

SUSTAINABLE HEALTHY ENVIRONMENT: A CHALLENGE TO THE NIGERIAN STATE.

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Abstract

This review paper looked at the obstacles militating against sustainable healthy environment in Nigeria. It frowned at conflicting roles, of agencies, lack of enforcement of environmental laws poor funding and lack of planning as central issues that gave rise to poor environmental health situation in Nigeria. It is advocated that awareness creation, political commitment, enforcement of environmental health laws and the re-introduction of sanitary inspectors will brighten the prospects of healthy sustainable environment in the country.

Keywords: Healthy Environment, Challenges Environmental Regulation.

Introduction

From earliest civilizations, some form of public health has existed. Egyptians, Greeks and Romans, all, at sometime built model towns and had finely developed sanitary systems as part of improving health and vitality. The latrine and flush closet were invented not as some have said during the European Renaissance, but in Crete 3000 years before or earlier. The relation between unsanitary conditions of the environment and health problems, mainly those related to transmission of infectious and parasitic diseases, is well understood, even in the antique era. For instance, the connection between marshy terrain and malaria had been noted-in Roman times and certainly drainage had proved itself to be an effective preventive measure.

The Arabic civilization carried on where Rome and Greece left off. As far back as the Renaissance (.before the 19th' century) Cordoba and other Arabian cities had health departments with sanitary inspectors, now called environmental health officers (EHO). The environmental health officers can thus be said to be the pioneers of Public Health. In fact, the history of Public Health as a discipline cannot be written without them; while Public Health on the other hand cannot be complete without the sub discipline of environmental health.

Environmental health deals with the sanitation of the environment. The environment as we all know is full of hazards; hazards that range from the air we breath to the water we drink, the food we eat, the house in which we live, the solid and human waste we generate in our homes, and other living organisms, many of them disease vectors, with whom we share our environment. Environmental hazard also includes the natural hazards such as desertification, coastal flooding and urban flooding where existing drainage has been blocked.

Industrial development-induced hazards, also called modern hazards, include industrial effluents discharged into open public drains and water channels, outdoor pollution from fumes of industries leading to irritation and diseases of the respiratory tract, engine oil from mechanic workshops estimated at millions of gallons discharged carelessly on the ground and into public drains, vehicular emission with high lead and

carbon monoxide contents, fumes and noise from generators sometimes positioned in the corridor and kitchen of their homes by the occupants, ozone depletion, etc. Compounding the environmental problem highlighted above is the problems of gas flaring and oil spillage in the Niger Delta regions with their serious health and economic consequences, as well as the occasional dumping of toxic waste as was experienced in Koko in Delta State in 1987.

But by far, the greatest challenge to environment and public health in Nigeria has been posed by the problems of municipal solid waste and human excreta (traditional wastes). Solid wastes pile up in the streets of many urban cities or in side dumps, sometimes totally blocking the roads. Soon they decay and serve as feed for great number of domestic and wild-animals, many of which are disease, vectors. Apart from their bad odour, they also lead to proliferation of disease-carrying flies or insects, and when it rains, some of them are flushed into the surface drains clogging them and causing flooding.

In Nigeria, as in many other African countries, sewage systems are found only in large cities. Infact, pit and bucket latrines are still in use in many urban slums. In the villages, bush defecation and defecation in riverbanks is still common and this has been a major cause of worm infestation and frequent outbreaks of water-borne diseases. For instance, epidemics of enteric diseases and urban filariasis have been reported in areas with lack of sanitary toilet facilities, and lack of acceptable waste disposal services has lead to widespread illness and death from ascaris, hookworm and other helminthic infestations. A recent survey of LAGs in Nigeria has shown that a national average of 32% of residents have no modern sewage disposal system but rather relied on bush disposal (Osibogun, 1999).

Consequently, the, urban and rural populace in Nigeria, like their counterparts in other African countries have continued to suffer a number of environmental and public health hazards eradicated or almost forgotten as a problem in developed countries. There is need therefore to take measures to sustain a healthy environment for our people, but in doing so, we face a number of challenges.

The Challenges

What are then the challenges of sustainable, healthy environment?

Conflicting roles of various line Ministries and Agencies First, there is the neglect arising from unclear constitutional responsibilities and inter-agency role conflicts. There are duplications of functions among the regular agencies created to manage the environment. Instead of such duplication to double the efficiency or effectiveness of their functions, it has ironically, led to a situation where no agency took responsibility. As an Igbo adage goes, a cow jointly owned by many persons runs the risk of death by starvation. Everybody's problem is no one's problem.

As you know, a number of agencies have been established in the country to deal with environmental problems and they include:

- a. The Federal Environmental Protection Agency (FEPA);
- b. The State Environmental Authorities (eg ASESA, ENSEPA);
- c. The Federal Ministry of Health through the National Agency for Food and

- Drug Administration & Control (NAFDAC) which assumes responsibility of controlling hazardous chemicals, pesticides and such other substances;
- d. Ministry of Environment created by the federal government, and some state governments.

The inter-agency role conflicts have not only led to apathy and indignation, but as usual with Nigerians, have been exploited in many occasions by polluters to escape apprehension or sanction or penalties. This brings us to the issue of legislation.

Lack of enforcement of existing environmental laws

Apart from the Public Health laws of 1958, (well known to all of us), a number of legal instruments have been promulgated in recent years. Adegroye (2000) lists the instruments as follows:

1. Federal Environmental Protection Agency act, 1988
2. Hazardous Waste (Criminal Provisions) Act, 1988
3. Import Prohibition (Contaminated Food) Act, 1989
4. National Policy on the Environment, 1989
5. National Guidelines and Standard for Environmental Pollution Control in Nigeria, 1990
6. National Effluent Limitation Regulation, 1991
7. Pollution Abatement in Industries and Facilities Generating Waste Regulation, 1991
8. Solid and Hazardous waste Management Regulations, 1991
9. Federal Environmental Protection Agency (Amendment Act, 1992.
10. Environmental Impact Assessment Act, 1992

Apart from some weaknesses in some of these laws (which is not discussed here), it is of urgent concern that, enforcement of the existing environmental laws in Nigeria is grossly inadequate. For instance the Federal Environmental Protection Agency Act of 1988 had made it mandatory for all industries to treat their wastes before burying or discharging them into public drain, but how many industries do that? It is also common occurrence to find industries flagrantly flouting the National Environmental Effluent Limitation Regulation of 1991. The unsatisfactory and unhygienic mode which both government and private sewage tankers discharge raw and untreated sewage into unauthorized places within and outside the urban cities is a pointer to this.

Some of the reasons for lack of enforcement of these laws include (a) Lack of appreciation by government of the seriousness of environmental problems and the need for urgent action on environmental matters. (b) Our slow judicial process leading to undue protraction or delay of cases, including environmental offences. (c) Corruption at all levels in our system. It is noteworthy that laws and regulations are useless without enforcement.

Conflicting Interest of LGA and Governments.

I have discussed as number one challenge the inter-agency conflicting roles. The intra-agency and Intra-government conflicting interest is also a challenge. An

interesting but unfortunate example of this is when a unit of the same government or agency responsible for environmental sanitation, in an attempt to create revenue source, deliberately licenses illegal structure and activities that would pollute the environment. They do this with flagrant disregard to environmental laws, which they are meant to protect. These units or agencies, in their attempt to generate revenue, break their own public health and environmental laws by approving or licensing small stalls and business premises by road side and sidewalks of busy streets. The result of such act is the constant littering of public places and highways, overcrowding and congestion of sidewalks, and the risk of road traffic accidents.

Inadequate Funding by Government

This is partly due to government's lack of appreciation of the enormity and seriousness of environmental problems. But more so, it is due to poor economic condition and dwindling financial resources of the government. With increasing urban population and worsening economic condition, it has become increasingly difficult for government to allocate enough resources for environmental matters, especially in face of numerous conflicting priorities.

Other challenges include:

Population Increase More people more wastes, and so population increase will continue to pose a challenge especially when the rate of population increase is not matched by increase in resources and other developmental activities. In addition, Population explosion and rapid growth of urban cities will lead to shanties and slums without adequate waste and sewage facilities

Lack of Planning Like population increase, will result in shanties and slum formation within adequate waste and sewage facilities. Finally is

Indiscipline of Nigerians This has eroded our culture of cleanliness. In the past, our grandparents swept the compound first thing every morning with their giant broom. The brooms were made of palm fronds - we call them "Oke Okpa" in my area. Refuse, mainly organic materials, generated in the homes was deposited into the forests and bushes well away from dwelling places. Up to the 50's and 60's the "Health inspector" went round the cities enforcing sanitary standards, and even school teachers engaged themselves with enforcement of personal and environmental hygiene. All these have been forgotten and are no longer the case, and this, indeed poses a great challenge to sustainable healthy environment.

Solutions

So what can be done?

Awareness Creation

There is need for grass-roots enlightenment and awakening their consciousness on proper waste management. Massive health education and public enlightenment campaign on matter of waste management should be sponsored by government and assisted by NGO's and other stakeholders. Awareness creation should be carried out through the mass media as message transmitted through these media, e.g. radio, can reach many people. Awareness on fake drugs and on immunization has successfully been created through these media.

Secondly, education on personal and environmental hygiene should be re-introduced into the nursery and primary school curriculum since habit cultivated early in life is not easily forgotten.

Re-introduction of Sanitary Inspectors i.e EHOs

This has been advocated by many recently, although it has its problems. If supported with adequate logistics such as transportation and adequate incentives, and with the assistance of law-enforcement agents, e.g. the police, this measure can go a long way to re-enforce sanitary standards.

Training of environmental health officers should be intensified by government. Their services should be employed during sanitation days to begin with, and later, on more regular basis to be worked out by their employers. Incentives in the form of call duty allowances can be paid to these officers as they are paid to doctors and nurses for extra duty.

Political Commitment:

Government in Nigeria should realize that a health and safe environment is attainable and is sine qua non for the optimum development of human and other natural resource. Government should therefore show more commitment to environmental sanitation by adequately funding and supporting the various agencies with necessary logistic, including refuse handling equipment and vehicles with proper maintenance outfits.

Enforcement of Environmental law and Regulations: Regulations and standards should be enforced equally across the nation and penalties should include fines and jail term for defaulters. The judiciary needs to be strengthened to be able to cope with the enforcement of environmental laws. But more importantly, special courts to deal with environmental offences should be set up in every LGA. This has been done successfully for road traffic offences in many parts of the world, including some African countries.

Finally, regulating agencies should be empowered to be effective. If properly enforced, the environmental law will regulate both individual households and industries generating and handling wastes.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the responsibility for environmental protection and public health cuts across the individual, households and communities (Popular sector), industries (Private sector), and the government (Public sector).

The achievement of a sustainable healthy environment includes community awareness and involvement, as well as clear intent and commitment by government. The health hazards of poor sanitation are numerous and enormous, and environmental sanitation therefore should be treated as a national priority.

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