biodiversity in Africa: A mid-term review of progress towards the Aichi Biodiversity Targets. UNEP-WCMC, Available at <https://www.cbd.int/gbo/gbo4/outlook-africa-en.pdf> (Accessed on 31/07/2026)

¹⁶ Africa Center for Strategic Studies., 'African Biodiversity Loss Raises Risk to Human Security' Available at <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/african-biodiversity-loss-risk-human-security/> (Accessed on 31/07/2026)

Further, unsustainable resource extraction is another major cause of environmental injustices in Africa. Despite being endowed with natural resources including arable land, extractives such as minerals, oil and gas, forests, large rivers and lakes and wildlife, Africa loses a large share of its natural capital through illegal activities such as illegal mining, illegal logging, the illegal trade in wildlife, unregulated fishing and environmental degradation and loss¹⁷. This situation fuels environmental injustices against vulnerable groups in Africa including indigenous peoples, local communities and rural women who rely on natural resources such as land, forests and water for their livelihoods and well-being¹⁸. In addition, unsustainable extraction of Africa's natural capital is leading to a dramatic transformation of landscapes in Africa, puts pressure on arable land, destroys ecosystems critical to rural livelihoods, and leads to pollution of air and water impacting human health and ecosystem services¹⁹.

In light of the foregoing concerns, promoting environmental justice in Africa is a prerequisite for sustainability. The ideal of environmental justice in Africa focuses on protecting the vulnerable including indigenous peoples, local communities, women and the youth who are adversely impacted by environmental threats including the triple planetary crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution²⁰. It has been correctly observed that by promoting environmental justice for all in Africa, it is possible to protect vulnerable individuals and communities including indigenous peoples, local communities, women and the youth who are adversely impacted by environmental threats while also safeguarding Africa's biodiversity, ecosystems and natural capital towards Sustainable Development²¹. It is therefore necessary to bolster environmental justice in Africa in order to achieve sustainability for present and future generations.

3.0 Fostering Environmental Justice in Africa

With Africa facing mounting environmental challenges such as climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution, securing environmental justice is key towards protecting the continent's vulnerable individuals and communities towards sustainability. In order promote environmental justice for people and planet in Africa, it is imperative to change narratives. For instance, by redefining Africa's position in the environmental justice discourse, it is possible to harness local, appropriate

¹⁷ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Our work in Africa' Available at <https://www.unep.org/regions/africa/our-work-africa> (Accessed on 31/07/2026)

¹⁸ Maphosa. S.B., 'Natural Resources and Conflict: Unlocking the economic dimension of peace-building in Africa' Available at <https://africaportal.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/No.-74.-Natural-Resources-and-Conflict..pdf> (Accessed on 31/07/2026)

¹⁹ United Nations Development Programme., 'Environmental Justice: Comparative Experiences in Legal Empowerment' Available at <https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/publications/Environmental-Justice-Comparative-Experiences.pdf> (Accessed on 31/07/2026)

²⁰ Mahadew. B., 'Can the African Human Rights System be an Effective Environmental Justice System in Africa?' Available at https://www.pulp.up.ac.za/images/edocman/edited-collections/environmental_justice_in_africa/Chapter%2011%20EJ.pdf (Accessed on 31/07/2026)

²¹ Ibid

and context-specific solutions towards fostering sustainability for both people and planet²². African countries have been urged to implement stronger environmental governance frameworks in order to tackle climate change, biodiversity loss, resource depletion and pollution towards environmental justice²³. Further, through a stronger and unified voice in global decision-making processes on key issues including climate action, biodiversity conservation and other environmental multilateral processes, it is possible for Africa to raise its environmental justice concerns and harness global support towards tackling these challenges towards sustainability²⁴. There is also need to decolonize governance towards promoting environmental justice in Africa. For instance, it has been observed that by moving away from Western environmental governance frameworks towards Afrocentric approaches, it is possible to strengthen environmental governance in Africa towards fostering justice for people and planet²⁵. It has been argued that Africa often looks too much for solutions from the West at the expense of its indigenous knowledge systems undermining effective environmental governance²⁶. For example, environmental indigenous knowledge systems, values and practices that have played a key role in promoting sound environmental governance in Africa for many centuries are usually ignored and deemed inferior, 'uncodified' and 'unscientific'²⁷. Consequently, by decolonizing governance, it is possible to harness Afrocentric solutions towards tackling Africa's environmental challenges and achieving justice for people and planet. In particular, it has been suggested that solutions to the environmental crises facing Africa including climate change, biodiversity loss, deforestation, desertification, water scarcity, biodiversity loss and pollution need to come from the attitudes, values, knowledge systems and philosophies of the people of Africa²⁸. Decolonizing governance therefore ensures effective, culturally relevant, local and community-driven solutions for sound environmental governance in Africa for justice, equity, development and sustainability²⁹.

In addition, it is imperative to empower communities towards promoting environmental justice in Africa for sustainability. In particular, there is need to ensure that indigenous and local

²² Hope for Environmental Justice in Africa., Available at <https://dialogue.earth/en/justice/hope-for-environmental-justice-in-africa/> (Accessed on 31/07/2026)

²³ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Strengthening Environmental Governance' Available at <https://www.unep.org/regions/africa/regional-initiatives/strengthening-environmental-governance> (Accessed on 31/07/2026)

²⁴ Afrobarometer., 'Afrobarometer at COP28: Elevating, Adding African Voices to the Climate Conversation' Available at <https://www.afrobarometer.org/articles/afrobarometer-at-cop28-elevating-adding-african-voices-to-the-climate-conversation/> (Accessed on 31/07/2026)

²⁵ Ikeke. M.O., & Ukutsemuya. J.I., 'The Afrocentric Imperative in Tackling African Environmental Challenges: Afroecosolidarity Perspectives' *East African Journal of Environment and Natural Resources*, Volume 7, Issue 1, 2024

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ The African Manifesto for Science, Technology and Innovation., Available at https://atpsnet.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/the_african_manifesto_for_sti.pdf (Accessed on 31/07/2026)

²⁸ Ikeke. M.O., & Ukutsemuya. J.I., 'The Afrocentric Imperative in Tackling African Environmental Challenges: Afroecosolidarity Perspectives' Op Cit

²⁹ Tirivangasi. H. M., & Nyahunda. L., 'Determinants of transformative climate change adaptation in rural Zimbabwe: an afrocentric analysis' Available at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14693062.2025.2521486#abstract> (Accessed on 31/07/2026)

communities have access to environmental information, participate adequately and meaningfully in environmental decision-making processes and are able to access justice in environmental matters in order to challenge discriminatory laws and policies and protect themselves from climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution among other environmental challenges³⁰. It has been observed that promoting environmental justice involves ensuring meaningful participation for marginalized groups and communities in environmental decision-making processes through avenues such as public hearings, commenting, activism, and leadership positions³¹. Through this approach, it is possible to harness the wisdom of indigenous and local communities including their Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) in order to promote sound environmental governance towards justice for people and planet³². In addition, it has been observed that access to justice gives disadvantaged and marginalized individuals and communities an avenue to challenge through legal processes the legality of decisions, acts, or omissions that harm the environment³³. Access to justice ensures that indigenous peoples, women, the youth and people of colour among other disadvantaged groups and communities are able to obtain remedies and demand action in respect of environmental hazards including pollution, biodiversity loss and climate change³⁴. It is therefore necessary to empower communities through access to environmental information, effective and meaningful participation in environmental decision-making processes and access to justice in environmental matters towards promoting environmental justice in Africa for sustainability.

4.0 Conclusion

Promoting environmental justice in Africa is vital in the quest towards sustainability. Realising this dream involves changing narratives, decolonizing governance and empowering communities in order to achieve justice for both people and planet now and in the future.

³⁰ United Nations Development Programme., 'Five steps to environmental justice' Op Cit

³¹ 16 Environmental Justice Examples, Issues and Actions., Available at <https://www.causeartist.com/environmental-justice-examples-issues/> (Accessed on 31/07/2026)

³² Ikeke. M.O., & Ukutsemuya. J.I., 'The Afrocentric Imperative in Tackling African Environmental Challenges: Afroecosolidarity Perspectives' Op Cit

³³ Brocca. L., 'Access to Justice in Environmental Matters' Available at <https://just-access.de/access-to-justice-in-environmental-matters/> (Accessed on 31/07/2026)

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