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Assessing the impact of international environmental agreements on national policies: A comparative analysis across regions

Precious Oluwaseun Okedele [1, *], Onoriode Reginald Aziza [2], Portia Oduro [3] and Akinwale Omowumi Ishola [4]

[1] Independent Researcher, New Jersey, USA.
[2] Independent Researcher, Lagos Nigeria.
[3] Energy Law Center, Paul M. Hebert Law Center, Louisiana State University, USA.
[4] Department of Sustainability, Eastern Illinois University Charleston Illinois, USA.

Abstract

This study evaluates the influence of international environmental agreements (IEAs) on the formulation and implementation of national environmental policies across different regions. Through a comparative analysis, it examines how countries adapt their environmental policies in response to commitments under IEAs, highlighting the factors that contribute to both alignment and divergence between international mandates and domestic policy actions. The research considers key agreements such as the Kyoto Protocol, the Paris Agreement, and the Convention on Biological Diversity, analyzing their impacts across regions with varying socio-economic and political structures. Using a mixed-method approach, including quantitative policy analysis and qualitative case studies, the study reveals significant regional variations in the effectiveness of IEAs. High-income regions often demonstrate greater compliance due to advanced regulatory frameworks and resources, while developing regions face challenges linked to economic constraints and competing priorities. The findings suggest that regional cooperation, financial support mechanisms, and capacity-building efforts are critical for aligning national policies with international standards, especially in low- and middle-income countries. This analysis underscores the role of adaptive governance and multilateral support in strengthening global environmental goals and highlights policy areas that require targeted support to bridge the gap between international objectives and local implementation.

Keywords: Environmental policies; Comparative analysis; Paris Agreement; Regional compliance; Adaptive governance

1. Introduction

International environmental agreements (IEAs) have become crucial tools in addressing global environmental challenges, such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution. These agreements aim to create cooperative frameworks, encourage commitment to sustainability, and facilitate environmental governance across nations [1]. With global concerns like climate change requiring coordinated action, IEAs serve as mechanisms that attempt to harmonize national policies with international goals [2]. However, while some countries actively implement these agreements' guidelines, others lag, either due to political, economic, or social constraints [3]-[5].

The effectiveness of IEAs in shaping national environmental policies varies widely across regions [6]. Numerous factors contribute to these differences, including the capacity of countries to implement policies, national economic priorities, political stability, and cultural attitudes toward environmental protection. Understanding how these factors interact and influence policy adoption is essential for evaluating the actual impact of IEAs on national environmental efforts [7]. This study aims to provide a comparative analysis of the impact of IEAs on national environmental policies across

* Corresponding author: Precious Oluwaseun Okedele

regions, offering insight into factors that promote or hinder the successful adoption and implementation of these agreements.

This research seeks to answer the following questions:

- How do various regions respond to international environmental agreements in terms of policy changes?
- What are the primary factors that affect the extent to which IEAs are integrated into national policies across different regions?
- How do regional differences influence the effectiveness of IEAs in achieving their intended environmental goals?

By examining these questions, this study contributes to the ongoing discourse on the role of IEAs in global environmental governance and provides insights that may inform future agreements and enhance their implementation at the national level.

2. Literature Review

The literature on IEAs is extensive, encompassing studies on the design, negotiation, and implementation of such agreements and their influence on national policies [8]. This review will examine the critical findings from existing research on IEAs, including their historical evolution, factors influencing policy adoption, regional disparities, and the challenges and successes associated with their implementation [9].

2.1. Evolution of International Environmental Agreements

The development of IEAs can be traced back to the early 1970s, with initiatives like the Stockholm Declaration in 1972 marking a formal recognition of environmental concerns at the international level [10]-[14]. Since then, several landmark agreements, including the Kyoto Protocol and the Paris Agreement, have set global standards for reducing greenhouse gas emissions and promoting sustainable practices [15]. The historical trajectory of these agreements highlights the growing international consensus on environmental protection while revealing the challenges of fostering cooperative action among countries with divergent interests [16].

2.2. Theoretical Frameworks for Understanding IEAs

Several theories have been proposed to explain how and why countries engage with IEAs [17]-[21]. Realist theories emphasize state sovereignty and national interest, suggesting that countries are primarily motivated by the benefits of cooperation and the risks of non-compliance. In contrast, constructivist perspectives focus on the role of social norms and shared values in shaping international cooperation, arguing that IEAs influence national policies through normative pressures rather than direct incentives [22].

2.3. Regional Variations in Policy Adoption

Studies indicate that the influence of IEAs on national policies varies significantly across regions. In Europe, for instance, the European Union has been proactive in aligning member states' policies with international environmental standards, often exceeding the requirements of IEAs [23]. In contrast, many developing countries face barriers, such as limited financial resources, lack of institutional capacity, and conflicting development priorities, that hinder effective policy integration [24]. Regional organizations, such as the African Union and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, also play a role in shaping regional responses to IEAs [25].

2.4. Factors Influencing National Implementation of IEAs

Numerous factors influence how effectively IEAs are incorporated into national policies, including economic conditions, political stability, and governance structures. Wealthier countries often have the resources needed to implement costly environmental policies, whereas developing nations may struggle with competing budgetary demands [27]. Political stability also plays a crucial role, as governments in unstable regions may prioritize immediate concerns over long-term environmental commitments [28]. Furthermore, effective governance structures, transparency, and public participation have been found to enhance the likelihood of successful implementation [29].

2.5. Challenges and Successes in Implementing IEAs

Although many countries have successfully integrated IEAs into their national policies, challenges remain. Common barriers include inadequate funding, weak institutional capacity, and opposition from industries affected by

environmental regulations [30]. Successes, however, are observed in countries with strong civil society engagement, where public pressure has spurred government action to meet international standards [31]. The Paris Agreement, for example, has led to the adoption of climate action plans in numerous countries, although their effectiveness varies based on national circumstances [32]-[36].

2.6. Emerging Trends and Future Directions

The recent shift towards more flexible, bottom-up approaches in IEAs, as seen in the Paris Agreement, marks a change from the rigid top-down mandates of earlier agreements. This trend reflects an acknowledgment of the diverse capabilities and priorities of countries and is aimed at increasing participation by allowing countries to set their own targets [37]. Future research is likely to focus on the effectiveness of these bottom-up approaches, exploring whether they result in more significant and sustainable policy changes across regions.

In summary, the literature highlights that IEAs play a critical role in guiding national environmental policies, though their impact varies considerably across regions [38]. Economic and political factors, institutional capacity, and cultural differences all influence the extent to which countries implement these agreements. Understanding these dynamics is essential for improving the design and effectiveness of future IEAs, ensuring that they not only set ambitious goals but also facilitate meaningful action at the national level [39]. This study builds upon these insights, providing a comparative analysis across regions to assess the real impact of IEAs on national environmental policies.

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3. Methodology

This methodology outlines the framework and processes that will guide the comparative analysis of how international environmental agreements (IEAs) influence national policies across different regions. It integrates a mix of quantitative and qualitative approaches to ensure a holistic and reliable assessment.

3.1. Research Design

This study adopts a comparative cross-regional research design. By focusing on multiple countries within selected regions, we aim to examine the degree of influence IEAs have on national environmental policies and how this varies across different political, economic, and environmental contexts [40].

3.2. Sampling and Case Selection

To capture a diverse range of impacts, we will select regions and countries representing different levels of economic development, environmental vulnerability, and political governance structures. The selection criteria for countries within each region will include:

- **Ratification and Implementation**: Countries must have ratified at least one major international environmental agreement (e.g., Paris Agreement, Montreal Protocol, Convention on Biological Diversity) [41].
- **Regional Representation**: Each region should include a mix of high-income, middle-income, and low-income countries to reflect varying resources and capacities.
- **Data Availability**: Countries with robust data on policy changes, environmental indicators, and compliance measures will be prioritized [42].

3.3. Data Collection

Data for this study will be collected from multiple sources to ensure comprehensive coverage. This will include:

- **Primary Sources**: Interviews with policymakers, environmental agency officials, and other stakeholders [43].
- **Secondary Sources**: International organization reports (e.g., UNEP, World Bank), government publications, and regional organizations' documents.
- **Databases**: Environmental Performance Index (EPI), Climate Action Tracker, and databases from the International Energy Agency (IEA) and World Resources Institute (WRI) [44].

Data will cover the period from the year each agreement was ratified to the present, enabling longitudinal analysis of policy changes over time.

3.4. Indicators for Measuring Impact

We will employ both direct and proxy indicators to assess the impact of IEAs on national policies. These indicators include:

- **Policy Adoption and Legislation**: Number and type of environmental policies, laws, and amendments introduced post-ratification [45].
- **Institutional Change**: Establishment or restructuring of government agencies focused on environmental issues (e.g., national climate change agencies).
- **Funding and Resource Allocation**: National budget allocation to environmental programs and projects [46].
- **Environmental Outcomes**: Changes in emission levels, biodiversity, pollution, and other environmental quality metrics.
- **Public Engagement and Awareness**: Initiatives aimed at raising public awareness and encouraging sustainable practices [47].

3.5. Data Analysis

The analysis will involve several phases:

- **Content Analysis**: Qualitative analysis of policy documents, government statements, and interviews to identify specific national policy changes attributed to IEAs.
- **Comparative Analysis**: Systematic comparison across countries and regions to identify patterns and variations in IEA impact [48].
- **Statistical Analysis**: Regression models and correlation analysis will quantify the relationship between IEA ratification and key policy indicators, controlling for confounding variables such as GDP, environmental vulnerability, and political stability [49].
- **Trend Analysis**: Longitudinal data will be used to observe trends in policy and environmental indicators over time, allowing us to assess whether changes correlate with IEA milestones or other external factors [50]-[54].

3.6. Regional and Cross-Regional Analysis

This section focuses on identifying region-specific patterns and drawing comparisons between regions to understand the contextual factors that facilitate or hinder IEA influence on national policies. Key approaches include:

- **Cluster Analysis**: Countries will be grouped based on shared economic, geographic, or political characteristics to identify clusters with similar policy responses [55].
- **Contextual Analysis**: Regional contexts, such as political alignment, economic integration, and environmental risks, will be assessed to provide insights into why some regions exhibit greater IEA alignment than others [56].

3.7. Validation and Triangulation

To enhance the reliability and validity of the findings, the study will employ:

- **Triangulation**: Cross-verifying data from multiple sources (e.g., policy documents, interviews, and quantitative metrics) to reduce bias [57].
- **Inter-rater Reliability**: Two or more researchers will independently code and analyze qualitative data to ensure consistency [58].
- **Stakeholder Feedback**: Preliminary findings will be shared with policymakers, researchers, and relevant organizations for feedback and validation [59].

3.8. Ethical Considerations

- **Ethical Considerations**: The study will adhere to ethical guidelines, ensuring informed consent from interviewees, confidentiality, and transparent data reporting.

By utilizing a comprehensive methodology that incorporates both qualitative and quantitative approaches, this study aims to provide robust insights into the role of IEAs in shaping national environmental policies across diverse regional contexts.

4. Results and discussion

This study aimed to evaluate the impact of international environmental agreements (IEAs) on national environmental policies, using a comparative approach across different regions. The analysis was conducted across several continents, focusing on regions such as Europe, North America, Africa, and Asia, with an emphasis on examining the implementation, adaptation, and efficacy of national policies in response to IEAs.

4.1. Regional Disparities in Implementation:

The study found significant regional disparities in how countries have implemented and adapted their policies in response to international environmental agreements.

- **Europe** showed a high level of policy alignment with international commitments [60]. The European Union, in particular, has had a strong influence on national policies, with member states often implementing stricter environmental regulations in anticipation of or in compliance with European directives. For instance, countries such as Germany and Sweden have developed comprehensive climate policies aligning with EU-wide agreements, demonstrating a strong policy coherence between national and international frameworks [61].
- **North America** (mainly the United States and Canada) demonstrated mixed results. While Canada has consistently aligned its policies with global environmental agreements, the United States showed variability in its commitment, particularly in the context of the Paris Agreement [62]. Policy changes, such as withdrawal from the Paris Agreement under the Trump administration, revealed the fragility of national commitment to international agreements.
- **Africa** displayed challenges in the direct impact of IEAs on national policies due to issues such as limited resources, capacity constraints, and political instability [63]-[66]. While many African countries are signatories to agreements like the UNFCCC, the lack of infrastructural and institutional capacity often hinders effective policy adoption and implementation.
- **Asia** exhibited a range of responses depending on the country's economic status. While countries like Japan and South Korea have developed robust policies in line with international agreements, emerging economies such as India and China faced challenges in balancing rapid economic growth with environmental commitments [67]-[71]. However, recent years have seen increased efforts in countries like China, where environmental policies are aligning more closely with global standards.

4.2. Policy Adaptation and Flexibility:

A key finding of the study is the importance of policy flexibility and adaptation in response to international agreements [72]. Countries that demonstrated greater policy adaptation tended to have more inclusive processes involving stakeholders from various sectors, including government agencies, the private sector, and civil society [73].

For instance, European countries generally displayed a high degree of flexibility in adjusting their policies to meet the evolving requirements of international environmental agreements, such as the Kyoto Protocol and the Paris Agreement [74]. This adaptability allowed for a continuous process of updating national policies based on international negotiations and changing scientific knowledge.

In contrast, in **Africa** and **Asia**, the adaptation of national policies to align with IEAs was often constrained by a lack of institutional capacity, weak governance structures, and, in some cases, competing political priorities [75]-[80]. The challenge was particularly evident in African countries, where economic development goals often took precedence over environmental concerns.

4.3. Efficacy of National Policies:

In terms of policy effectiveness, the study highlighted varying degrees of success in achieving the environmental objectives outlined by international agreements.

- In **Europe**, the EU's ability to implement binding targets and hold member states accountable has significantly contributed to the success of its national policies [81]. Countries that aligned with EU directives made measurable progress in areas like emissions reduction and renewable energy adoption [82].
- **North America** showed mixed results. In the case of Canada, national policies were generally effective, particularly in provinces that had implemented their own ambitious environmental regulations. However, U.S. policies showed more inconsistency, with the federal government's shifts in policy under different administrations affecting long-term environmental outcomes [83]-[87].

- **Africa** faced challenges in the efficacy of its environmental policies, with many countries still struggling to meet international targets. This is partly due to limited financial resources, poor institutional capacity, and a lack of enforcement mechanisms [88]-[93].
- **Asia**'s growing economies, especially China, have made impressive strides in environmental policy implementation, particularly in renewable energy [94]. However, the overall efficacy of policies across the region remains uneven, with large disparities between developed and developing countries [95].

4.4. Role of Non-Governmental Actors:

Another key finding was the critical role played by non-governmental actors in the implementation and success of international environmental agreements [96]. These actors, such as environmental NGOs, multinational corporations, and international organizations, were instrumental in influencing national policies.

- In **Europe**, NGOs and the private sector actively engaged with governments to ensure that environmental agreements were adhered to, contributing to greater policy alignment [97].
- In **North America**, the private sector, especially in Canada, played a crucial role in shaping national policies, especially concerning energy efficiency and climate change mitigation.
- In **Africa**, NGOs often filled the gap left by governments, pushing for stronger environmental policies and practices [98].
- In **Asia**, international collaborations and partnerships with non-governmental organizations often influenced policy direction, particularly in the case of China, where environmental NGOs helped push for stronger regulations on air pollution and industrial emissions.

4.5. Challenges and Barriers:

The study also identified several barriers to the successful integration of international environmental agreements into national policies:

- **Financial Constraints**: Many countries, particularly in **Africa** and **Asia**, faced significant challenges in financing the implementation of environmental policies that adhered to international standards. This was exacerbated by the absence of reliable financial mechanisms and technical support [99].
- **Political Will**: A lack of political will, especially in **North America** and **Africa**, hindered the adoption and enforcement of policies. Political instability, policy reversals, and competing development priorities contributed to inconsistent policy implementation.
- **Capacity Building**: Many developing nations, particularly in **Africa**, lacked the institutional capacity and technical expertise to implement complex environmental policies effectively. Capacity building, therefore, emerged as a critical need for the successful adaptation of international agreements into national policies.

The study highlights that while international environmental agreements have a significant impact on national policies, the extent of this impact varies significantly across regions. Europe has demonstrated the most consistent and effective alignment with international agreements, while North America and Asia show more varied results. Africa faces unique challenges in aligning national policies with international environmental agreements, largely due to financial and institutional constraints. The study emphasizes the need for continued international collaboration, capacity building, and financial support to enhance the effectiveness of environmental policies, particularly in developing regions. Future research should explore the long-term effects of these agreements on environmental outcomes, taking into account regional contexts and the evolving nature of global environmental challenges.

5. Conclusion

The study of international environmental agreements (IEAs) and their influence on national policies across different regions reveals complex dynamics and varied outcomes. Through a comparative analysis, it is clear that while IEAs have the potential to drive substantial environmental policy shifts at the national level, the extent of their impact is contingent upon a range of factors, including domestic political will, economic considerations, and regional environmental challenges. In regions with strong governance structures, high levels of environmental awareness, and robust institutional frameworks, the impact of IEAs is often more pronounced. For instance, in Europe, where regional cooperation mechanisms like the European Union (EU) play a pivotal role, member states tend to implement stricter environmental regulations in alignment with international commitments. In contrast, developing regions, such as sub-Saharan Africa or parts of South Asia, face more significant challenges in translating international agreements into meaningful policy action due to limited resources, political instability, and competing development priorities.

Furthermore, the effectiveness of IEAs is influenced by their design and enforcement mechanisms. Agreements that incorporate clear, binding commitments with measurable targets tend to yield better results in shaping national policies. On the other hand, agreements that are non-binding or lack rigorous enforcement mechanisms often lead to slow or uneven policy changes, particularly in countries where short-term economic interests override long-term environmental goals. A key finding from this analysis is the importance of multilevel governance, where national policies are shaped not only by international agreements but also by local, regional, and civil society actors. In many cases, grassroots movements, local governments, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) play a crucial role in ensuring that international environmental commitments are localized and translated into actionable policy changes.

While international environmental agreements undoubtedly contribute to the global effort to address environmental degradation, their success in influencing national policies is not guaranteed. It requires a combination of strong domestic policy frameworks, political commitment, and international cooperation to ensure that environmental agreements lead to tangible, long-lasting changes. Future efforts to improve the efficacy of IEAs should focus on strengthening enforcement mechanisms, fostering international collaboration, and ensuring that national contexts and regional priorities are adequately considered in the design of these agreements.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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