

Environmental Sustainability as the Overarching Sustainability Pillar: Nexus with Religion in Nigeria

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Abstract

Sustainability is a known term in the academic discourse in present times. There are, however, some arguments about what constitutes the pillars of sustainability in current academic debates. Against its traditional three pillars, this paper argues for a reconsideration and expansion of the pillars of sustainability. It shows how culture has become a fourth pillar of sustainability. To prove its point, the paper discusses the interconnectedness of religion, a part of culture, with environmental sustainability. Using the Nsukka area as a case study, the paper shows how religious cum cultural practices contribute to environment sustainability thereby ensuring that the Quality of Life (QoL) of the people is maintained. This way, the paper contributes to the redefinition and expansion of the pillars of sustainability in present academic discourse.

Keyword: Sustainability, Culture, Religion, Nigeria

Introduction

Sustainability - an evolving concept with multiple pillars

Leopold (1949) expounded the land ethic which parallels today’s concept of sustainability. He argued that ‘We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect.’ Land Ethic espouses a responsible relationship between people and the land they inhabit, with land of that time broadly representing the environment as we know it today. The idea of sustainability at present implies a ‘concept of care’, ‘prudence in use’ and ‘a state of harmony with nature’. It suggests a state of peace and tranquility and preservation of the sanctity of the earth. It has been with us since the Biblical times. Though sustainability was not known with its current name until the late 70s and early 80s, the punishment for unsustainable environmental practice was alluded to in the Bible that whoever destroys the earth will be destroyed (Rev 11: 18), thus accentuating the need to preserve the earth and its resources.

We would surmise that the field of sustainability appeared to take firm roots and became an overarching frame of reference in global discourses following the United Nations (hence forth UN) report on Environment and Development in the 1980s (Brinkmann & Garren 2018). In its early conceptualization, sustainability wove together the themes of environment, economics, and social equity trying to curtail the effects of human activities on the planet (Figure 1). These 3 themes represented the initial pillars of sustainability where they were made to be interdependent and reinforcing (UN 2002). Thus, sustainability was operationalized on the principles of inter-generational equity, intra-generational equity, integration and sustainable use.

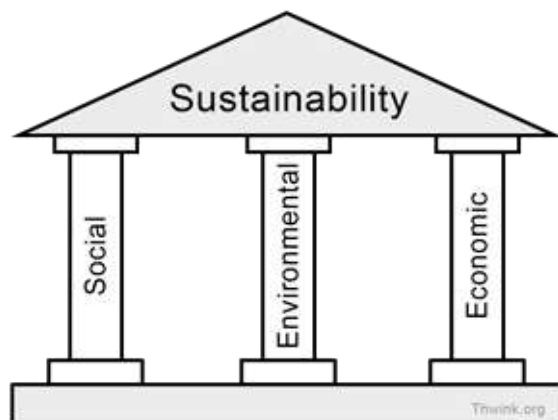


Figure 1: The popular 3 pillar model of sustainability (Source: Garren & Brinkman 2018).

Recently, the idea of sustainability has become subject to varying debates and definitions with this dynamism giving rise to a certain degree of confusion and multiple interpretations of the concept (Bova 2022). Although some authors anchor their articulation of sustainability on the social, economic and environmental pillars (e.g Sarkis et al., 2006, Boström, 2012, Garren & Brinkmann 2018), compelling evidence, however, appears to favour the interpretation and conceptualization of the term based on four dimensions namely the social, the economic, the environmental and cultural - with the United Nations Scientific and Cultural Organization (2001) being the leading proponent of culture as the fourth of the pillars of sustainability (Throsby 2017). On the belief that culture is always interrelated with the environment (Opoku 2015), Dessein et al (2015: 8) show that “recognising culture as at the root of all human decisions and actions, and as an overarching concern (even a new paradigm) in sustainable development thinking, enables culture and sustainability to become mutually intertwined so that the distinctions between the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainability begin to fade”. In this paper, an attempt is made to demonstrate the relevance of sustainability thinking and practice by humans in relation to the environment using the examples from African Traditional Religion and Christianity in Nigeria.

The Fourth Pillar of Sustainability: Culture

Following recognition that education is an important cultural activity needed in championing sustainable development and bettering the capacity of people to tackle environment and development issues (UNESCO 1992), culture was recognized as a pillar of sustainability; the fourth one at that. For UNESCO (200:4), cultural diversity remains important in the developmental process with cultural diversity being needed for humankind just as biodiversity is for nature (Nzeadibe et al 2015). Accordingly, Throsby (2017:137) argues that ‘just as environmentally sustainable development requires the protection of biodiversity, so also should account be taken of the value of cultural diversity to the processes of economic, social and cultural development’. In this way, cultural diversity, ranks as a root of development seen not just in terms of economic growth but as way to achieve a very good intellectual, emotional, moral and spiritual life (UNESCO 2001: 4). In this context, we would argue that religion being an expression of culture or cultural diversity can support the quest for sustainability in society. This would be illustrated in subsequent sections of this paper.

Taking this argument about the place of culture in sustainability discourse further, a recent study on Municipal Solid Waste Management in Nigeria situated the undertaking as ‘an overarching concern within cultural sustainability’ and challenged previously held notions about MSWM (Nzeadibe et al 2018) arguing that MSWM in Nigeria was a problem with roots in cultural activity (Dessein et al. 2015:14). When the COVID-19 pandemic came, drastic and unprecedented substitutes were unleashed on urban and rural cultures, human mobility, religious worship, and on the way human activities are organized and operated. These invariably gave rise to far-reaching challenges to sustainability of cultures across the world.

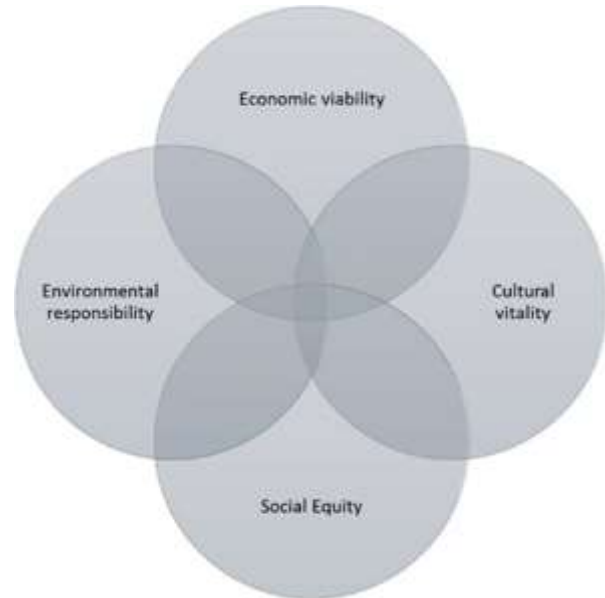


Figure 2 shows the four pillars of sustainability with the maintenance of cultural vitality as being of equal importance to environmental, social, and economic concerns (Source: Loach et al 2016)

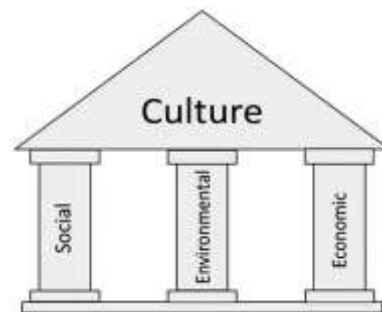


Figure 3 re-imagines the four pillars which are social, economic, and environmental structures which support culture. (Source: Loach et al 2016)

In the above conceptualizations, instead of viewing all four parts of sustainability as equal, it seems more beneficial utilizing sustainability models to think about how social, economic, and environmental frameworks in societies and organisations can be organized to holdup their cultural contributions.

Entry of COVID-19 and a Redefinition of Sustainability

The post-2015 development programme of the UN gave rise to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Evidently, the SDGs were developed and used as a road map to guide achieving sustainability of global development post-2015 (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2015). Unfortunately, the unexpected breakout and spread of COVID-19 pandemic with its varying impact on societies, organisations’ performance on everyday lives of the people appears to have greatly affected sustainability thinking and practice. This scenario, arguably, opened a new vista of what constitutes

sustainability and inadvertently necessitated an expansion of the boundaries of the concept of sustainability, thus, leading to rethinking and redefinition of sustainability to include an intersection with human health (Hakovirta & Denuwara 2020; Marques et al 2021). Considering that the pandemic and its associated challenges became a public health crisis attracting international interest with implications for sustainability. It led to a reconsideration of the idea of sustainability, to embrace the human health dimension, becomes not only apposite but also imperative.

In this context, COVID-19 has been described as ‘the evasive, invasive, elusive, invisible one’ that came to expose the underbelly of our decadent healthcare system and the depravity in our society (Tomori² 2021). COVID-19 has revealed the glaring level of inequity in every aspect of our society from health to education and on to standard of living. It was further argued by Tomori that ‘COVID-19 disease has had, is having and will continue for a long time to ‘have serious and far-reaching impact on every aspect of our life and living – social, education, economy and human development’ (Nzeadibe et al. 2022). We, therefore, argue that the entry of COVID-19 and its multiplex challenges into the sustainability mix was a turning point in the redefinition of the concept of sustainability, with health now being the fifth internationally recognized pillar of sustainability (Figure 5). We will take liberty to draw our illustrations from African Traditional Religion and Christianity in this paper for the simple reason that they are the widely practiced religions in the Nsukka region.

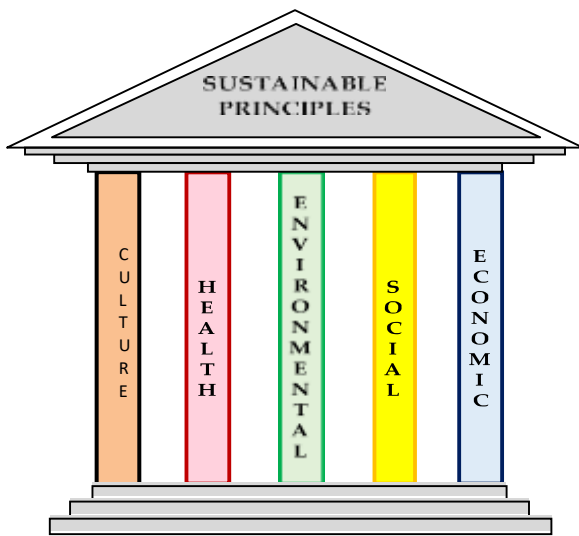


Figure 4: Expanding the pillars to include health (After Hakovirta and Denuwara 2020)

Religion and Environmental Sustainability Practice: The Case of African Traditional Religion in Nsukka Region³ of Nigeria

We would argue that the environmental dimension is the overarching pillar of sustainability since whatsoever happens in the economic,

social, cultural and health sectors take place within the environment and the state of the environment can positively or negatively influence the outcomes of the activities in the other domains.

In a sense, sustainability of the environment is the possibility of the environment to maintain a clearly defined level of environmental excellence and natural resource extraction levels forever. By this we mean, an enjoyment of the quality of the environment i.e fulfilment with the total environment called environmental quality of life (QoL) which includes the natural, social, cultural, economic and health environments. This ranks as one of the biggest problems of the world since there are consequences if the problem is not solved now or delayed. Unfortunately, the problem has attracted a very low apriority. Religion as a cultural activity takes place in the environment. QoL in rural communities may be boosted by access to recreational and natural environmental tools and objects, green spaces, social control agents including a sense of belongingness to places or groups of individuals (Kitchen & Muhajarine, 2008). In the view of Worika (2002) in a class discussion with one of the authors: African traditionalism which bears some parallel with terracentrism supports sustainability as what is generally perceived as the worship of inanimate objects- stones, trees, rivers, mountains, rocks, is not so much what it is perceived to be as with communing with ancestral and other supernatural forces via the instrumentality of natural environmental objects and media.

Thus, to the local autochthonous African, the earth (land, sea, air, and all environmental media and objects) has also a spiritual component. This view appears to be reinforced by Cordes (1997) who avers that for indigenous peoples, the issues transcend usual economic calculations because of their special relationship to the land and the environment. For most indigenous populations, land is much more than an economic input or source of aesthetic value. Rather, land is an important element in their cultural and religious identity and often defines the nature of social organization’.

In the above quotation, at least we see the dimensions of the sustainability which are four namely social, economic, environmental and cultural.

Coming nearer home, in a study by Nzeadibe & Ajaero (2010), it was found that in rural areas of the Nsukka region⁴ of Enugu State, masquerades, cult systems and deities are seen as sacred. They also act as agents of social control and as a platform for recreation and tourism (Aniakor, 1978; Aniakor, 2002; Okwor, 2003). It was further reported in Nzeadibe & Ajaero (2010) that two types of ancestral spirits are identified in the Nsukka area. The *Odo* is said to have its origin in Ikem (Okwor 2003). It is found in Ikem and Eha-Amufu communities. *Omabe* is celebrated in communities like Nsukka(town), Eha-Alumona, Eha-Ndiagu, Opi, Obollo-Afor and Orba. The *Omabe* cult is cross-lineage. It is an association found among the Nsukka Igbo-Odo. Its functions are greatly social-orientated. Its influence also extends to political leadership as Aniakor (1978, 2002) showed. *Odo* is a deity founded to perform some important social, political, and religious roles in the areas where they operate (Okwor 2003; Ezechi 2011). *Omabe* and *Odo* cults have their activities deeply rooted in religious world of the people. They are seen as the point of contact between the living and the dead (Opata 1997). They are mechanisms of social control in the area they hold

environmental setting which distinguishes it from nearby geographical regions (see, for example, Ofomata 1978).
⁴ On the further uses of the name Nsukka, see Uwaegbute (2021).

² OyewaleTomori is a WHO Expert in Virology and Infectious Diseases, and Chairman of the Ministerial Expert Advisory Committee on COVID-19 (MEACOC) in Nigeria.
³ Nsukka may be conceptualized as an economic, social, cultural and environmental region because of its unique social system, economic activities, cultural attributes and peculiar natural

sway. They are vested with the power to punish criminals, deviants and other offenders in the communities. At present, studies have shown that these masking traditions attract people of diverse religious background, even the Christians (Uwaegbute 2021; Ugwu 2014). These cult systems are mostly seen as being important in reducing criminal activities, promote the community's social cohesion and justice, and maintain a sense of the community while they equally act as a source of tourist attraction (Oji; Agbo; Onyishi & Ugwanyi 2024).

There are festivals that ritually unite the different communities of Nsukka. These festivals celebrate the masquerade cults. They are celebrated every two or three years, which ritually and socially unite the different segments of Nsukka Igbo community, are celebrated, annually, biannually, or triennially depending on traditional arrangements (calendar) in communities they are found. Among the Eha-Amufu people, the *Onwa Asaa* (seventh moon) is dedicated to the celebration of marriage of young people (men and women). It is mostly celebrated around March. The *Ikpu Uzo* is also there. It is a two or three-day communal clearing of farm roads. It is carried out in the months of June or July. In Eha-Ndiagu, the *Omabe* season is celebrated around January to December. The *omabe* is seen for a full year retiring to the ancestral world. *Akatakpa*, a type of *omabe* masquerade, is celebrated yearly. It is disregarded as the police of the *omabe*. As such, it is regarded as a masquerade for the youth celebrated between the months of June and August. In Opi, such festivals include *Ogbapi*, *Egbuhere*, (around April) and *Agbache* (June/July). In Obollo-Eke the people celebrate *Onwa Ano* (fourth moon) around February or March in commemoration of some deities. It is believed that people who died during this celebration died a bad death and are not given properly arranged burials. In the same community, *Akatakpa* masquerade heralds the arrival of the sixth month. Many of these communities also celebrate the new yam (*iri ji*) festival annually.

Though not explicitly stated in the recent work of Uwaegbute (2021), religion and culture are decidedly intertwined in Nsukka region where young people are increasingly taking to masking tradition and cultural festivals in an explicitly Christian milieu where they appear to make environmental QoL contributions to communities. In all, people from the area anticipate these festivals and cult systems annually. They help solidify the social fabric and values that exist in the community. They also make provisions for opportunities for interactions in the communities they exist and in the process, contribute to environmental QoL.

It is worthy to note that what is usually referred to as sacred forests or evil forests are, in fact, centres of traditional religious worship and conservation areas by local autochthonous Africans who follow this way of life. These conservation centres are doing the significant work of conservation and acting as carbon sink and sanctuary for endemic wildlife species in many communities and it is a taboo to cut down trees, hunt animals and indeed remove species from the sites. The adherents of the traditional religion in these areas protect the species even at the risk to their lives and limbs. Thus, religion, culture and environmental sustainability seem to reinforce one another in a rather seamless manner.

Christian Religious Worship During COVID-19 and Sustainability Practice

Recent studies by Chukwuma (2021) and Asadu (2022) which investigated the impacts of COVID-19 the break out on practices of churches in Nigeria. According to these studies, in the time of the pandemic, age-long practices of churches like solemnisation of Holy Matrimony, Holy Communion, baptism, prayer and the sharing of

the sign of observed by some churches which entails the shaking of one another's hands were modified or temporarily abrogated. The proscription of public gatherings of large number of people led to the suspension of economic, cultural and social activities while the shutdown of worship centres as a result of the pandemic was unprecedented in Nigeria. These authors argued that COVID-19 outbreak had implications on age-long church practices in Nigeria. During the pandemic which was primarily a health challenge, sustainability thinking was activated by global institutions as a means to counter the effect of the pandemic and to restore confidence to the global system. For example, during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, one of the authors, C Nzeadibe was invited by the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network (UNSDSN) to participate in a virtual global discussion to promote sustainability and happiness amidst a global crisis. Happiness as a concept was chosen to help in the unification efforts of the world under a unifying banner of solidarity. Humans, irrespective of place and time, share happiness and well-being in common. They are believed to be harnessed by connecting with one another. This was a very important sentiment shared by most people in the time of the pandemic. In his presentation to the global webinar titled *Happiness and Sustainability Around the Earth*, he argued that 'Culture is a key factor in happiness in Nigeria and can support or inspire societal transition to more sustainable living while religion may have aided this adaptive phenomenon' (Nzeadibe 2020). Thus, the line between religion, culture and sustainability in the Nigerian environment would seem to be blurring at an increasing rate given the current framing of global challenges and their solutions around the sustainability paradigm.

Conclusion

It would appear that religion is playing an increasingly important role in ensuring environmental sustainability. According to the UN Environment Programme (2024), 'all religions agree that nature is an act of divinity and should be treated as such...'. UNEP (2024) further states that religious leaders are important to the success of world solidarity aimed at achieving an ethical, moral and spiritual commitment in protection of the environment and the creations of God. They do this by becoming observers, who make strong public commitments, relate their story of commitments to the public including the challenges and fulfilment of keeping them while inviting other people to join their work. These religious leaders can also show their sustainable behaviours and serve as examples for those who follow them, including the public.

A few examples from Christianity may suffice as illustration to reflect on how religions have addressed religious commitments towards the environment. Many Bible verses talk about the environment and how it can be sustained. In this way, Christians are invited to have environmental responsibility and encourage behaviours that will sustain the environment. (OpenBible.info., n.d).

In the Old Testament, we come across an injunction: 'Do not pollute the land where you are. Bloodshed pollutes the land, and atonement cannot be made for the land on which blood has been shed, except by the blood of the one who shed it.' (Num 35:33). In the New Testament, it is recorded that "When they had all had enough to eat, he said to his disciples, 'Gather the pieces that are left over. Let nothing be wasted.'" (Matt. 14:20; Mark 6:43; Luke 9:17 and John 6:12-13). These gospel texts give an account of Jesus' miraculous feeding of five thousand people from five loaves of bread and two fish. At the end, the gospels recorded that the disciples of Jesus picked twelve baskets of leftover food items. According to Nzeadibe (2006) that this event may actually be the origin of organised recycling and waste recovery which had implications for not only the

environmental pillar but also the social, cultural, economic and health dimensions of sustainability.

As also warned by an Ecumenical Patriarch 'We must treat nature with the same awe and wonder that we reserve for human beings. And we do not need this insight in order to believe in God or to prove his existence. We need it to breathe; we need it for us simply to be.' (Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew 2010). Equally stressed by Pope Francis, there is the '... urgent challenge to protect our common home includes a concern to bring the whole human family together to seek a sustainable and integral development, for we know that things can change. The Creator does not abandon us; he never forsakes his loving plan or repents of having created us. Humanity still has the ability to work together in building our common home.' (Pope Francis 2015)

In conclusion, we submit that sustainability has become an acceptable frame of reference in global development discourses. Religion should be the compass that would steer the conscience of the society towards environmental sustainability and sustainable living. Religion should take full advantage of its influence in the society to engage, positively, in advocating for environmental sustainability. Religious leaders can leverage their influence and be on the vanguard of actions and push for reforms to improve human lives, environment and society.

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