

ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS IN AFRICA AND THE QUEST FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

Environment protection and management has become one of the urgent interest and focus of many societies in modern times. This is because man and indeed the human society, is largely dependent on the survival, growth and continuous progress of the natural environment. Africa as a continent is undoubtedly un-isolated in this quest for environmental sustainability and progress. It is an open secret that the African continent is hugely blessed with enormous natural resources, green vegetation, wild life, oil and other valuable resources that contribute meaningfully to the wealth of the continent and many countries of the world. Africa's natural resources, remain fundamentally essential to the progress of African countries and indeed Africa as a continent. These resources have remained some of the world's greatest treasure. One cannot but affirm, that Africa's natural resources contributes meaningfully to the progress of many countries and continents around the world. It remains one of the major host to the world's natural reserve. However, Africa's natural environment has continuously been threatened in recent times. Africa's natural environment is faced with the challenges of flooding, erosion, bush burning, deforestation, destruction of aquatic animals and water body, killing of wild lives, gas flaring, illegal mining, oil spillage and many other activities that are largely detrimental to the natural environment. Africa's environmental crisis is a constituent of both human activities and natural occurrences. It is disheartening to note, that the continuous destruction of the

natural environment remains detrimental to the existence and progress of the human society. It is an open secret, that the progress and sustainable development of any society, is largely dependent on leadership. The rise and fall of nations and indeed human societies is dependent on the effectiveness and competence of its leadership. Leadership in Africa, remains essential to the progress and development of the African continent and African countries. The preservation, nurture and sustainable development of Africa's natural environment is largely dependent on its leadership. Hence, Africa requires effective leadership to nip on the board and address all environmental challenges, for optimal productivity. This work holds, that leadership is essentially fundamental to environmental sustainability in Africa.

Keywords: Environmental crisis, Africa, Sustainable Development, Preservation, Nature

Introduction

Africa is peculiarly known as a land of abundance. It is largely considered as a continent with tremendous human and natural resources. Her natural resources contribute profoundly to the world's reserve of natural wealth. It is undoubtedly true, that Africa is home to some of the largest virgin lands, wild life, and natural gas. Africa's natural resources contributes to some of the major sources of wealth to many African countries. Despite Africa's abundance in human and natural resources, Africa is considered as one of the poorest continents of the world. Many African countries grapple with abject poverty, the problem of insecurity, ethno-religious crisis, poor standard of living, infrastructural decay, socio-political crisis etc. one cannot but affirm that Africa, and indeed many African countries are burdened with debt crisis, the problem of inflation, high cost of living and many other challenges that makes social existence problematic. One cannot but hold, that Africa is bedeviled with enormous socio-political cum economic challenges. The various economic, social, political and religious crisis in Africa and indeed many African countries, gravely impede the speed of progress and development in African countries and Africa at large.

Environmental degradation is considered as one of the enormous problems of Africa. Africa's natural environment has in recent times come under serious threat of depletion and destruction. Africa is plagued with the challenges of illicit, illegal mining that destroys gravely Africa's environment. The challenges of bush burning, deforestation, oil spillage, destruction of wild life, flooding, wild fire, erosion and other environmental challenges remain significantly problematic to the existence and progress of many African countries, and Africa at large.

Leadership remains central-focal to the development and sustainability of Africa's natural environment and natural resources. Unfortunately, Africa has not experienced the best of leadership. In fact, many African countries are bedeviled with poor, corrupt and inept leadership, that has greatly hampered on the progress of such nation and society. This work advocates that effective leadership is essentially propitious to environmental sustainability and development in Africa.

Environmental Crisis in Africa

Environmental crisis stares the entire world in the face. They range from climatic change, global warming, rise in sea level, desertification, tsunamis, to deforestation, flood, oil spillage, destruction of wild life and water body etc. The various effects of environmental degradation cannot be undermined, as this affects the human society and natural environment negatively. While the world grapples with various environmental challenges, Africa has its fair share of environmental crisis. Africa's natural environment has been greatly affected by exploitative human activities and other natural disasters. The effect of such, is the destruction of the eco-system and productivity cum development of the various Africa nations and the continent at large. The continuous destruction of Africa's natural environment, can lead to immense famine, hunger, displacement of people from their homes, extinction of some species of non-human animal etc. environmental crisis in Africa, has remain grievous and detrimental to human health and existence. Clay observes that: "Half of Africa's almost 450 million inhabitants have no access to health services, while two thirds lack safe drinking water...environmentally-related disease compromise the continents productivity, making it more difficult to generate revenue to fight the environmental health problem (1).

Africa's environmental problems comes from various ways, the most important ones include:

- Deforestation: deforestation is simply the conversion of forest to non-forest use. Deforestation occurs for many reasons: trees are cut down to be used as fuel or timber, while cleared land is used as [pasture](#) for livestock, plantations of commodities and human settlements. Forest is very important in the ecosystem as it serves as windbreaks and shade. It also helps in the "recycling of rainwater; countering of the accumulation of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere by [sequestering carbon dioxide](#) through [photosynthesis](#)" (Primack 118). Deforestation does not only contribute to climatic change and global warming but also to biodiversity loss, aridity and damage to the habitat. As important as the forest is to the ecosystem, it is alarmingly being degraded. It is estimated that "about half of the Earth's mature [tropical forests](#)—between 7.5 million and 8 million km² (2.9 million to 3 million sq mi) of the original 15 million to 16 million km² (5.8 million to 6.2 million sq mi) that until 1947 covered the planet—have now been destroyed" (Nielsen 35). This means about 50% of the world forest is gone already and from predictions, unless significant measures are taken on a worldwide basis to halt the current deforestation rate, "by 2030 there will only be 10% remaining with another 10% [in a degraded condition](#) 80% will have been lost, and with them hundreds of thousands of irreplaceable species" (Wilson 4). Africa presently is believed to host more than 16% of the remaining world forests (Gondo 2014), but as it stands, this may not be the case any longer in the nearest future. Africa is questing for development and as such is felling trees for urbanization and erecting of industries. It is an open secret that timber business is one of the most lucrative businesses now in African villages. Trucks load of trees are seen passing to both local and international

markets every day and many youths in the villages forage the forest daily for trees for timber. Aside from trading on timber, forest is also cleared for agricultural purposes, to meet the needs of the continuously growing population and also for construction of roads and buildings. Considering the importance of forest to the survival of the ecosystem, the danger of deforestation as it is currently being effected in Africa could be well appreciated.

- **Transportation activities:** the environmental impact of transportation activities is very significant because it is a major user of world energy and petroleum. Transportation is one of the greatest causes of air pollution and global warming through emission of carbon monoxide, nitrous oxides and particulates. It also contributes to water, land and noise pollution (Bisong, 2020). It is estimated that reduction of transportation activities could “improve water and air quality; decrease the quantity of smog and acid rain, and work against global warming and climate change” (Bisong 2020b). Africa could arguably be considered one of the least emitter of poisonous gases to the atmosphere through transportation. This is because a higher percentage of its population is poor and may be unable to afford a car. However, the environmental impact of transportation activities in Africa cannot be underestimated. Africa is home to second hand cars, most of which are considered not road worthy in developed climes. Africa has become a dumping ground for used vehicles and this contributes majorly to waste management problems and environmental pollution. Also due to expanding transportation network occasioned by over population, trees are fell for construction of roads, bus stops, parks etc, impacting seriously on environmental health. In Africa, public transportation system is very poor, making everyone wanting a private car at the slightest opportunity. Ownership of private cars has become a sign of wealth and comfort in Africa, increasing congestion and adding to the global warming currently experienced in the world. It is estimated that in the nearest future, the environmental impact of transportation activities of Africans would skyrocket. Most Africans wanting private cars are unable to get it because of the poverty level in the continent. The governments are making strenuous efforts in improving poverty in Africa. This implies a future increase in private cars ownership and a corresponding increase in their environmental impact. If nothing is done to prevent that future from becoming a reality, global warming, sea level, flooding etc would reach alarming rate.
- **Industrial activities:** industrial activities are processes whereby raw materials are changed into finished goods on a large scale. These activities include: production of coal, biodiesel, electricity, nuclear power, petroleum, reservoirs, wind power etc. industrial production is one of the highest causes of environmental problems. Africa is not an industrial continent as such but the impacts of her industrial activities cannot be underrated. Because of weak government in Africa, most of the manufacturing and drilling companies in Africa do not observe environmental safety measures in their productions. The case of Niger Delta of Nigeria is a good example. The oil rich region has been made infertile by oil spillage and their rivers have become unsafe for aquatic lives.

- **Overpopulation:** due to agricultural and industrial revolution, human population has constantly been on the increase, making it a source of serious concern to environmentalists and other scholars (Malthus 2013, Ehrlich 2013, Leopold 2001, Bisong 2016). It is the belief of these scholars that if unchecked, human populations could collapse the environment. This is simply because, the more the population, the more the pressure on the environment. Population increase would invariably demand an increase of houses, farmlands, industries, automobiles and other activities that milk the environment. This would tantamount to an increase in atmospheric carbon dioxide, deforestation, biodiversity loss and many more effects. Presently, experts believe that the equilibrium of biospheric processes is threatened, as most of the accommodated mechanisms of the Earth are functioning close to their full capacity (Laptev 111). According to predictions, if the present "rate of development continues unabated, the depletion of the biosphere to the point of instability would occur in the second half of the next century" (Bisong, 2016: 38-39). The continuous leap of population would from estimates, fast-track the impending collapse of the environment. Africa is one of the most populous continents in the world and also one of the fastest growing. This is because in many parts of Africa, polygamy is still widely practiced and the belief in having many children is still prevalent among Africans. This trend has to be checked for the sake of the environment.

Leadership and Environmental Sustainability in Africa

The word leadership has remained popular amongst various authors and has been x-rayed from various standpoints with distinct interpretations. Generally, the word leadership is derived from the phrase "to lead" which implies to direct and influence people towards a desired path. Leadership is the act of influencing, controlling and directing people towards the actualization and achievement of specific goals and objectives.

Myles Munroe defines leadership as the capacity to influence others through inspiration motivated by a passion, generated by a vision, produced by a conviction ignited by a purpose (54).

For Njoku, leadership is the 'ability to lead and coordinate people effectively for the realization of the common good' (Njoku 2019). Onah conceives it as a concerted effort of individuals with the authority and responsibility to plan, organize, coordinate, lead and control activities of others, with the intent of achieving specific organizational goals. (10) It is a truism that leadership is an essential tool of organizational progress, purposeful achievement and sustainable development. Good and effective leadership can lead to the progressive development and common good of a nation. The attainment of meaningful reform and objective is largely dependent on leadership. (Kauzya and Balogun 3).

Human beings cannot do without the environment. We need the environment for food, shelter, comfort, security and even for spiritual activities, meaning that without the environment, there would be no humans. The importance of the environment to all is an explicit call for all hands to be on deck as regards environmental sustainability. It is the duty

of all humans to be environment friendly in all their activities. Though, sustainable environment is a collective effort, the leaders are to be at the forefront of this drive. They are responsible for making policies and formulating laws that should guide and direct actions. They are also responsible for enforcing these laws and policies for effectiveness. As Aristotle (2001) noted, virtues and good living do not emanate in man by chance but through forced training. In this case, the force trainer has to be the leaders through the functionality of the laws and policies that would push people to do the right. Leadership remains essential in the fundamental progress and development of any nation and human society. The progress and sustainable development of Africa therefore, is largely dependent on its leadership. In overcoming the myriad challenges and environmental crisis in Africa, leaders must fundamentally be persons of high intelligence with capacity for good and effective governance. Leadership in Africa, must be a departure from the old narrative of corruption, administrative ineptitude, ethnocentrism, bias and self centredness. Rather African leaders, must be persons of integrity and intelligence. People with profound moral character, devoid of corrupt practices and moral decadence. African leaders must have the moral stamina of differentiating between their personal funds, and public funds. In other words, public funds must not be used for private gains, but for the enhancement of the general good of the people. Leadership in Africa, must have the capacity to enhance unity, peaceful coexistence of citizens, and the sustainable development of the various nations and indeed the continent at large. Leadership must enhance good policy formulation that are targeted to solving environmental challenges, and ensuring the progressive development of the continent. This section outlines what the African government and policymakers need to put in place, for environmentally friendly lifestyles to arise from individuals.

Population Control Measures Should Be Adopted

As has been alluded to already, Africa's population is one of the fastest growing. One reason for this, is the African attachment of utmost significance to male children. A typical African family would most likely continue producing, until a male child is birthed. Male children are expected to carry the family lineage and play a significant part in securing safe and easy passage of the deceased to the world of ancestors. Again, most African families believe in having so many children. This position is given impetus on the fact that for most Africans, children are considered as great wealth. In this regard, many give birth to more children than they can take care of. For these Africans, children can easily serve as free labour, working in the massive farmlands for the family. To this end therefore, government is expected to set up good measures of population control, that will help reduce over population. One of the measures of controlling population in African States is to have massive sensitization and awareness programs to educate citizens on the negativities of overpopulation.

Improve On the Transportation System

Importance of transportation cannot be overemphasized. To ease movement, cars, trains, ships and airplanes are produced. A typical African would buy cars to show his/her wealth but most others do that for ease of movement. Cars are also bought for comfort and

reliability. Private cars are therefore important but if their impacts on the environment are considered, it would become clear that they are not necessary. If good transportation plans and policies are put in place in African countries, only few individuals would find the need for private cars. A Curitiba city of Brazil clearly demonstrated this. As reported by William Cunningham and Mary Cunningham, prior to the emergence of Mayor Jaime Lerner, Curitiba was like other cities of the world: traffic congestion, deteriorated and inadequate road network, air pollution, many private cars etc. Mayor Lerner through good policies was able to transform the city to a stellar example of an environmentally sustainable city. He simply improved the transport network system and provided a mass transit programme that provided the ease, comfort and reliability that private cars provide and much more. This resulted to more than 75% of the population opting to the cheaper mass transit, leading to a great reduction in congestion and pollution. It is imperative for African government to think of development along the line of Curitiba City. The transport system should be taken charge by the government and made to be environmentally friendly. Laws banning the importation of used cars, could be enacted, to stop Africa from being a dumping ground for not good enough cars. This would stem the rate of pollution from exhaust fumes and waste. The educational curriculum could also be made to feature ecology as a compulsory subject from primary to tertiary level. This would help create the awareness that walking and cycling are not forms of suffering as it is presently perceived in Africa, but good ways of exercising and protecting the environment.

Redefining the Concept of Development

Africa is generally described as a developing continent, which means it is moving towards development. The term 'developed' is mostly ascribed to the first world countries (the U.S.A and Europe). The standard of measurement of development currently is the level of productivity (exploitation of environmental resources) and technological advancement. A developed economy according to Bisong (2020b) is “one that records high productivity, has attained high infrastructural development and has achieved much in terms of science and technology”. Unfortunately, development measured on these terms (infrastructure and high productivity) pitches itself against the environment. Even technology is more of a curse than a blessing to the environment (Bisong 2020). It is therefore true as many scholars (Redcliff 2005, Serge 1990, Brunel 2013, Bisong 2016) have observed that, development is a bane to the environment. Development as it is presently construed, exploits the ecosystem, which implies that if every country in the world becomes developed in this sense of development, the environment would collapse.

Africa today, is the hope of the environment as most of the world forest is in Africa. According to Gondo (2014), Africa’s forests cover an estimated 674 million hectares (ha) or 23% of Africa’s land area and account for 16.7% of global forest cover”. This is perhaps the reason, Fleshman (2018), describes African forest as “the Lungs of the World”, which means the world relies on it for environmental sustenance.

Africa is presently underdeveloped which means most of the world energies is in Africa, implying that if she attains development, the world energy supply may no longer be enough to sustain life. Though, Africa needs development, it is clear that it is not the sort of development that exploits the environment that must be pursued. Development thus needs to be redefined. Development would no longer be measured on the extent of exploitation and utilization of earth resources but “on the extent to which human progress equilibrates with environmental health” (Bisong 2020b). This is real development, for development that exploits the environment is not sustainable – it would collapse when the environment collapses. African governments must understand that human progress must not be at the detriment of the environment. Human development must go hand in glove with development of forest, wildlife, water and other aspects of the ecosystem for it to be sustainable. Development should not leave the environment worse than it was. Every act of development should be accompanied by acts of environmental restoration. Laws should be enacted to control the killing of wildlife, felling of forest trees and pollution of the environment. Industries should be tasked on environmental restoration and cleaning. The government would have to censor all technologies to determine their environmental impacts, only environmentally friendly ones should be approved for use in Africa. Employment opportunities must be generated – this is the only way hunting of wildlife and felling of forest trees for trading could be discouraged.

Most importantly, laws should be enacted to stem consumerism. Pricing and taxation laws should accommodate the environmental cost of the products. Presently, America is rated higher on consumption rate (McDonald 2020). But I think Africans are more consumer minded than Americans, the limitation has always been poverty. The lifestyle of an average African made this very vivid – flamboyant lifestyles, fleet of cars, jewelries, clothing etc. Most of these remain unused. The effects of consumerism on the environment is well known and a responsible leader must ensure this tide is stemmed to save the environment.

Conclusion

In concluding this paper, suffice it to affirm, that Africa has been immensely affected with diverse environmental challenges. These challenges remain detrimental to the growth, progress and development of the continent, if not properly handled. Africa plays essential role in the progress of the world and the preservation of wild life and diverse species of various non-human animals. Africa’s natural environment contributes immensely to the provision of man’s needs and indeed the progress of nations around the world. The preservation of this natural environment and eco-system is not only of utmost importance, but urgent. The sustainable economic, infrastructural, and socio-political development of African countries and indeed African continent, is largely dependent on its leadership. Africa requires effective leadership and good governance in other to address the myriad challenges that confront the continent. African leaders must be altruistically conscious and determined to drive the common good of the populace. Good governance must be consciously dispensed and public funds properly utilized for the development of the various nation-state and continent at large. One cannot but affirm that leadership in Africa, must

drive good policies that will protect the natural environment and enhance productivity. Human exploitative activities that plunder, denigrate and destroy the natural environment must be adequately addressed. In this regards illegal mining, illicit oil exploration, deforestation, destruction of wild life and other human activities that are immensely detrimental to the natural environment must be curbed, while proper measures must be put in place to address non-human activities that also destroy our environment. The prosperous and progress development of Africa and indeed African nations is largely dependent on effective leadership and good governance.

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