

The Intersection of Appropriate Dispute Resolution (ADR), Environmental Justice and Sustainable Development in the Global South: A Critical Appraisal

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Kariuki Muigua*

Abstract

This paper critically appraises the intersection of Appropriate Dispute Resolution (ADR), environmental justice and Sustainable Development in the Global South. The paper observes that the Global South faces several challenges which undermine progress towards Sustainable Development. In particular, the paper notes that environmental injustices caused by climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution are a major impediment to the pursuit of Sustainable Development in the Global South. Consequently, the paper argues that fostering environmental justice is crucial towards achieving Sustainable Development in the Global South. In order to realise this dream, the paper appraises how the concept of ADR can be utilised to promote environmental justice towards Sustainable Development in the Global South.

1.0 Introduction

Sustainable Development provides a practical tool towards forging harmony between humanity and nature in order to ensure prosperity now and in the future. Sustainable Development in general seeks to foster development that meets the needs of the present generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs¹. In order to achieve this goal, Sustainable Development involves promoting environmental protection and conservation, economic development and social equity². Sustainable Development has been described as both an ideal and principle geared towards meeting human development goals and needs while at the same time ensuring the ability of nature to provide the natural resources and ecosystem services upon which the economy and society depends³.

It has been observed that by pursuing Sustainable Development, it is possible to create and maintain the conditions under which humanity and nature can exist in productive harmony to support present and future generations⁴. This approach provides an integrated approach to development that improves the quality of our lives both as individuals and societies, fosters economic growth, protects our environment and its ecosystems and also preserves natural resources for future generations⁵. Through Sustainable Development, it is therefore possible to ensure that humanity and nature exist in productive harmony to

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¹ World Commission on Environment and Development., 'Our Common Future.' Oxford, (Oxford University Press, 1987)

² Fitzmaurice. M., 'The Principle of Sustainable Development in International Development Law.' *International Sustainable Development Law.*, Vol I

³ Mensah. J., 'Sustainable Development: Meaning, history, principles, pillars, and implications for human action: Literature review' *Cogent Social Sciences*, Volume 5, Issue 1

⁴ United States Environmental Protection Agency., 'What is Sustainability.' Available at <https://www.epa.gov/sustainability/learn-about-sustainability> (Accessed on 01/07/2026)

⁵ Ibid

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support human growth and development while also ensuring sound environmental protection and conservation for posterity.

Achieving Sustainable Development however remains an elusive goal for the global community. It has been observed that the global community is facing mounting threats including poverty, rising inequalities within and among nations, gender inequalities, unemployment, global health threats, conflicts, and more frequent and intense natural disasters which undermine progress towards Sustainable Development⁶. These challenges are worsened by environmental threats including depletion of natural resources, environmental degradation, desertification, drought, freshwater scarcity, biodiversity loss and climate change which undermine harmony between humanity and nature⁷. In particular, it has been observed that the Global South faces numerous economic, social and environmental challenges which hinder the attainment of Sustainable Development⁸. For instance, the triple planetary crisis of climate change, pollution and biodiversity loss present a major obstacle in the quest towards Sustainable Development since these challenges fuel environmental injustices with disproportionate impacts on people, communities and nations in the Global South⁹. Fostering environmental justice is therefore key towards promoting Sustainable Development in the Global South.

This paper critically appraises the intersection of Appropriate Dispute Resolution (ADR), environmental justice and Sustainable Development in the Global South. The paper observes that the Global South faces several challenges which undermine progress towards Sustainable Development. In particular, the paper notes that environmental injustices caused by climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution are a major impediment to the pursuit of Sustainable Development in the Global South. Consequently, the paper argues that fostering environmental justice is crucial towards achieving Sustainable Development in the Global South. In order to realise this dream, the paper appraises how the concept of ADR can be utilised to promote environmental justice towards Sustainable Development in the Global South.

2.0 The Intersection of Environmental Justice and Sustainable Development in the Global South

Environmental justice plays a key role in unlocking Sustainable Development. Environmental justice is a concept that recognises the disproportionate impacts of environmental hazards including the triple planetary crisis of climate change, pollution, and biodiversity loss¹⁰. In particular, 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

⁶ 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 01/07/2026)

⁷ Ibid

⁸ African Development Bank., 'The way Forward to Achieving Sustainable Development in Africa.' Available at https://www.afdb.org/fileadmin/uploads/afdb/Documents/Publications/ADR15_chapter_8.pdf (Accessed on 01/07/2026)

⁹ United Nations Climate Change., 'What is the Triple Planetary Crisis?' Available at <https://unfccc.int/news/what-is-the-triple-planetary-crisis> (Accessed on 01/07/2026)

¹⁰ United Nations Development Programme., 'Five steps to environmental justice' Available at <https://www.undp.org/blog/five-steps-environmental-justice> (Accessed on 01/07/2026)

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environmental information, participation in environmental decision-making processes and access to justice in order to ensure sustainable and equitable development¹¹. Further, it has been pointed out that 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 policies¹².

Environmental justice plays an important role in promoting Sustainable Development since it 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 environment¹³. It has been observed that by recognising the disproportionate impacts of environmental hazards, environmental justice seeks to ensure the just treatment and meaningful involvement of all people in environmental decision-making processes in order to ensure full protection from adverse environmental impacts, and foster equitable access to a clean, healthy, sustainable, and resilient environment¹⁴.

The concept of environmental justice is inextricably linked to the protection and fulfilment of human rights and Sustainable Development¹⁵. It has been pointed out that the triple planetary crises of climate change, nature loss, and pollution is directly and indirectly impacting human rights globally¹⁶. These challenges undermine the enjoyment and protection of human rights and exacerbate environmental injustices, disproportionately affecting the most vulnerable, marginalized and excluded people and communities¹⁷. For instance, despite their negligible contribution to the climate crisis, people, communities and nations in the Global South are disproportionately impacted by climate change¹⁸. It has been observed that developing nations and communities in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean Islands and the Pacific Islands which due to an unfortunate mixture of economic and geographic vulnerability, continue to shoulder the brunt of the burdens of climate change despite their relative innocence in causing it¹⁹. Despite climate change being a global problem, it has a more destructive and widespread effect on people and communities living

¹¹ Muigua. K., Wamukoya. D., & Kariuki. F., 'Natural Resources and Environmental Justice in Kenya.' Glenwood Publishers Limited, 2015

¹² 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 01/07/2026)

¹³ 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 01/07/2026)

¹⁴ Environmental Justice Factsheet., Available at <https://css.umich.edu/publications/factsheets/sustainability-indicators/environmental-justice-factsheet> (Accessed on 01/07/2026)

¹⁵ United Nations Development Programme., 'Promoting Environmental Justice: Securing Our Right to a Clean, Healthy and Sustainable Environment through UNDP Programming' Available at <https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2022-06/Environmental%20justice-Guidance%20Note.pdf> (Accessed on 01/07/2026)

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Sultana. F., 'Critical Climate Justice' Available at <https://www.farhanasultana.com/wpcontent/uploads/Sultana-Critical-climate-justice.pdf> (Accessed on 01/07/2026)

¹⁹ Giles. M., 'The Principles of Climate Justice at CoP27.' Available at <https://earth.org/principles-ofclimatejustice/#:~:text=That%20response%20should%20be%20based,the%20consequences%20of%20climate%20change> (Accessed on 01/07/2026)

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in the Global South, which have been marginalised and have fewer resources to adapt or respond to its adverse consequences²⁰. It has been argued that climate change contributes to poverty, the destruction of property and infrastructure, reduction of crop yields, displacement of communities and in several cases, the destruction of lives in the Global South²¹. Climate change is therefore a major threat to Sustainable Development in the Global South.

In addition to climate change, biodiversity loss is also fuelling environmental injustices in the Global South undermining the pursuit of Sustainable Development. For instance, it has been observed that indigenous peoples and local communities, who primarily live in the Global South, occupy most of the biodiversity hotspots on the planet, utilising their traditional knowledge systems to ensure harmony with nature²². The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) points out that areas occupied and managed by indigenous peoples and local communities in the Global South are the oldest form of biodiversity conservation, and often the most effective²³. However, due to their subsistence economies and spiritual connection to lands and territories, indigenous peoples and local communities in the Global South suffer adversely from biodiversity loss and environmental degradation worsening their vulnerability and undermining their lives, livelihoods, and cultural and spiritual well-being²⁴. Indigenous peoples and local communities in the Global South have been successful stewards of global biodiversity for many centuries yet they are being adversely impacted by biodiversity loss which affects their fundamental human rights including the right to development²⁵.

Pollution is another major cause of environmental injustices in the Global South which affects the attainment of Sustainable Development. For instance, it has been observed that dumping of toxic industrial waste in the Global South pollutes water resources affecting the health and livelihoods of vulnerable communities²⁶. In addition, unsustainable resource extraction including irresponsible mining practices in the Global South destroy local ecosystems including water resources and land with severe impacts on the health and livelihoods of poor and vulnerable communities²⁷.

In light of the foregoing challenges, fostering environmental justice is key towards achieving Sustainable Development in the Global South.

²⁰ Bandera. G., 'How climate colonialism affects the Global South' Available at <https://www.fairplanet.org/story/how-climate-colonialism-affects-the-global-south/> (Accessed on 01/07/2026)

²¹ Ibid

²² International Institute for Environment and Development., 'Indigenous knowledge and values: key for nature conservation' Available at <https://www.iied.org/20351iied> (Accessed on 01/07/2026)

²³ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Indigenous Peoples: The unsung heroes of conservation' Available at <https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/story/indigenous-peoples-unsung-heroes-conservation> (Accessed on 01/07/2026)

²⁴ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Indigenous Peoples and the nature they protect' Available at <https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/story/indigenous-peoples-and-nature-they-protect> (Accessed on 01/07/2026)

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ Beyond Plastic: Africa's Grassroots Uprising for Environmental Justice., Available at <https://pacja.org/beyond-plastic-africas-grassroots-uprising-for-environmental-justice/> (Accessed on 01/07/2026)

²⁷ Ajibade, L.T & Awomuti, A.A. 'Petroleum Exploitation or Human Exploitation? An Overview of Niger Delta Oil Producing Communities in Nigeria' *African Research Review* Vol. 3 (1), 2009. Pp. 111-124

3.0 Utilising Appropriate Dispute Resolution towards Environmental Justice and Sustainable Development in the Global South

The idea of Appropriate Dispute Resolution (ADR) refers to the suitability and effectiveness of certain processes in managing conflicts for peace, justice, prosperity and development²⁸. In particular, it has been observed that mechanisms such as negotiation, mediation, conciliation, adjudication, arbitration and Traditional Dispute Resolution Mechanisms (TDRMs) provide several benefits making them ‘appropriate’ in conflict management²⁹. These benefits include informality, privacy, confidentiality, flexibility and the ability to promote expeditious and cost-effective management of disputes³⁰. Further, it has been observed that ADR allows for more creative and collaborative solutions than those available in traditional litigation³¹. In addition, ADR also improves communication between parties in conflict and provides a forum for creative solutions to disputes that better meet the needs of the parties³².

In light of the foregoing advantages, it has been argued that there is need to embrace ADR as an ‘appropriate’ and not ‘alternative’ forum for accessing justice³³. Labelling ADR processes as ‘alternative’ is misleading since it may be understood to imply that these mechanisms are second-best to litigation which is not the case³⁴. The United Nations observes that ADR provides a wide range of options and possibilities that parties may choose to use, with the intent of removing a potential source of conflict, preventing its escalation and finding the way back to a constructive cooperative and a potentially productive future working relationship³⁵. Most ADR processes are ideal in promoting effective solutions that respects each side's perspectives while minimising the negative impact of conflicts making them appropriate in conflict management³⁶. Further, ADR mechanisms such as negotiation, mediation and conciliation can preserve and in some cases even enhance the relationship between the parties once an agreement has been reached between them³⁷.

Due to their numerous benefits, there have been calls to widely embrace ADR processes in order to ensure appropriate, efficient, expeditious and cost-effective management of conflicts and disputes for Sustainable Development³⁸. In particular, with people, communities and nations in the Global South facing

²⁸ P. Fenn, ‘Introduction to Civil and Commercial Mediation’, in Chartered Institute of Arbitrators, *Workbook on Mediation*, (CIArb, London, 2002), pp. 50-52

²⁹ Muigua. K., ‘Alternative Dispute Resolution and Access to Justice in Kenya.’ Glenwood Publishers Limited, 2015

³⁰ Ibid

³¹ JAMS ADR., ‘What is ADR’ Available at <https://www.jamsadr.com/adr-spectrum/> (Accessed on 02/07/2026)

³² Alternative Dispute Resolution., Available at <https://www.dol.gov/general/topic/labor-relations/adr#:~:text=Types%20of%20ADR%20include%20arbitration,%2C%20neutral%20factfinding%2C%20and%200minutials.> (Accessed on 02/07/2026)

³³ P. Fenn, “Introduction to Civil and Commercial Mediation” Op Cit

³⁴ Ibid

³⁵ United Nations., ‘Alternative Dispute Resolution Approaches and their Application in Water Management: A Focus on Negotiation, Mediation and Consensus Building’ Available at https://www.un.org/waterforlifedecade/water_cooperation_2013/pdf/adr_background_paper.pdf (Accessed on 02/07/2026)

³⁶ The Role of Negotiation in Conflict Resolution Strategies., Available at <https://www.karrass.com/blog/conflict-resolution-strategies> (Accessed on 02/07/2026)

³⁷ Negotiation., Available at <https://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/rp-pr/csj-sjc/dprs-sprd/res/drrg-mrrc/03.html#:~:text=Negotiations%20allow%20the%20parties%20to,the%20form%20of%20an%20agreement> (Accessed on 02/07/2026)

³⁸ Muigua. K., ‘Alternative Dispute Resolution and Access to Justice in Kenya.’ Op Cit

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numerous environmental injustices, embracing ADR provides an appropriate forum towards tackling these injustices and inequalities for Sustainable Development³⁹. For example, ADR is an appropriate tool for individuals and communities to give their own voices, to share in decision-making, and to promote innovative solutions in respect of environmental problems such as climate change and biodiversity loss towards actualising the ideal of environmental justice⁴⁰. By embracing ADR techniques such as mediation, negotiation and conciliation, it is possible to promote environmental justice by enhancing collaboration and cooperation towards effective management of environmental conflicts⁴¹. In particular, with climate change fuelling injustices and environmental conflicts in the Global South, negotiation and mediation can ensure effective management of these conflicts since these processes provide incentives for different parties and stakeholders to come together to discuss common responses towards environmental and climate justice⁴². Due to their focus on inclusivity and participation, ADR processes create opportunities for dialogue and negotiation around shared understanding and responses on climate change for environmental justice and Sustainable Development⁴³.

ADR is therefore an appropriate tool in promoting environmental justice in the Global South. In particular, ADR mechanisms such negotiation, mediation and conciliation can be effectively harnessed to ensure participation, cooperation and collaboration among all stakeholders including indigenous peoples and local communities in environmental decision-making towards realizing environmental justice⁴⁴. Through this, it is possible to come up with quick and innovative solutions to environmental challenges such as climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution at the expense of lengthy and expensive court processes that can end up worsening environmental injustices⁴⁵. Further, arbitration is an appropriate mechanism for managing climate change conflicts due to its ability to ensure expeditious and expert adjudication of conflicts and disputes concerning climate change while also ensuring final and binding awards⁴⁶.

It is therefore necessary to embrace and apply ADR techniques towards actualising the ideal of environmental justice in the Global South for Sustainable Development.

³⁹ Muigua. K., 'Achieving Environmental Justice through Alternative Dispute Resolution and the Court Process' Available at <https://kmco.co.ke/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Achieving-Environmental-Justice-through-Alternative-Dispute-Resolution-and-the-Court-Process-2.pdf> (Accessed on 02/07/2026)

⁴⁰ Environmental Law Institute., 'A Community Guide to Using Alternative Dispute Resolution to Secure Environmental Justice' Available at <https://www.eli.org/environmental-governance/community-guideusing-alternative-dispute-resolution-secure-l> (Accessed on 02/07/2026)

⁴¹ Ibid

⁴² United Nations., 'Climate Change and Mediation' Available at <https://peacemaker.un.org/en/areas-of-work/climate-change-mediation> (Accessed on 02/07/2026)

⁴³ Ibid

⁴⁴ 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 02/07/2026)

⁴⁵ Ibid

⁴⁶ Muigua. K., 'The Viability of Arbitration in management of Climate Change Related Disputes in Kenya' Available at <http://kmco.co.ke/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/The-Viability-of-Arbitration-inmanagement-of-Climate-Change-Related-Disputes-in-Kenya-11th-April-2022.pdf> (Accessed on 02/07/2026)

4.0 Conclusion

The prevalence of environmental injustices in the Global South is a major setback in the pursuit of Sustainable Development. ADR processes including negotiation, mediation, conciliation and arbitration provide an appropriate forum towards tackling environmental injustices caused by climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution in the Global South⁴⁷. Harnessing ADR is therefore an appropriate approach towards promoting environmental justice for Sustainable Development in the Global South.

⁴⁷ Muigua. K., 'Attaining Environmental Justice through Alternative Dispute Resolution' Op Cit

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