

Translating Africa's Natural Resources into Prosperity and Green Growth for the People: A Legal Perspective

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Abstract

This paper examines how Africa's natural resources can be translated into prosperity and green growth for the people. The paper notes that Africa's is endowed with natural resources. It argues that the abundance of natural resources in Africa provides immense opportunities to unlock development, prosperity and green growth. Despite being endowed with natural resources, the paper observes that Africa is yet to translate its resource wealth into prosperity and green growth. Consequently, the paper notes that it is imperative to harness opportunities and address challenges in the natural resource sector in Africa in order to spur prosperity and green growth. The paper explores legal pathways through which Africa can translate its natural resources into prosperity and green growth for the people.

1.0 Introduction

Natural resources play a fundamental role in unlocking development, prosperity and green growth. For instance, natural resources have been described as the foundation of social and economic development and human progress and prosperity¹. Natural resources including oil, gas, forests, land, water and minerals are at the heart of economic and social progress, providing raw materials for many industries while also supporting livelihoods². In addition, natural resources provide humanity with crucial and life-

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¹ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Sustainable Natural Capital' Available at <https://www.unep.org/regions/asia-and-pacific/regional-initiatives/supporting-resourceefficiency/sustainable-natural> (Accessed on 08/04/2026)

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 08/04/2026)

supporting services including food, water, energy and medicines therefore fostering human health and well-being³. Due to their numerous benefits, it has been correctly noted that the abundance of natural resources is a great advantage for a country's economic and social development, while resource shortage is associated with underdevelopment⁴.

In addition, natural resources are at the heart of green growth. The concept of green growth has been described as a development paradigm that aims to harmonise economic growth with environmental sustainability⁵. Green growth emphasizes environmentally sustainable economic progress to foster low-carbon and socially inclusive development⁶. Green growth has also been defined as economic growth that is efficient in its use of natural resources, clean in that it minimizes pollution and environmental impacts, and resilient in that it accounts for natural hazards and the role of environmental management and natural capital in preventing physical disasters⁷. Green growth provides a pathway that seeks to achieve growth targets and development objectives in a more efficient, sustainable and resilient manner⁸. It has been observed that natural resources can unlock green growth by supporting investments in low carbon, resource efficient and socially inclusive economic growth⁹.

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

⁴ Bridge. G., 'Natural Resources' *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography*, 2009., pp 261-268

⁵ Green Growth., Available at <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/index.php?menu=1447> (Accessed on 08/04/2026)

⁶ United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific., 'Green Growth Uptake in Asia-Pacific Region.' Available at https://unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/env/cep/CEP-20/ppp/Item10_b_ESCAP_GreenGrowthUptake_e_sm.pdf (Accessed on 08/04/2026)

⁷ The World Bank Group., 'Inclusive Green Growth: The Pathway to Sustainable Development' Available at <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/368361468313515918/pdf/691250PUB0Publ067902B09780821395516.pdf> (Accessed on 08/04/2026)

⁸ African Development Bank Group., 'Green Growth' Available at <https://www.afdb.org/en/topics-and-sectors/initiatives-partnerships/green-growth-initiative/background> (Accessed on 08/04/2026)

⁹ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Green Economy' Available at <https://www.unep.org/regions/asia-and-pacific/regional-initiatives/supporting-resource-efficiency/green-economy> (Accessed on 08/04/2026)

Harnessing natural resources is therefore vital towards prosperity and green growth. However, it has been observed that challenges such as poor resource governance and unsustainable resource extraction undermine the sustainable use of natural resources for development, prosperity and green growth¹⁰. Consequently, it is imperative to implement effective approaches towards translating natural resources into prosperity and green growth.

This paper examines how Africa's natural resources can be translated into prosperity and green growth for the people. The paper notes that Africa's is endowed with natural resources. It argues that the abundance of natural resources in Africa provides immense opportunities to unlock development, prosperity and green growth. Despite being endowed with natural resources, the paper observes that Africa is yet to translate its resource wealth into prosperity and green growth. Consequently, the paper notes that it is imperative to harness opportunities and address challenges in the natural resource sector in Africa in order to spur prosperity and green growth. The paper explores legal pathways through which Africa can translate its natural resources into prosperity and green growth for the people.

2.0 Africa's Natural Resources, Prosperity and Green Growth: Promises and Pitfalls

Africa is one of the most resource-rich regions in the world. It has been observed that Africa holds a huge proportion of the world's natural resources including both renewable and non-renewable resources¹¹. Africa's abundant natural resources include vast arable land, fresh water resources, oil, natural gas, minerals, forests and wildlife¹². In particular, it has been observed that Africa hosts the world's largest uncultivated arable landmass¹³;

¹⁰ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Our Work in Africa' Available at <https://www.unep.org/regions/africa/our-work-africa> (Accessed on 08/04/2026)

¹¹ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Our Work in Africa' Op Cit

¹² Ibid

¹³ African Development Bank Group., 'African Natural Resources Center' Available at https://www.afdb.org/fileadmin/uploads/afdb/Documents/Publications/anrc/AfDB_ANRC_BROC_HURE_en.pdf (Accessed on 08/04/2026)

some of the largest and longest rivers in the world (the Nile and the Congo)¹⁴; and the world's second largest tropical forest (the Congo basin rainforest)¹⁵. The African Great Lakes Region also hosts some of the major freshwater lakes in the world including Lake Albert, Lake Edward, Lake Kivu, Lake Malawi/Nyasa, Lake Tanganyika, Lake Turkana, and Lake Victoria which support key economic activities including agriculture, transport, tourism, fisheries and aquaculture¹⁶. Africa also has a rich extractive sector holding a significant proportion of the world's oil, gas and mineral reserves¹⁷.

Africa is therefore endowed with natural resources including arable land and renewable resources (such as water, forestry, and fisheries) and non-renewable resources (minerals, coal, gas, and oil). The abundance of natural resources in Africa can be platform for development and prosperity. It has been observed that the continent sits on vast resource wealth—including metals, minerals, oil, and gas—that remains relatively underdeveloped and could help generate revenue to spur human progress and development¹⁸. It has been observed that with the right approaches, natural resources in Africa can be effectively harnessed to finance social amenities, infrastructure, energy, education, health, industry, and governance towards development and prosperity¹⁹.

Africa's abundant natural resources are therefore able to trigger social and economic development. It has been argued that tapping into the continent's rich natural capital could be the key to unlocking Africa's development potential and pulling millions out of the poverty trap²⁰. In addition, Africa's natural resources provide opportunities to achieve green growth. For example, it has been observed that Africa's vast arable land

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Great Lakes of Africa., Available at <https://www.greatlakesofafrica.org/> (Accessed on 08/04/2026)

¹⁷ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Our Work in Africa' Op Cit

¹⁸ World Bank Group., 'Africa's untapped natural resource potential could be the engine for economic transformation' Available at <https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/african/africas-untapped-natural-resource-potential-could-be-the-engine-for-economic-transformation> (Accessed on 08/04/2026)

¹⁹ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Our work in Africa' Op Cit

²⁰ 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 08/04/2026)

provides a pathway to pursue green growth through sustainable agricultural practices including organic farming, precision agriculture, and agroforestry towards enhancing productivity while minimizing negative impacts on ecosystems and avoiding food insecurity and biodiversity loss²¹. In addition, Africa's rich blue economy presents immense opportunities to pursue green growth through sustainable marine and coastal tourism²².

Africa's vast renewable energy resources are also central in the pursuit of green growth. Africa is also endowed with renewable energy sources including wind, solar, hydro, bioenergy, ocean tidal waves, and geothermal energy which are abundant all over the continent²³. In addition, Africa also holds viable deposits of critical minerals including lithium, graphite, cobalt, nickel, manganese and copper which are needed for renewable energy technologies including the production of solar panels, wind turbines and batteries used in electric vehicles²⁴. It has been observed that Africa is poised to meet the growing demand for critical minerals as the global energy transition gathers pace²⁵. The transition to clean sources of energy not only fosters sustainability by reducing greenhouse gas emissions but also bring economic growth is therefore key in fostering green growth²⁶.

²¹ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Africa's green business opportunities are abundant, UNEP study shows' Available at <https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/press-release/africas-green-business-opportunities-are-abundant-unep-study-shows#:~:text=The%20African%20Continental%20Free%20Trade,transition%20to%20net%20zero%20emissions> (Accessed on 08/04/2026)

²² Ibid

²³ African Union., 'Agenda 2063: The Africa we Want' Available at https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/33126-doc-framework_document_book.pdf (Accessed on 08/04/2026)

²⁴ African Development Bank Group., 'Renewable energy offers Africa's best opportunity to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, experts say' Available at <https://www.afdb.org/en/news-and-events/press-releases/renewable-energy-offers-africas-best-opportunity-achieve-sustainable-development-goals-experts-say-63909> (Accessed on 08/04/2026)

²⁵ World Bank Group., 'Africa's untapped natural resource potential could be the engine for economic transformation' Op Cit

²⁶ Gorji. A., & Martek. I., 'The Role of Renewable Energy as a 'Green Growth' Strategy for the Built Environment' Available at <https://www.mdpi.com/2075-5309/13/5/1356> (Accessed on 08/04/2026)

From the foregoing, it is evident that Africa is endowed with natural resources providing opportunities to unlock development, prosperity and green growth. However, it has been observed that most of Africa's natural resources including arable land, minerals, oil and gas remain underdeveloped undermining development, prosperity and green growth²⁷. Further, due to poor natural resources governance, it has been observed that Africa is losing a huge share of its natural capital through illicit financial flows, illegal mining, illegal logging, illegal trade in wildlife, unregulated fishing and environmental degradation and loss among others²⁸. Corruption, inequitable benefit-sharing regimes and exploitation of Africa's natural resources by foreign corporations also result in the loss of a significant share of the continent's natural capital undermining development²⁹.

In light of the foregoing concerns, there is need for effective policies in order to translate Africa's natural resources into prosperity and green growth.

3.0 Harnessing Africa's Natural Resources for Prosperity and Green Growth

The abundance of natural resources in Africa provides immense opportunities to achieve development, prosperity and green growth. It has been observed that resources comprise Africa's largest form of wealth³⁰. If well harnessed and equitably managed, Africa's abundant natural resources including arable land, water, minerals, forests, oil, gas and wildlife can finance the continent's development agenda towards prosperity for the people of Africa³¹. Further, Africa's natural resources including land, renewable sources of energy, critical minerals and the blue economy can promote the continent's green growth agenda by promoting economic growth while minimizing negative

²⁷ World Bank Group., 'Africa's untapped natural resource potential could be the engine for economic transformation' Op Cit

²⁸ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Our work in Africa' Op Cit

²⁹ African Development Bank Group., 'Africa's Natural Resources: The Paradox of Plenty' Available at <https://www.afdb.org/fileadmin/uploads/afdb/Documents/Publications/%28E%29%20AfricanBank%202007%20Ch4.pdf> (Accessed on 08/04/2026)

³⁰ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Our work in Africa' Op Cit

³¹ Ibid

environmental impacts³². However, unsustainable extraction practices, poor resource governance, corruption, inequitable benefit-sharing arrangements among other factors undermine development, prosperity and green growth in Africa due to loss of the continent's natural capital³³.

It is therefore imperative to adopt sustainable practices in order to translate Africa's natural resources into prosperity and green growth. In particular, it is imperative to strengthen environmental governance in Africa. It has been observed that failure to foster sound environmental governance results in Africa losing a huge share of its natural capital through illegal mining, illegal trade in wildlife, unregulated and unreported fishing, illegal logging and environmental degradation³⁴. Strengthening environmental governance in Africa through effective legal, policy, institutional, scientific, technical and community-based approaches is key in translating Africa's natural resources into prosperity and green growth³⁵.

It is also necessary to strengthen investments in natural resources in Africa. It has been observed that most of Africa's natural resources including arable land, minerals, oil and gas remain untapped due to inadequate investments undermining the continent's development³⁶. Consequently, enhancing investments including through local content policies and value addition is key towards translating Africa's natural resources into prosperity and green growth³⁷.

³² United Nations Environment Programme., 'Africa's green business opportunities are abundant, UNEP study shows' Op Cit

³³ Ibid

³⁴ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Our work in Africa' Op Cit

³⁵ Ibid

³⁶ World Bank Group., 'Africa's untapped natural resource potential could be the engine for economic transformation' Op Cit

³⁷ United Nations Economic Commission for Africa., 'Adding Value to Natural Resources. A multilevel challenge' Available at <https://archive.uneca.org/stories/adding-value-natural-resources-multilevel-challenge#:~:text=There%20are%20many%20ways%20to%20add%20value,beyond%20through%20local%20content%20and%20industrial%20policy>. (Accessed on 08/04/2026)

In addition, there is need to embrace sustainable extraction of Africa's natural resources. It has been observed that poor resource extraction in Africa undermines Sustainable Development by violating human rights including through displacement of indigenous and local communities while also affecting environmental sustainability through environmental degradation, deforestation, biodiversity loss and pollution³⁸. As a result there is need to embrace sustainable practices while harnessing Africa's natural resources, including through upholding human rights and protecting the environment, in order to translate the continent's natural capital into prosperity and green growth³⁹.

Embracing equitable benefit-sharing arrangements is also key towards translating Africa's natural resources into prosperity and green growth. Equitable benefit-sharing involves the fair access to benefits that accrue from natural resources by all stakeholders including indigenous and local communities⁴⁰. It has been observed that natural resources benefit-sharing in Africa has largely been inequitable where indigenous and local communities that interface with the resources and who bear the highest costs of overexploitation and conservation being the least beneficiaries undermining development and prosperity at local levels⁴¹. Consequently, there is need to implement equitable benefit-sharing arrangements in order to ensure that all stakeholders, including indigenous and local communities, get tangible benefits from Africa's abundant natural resources for development, peace, and prosperity⁴².

³⁸ Muigua. K., 'Embracing Sustainable Mining in Africa' Available at <https://kmco.co.ke/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Embracing-Sustainable-Mining-in-Africa.pdf> (Accessed on 08/04/2026)

³⁹ Pan African Resources., 'Sustainable Mining.' Available at <https://www.panafricanresources.com/sustainablemining/#:~:text=Sustainable%20mining%20refers%20to%20the,generations%20can%20also%20be%20me t> (Accessed on 08/04/2026)

⁴⁰ Jonge, B., 'What is Fair and Equitable Benefit Sharing?' *Journal on Agricultural and Environmental Ethics*, Vol. 24, issue 2, (2011)

⁴¹ Kenya Wildlife Conservancies Association., 'Factsheet: Natural Resources (Benefit Sharing) Bill 2022.' Available at <https://kwakenya.com/download/factsheet-natural-resources-benefit-sharing-bill-2022/> (Accessed on 08/04/2026)

⁴² Fagbadebo. O., Binza. M., Kabange. M., 'Resource-Based Conflicts in Africa' Available at https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-031-25151-1_6 (Accessed on 08/04/2026)

Through the foregoing approaches, it is possible to translate Africa's natural resources into prosperity and green growth for the people.

4.0 Conclusion

The abundance of natural resources in Africa provides opportunities to unlock development, prosperity and green growth. However, Africa's faces several challenges including poor resource governance, inequitable benefit-sharing arrangements, corruption and unsustainable resource extraction practices undermining the continent's development agenda⁴³. It is therefore imperative to translate Africa's natural resources into prosperity and green growth by strengthening environmental governance, enhancing investments in natural resources, embracing sustainable extraction practices, and fostering equitable benefit-sharing⁴⁴. Translating Africa's natural resources into prosperity and green growth for the people is an important agenda that needs to be fast-tracked towards Sustainable Development.

⁴³ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Our work in Africa' Op Cit

⁴⁴ Ibid

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