Empowering African Citizen for Sustainable Environmental Governance: Envisioning a New Africa

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Abstract: The environmental challenges facing the African continent are of critical concern, with rapid urbanization, resource depletion, and climate change posing significant threats to its ecological integrity and socio-economic stability. This paper presents a strategy for resolving these problems by enabling citizens to participate in sustainable environmental governance. This suggested framework is based on a multifaceted approach that combines advocacy for public policy, community participation, education, and technological innovation. It underlines the part played by involving citizens in fostering environmental sustainability. The concept of a "New Africa" envisions a populace that is and empowered to actively engage in environmental policy and practice-related decision-making. The emphasis on inclusive and participatory government that results from this paradigm shift ensures that the various views and viewpoints of African communities are heard and valued. African countries will be well-positioned to pave the way for sustainable environmental governance by adopting this forward-thinking paradigm, ensuring the peaceful co-existence of nature and society. The bedrock of this transformative journey will be the empowerment of African citizens, promoting a continent where the environment flourishes and communities prosper side by side. This vision provides a roadmap for a strong and wealthy Africa that is prepared to take on the challenges of the 21st century.

Keywords: Capacity Building; Citizen Participation; Environmental Governance; Environmental Sustainability

Introduction

Africa is a continent endowed with rich natural resources and biodiversity, yet it faces significant environmental challenges that threaten its sustainable development. Environmental governance in Africa has historically been characterized by rudimentary frameworks and ineffective implementation, leading to widespread environmental degradation and the loss of biodiversity. However, there is a growing recognition of the crucial role that citizen empowerment plays in improving environmental governance and fostering sustainable development (Yuan & Shen, 2024). This paper seeks to explore the rudiments of environmental governance in Africa, the role of citizen empowerment in environmental governance, barriers to citizen empowerment, strategies for empowering African citizens, and ultimately, envisioning a new Africa where sustainable environmental governance is achieved.

The rudiments of environmental governance in Africa lay the foundation upon which sustainable practices are built. These rudiments encompass a complex interplay of policies, regulations, institutional frameworks, and cultural norms that shape environmental decision-making processes. However, the efficacy of these frameworks often falls short due to various contextual factors such as weak institutional capacity, political instability, and competing socio-economic priorities (Azizi & Leandro, 2025). Central to the discourse on environmental governance is the role of citizen empowerment. Citizens serve as vital agents of change, capable of driving sustainable practices and holding governing bodies accountable. Empowering citizens through education, access to information, and

participatory platforms fosters a sense of ownership over environmental issues and promotes bottom-up decision-making processes (Liu & Martens, 2023).

Despite the inherent potential of citizen empowerment, numerous barriers impede its realization in the context of environmental governance in Africa. These barriers range from structural challenges, such as limited access to information and resources, to socio-cultural factors, including gender disparities and traditional power dynamics (Bibi & Sartini, 2023). Addressing these barriers requires a multifaceted approach that engages diverse stakeholders and leverages innovative strategies. In light of these challenges, this paper proposes a set of strategies for empowering African citizens in environmental governance. These strategies encompass initiatives aimed at enhancing civic education, fostering inclusive participation, leveraging technology for greater transparency, and strengthening civil society networks (Djatmiko et al., 2025). By prioritizing the empowerment of marginalized communities and amplifying their voices in decision-making processes, these strategies seek to democratize environmental governance and foster sustainable outcomes.

Looking ahead, the vision for a new Africa hinges on the collective efforts of empowered citizens, enlightened policymakers, and committed stakeholders. It envisions a continent where environmental stewardship is ingrained in the fabric of society and where citizens actively contribute to shaping policies and practices that safeguard the environment for future generations. This vision calls for a paradigm shift—a departure from conventional top-down approaches towards inclusive, participatory, and sustainable environmental governance models. Environmental governance in Africa has been historically shaped by a combination of colonial legacies, post-colonial challenges, and contemporary socio-political dynamics. Colonial extraction and exploitation practices have left lasting scars on African ecosystems, while post-independence governance structures have often struggled to effectively address environmental issues (Adekunle, 2021). Fragmented governance systems, weak regulatory frameworks, and limited institutional capacities have hindered efforts to manage natural resources sustainably (Handoyo, 2024). Moreover, corruption and a lack of transparency have further undermined environmental governance across the continent (Spyromitros & Panagiotidis, 2022).

Engaging citizens in decision-making processes not only enhances accountability and transparency but also fosters a sense of ownership and stewardship over natural resources (Mustalahti et al., 2020). Through participation in environmental monitoring, advocacy, and policy formulation, citizens can contribute valuable local knowledge and perspectives to governance processes (Wang & Ran, 2024). Additionally, citizen-led initiatives often play a pivotal role in driving bottom-up approaches to environmental conservation and sustainable development (Stelwagen et al., 2021).

Despite its potential benefits, citizen empowerment in environmental governance faces numerous challenges in Africa. Structural inequalities, limited access to information, and socio-cultural barriers often marginalize vulnerable groups, constraining their participation in decision-making processes (Islam, 2024); (Sasaki & Baba, 2024). Additionally, repressive political regimes and a lack of institutional support can suppress civic activism and dissent, further undermining citizen engagement (Cheeseman & Dodsworth, 2023). Furthermore, the dominance of top-down governance models and entrenched interests often limit the influence of grassroots movements and community-based organizations (Zapata Campos et al., 2023).

Addressing barriers to citizen empowerment requires a multifaceted approach that encompasses legal reforms, capacity building, and institutional restructuring. Strengthening legal frameworks to guarantee access to information, freedom of expression, and participatory rights is essential for fostering an enabling environment for citizen engagement (Pentney, 2024; Shin et al., 2024). Investing in civic education and awareness-raising initiatives can enhance citizens' understanding of environmental issues and their rights, empowering them to advocate for change (Dushkova & Ivlieva, 2024). Furthermore, promoting decentralization and devolution of power can decentralize decision-making processes, enabling greater local ownership and participation (Horgan, 2022; Uddin, 2019). Additionally, leveraging technology and social media platforms can facilitate citizen mobilization and networking, amplifying their voices in environmental governance processes.

A vision for a new Africa in environmental governance entails a paradigm shift towards inclusive, participatory, and sustainable approaches to natural resource management. It envisions a continent where citizens are empowered as active agents of change, working collaboratively with governments, civil society, and the private sector to safeguard ecosystems and promote environmental justice. This vision entails fostering a culture of environmental stewardship, promoting social equity, and embracing indigenous knowledge and practices.

Method

The research adopts a comprehensive approach by blending qualitative and quantitative methodologies to

gain insights into citizen participation in Africa's environmental governance. The study targets various stakeholders, including political appointees, regional organization officials (such as the African Union), civil society organizations (CSOs), the private sector, indigenous groups, and local communities. It also considers the roles of international bodies like the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in shaping environmental policies and financing projects in Africa.

A standardized survey questionnaire was crafted in November 2023 to gauge stakeholder perspectives on environmental governance in Africa. Respondents filled out the questionnaire via a Google Form link over 20 days. To ensure a diverse representation, respondents were sampled from various regions across the continent, resulting in a total of 144 participants. Data analysis involved calculating mean scores to interpret respondents' opinions on different aspects of environmental governance. These scores were accompanied by remarks denoting consensus, disagreement, or neutrality, with higher scores indicating stronger agreement and lower scores suggesting disagreement or neutrality.

Result and Discussion

Data Presentation and Interpretation
Demographic Status of Respondents

The study analysed a sample of 144 respondents to gauge their demographic characteristics and perceptions regarding environmental governance in Africa. Results as shown in Table 1 revealed a slightly higher representation of male respondents (64.6%) compared to female respondents (35.4%). The age distribution indicates a diverse sample, with the majority falling within the 36 to 65 age range, particularly in the 46 to 65 group. Educational attainment primarily lies at the bachelor's level (50%), followed by a master's degree or higher (29.9%). Most respondents perceive environmental governance in their countries as poor (77.1%), with varying degrees of perceived citizen influence; 53.5% believe it's slight. These findings highlight a diverse and educated participant base with significant concerns about environmental governance in Africa. Policymakers and stakeholders can leverage these insights to develop sustainable solutions and address areas for improvement in environmental governance.

Table 1. Demographic Status of Respondents

Gender of Respondents	Frequency	Percentage
Male	93	64.6
Female	51	35.4
Total	144	100
Age of Respondents		
18 to 25	11	7.6
26 to 35	29	20.2
36 to 45	39	27.1
46 to 65	50	34.7
56 and Above	15	10.4
Total	144	100
Highest Level of Education		
Primary education	4	2.8
Secondary education	25	17.3
Bachelor's degree	72	50.0
Master's degree or higher	43	29.9
Total	144	100
State of Environmental Governance in your Country		
Excellent	5	3.5
Good	28	19.4
Poor	111	77.1
Total	144	100
Extent Citizens Can Influence Environmental Governance In Your Region		
Slightly	77	53.5
Moderately	28	19.4
Significantly	39	27.1
Total	144	100

Rudiment of Environmental Governance in Africa

Table 2 indicates various aspects of the historical context and challenges of environmental governance in Africa. The historical context and challenges of environmental governance in Africa are multifaceted, influenced by colonial legacies, decolonization efforts, resource constraints (Parra et al., 2020), international partnerships, political dynamics, indigenous knowledge, and climate change. While colonialism's impact is undeniable, post-colonial governments have diverged from colonial practices in shaping environmental policies. However, the historical exploitation of natural resources still contributes to present-day environmental challenges. Decolonization has allowed African nations to assert sovereignty over resources, shaping environmental policies (Dang, 2021; Domínguez & Luoma, 2020).

Nevertheless, inadequate infrastructure and resources hinder effective governance. International aid and partnerships play a crucial role in supporting conservation efforts. Political instability and corruption undermine governance effectiveness. Indigenous knowledge and traditional practices are valuable for sustainable management. Climate change exacerbates existing challenges, requiring urgent attention. Collaborative approaches involving governments (Dwirahmadi et al., 2023), NGOs, and local communities are essential for effective governance. Education and awareness campaigns foster a culture of environmental stewardship. Addressing these challenges necessitates a holistic approach that integrates diverse perspectives, fosters collaboration, builds capacity, and empowers communities through sustainable environmental governance.

Table 2. Historical Context and Challenges of Environmental Governance in Africa

Aspect of Environmental Governance in Africa	Mean Score	Remarks
The colonial legacy has significantly influenced the current state of environmental governance in Africa.	0.30	Agreed
Historical exploitation of natural resources by colonial powers has contributed to present-day environmental challenges in Africa.	0.25	Neutral
Decolonization efforts in Africa have had a substantial impact on the development of environmental policies and regulations.	0.30	Agreed
The lack of adequate infrastructure and resources has hindered effective environmental governance across African nations.	0.35	Agreed
International aid and partnerships play a crucial role in supporting African countries in addressing environmental issues.	0.40	Agreed
Political instability and corruption have posed significant challenges to environmental conservation efforts in Africa.	0.45	Agreed
Indigenous knowledge systems and traditional practices are valuable resources for sustainable environmental management in Africa.	0.40	Agreed
Climate change exacerbates existing environmental challenges in Africa and requires urgent attention from policymakers.	0.45	Agreed
Collaborative approaches involving governments, NGOs, and local communities are essential for effective environmental governance in Africa.	0.40	Agreed
Education and awareness campaigns are crucial for fostering a culture of environmental stewardship and sustainability in African societies.	0.35	Agreed

The assessment presented in Table 3 evaluates the current state of environmental governance in Africa across several dimensions, including policy implementation, enforcement, transparency, stakeholder engagement, accountability, education, resource management, prioritisation of marginalised communities, and collaboration between government agencies. Key findings indicate a neutral stance in government policies for natural habitats and biodiversity and regulation enforcement against pollution and conservation, suggesting potential for improvement in policy implementation and enforcement mechanisms. Similarly, the transparency and accessibility of environmental laws also received a neutral score, indicating a need for making regulations more transparent and accessible.

On the positive side, there is agreement that government initiatives adequately address climate change, stakeholders are effectively involved in environmental governance, and there is accountability to ensure compliance with regulations. Additionally, there is recognition that environmental education programs are adequately funded and accessible to the public, and the government is effectively managing and conserving natural resources. However, there are areas of concern, including the prioritisation of marginalised communities and vulnerable ecosystems, where there is disagreement regarding the adequacy of policies. Moreover, collaboration between government agencies to address environmental challenges received a neutral score, suggesting room for improvement in inter-agency coordination. In summary, there are areas of agreement

and recognition of efforts in environmental governance, there are also areas that require attention, such as policy implementation, transparency, prioritisation of marginalised communities, and inter-agency collaboration. These findings could guide efforts to enhance environmental governance in Africa and promote a more sustainable future.

Table 3. The Current State of Environmental Governance in Africa

Aspects of Environmental Governance	Mean Score	Remarks
Effective Implementation of Habitat Policies	0.22	Neutral
Enforcement of Pollution Regulations	0.25	Neutral
Transparency of Environmental Laws	0.28	Neutral
Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation	0.30	Agreed
Stakeholder Engagement Effectiveness	0.28	Agreed
Accountability and Oversight	0.30	Agreed
Funding and Accessibility of Education Programs	0.30	Agreed
Management and Conservation of Natural Resources	0.38	Agreed
Prioritisation of Marginalised Communities and Vulnerable Ecosystems	0.18	Disagreed
Collaboration and coordination between government agencies	0.25	Neutral

Source: Author's Fieldwork, 2023.

The Role of Citizen Empowerment in Environmental Governance in Africa

The study investigates the importance of citizen engagement in environmental governance decision-making in Africa. Table 4 revealed agreement levels with statements on citizen involvement. Results indicated that involving citizens enhances decision legitimacy, informs balanced outcomes, and fosters community ownership and responsibility. Inclusivity ensures diverse perspectives are considered, promoting transparency and accountability in government actions. Though some aspects like addressing local needs and innovation show mixed perceptions, overall, the data highlights the significant role of citizen empowerment in environmental governance, fostering community ownership, social cohesion, and democratic governance.

Table 4. Importance of Citizen Participation in Decision-Making Processes in Africa

Importance of Citizen Participation in Decision-Making Processes in Africa	Mean Score	Remarks
Citizen participation enhances the legitimacy of decisions made by the government.	0.42	Agreed
Engaging citizens in decision-making processes leads to more informed and balanced outcomes.	0.38	Agreed
Citizen participation fosters a sense of ownership and responsibility.	0.45	Agreed
Involving citizens in decision-making ensures that diverse perspectives are considered.	0.40	Agreed
Government decisions are more transparent and accountable when citizens have a say in the process.	0.45	Agreed
Citizen participation helps identify and address the needs and priorities of local communities.	0.35	Agreed
Active citizen involvement leads to greater trust and satisfaction.	0.40	Agreed
Decision-making processes that include citizen input are more innovative.	0.25	Neutral
Citizen participation promotes social cohesion and a sense of belonging.	0.40	Agreed
Ensuring citizen participation is essential for a functioning democracy.	0.40	Agreed

Barriers to Citizen Empowerment in Environmental Governance in Africa

Table 5 presents a detailed analysis of obstacles to citizen empowerment in environmental governance across Africa, along with stakeholders' levels of agreement on their significance. Socio-economic barriers, notably poverty and resource constraints, are identified as major impediments, with a mean score of 0.45, indicating strong consensus. Poverty hampers access to education and resources necessary for active participation in environmental decision-making. Political challenges such as corruption and lack of political will, scored at 0.40, also significantly hinder citizen empowerment, eroding trust in government institutions. Ineffective policies and governance structures, although neutrally scored at 0.25, still pose concerns, potentially undermining citizen confidence. Cultural norms and values, with a mean score of 0.30, and low levels of education and awareness, at 0.40, further impede citizen engagement. While financial constraints received mixed agreement, they remain a potential barrier to full participation. Lack of transparency and accountability (0.40), regional instability (0.40), gender disparities (0.38), and inadequate infrastructure and technology (0.38) also hinder citizen involvement. Overall, addressing these multifaceted barriers demands comprehensive strategies focusing on education, transparency,

inclusivity, and governance enhancement (Ainscow, 2020).

Table 5. Barriers to Citizen Empowerment in Environmental Governance in Africa

Barriers	Mean Score	Remarks
Socio-economic barriers hinder citizen participation in environmental governance.	0.45	Agreed
Political constraints impede citizen empowerment in environmental decision-making processes.	0.40	Agreed
Ineffective policies discourage citizens from engaging in environmental governance efforts.	0.25	Neutral
Cultural norms and values often conflict with modern environmental conservation practices, creating obstacles in environmental initiatives.	0.30	Agreed
Limited access to education and awareness about environmental issues contributes to low levels of citizen engagement in environmental governance.	0.40	Agreed
Financial constraints prevent citizens from accessing the necessary resources to participate effectively in environmental governance activities.	0.20	Disagreed
Lack of transparency and accountability undermines citizens' trust in government efforts to address environmental concerns.	0.40	Agreed
Socio-political instability and conflicts in certain regions of Africa pose challenges to citizen participation in environmental governance initiatives.	0.40	Agreed
Gender disparities in access to education and decision-making processes further marginalize women's involvement in environmental governance efforts.	0.38	Agreed
Insufficient infrastructure and technology hinder citizens' ability to actively participate in environmental monitoring and advocacy efforts.	0.38	Agreed

Strategies for Empowering African Citizens in Environmental Governance in Africa

Empowering African citizens in environmental governance is vital for sustainable development and the well-being of both people and the planet. Table 6 revealed a consensus on various strategies for achieving this empowerment. Access to education is crucial in enhancing awareness and understanding of environmental issues, enabling citizens to participate effectively in decision-making processes and take action to address challenges such as climate change and pollution (Yang & Fang, 2024). A multifaceted approach encompassing education, participation, transparency, accountability, community engagement, legal frameworks, investment, access to information, collaboration, and inclusivity is essential for empowering African citizens in environmental governance (Santarlacci et al., 2024). Implementing these strategies effectively can foster environmental stewardship and collective action for a sustainable future in Africa.

Table 6. Strategies for Empowering African Citizens in Environmental Governance in Africa

Strategies for Empowering African Citizens in Environmental Governance in Africa	Mean Score	Remarks
African citizens should have access to comprehensive environmental education programs to increase their understanding of environmental issues.	0.45	Agreed
Providing platforms for public participation in decision-making processes regarding environmental policies is crucial for empowering African citizens.	0.40	Agreed
Ensuring transparency and accountability in environmental governance institutions is essential for building trust among African citizens.	0.45	Agreed
Implementing community-based conservation initiatives can empower African citizens to actively engage in environmental protection efforts.	0.38	Agreed
Strengthening legal frameworks and enforcement mechanisms for environmental protection can enhance the empowerment of African citizens.	0.38	Agreed
Promoting indigenous knowledge and practices in environmental management can contribute to empowering African citizens.	0.35	Agreed
Investing in sustainable development projects that prioritize the involvement of local communities can empower African citizens to take ownership of environmental issues.	0.48	Agreed
Facilitating access to information regarding environmental policies, laws, and regulations is important for empowering African citizens.	0.40	Agreed
Collaborating with civil society organizations and grassroots movements can amplify the voices of African citizens in environmental governance processes.	0.40	Agreed
Encouraging the active participation of youth and marginalized groups in environmental decision-making is crucial for fostering inclusivity and empowerment in Africa.	0.42	Agreed

The Way Forward: Vision For A New Africa

Africa stands at a pivotal moment in its developmental trajectory, confronting a myriad of environmental hurdles spanning from climate change and deforestation to pollution and biodiversity loss (Chapman et al., 2022). However, within these challenges lies a transformative opportunity for sustainable development. Empowering African citizens to actively engage in environmental governance is paramount to unlocking this potential. Cultivating a culture of environmental stewardship and participation can pave the way for a more sustainable and prosperous future. Education and Awareness: The cornerstone of empowering citizens for environmental governance resides in education and awareness. Collaborative efforts among governments, civil society organizations, and the private sector are imperative to develop comprehensive environmental education programs spanning from early childhood to adulthood (Adekomaya & Majozi, 2022). These initiatives should prioritize raising awareness about the significance of environmental conservation, the ramifications of human activities on the environment (Cheng et al., 2023); (Türkoğlu, 2019) and the individual's role in promoting sustainability: Strengthening Community Participation: Communities across Africa bear the brunt of environmental degradation, yet they are frequently marginalized in decision-making processes. Empowering local communities to actively participate in environmental governance is essential to ensuring that policies and initiatives align with their needs and priorities (Hernández Guzmán & Hernández García De Velazco, 2024; Kapucu et al., 2024).

This can be achieved through the establishment of participatory mechanisms such as community-based natural resource management programs, environmental advocacy groups, and platforms for dialogue between communities and policymakers; Enhancing Access to Information (Ullah & Kim, 2020). Access to information is pivotal for effective environmental governance. Governments must enact and enforce legislation guaranteeing citizens' right to access environmental information, encompassing data on air and water quality, biodiversity, climate change projections, and environmental policies. Furthermore, efforts should be made to enhance digital literacy and expand internet access, particularly in rural and marginalized areas, to ensure equitable access to environmental information. Promoting Environmental Justice: Environmental degradation disproportionately impacts marginalised and vulnerable communities, exacerbating existing inequalities (Hernández Guzmán & Hernández García De Velazco, 2024). Fostering sustainable environmental governance in Africa necessitates a commitment to environmental justice, ensuring equal access to environmental resources and decision-making processes for all. This entails addressing the root causes of environmental injustices, such as land grabbing and discriminatory policies, and advocating for inclusive and equitable solutions (Busscher et al., 2020). Investing in Green Technologies and Innovation: Harnessing the potential of green technologies and innovation is critical for transitioning towards sustainability (Junliang et al., 2024).

Governments, businesses, and research institutions should invest in the development and adoption of renewable energy sources, sustainable agriculture practices, waste management solutions, and eco-friendly technologies (Qamruzzaman & Karim, 2024). By supporting indigenous innovations and facilitating knowledge exchange and collaboration, Africa can lead the charge in sustainable development and environmental stewardship (Obiero et al., 2023). Empowering African citizens for sustainable environmental governance is not only a moral imperative but also a strategic necessity for the continent's future prosperity. By prioritizing education, bolstering community participation, ensuring access to information, advocating for environmental justice, and fostering innovation, Africa can surmount its environmental challenges and emerge as a global leader in sustainability (Gaegane, 2024; Martins et al., 2023). This vision for a renewed Africa embodies resilience, inclusivity, and prosperity, where both people and the planet thrive in harmony.

Conclusion

Empowering African citizens to engage in sustainable environmental governance is pivotal for the continent's enduring welfare. By prioritizing education, community involvement, capacity building, policy formulation, and green innovations, African nations can envision a new era of environmental sustainability and economic progress. Through unified collaboration at local, national, and global levels, Africa can surmount its environmental obstacles and construct a resilient and sustainable future for generations to come: Launch extensive educational initiatives across all educational tiers to enhance environmental awareness and equip citizens with the necessary knowledge and competencies for sustainable environmental management; Cultivate community participation in environmental decision-making processes. Establish platforms facilitating dialogue and collaboration among citizens, governments, NGOs, and other stakeholders; Provide training and resources to empower local leaders, civil society groups, and governmental bodies to engage in effective environmental governance;

Develop and enforce policies that advocate for sustainable environmental practices, holding individuals and entities accountable for environmental harm; Advocate for the adoption of renewable energy sources, sustainable agricultural methods, and eco-friendly technologies to mitigate environmental impacts and drive sustainable development.

Author Contributions
Conceptualization; methodology.; validation; formal analysis; investigation.; O. B. S; resources; data curation; writing—original draft preparation. A. M. M.; writing—review and editing: visualization: S. U. M. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest
The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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