

The Mashariki Today

THE FUTURE OF KENYA'S ENVIRONMENTAL DIPLOMACY



By Dr John Mwangi, Head of Research, MRPC & Daniel Ondu, Associate Fellow, MRPC

Introduction

The 2014 Kenya's Foreign Policy document laid a strong foundation and clearer framework for her international diplomatic engagements. The document was touted as a significant milestone in the nation's diplomatic evolution since independence (Riungu, 2018). It clearly outlines the five inter-linked pillars of peace, economic, diaspora, environment and culture, as driven by the Kenya's aspirations in the Vision 2030. The environmental diplomacy pillar of the Kenya's foreign policy focuses on promoting sustainable environmental governance and natural resources management, including addressing issues related to climate change, pollution and natural resource degradation (MFA, 2014). Its key provisions include championing the strengthening of the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP), advancing Kenya's participation in global environmental initiatives and ensuring effective implementation of the Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs) such as the Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer (UNEP, 1987). The pillar also aims to enhance Kenya's compliance with the relevant national, regional and international environmental legislations and standards, among other operational guidelines.

Positively, the Government of Kenya (GoK) with the support of relevant stakeholders has increased climate change action initiatives. It has also developed needed legal and policy frameworks such as the National Climate Change Action Plan (2013), the Climate Change Act (2016) and the National Adaptation Plan (2017-2030). However, the International Food Policy Research Institute report (IFPRI, 2023) predicts the country's vulnerability to climate change adding that the climate-induced events are likely to increase in frequency and intensity. As climate change continues to negatively impact the country, particularly in terms of extreme weather events and altered precipitation patterns (IPCC, 2022), the updating of the Kenya's foreign policy should put more emphasis on climate resilient development (CRD) which stresses equity as a core element of sustainable development (Owen, 2020; Cornforth et al., 2021), and innovative climate adaptation approaches. These approaches include implementing techniques such as climate-smart agroecology¹ to improve productivity while building resilience and developing insurance schemes tailored to climate risks to cushion communities from the financial impacts of climate-related disasters.

To its advantage, the recent hosting of the 2023 Africa Climate Summit in Nairobi, positioned Kenya as a leader in climate science advocacy in Africa. The Summit provided an opportunity for the African leaders to commit to the Nairobi Declaration on Green Growth and Climate Finance Solutions (AU, 2023). The major key outcomes of the summit included a commitment by member states to initiate reforms in the climate investment financial system and to tailor the climate change adaptation and resilience solutions to the local African needs. Through such advocacy for increased investments in climate research and collaborating with both local and global scientific jurisdictions, Kenya can improve its influence on international climate policies. The updated Foreign Policy should not only enhance Kenya's participation in global fora like the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), but also provide a comprehensive structure for spearheading regional climate initiatives that address Africa's unique



¹Agroecology is a sustainable farming approach that integrates nature & ecological principles with agricultural practices.

vulnerabilities to climate change. For instance, leveraging its strategic climate change agenda by focusing on emerging regional climate trends such as climate-induced changes in East Africa that have exacerbated tensions and conflicts over resources.

Carbon markets concept has also recently emerged. It presents the opportunities for countries, especially in Africa, to accelerate their green economic transition by 2050 (UNEP, 2021). Despite being hardest hit by climate change impacts while contributing only 3% of global carbon emissions (FSD Africa, 2024), Africa still hold unique potentials to capitalize on climate finance, through fair and sustainable implementation of carbon credits, and loss and damage compensations, to drive the growth of its new green sector. Securing adequate climate finance, therefore, is significantly important for Kenya to meet its Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) under the Paris Agreement. Kenya's environmental diplomacy should advocate for increased funding from developed nations and other international financing mechanisms like the Green Climate Fund. This also includes pushing for reforms in global climate finance architecture to make them more equitable and accessible to most vulnerable countries (AU, 2023) and ensuring that the allocated funds are directed toward the intended sustainable development projects.



Science, Technology, and Innovation (STI)

The past decade, otherwise referred to as 'a decade of disruption' (Palandrani, 2022), has seen remarkable growth in technology and innovation, characterized by the proliferation of smartphones, advancements in artificial intelligence (AI), and the expansion of the Internet of Things (IoT). These innovations have transformed everyday life, influenced industrial revolution, and led to the integration of technology into all aspects of the society including communication, transportation, development of renewable energy and environmental sustainability. For instance, satellite technology is being applied to optimize water resource management, predict droughts and enhance climate-related disaster preparedness in developed countries (Dikmener, et al., 2024). Locally, companies in Kenya like 'Taka Taka Solutions', are also leveraging emerging technologies such as material recovery facilities (MRFs) towards sustainable waste collection, disposal, and management

approaches. Founded in 2011, Taka Taka Solutions applies end-to-end (from source to compost) waste management technology to create positive social impact for waste pickers, improved income, and enhanced environmental benefits like reducing carbon emissions.

However, just like many other sectors, the designers of the 2014 Kenya Foreign Policy may have underestimated the rate of technological penetration into the environmental management. Several technological laws such as the Science, Technology, and Innovation Act (2013), the Data Protection Act (2019) and the Kenya Robotics and Artificial Intelligence Society Bill (2023), have emerged to regulate innovation use and guide establishment of related research and development centers. Following in the footsteps of Rwanda within Africa, Kenya also unveiled its National AI Strategy Development Framework (2024) which aims to support Kenya's emerging technologies and ensure responsible AI deployment in the country. The future of Kenya's environmental diplomacy, to this regard, calls for synchronization of these technology-use laws with the environmental guidelines for a digital and sustainable environmental governance. Integration of IoT and AI into its environmental strategies can help Kenya collect real-time data on specific environmental parameters and analyze these data to precisely predict future environmental trends and inform data-driven policy decisions. Moreover, the Kenya Foreign Policy should focus on initiating and building innovation partnerships with like-minded countries and international organizations that are at the forefront of improving these environmental management technologies.

On the other hand, digital diplomacy in Kenya has gained prominence post-COVID-19 pandemic (Ong'ong'a, 2023). Digital diplomacy has also proven effective for engagement in international relations and promoting various policy agenda across different jurisdictions. This digital revolution highlights the importance of digital tools, mainly social media, in enhancing diplomatic initiatives that include raising environmental awareness, participating in online policy dialogues and engaging in virtual international conferences. In the digital age, Kenya must leverage the big data presented, to inform diplomatic policy decisions and embrace digital diplomacy to promote its environmental agenda. Through policy integration, digital diplomacy would allow Kenya to showcase its environmental achievements and attract international support for its climate action initiatives.



Kenya's Diaspora as an Engine for Promoting Environmental Diplomacy

Kenya's diaspora is approximated to be 4 million people (MFA, 2024). Kenya is also ranked among the top recipients of diaspora remittances in Africa, hitting an all-time high of \$4.19 billion in 2023 (CBK, 2023). The diaspora community through their representative associations like the Kenya Diaspora Alliance (KDA) and the Kenyan Community Abroad (KCA) have facilitated several investment programs and community development projects back in Kenya, ranging from supporting households' income, education and health initiatives. However, Kenya Institute of Public Policy Research (KIPPRA, 2024) notes that there's a huge untapped potential of the diaspora community to positively contribute to Kenya's environmental agenda. Due to their spread across the globe and high remittance, Kenya's diaspora, represents a significant resource for promoting environmental diplomacy.

Firstly, as ambassadors for Kenya's environmental initiatives, they can help advocate for sustainable practices, pitch investment ideas in the green sectors and influence policy in their host countries. For instance, the diaspora's advocacy for various issues often aligns with national interests, prompting the government to consider changes in policies related to social and economic reforms. Moreover, encouraging the Kenyan diaspora to invest these remittances in green projects can also drive sustainable development, in the areas of renewable energy, sustainable agriculture, green jobs and conservation projects. This, among other strategies, includes increasing the number of platforms that help facilitate networks and partnerships between diaspora investors and entrepreneurs, local businesses and stakeholders (KIPPRA, 2024). The diaspora through their extensive network and exposure can bring in not only financial resources but also expertise and innovative strategies that can help Kenya achieve its environmental goals. Finally, diaspora-lead initiatives that support the country's environmental goals can also help Kenya enhance its environmental diplomacy. For example, diaspora communities have recently helped in establishing partnerships with international NGOs such as the Kenyan chapter of the Foundation for Environmental Education (FEE), participated in global environmental campaigns (KIPPRA, 2024) and contributed to the transfer of green technologies like the floating solar plant concept in Rift Valley Roses Kenya (Globalfieds, 2023).



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Kenya's environmental diplomacy should, therefore, establish a structured network for diaspora engagement in environmental issues to help amplify Kenya's voice in the global environmental arena. It should also reconcile bureaucratic processes related to investment permits, approval and licensing for green projects and setting up clear timelines for decision-making and implementation. Furthermore, Kenya's environmental diplomacy should harness the potential of above diaspora resources streamline legal framework to support its low-carbon initiatives, environmental efforts and resource-efficient paths to economic growth, sustainable development and the achievement of the Kenya Vision 2030.



Conclusion

In conclusion, the Kenya's environmental diplomacy should not be a one-time event, but rather a work-in progress, whose future lies in its ability to adapt to the rapidly changing global environmental dynamics. As far as climate change is concerned, the environmental diplomacy should heavily focus on securing adequate climate finance to fund research, and mitigation and adaptation projects. The updated Kenya's environmental diplomacy ought to prioritize integrating climate science and climate security into policy-making processes. Bridging the gap between science and policy will be important to ensure that decision-making on the environmental issues is informed by scientific evidence.

Empowering its diaspora community to take an active role and engage in environmental diplomacy, and rationalizing bureaucratic processes can enable Kenya to promote its global environmental influence. As technological innovations, evolve, so must Kenya's approach to reviewing its diplomatic policies. Streamlining the current environmental diplomacy pillar in the Kenya's Foreign Policy to reflect these priority areas, will ensure that the country remains a leader in environmental governance and a strong advocate for sustainable development in Africa.

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Address: P O Box 650 - 00621, Nairobi

Phone: +254 734 088 233 | 0114 088 233

Email: info@masharikirpc.org

www.masharikirpc.org