

Ethical Challenge of Desertification in Northern Nigeria

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Abstract

Desertification is an urgent environmental problem that is faced by Northern Nigeria. As an environmental problem it creates a lot of challenges for the human community. These challenges include: conflicts over grazing lands and farmlands, pollution of water sources and the air by encroaching desert wind and sand, internal displacement of people, force migration of people, destruction of human lives and properties, and so on. If desertification is not stopped it impedes development and sustainability. This paper uses a critical analytic method, to examine the ethical challenges that desertification poses. It makes a conceptual analysis of the main concepts such as ethics, desertification and Northern Nigeria. It looks at how desertification is an ethical issue. The paper finds and concludes that if desertification is curbed through tree planting, and other ethical consciousness raising that leads to other practical actions, it will save both human and natural environment in Northern Nigeria.

Introduction

One of the crucial crises that humanity is facing is the environmental crisis. This crisis can come in the form of climate change, soil erosion, gas flaring, oil pollution, indiscriminate dumping of industrial and domestic waste, deforestation, and desertification. The environmental crisis must be tackled if not, it will impede human progress and equally destroy bio-cultural diversity. It ought to be noted that

the solution to each of these environmental problems can be found not only in the social sciences and sciences, but also in the humanities. The solution requires ethical and moral re-awakening on the path of humans to take these problems seriously and mobilize to solve them. If people are not convinced of these as problems especially as moral problems their impetus to eradicate these problems is diminished. It is within the purview of seeing the crisis as a moral problem that one of these environmental problems that of desertification is discussed here in relationship to Northern Nigeria.

What then is desertification? How do we understand Northern Nigeria? What is ethics? What are the ethical challenges that desertification pose? These and other related issues are hereby discussed. The paper will not go into geographic and scientific technical issues about deserts, the factors that cause desertification, etc. The paper focuses on creating awareness on the issue from a humanistic ethical perspective.

Conceptual Definitions

The word ‘desertification’ is linked to the word ‘desert.’ The word ‘desert’ according to Hook (2008) is a place, ‘having less than 254mm/1oin of precipitation annually, and that the evaporation rates they display exceed this amount’ (p. 66). For Bellamy (2007), a ‘desert’ is, ‘any area in which few forms of life can exist because of lack of water, permanent frost, or absence of soil’ (p. 125). He also says that, ‘a biome where evaporation exceeds precipitation for whatever cause with consequent paucity of vegetation less than 25 cm of the rain will produce a desert in almost any temperature range. Such ecosystem has relatively little thorny plants and little number of animals. It has scattered settlement near the water’ (Bellamy 2007, p. 125).

Desertification could simply be understood as the process of a desert expanding and encroaching into places that

were not deserts, places that are often considered more habitable and more productive. Bellamy (2007) defines it as: ‘Expansion of deserts due to human activity. The microclimatic change that expand the desert at the expense of its subhumid margins’ (p. 125). The United Nations (2012) defines it as: ‘...land degradation in arid, semi-arid and dry sub-humid areas resulting from various factors, including climatic variations and human activities’ (art. 1). It is important to note that there are debates on the definition of desertification. As Ambalam (2014) citing Darkoh notes the term ‘desertification’ was developed by the French scientist and explorer Louis Lavauden in 1927, and popularly used by the French forester Andre Aubreville. Ambalam (2014) also quotes Amin who indicates that The Food and Agriculture Organization was the first international agency to use the word in 1962.

The problem of desertification is a problem for philosophy for every aspect of the environmental problem raises fundamental problems in moral philosophy or ethics. For DesJardins (2006) environmental problems raise problem about human beliefs and how to behave towards the earth. It is important to note that desertification is an ethical question and poses serious challenges to human society and how we ought to live on earth.

Ethics is concerned with human conduct and behaviour in terms of right and wrong. As a branch of philosophy, it critically examines the standards for measuring morality. On what bases are some actions morally acceptable and others are not? In order words as Ekwealo (2012) asserts: ‘Ethics is a systematic study of the fundamental principles of morality. As a study, it is critical examination of values with the view to having qualitative way of living and conduct’ (p. 1). Today, in the light of the environmental crisis, the dimension of ethics has been widening to include

environmental ethics. Human behaviour towards the natural world is also an ethical question. The question of desertification then is proper in discussion in environmental ethics. Environmental ethics is here understood to mean the philosophical questioning of human behaviour towards non-human species. It is right to propose as Light and Rolston (2003) do that: 'Environmental ethics is...philosophical ethics concerned with describing the values carried by the non-human natural world and prescribing an appropriate ethical response to ensure preservation or restoration of those values' (p.1). It is morally right for humans to act not only for the interests of humans but of all species and all nature.

Most maps of Northern Nigeria show that it roughly refers to most of the areas above the Rivers Niger and Benue (Our Reporter 2014). Northern Nigeria Tourism (2009) indicates that the following nineteen states constitute modern Northern Nigeria: Adamawa, Bauchi, Benue, Borno, Gombe, Jigawa, Kaduna, Kano, Kastina, Kebbi, Kogi, Kwara, Nassarawa, Niger, Plateau, Sokoto, Taraba, Yobe, Zamfara (par. 2). It is generally believed as proposed by Northern Nigeria Tourism (2009) that: 'Northern Nigeria is predominantly occupied by Hausa, Fulani, Gwari, Borim, Kanuri, Tiv, Jukun and many other tribal groups.

Situation of Desertification in Northern Nigeria

Some words need to be said about the situation of desertification in northern Nigeria in order to better understand the predicament of the region. Desertification is a problem that is seriously threatening Northern Nigeria. There are many states in Northern Nigeria that are in the frontline of this issue of desertification. They include the following states: Sokoto, Kano, Adamawa, Kaduna, Niger, Zamfara, Yobe, Borno, Kebbi, Bauchi and Jigawa. Odiogor (2010) shows that in a place like Yobe State for instance sand dunes are

advancing and taking over villages 30 hectares per year. Take note of the following fact given by Odiogor (201

The Northern part of Nigeria is endowed with a large expanse of arable land that has over the years proved a vital resource for agriculture and other economic activities. But the Sahara desert is advancing south wards at the rate of 6.0 percent every year.

Consequently, Nigeria loses about 350,000 hectares of land every year to desert encroachment. This has led to demographic displacements in villages across 11 states in the North. It is estimated that Nigeria loses about \$5.1billion every year owing to rapid encroachment of drought and desert in most parts of the north.

You can see then that the challenge of Northern Nigeria, among others is desertification. The vast Sahara Desert keeps encroaching. That Northern Nigeria is facing a problem of desertification should not be in doubt. Northern Nigeria that is the concern here is the land, the peoples, and their cultures. Permit a long quotation from Emeka (2013) who describes the state of desertification in northern Nigeria as follows:

The areas of the country that are faced with serious desertification are inhabited by 28 million people and over 58 million livestock. An indisputable fact is that most of the region north of latitude 12 0N is heavily prone to ecological degradation. For example, more than 65 percent of Sokoto State is said to be under siege, while about 55 percent of Borno State is afflicted. Today, it may be said that hundreds of thousands of square kilometers of arable land have been lost to desertification in states

such as Sokoto, Zamfara, Katsina, Jigawa, extreme North of Kano, Yobe and Borno States. (p. 47-48)

You can see why it should be an important issue to be discussed. Whatever affects the region affects all of these. The problem of desertification that is the concern here affects not just the land; it impacts negatively on peoples' lives and their culture. It is with this in mind that the ethical issues involved are analyzed.

Ethical Challenge of Desertification

The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (1992) in Agenda 21, chapter 12 indicates that desertification causes poverty, land degradation, decline in land fertility, and agricultural challenges. Because of the challenge of desertification, the United Nations declared 2006 as the Year of Deserts and Fight against Desertification. It is because the problem is still unabated that she has continued to work on the issue. Desertification is a problem for all regions of the world. Recognizing the problems that desertification causes, the United Nations declared the decade lasting from 2010 to 2020 as the 'Decade for Deserts and Fight against Desertification.'

The impact of desertification on humans is so enormous that it must be discussed. Desertification in Northern Nigeria is not a question to be ignored. It raises serious issues of ethical responsibilities and obligations. While desertification that is caused by natural factors is not a moral issue in itself, yet indirectly, it affects humans as they live in the natural environment. They cannot keep quiet or fail to act in the name that it is precipitated by natural factors. In as far as it affects human livelihood and well-being, the human response to it becomes an ethical question. If desertification is enhanced by anthropogenic activities, then it directly raises questions in the realm of environmental ethics. Humans have a duty to protect the environment from degradation. If this is not done, human

behaviour can be said to be immoral with regard to environmental protection. On the question of desertification in Northern Nigeria, it is an important issue not to be ignored

Since humans have the responsibility to protect the environment, whatever they do that degrades the land is an ethical issue then. When humans fail to take responsibility to plant and protect trees that can impede the encroaching desert, they behave in an unethical manner. It will not be enough to say that desertification is natural. One way that desert encroaches is that they come through the seasonal mighty wind that comes from the Sahara Desert. If this wind is not impeded by trees and other obstructions, the sand and other dust carried by the mighty wind continues to move southward, leading to the expansion of the desert. The expansion of the desert greatly affects human livelihood and wellbeing. Omijeh (2008)

The Northern part of Nigeria especially the frontline states comprising of Bauchi, Gombe, Borno, Yobe, Jigawa, Kano, Katsina, Sokoto/Zamfara and Kebbi which lie roughly North of latitude 12^oN face serious threats of desertification occasioned by over exposure of the fragile environment mostly through improper farming techniques, overgrazing by livestock and occurrence of frequent fires and drought. This ugly trend is further exacerbated by increase in the rate of fuel wood extraction especially by communities near to forest reserves due to high costs of alternative sources of domestic energy such as kerosene, gas and electricity.

One source of conflict in Northern Nigeria is often the struggle over grazing lands and farmlands. Cattle herdsman and farmers are often involved in violent conflict over who has right over the arable land. The cattle herdsman are often

moving in search for pastures. In the process, they encroach into farmlands. As the desert continues to move southward, it affects both pasture and farmlands. People's farmlands can be destroyed by the sand and wind coming from the Sahara Desert. Both cattle herdsman and farmers have to struggle over the few remaining pastures. Desertification should be a question of deep concern for humans. Hundreds of people and countless properties have been lost to conflicts which are partly precipitated by desertification and climatic changes. The lost of human lives should be something unacceptable to both individuals and government. If due to human negligence the desert is allowed to encroach on farmlands and pastures, thus causing conflicts, it shows that the humans are irresponsible. Odiogor (2010) opines that:

One noticeable consequences of desert encroachment in the state is its accentuation of poverty, especially on inhabitants along the desert fringes, and the Fulani population is known to be mostly affected as their herdsman are constantly seeking new grazing lands as a result of the desert encroachment.

Desertification degrades the land and water sources. In the process of desertification, a great quantity of sand from the Sahara Desert as noted above is moving southward. Desertification threatens endangered species. Vital organisms, animals, flora and fauna are being threatened by desert sand. Desertification then affects biodiversity. Hook (2008) indicates that large mammals do not typically exist in deserts. In areas in Northern Nigeria where there used to be large mammals, as the desert is encroaching, these mammals have been driven out of their natural habitats. This should be of concern to humans. All species in their natural habitats provides ecosystemic functions. And so when animals are driven out of their natural habitats as a result of

desertification, it creates imbalance in the ecosystem. Humans must take action to stop desertification. Humans are called to be stewards of nature, not destroyers. They should not allow harm to happen to the ecosystem. The reality that desertification in Northern Nigeria precipitates serious problems for humans and the ecosystem should not be in doubt. It can be accompanied by drought which results in deaths of people, livestock, and vegetation and in places such as Borno, Bauchi, Adamawa, Jigawa, Katsina, Zanzara, Sokoto and Kebbi the lives of millions of people and cattle are endangered (Odiogor 2010).

Desertification can be as a result of deforestation. When humans continue to cut down trees either for built environment or even for agricultural practices, it makes it easier for the desert wind and sand to keep moving southward. It is the truism that the trees of the world are the lungs of the world. Trees provide oxygen that is vitally needed by humans to survive. While it is possible for humans to survive without food or water for many days, it is difficult for humans to survive without air even for a few seconds. By depriving humans of enough source that provide the vital oxygen they need, humans do a disservice to themselves if they ignore desertification. Thus, it is an ethical issue. As noted above, desertification can precipitate conflict and violence. People who are not used to living in desert conditions have to adapt and adjust to desert conditions. Ways of life that people are used to for decades can be affected by desertification. Not all can adequately adjust to new conditions. Thus, many people will suffer. It is a human responsibility to combat desertification by planting trees.

During the year 1984, Nigeria launched a tree planting campaign to make people aware of the dangers of desertification and the need to curb it (Odiogor 2010). An important effort that Nigerian government has taken to combat

desertification is the Great Green Wall Project launched by President Jonathan in Bachaka in Kebbi State (The News 2014). The News (2014) states that:

President Goodluck Jonathan on Tuesday launched the implementation of the Nigerian component of the Great Green Wall (GGW) Initiative at Bachaka in Arewa Local Government Area of Kebbi state, north west Nigeria. GGW is a regional afforestation programme designed to create a greenbelt of trees across Africa at the southern edge of the Sahara desert to prevent desertification. It was developed by the African Union to address the detrimental social, economic and environmental impacts of land degradation and desertification on communities bordering the Sahel and Sahara deserts.

In African culture, humans are perceived to be the centre of creation; this does not mean they are the masters. It only implies that all things are created for the wellbeing of humans. Of all creatures, only humans are generally believed to be rational and can take responsibility. Being at the centre of nature, they have to take responsibility to ensure that they don't exploit or mismanage the resources of nature. It becomes irresponsible if they do not live up to their responsibility to be stewards of nature. When humans allow deserts to encroach, it can endanger vital food supply sources and put humans at risk.

Another issue involved in combating desertification is finance. A lot of money is spent by government and other bodies to combat it. All the various agencies created by government have to be run with money. If the people saddled with these responsibilities are not honest they will embezzle the funds and thus the problem is poorly tackled.

Desertification is also a threat to landscape and land space. Land is not just a resource in African cosmology.

Ameh (2008) correctly says that land is held to be spiritual and sacred in Africa. It is the dwelling place not only of humans but also of other creatures and the gods. Odiogor (2010) is right to note that:

That land is one of the most cherished resources of Nigeria is a fact often taken for granted to the extent that not much care is given to adverse conditions that affect this vital resource either through manmade causes or natural phenomena. Land is a symbol of identity in most African countries, a means of cultural affiliation, social and economic survival.

Towards Curbing Desertification

It would not be out of place to note that Nigeria has implemented some policies in trying to combat desertification. Medugu (2009) states that: there was the 1977 National Committee on Arid Zone Afforestation Project which was dissolved in 1985, the Department of Rural Development and River Basin Development Authorities (RBDA) of the Federal Ministry of Agriculture, Water Resources and Rural Development (which absolved the functions of the previously mentioned committee), the Forestry Management Department of the Federal Ministry of Agriculture (which had transferred to it in 1987 the functions of the RBDA); and the Federal Environmental Protection Authority of 1988. With regard to various states governments in northern Nigeria, various programs to combat desertification have been launched and implemented. For instance in Sokoto state, under the government of Ahmadu Daku, a tree planting campaign supported by the World Bank was launched (Emeka 2013). The Usman Danfodio University and the state polytechnic have developed various products such as improved wood stove, biogas plants, solar cooks, heaters, and dryers to reduce wood consumption (Emeka 2013). Emeka (2013) states

further that Borno State has also implemented some measure which includes:

...the felling of trees (control) Edict (Borno State Edict No.8) of 1987 to control the use of wood for fuel and to check the pressure on the states meager forest resources; the Burning of Bush (control) Edict (Borno State Edict No.7) of 1987 to control bush burning. A new ministry of Animal and forestry Resources was established in 1989 to coordinate all desertification control projects in the state and to serve as the headquarters for the Borno State Implementation Agency for the National Committee for drought and desertification control in Nigeria. Ambitious forest scheme was embarked upon, leading to the establishment of village woodlots, several kilometers of roadside plantations of trees, fenced and fully equipped with a borehole as part of the state's multipurpose, Block forestry project; the distribution of tree seedlings annually to various afforestation projects; and the trial planting of indigenous tree species for shelterbelt establishment. Planned grass planting programmes. (p. 51-52)

One problem with Nigeria is that there are inconsistencies in policies and government programmes often change once there is a change in government. Another problem is that policies are poorly implemented. Programmes are poorly managed. There is need for massive awareness and consciousness raising on the issue of desertification. This is where the teaching of environmental ethics which can be done through environmental education, social studies, citizenship studies, and other social courses need to be taken seriously. Philosophers in Nigeria need to be attentive to the issue of the environment. Particularly there needs to be education, and empowerment on how to combat desertification especially

through tree planting and. Combating desertification can also be done through what the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (1992) calls: ‘Encouraging and promoting popular participation and environmental education, focusing on desertification control and management of the effects of drought.’

Conclusion

This paper has examined in an analytic manner the situation of desertification in northern Nigeria. Before that was done the paper made some conceptual clarifications of the terms ethics, desert, desertification, and northern Nigeria. It was revealed that desertification is a serious problem affecting northern Nigeria. It has led to devastation of the environment, destruction of human lives and properties and bio-cultural loss. It was shown that the problem of desertification is an ethical one and ought to be a concern for philosophy and philosophers. Desertification can greatly impede people’s abilities to enjoy the optimal good life that government should provide. If humans and human organizations don’t take adequate responsibility to combat and eliminate it they are failing in their moral responsibilities. It therefore behoves humans to act to stop it and thus create a better harmonious environment for human survival.

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