

African Research Review

An International Multi-Disciplinary Journal, Ethiopia

Vol. 5 (1), Serial No. 18, January, 2011

ISSN 1994-9057 (Print)

ISSN 2070-0083 (Online)

Linkages between Poverty and Environmental Degradation (Pp. 475-484)

Ibimilua, Foyeke Omoboye - Department of Geography, School of Arts and Social Sciences, College of Education, Ikere-Ekiti, Ekiti State, Nigeria.

E-mail: fbimilua@yahoo.com

Abstract

Fundamentally, the concern for the environment has much to do with 'rich-poor' divide. There is a general belief that the poor tampers more frequently with the fauna and flora of the environment, while the devastation caused by the rich to the environment is higher in scale. The point being made is that both the poor and the rich do cause damages to the environment, but at different frequency and magnitude. This study conceptualizes environmental concerns of the poor so as to formulate appropriate policy measures for environmental awareness and sustainable development. It is limited to poverty -environment interrelationships through an overview of the perception of the poor about the environment and their behaviour to the environment. The environment provides water, energy and raw materials through which socio, cultural and economic, spiritual and financial resources are generated. At the same time, it is the recipient and recycler of wastes. If the environment is damaged, all the resources it provide will equally be damaged, hence, the necessity to take care of the environment.

Key Words: *Linkages, Poverty, Environmental Degradation, Environmental Hazards*

Introduction

Two of the major problems that are facing the world today are poverty and environmental degradation. Man interacts with the environment in the quest for satisfying his daily needs. This process of man- environment interaction

causes some damages to the environment. Apart from these anthropogenic damages, some unanticipated consequences of natural disasters impinge seriously upon the environment. These problems are compounded by lack of material resources, inadequate loans and subsidies, illiteracy and lack of environmental awareness and consciousness. The environment becomes degraded, causing threats to the existence and survival of man. A positive change in attitude towards the environment is needed in order to save the most cherished flora and fauna.

The desire of every person is to live in a good environment that guarantees potable and clean water, good accommodation, decent clothing, hygienic food, conducive housing and even pure air. There is no way we can live conveniently and comfortably in the environment without tampering with it. Nevertheless, the fundamental ethics of environmental management demand that the desire can still be met within the ambit of conservation, preservation, rehabilitation and sustainability.

A major problem that inhibits sustainable development is poverty. It is like a disease that saps the vitality of people and nations. Poverty is caused by social, cultural, economic and political factors that can be recognized and remedied if and when the resources and means are available. The major causes of poverty need to be identified as well as the steps that could be taken to combat them. Hence this research raises awareness about the threats facing the environment as a result of poverty. It proposes steps that could be taken in order to halt the damage that modernization is inflicting on the environment. It equally explains the constraints that poor people face in their attempt to escape from poverty. More importantly, possible ways out of poverty are suggested.

The human and therefore moral and religious challenges of our times are to halt the destruction of our environment and heal where possible, the damages which have already been inflicted on the planet. Sean (2004) viewed the environment from religious perspective and argued that the earth is the Lords and that our role is to look after this precious gift and not to destroy it. Hence, a combination of environmental awareness and management is required to save the planet earth. Beyond environmental awareness, participatory democracy is critical to addressing environmental issues (CEE, 1994). This will guarantee the citizens participation in environmental management and the essence of participatory poverty assessment (PPA) in poverty eradication.

This research work examines the interrelationship between poverty and the environment. The major focus is on how improved environmental condition can reduce the vulnerability of the poor and how they can break the vicious cycle of poverty. This escape from poverty will eventually create better environmental awareness and consideration for ecosystem balance. This study therefore creates an informed interest in the protection of the environment within the ambit of improved health and nutritional practices, women empowerment and gender equality, sound education and literacy programme.

We need to protect the Victorian value of our urban centres and the socio-cultural heritages of the rural areas. It is also our collective responsibility to save the aquatic diversity from looming dangers of water pollution and save our fauna species from extinction due to habitat destruction. This means the protection of the forest resources from further damages. The ultimate result is that man is bailed out of poverty and at the same time utilizing the environment resources in a sustainable way.

Concept of Poverty

The concept of poverty could be viewed from as many points: social, cultural, economic and environmental. Likewise, the question as to who are the poor? remains difficult to answer because poverty is a social concept whose definition depends on many factors, among which are culture, level of social development and the background of individuals trying to define the poor (Olanrewaju, 2004).

However, there are many approaches to poverty evaluation and the identification of the poor. The nutritional approach considers the per capital nutrient intake that is essential for good health while the relative income approach measures the standard of living and style of livelihood of individuals. The environmental approach considers the nature of man-environment interrelationships vis-a-vis the general environmental conditions and the physical developments within the environment. Finally, the social well-being approach evaluates the way of life, welfare and organization of individuals, communities and the nation at large (Olanrewaju, 2004). All these approaches are interrelated.

Table 1 presents the poverty profile in different zones in Nigeria. From the table, it is clear that all zones in Nigeria have large population of poor people with northern belt taking the lead

Environmental Degradation

“When the environmental school of thought propounded the theories of environmental possibilism and probabilism as being superior concepts to environmental determinism, for explaining man-environment relations, little did they know that the ‘conquest of the environment’ would lead to its destruction” (Ogunsanya, 1999). The quest for man to satisfy his daily needs and to develop has led to the exploration of all resources to his advantage. There are various human activities involved in the process of exploration of these resources. However, it is pertinent to note that these activities are carried out without giving cognizance to the environment where the entire processes take place, thus man is faced with a rapidly deteriorating environment that daily draws disturbing attention. Such effects are visible in environmental problems such as flooding, pollution, deforestation, biodiversity loss and global warming to mention a few.

The various developmental activities of man has greatly interfered with the natural environment; thereby degrading it. Such human activities are:

- i. Deforestation i.e. destruction of the natural vegetation through farming, road construction and lumbering
- ii. Use of fertilizers which may pollute water and even affect the soil
- iii. Oil exploration which can lead to oil spillage thereby damaging farmlands, vegetation and aquatic lives.
- iv. Agricultural practices such as overgrazing, bush burning, application of fertilizer, pesticides and herbicides
- v. Damming rivers thereby interrupting their natural flow
- vi. Industrialization which leads to air, land and water pollution
- vii. Hunting which has greatly contributed to bio-diversity loss or extinction of some animals

In order to attain sustainable development, it is necessary to find means of addressing the issue of over - dependence or overuse of the environmental resources. It is obvious that man is not aware of the consequences of his actions and as such need to be informed. Sada and Odemerho (1988) as reported in Ajibade (2000) argued that the first step in the effective control and management of the environment is in the development of public

environmental awareness most especially in the area of conception, interpretation and perception of environmental issues.

Relationships between Poverty and Environmental Degradation

The environment is the totality of all the factors and circumstances that surround influence and direct the growth and behaviour of individual beings, groups, species and communities (Omotor, 2000). The way and manner by which man relates with the environment determines how friendly the environment will be to him. There are many environmental problems; some are natural while others are anthropogenic. Natural catastrophes that affect the environment include landslide, volcanic eruption, hurricane, earthquake, flooding, global warming, ozone layer depletion and desertification. The man-made hazards include wastes, food poisoning, bush burning and environmental degradation. Increasingly, man is damaging his environment. He induces some calamities on his environment in the quest for his daily bread and other needs.

The issues of development is to bring about positive and sustainable change which lead to improvement in physical, emotional and spiritual well-being which give people encouragement and confidence to realize their potential (Karim, 2005). In the course of development, some threats are imposed on the environment. It is logical, therefore, to say that the environmental crises in the world today resulted from development.

Studies have confirmed that economic development depends on the environment (Abang, 1995, Agabi 1995; Omotor, 2000; DFID, 2001 and DFID, 2002). Also the poor people rely on the natural environment for many of their activities. They depend on it for food, shelter, clothing and even medicine. This has led to the degradation and even destruction of the natural environment. On the other hand, the destruction of the natural environment has led to hunger and malnutrition in many nations thus worsening poverty rate.

Poverty and environment are closely interrelated and each in turn affects the other, poverty leads to environmental deterioration and environmental deterioration worsens the rate of poverty. In short, poverty is the major cause of environmental degradation and when the environment is degraded, the existence and the survival of man become threatened. Several species of plants and animals become extinct while millions of birds, reptiles, amphibians, butterflies and other resources of economic importance are destroyed.

Poverty is the bane of environmental protection, especially in rural areas. Majority of the rural dwellers depend on the biomass for livelihood. For instance, the rural poor depends on the immediate environment for food, drink, medicine, fuel, building materials and virtually everything. In doing this, the biomass is destroyed. This kind of over-reliance on the immediate environment by the poor is what Agarwal (1985) referred to as “biomass-based subsistence economy”.

In his own study, Abang (1995) observed that millions of Nigerians still lack access to basic necessities of life like adequate food, shelter, and health such that the quality of life of these group of people is deteriorating and that the poverty gap is widening.

These continue to create environmental problems for the society, just as little concern for improvement is given to the environment. This attitude has no doubt retarded the economic growth of the country.

Ensuring that households have access to basic services like water, sanitation and energy is a basic concomitant to development. This will, no doubt have impact on human DFID (2000) reported that billions of people over the world die annually from lack of access to safe drinking water and environmental hazards that result from poverty and environmental deterioration.

The combination of population pressure, environmental degradation, armed conflicts and diseases to which this would lead could impose catastrophic pressure upon the planet (DFID, 1997). Particularly, population pressure is responsible for many environmental problems like degradation, water pollution, hazardous wastes, pests, diseases, food contamination and premature death. Most of these problems result from urbanization and overcrowding. These lead to the development of slums, squatter settlements, unhealthy dwelling, poor quality of housing, lack of basic infrastructure and unemployment.

The living condition of the poor is generally awkward. They live in unhealthy surrounding (environment) that are overcrowded and poorly ventilated. The sanitation of their environment is nothing to write home about as their drainage system is always ill- maintained. The characteristics of the urban-poor are lack of physical space, squatting settlements, dilapidated houses, dingy rooms, squalor environmental conditions, overcrowding and criminalities.

According to DFID (2001) report, one in five of the world's population lives without adequate shelter, clean water or health care, and without education. Two third of these people are women. The voices of poor people illustrate the many dimensions of poverty. Lack of income or the means to earn a living, poor health and lack of education are central themes but so too are the powerlessness and feelings of lack of dignity that poor people experience. From the above analysis, we can deduce that food, shelter, and clothing, which are the basic necessities of life are equally the major problems confronting the poor people.

The poor needs to interact with the environment in many ways. These interactions however bring many associated problems. Many environmental problems like crimes, diseases, accidents and other social pathologies are caused by the societal necessity to meet some basic human needs (David, 1994). Man's exploitation of natural resources implies that some damages would be done to the environment. Nevertheless, man-environment interaction should be collaborative, making a close examination of poverty – environment interrelationships, a concomitant to poverty reduction.

Poverty reduction has become a global issue. Thus, international community set ambitious targets in the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) to make life conducive and convenient for all. These include the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger, achievement of universal primary education, promotion of gender equity and women empowerment. Others are reduction of child mortality, improvement of maternity health, reduction of the scourge of HIV/AIDS and other diseases, achievement of environmental sustainability and the development of global partnership for development.

In developing nations, most development activities are not sustainable. Man has destroyed environmental resources deliberately or/and ignorantly through many of his uncontrolled activities like deforestation, unsustainable agricultural practices, urbanization, indiscriminate bush burning, fishing, industrialization, poaching, housing, mining and dereliction. The activities have exterminated many species even as several other have become extinct. Poverty is a contributory factor to this scourge. Hence, possible solutions to poverty are mass employment, increment in per capita income and the adoption of modern technologies that will not destroy the natural and cultural heritages of the environment. The concomitant alleviation of poverty will reduce reliance on and destruction of the flora and fauna of the environment.

A healthy environment is a key indicator of sustainable development. If the environmental condition is deleterious, it will impinge negatively upon the inhabitants. Likewise, the poor are more vulnerable to environmental risks and hazards. Shocks and stresses of natural and anthropogenic hazards impact negatively on human well being and standard of living. Since the poor are equally powerless, they have limited access and control over their environmental resources and services. Hence, poverty leads to further environmental decline. This exacerbates their vulnerability.

From the foregoing, poverty is the major cause of environmental deterioration. A halt to the assault on the environment would prevent man (including the poor) from further risk and protect other components (flora and fauna) of the environment from extinction.

Conclusion

Since man must exist and survive in his environment, it is equally pertinent that he should make use of environment resources in a judicious way: He should possess a positive mentality and think ecologically about the environment. The ecological way of thinking about the environment is not a draconian postulation meant to prevent human race from reaping the fruits of the natural environment rather, it is an ethical consideration to the rights and obligations of man as he inter- relates with nature. It emphasizes the necessity for a symbiotic man- environment interaction and awareness that the environment and the resources therein should be valued in a logical way.

The relationship between poverty and the environment has become part of global concerns. Infact, sustainable development is impossible without efficient environmental management. In the same vain, poverty alleviation is also impossible without tackling the problem of environmental degradation. Poverty reduction is the goal of economic development and thus the environment and the resources therein are important for the attainment of this objective.

References

- Abang, S.O. (1995). "The Nigerian Environment and Social –Economic Pressure" In Agabi, J. A., Abang, S. O. and Animasaun, A. I. (eds.) *Nigerian Environment*. Lagos, Nigerian: Conservation Foundation.
- Agabi, J.A. (1995). *Biodiversity Loss in Nigerian Environment* Lagos: Macmillan.
- Agarwal, A. (1985). *The 5th Annual World Conservation*. London: WWF
- Ajibade, L.T. (2000). "The Environmental Systems" In H. I Jimoh and C. P. Fabiyi (eds.) *Contemporary Issues in Environmental Studies*. Ilorin, Nigeria: Haytee Publishers.
- Council for Environmental Education (CEE) (1994): "Environmental Education: On the Fringe of the Machine". *CEE Annual Review 1994*: pp 1-68
- David (1994). *Parasites of Poverty*. Stockholm, Gotab.
- DFID (1997). *Eliminating World Poverty: A challenge for the 21st Century*. London: DFID
- DFID, (2000). *Achieving Sustainability: Poverty Elimination and the Environment*. London: DFID.
- DFID (2001). Poverty and the Environment: "What the Poor Say. Environment Policy" Key sheet No. 1 UK, DFID
- DFID (2002). *Making Connections. Infrastructure for Poverty Reduction*. London: DFID.
- Karim, S. (2005). "Planning for Sustainability". *Footsteps No 64* pp 1-16
- Ogunsaya, A. (1999). "Contemporary Issues in Environmental Studies". In H.I Jimoh and I.P. Fabiyi (eds) *Contemporary Issues in Environmental Studies*. Ilorin, Nigeria: Haytee Publishers.
- Olanrewaju, D.O. (2004). "Town Planning: A Veritable Means for Poverty Reduction." Inaugural Lecture Series 38, Federal University of Technology, Akure, Nigeria.
- Omotor, D.G. (2000). Environmental Problems and Sustainable Development in Nigeria". *Journal of Development Studies* 2 (1) pp 146-149

- Sada, P.O. and Odehnerho, F.O. (1988). "Environmental Management and Development: Introduction of the Main Issues". Sada P.O. and Odemerho, F.O. in *Environmental Issues and Management in Nigerian Development*. Ibadan, Evans Brothers (Nigeria Publisher) Ltd.
- Sean, M. (2004). *Living Highly on the Earth*. London, Catholic Institute for International Relations (CIR).
- World Bank (1996). *Study on Poverty Assessment and Alleviation in Nigeria*, Washington, D.C. World Bank.