

The Theological Implications of Achieving Sustainable Urban Environment in Africa

Cyprian Obiora Alokwu

Introduction

In the last couple of decades, discourses on environmental issues have significantly assumed a new dimension—a shift to the urban areas and cities. This shift is because urban migration has been greatly experienced more than ever before across the globe, including Africa. *Urban shift*—the result of the increased movement of people to urban areas is attributed to the continuous exodus of people from rural to urban areas in search of better jobs and opportunities. In Africa, economic recession has been identified as one of the driving forces to the rapid rate of rural-urban migration. Africa is still very largely rural and agricultural. Approximately about 70 per cent of Africa's poorest live in rural areas, where social amenities which make life more comfortable are not provided. The desire to escape the harsh realities of persistent poverty in rural areas and to enjoy the more comfortable life in the urban cities has accelerated this phenomenon of urban shift.

This paper argues that the unrestrained drift to urban areas would stifle efforts to achieve urban sustainability in Africa and therefore suggests the adoption and implementation of the principles of sustainable city and the entrenchment of behavioral attitude capable of changing urban dweller's perception on urban environment. This attitudinal change could be achieved through the inclusion of Christian theological resources since it has been noted that Christianity does not only constitute a major component of the population of Africa but that serious theological thoughts in the Christendom is now shifting down to Africa who are also notoriously religious.

Although we have noted earlier that the trend in rural to urban migration is global, the fastest growth, is however occurring in developing countries including Africa. Urban migration in Africa has increased at an alarming pace (it is currently growing at an annual rate of 4%, the highest in the world), and it has been forecast that by the year 2025, Africa's urban population will be three times larger than what it is now, with more than half of the population living in cities. A clearer picture was presented in the World Health Organization publication titled “Global Challenges in Cities: With Focus on Africa” which states that:

Africa's rates of demographic and urban growth are the highest in the world. Urban growth rates in many African countries exceed 4%, whereas in developed countries urban growth is static or even negative. In Africa, the percentage of the population living in urban areas is 37%.

This is expected to reach 54% in 2030, and in a few countries, it will be as high as 80%.

If the trend continues, it is argued that urban migration in developing countries, including Africa, is not going to stop or stabilize in the near future and the poorest will be hard hit.

Because urban migration comes with heavy pressures on the urban environment, the task of maintaining urban sustainability becomes very difficult. **The critical impact of accelerated urbanization** on various African environments has been well documented and analyzed. As a result, since the **Rio Conference**, there has been renewed attention to the problems of **African urban environments**.

The table below summarizes some of the problems associated with urban migration especially in Africa.

Unemployment	Two-thirds (2/3) of migrants from rural to urban centers are in the age group of between 15-29 years are unemployed. They create a demand for employment that only few cities are able to meet. Unemployment has its adverse effect on the environment, the society and the poor themselves.
Poverty	High rates of rural migration to urban cities and low levels of economic growth are causing an increase in urban poverty. African cities have the highest rate of poverty (40%) of all the world regions.
Environmental pollution and degradation	The informal economy of urban settlements in many African states contributes to the degradation of the environment through: Weak regulatory structures that lead to haphazard disposal of industrial by-products; Poorly constructed residential and workplaces with large amount of soil and water pollution; and Poorly enforced emissions regulations for factories and motor vehicles

Health problems	Residents, especially the poor, of African cities are suffering from health problems related to both underdevelopment and industrialization. In many African countries overpopulated slums exhibit high rates of disease due to unsanitary conditions, malnutrition, and lack of basic health care. Underdevelopment is characterized by low incomes, limited education, overcrowding, and inadequate food. There is a heavy burden of diseases and infections such as malaria, diarrhea, upper respiratory tract infections and skin diseases. Almost half of the children in Africa show signs of malnutrition.
Social Problems	“Slum” dwellers located in illegal settlements with insufficient housing and sanitation are seen as the "breeding grounds" for social problems such as crime, drug addiction and alcoholism. These issues raise problems in the political, social, and economic arenas.

Table1. Some of the problems of urban migration.

The Effects of Urban Migration on Africa's Urban Environment

Urban growth and migration contribute markedly to urban environmental deterioration because the environment generally is placed under pressure. The concentration of population in urban cities apparently reveals the extent to which economic activities can generate both costs and benefits. The effects of urban growth and migration and their activities have outweighed the relative advantages thereof as the built environment has been adversely affected by other anthropogenic activities. Of very significant consideration here, is its effect on urban health especially as it affects the urban poor.

High population in cities has also placed an increased demand on basic infrastructure and services such as housing, sanitation, water, schools and health facilities such that there is no corresponding infrastructure development and service delivery in many African states. Urban population, urban lifestyles and consumption patterns being responsible for a large proportion of the production of goods and services undoubtedly accounts for a much larger proportion of wastes and pollution that we currently encounter globally and in Africa today.

Here, we summarize some of the major consequences. First, since many people who migrated to urban cities are unemployed, they find it difficult to make ends meet. As a result, they usually resort to the exploitation of their immediate

environment as a survival strategy in the face of adverse economic situations. Second, because the unemployed are primarily concerned with meeting the basic necessities of life (food, water, shelter and clothing), the issue of environmental sanitation or environmental protection is often not a priority. Third, the issue of traffic congestion as a result of increase in population and the number of motor vehicles raises some serious environmental concerns. The critical areas of concern are mainly the incessant accidents in and around the urban areas together with the problem of air pollution especially in the form of carbon emissions. Fourth, urban migration comes with a heavy demand for housing. Because of the great number of urban migrants, many African governments have not been able to adequately address the issue of housing. The result is the increased number of street 'kids and adults'. The housing situation in many Africa countries at the moment is still overwhelming and has increased the ubiquitous sprouting of informal settlements with the result that services that go on in these areas are either grossly inadequate or as in most cases non-existent.

The ability of many African governments to tackle the above mentioned issues calls for investigation. This is because the question of whether African countries have the capacity, the political will, appropriate policies, appropriate technology and skills and other relevant resources to adequately deal with the demands placed on the continent by the current rate of urban migration is very crucial but still controversial. Srinivas, argues that, inadequate financial resources, ineffective institutional structures, weak legislations or their implementation, lopsided policies and lack of adequate trained personnel are some of the major factors militating against the realization of the concept of *sustainable city* in African states. A proper articulation of solution to the above challenges has become imperative in order to ensure that African cities are not only livable but also are environmentally sustainable. For this to happen, the effects of urban migration should be seen both in terms of its immediate and cumulative effects on the natural environment, the built environment and the socio-economic environment. The above therefore necessitates the consideration of the concept of sustainable city to enhance the management of urban environment.

Towards the Establishment of Sustainable Cities in Africa.

Having provided the above background, let us now turn to issues of urban sustainability. The growing concern and the subsequent debate around the concept of sustainable cities have generated quite a substantial academic and policy literature. The concept of the sustainable city is fast gaining ground as an ideal to which cities should aspire in order to achieve urban sustainability. Sustainable city contextually, refers to the concept of the establishment of urban forms and processes that are both more environmentally benign and better able to deliver improvements in quality of life to the majority of the urban inhabitants.

“A sustainable city is one in which improvement in the quality of human life is achieved in harmony with improving and maintaining the health of ecological systems; and where a healthy economy's industrial base supports the quality of both human and ecological systems”

Underpinned by fundamental views on what urban sustainability constitutes, the concept of sustainable city denotes concerted and deliberate efforts aimed at reversing, and where possible, halting those trends that pose threats to ecosystems health and the well-being of cities in general. Sustainable city proponents, argue that by dealing with such issues as solid waste, sanitation, sewage, land-use, transportation, housing, energy efficiency, social conflict and poverty (these could jeopardize the ecosystems health), cities can be turned into more livable environments. The main goal of sustainable city, they argue, is the conceptualization and implementation of the urban sustainability agenda.

It is becoming increasingly necessary that there should be a number of different approaches and models through which *sustainable city* could be pursued. As a result, it is argued that sustainable city like its twin sister sustainable development is a utopia, fraught with contradictions. Sustainable city is a reminder, nay, a caveat that our natural resources are limited and are in fact, in danger of running out and that development beyond certain levels could not only jeopardize the ecosystems, but that the continued existence of humanity on the surface of earth is also under serious threat. In order to avert this doom, Wambach advocated for a behavioral change towards creating a sustainable society. Wambach's idea of sustainable society is similar to the concept of sustainable city. He defined sustainable society to mean “a society whose renewable resources are consumed no faster than they can be renewed and non-renewable resources are consumed no more rapidly than renewable substitute can be found”. Put in another context, sustainable society is a society that has been deeply conscientized to the extent that it is less anthropocentric, less ecocide, more biocentric, and more intergenerational in its thinking, attitude and interaction with the rest of the universe. *Sustainable city* could be achievable through minimizing resource inputs and waste output. For this to happen, it requires entrenching a culture of *economization* of resources in all strata of the society.

Characteristics of Sustainable City

Let us summarize this section with the characteristics of sustainable city with the hope that a better understanding can be reached about defining a sustainable community. Cities will need to become more aware of the impact of their consumption patterns on the ecosystems as well as work towards a policy to reduce, recycle, and re-use consumed goods.

Being very complex entities, cities can be characterized by a number of different properties. These properties may change across countries and geographical regions. This section gives us an overview of the salient issues in cities. Another way of looking at the characteristics of a sustainable community is by examining behavioral patterns, resource consumption patterns, and policies which compares strategies for their sustainability or lack of sustainability.

More Sustainable	Less Sustainable
Compact forms of residential development.	Low-density, spread-out residential development.
Mixed land use; homes, jobs and shopping in close proximity/TD.	Segregation of land uses: homes, jobs and shopping separated into uniform tracts or concentrations.
Employment based primarily on education and skills.	Employment based primarily on environment polluting or non renewable resource based industry.
Movement on foot and by bicycle and transit.	Heavy dependence on private cars.
Wind and solar energy.	Thermal and nuclear energy.
Protection and use of natural hydrologic systems.	Hard surfaces preventing infiltration; channeling natural water-courses.
Tertiary treatment of sewage; use of natural means of sewage treatment.	Discharge of sewage into water bodies or water-courses untreated or with low level of treatment.
Natural open space; protection of wetlands, woodlands, stream valleys, habitat, etc.; use of manure, compost, integrated pest management, etc.	Destruction of natural landscape; "manicured" parkland with exotic species; heavy use of chemical fertilizers, herbicides, pesticides.
Reduction of waste; recovery, re-use and recycling of waste materials.	Landfills, incinerators.

Table 2. Characteristics of sustainable city.

The above could be possible through a sustained programme of environmental awareness and education to the society. Effective environmental education and awareness would be realized when all stake holders involving the government,

the NGOs including the church are involved in a collaborative venture. This now brings us to the role of public theology in this regard.

The Role of Public Theology in Achieving Sustainable Urban Environment in Africa

It has become evident that government alone cannot solve the problems of urban sustainability. Therefore there is need for other sectors especially the church to partner with the government in this direction as we are reminded by Patricia Mische that:

Science and technology alone cannot resolve ecological threats. Nor can governments or the laws they promulgate ... Sustaining the integrity of creation thus requires not only the external laws governments enact to deal with belligerent behaviour, but also inner governance, laws internalised in our hearts and minds and the will to live by them... Church praxis has special relevance for the development of inner governance and a culture of ecological responsibility. Religions carry the archetypes, the symbols, meanings, values and moral codes around which people coalesce and define themselves, their sense of the sacred, and their relationship with each other and the natural world.

This collaboration is rational since Christians constitute a large segment of African society. It is also said that Africans themselves are notoriously religious. For the African therefore, every facet of life was associated or defined in religious terms. Therefore getting the church in Africa to be involved in the search for solution to Africa's environmental problems would be of immense benefit to Africa. This, however, calls for a proper understanding of the nature and role of public theology in the cities of Africa especially in the context of urban sustainability. This understanding has become imperative because of the perceived 'cacophonous theologies' prevalent in Africa. In this regard the role of public theology is to understand and systematically articulate the crisis, the causes, the effects (present and potential) and provide resources for the church to approach the problem in a more creative and helpful ways. Public theology as an interdisciplinary theological enterprise is expected to provide the church with theological resources to deal with issues which reside in the public domain on which the church is obliged to speak and act decisively in the exercise of its prophetic ministry.

For the church in Africa to do this through its public theology, it needs to be provided with theological resources. The question is whether public theology has the wherewithal-well articulated theological resources to do this. I do not know what the answer is, but I want to propose the inclusion of the concept of

oikothology as praxis for urban sustainability in Africa. This makes sense because economy, ecology and social cohesion (all emanating from the Greek root word-oikos) are the pillars of a sustainable city.

The concept of *oikothology* could be regarded as the ideal eco-theological postulation to be pursued if the current anthropocentric attitude to nature including the problem of urban sustainability must be arrested. According to Conradie, the impetus behind the emergence of *oikos-theology* is precisely because it is at home with the dominant rhetoric of liberation theology, black theology and a culture of human rights-every human being has an equal dignity and integrity before God.

Fundamental to oikothology is the concept of a home or house. In this context, the earth is seen as household (family) of God in a metaphoric sense and it describes how the earth should be viewed in understanding human relationship with it. The idea of “home for all” expressed in *oikothology* includes the material as well the non material entities as belonging to the bigger family of God.

The relevance of this term with regard to the current earth crisis and particularly the urban environment challenges is appreciated in its ability to integrate economy and ecology as a holistic approach for achieving environmental management. With regard to urban environmental problems, this concept with all its associated metaphors-the earth as our oikos-our home, would provide a dynamic framework which does not only challenge our current life styles and global environmental ethic responsible for the seemingly anthropocentric attitude to the environment, it would also provide individual Christians and the society at large with a praxis that fosters environmental integrity and the struggle for social and economic justice which is at the heart of public theology. It is “a cry for the church to proclaim its relevance to the society that has lost its way environmentally”. It critiques the current global anthropocentrism, utilitarianism and the capitalist system and further expresses the idea that certain things should not be done to the environment and that wanton acts of despoliation or cruelty or over-exploitation of natural resources, should be avoided as exceeding the legitimate role of humanity will be disastrous to both the environment and humanity as well.

Oikothology raises some fundamental questions (these are beyond the scope of this work) of how the church could contextually engage in environmental issues such as:

- How human beings perceive themselves in nature, i.e. whether human beings are one of the many components in a global ecosystem, or

- Whether they are separate from nature, having dominion over it and using it as a means to achieving their ends irrespective of how their actions affect the ecosystem.
- Whether the church has demonstrated in practical terms its willingness to collaborate with government and other stakeholders in resolving some of the social issues confronting urban residents.

How well or bad these questions are answered determines how the use public theology could change our anthropocentric view of nature. This is because our perception of the place and role of humanity in the bigger picture of nature influences our response to the above concerns. Whatever our bias or perception is, the irony is that our actions do not only affect the health of the ecosystem, our own health is as well jeopardized. Human activities that affect the environment have a lot to do with the health of the environment. In the search for a more inclusive and holistic approach to the above concerns, there is need to synthesize the concept of *oikotheology* and the concept of sustainable city as a way of integrating Christian theology and environmental studies to address the current environmental problems.

Putting Public theology in the Urban Perspectives

From the perspectives of public theology the Church is called and sent to be engaged in socio-economic, political and cultural issues in our society. This calling reaffirms the notion that God is not only concerned with the supernatural, but is active to humanize the world as we know it, and his power is active in the secular life of humankind. The extent to which the church understands this mandate will definitely influence its involvement and determine its relevance in the society. Unfortunately, the prevailing *cacophonous* theologies on socio-political and economic involvement of the church in society is incongruous, *uncontextual* and does not correspond to the modern theological postulations being currently championed by scholars of theology and development studies. Cox and Haar identified doctrinal and theological differences as major hindrance to having a unified response to socio-economic and political issues in the society. Based on the above, therefore, it has become imperative for the church in Africa to stop singing in discordant voices in its involvement in public theology. *Public Theology* draws from works on Liberation Theology, Contextual Theology and social theology and it provides resources for people to make connections between their faith and social realities including the practical issues of urban environmental problems.,

We have to remind ourselves that public theology or any theology for that matter that ignores context is worthless and not worth pursuing.. Arguing on the importance of contextualization in theology, Steve de Gruchy asserts that “when

people forget context and crisis, they turn abstract, detached, ideological, remote and unhelpful. However, when they remember context and crisis, they show their identification with the people who are subjects and objects of Christian ministry”. Effective contextualization would produce theologians who according to Buffel would engage in “doing theology instead of thinking theology”. Thinking theology makes theology an abstract thing but doing theology empathizes it and translates theories into reality. Contextualization would assist the church in Africa to respond meaningfully to the socio- political and economic challenges plaguing the continent.

This call for a contextual approach has become absolutely unavoidable because if the current rate of environmental and socio-economic problems including urban growth continue unabated, the continued existence of the earth would be seriously threatened and Christianity would not be exonerate from any blame. It is therefore expedient that public theology as an inter-disciplinary enterprise be not left out in the search for solution to urban environmental problems. This is relevant and timely since theology, if it engages contextually, is one of the major resources in addressing human challenges.

As a way of achieving sustainable cities in Africa the Church's urban ministry with regard to urban renewal need to be reappraised. A critical investigation in this area would reveal the extent of the work that needs to be done. For example, walking along the streets of many of our urban cities, one could easily spot huge number of destitute, street kids, beggars and all manners of indigent people who are not able to meet the basic necessities of life. Though the church has attained some degree of relevance in the lives of some of the urban residents especially the poor in many different ways, its efforts have not yet paid off in turning around their lives in more positive ways. Until this is done, public theology could not say without some sense of guilt that its stewardship responsibility had been fulfilled and that it had paid true allegiance to the Gospel by fulfilling Jesus injunction of clothing and feeding the poor .

The issue of sanitation and service delivery in general-an integral component of sustainable city, is perceived to be in appalling state in most of the urban areas throughout the continent. Different tiers of governments have proved very ineffective in this regard because of inadequate resources and lack of political will. The church as an important role player in urban renewal is expected to use its public theology to draw the attention of relevant authorities to this sticky situation. This is because ordinarily the urban poor who are most vulnerable to environmental and health hazards of the unsanitary conditions, lack the wherewithal to make their voices to be heard. The church could not only seek to be their voice, it could organize some environmental/ sanitation teaching

programmes where simple hygiene, the need and reasons for proper environmental management could be taught. This way, the urban poor would be made to understand that clean environment promotes good health and that cleanliness is next to godliness. The church could also mobilize its members to embark on sanitation exercise once in a while, as a practical show of its commitment to environmental protection. They could also adopt a spot to be maintained as an environmental routine. The church could also organize and encourage its members to be involved in tree planting programmes as a means of contributing to environmental protection and management.

As noted earlier, the current demand for housing in our urban areas outstrips the resources and ability of many governments. Though the church may not have the financial muscle to engage in housing projects, it does however have a track record of transparency and trust. This *asset* could enable it collaborate with the government and donor agencies who would make finances available for it to provide housing to the urban poor. It could also make different tiers of government to be more accountable and committed to service delivery. This suggestion is premised on the understanding that the implementation of the government housing policy in many African cities is still fraught with many problems including corruption and the church could assist in this way.

Conclusion

The paper has exhaustively discussed the challenges posed by urban migration on Africa's urban environment. It has also highlighted the need for a collaborative effort towards finding solution to the above discussed problem and therefore suggested that the church using its public theology could play a major role. The outcome of the discussion of the paper is that the concept of oikothology as an ecotheological resource in achieving the much needed sustainable city in Africa is an invaluable gift of the church to Africa.

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