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Bridging Continents and Restoring Our Shared Future: The European Union (EU) Nature Restoration Law and Africa's Path to Sustainable Ecosystem Recovery.

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Acronyms

AU: African Union

AFCFTA: African Continental Free Trade Area

AMCEN: African Ministerial Conference on Environment

BBC: British Broadcasting Corporation

CBD: Convention on Biological Diversity

CMS: Convention on Migratory Species

CITES: Convention on International Trade for Endangered Species

EAC: East African Community

ECOWAS: Economic Community of West African Countries

EU: European Union

FAO: Food and Agriculture Organization

GCF: Green Climate Fund

GEF: Global Environment Facility

GPFLR: Global Partnership on Forest and Landscape Restoration

GRI: Global Restoration Initiative 2023

IPBES: Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services

IPCC: Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change 2022

IUCN: International Union for Conservation of Nature

KMGBF: Kunming Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework

MEAs: Multilateral Environmental Agreements

NBS: Nature Based Solutions

NGOs: Non-Governmental Organizations

NRL: Nature Restoration Law

SADC: Southern Africa Development Community

TFCAs: Trans Frontier Conservation Areas

UN: United Nations

UNCCD: United Nations Convention on Combatting Desertification

UNEP: United Nations Environment Programme

UNESCO: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

UNFCCC: United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change

WWF: World Wildlife Fund

Executive Summary

Global ecosystems face unprecedented degradation, with biodiversity loss and land desertification threatening food security, climate resilience, and sustainable development. This crisis demands urgent action, particularly in Africa, where 65% of productive land is degraded[1] and key species face extinction[2]. Against this backdrop, the European Union's landmark Nature Restoration Law (NRL) emerges as a potential game-changer, setting legally binding targets to restore 20% of EU ecosystems by 2030. This paper explores how Africa can draw lessons from the NRL while addressing its unique environmental and socioeconomic challenges.

Africa's environmental governance gaps, which include weak enforcement of existing laws, fragmented policies with gaps on mandatory restoration provisions, and underfunded restoration programs, contrast sharply with the EU's integrated approach. The EU Nature Restoration Law (NRL)'s emphasis on science-based targets, cross-sectoral coordination, and community engagement offers a replicable model. Restoration initiatives in some African countries demonstrate how integrating local knowledge with science-based conservation practices augmented by strong legal frameworks can drive transformative ecological recovery. These case studies highlight the continent's potential to scale up nature restoration when community-led approaches are reinforced by policy and institutional support.

The UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration, Target 2 of the KMGBF under the CBD, and other existing multilateral agreements such as UNFCCC and UNCCD provide conducive platforms for Africa-EU collaboration on ecosystem restoration. Be that as it may, realizing this potential requires adopting NRL-inspired domestic laws with tailored restoration targets. Additionally, it requires establishing dedicated Africa-EU green finance mechanisms and strengthening the capacity of regional bodies like the AU, EAC, and SADC to harmonize nature restoration policies encompassing mandatory nature restoration provisions.

This paper concludes with a call for legally enforceable global restoration commitments inspired by the EU NRL. By aligning the NRL's governance model with African priorities through shared funding, technology transfer, and capacity building, the EU and Africa can jointly advance the Convention on Biological Diversity, the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, and the 2030 Agenda on nature restoration. Success hinges on translating policy ambition into localized action that balances ecological recovery with livelihood needs.

[1] United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification. (2022). *Global land outlook 2* (p. 15). https://www.unccd.int/sites/default/files/2022-04/GLO2%20EN.pdf

[2] Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services. (2018). *The IPBES regional assessment report on biodiversity and ecosystem services for Africa* (p. 8). https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.3236178

Introduction: Global Nature Degradation and the EU's Response

The overview of ecosystem degradation globally

Globally, natural ecosystems are degrading at an alarming rate, leading to serious environmental, and socio-economic repercussions for many countries, including developed nations. Towering forests that once stood as guardians of biodiversity are vanishing, rivers that once teemed with life are drying up and once thriving ecosystems are now mere shadows of their former selves. The relentless march of human activities such as deforestation, unsustainable land use practices and unsustainable timber logging and climate change induced by both anthropogenic and natural factors has placed the natural world on the brink of collapse. The triple planetary crisis of climate change, pollution, and biodiversity loss is causing widespread environmental damage, resulting in severe environmental and socio-economic challenges[3]. Biodiversity, a fundamental aspect of nature, underpins all life on Earth, and its degradation poses a significant threat to the survival of all species, including humans. Human activities have been the primary drivers of this degradation, prompting UN Secretary-General António Guterres to state, "Humanity is waging war on nature. This is senseless and suicidal."[4]

Added to that McGrath BBC Environment Correspondent highlights that human activities are damaging and degrading nature in an unsustainable fashion as noted by a United Nations Report and if nothing changes, an additional area of land the size of South America will damaged by 2050[5]. Both the statement by the United Nations Secretary General and the article by McGrath substantiate the gravity and extent of nature degradation globally. Ironically the degradation is being driven by humans who were supposedly biblically entrusted with custody and stewardship over nature's resources in the garden of Eden as illustrated in the book of Genesis in the Bible. Countries worldwide rely on a wide range of ecosystem services to drive socio-economic development. This degradation is not just an environmental crisis, it is a direct threat to humanity's well-being as healthy ecosystems provide essential services that sustain life. If left unchecked, the consequences will be irreversible, impacting generations to come.

Africa's Environmental Challenges: A Case for Stronger Restoration Laws

The State of Environmental Degradation in Africa

Africa is home to some of the world's most diverse ecosystems, ranging from the dense tropical forests of the Congo Basin to expansive savannas, wetlands, and coastal areas. However, these ecosystems are experiencing unprecedented degradation due to deforestation, land-use change, climate variability, and

[3] *What is the Triple Planetary Crisis?* UNFCCC. Available at: https://unfccc.int/topics/science/workstreams/cooperation-with-the-ipcc/what-is-the-triple-planetary-crisis (Accessed: 12 March 2025).
[4] *United Nations Secretary-Genera Statement.* Available at: https://www.un.org/sg/en (Accessed: 30 August 2024).
[5] McGrath, M. *Nature loss: Insatiable greed degrading land around the world - UN.* BBC. Available at: https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-64937433 (Accessed: 12 March 2025).

unsustainable resource extraction. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO, 2022), Africa loses approximately 3.9 million hectares of forest annually, making it the second-highest region in terms of deforestation worldwide. The consequences of this degradation extend beyond biodiversity loss and include severe impacts on food security, water availability, and economic stability.

Land degradation currently affects nearly 65% of productive land across the continent, with over 45% of Africa's population directly impacted by declining soil fertility, desertification, and loss of biodiversity (United Nations Environment Programme [UNEP], 2021). The urgency of restoration efforts in African landscapes is not merely an environmental necessity but a critical strategy for economic resilience, climate adaptation, and sustainable development. Addressing this crisis requires stronger legislative frameworks, increased financial commitments, and policy interventions that align with global restoration goals. The European Union's (EU) Nature Restoration Law, which sets legally binding targets for ecosystem recovery, presents a valuable model that could inspire policy reforms in Africa.

Current Degradation Trends in African Ecosystems

Deforestation and land degradation remain among the most pressing environmental challenges across the continent. The Congo Basin, which serves as the world's second-largest rainforest and a major carbon sink, is being lost at an estimated rate of 500,000 hectares per year (Global Forest Watch, 2023). In West Africa, over 90% of primary forests have been cleared due to the expansion of cocoa farming, logging, and urban development (World Bank, 2022). In Southern Africa, countries such as Zambia and Zimbabwe continue to experience high deforestation rates driven by charcoal production and illegal logging. Although Rwanda has made notable progress in reversing deforestation through agroforestry and reforestation initiatives, many other African nations struggle with weak enforcement mechanisms and limited financial resources for restoration.

Wetlands, which play a crucial role in maintaining biodiversity, regulating water cycles, and providing carbon sequestration, are also under severe threat. In Central and West Africa, wetlands are disappearing due to pollution, agricultural expansion, and urbanization. Lake Chad, once a vital freshwater source supporting over 30 million people in Chad, Nigeria, Niger, and Cameroon, has shrunk by nearly 90% since the 1960s due to climate change and unsustainable water withdrawals (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2021). Similarly, some of Zimbabwe's wetlands, which serve as important buffers against droughts and floods, have been drained for urban expansion, leading to increased water shortages and biodiversity loss. Rwanda's Nyabarongo Wetlands, once a thriving ecological zone, have also suffered from pollution due to agricultural runoff and industrial waste.

Biodiversity loss across Africa has reached alarming levels, threatening the survival of both wildlife and human communities that depend on natural ecosystems for sustenance. The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN, 2023) reports that elephant populations have declined by over 60% in the past five decades due to habitat loss and poaching. Amphibian populations across the continent are also experiencing drastic declines, with over 40% of species at risk of extinction due to deforestation and climate variability. This widespread biodiversity loss not only disrupts ecological balance but also threatens the economic benefits derived from ecotourism, a major source of revenue for many African nations, including Kenya, South Africa, and Tanzania.

The Urgency of Restoration in African Landscapes

Restoration of degraded ecosystems in Africa is an urgent priority, not only from an environmental perspective but also for economic and social stability. Restored ecosystems contribute to food security by improving soil fertility, increasing water availability, and stabilizing local microclimates. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO, 2023) highlights that agroforestry-based restoration can significantly enhance agricultural productivity and resilience to climate change. Restoration initiatives can also create employment opportunities, particularly in rural areas where job creation is crucial. According to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP, 2022), large-scale reforestation and land restoration projects have the potential to generate over 30 jobs per hectare in sectors such as conservation, agroforestry, and sustainable land management.

Beyond its economic benefits, ecosystem restoration is a cost-effective strategy for climate adaptation. Africa is among the regions most vulnerable to climate change, yet it contributes the least to global greenhouse gas emissions (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC], 2022). The Global Restoration Initiative (GRI, 2023) estimates that restoring degraded lands in Africa could sequester up to 26 gigatons of carbon dioxide by 2030, significantly contributing to global climate mitigation efforts. This underscores the importance of integrating restoration efforts into national climate action plans and international climate finance mechanisms.

Restoration efforts also present an opportunity for African nations to attract global investments. The European Green Deal, which has committed over one trillion euros to climate action and sustainability initiatives, offers potential funding avenues for African restoration projects (European Commission, 2023). Similarly, the Global Environment Facility (GEF) has allocated over $1 billion toward land restoration projects in Africa, supporting initiatives aimed at reversing desertification and improving land-use practices. Strengthening Africa's position in global carbon markets could also enhance financial incentives for restoration, allowing countries to trade carbon credits derived from afforestation and reforestation programs.

The EU's Nature Restoration Law: A Game Changer for Global Biodiversity Conservation?

The role of law and policy in nature restoration

Law and policy play a fundamental role in nature restoration by establishing legal frameworks, governance structures, and regulatory, enforcement and monitoring mechanisms essential for rehabilitating degraded ecosystems. Strong legal and policy measures, complemented by effective monitoring and enforcement mechanisms, provide the foundation for mandatory restoration efforts. These ensure that environmental recovery is prioritized, ensure that it is systematically implemented, and continuously monitored. In highlighting further, the importance of laws and policies on nature restoration, James highlights that that there must be an enabling legal framework in place to move us out of a siloed focus on single ecosystems and services and guide considered and coordinated selection of restoration sites to ensure

that the best possible environmental outcomes are achieved across all landscapes in advancing nature restoration[6].

Background and Introduction to the Nature Restoration Law

Numerous nature laws and policies have been enacted globally, primarily aimed at combating nature or environmental crimes that lead to the destruction and degradation of natural ecosystems. These legal frameworks span international multilateral environmental agreements, regional policies, and national legislation. To reinforce their prohibitive measures, strict penalty regimes have often been implemented, alongside the establishment of international networks and alliances dedicated to addressing environmental and nature-related crimes. Furthermore, global restoration initiatives, such as the Global Partnership on Forest and Landscape Restoration (GPFLR), have been launched to support ecosystem recovery. However, the effectiveness of these institutions remains limited by the absence of clear and comprehensive legally binding instruments specifically mandating the restoration of degraded ecosystems.

Many countries worldwide are adopting a fragmented approach in their legislative frameworks when incorporating mandatory provisions for nature restoration and rehabilitation. Existing laws have largely prioritized combating environmental degradation, often at the expense of legally mandated restoration efforts. While both aspects are crucial, the alarming scale of ecosystem degradation calls for a greater emphasis on restoration and rehabilitation. This imbalance has led to inefficiencies, inconsistencies, and a lack of coherence in achieving the overarching goal of ecosystem recovery and conservation. Moreover, most global nature laws and policies continue to lack clear, comprehensive, and binding provisions mandating the rehabilitation or restoration of degraded ecosystems. To further substantiate the above notions on the current laws' inadequacies on mandatory nature restoration, the Society for Ecological Restoration Legal Working group highlights that restoration under existing laws is done on an ad hoc basis and often in small-scale projects[7]. Existing laws miss the necessary deadlines and detailed and clear obligations on nature restoration[8].

Recognizing this lacuna, the European Union has taken a groundbreaking step by enacting the Nature Restoration Law, a legally binding framework dedicated specifically to nature restoration across its member states. In efforts to halt environmental degradation and restore degraded ecosystems, institutions like the European Union have emerged as trailblazers, setting a precedent for global action. The European Union is the first governing body in the world to establish a dedicated legislative instrument that legally mandates nature restoration, marking a significant milestone in environmental governance.

Unpacking EU's Nature Restoration Law

European Union's nature restoration law entered into force on the 18th of August 2024, and it sets legally binding targets for member states to restore 20% of land areas and 20% of seas by 2030, and all ecosystems in need of restoration in Europe by 2050. The law also sets binding targets to reduce the impacts of

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[6] Bell-James, J. (2023). From the silo to the landscape: The role of law in landscape-scale restoration of coastal and marine ecosystems. *Journal of Environmental Law, 35*(3), 419–436. https://doi.org/10.1093/jel/eqad027

[7] **Society for Ecological Restoration Legal Working Group. (2023).** *The EU Nature Restoration Law: Providing legal certainty in tackling the biodiversity and climate crisis.* Society for Ecological Restoration.

[8] ibid

natural disasters related to climate change, biodiversity loss and also to halt the loss of urban green spaces and increase urban green space and tree canopy cover for urban climate adaptation. Additionally, the law sets binding targets to restore degraded ecosystems, particularly those with the most potential to capture and store carbon.

According to the European Union, the full implementation of the law is crucial to restore European Union's biodiversity and stop further biodiversity loss, to reach climate neutrality by 2050, and adapt to climate change and to enhance food security for European Union's citizens. The law will also support other European Union's ambitions such as water security[9]. The Nature Restoration Regulation is the first continent-wide, comprehensive law of its kind. It is a key element of the EU Biodiversity Strategy, which sets binding targets to restore degraded ecosystems, in particular those with the most potential to capture and store carbon and to prevent and reduce the impact of natural disasters[10].

Key provisions and legally binding commitments

The Nature Restoration Law consists of six chapters which are the general provisions chapter 1 to chapter 3, restoration targets and obligations chapter 4 to chapter13, national restoration plans chapter 14 to chapter 19, monitoring and reporting chapter 20 to chapter 21, delegated and implementing acts chapter 22 to chapter 24, and the regulation's final provisions chapter 25 to chapter 28[11]. All articles within the law are meticulously structured and seamlessly integrated to form a sturdy regulatory framework that mandates nature restoration among member states.

Article 4 sets out the restoration targets for terrestrial, coastal, and freshwater ecosystems. This article emphasises the importance of connectivity and requires Member States to ensure continuous improvement and no deterioration once good condition has been achieved. This article requires Member States to put in place restoration measures to improve at least 30% of listed habitat types to good condition by 2030 (60% by 2040, and 90% by 2050). Member states are mandated to continuously improve the quality and quantity of the terrestrial, coastal, and freshwater habitats of the species listed in Annexes II, IV and V to the Habitats Directive and terrestrial, coastal, and freshwater habitats of wild birds falling within the scope of the Birds Directive until sufficient levels are reached[12].

Article 5 prescribes the restoration targets for marine ecosystems. Member States are required to ensure that the condition of at least 50% of the area distributed over all habitat types in Groups 1 to 6 is known by 2030 (all by 2040), and at least 50% of the area of Group 7 is known by 2040 (all by 2050)[13]. Article 8 is pertinent as it sets targets for urban ecosystems. It aims to ensure that there is no net loss of urban green spaces and of urban tree canopy cover by 2030. Article 9 highlights the obligations for Member States to identify and remove artificial barriers to the connectivity of surface waters, contributing to the

[9] European Commission. (n.d.). Nature restoration regulation. Environment. https://environment.ec.europa.eu/topics/nature-and-biodiversity/nature-restoration-regulation_en

[10] ibid

[11] **International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN).** (2024). *IUCN briefing: EU nature restoration regulation – final*. https://www.iucn.org

[12] ibid

[13] ibid

target of restoring at least 25 000 km of rivers into free-flowing rivers. Article 10 mandates the improvement of pollinator diversity and the reversal to the decline of pollinators by 2030. Article 11 prescribes targets for the restoration of agricultural ecosystems where member states are to achieve an increasing trend on at least two out of three indicators, measured in the period from 18 August 2024 until 31 December 2030, and every six years after that, until satisfactory levels are reached. The indicators are grassland butterfly index, stock of organic carbon in cropland mineral soils and share of agricultural land with high diversity landscape features[14].

Article 12 prescribes obligations for the restoration of forest ecosystems. Member States are to achieve an increasing trend of at least six out of seven indicators, measured from 18 August 2024 until 31 December 2030, and every six years after that, until satisfactory levels are reached. These indicators include standing deadwood, lying deadwood, share of forests with uneven-aged structure, forest connectivity, stock of organic carbon, share of forests dominated by native tree species and tree species diversity. Article 15 highlights the content of the National Restoration Plans with intermediate deadlines corresponding to the targets and obligations set out in articles 4 to 13, up to 2050. Monitoring and reporting mechanisms are prescribed by article 20 and 21 which stipulates that member states are required to start monitoring habitat types and indicators from the moment the regulation enters into force and continue to monitor and report on the progress every six years, submitting their first report by 30 June 2031. Mandatory reporting is stipulated and required every 3 years.

Legal Implications for Europe and beyond

The EU Nature Restoration Law is a milestone in global environmental policy. While its primary focus is on European ecosystems, its influence will surely extend beyond the EU, shaping international biodiversity laws, trade policies, and funding mechanisms for ecosystem restoration. For Africa, the law serves as an important model for integrating mandatory ecosystem restoration into legal frameworks, reinforcing sustainable land and forest management, and strengthening biodiversity conservation efforts.

The law introduces legally binding targets for restoring at least 20% of the EU's land and sea areas by 2030 and all degraded ecosystems by 2050. It reinforces the EU's Biodiversity Strategy for 2030, which aims to halt biodiversity loss and restore ecosystems critical for climate resilience. In line with this law member states are required to develop and implement national restoration plans, integrating restoration into national policies. Additionally, the law introduces much needed mechanisms for climate change mitigation and adaptation. It ushers in mandatory restoration efforts targeting peatlands, wetlands, forests, and marine ecosystems which will enhance carbon sequestration, helping the EU meet its climate neutrality goal by 2050. Restored ecosystems improve flood control, soil fertility, and water retention, making the region more resilient to climate-related disasters.

[14] ibid

Apart from the ecological benefits, the effective implementation of the law will potentially yield many economic and social benefits. The law is expected to generate green jobs in ecological restoration, sustainable agriculture, and conservation. The envisaged investments in restoration will potentially boost rural economies, particularly in areas reliant on degraded landscapes which will be restored or rehabilitated through implementation of the law.

While the enactment of the law is expected to bring numerous positive outcomes, its implementation may also present certain challenges. There is a possibility that some agricultural and forestry sectors may oppose the law, due to the potential land-use restrictions and economic costs the law imposes on these sectors. Due to the magnitude of the proposed restoration interventions, implementation will obviously require substantial funding, and ensuring compliance across 27 EU member states will be complex. In many cases, the effectiveness of even the most well-designed laws globally has been undermined by inadequate enforcement and monitoring mechanisms. Hopefully, this will not be the case with the EU Nature Restoration Law, as its success will rely on sturdy long-term monitoring and innovative enforcement strategies.

The EU's mandatory restoration targets can serve as a model for how national environmental and nature laws of African nations could be revised to incorporate specific and enforceable restoration obligations. Governments could introduce mandatory national restoration plans, similar to the EU approach, requiring all degraded ecosystems to be restored by a given timeframe. Nature laws in blocs or regions such as Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries could be harmonized under a regional framework, ensuring transboundary conservation and mandatory ecosystem rehabilitation. Many African nations, face severe land degradation, affecting forests, rangelands, and wetlands. The Nature Restoration Law provides a model for requiring landowners and industries to restore degraded ecosystems, which can be integrated into land tenure and environmental laws. Furthermore, the EU law mandates restoration in agricultural landscapes, a concept African countries can adopt to promote sustainable farming. The role of agriculture in nature degradation is often overlooked, yet unsustainable agricultural practices can significantly contribute to environmental degradation.

African nature laws and policies can borrow a leaf from the EU Nature Restoration Law on sustainable forestry management through incorporating mandatory restoration targets, ensuring that deforestation is offset by legal restoration obligations. Agroforestry and nature-based solutions could be incentivized through legal mechanisms, benefiting rural communities. The EU law recognizes ecosystem restoration as an effective tool for climate mitigation and African countries can integrate this principle into their climate action laws. In alignment with global best practices and multilateral environmental agreements, the EU's law is designed to support the Global Biodiversity Framework's target of restoring 30% of degraded ecosystems by 2030. African countries can use the EU model to develop or enhance already existing national restoration laws to align with the GBF's global biodiversity targets.

The enactment of the EU Nature Restoration Law might have implications for international trade and partnerships. In doing trade countries may have to comply with EU Environmental Standards. Due to the serious stance the European Union has taken on nature and environmental issues there is a possibility

that African countries exporting agricultural and natural resources to the EU will need to comply with EU biodiversity and sustainability standards one day. Exports such as tobacco, timber, and horticultural products may face new legal requirements that aim at ensuring that their production does not contribute to ecosystem degradation.

The Nature Restoration Law also provides opportunities for African-EU Collaboration in nature restoration interventions. The EU law can unlock funding for Africa's restoration initiatives, providing financial support through climate adaptation funds, biodiversity finance mechanisms, and EU-Africa partnerships. African nations can negotiate biodiversity-friendly trade agreements with the EU that include financial and technical support for ecosystem restoration. The Restoration Law sets a global precedent for legally binding restoration obligations. By adopting similar legal frameworks, African nations can strengthen nature laws to include mandatory restoration targets to align with international nature laws and global best practices on nature restoration. African nations, can use the EU's legal model to push for legally binding restoration laws, ensuring that ecosystem rehabilitation becomes a core legal obligation rather than a voluntary initiative.

How the EU Nature Restoration Law Can Inspire Policy Reforms in Africa

The European Union's Nature Restoration Law provides a legally binding framework that African countries can adapt to strengthen their own restoration policies. One of the law's most notable aspects is its establishment of specific restoration targets, including the commitment to restore 20% of land and marine ecosystems by 2030. African nations could adopt similar legally binding restoration targets, ensuring that environmental rehabilitation becomes a national priority rather than a voluntary initiative. Rwanda's Forestry and Landscape Restoration Strategy (2018), which aims to restore two million hectares of degraded land, serves as an example of how national policies can align with international restoration commitments.

Another key feature of the EU law is its emphasis on compliance and accountability. European countries are required to implement strict monitoring mechanisms and face penalties for non-compliance. In contrast, many African environmental laws lack strong enforcement measures, resulting in ineffective implementation. By adopting stronger compliance mechanisms, African governments can ensure that restoration efforts are not only ambitious on paper but also translate into tangible outcomes.

The EU law also integrates restoration objectives into trade and investment policies, encouraging sustainable supply chains and responsible land-use practices. African nations could follow a similar approach by incorporating restoration commitments into trade agreements, particularly under the African Continental Free Trade Area (AFCFTA). This could incentivize sustainable agricultural production and forest conservation by linking access to markets with environmental compliance.

Furthermore, the EU law promotes public-private partnerships in restoration, leveraging corporate investments and private sector engagement. African governments should explore similar models, creating financial incentives for businesses to invest in restoration projects. This could include tax breaks for companies engaging in reforestation, carbon sequestration, and biodiversity conservation.

The environmental challenges facing Africa demand urgent and coordinated action. With deforestation, wetland loss, and biodiversity decline threatening both ecological and economic stability, restoration is not simply an environmental goal but a necessity for sustainable development. The EU's Nature Restoration Law provides a valuable framework that African policymakers can adapt to strengthen legal commitments to ecosystem recovery.

Greening Together: The UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration as a Catalyst for Africa-EU Sustainability Synergies

The UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration (2021–2030) is a global initiative spearheaded by the United Nations to address the escalating crisis of environmental degradation and restore degraded ecosystems worldwide. Launched in response to the alarming rate of ecosystem decline, the initiative underscores that without urgent action, over 75% of the Earth's ecosystems will continue to degrade, threatening biodiversity, climate stability, and human well-being (UNEP, 2021). The Decade aligns closely with the European Union's Nature Restoration Law, which establishes legally binding targets to restore 20% of land and marine ecosystems by 2030. While the EU's efforts are primarily focused on Europe, the global scope of the UN Decade presents a unique opportunity for cross-regional collaboration between Europe and Africa, particularly in areas such as funding, knowledge sharing, and policy alignment.

Africa is a critical region for global restoration efforts due to its extensive degraded landscapes, including the Sahel, the Congo Basin, and coastal ecosystems. According to the Global Partnership on Forest and Landscape Restoration (GPFLR, 2022), over 700 million hectares of land in Africa are degraded and in need of restoration. The UN Decade aims to mobilize global resources and technical expertise to reverse these trends, making it a vital framework for aligning African restoration initiatives with the EU's policy-driven commitments.

A key feature of the UN Decade is its emphasis on multistakeholder collaboration, involving governments, private investors, and local communities. Africa stands to benefit significantly from EU-backed restoration initiatives through financial mechanisms such as the European Green Deal and the Global Gateway Initiative, which allocates substantial funding towards sustainable environmental projects in developing regions. The EU-Africa partnership under the UN Decade could enhance restoration efforts through joint research initiatives, technology transfer, and capacity-building programs, enabling African nations to adopt scientific restoration methodologies while preserving traditional land management practices.

The UN Decade also highlights the importance of nature-based solutions (NbS) for climate adaptation. Africa, being one of the most climate-vulnerable continents, can integrate restoration strategies into na-

tional adaptation plans, ensuring that projects not only rehabilitate degraded land but also enhance climate resilience, food security, and water availability. Europe, in turn, can learn from Africa's expertise in community-led restoration approaches, such as agroforestry, water conservation, and indigenous forest management systems. These low-cost, high-impact solutions could complement EU restoration efforts and provide scalable models for other regions.

By aligning Africa's restoration agenda with the UN Decade and the EU's Nature Restoration Law, both regions can advance their climate and biodiversity goals while securing long-term socio-economic benefits. Strengthening EU-Africa cooperation within this global initiative will accelerate large-scale restoration efforts, ensuring a more sustainable future for both continents.

Multilateral Environmental Agreements, Africa's Commitments and Africa's Walk towards a revived green future

Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs) are legally negotiated pacts or treaties established between three or more States with the key objective or goal to protect the environment from threats, hazards or danger to humans, animals, plants, land including soil, water, air for a safe environment and sustainable development. MEAs are governed by international law and deal with global or regional environmental challenges by finding a solution to mitigate or prevent the environmental problems through established legally binding obligations or commitments.[15]

African nations have committed to various MEAs, including the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD)[16], the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)[17], the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES)[18], the Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes[19], and the Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants,[20] playing a crucial role in protecting their diverse ecosystems and combating environmental challenges specific to the continent[21]. Another important MEA is the Kunming Montreal Global Biodiversity framework (KMGBF)[22]that represents a pivotal global commitment to reconcile human development with nature conservation. Its comprehensive approach addresses biodiversity threats, promotes sustainable use with fair benefits, and provides actionable implementation pathways. Target 2 of the KMGBF

[15] African Union. (n.d.). *Objectives of MEAs Sub-Unit.* https://au.int/en/meas#:~:text=Objectives%20of%20MEAs%20Sub%2DUnit&text=Strengthen%20Capacity%20building%20of%20Regional,diverse%20natural%20resources%20in%20Africa
[16] Convention on Biological Diversity. (n.d.). *Home page*. https://www.cbd.int
[17] United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. (n.d.). *Home page*. https://unfccc.int
[18] Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora. (n.d.). *List of Contracting Parties*. https://cites.org/eng/disc/parties/index.php
[19] Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and Their Disposal. (n.d.). *Parties to the Basel Convention.* United Nations Environment Programme. https://www.basel.int/Countries/Parties/Overview/tabid/1299/Default.aspx
[20] Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants. (n.d.). *Status of ratifications.* United Nations Environment Programme. https://www.pops.int/Countries/StatusofRatifications/tabid/252/language/en-US/Default.aspx
[21] African Union. (n.d.). *Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAS).* https://au.int/en/meas
[22] Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. (n.d.). *Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (KMGBF).* https://www.fao.org/biodiversity/kunming-montreal-global-biodiversity-framework/en

specifically relates to ecosystem restoration and emphasizes the need for parties to adopt strategies for ecosystem restoration.

The MEAs play a crucial role in addressing environmental issues globally, and respectively, African countries have made significant commitments to these agreements. For example, the African Ministerial Conference on the Environment (AMCEN) has been instrumental in promoting cooperation among African countries to address environmental challenges[23].

African Countries' Commitments

Against the above background, Zimbabwe, Zambia, and Rwanda have demonstrated strong commitment to nature restoration by ratifying key MEAs including CBD, GBF. CITES, Ramsar, CMS, UNFCCC, and UNCCD which collectively emphasize ecosystem rehabilitation, biodiversity conservation, and climate resilience. Zimbabwe and Zambia's ratification of the Ramsar Convention underscores the two countries' dedication to wetland restoration. Rwanda has gone further by implementing forest landscape restoration initiatives and climate mitigation strategies under its *Green Growth and Climate Resilience Plan*. These MEA obligations should directly shape national laws and policies by mandating the integration of restoration targets into domestic frameworks like Rwanda's *National Biodiversity Strategy*. Secondly, the MEAs should shape strengthening protections for critical ecosystems like wetlands and forests, and aligning funding mechanisms with global standards similar to Zambia's *National Adaptation Plan*. All three countries reinforce these commitments through well-established conservation landscapes including national parks, protected forests, trans frontier conservation areas (TFCAs), community conservancies and game reserves that are governed by national policies that now need explicit restoration mandates to fully comply with the MEA pledges.

The implementation of MEAs commitments on nature restoration faces systemic challenges across many African countries. Three interrelated barriers prove particularly persistent. Firstly, chronic shortages of financial resources, technical capacity, and skilled personnel constrain enforcement capabilities. Secondly, governance weaknesses including corruption, institutional fragmentation, and inadequate monitoring systems all undermine existing compliance mechanisms. Thirdly, competing national priorities create fundamental tensions, as pressing needs for poverty alleviation and economic development frequently divert political attention and limited budgets away from long-term environmental goals. This tripartite challenge of resource limitations, governance deficits, and policy trade-offs explains why even well-designed MEAs provisions often struggle to translate into tangible restoration outcomes at national levels.

Ecological Restoration in Practice: African Case Studies

Across Africa, particularly in Zimbabwe, Zambia and Rwanda, innovative restoration initiatives are also being implemented demonstrating how integrated approaches can address ecological and food security

[23] United Nations Environment Programme. (n.d.). *Global Environment Watch (GEWA) platform*. https://dev-d9.unep-gewa.org

challenges. These cases reveal critical insights about community nature-based solutions and sustainable land and forest management.

The Zimbabwean government has launched the climate resilient national master plan to increase irrigable land and improve national food security. This GCF-financed project is aimed at strengthening the resilience of agricultural livelihood of vulnerable communities and promoting sustainable agriculture practices that prioritize nature restoration[24]. The passionate lesson learnt is that the project highlights the importance of community involvement in adopting sustainable agricultural practices and capacity building in nature restoration efforts. It also demonstrates the need for integrated water management approaches to address the complex relationships between water, soil, and agriculture which are all pertinent facets of nature.

In Zambia, the Kafue flats faced significant environmental degradation due to overgrazing, poaching, and habitat fragmentation. The Zambian government, in partnership with the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), implemented a restoration project to rehabilitate habitats, reintroduce native species, and promote sustainable livelihoods for local communities. The lesson from this is that the project demonstrates the importance of collaborative management approaches between governments, NGOs, and local communities. It also highlights the need for long-term commitment and funding to achieve meaningful restoration outcomes.[25] In Rwanda, the Nyungwe Forest that faced significant deforestation and habitat fragmentation due to agricultural expansion and urbanization is a good reference[26]. The Rwandan government, with support from the (GEF), implemented a landscape restoration project to restore degraded forests, promote sustainable agriculture practices, and support local livelihoods. This project highlights the importance of integrating restoration efforts with broader development goals, such as poverty reduction and economic growth. It also demonstrates the need for strong policy and institutional frameworks to support restoration efforts.[27]

These case studies collectively reveal three fundamental pillars for successful ecological restoration in Africa which are multi-stakeholder collaboration that bridges local, national, and international actors, genuine community engagement that values traditional ecological knowledge alongside scientific approaches and sustained political and financial commitment that transcends electoral cycles and project timelines. Together, these elements form a replicable framework for achieving durable restoration outcomes across diverse African ecosystems.

[24] United Nations Development Programme. (n.d.). *Climate adaptation*. https://www.adaptation-undp.org
[25] WeFE4MED. (2021). *Restoring the Kafue Flats: A case study from Zambia* [Report]. https://wefe4med.eu/system/files/2021-11/zambia.-restoring-the-kafue-flats-255.pdf
[26] https://www.scirp.org/journal/paperinfromation?paperid=71771
[27] Rwanda Environment Management Authority. (n.d.). *Home* [Government agency website]. https://www.rema.gov.rw/home

The Potential Impact of the EU-Africa Partnership in Restoration

The EU-Africa partnership in restoration presents an opportunity for both regions to strengthen environmental governance, enhance biodiversity conservation, and promote sustainable land and forest management. Africa can benefit from the EU's leadership in developing legally binding restoration policies and access to financial support for large-scale ecosystem recovery. In return, Europe can gain from Africa's extensive indigenous knowledge systems, which offer time-tested strategies for ecosystem restoration and climate resilience.

One of the key areas where Africa stands to benefit is in funding and donor engagement. The EU has established ambitious financial mechanisms under the European Green Deal and the Global Gateway Initiative, which prioritize environmental sustainability. By aligning with these initiatives, African nations can secure funding for reforestation, wetland rehabilitation, and climate-smart agriculture. Additionally, carbon markets provide an opportunity for African nations to leverage their vast forest cover and biodiversity in exchange for financial investments from European industries seeking to offset their emissions. Strengthening partnerships in these areas will help accelerate the implementation of Africa's existing restoration commitments under frameworks such as AFR100 and the Great Green Wall Initiative.

Collaboration in knowledge transfer and capacity building is another crucial aspect of the EU-Africa partnership. Europe's advancements in ecological monitoring, satellite-based land-use assessments, and climate adaptation technologies can support Africa's restoration programs. At the same time, Africa's indigenous conservation practices, such as agroforestry, rotational grazing, and water harvesting techniques, provide valuable insights for European countries facing land degradation and climate change impacts. A knowledge exchange that integrates modern scientific approaches with traditional African environmental management systems would enhance the effectiveness of restoration initiatives on both continents.

Furthermore, fostering stronger trade and policy alignment between Africa and the EU can ensure that restoration efforts are integrated into economic development plans. The EU's commitment to sustainable supply chains means that African agricultural and forestry products must meet stricter environmental standards. African governments can take advantage of this shift by adopting policies that promote sustainable land use, thereby increasing market access for environmentally friendly products. This integration of restoration with trade policies creates economic incentives for African countries to prioritize ecological sustainability.

Strengthening Africa-EU Collaboration on Nature Restoration

To enhance cooperation between Africa and the EU, it is crucial to leverage existing frameworks and initiatives. The Africa-EU Partnership on Sustainable Development should be utilized to promote joint efforts in ecosystem restoration, biodiversity conservation, and climate action, ensuring alignment with global sustainability goals. Additionally, the EU-Africa Infrastructure Trust Fund can play a pivotal role in financing green infrastructure projects, large-scale ecosystem restoration, and climate resilience programs, providing much-needed investment in sustainable development.

Beyond financial support, fostering knowledge sharing, capacity building, and technology transfer between African and EU nations is essential. This includes exchanging best practices in nature restoration, sustainable agriculture, and conservation techniques, as well as facilitating access to advanced environmental technologies. By strengthening institutional and technical expertise, both regions can enhance the effectiveness and scalability of restoration initiatives, ensuring long-term ecological and socio-economic benefits.

Policy Recommendations: leveraging international best practices from the EU Law Relevant for Africa

In line with the discussion above, it is hoped that African countries can draw inspiration from the EU's Biodiversity Strategy, which aims to restore 15% of degraded ecosystems by 2030.[28] Another area of interest is the EU's Green Infrastructure Strategy from which African can learn how to promote ecosystem-based solutions for climate change mitigation and adaptation.[29] EU's Environmental Impact Assessment Directive can be taken advantage of by Africa to adopt similar environmental impact assessment procedures to ensure restoration projects are environmentally sustainable[30]. Accordingly, specific policy improvements can be considered in many areas such as incorporating restoration into national environmental policies, development plans, and sectoral policies specifically in the agriculture, forestry, and water resources sector.

Further, African countries can strengthen their efforts by integrating mandatory restoration into national policies by conducting thorough assessments to identify degraded ecosystems, restoration potential, and socio-economic benefits.[31] Another aspect would be to consider the establishment of national restoration standards, guidelines, and protocols to ensure consistency and effectiveness,[32] or create dedicated institutions or units within existing ministries to oversee restoration efforts, coordinate stakeholders, and ensure policy implementation[33]

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[28] European Commission. (2020). *EU biodiversity strategy for 2030: Bringing nature back into our lives* (COM/2020/380 final). https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0380

[29] European Commission. (2013). *Green infrastructure (GI) — Enhancing Europe's natural capital* (COM(2013) 249 final). https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52013DC0249

[30] European Union. (2014). *Directive 2014/52/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 16 April 2014 amending Directive 2011/92/EU on the assessment of the effects of certain public and private projects on the environment (Environmental Impact Assessment Directive)*. *Official Journal of the European Union, L 124*, 1-18. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32014L0052

[31] United Nations Environment Programme. (2019). *Restoration assessments: A guide for practitioners*. https://www.unep.org/resources/report/restoration-assessments-guide-practitioners

[32] Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), Society for Ecological Restoration (SER), & International Union for Conservation of Nature Commission on Ecosystem Management (IUCN CEM). (2023). *Standards of practice to guide ecosystem restoration: A contribution to the United Nations Decade on Ecosystem Restoration 2021–2030*. FAO. https://openknowledge.fao.org/handle/20.500.14283/cc9106en

[33] World Bank. (2019). *Institutional arrangements for restoration*. https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/

Conclusion: A Call for Joint Action on Legally Enforceable Mandatory Global Restoration

The EU's Nature Restoration Law (NRL), as a pioneering regulatory framework for mandatory ecosystem recovery, has the potential to significantly influence nature governance in Africa, both directly and indirectly. By setting ambitious targets for habitat restoration, biodiversity conservation, and climate resilience, the NRL could serve as a model for African policymakers seeking to strengthen their own nature laws. Additionally, the law's emphasis on sustainable land use and green financing may encourage greater EU-Africa collaboration in funding large-scale restoration projects, such as the Great Green Wall Initiative a pan African environmental and development initiative aimed at combating desertification, land degradation and climate change in the Sahel region of Africa or even transboundary conservation and nature restoration programs.

However, the NRL's effective positive impact on Africa will depend on several factors, including financial and technical support from the EU. Channeling of climate and biodiversity funds from the EU towards African-led restoration efforts and advocacy and lobbying interventions on enactment and reforming of laws and policies enshrining mandatory nature restoration will enhance the influence of the EU NRL in Africa. Secondly, nature laws and policy harmonization will create a conducive environment for the EU NRL to positively influence African nature laws and mandatory nature restoration interventions. How African regional bodies such as AU, EAC, SADC and ECOWAS decide to align their strategies with the NRL's principles will determine the extent of the NRL's influence in Africa. The willingness and the extent of local adaptation to which African nations tailor mandatory restoration approaches and nature laws to incorporate mandatory restoration to their unique ecological and socio-economic contexts will also determine the extent to which EU's NRL will influence the African nature and legal landscape.

If leveraged effectively, the NRL could accelerate Africa's transition toward sustainable development, sustainable nature management and governance reinforcing global climate and nature conservation goals while also addressing economic insecurity and food security for rural livelihoods. Ultimately, the law's success in influencing Africa will hinge on equitable partnerships, knowledge exchange, and shared commitment to legally enforceable mandatory ecological restoration. The EU's Nature Restoration Law represents more than just a regional policy, it could become a catalyst for large scale legally enforceable global mandatory restoration efforts. Its implementation has potential to foster inclusive, science-based, and locally adaptive strategies for legally enforceable mandatory restoration in Africa and beyond.

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