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THE ROLE OF INTERNATIONAL AGREEMENTS AND ACTORS IN ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION FOR THE ACHIEVEMENT OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract:

This paper examines the contribution of international agreements and actors to environmental protection for sustainable development. It analyzes the evolution of key instruments, from the 1972 Stockholm Declaration to the 2015 Paris Agreement, alongside the roles of international and regional organizations.

The findings reveal that environmental protection and sustainable development are mutually reinforcing objectives, with international legal frameworks providing the foundational basis for national implementation. The United Nations and its specialized agencies emerge as pivotal actors in this endeavor. However, challenges persist, including conflicting state interests, sovereignty claims over natural resources, weak coordination among international bodies, and the detrimental role of multinational corporations, all of which necessitate enhanced compliance mechanisms and broader stakeholder integration to ensure effective environmental governance.

Keywords: Environment, Sustainable Development, International Organizations, Regional Organizations.

Introduction

The subject of the environment and sustainable development ranks among the emerging issues that have come to prominence over the past fifty years, occupying a position of central importance and attracting global attention. This is owing to the novel and comprehensive concept it embodies, encompassing both the protection and preservation of natural resources, on the one hand, and the achievement of sustainable economic and social development, on the

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other. Numerous international reports and documents addressing environmental and developmental issues have been issued, foremost among them the 1972 Club of Rome Report. Among its proposals was that states should replace the objective of economic growth with an alternative goal—namely, establishing equilibrium in the utilization of rapidly depleting natural resources by setting limits to growth. This marked the inception of an alternative approach, which came to be known as sustainable development—an approach befitting the current century.

Given the importance of this subject from both legal and institutional perspectives at the international level for environmental protection in the service of sustainable development, we have deemed it appropriate to structure this contribution around the following problematic:

To what extent do international agreements and actors contribute to environmental protection for the achievement of sustainable development?

To address this problematic, we have chosen to organize our analysis according to the following structure:

1. International Agreements in Consolidating Environmental Protection for Sustainable Development

- **1.1** Principal international agreements for environmental protection
- **1.2** The role of international agreements in establishing key principles of environmental protection

2. The Role of International and Regional Actors in Environmental Protection

- **2.1** The role of international actors in environmental protection
- **2.2** The role of regional actors in environmental protection

1. International Agreements in Consolidating Environmental Protection for Sustainable Development

The concept of environmental protection has come to be regarded as a shared human heritage worldwide. It has rapidly become one of the most significant contemporary developments on both international and domestic levels, progressively acquiring prominence in national and international legal frameworks alike. Scarcely any constitution worldwide today fails to include a provision affirming the

individual's or citizen's right to a healthy environment. Consequently, to safeguard this domain, it is first imperative to ensure environmental protection that preserves biological diversity and guarantees the continuity of life—an objective pursued by all international and national agreements (Fadli, 2020, p. 71). In this section, we shall first examine the principal international agreements for environmental protection, followed by an exploration of the role of these agreements in establishing the fundamental principles of environmental protection.

1.1 Principal International Agreements for Environmental Protection

The international legal framework for the environment has evolved incrementally through a succession of pivotal global instruments, each of which—by virtue of its timing, thematic scope, and the political momentum behind its adoption—reflects the international community's steadily deepening awareness of ecological perils and its correspondingly refined diplomatic responses to them. While these instruments differ considerably in their legally binding nature and in the enforcement mechanisms they provide for, they collectively constitute an accumulating normative tapestry whose threads were first woven in the early 1970s and which continues to expand to this day. Indeed, tracing these landmark agreements in their chronological sequence reveals a gradual yet unmistakable transformation: environmental protection has shifted from a peripheral concern to a central pillar of global governance, culminating in the historic breakthroughs embodied in instruments such as the Paris Agreement. The following is a survey of the most salient among these international instruments.

First: The Stockholm Declaration of 1972

Named after the Swedish city in which the first International Conference on the Human Environment was held on December 15, 1972, this Declaration was issued pursuant to Resolution 2996, comprising a preamble and 26 principles. It is considered the first explicit legal intervention in the field of international environmental law, articulating a set of principles sufficient to regulate the environmental domain. Much like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, some scholars regard it as a source of international

environmental law despite its non-binding character (Alwani, 2016-2017, p. 60).

Second: The Hague Declaration

The Hague Declaration served to affirm to the States Parties the necessity of cooperation between industrialized and developing nations in preserving the atmosphere. The Declaration establishes a linkage between the environment and the human right to life, and calls for the strengthening of institutions to collect information and issue decisions conducive to environmental preservation. Signed by 20 States in 1989 in the Netherlands and deposited with the Dutch government, its objective was the preservation of the human right to a dignified existence, which in turn necessitates the protection of all forms of environment—maritime, atmospheric, and terrestrial—and it encompasses numerous principles.

Third: The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (The Earth Summit) of 1992

This second United Nations conference, held in the first half of June 1992 in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, was the largest global gathering in history. Dubbed the "Earth Summit" and convened under United Nations auspices from June 3 to June 14, 1992, it was attended by 185 world leaders, alongside international, regional, and local organizations concerned with environmental affairs, as well as other personalities, political parties, media professionals, and intellectuals. The objective was to find solutions to the problems and dangers threatening life on planet Earth (Hassani, 2019, p. 49).

Fourth: The Kyoto Protocol on Climate Change of 1997

This Protocol is distinguished by its coherent framework and multiple advantages. It is founded on a simple principle—namely, the commitment of developed countries and countries with economies in transition to reduce greenhouse gas emissions—and on the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities. On this basis, industrialized countries historically responsible for the greenhouse effect are bound by a series of commitments, as well as cooperation with other Parties to enhance joint effectiveness in reducing greenhouse gas emissions. The Convention was ratified by 183 States and entered into force on February 16, 2005 (Hassani, 2019, p. 50).

Fifth: The World Summit on Sustainable Development (Earth Summit II), Johannesburg 2002

Held from August 26 to September 4, 2002, this Summit took place ten years after the first Earth Summit on the environment at Rio de Janeiro in 1992. It may therefore be appropriately termed the second Earth Summit on Environment and Sustainable Development. The Summit sought to encourage countries to reconsider their consumption and production patterns, to commit to environmentally responsible economic growth, and to expand cross-border cooperation for the exchange of expertise, technology, and resources.

Sixth: The Copenhagen Summit (Climate Summit) of 2009

Held under the theme "Protecting the Earth from Climate Change" in Denmark from December 7 to 18, 2009, this Summit was primarily concerned with climate change. It was attended by 193 States, including Algeria. The resulting accord recognized climate change as one of the greatest challenges, necessitating enhanced capacities to combat it. The Summit concluded after two weeks of negotiations that ultimately proved unsuccessful, failing to reach an agreement on emissions reduction (Hassani, 2019, p. 50).

Seventh: The Cancun Summit in Mexico of 2010

This climate change-related summit was held in Mexico from November 29 to December 11, 2010, under the presidency of the Mexican Minister of Foreign Affairs. Through this Summit, the Copenhagen Accord was transformed into an international agreement, and for the first time, a commitment was made to limit gas emissions so as to keep the global temperature increase below two degrees Celsius. Outstanding disagreements were deferred to the subsequent summit held in South Africa in 2011 (Hassani, 2019, p. 89).

Eighth: The Paris Climate Summit of 2015

Held on December 22, 2015, in Paris, this Summit represented a significant advance over the Copenhagen Summit. Attended by more than 190 States under the banner "We Have No Other Planet," emphasis was placed on the power of environmental discourse and diplomacy to unite nations and world leaders in protecting human-environmental security. The Agreement mandated commitments to mitigate the effects of climate change and support developing

countries through the transfer of clean technology (Kloum & Messaoud, 2021, p. 1072).

1.2 The Role of International Agreements in Establishing Key Principles of Environmental Protection

The protection of the environment from a legal perspective assumes paramount importance. Environmental protection has come to occupy a fundamental position in the policies of nations worldwide and constitutes one of the greatest challenges confronting all peoples. Given the comprehensive nature of environmental issues and the role of international legislation in their regulation, as well as their interaction with national economies and the global economy, this has impelled nations to cooperate in enhancing this relationship on a global scale (Lakhal, 2015, p. 20). The willingness of States, governmental and non-governmental organizations to convene conferences and conclude international agreements has had a positive impact in halting environmental degradation. Indeed, most States have enacted the necessary environmental protection legislation, grounded in humanitarian considerations that underscore the imperative of respecting the human right to live in a pollution-free environment, while also necessitating the regulation and control of human conduct toward the natural environment in which they reside (Salama, 2002-2003, p. 111). Among the most significant principles enshrined in international declarations for environmental protection and the entrenchment of a culture of respect for it are the following (Salama, 2002-2003, p. 60):

- The right of every person to freedom and equality, and to live in healthy conditions within an environment that ensures dignity and well-being, counterbalanced by the obligation to protect the environment and preserve it for future generations.
- The necessity of preserving and improving the environment and all its natural resources, including air, water, and soil.
- Ensuring the Earth's capacity to maintain the productivity of renewable resources.
- The duty of humankind to preserve the human heritage and wildlife.
- The rational utilization of non-renewable resources.

- The necessity of halting the discharge of toxic and chemical substances that contribute to global warming.
- The obligation of States to take all measures to prevent marine pollution.
- The promotion of economic and social development to ensure a favorable living environment.
- The imperative of strengthening States' environmental policies to enhance development in both the present and the future.

The Stockholm Declaration marked the birth of global interest in the environment, transitioning to the practical sphere by encompassing 26 principles and 109 recommendations. This established it as the foundation for subsequent research, legislation, conferences, and agreements across all aspects of environmental protection—whether maritime, atmospheric, or terrestrial—and beyond. It urged every State to play its role in providing a clean environment, to take all necessary measures to prevent pollution, and to cooperate with States and specialized organizations (Alwani, 2016-2017, p. 61). Among the most significant recommendations were (Alwani, 2016-2017, p. 62):

- The development and codification of international environmental law at both international and national levels.
- Increasing the frequency of agreements on environmental issues, particularly those concerning marine environments.
- Incorporating environmental law into the national legal framework and developing it.
- Industrialized States bearing obligations to assist developing nations affected by environmental pollution.
- The necessity of cooperation between financial institutions and development organizations.
- The imperative that all States, not merely member States, implement the declarations.
- Establishing new institutions within the United Nations responsible for environmental preservation, endowed with decision-making authority.
- The Declaration also calls upon all States and governmental and non-governmental organizations to participate in environmental preservation.

2. The Role of International and Regional Actors in Environmental Protection

Principles 22, 24, and 25 of the Stockholm Declaration of 1972 affirmed the necessity of international cooperation for environmental protection through international organizations. Article 25 stipulates that States shall work toward enabling international organizations to play an effective, dynamic, and coordinating role in preserving and improving the environment (Zaid Al-Mal, 2013, p. 167). In this section, we address the role of international actors in environmental protection in Subsection 2.1, followed by the role of regional actors in Subsection 2.2.

2.1 The Role of International Actors in Environmental Protection

An international organization is defined as a voluntary association of a number of subjects of international law, taking the form of a permanent body established by an international agreement, possessing its own autonomous will, endowed with a distinct legal system, and equipped with independent organs through which it exercises its activities to achieve the common objective for which it was created. International organizations play a significant role in environmental protection through numerous activities employing various means—studies and research, program exchange, issuance of recommendations, regulations, and decisions, and the formation of necessary committees and bodies for environmental protection. Among these organizations are the United Nations and the specialized agencies that have focused on mitigating the problems impeding environmental protection (Merzouki, n.d., p. 69).

First: The Role of the United Nations in Environmental Protection

The preamble to the United Nations Charter emphasizes the achievement of international cooperation in solving international problems of an economic, social, cultural, or humanitarian character. The organization has established policies to strike a balance between environmental protection and preservation, on the one hand, and the achievement of sustainable development, on the other. Thus, the United Nations has embraced environmental issues and the promotion of sustainable development within its programs. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) was established by the UN General

Assembly in 1965, with sustainable development at the core of its policy focus. UNDP seeks to combat poverty through the rational exploitation of natural resources, in addition to improving the living conditions of impoverished populations, where a significant number of people living in poverty have been recorded. Failure to address this situation and take necessary measures will result in an increase in these numbers (Zaid Al-Mal, 2013, p. 178).

Between 2004 and 2007, numerous development projects in the environmental field were launched, some pertaining to climate change and others to carbon mitigation.

In addition to UNDP, the General Assembly resolution established the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), whose objectives include encouraging international cooperation in the environmental field, as well as environment and development, while promoting access to, evaluation of, and exchange of environmental information. The Programme aims, through supporting and empowering States and their participation, to improve quality of life without compromising the lives of future generations (Ziani & Ben Said, 2010, p. 40).

Among the programs emphasized are the enhancement of public awareness and the taking of necessary actions to encourage environmental protection through cooperation with all actors, whether international or governmental. Among the institutions affiliated with the United Nations system and operating under its rules is the Commission on Sustainable Development, which works to implement the World Summit on Sustainable Development plan at the national, regional, and international levels, as well as to effectively monitor the application of Agenda 21 and improve international cooperation while supporting governmental capacity for decision-making regarding the integration of environmental and developmental issues. The Commission on Sustainable Development consists of 53 member States (13 African, 11 Asian, 6 Eastern European, 10 Latin American and Caribbean, and 13 Western European and other States), elected by the Economic and Social Council for a term of three years.

Second: Specialized Agencies

Specialized agencies were established to support international cooperation in various economic, social, and even service-related fields that serve the interests of States. They are linked to the United

Nations through the Economic and Social Council by special agreements. Among the most important specialized agencies that have sought to strengthen environmental governance as a framework for safeguarding the future of generations are:

- **The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO):** This organization is concerned with stimulating and encouraging food production in the environmental field through a sustainable strategy to meet the basic needs of populations while respecting the rights of future generations. In pursuit of its environmental objectives, FAO convened all its members in 1991 to adopt the integration of environmental sustainability considerations into all development activities (Moamer, 2014, p. 108).
- **The World Health Organization (WHO):** The Secretariat, in collaboration with the World Meteorological Organization, published the "Health and Climate Atlas" on October 31, 2012. This organization seeks to develop a range of specific programs and projects addressing the risks and threats of climate change, particularly in Africa. It focuses on integrating health and environmental preservation by establishing environmental health standards, in cooperation with UNEP, along with establishing, strengthening, and monitoring standards and evaluating the environmental situation to reduce chemical and other pollutants to protect the human environment in general (Ben Saghir, 2017, pp. 111-112).
- **The World Meteorological Organization (WMO):** Established in 1950 as the International Meteorological Organization, it became a specialized agency of the United Nations in 1951. It serves as the official authoritative body within the UN system on weather, climate, and water. Since its inception, the organization has endeavored to raise international awareness to improve understanding of weather, climate, and water phenomena. WMO provides a unique mechanism for rapid data and information exchange. It also makes significant contributions to achieving sustainable development, safety, and security worldwide, in addition to reducing loss of life and property from natural disaster risks.

Furthermore, it preserves the global environment and climate for the benefit of present and future generations. Alongside its work with other agencies and international and regional organizations, WMO seeks to achieve integration of efforts with national facilities aimed at improving forecasting and early warning services to protect lives and property from natural hazards such as storms, floods, and others (Mohamed, 2015, p. 44).

2.2 The Role of Regional Actors in Environmental Protection

Regional organizations have played an effective role in the field of environmental protection and the development of international environmental law. This has been achieved through the adoption of a dedicated strategy in this regard, issuing recommendations that affirm close cooperation to establish a collective policy for economic and social development, with environmental protection and preservation among its objectives.

- **The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD):** According to its constitutive instrument, the organization's activities focus primarily on economic issues of a broad scope, extending to numerous other matters, including environmental protection. In 1970, the organization established an Environment Committee to assist member governments in defining their policies regarding environmental problems, taking into consideration relevant information—particularly economic and scientific—and harmonizing their environmental policies (Salah, 2010, pp. 122-123).

- **The Organization of American States (OAS):** While the OAS Charter did not originally address environmental protection, the organization has long been involved in numerous environmental activities, particularly concerning environmental protection. The Eighth Conference of the organization in 1938 recommended the formation of a committee of experts to study problems relating to nature and wildlife in the Americas. This led to the preparation of the Convention on Nature Protection and Wild Life Preservation in the Western Hemisphere, which was approved in 1940 and entered into force in 1942 (Mani, 2006, p. 336).

- **The Organization of African Unity (OAU) (predecessor to the African Union):** Since its establishment, the OAU has undertaken significant activities in the field of environmental protection and natural resources in the African continent. The organization's founding Charter enshrines the necessity of protecting the natural resources of member States and has formed a legal basis for addressing environmental problems on the continent. The organization also prepared the African Convention on the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources in 1968, in addition to adopting the Lagos Plan of Action for the Economic Development of Africa (1980–2000), which encompassed environmental protection and nature conservation. This Plan recognized the necessity of development while taking environmental protection into account. Similarly, the African Scheme for Halting Environmental Degradation in African Member States, established in Cairo in 1986, aimed to establish regional cooperation concerning fundamental natural resources: water, soil, forests, wildlife, energy, and seas (Hannouni, 2001, pp. 166-167).

Conclusion

Environmental protection and sustainable development are interconnected and mutually reinforcing objectives. This is manifested through the utilization of natural and climatic resources without compromising the environmental dimension as a means of achieving sustainable development, thereby preserving the right of future generations to life. International agreements, covenants, conferences, and declarations have significantly contributed to establishing the legal framework at the international level, with these international instruments laying the foundational cornerstone for environmental protection and the achievement of sustainable development at the national level for all States.

On the other hand, States and international governmental organizations, led by the United Nations, constitute fundamental and influential actors in the mission of achieving sustainable development. This is accomplished through the establishment of programs designed to ensure environmental protection to meet and implement environmental projects while advancing the development process. However, conflicting interests among international actors have created

obstacles to environmental protection and sustainability, through the invocation of the principle of sovereignty to which some States adhere—that is, States' sovereignty over their natural resources—as well as the lack and weakness of coordination among various international bodies in monitoring international environmental commitments. This necessitates the binding legal submission of States to these international instruments in the field of environmental protection, while also involving other non-governmental actors and multinational corporations—which have contributed to many environmental problems and hindered sustainable development.

Recommendations

Based on the preceding analysis and the persistent challenges hindering the effective implementation of international environmental law, the following six recommendations are proposed for policymakers, international organizations, and national governments:

- States should move beyond mere ratification of environmental agreements toward establishing robust domestic legal frameworks that ensure effective implementation, which requires developing clear monitoring, reporting, and verification (MRV) systems coupled with graduated sanction mechanisms for non-compliance, so that the binding character of international environmental obligations becomes practically enforceable rather than merely declaratory.
- Efforts must be directed toward streamlining the mandates and activities of United Nations agencies, regional bodies, and financial institutions, given the palpable weakness in coordination among them; establishing a unified global platform for information-sharing and joint operational planning would significantly reduce redundancy, optimize financial resource utilization, and foster a more coherent approach to transboundary environmental crises.
- The frequent invocation of permanent sovereignty over natural resources should not be viewed as an absolute barrier to international cooperation; instead, a constructive middle ground must be forged through bilateral and multilateral environmental diplomacy, which could take the form of voluntary peer-review

mechanisms and transboundary cooperation treaties that respect national jurisdiction while recognizing the indivisible nature of shared ecosystems such as the atmosphere, oceans, and river basins.

- Binding corporate social responsibility (CSR) standards should be elevated to the level of hard law, establishing clear liability regimes for transnational corporations, while non-governmental organizations ought to be formally integrated into national and international decision-making processes not merely as observers but as active contributors to policy design and grassroots implementation.
- Developed nations must honor their financial and technological commitments under instruments like the Paris Agreement by providing developing countries with access to affordable clean technologies alongside substantial capacity-building programs tailored to local contexts, as the North-South divide remains a formidable barrier to achieving global sustainability and such support is essential to empower developing States to embrace green economies without compromising their growth trajectories.
- Consideration should be given to establishing a dedicated judicial body to address the growing complexity and frequency of transboundary environmental disputes; whether through expanding the mandate of the International Court of Justice or creating a new independent tribunal, such an institution would provide authoritative interpretations of environmental treaties, offer expedited dispute resolution, and contribute incrementally to the crystallization of customary international environmental law.

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