



Beyond hosting UNEP: Kenya's environmental diplomacy in the United Nations system and multilateral environmental governance

Charles Otieno P. Ochieng

charlestonpauliv@gmail.com (+254712764261)

Tom Mboya University, Kenya

<https://doi.org/10.51867/ajernet.7.2.76>

ABSTRACT

Kenya occupies a distinctive position in global environmental governance because Nairobi hosts the headquarters of the United Nations Environment Programme, the headquarters of UN-Habitat, and the United Nations Office at Nairobi, giving the country unusual institutional visibility in multilateral environmental politics. Despite this prominence, existing accounts of Kenya's environmental role often remain descriptive and celebratory, without clearly distinguishing between diplomatic visibility, agenda-setting capacity, coalition brokerage, and substantive policy influence. This study examines how Kenya has used its host-state position, foreign-policy commitments, and multilateral engagement to advance environmental diplomacy within the United Nations system and wider environmental governance processes. The study is grounded in the concepts of host-state advantage, norm entrepreneurship, and diplomatic brokerage as complementary lenses for understanding how a non-great power may exercise influence in multilateral environmental governance. Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative desk-research design based on document analysis. The analysis triangulates official Kenyan policy and legal documents, United Nations institutional materials, African multilateral declarations, and relevant scholarly literature in order to assess Kenya's environmental diplomacy from national, institutional, continental, and academic perspectives. The findings show that Kenya's environmental diplomacy is strongest in institutional access, convening power, agenda-setting, coalition-building, and the projection of African priorities in debates on climate finance, adaptation, sustainability, and equitable governance. The study concludes that Kenya is best understood not merely as a host of environmental institutions but as a strategically positioned diplomatic actor whose influence is significant yet bounded by financing dependence, implementation constraints, and broader asymmetries in global environmental governance. The study is important because it demonstrates how environmental diplomacy in the Global South may derive from institutional centrality and brokerage rather than material power alone, and it recommends stronger linkage between Kenya's multilateral environmental advocacy and domestic implementation in order to enhance diplomatic credibility and substantive policy effect.

Keywords: Diplomatic Brokerage, Environmental Diplomacy, Host-State Advantage, Kenya, Multilateral Environmental Governance, Norm Entrepreneurship

I. INTRODUCTION

Environmental diplomacy has become an increasingly important dimension of international relations in an era defined by climate change, biodiversity loss, environmental degradation, and intensifying debates over sustainable development and global justice. As environmental crises have grown in scale and transboundary reach, diplomacy has expanded beyond its traditional security and economic concerns to include negotiations over mitigation, adaptation, ecological finance, environmental governance, and the equitable distribution of responsibilities within the international system. Within this broader setting, multilateral environmental governance has emerged as a critical arena in which states seek to shape rules, frame priorities, mobilize coalitions, and advance both normative and material interests. For states in the Global South, environmental diplomacy has also become a means of asserting voice and agency within a global order in which decision-making power remains unevenly distributed, particularly where environmental negotiations reflect broader struggles over representation, legitimacy and bargaining power (Ali & Voinov Vladich, 2016). In that sense, environmental diplomacy is not simply about ecological stewardship; it is also about the politics of global governance and the pursuit of more equitable participation in international decision-making.

Africa occupies a particularly significant place in these debates. The continent contributes comparatively little to historical greenhouse gas emissions, yet it bears a disproportionate burden of climate vulnerability, environmental stress, and development constraints. This asymmetry has sharpened African demands for climate justice, adaptation support, reform of global financial structures, and more inclusive environmental governance. African states have therefore increasingly sought to articulate shared positions in international environmental forums and to strengthen continental coordination around issues such as climate finance, energy transition, biodiversity, and sustainable development. These developments have elevated the diplomatic importance of states that are able to convene, coordinate, and project African priorities within multilateral institutions. It is within this broader continental and global context that Kenya's environmental diplomacy becomes analytically important.

UNEP's establishment in Nairobi after the 1972 Stockholm Conference was historically significant because it marked the first time a major UN headquarters was located in the Global South, thereby transforming Nairobi into a durable site of environmental governance and international diplomacy. Over time, this institutional presence has given Kenya unusual diplomatic proximity to global environmental debates, recurring opportunities for agenda engagement, and a symbolic association with multilateral environmental action.

Kenya has become one of Africa's most visible states in multilateral environmental diplomacy. That visibility is rooted partly in institutional geography and partly in state policy. Nairobi hosts the headquarters of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the headquarters of UN-Habitat, and the United Nations Office at Nairobi (UNON), which serves as the only UN headquarters office in Africa and the Global South (UNEP, 2022, 2024; UN-Habitat, 2024; UNON, n.d.). UNEP's establishment in Nairobi after the 1972 Stockholm Conference was historically significant because it marked the first time a major UN headquarters was located in the Global South, thereby transforming Nairobi into a durable site of environmental governance and international diplomacy. Over time, this institutional presence has given Kenya unusual diplomatic proximity to global environmental debates, recurring opportunities for agenda engagement, and a symbolic association with multilateral environmental action.

Kenya's environmental diplomacy is also anchored in formal state policy. The country's 2014 Foreign Policy identifies environmental diplomacy as one of Kenya's key diplomatic pillars and links it to sustainable management of natural resources, climate cooperation, and broader international engagement (Government of Kenya, 2014). More recent official statements by the Ministry of Foreign and Diaspora Affairs indicate that Kenya's environmental and climate diplomacy is oriented toward climate finance, strengthening UNEP and UN-Habitat, advancing adaptation and resilience, and advocating reform of the global financial architecture in ways more responsive to developing-country priorities (Ministry of Foreign and Diaspora Affairs, n.d.). These policy commitments suggest that Kenya's role in environmental diplomacy is not merely incidental to its hosting function; rather, it reflects an attempt to convert institutional presence into broader diplomatic relevance within the United Nations system and beyond.

Despite this visibility, the scholarly and policy literature often describes Kenya's environmental role in broad and celebratory terms that do not always distinguish clearly between diplomatic prominence, agenda-setting capacity, coalition-building influence, and measurable policy effectiveness. Kenya is often portrayed as a leader or central player in environmental governance largely because it hosts key institutions and participates actively in environmental forums. Yet such descriptions may conflate symbolic prominence with substantive influence. Hosting institutions does not automatically mean shaping outcomes, just as frequent participation in environmental diplomacy does not necessarily translate into effective implementation, durable policy leverage, or measurable environmental gains. A more analytically grounded study is therefore needed to clarify how Kenya's environmental diplomacy actually works, where its strengths lie, and what its limitations reveal about African agency in multilateral environmental governance.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

The problem addressed in this study is that Kenya's environmental diplomacy is widely acknowledged, but insufficiently theorized and unevenly evaluated in existing scholarship. Much of the available discussion emphasizes Kenya's visibility as host of UNEP, UN-Habitat, and UNON, as well as its active engagement in climate and sustainability diplomacy. However, this literature often remains descriptive and policy-oriented, tending to celebrate Kenya's institutional location and diplomatic participation without adequately interrogating the mechanisms through which influence is exercised or the limits that constrain its effectiveness. As a result, the relationship between Kenya's host-state position, its diplomatic agency, and its actual influence in multilateral environmental governance remains underexplored.

The problem is also conceptual and empirical. Conceptually, there is limited sustained engagement with the theoretical foundations needed to explain how a state such as Kenya, which is not a great power in conventional international relations terms, may nevertheless exercise influence within global environmental politics. Empirically, there is insufficient distinction between Kenya's role in hosting, convening, and symbolic agenda visibility on the one hand, and its capacity to shape outcomes, mobilize coalitions, and sustain implementation credibility on the other. Put differently, there is a gap between what is often claimed about Kenya's environmental leadership and what is systematically demonstrated about the forms, reach, and limits of that diplomacy.

There is also a contextual gap in the literature. Existing scholarship on African climate and environmental diplomacy often focuses either on continental declarations, broad South–North justice debates, or the role of larger and more materially powerful African states such as South Africa. Kenya's case is less frequently examined as a distinct diplomatic model grounded in institutional centrality, brokerage, and coalition-building. Yet Kenya's position is analytically important precisely because it may reveal a different form of environmental diplomacy: one based less on structural power and more on host-state advantage, norm entrepreneurship, and representational access within multilateral institutions. Addressing this problem is therefore necessary not only to understand Kenya more fully, but also to enrich broader debates on environmental diplomacy, Global South agency, and international order.

1.2 Research Objective

- i. Examine how Nairobi's role as host to UNEP, UN-Habitat, and UNON has shaped Kenya's diplomatic visibility and institutional access in environmental governance;
- ii. Analyze how Kenya has used coalition-building, agenda-setting, and diplomatic brokerage to project African priorities in multilateral environmental forums; and
- iii. Assess the principal limits and constraints that affect the translation of Kenya's diplomatic prominence into substantive policy influence and implementation credibility.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Review

2.1.1 Norm Entrepreneurship

A central theoretical anchor for this study is the concept of norm entrepreneurship. In international relations, norm entrepreneurship refers to the capacity of actors to shape how issues are understood, to frame claims in morally and politically persuasive terms, and to influence the diffusion of ideas and standards within institutional settings. Corbett et al. (2019) are particularly important here because they show that even states lacking overwhelming material capabilities may still exercise influence within international organisations by performing relevance strategically, building coalitions, and framing vulnerability or responsibility in ways that resonate with wider multilateral audiences. Their argument is especially valuable for this study because it displaces the assumption that only materially powerful states matter in international governance and instead highlights the capacity of weaker or non-hegemonic actors to shape institutional discourse from within.

Applied to Kenya, norm entrepreneurship provides a strong interpretive lens for understanding how environmental diplomacy may work through framing rather than coercion. Kenya does not possess the structural power of major global actors in environmental politics. It cannot determine climate finance rules unilaterally, nor can it shape multilateral bargaining outcomes in the manner of great powers. Yet Kenya can influence environmental diplomacy by articulating African concerns in persuasive normative language, especially around climate justice, adaptation, green development, and reform of inequitable global governance structures. In this sense, Kenya's role is not best understood through a classic power-politics model alone, but through its ability to frame environmental questions in ways that connect national interests, continental priorities, and broader Global South claims. Norm entrepreneurship therefore helps explain how Kenya may matter in environmental governance despite its limited traditional power resources.

The usefulness of norm entrepreneurship for this study lies not simply in identifying Kenya as a diplomatic participant, but in clarifying the mechanism through which its environmental role can become significant. The theory directs attention to language, advocacy, coalition-building, and institutional performance. It therefore helps explain why Kenya's diplomatic influence may be strongest where it can articulate shared African priorities, convene actors around common claims, and project normative legitimacy within multilateral settings.

This is particularly relevant in environmental diplomacy, where claims about justice, sustainability, adaptation, and differentiated responsibility are not merely rhetorical; they are central to how global environmental governance is negotiated and legitimized.

2.1.2 Host-State Advantage

The second major theoretical pillar of the study is host-state advantage, which is treated here as a form of institutional centrality. Although the literature does not always use the term in identical ways, the underlying idea is that a state hosting major international organisations acquires repeated access to diplomatic networks, information flows, and symbolic legitimacy that may enhance its visibility and influence. Legal scholarship on host-state agreements emphasizes that hosting an international organisation creates a structured relationship between the organisation and the territorial state, including privileges, immunities, and operational arrangements that make the host state an indispensable institutional environment for the organisation's work (UNEP, 2022; UNON, n.d.). Even if that legal relationship does not automatically confer policy control, it does create a distinctive diplomatic setting in which the host state gains recurring contact with multilateral actors and decision-making processes.

This perspective is particularly relevant to Kenya because Nairobi hosts UNEP, UN-Habitat, and UNON. UNEP's own institutional history makes clear that Nairobi became the first UN headquarters in the Global South after the 1972 Stockholm Conference, while UNON later consolidated the city's status as the UN's headquarters in Africa. That institutional geography matters because it transforms Nairobi into more than a national capital. It becomes a permanent site of environmental diplomacy, technical consultation, ministerial engagement, and international agenda circulation. The significance of host-state advantage in this case therefore lies not in ownership or command over the institutions, but in proximity, repetition, and visibility. Kenya is repeatedly present where multilateral environmental governance is discussed, staged, and symbolically anchored.

Host-state advantage also helps explain why Kenya's diplomatic role may exceed what might be predicted from

material capability alone. A state that hosts major organizations gains opportunities to convene meetings, interact regularly with diplomatic delegations and institutional officials, and acquire symbolic association with globally important policy agendas. In Kenya's case, this means that environmental diplomacy is embedded in the spatial and institutional life of Nairobi itself. The city becomes part of the diplomatic infrastructure through which environmental governance is performed. This is analytically important because it shows that influence can stem from organizational location and sustained access, not only from military or economic power. Host-state advantage therefore complements norm entrepreneurship by explaining how Kenya's diplomatic relevance is structurally enabled even before specific advocacy strategies are deployed.

2.1.3 Diplomatic Brokerage and Global South Agency

A third theoretical dimension of the study is diplomatic brokerage, situated within wider debates on Global South agency. Brokerage in diplomacy refers to the capacity of an actor to connect otherwise distinct political spaces, mediate between interests, translate claims across institutional settings, and facilitate coalition-building or negotiation. The diplomacy literature broadly emphasizes negotiation, representation, and mediation as core functions of diplomatic practice, especially within institutional and multilateral settings (Kaul, 2013). In international organisations, these functions become particularly important because influence often depends not on command, but on the ability to connect actors, frame issues, and move positions toward procedural or normative convergence.

This idea is highly relevant to Kenya's environmental diplomacy. Kenya can be interpreted as a broker not only because it hosts environmental institutions, but because it frequently occupies a position between African collective claims and wider multilateral processes. It can link African ministerial positions, such as those emerging through AMCEN or the Africa Climate Summit, to the wider diplomatic arenas of UNEA and other UN-linked processes. Brokerage is therefore a useful theoretical addition because it explains how Kenya's influence may operate not merely through self-assertion, but through intermediation—bridging continental priorities and global platforms, and translating African claims into the language of multilateral environmental governance.

The Global South dimension further sharpens this perspective. Kaul's work on the rise of the Global South argues that developing countries have increasingly become consequential actors in the governance of global public goods, including environmental governance, even though they continue to operate under conditions of unequal power (Kaul, 2013). This insight is important because it places Kenya's environmental diplomacy within a broader redistribution of voice in world politics. Kenya's role is not simply national. It is also expressive of a wider pattern in which states from the Global South seek to redefine the terms of global governance through institutional participation, collective voice, and normative contestation. In this sense, diplomatic brokerage is one way in which Global South agency becomes visible in practice. Kenya's diplomacy can therefore be read not only as national foreign policy, but as part of a broader effort to expand African and Global South influence in environmental decision-making.

2.2 Empirical Review

2.2.1 Environmental Diplomacy and Multilateral Environmental Governance

Environmental diplomacy has emerged as an increasingly important field of inquiry within international relations because environmental problems rarely conform to political borders and therefore require sustained intergovernmental negotiation, norm formation, and institutional coordination. Ali and Voinov Vladich conceptualize environmental diplomacy as a form of diplomatic engagement shaped by the transboundary character of ecosystems, environmental risk, and shared ecological vulnerability (Ali & Voinov Vladich, 2016). In their account, environmental diplomacy is not confined to classic treaty negotiation but extends to the management of common goods, the resolution of environmental disputes, and the broader institutional processes through which states and non-state actors respond to global ecological challenges. This wider conception is useful for the present study because it places environmental diplomacy at the intersection of governance, science, politics, and multilateral bargaining rather than reducing it to isolated climate negotiations alone.

The rise of multilateral environmental governance has further expanded the significance of this field. UNEP describes itself as the leading global environmental authority within the United Nations system, while UNEA is officially defined as the world's highest-level decision-making body on environmental matters, with universal membership of all UN member states (UNEP, 2024, n.d.-a). These institutional developments matter because they indicate that environmental governance now occupies a more formalised and visible place within international order. Multilateral environmental diplomacy is therefore increasingly conducted through standing institutions, regular assemblies, technical negotiation platforms, and regionally coordinated positions, rather than through one-off conferences alone. This institutional density has created new opportunities for states to shape agendas, build alliances, and influence the evolution of global environmental norms.

Yet much of the broader literature on environmental diplomacy still tends to focus on regime development, treaty processes, climate negotiation architecture, or global environmental norms in the abstract. Less attention is often paid to how particular states acquire diplomatic relevance within multilateral environmental governance through

geographic positioning, organizational proximity, and repeated institutional access. In that respect, the concept of environmental diplomacy is well developed at the general level, but less fully explored in relation to the diplomatic agency of particular host states in the Global South. This is especially important in the African context, where the politics of representation, agenda access, and institutional location carry implications not only for environmental governance, but also for voice, legitimacy, and equity within international order.

2.2.2 Host-State Advantage, Norm Entrepreneurship, and Diplomatic Brokerage

A second body of scholarship relevant to this study concerns the ways in which states that are not conventionally powerful may still exercise influence within international organisations. Corbett, Xu, and Weller challenge the assumption that structurally weaker states are necessarily peripheral within multilateral institutions (Corbett et al., 2019). Their work on norm entrepreneurship “from below” shows that small or otherwise less powerful actors may exercise influence by framing issues persuasively, performing vulnerability or relevance strategically, and building coalitions that reshape how norms circulate within international organisations (Corbett et al., 2019). This line of argument is directly relevant to the Kenyan case because it suggests that diplomatic influence need not rest solely on military strength, economic size, or hegemonic status. It may also arise through institutional presence, persuasive framing, coalition-building, and repeated participation in decision-making arenas.

Related scholarship on small states and international organisations reinforces this point. Corbett and colleagues’ later work on why small states engage with international organisations argues that such participation is not accidental but tied to sovereign recognition, access, legitimacy, and the pursuit of interests through institutional platforms (Corbett et al., 2021). This is an important corrective to more state-centric or power-centric readings of multilateral politics. It suggests that access to international organisations can itself become a strategic resource, especially where those organisations shape agenda-setting, policy discourse, and normative legitimacy (Corbett et al., 2021; Magliveras, 2025). For a state such as Kenya, which is not a great power but enjoys unusual institutional centrality within the UN environmental system, this literature provides a strong starting point for understanding how diplomatic relevance may be generated and sustained.

A further dimension of this literature concerns diplomacy inside international organisations. Magliveras argues that diplomacy within international organisations should not be treated merely as an extension of inter-state relations, but as a distinct process in which organisations themselves become active sites of negotiation, representation, and institutional interaction (Magliveras, 2025). This perspective strengthens the case for treating host-state advantage as analytically important. A state that hosts major organisations is not simply a passive landlord; it may gain repeated access to diplomatic circuits, knowledge flows, elite networks, and symbolic legitimacy. Similarly, Harig’s work on Global South influence through leadership appointments in international organisations suggests that international institutions can become sites through which states from the Global South challenge global hierarchies and reshape normative practices from within. These arguments are important because they show that institutions are not neutral venues. They are arenas in which access, presence, representation, and authority matter.

However, despite these advances, the existing literature does not fully theorize the specific diplomatic advantages conferred by hosting major environmental institutions in the Global South. Norm entrepreneurship explains how structurally weaker states may influence organizations, and the international-organization literature explains why institutional participation matters, but the host-state dimension itself remains comparatively underexplored. This gap is particularly notable in relation to environmental governance, where place, convening, and symbolic association with global ecological authority may matter more than in some other sectors of diplomacy. Kenya therefore offers an opportunity to extend these debates by showing how host-state advantage, normative brokerage, and African representational politics intersect in a concrete case.

2.2.3 African Environmental Diplomacy and Kenya’s Position

The literature on African environmental diplomacy has expanded significantly in recent years, especially around climate justice, adaptation finance, and the effort to articulate common continental positions in global environmental forums. UNEP materials on AMCEN indicate that the African Ministerial Conference on the Environment has, since its creation in 1985, served as Africa’s primary ministerial platform for environmental coordination and political guidance (African Union, 2023; UNEP, n.d.-b, 2025). AMCEN’s long institutional history suggests that African environmental diplomacy cannot be reduced to fragmented national efforts; it has also developed through continental coordination, ministerial dialogue, and shared norm formation. The significance of such a platform is that it enables African states to frame environmental priorities in more collective terms, thereby strengthening bargaining leverage in wider global settings.

The strengthening of UNEA has added another important layer to African environmental diplomacy. UNEP’s official materials emphasize that UNEA sets priorities for global environmental policies and international environmental law, and that it operates with universal participation. Because UNEA is based in Nairobi, African diplomacy—at least in the environmental domain—has unusual geographical proximity to one of the central decision-making arenas of

global ecological governance. This gives Kenya, as host state, a more prominent role than would ordinarily be expected from a state of its conventional power profile. In addition, UNEP's own institutional communications have repeatedly referred to Nairobi's growing role as a global environmental hub, especially following the concentration of major meetings there, including UNEA sessions, the Africa Climate Summit, and related multilateral processes.

Kenya's position became even more visible in 2023 with the Africa Climate Summit and the African Leaders Nairobi Declaration on Climate Change and Call to Action. African Union materials show that the Nairobi Declaration was explicitly framed as a contribution from the African continent to global climate politics, with a strong emphasis on green growth, climate finance solutions, and the institutionalization of the Africa Climate Summit as a biennial event. UNEP reporting around the summit similarly emphasized climate justice, adaptation finance, and Africa's effort to define its own agenda rather than merely react to externally framed climate priorities. These developments suggest that Kenya's role is not simply that of host to global institutions, but also that of a broker of continental environmental narratives and collective African positioning.

Comparative scholarship helps sharpen this point. Olutola and Landsberg's analysis of South Africa's climate diplomacy presents South Africa as a more materially grounded and multi-level diplomatic actor whose role derives partly from broader national power, industrial profile, and geopolitical standing (Olutola & Landsberg, 2018). By implication, Kenya represents a different model of African environmental diplomacy. Its strength lies less in structural weight and more in institutional centrality, multilateral embeddedness, and the capacity to convene and articulate. This comparison is important because it suggests that African environmental diplomacy is not uniform. Different states exercise influence through different pathways: some through material power and strategic status, others through institutional location and diplomatic brokerage.

2.3 Research Gaps in Existing Scholarship

Although the reviewed literature provides important insights, several major gaps remain. The first is a contextual gap. There is substantial literature on global environmental diplomacy, on international organizations, and on African climate politics more broadly, but less focused analysis of Kenya as a distinct diplomatic case within the UN environmental system. Existing discussions often mention Kenya in passing because it hosts UNEP and UN-Habitat, yet fewer studies examine what that hosting actually means for diplomatic influence, agenda access, or coalition-building in practice. Kenya is therefore visible in the literature, but insufficiently analyzed as a case in its own right.

The second is a conceptual gap. Norm entrepreneurship, small-state participation in international organizations, and Global South agency all offer valuable insights, but they are not often brought together systematically in studies of environmental diplomacy. Similarly, host-state advantage is frequently implied but rarely developed as a central analytical concept in environmental governance scholarship. As a result, there is limited conceptual integration between studies of diplomatic access, organizational location, and African environmental influence. This weakens the ability of the literature to explain how Kenya's institutional centrality may generate a specific type of multilateral diplomatic agency.

The third is an empirical gap. Many discussions of Kenya's environmental role tend to emphasize its symbolic prominence, leadership image, or diplomatic visibility without clearly distinguishing among institutional hosting, agenda-setting influence, coalition brokerage, and demonstrable implementation outcomes. Put differently, there is often a slippage between presence and power, and between participation and effectiveness. This article addresses that empirical gap by asking not simply whether Kenya is visible, but how its environmental diplomacy operates, where its influence is strongest, and what limits remain in the translation of diplomatic prominence into substantive policy outcomes. In so doing, the study seeks to contribute a more grounded and theoretically informed account of Kenya's environmental diplomacy within multilateral environmental governance.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative desk-research design based on document analysis. Document analysis is widely recognized as an appropriate qualitative research strategy where the object of inquiry concerns policy ideas, institutional positioning, legal frameworks, public discourse, and governance processes as they are articulated in official texts, reports, declarations, and related documentary sources. Bowen defines document analysis as a systematic procedure for reviewing and evaluating documents in order to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge. Similarly, prior emphasizes that documents should not be treated merely as passive containers of information, but as socially and politically situated artefacts that reveal institutional priorities, discursive practices, and relations of power. These insights are particularly relevant for the present study because Kenya's environmental diplomacy is not most clearly observed through survey responses or numerical indicators alone, but through policy language, multilateral declarations, institutional records, and the structured representation of national and continental priorities in official texts (Bowen, 2009; Prior, 2003).

A qualitative document-based design is especially appropriate for this study because the research seeks to explain how Kenya's environmental diplomacy is articulated, institutionalized, and projected within the United Nations system and wider multilateral environmental governance. The focus of the article is not on measuring diplomatic outcomes through statistical modeling, but on understanding the forms, mechanisms, and limits of Kenya's diplomatic influence as expressed in official environmental and foreign-policy documentation. In this respect, the study is interpretive and analytical rather than positivist in a narrow causal sense. It seeks to understand meaning, positioning, and institutional practice rather than to estimate causal effect sizes. Such an approach is consistent with broader qualitative traditions that prioritize depth, context, and interpretive coherence when analyzing governance and international relations phenomena (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; O'Leary, 2017).

The study is also designed as a desk-research inquiry because the central empirical material is publicly available documentary evidence rather than original interview or survey data. This is important for both methodological clarity and transparency. The article does not claim to present primary fieldwork findings; instead, it draws on verifiable official documents and scholarly sources in order to examine the architecture of Kenya's environmental diplomacy. A desk-study approach is therefore not a methodological weakness in this context, but an analytically appropriate strategy because the subject under investigation—multilateral environmental diplomacy—is itself constituted through texts, declarations, policy frameworks, legal instruments, and institutional outputs. Put differently, much of what environmental diplomacy is and does becomes visible through documents, making documentary analysis is particularly well suited to the study's objectives (Bowen, 2009; Prior, 2003).

3.2 Data and Document Selection

The study draws on four broad categories of documentary material. The first consists of official Kenyan state documents, including the Foreign Policy of the Republic of Kenya (2014), Kenya Vision 2030, the Climate Change Act (2016), relevant National Climate Change Action Plans, and Kenya's Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs). These documents are important because they provide the authoritative national policy basis through which Kenya's environmental diplomacy is framed, justified, and linked to broader development and foreign-policy priorities. They make it possible to assess how Kenya officially defines environmental diplomacy and how it aligns external advocacy with domestic planning, legal frameworks, and long-term governance commitments.

The second category consists of United Nations institutional materials, particularly from UNEP, UN-Habitat, and UNON. These include official institutional histories, mission statements, meeting reports, UNEA documentation, and explanatory materials on organizational role and status. Such documents are important because they illuminate the institutional environment within which Kenya operates and help clarify the significance of Nairobi as a diplomatic site. Since the article is centrally concerned with host-state advantage, these materials are especially valuable for examining the organizational and symbolic significance of Nairobi within multilateral environmental governance.

The third category comprises African multilateral and continental materials, including AMCEN documents, African Union declarations, and the African Leaders Nairobi Declaration on Climate Change and Call to Action. These texts are essential because Kenya's environmental diplomacy cannot be fully understood through national and UN sources alone. Kenya's role also involves the articulation and projection of African positions in global forums. Continental documents therefore help trace the extent to which Kenya functions as a broker and platform for African environmental priorities rather than only as a national actor.

The fourth category consists of peer-reviewed scholarly literature and credible academic analyses on environmental diplomacy, norm entrepreneurship, host-state relations, African climate diplomacy, and multilateral governance. These sources are necessary both for theoretical grounding and for situating the study within existing academic debates. Because this is a desk-research study, engagement with existing literature is not supplementary but constitutive of the analysis itself. Scholarly materials enable the study to interpret official documents critically, relate empirical observations to theory, and identify the conceptual, contextual, and empirical gaps that justify the research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Tracy, 2010).

Document selection was guided by relevance, credibility, and analytical utility. Documents were included where they met three criteria: first, where they bore directly on Kenya's environmental diplomacy, multilateral environmental governance, or Africa's representation in environmental forums; second, where they originated from credible official or scholarly sources; and third, where they offered substantive insight into one or more of the study's analytical themes, namely institutional hosting, diplomatic framing, coalition-building, domestic policy credibility, and implementation constraints. This purposive approach to source selection is consistent with qualitative research principles, which prioritize information-rich materials rather than statistical representativeness (Patton, 2015).

3.3 Analytical Procedure

The documents were analyzed through a thematic interpretive strategy. Thematic analysis is useful in qualitative research because it allows the researcher to identify recurring patterns of meaning across a body of material while remaining attentive to context, nuance, and conceptual interpretation. Although often associated with interview-based

research, thematic analysis is equally useful for documentary inquiry where the aim is to identify repeated motifs, categories, and discursive structures across policy and institutional texts. In this study, the analytical process involved repeated reading of the selected materials, identification of recurring themes, coding of key ideas, and interpretive synthesis in relation to the study's theoretical framework (Nowell et al., 2017).

The analytical categories were not generated randomly but were guided both by the research objective and by the theoretical foundations already outlined in the previous section. In practical terms, the analysis focused on five interconnected themes: institutional centrality, agenda-setting, coalition-building, domestic policy credibility, and implementation constraints. These themes were selected because they directly reflect the study's core question concerning how Kenya uses its host-state position and multilateral engagement to advance environmental diplomacy, and what limits constrain the translation of visibility into substantive influence. The thematic process therefore remained both inductive and deductive. It was inductive in that the analysis remained open to patterns that emerged from the texts themselves, and deductive in that interpretation was guided by the concepts of norm entrepreneurship, host-state advantage, and diplomatic brokerage.

The interpretive procedure unfolded in three stages. First, the selected documents were reviewed in order to identify how Kenya's environmental diplomacy was described, justified, and linked to broader policy priorities. Second, the texts were compared across source categories to identify convergences and tensions between national policy language, United Nations institutional discourse, African multilateral positioning, and scholarly interpretation. Third, the resulting themes were interpreted through the theoretical framework in order to determine not only what Kenya's environmental diplomacy looks like, but how and why it acquires influence in some domains more than others. This layered procedure allowed the study to move beyond summary description and toward a more critical assessment of Kenya's diplomatic role.

3.4 Validity, Trustworthiness, and Analytical Rigor

Because qualitative desk research does not rely on statistical validity in the conventional sense, the quality of the analysis depends on credibility, transparency, and analytical coherence. Tracy argues that qualitative rigor is enhanced where studies demonstrate sincerity, methodological transparency, rich interpretation, and meaningful contribution. In this study, credibility was strengthened through the use of multiple categories of documentary evidence rather than reliance on a single source type. The analysis does not depend exclusively on Kenyan policy documents, or solely on UN materials, or solely on scholarly interpretation. Instead, it triangulates across these materials so that claims about Kenya's environmental diplomacy can be assessed against national, institutional, continental, and academic sources. This form of triangulation strengthens the trustworthiness of the findings because it reduces overdependence on any one documentary perspective (Tracy, 2010; Bowen, 2009).

Transparency was also enhanced by clearly specifying the types of documents used, the logic of document selection, and the thematic procedure employed in the analysis. By making the research design explicit, the study allows readers to assess how the conclusions were reached and to judge whether the interpretation is adequately grounded in the source base. In addition, the theoretical framework was not treated as a decorative addition but as an analytical guide that structured interpretation throughout the study. This contributes to rigor because it ensures that the findings and discussion are not merely descriptive summaries of official documents, but theoretically informed readings of how diplomatic influence is constructed and constrained.

Analytical rigor was further strengthened by maintaining a critical stance toward the documents themselves. Official texts were not assumed to be neutral reflections of reality. Rather, they were treated as institutional and political artefacts that express aspirations, priorities, self-representations, and strategic narratives. This is methodologically important because diplomatic documents often emphasize success, legitimacy, and commitment more than they reveal practical constraints or implementation weaknesses. By comparing policy texts with scholarly literature and institutional records, the study was able to distinguish between rhetorical positioning and more demonstrable forms of diplomatic influence. This critical treatment of documents helps prevent the analysis from collapsing into a descriptive restatement of official claims.

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

4.1 Findings

4.1.1 Nairobi as diplomatic infrastructure and institutional centrality

The first major finding of the study is that Kenya's environmental diplomacy is structurally enabled by Nairobi's institutional position within the architecture of global environmental governance. The triangulated evidence from UNEP, UNON, Kenyan policy discourse, and scholarly interpretation shows that Nairobi is not merely the physical location of environmental institutions, but a diplomatic site through which multilateral environmental governance is routinely convened, symbolically anchored, and operationally reproduced.

UNEP's official institutional history emphasizes that the organization was established following the 1972

Stockholm Conference and that Nairobi became the first UN headquarters in the Global South. UNON's own institutional profile similarly affirms Nairobi's status as the only UN headquarters in Africa and a principal UN duty station. These facts matter analytically because they place Kenya in a privileged position of institutional proximity to recurring environmental negotiations, ministerial forums, expert processes, and agenda-setting encounters. (UNEP, 2022, 2024; UNON, n.d.).

This institutional geography gives Kenya several forms of diplomatic advantage. First, it increases visibility. By hosting the headquarters of UNEP and UN-Habitat, Kenya becomes recurrently associated with the global environmental agenda in ways that exceed the diplomatic profile of most African states. Second, it creates access. Nairobi-based diplomacy enables repeated interaction among Kenyan officials, African delegations, UN personnel, technical experts, and civil-society actors within a shared institutional environment. Third, it supports convening capacity. UNEA sessions, UNEP-related consultative processes, and associated environmental events routinely bring the world's environmental governance community to Nairobi, thereby making the city a continuing node of diplomatic encounter. The literature on diplomacy within international organizations suggests that such repeated access and institutional embeddedness are not merely symbolic; they can produce long-term diplomatic capital, knowledge accumulation, and representational authority. In Kenya's case, the hosting function therefore operates as diplomatic infrastructure rather than simple administrative presence. (Magliveras, 2025; Corbett et al., 2019).

The triangulated evidence also indicates that Nairobi's role has deepened over time. UNEP materials continue to describe the city as central to multilateral environmental action, while recent Kenyan foreign-policy discourse presents Nairobi's status as a strategic national asset in contemporary diplomacy. This convergence between institutional history and current policy framing is important. It suggests that Kenya itself recognizes the diplomatic significance of hosting environmental institutions and seeks to convert that institutional position into broader strategic influence. In this sense, Nairobi is not simply where environmental diplomacy happens; it is part of the mechanism through which Kenya participates in, legitimizes, and potentially shapes multilateral environmental governance. The first finding of the study is therefore that Kenya's environmental diplomacy begins with institutional centrality, and that this centrality is both material and symbolic. (Government of Kenya, 2014; UNEP, 2022).

4.1.2 Kenya as an agenda-setting and coalition-building actor

The second major finding is that Kenya's environmental diplomacy extends beyond institutional hosting and operates through active agenda-setting and coalition-building. Here the triangulated source base is especially important. Kenyan foreign-policy materials, UNEP accounts of African environmental coordination, the African Leaders Nairobi Declaration, and the scholarly literature all converge in showing that Kenya's environmental diplomacy is not purely passive or representational. Rather, Kenya repeatedly positions itself as an actor seeking to frame debates, articulate priorities, and broker African concerns in wider multilateral settings. Kenya's Ministry of Foreign and Diaspora Affairs expressly identifies environmental and climate change diplomacy as part of the country's substantive foreign-policy agenda, with emphasis on climate finance, resilience, sustainability, and reform of global governance arrangements. This indicates that Kenya's environmental role is policy-articulated, not merely institutionally inherited. (Government of Kenya, 2014; Ministry of Foreign and Diaspora Affairs, n.d.)

The clearest empirical illustration of this finding lies in Kenya's role in the 2023 Africa Climate Summit and the resulting African Leaders Nairobi Declaration on Climate Change and Call to Action. African Union materials show that the declaration framed climate action not only as environmental necessity but also as a matter of finance reform, green growth, and a stronger African voice in global governance. UNEP-related materials and official Kenyan statements surrounding subsequent follow-up engagements reinforce the same impression: Kenya has attempted to use Nairobi not only as a hosting site, but as a political platform for elevating African priorities in climate diplomacy. This is significant because it shows how Kenya's diplomacy functions through the construction and projection of broader continental claims rather than through unilateral national assertion alone. The finding therefore supports the interpretation of Kenya as a diplomatic broker capable of linking African concerns to global environmental forums. (African Union, 2023; UNEP, 2025).

This finding is further reinforced by Kenya's relationship to AMCEN. UNEP's official materials describe AMCEN as Africa's highest environmental policy body and principal ministerial platform for coordinating environmental action and shaping common positions in global negotiations. The fact that AMCEN's twentieth session in 2025 took place in Nairobi is itself revealing. It reflects both the city's institutional importance and Kenya's continuing relevance to continental environmental diplomacy. The significance of this for the present study is that it demonstrates how coalition-building is materially staged through Nairobi. Kenya's environmental diplomacy therefore appears strongest where it can convene, connect, and amplify African positions in multilateral spaces. In this respect, the source base consistently supports the view that Kenya's influence is not only positional but also relational: it depends on how effectively the country acts as a hinge between continental environmental priorities and the wider United Nations system. (UNEP, 2025).

Domestic policy frameworks and the construction of diplomatic credibility

A third major finding is that Kenya's environmental diplomacy is strengthened by a substantial domestic policy, planning, and legal framework that enhances its external credibility. The triangulated evidence shows that Kenya's environmental diplomacy is not built on international advocacy alone. It is also grounded in internal instruments that enable the country to present its environmental claims as anchored in law, policy, and institutional planning. Kenya Vision 2030 links long-term development to a clean and secure environment; the Climate Change Act of 2016 establishes a legal basis for climate governance and mainstreaming; and successive climate policy instruments, including the NDC framework, further reinforce the state's commitment to climate and sustainability goals. These materials suggest that Kenya's diplomacy gains strength not only from hosting institutions, but also from being able to point to domestic frameworks that support its external environmental claims. (Government of Kenya, 2007, 2016).

This is an important finding because diplomatic credibility in multilateral governance often depends on the extent to which external advocacy appears connected to internal policy coherence. A state that calls for environmental justice or climate finance but lacks visible domestic commitment may struggle to sustain normative authority. Kenya's case is different in that its environmental diplomacy is reinforced by a relatively dense documentary architecture. Although the present study does not evaluate local implementation outcomes directly, it does show that Kenya can draw on nationally recognized frameworks to support its diplomatic positions. This matters analytically because it narrows the gap between representation and policy language. Kenya is not simply arguing for environmental action in international forums; it is also situating such action within a domestic governance narrative of resilience, sustainability, and development transformation. (Government of Kenya, 2014; Government of Kenya, 2016).

The triangulated nature of the evidence also reveals an important nuance. Official Kenyan documents project considerable policy coherence, and UNEP-related materials often reflect positively on Kenya's role as a site of environmental diplomacy. Yet scholarly literature on climate diplomacy and environmental governance reminds us that such coherence should not be assumed to translate automatically into implementation success. This is precisely why domestic policy frameworks should be interpreted here as sources of diplomatic credibility, not as definitive proof of substantive environmental effectiveness. The study therefore finds that Kenya's internal legal and planning instruments strengthen its standing in environmental diplomacy, but they do not by themselves resolve the larger question of how far that diplomacy has translated into measurable governance outcomes. That distinction is important because it preserves analytical discipline and prevents the findings from collapsing into a simple equation of policy commitment with policy success. (Olutola & Landsberg, 2018; Corbett et al., 2019).

4.1.3 Limits of influence and implementation constraints

The fourth major finding is that Kenya's environmental diplomacy, while significant, remains clearly bounded by implementation constraints, financial dependence, and broader asymmetries in the global environmental order. The documentary record itself supports this conclusion. Official policy and multilateral texts strongly substantiate Kenya's visibility, convening power, and coalition-building role. They do not, however, equally substantiate a capacity to determine major multilateral bargaining outcomes or to convert diplomatic prominence into consistently demonstrable domestic environmental gains. This is where the value of triangulation becomes especially clear. If one relied only on Kenyan and UN institutional texts, the picture might appear more uniformly positive. When those materials are read alongside the scholarly literature and interpreted through a theoretical lens sensitive to limits as well as strengths, a more balanced finding emerges.

One dimension of this limitation is financial dependence. Kenya's climate and sustainability ambitions, like those of many developing states, remain tied to external support, international finance, and broader global resource asymmetries. This means that Kenya's environmental diplomacy often operates in a context where normative advocacy is stronger than distributive bargaining power. The country may successfully frame issues, convene actors, and articulate justice-based claims, but it remains structurally constrained by the financing architecture and political inequalities that shape global environmental governance. In practical terms, this means that Kenya's diplomacy is often strongest in representation and agenda-framing, and weaker in determining the terms on which material resources are ultimately distributed. (Government of Kenya, 2014; African Union, 2023).

A second limitation concerns the gap between diplomatic visibility and implementation evidence. The source base clearly demonstrates that Kenya occupies a prominent position in multilateral environmental governance. What is less clearly demonstrated, at least within the documentary materials available to this desk study, is how far this prominence has translated into consistent and measurable implementation success at national and subnational levels. The current study does not dispute Kenya's environmental relevance; rather, it finds that the empirical basis for claiming broad leadership in outcomes remains more limited than the basis for claiming leadership in convening, framing, and symbolic institutional centrality. This distinction is crucial. It allows the article to affirm Kenya's diplomatic significance while resisting the temptation to overstate its effectiveness. The finding is therefore that Kenya's environmental diplomacy is best characterized as significant but uneven: strong in presence, brokerage, and agenda access; less clearly evidenced in direct outcome control and demonstrable implementation transformation. (Corbett et al., 2019; Olutola & Landsberg, 2018).

Integrated finding: Taken together, the findings suggest that Kenya's environmental diplomacy operates through a recognizable sequence of relationships. Institutional hosting creates diplomatic access and visibility; that access facilitates agenda-setting and coalition-building; domestic policy frameworks strengthen the credibility of Kenya's external advocacy; and structural financial and institutional inequalities constrain how far diplomatic prominence can be converted into substantive environmental effectiveness. In other words, Kenya's environmental diplomacy is neither empty symbolism nor unqualified leadership. It is a strategically important but bounded form of influence rooted in institutional centrality, representational brokerage, and normatively framed multilateral engagement. This integrated finding is one of the article's key contributions because it clarifies the mechanisms through which Kenya matters in environmental governance and also the limits that prevent that significance from being overstated.

4.2 Discussion

The findings of this study support a more nuanced understanding of Kenya's environmental diplomacy than is often found in both policy discourse and descriptive scholarship. The evidence triangulated across Kenyan foreign-policy documents, United Nations institutional materials, African multilateral declarations, and peer-reviewed scholarship indicates that Kenya's environmental diplomacy is neither a mere symbolic by-product of hosting UNEP and UN-Habitat nor an unqualified case of environmental leadership. Rather, it is a distinctive and strategically important form of multilateral diplomacy rooted in institutional centrality, issue-framing, and brokerage, yet constrained by structural inequalities, financial dependence, and uneven implementation capacity. The significance of the study therefore lies not simply in confirming that Kenya matters in environmental diplomacy, but in clarifying how that relevance is produced, what form it takes, and where its limits become visible. (mfa.go.ke (unep.org))

A first major implication of the findings is that they strongly support the usefulness of host-state advantage as a central interpretive concept. The literature reviewed earlier suggests that states hosting international organizations gain recurring access to diplomatic networks, institutional routines, and symbolic capital. The evidence from the current study confirms this in a particularly clear manner. Nairobi's status as headquarters of UNEP, UN-Habitat, and UNON, together with its role as a recurring site of UNEA and AMCEN processes, gives Kenya a form of diplomatic embeddedness that is not reducible to conventional material power. UNEP's own historical and institutional materials reinforce the importance of Nairobi as the first UN headquarters in the Global South and as a continuing site of environmental multilateralism, while official Kenyan foreign-policy discourse treats this institutional concentration as an asset for broader international engagement. This confirms that host-state advantage is not simply a passive geographical condition. In Kenya's case, it functions as a continuing opportunity structure through which diplomatic visibility, access, and convening power are repeatedly reproduced. (unep.org (mfa.go.ke))

At the same time, the findings complicate any overly deterministic reading of host-state advantage. Hosting institutions creates access, but it does not automatically generate control over agendas or outcomes. This is an important analytical point because some descriptive narratives of Kenya's environmental significance appear to assume that institutional hosting translates directly into environmental leadership. The evidence here suggests a more careful interpretation. Kenya benefits from repeated proximity to multilateral environmental governance, but proximity is not the same as dominance. It lowers the barriers to participation and enhances symbolic authority, yet the capacity to influence outcomes still depends on framing, coalition-building, and the wider political economy of global environmental governance. In this respect, the study extends the host-state literature by showing that institutional centrality is best treated as an enabling condition rather than a sufficient explanation of diplomatic influence. (opil.ouplaw.com)

A second major implication of the findings is that Kenya's environmental diplomacy is well explained by norm entrepreneurship, particularly when that concept is interpreted through Global South diplomatic practice rather than through classic great-power politics. Corbett, Xu, and Weller argue that states lacking overwhelming material resources can nevertheless exercise influence in international organizations by framing claims persuasively, building coalitions, and performing relevance strategically. The Kenyan case confirms the value of this insight. The study found that Kenya's environmental diplomacy is strongest where it engages in issue-framing and normative projection—particularly around climate finance, green growth, adaptation, and the wider articulation of African priorities in global environmental governance. Kenya's role in the 2023 Africa Climate Summit and in projecting the African Leaders Nairobi Declaration provides strong evidence of such normative performance. Kenya's diplomacy in this domain is therefore not rooted mainly in coercive leverage or distributive power, but in its capacity to help define the political language through which African environmental concerns are advanced in multilateral forums. (cambridge.org (au.int))

However, the findings also refine the norm-entrepreneurship perspective in an important way. Kenya's influence in environmental diplomacy does not rest on normative framing alone; it is strengthened by the material fact of Nairobi's institutional centrality and by the relational function of diplomatic brokerage. Put differently, norm entrepreneurship appears more effective in this case because Kenya speaks not from the margins of multilateral environmental governance but from one of its institutional centres. This is a significant extension of existing scholarship. Corbett and colleagues' work is highly valuable for explaining how weaker states may gain influence in international organizations, but the

Kenyan case suggests that the effectiveness of norm entrepreneurship may be significantly amplified where the state also possesses host-state advantage and brokerage capacity. The study therefore shows that Kenya's environmental diplomacy is not best explained by one theoretical lens alone. It is the interaction between institutional location, normative framing, and brokerage that produces its distinctive form of diplomatic significance. (cambridge.org (unep.org))

A third important implication of the findings is that they provide strong support for interpreting Kenya's role through the lens of diplomatic brokerage. The article's results suggest that Kenya does not simply participate in multilateral environmental governance as a national actor; it also repeatedly performs a linking or hinge function between African environmental priorities and broader global processes. This is most visible in the convergence between AMCEN, the Africa Climate Summit, UNEA-linked politics, and Kenyan diplomatic positioning. UNEP's account of AMCEN as Africa's leading environmental policy body and the African Union's presentation of the Nairobi Declaration as a continental contribution to global climate politics support the view that Kenya often operates as a relay point for African claims in global arenas. This finding is important because it shows that Kenya's environmental diplomacy is deeply relational. Its influence lies not only in what it says on its own behalf, but also in how it facilitates, hosts, amplifies, and projects wider African positions. (unep.org (au.int))

4.2.1 This brokerage role also places Kenya within broader debates on Global South agency.

The literature increasingly recognizes that states from the Global South are not merely recipients of global norms or rule-takers in international institutions. They also act as negotiators, interpreters, norm-shapers, and coalition-builders in global governance. The Kenyan case supports this proposition, but it also adds a further nuance. It suggests that Global South agency is not always expressed through confrontation with dominant powers alone. It may also be expressed through institutional embeddedness, convening authority, and the creation of diplomatic platforms through which shared Southern or African claims can be articulated.

Kenya's case is therefore analytically valuable because it broadens how Global South agency can be understood: not only as resistance or contestation, but also as brokerage, representational work, and infrastructural diplomacy. (hdr.undp.org (unep.org))

The findings also illuminate an important tension between diplomatic visibility and implementation credibility, and it is here that the study most clearly qualifies celebratory narratives of Kenya's environmental role. The triangulated evidence shows that Kenya's prominence in environmental diplomacy is well supported at the levels of institutional access, convening power, policy articulation, and coalition-building. What is less strongly demonstrated in the documentary record is how far this diplomatic prominence is translated into measurable implementation outcomes. This does not mean that Kenya's diplomacy lacks value or that its environmental commitments are empty. Rather, it means that the strongest empirical basis of the current study lies in showing how Kenya matters in representation, agenda-setting, and diplomacy—not in proving that such prominence has fully overcome domestic or structural constraints. This is a crucial analytical distinction because it prevents the study from conflating multilateral relevance with domestic environmental transformation. (mfa.go.ke (apnews.com))

This tension is theoretically important. It suggests that host-state advantage and norm entrepreneurship may generate diplomatic influence more readily than implementation power. Kenya can frame, host, convene, and amplify, but those capabilities do not automatically resolve the financing asymmetries, development pressures, and governance burdens that shape environmental outcomes. This finding aligns with wider literature on global environmental politics, which repeatedly shows that the ability to shape discourse and the ability to secure or implement distributive outcomes are not the same thing. In this respect, the Kenyan case confirms a broader feature of multilateral governance in unequal international systems: states from the Global South may gain visibility and moral authority without necessarily overcoming the structural hierarchies that condition resources, bargaining outcomes, and implementation. (unep.org (cambridge.org)).

4.2.2 The comparative dimension of the discussion further strengthens this interpretation.

Olutola and Landsberg's analysis of South Africa's climate diplomacy presents South Africa as a more materially grounded and multi-level actor, deriving influence not only from diplomacy but also from wider geopolitical standing, industrial profile, and strategic reach. The findings of the present study suggest that Kenya represents a different but equally important African diplomatic model. It is less materially grounded and more institutionally mediated. Its influence lies less in structural weight than in presence, access, and brokerage within multilateral environmental institutions. This comparison does not diminish Kenya's significance; rather, it clarifies the nature of that significance. It also demonstrates that African environmental diplomacy is not monolithic. Different African states may matter in global governance for different reasons, and Kenya's distinctiveness lies precisely in how it has leveraged institutional centrality into representational and coalition-based influence. (brill.com)

The discussion also has implications for how environmental diplomacy itself should be studied. The current findings suggest that environmental diplomacy should not be reduced to treaty participation or formal negotiation

outcomes alone. It should also be analyzed through diplomatic infrastructure, organizational location, coalition-building, agenda access, and symbolic authority. In this sense, the study contributes to the literature by broadening the empirical markers through which diplomatic significance is assessed. Kenya's case demonstrates that a state may matter greatly in global environmental governance even where its influence is not primarily measured through hard bargaining victories. Influence may also lie in making certain meetings possible, in anchoring institutional legitimacy, in giving representational form to continental positions, and in shaping the normative environment within which negotiations occur. That broader understanding is one of the key scholarly contributions of the article. (unep.org (mfa.go.ke))

Finally, the discussion underscores the value of the study's triangulated desk-research design. One of the risks in studying diplomacy through official documents is that national and institutional texts often present highly coherent and optimistic narratives of policy relevance. By reading those texts alongside African multilateral materials and peer-reviewed scholarship, the present study was better able to distinguish between diplomatic self-representation and more defensible analytical claims. This triangulation allowed the manuscript to identify Kenya's environmental diplomacy as genuine and important while also resisting overstatement. In methodological terms, the discussion therefore reinforces the importance of triangulation in desk-research studies of diplomacy and governance. In substantive terms, it confirms that Kenya's environmental diplomacy should be understood neither as empty symbolism nor as unconstrained leadership, but as a significant, regionally consequential, and structurally bounded form of multilateral influence.

V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

This study set out to examine how Kenya has used its host-state position, foreign-policy commitments, and engagement in multilateral environmental processes to advance environmental diplomacy within the United Nations system and wider multilateral environmental governance. The analysis has shown that Kenya occupies a distinctive position in this field because Nairobi hosts major environmental institutions and repeatedly serves as a site for diplomatic engagement, agenda circulation, and environmental negotiation. Kenya's environmental diplomacy is therefore not accidental or merely symbolic. It is rooted in institutional centrality, sustained multilateral access, and the country's capacity to project African environmental concerns within highly visible global forums.

The study further established that Kenya's environmental diplomacy is strongest in three interrelated areas. First, it is strong in institutional access and visibility, because Nairobi's role as a diplomatic and organizational centre gives Kenya repeated proximity to environmental governance processes. Second, it is strong in agenda-setting and coalition-building, especially where Kenya acts as a broker of broader African priorities in relation to climate finance, adaptation, sustainability, and equitable governance. Third, it is strengthened by domestic policy and legal frameworks that give Kenya a degree of diplomatic credibility when presenting itself as a serious environmental actor in multilateral settings. These strengths together explain why Kenya has become one of Africa's most visible states in environmental diplomacy. At the same time, the analysis has demonstrated that Kenya's influence should not be overstated. The evidence supports the claim that Kenya is prominent, strategically placed, and often effective in convening, representational, and normative terms. However, the study does not support the stronger claim that Kenya consistently converts that diplomatic prominence into full implementation effectiveness or decisive control over multilateral environmental outcomes.

Kenya's environmental diplomacy remains constrained by financing dependence, structural inequalities in global governance, and the continuing gap between diplomatic representation and measurable domestic implementation. The study therefore concludes that Kenya is best understood as a significant but bounded environmental diplomatic actor: one whose relevance is real, regionally important, and institutionally enabled, yet still limited by wider global asymmetries and national implementation challenges. The broader analytical contribution of the study lies in showing that environmental diplomacy in Africa should not be measured only through conventional indicators of state power. Kenya's case demonstrates that influence in multilateral environmental governance may also emerge through host-state advantage, diplomatic brokerage, coalition-building, and the strategic use of institutional location. In this respect, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how states in the Global South may exercise agency in international environmental politics without possessing great-power resources. Kenya's experience illustrates both the possibilities and the limits of such diplomacy, thereby offering a valuable lens through which to understand the relationship between institutional centrality, representational power, and environmental governance in an unequal international order.

5.2 Recommendations

The first recommendation is that Kenya should strengthen the connection between its multilateral environmental diplomacy and its domestic implementation record. Diplomatic visibility is most credible when it is supported by demonstrable environmental progress at home. Kenya should therefore ensure closer alignment between its international environmental commitments and the practical implementation of national climate, sustainability, and environmental

governance frameworks. This requires stronger follow-through, clearer reporting, and more consistent demonstration of results across sectors and levels of governance. The second recommendation is that Kenya should continue to leverage Nairobi's institutional centrality as a strategic diplomatic asset. The city's role as host to major environmental institutions should be used more deliberately to deepen Kenya's position as a convenor, facilitator, and broker of African environmental priorities. This means sustaining active participation in global environmental forums, using Nairobi-based processes to strengthen regional coordination, and ensuring that Kenya remains central to emerging debates on climate finance, adaptation, environmental justice, and green development.

Third, Kenya should further strengthen coordination across the institutions responsible for environmental diplomacy. Effective environmental diplomacy cannot rest on one ministry or one policy document alone. It requires consistent interaction among foreign affairs, environment, planning, finance, and relevant subnational actors. Stronger inter-institutional coordination would help ensure that Kenya's environmental diplomacy is not fragmented and that external advocacy is better linked to domestic governance priorities. Fourth, Kenya should continue to position itself as a broker of African collective voice rather than as a solitary national actor. Its comparative advantage lies in linking African multilateral environmental claims to wider United Nations processes. This role should be deepened through continued support for continental coordination, stronger engagement with African environmental platforms, and deliberate efforts to ensure that Kenya's diplomacy amplifies broader African priorities rather than only national interests.

Finally, future research should build on this study by examining the domestic and subnational effects of Kenya's multilateral environmental commitments. While the present article has shown how Kenya's environmental diplomacy operates at the institutional and multilateral level, further work is needed to understand how these diplomatic efforts translate into implementation, governance change, and environmental outcomes within the country. Such research would provide a stronger basis for evaluating the long-term effectiveness of Kenya's environmental diplomacy and would help bridge the gap between international representation and local environmental transformation.

Declaration of Interest

The author declares that he has no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have influenced the work reported in this paper.

Funding Declaration

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

REFERENCES

- African Union. (2023). *The African leaders Nairobi declaration on climate change and call to action*. https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/43682-doc-AU_Nairobi_Declaration_Action_1.pdf
- Ali, S. H., & Voinov Vladich, H. (2016). Environmental diplomacy. In C. M. Constantinou, P. Kerr, & P. Sharp (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of diplomacy*. SAGE Publications. <https://sk.sagepub.com/hnbk/edvol/download/the-sage-handbook-of-diplomacy/chpt/49-environmental-diplomacy.pdf>
- Bowen, G. A. (2009). Document analysis as a qualitative research method. *Qualitative Research Journal*, 9(2), 27–40. <https://doi.org/10.3316/QRJ0902027>
- Corbett, J., Xu, Y.-C., & Weller, P. (2019). Norm entrepreneurship and diffusion “from below” in international organisations: How the competent performance of vulnerability generates benefits for small states. *Review of International Studies*, 45(4), 647–668. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210519000068>
- Corbett, J., Xu, Y.-C., & Weller, P. (2021). Why do small states engage with IOs? In *International organizations and small states: Participation, legitimacy and vulnerability* (pp. 58–84). Bristol University Press. <https://doi.org/10.46692/9781529207712.003>
- Government of Kenya. (2007). *Kenya Vision 2030*. Government Printer. <https://vision2030.go.ke/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Vision-2030-Popular-Version.pdf>
- Government of Kenya. (2014). *Foreign policy of the Republic of Kenya*. Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Trade. <https://mfa.go.ke/foreign-policy-republic-kenya>
- Government of Kenya. (2016). *Climate Change Act, No. 11 of 2016*. Government Printer. <https://faolex.fao.org/docs/pdf/ken160982.pdf>
- Kaul, I. (2013). *The rise of the Global South: Implications for the provisioning of global public goods* (Human Development Report Office Occasional Paper 2013/08). United Nations Development Programme. <https://hdr.undp.org/system/files/documents/hdro1308kaul.pdf>
- Magliveras, K. D. (2025). Diplomacy and international organizations: Interactions and incongruities. In P. Perraki (Ed.), *Contemporary diplomatic and consular relations: Selected aspects* (pp. 125–140). Springer.

https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-99243-8_8

- Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2016). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation* (4th ed.). Jossey-Bass.
- Ministry of Foreign and Diaspora Affairs. (n.d.). *Environmental and climate change diplomacy*. <https://www.mfa.go.ke/environmental-and-climate-change-diplomacy>
- Nowell, L. S., Norris, J. M., White, D. E., & Moules, N. J. (2017). Thematic analysis: Striving to meet the trustworthiness criteria. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 16(1), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917733847>
- O’Leary, Z. (2017). *The essential guide to doing your research project* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Olutola, O. I., & Landsberg, C. (2018). Concentric circles of South Africa’s climate diplomacy. *Africa Review*, 10(2), 173–187. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09744053.2018.1485255>
- Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods: Integrating theory and practice* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Prior, L. (2003). *Using documents in social research*. SAGE Publications.
- Tracy, S. J. (2010). Qualitative quality: Eight “big-tent” criteria for excellent qualitative research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 16(10), 837–851. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800410383121>
- UN-Habitat. (2024). *Executive Director of UN-Habitat assumes office in Nairobi, Kenya*. <https://unhabitat.org/executive-director-of-un-habitat-assumes-office-in-nairobi-kenya>
- United Nations Environment Programme. (2022). *How Nairobi came to host UNEP’s headquarters*. <https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/story/how-nairobi-came-host-uneps-headquarters>
- United Nations Environment Programme. (2024). *About UNEP*. <https://www.unep.org/who-we-are/about-us>
- United Nations Environment Programme. (2025). *Legacy to leadership: AMCEN-20 seeks to spark a greener Africa*. <https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/press-release/legacy-leadership-amcen40-seeks-spark-greener-africa>
- United Nations Environment Programme. (n.d.-a). *United Nations Environment Assembly*. <https://www.unep.org/environmentassembly>
- United Nations Environment Programme. (n.d.-b). *About the African Ministerial Conference on the Environment (AMCEN)*. <https://www.unep.org/regions/africa/african-ministerial-conference-environment/about-amcen>
- United Nations Office at Nairobi. (n.d.). *About UNON*. <https://www.unon.org>