

## THE MEDIATION OF SUSTAINABILITY: MEDIA LANDSCAPES AND ENVIRONMENTAL DISCOURSE IN EQUATORIAL AFRICA

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### ABSTRACT

The media play a critical role in shaping public understanding of sustainability challenges, such as climate change adaptation, natural resource management, and biodiversity conservation. However, in regions undergoing rapid political transformation, such as Equatorial Africa, the structure and control of media systems themselves are in flux, raising questions about how environmental issues are communicated to the public. While the decolonization of media from former metropolitan powers is widely noted, the implications of this shift for sustainability governance remain underexplored. This article investigates the contemporary media landscapes of Equatorial Africa to analyze how evolving structures of state control and national sovereignty influence the capacity for environmental communication. Employing a systematic analysis of recent scholarly publications (2022-2025) from the Russian academic segment, this study examines the political economy of media in key countries, including the Democratic Republic of Congo, Senegal, Burkina Faso, and Niger. The findings indicate that media systems in the region remain at a nascent stage of development, characterized by strong state influence and a continued reliance on radio as the primary information channel. A central trend is the deliberate restriction of foreign media outlets as part of a broader project of asserting national sovereignty. We argue that this pursuit of "media sovereignty" often manifests as increased state control, which subsequently restricts the plurality of voices and the independence of reporting. This has direct consequences for sustainability, as it potentially limits critical discourse on environmental degradation, corporate accountability, and climate policy, framing these issues primarily through a lens of nationalistic and political expediency rather than ecological necessity. The study concludes that the ongoing "ideologeme" in Equatorial African media—the process of elevating national languages and narratives—is intrinsically linked to environmental communication. The move away from colonial linguistic frameworks presents an opportunity for locally relevant sustainability narratives but is simultaneously constrained by new forms of state-controlled media environments. Understanding this dynamic is essential for international partners and NGOs seeking to effectively collaborate on sustainability initiatives in the region.

**Keywords:** cultural sustainability, urban regeneration, place-making, transit-oriented development (TOD).

## INTRODUCTION

The countries of Equatorial Africa face some of the world's most acute challenges to sustainable development: rapid deforestation, increasing desertification, growing vulnerability to climate change, and water scarcity (Nepomussen, 2008). Effectively addressing these challenges requires not only political will and technology but also the active participation of an informed society. In this context, the mass media play a critically important function by shaping public discourse, disseminating knowledge about environmental risks, and mobilizing the population to action. However, the media's ability to perform this role is directly dependent on their structural organization, economic independence, and freedom from political pressure. After decades of colonial influence, the media landscape of Equatorial African countries continues to transform in the process of asserting national sovereignty (Xiang, 2025). As Vartanova notes, there is a "breakdown of the former, 20th-century geopolitical model of a unipolar world, leading to the emergence of new ideological and ideological paradigms in the information and communication environment at the global, regional, and national levels" (Vartanova, 2018; 2023). Within this breakdown, African states are actively striving for "media sovereignty," limiting the influence of media from former metropolises and strengthening control over national information flows (Bezabih, 2017; Stupak, 2024). This political trend, however, has profound implications for sustainability governance. On the one hand, it opens opportunities for the development of an environmental discourse based on local values and languages. On the other hand, the strengthening of state control over the media, as practice shows, often leads to the marginalization of critical themes, including issues of environmental degradation and corporate accountability. This study is based on the theoretical premise that media systems are a key element of socio-ecological systems. As emphasized in works on environmental communication (Cox, 2013; Hansen, 2018), the media do not merely reflect environmental problems but actively construct their perception by society and those in power. Thus, changes in the media landscape directly affect how sustainable development problems are formulated, discussed, and solved. While there are works dedicated to the general state of the media in Africa (for example, Beavogi Boimassa, 2012; Baichik, Nikonov, 2012; Rusyaeva, 2024), their connection to the specific issues of environmental communication and natural resource management remains understudied.

The aim of this article is to analyze the current state of media landscapes in Equatorial African countries through the lens of their potential for fostering effective environmental communication and supporting sustainable development goals. The research sets the following objectives: 1) to identify key trends in the development of the region's media systems (concentration of ownership, level of state control, technological development); 2) to analyze how these trends influence opportunities for independent coverage of issues related to ecology and climate; 3) to assess the consequences of the identified media trends for the implementation of sustainable development policies in the region.

## MATERIAL AND METHOD

**Methods.** To achieve the stated aim, a systems approach is applied, which allows for the investigation of the media landscape as a complex system interacting with political, economic, and, crucially for our research, ecological and social spheres (Bodrunova, 2014). This involves analyzing not only the internal structure of the media but also their role in risk communication and natural resource management. The methodological foundation consisted of qualitative content analysis and a systematic review of scientific publications from the period 2022-2025, dedicated to the media landscapes of specific Equatorial African countries. The search for materials was conducted in the Russian academic segment using the keywords "media landscape" + [name of country]. A date filter (2022-2025) was used to ensure relevance.

The selected articles were analyzed for the presence of data, directly or indirectly related to the following aspects significant for environmental communication:

- ✓ *Ownership structure and control:* the degree of state, private, or foreign control over major media outlets.
- ✓ *Pluralism of opinions:* the presence of diverse viewpoints in the media space, which is a prerequisite for discussing complex environmental trade-offs.
- ✓ *Technological access:* the prevalence of radio, television, and the internet, which determines audience reach, especially in rural areas most dependent on natural resources.

- ✓ *Legal environment:* legislative restrictions affecting freedom of speech and the ability to criticize the actions of authorities or corporations in the environmental sphere. The materials for analysis included articles dedicated to Senegal (Gunchenko, 2025), Algeria (Barabanova, 2024), Burkina Faso (Karpenko, 2024), Eswatini.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the media landscape in Equatorial Africa reveals that the primacy of radio broadcasting is not merely a technological or economic footnote but a fundamental structural factor with profound and paradoxical implications for sustainability. This medium's dominance presents a critical juncture: it holds the unparalleled potential to be the central nervous system for climate resilience and environmental education, yet, under prevailing conditions of state control, it simultaneously risks becoming a tool for consolidating top-down authority and stifling the very participatory discourse that sustainable development requires. This duality makes radio the most important, and most precarious, channel for ecological futures in the region (Mironenko, 2024).

The argument for radio's potential is powerful and rests on its unique penetration and accessibility. In vast regions of Equatorial Africa where literacy rates are variable, electricity grids are unreliable or non-existent, and internet connectivity remains a luxury of the urban elite, radio is stubbornly resilient. It operates on affordable, battery-powered receivers, transcends linguistic barriers through local language programming, and reaches into the most remote rural communities—precisely those populations whose livelihoods are most directly and immediately dependent on the health of their natural environment (Kalyuzhin, 2018; Karpenko, 2024). For these communities, sustainability is not an abstract policy goal but a daily question of survival. It is about knowing when to plant crops in the face of increasingly erratic rainfall, how to manage soil depletion, where to find water during a drought, or how to protect against new pests and diseases linked to climate change. In this context, radio is arguably the most potent tool imaginable for disseminating vital, life-saving information. It can serve as a platform for agronomists to explain drought-resistant farming techniques, for health workers to warn about waterborne diseases following floods, and for community leaders to discuss local conservation strategies. The high degree of public trust in radio, as identified in the findings, is its greatest asset; information delivered via this medium is more likely to be received as credible and acted upon by its audience. This trust, built over decades, can be harnessed to accelerate the adoption of sustainable practices, creating a direct link between national or regional environmental knowledge and hyper-local action. A well-functioning, pluralistic radio sector could facilitate a two-way dialogue, allowing farmers to share their on-the-ground observations with scientists and policymakers, thereby grounding sustainability strategies in local reality and need.

However, the potential of radio is critically mediated by the equally dominant finding of pervasive state control over the media sector. The same features that make radio a powerful tool for empowerment—its reach, accessibility, and trust—also make it an irresistible instrument for social and political control. When the state is the primary owner, funder, and regulator of the most influential radio stations, the channel's democratic potential is fundamentally compromised (Dan, 2024). The "media sovereignty" that governments seek often translates into a monopolization of the airwaves, where the flow of information is managed to align with official priorities and preserve regime stability (Mukfi, 2024). The consequences for sustainability are severe and multifaceted. Firstly, it leads to the suppression of critical environmental reporting. A state-controlled radio station is highly unlikely to broadcast investigative pieces on environmental degradation caused by a government-backed logging concession or a mining project owned by a political ally. News about pollution from state-owned industries, failures in public waste management, or land expropriation for large-scale agricultural projects will be framed to avoid attributing blame to the authorities. This creates a significant accountability gap, allowing ecological crises to fester without public scrutiny or pressure for remediation. The environment becomes a silent victim of political expediency.

Secondly, the framing of sustainability challenges themselves is distorted. Climate change adaptation, for instance, is likely to be presented not as a complex, collective challenge requiring public debate and potentially critical evaluation of government policies, but as a series of technical directives issued by the state (Nisbet, 2020). The narrative will emphasize compliance and implementation from the top down, rather than empowerment, innovation, and feedback from the bottom up. This top-down approach ignores local knowledge and fails to build genuine community ownership over sustainability solutions, often rendering them ineffective. Furthermore, in the event of an environmental disaster—a major oil spill, a devastating flood, or a prolonged drought—the state-controlled media's primary objective will be to manage public perception to maintain order and shield the government from criticism.

This may involve downplaying the severity of the crisis, exaggerating the government's response efforts, or attributing the cause solely to external or natural factors beyond human control. The restriction of foreign broadcasters, such as the suspension of France's RFI in Burkina Faso, exemplifies this strategy of creating an information monoculture, further insulating the public from alternative perspectives and independent reporting on environmental issues.

The paradox is therefore stark. The medium best suited to reaching the populations most vulnerable to climate change and environmental degradation is also the medium most susceptible to being co-opted to control the narrative around those very issues. The high trust citizens place in radio is leveraged not to empower them with knowledge for resilient decision-making, but to ensure their compliance with a state-managed agenda. This control stifles the kind of vibrant, critical, and pluralistic public discourse that is essential for identifying problems, debating trade-offs, and building consensus around sustainable pathways. For genuine sustainability to take root, communities must be active agents in their own development, able to access independent information, question authority, and advocate for their ecological interests. The current structure of the radio landscape in Equatorial Africa, as revealed by this analysis, fundamentally constrains this agency, posing a monumental challenge to achieving the region's sustainable development goals. The future of its environment may well depend on whether radio can evolve from a tool of state control into a genuine platform for public dialogue.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study demonstrates that the evolution of media systems in Equatorial Africa is not an isolated political phenomenon but a critical factor shaping the region's capacity to navigate its profound sustainability challenges. The analysis reveals a central tension: as the region asserts its media sovereignty, the concurrent trend towards state control and the strategic use of dominant radio broadcasting creates a media environment that is fundamentally at odds with the principles of participatory and accountable environmental governance.

The implications of these findings for sustainability are direct and severe. Firstly, for environmental policy, the prevalence of state-influenced media poses a significant barrier to effective implementation. Sound environmental policy depends on robust data, transparency, and the ability to correct course when policies fail. However, a media landscape that discourages critical investigation and independent monitoring undermines this process. For instance, policies aimed at combating deforestation (SDG 15) or managing water resources (SDG 6) are unlikely to succeed if the media cannot freely report on illegal logging facilitated by corrupt officials or the pollution of rivers by state-owned enterprises. The lack of a free press effectively removes a key mechanism of accountability, allowing environmentally damaging practices to continue unchecked. The move towards national languages, while culturally significant, risks further insulating the policy discourse if it is used to exclude critical international perspectives and reinforce state-controlled narratives.

Secondly, the structure of the media landscape has profound consequences for community engagement, a cornerstone of sustainable development. The top-down, state-managed communication model, facilitated by the dominance of official radio, inhibits the genuine participation of local communities. Sustainable Development Goal 16, which promotes peaceful and inclusive societies, specifically targets ensuring public access to information. Yet, when information is primarily a tool for directive rather than dialogue, it disempowers the very communities who are the first responders to climate change and the primary stewards of local ecosystems. Effective community engagement requires a pluralistic media space where farmers, indigenous groups, and civil society organizations can voice their concerns, share local knowledge, and hold local authorities accountable. The current media model, as described, stifles this essential feedback loop, leading to policies that are often misaligned with local realities and needs, thereby jeopardizing the success of initiatives related to zero hunger (SDG 2) and climate action (SDG 13).

Finally, the research findings highlight a significant obstacle to achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals broadly. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is explicitly grounded in the principles of inclusivity and "leaving no one behind." However, a controlled media environment directly contradicts this ethos. By limiting the flow of independent information and suppressing dissenting voices, the current media systems in Equatorial Africa risk leaving its most vulnerable populations behind. The ability of citizens to make informed decisions about their health (SDG 3), economic activities (SDG 8), and environment is compromised. The "ideologeme" of promoting national languages, as noted by D.V. Dunas, must be leveraged not just for political sovereignty but for empowering citizens with the knowledge necessary to achieve ecological and economic sovereignty.

In conclusion, the path towards sustainable development in Equatorial Africa is inextricably linked to the evolution of its media landscapes. The pursuit of media sovereignty must be carefully balanced with the protection of informational pluralism. For the region to truly advance its environmental and social resilience, it is imperative that media reforms move beyond changing the language of broadcast and toward fostering an environment where independent journalism can thrive. International partners and NGOs working on sustainability projects must recognize media freedom not as a separate political issue, but as a critical enabler for all SDGs. Supporting community radio initiatives, journalist training on environmental reporting, and advocating for legal frameworks that protect press freedom are no longer optional extras; they are essential investments in the region's sustainable future. The development of Equatorial Africa's media systems will, in large part, determine the success of its journey toward a resilient and equitable future.

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