

ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION, NORTH-SOUTH DEBATE AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Efefiong A. EDET¹ and Emmanuel SUNDAY²

^{1, 2}Department of Political Science, University of Calabar Calabar, NIGERIA

Abstract

This paper interrogates environmental degradation, global North-South debate and sustainable development. It examines the blame game between the developed and developing countries over the increasing degradation of the environment which has birthed deleterious consequences globally. It also reflects on the environmental concerns in both wealthy and poor countries and how they should be addressed so as to guarantee sustainable development. Anchored in the Theory of Collective Goods as the frame of analysis, the paper hypothesizes that the impact of the North's high consumption rate and gas emission along with the South's population explosion and poverty contribute adversely to the environment. Using documentary method with data sourced from mainly secondary sources and relying on inductive analytical technique for data analysis, the paper found out that both parties are responsible for the deplorable state of the environment. The impact of the North's high consumption rate and gas emission along with the South's population explosion and poverty all contribute adversely to the environment. It is recommended, among others, that all countries sign up for the Paris Climate agreement and that the people should be actively involved by the government and other stakeholders in the implementation of environmental policies and programmes if sustainable development is to be achieved.

Keywords: Environmental degradation, Policy, Poverty, Sustainable development.

Introduction

The discourse on poverty, environment and sustainable development to a wider extent derives from the global concern about environmental degradation arising from the natural exploitation and utilization of resources. The issue has remained topical. For instance, Odum (2016) found out that there are serious indications that efforts being made to enthrone the culture of right environmental practices are still inadequate. Accordingly, poverty and environmental degradation remains a major contemporary problem of our time. Owing to this, there is need to address the interface between poverty, environment and sustainable development. Very importantly, the problem has generated much debate between the developed and developing countries, who have blamed the other for environmental degradation and the imbalance of the world ecosystem.

In addressing the foregoing, the paper begins with conceptual clarification of poverty, environment and sustainable development and a discourse of the theoretical frame of analysis. This is followed by an analysis of the nexus between poverty and environment so as to ascertain if poverty is immutably associated with environmental degradation. Lastly, environmental policy and sustainable development will be discussed before conclusion.

Conceptual and Theoretical Discourses

Generally, there is no single definition of the concept poverty, just as there are many theorists who view it from different angles. Poverty can be seen as a general scarcity or the condition of one who lacks a certain amount of money or assets possessions. It is a multifaceted concept which includes economic, social, environment and political elements. Absolute poverty refers to the lack of basic needs such as food, shelter and clothing. In the words of Olowa (2012: 25), broadly stated, poverty can be conceptualized in

four ways as “lack of access to basic needs/goods; or result of lack of or impaired access to productive resources; outcome of inefficient use of common resources and result of exclusive mechanisms”. Expatiating on this, he further explicates that:

Poverty as lack of access to basic needs/goods is essentially economic or consumption oriented. It explains poverty in material terms and specifically employs consumption-based categories to explain the extent and depth of poverty and establish who is and who is not poor. Thus, the poor are conceived as those individuals or households in a particular society, incapable of purchasing a specified basket of basic goods and services. Poverty as o outcome of inefficient use of common resources can result from weak policy environment, inadequate infrastructure, weak access to technology etc. (Olowa: 25)

Poverty can be transient or structural. Transient poverty is conceived as transitory and is associated with natural and man-made disasters. It could be reversed and could transform to structural poverty if it lasts longer. Structural poverty denotes permanent or persistent social and economic deprivations and is associated several factors like lack of skills for gainful employment, limited productive resources, endemic social, political and cultural factors etc. Poverty affects different aspects of people’s lives when they are denied opportunities to work, to learn, to live a healthy and fulfilling life and to live out their retirement years in security. Lack of income, access to quality health, education and housing and the quality of the local environment all affect people’s wellbeing.

There is no universally acceptable definition of the concept of environment. Olurin in Otong (2011) sees it as capable of having many different interpretations as there is professional interest in its different facets. It denotes all physical and biological systems in which other living organisms live (Aina in Otong, 2011). The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English conceptualizes environment as the physical and social conditions in which people live, especially as they influence their feeling and development. Baba in Otong (2011) looks at the environment as the components and systems of the geosphere (e.g soil, flora climate) as it is applicable in the natural sciences or the abundant resources on which man taps to sustain his economic activities and assure his survival and wellbeing. From geographical and environmental point of view, the environment generally consists of human and the physical environment where ecosystem exists. The human environment generally consists of all organisms and human activities in the natural physical setting which includes mining, agriculture, transportation, settlement, industrialization etc while the physical environment consists of hydrosphere, atmosphere, biosphere, lithosphere and cryosphere.

This paper adopts the Theory of Collective Goods as the theoretical framework. In the *Tragedy of the Commons*, Garrett Hardin (1968) expatiated on the theory of collective goods. Here, collective goods refer to resources owned by no one but used by all (for instance, air, the oceans, outer space etc). Their usage encompasses choices and activities that are interdependent. One country’s decisions have implications for others. Put differently, countries can suffer unanticipated deleterious consequences prompted by others’ actions. From this perspective, the production and sale of chlorofluorocarbons by certain countries affects all others as they equally suffer the perennial depletion of the ozone layer.

Based on the foregoing, and in relation to the study, the environmental world-wide, is the common good which has been grossly exploited and degraded through the actions and activities of individuals and firms across the globe and has in turn wrecked havoc on every nook and crannies of the international system irrespective of how involved or not that region is in environmental degradation.

For the wealthy countries, the developing ones should learn from them and eschew environmental implications of unsustainable development. For instance, owing to clear cut logging practices, the developing world’s forests are rapidly disappearing. Because of high-yield, single crop agriculture, the farmlands of the developing world are being transformed into desert... untreated industrial and municipal discharge has made the waters of the developing world undrinkable for humans and unlivable for aquatic life. Being burdened with huge foreign debt, many developing countries, to service this debt, resort to

unhealthy exploitation of natural resources. Further, to leverage their wobbling economy, they compromise international best practices health and environmental standards in order to lure foreign investors who are attracted by the low production costs of the commodity exports. This explains the reason for the relocation of some western businesses operations to these areas.

Just like the North blames for the south for global environmental hazards, the latter also castigates the former as well. For instance, they argue that the western countries have a high rate of using up non-renewable resources and render renewable ones non-renewable. They are home to about 20% of the population of the world, but use up over 80% of the energy of the world (Ross 1991), thus culpable for much of emission of greenhouse gases and gases that deplete the ozone layer. To that end, the countries of the South have been insisting on making the North take up the burden of addressing the world's environmental problems, especially in regards to two issues. As pointed out by Beyerlin (2006) the first subject is climate change for which, at least for the past, the industrialized states are mainly responsible. Curiously, developing states still blame the North for pursuing a policy of eco-imperialism. This is because they believe the North restrain their sovereignty over natural resources, in the process preventing them from becoming industrialized and keeping their products away from the world markets

Propositional and Methodological Considerations

In the main, this study hypothesizes that the impact of the North's high consumption rate and gas emission along with the South's population explosion and poverty contribute adversely to the environment. In doing this, the paper relies heavily on the documentary instrument of data generation and on inductive analytical technique for data analysis. As pointed out in Biereenu-Nnabugwu (2006: 379) the technique "is geared towards the development of explanatory model based on issues that emerge or was observed" Armed with this, the paper sought to find out parties responsible for the deplorable state of the environment.

Poverty, the Environment and Pollution Capacity

The Brundtland Commission (also known as the world Commission on Environment and Development) in the late 1980s established some salient links between poverty and environmental degradation. It opined that most parts of the world are trapped in an invidious downward spiral, in that, indigent people are compelled to overexploit the resources of the environment to eke out a living daily and their degradation of their environment further impoverishes them, making their survival even more uncertain and difficult (WCED, 1987).

Arild Angelsen later called this submission poverty-environment hypothesis (Hayes in Hayes & Nadkarni, 2001). The Brundtland commission presented the hypothesis while articulating proposals for sustainable development. Basically, their report was predicated on the idea that many contemporary trends of development leave surging numbers of people vulnerable and indigent, while degrading the environment simultaneously (WCED in Hayes and Nadkarni, 2001). Most scholars have also expressed conviction on the close link between poverty and environmental degradation. For instance, Anijah-Obi in Nwagbara, Abia, Hyang & Ejeje (2012) maintained that:

... poverty ... is closely linked to environmental degradation. The poor are both victims and agents of environmental damage.... Those who are poor and hungry will often destroy their immediate environments in order to survive. They are responsible for tilling tired soils and cutting down forests. They live in slums and throw waste into gutters and streams, because they lack the basic resources and materials necessary for living within a minimum standard conducive to human dignity and wellbeing.

Sharing similar sentiments, Owens (2013) expressing how poverty impacts on the environment, submitted that poor communities are overly ignorant on how to manage environmental resources wisely

and so engage in harmful ways of using natural resources, like forest wood and soil. They lack proper knowledge of production techniques which results to air pollution and poor water management knowledge which results to air and water pollution respectively. Heady (2000) averred that many poor people, mostly in developing countries depend for their livelihood on natural resources and these people are very vulnerable to deterioration in the resource. This is compounded the more by the increasing population which places more weight on the environment.

Some other writers have argued that excessive debt owed by the Third World accounts for their marginal attention to environmental concerns and non-prioritization of sustainable development in their agenda. Neumayer (2005) posited that many environmentalists share the conviction that the high indebtedness of developing nations triggers increased exploitation and unsustainable natural resources use. For instance, it was documented that a group in the Philippines were of the opinion that the indebtedness of the country leads to mining of coral reefs to export fish, destruction of forests to export wood and the exhaustion of soils through heavy pesticide and chemical fertilizer application to enhance export-oriented agriculture (Neumayer, 2005).

While there seems to be much attention and focus on the linkage between poverty to environmental degradation, it is pertinent to state here that the developed nations also play significant role, as well as with respect to degrading the environment. European Union member-countries, Canada, the United States, among others have been adjudged to be very wealthy in terms of per capita, but quite interestingly they also top the list of countries that perpetrate environmental pollution (Manickam, 2010). China and Russia, for example are plagued by air, water and soil pollution owing to the activities of various industries including those engaged in platinum production (The Blacksmith Institute, 2006). Being that their economies are relatively flourishing vis-à-vis the Third World, these countries hardly make firm commitments to reduce environmental degradation as this will affect their industrial output, a fact that explicates their “hard to get” disposition towards the ratification of the Kyoto Protocol.

As argued by Manickam (2010), trade concerns and issues of the environment do not work hand in hand. Enthusiasts of trade and industry perceive issues of the environment as anathema to their progress. The dividends of environmental normalization are more often than not eclipsed by the drive for profit maximization. So, it can be observed that the issue of environmental degradation is not and should not be limited to practices in poor countries nor should it be tied to poverty immutably. The harmful and unsustainable exploitation of the environment is found across various parts of the world irrespective of the presence of poverty or not.

Little wonder why the blame game between both worlds persists. While the North insists that the explosion in population in the south is the primary factor in environmental degradation, the south argues that it is the North's high rate of consumption that accounts for environmental degradation. Be that as it may, the fact remains that the survival of humans, irrespective of the climes they live in, relies on the environment which ought to be exploited and managed efficiently. Rather, in the process of exploiting the resources of the environment to satisfy mankind's increasing needs, the utilization of culture and technology has caused untold disharmony to the ecosystem. The application of chemicals, soil additives and other non-natural techniques of improving yield have also contributed to environmental degradation which hampers on sustainable development (Nwagbara, Abia, Uyang & Ejeje, 2012).

Environmental Policy and Sustainable Development

The concept sustainable development has been defined in various ways by various authorities. The concept was first used in the world conservation strategy and articulated sustainability in ecological terms rather than economic development. The emphasis was on the maintenance of ecological processes, the sustainable use of resources and maintenance of genetic diversity (Soussan in Osei-Hwedie, 1995). This formulation focused mainly on the physical environment and perceived the economic-environment nexus only in terms of the impact of humans on the environment, thus, attacking the symptoms rather than causes of environmental degradation. It also neglected the notion that poverty and environmental degradation are outcomes of developmental patterns and processes (Soussan in Osei-Hwedie, 1995).

The need and subsequent reformulation of the concept led to the establishment of the Brundtland commission in 1984 which viewed sustainable development as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs. It viewed sustainable development as acknowledging the necessity to foster and maximize economic growth. But this growth should not put the condition of vulnerable people on the line, or drain future viability or capability of the resource base. So the quality of growth was seen as equally crucial as the quantity of growth (Osei-Hwedie, 1995). The Brundtland report identified two cardinal issues in sustainable development (i) the basic needs of all people must be met in a secure and dignified manner, i.e. priority status must be accorded to the needs of the poor; and (ii) development has absolute limits since potential for development depends on the state of technology and social organization, and their impact on the environment (Soussan in Osei-Hwedie: 5). Key policy objectives of sustainable development that the Brundtland report identified are: reviving economic growth, changing the quality of life, meeting essential needs for jobs, food, energy, water and sanitation, ensuring a sustainable level of population, conserving and enhancing the resource base, re-orienting technology and managing risk, merging environment and economics in decision making processes (Soussan in Osei-Hwedie: 5,6).

From the foregoing, a society that is sustainable is one that broader questions of welfare and social needs and economic opportunity are integrally connected to concerns of the environment (Agyeman, Bullard and Evans, 2005). Sustainable development thus raises questions concerning the utilization and control of resources and who wields the power of making decisions on the kind of development to pursue. The logic of sustainable development lies on the idea that the future must not be predicated on qualitatively divergent forms of development than what has been experienced so far (Osei-Hwedie, 1995). It cannot be gainsaid that there is dire need for the achievement of sustainable development all over the world as future generations' wellbeing will be anchored on how well the present generation manages and utilizes its resources, especially with regards to the environment. Although, this task requires the collaboration of both wealthy and poor nations, the developing countries must perforce strive to streamline their efforts towards sustainable development in order to reduce the misery and deprivation of their people. This section discusses how environmental concerns in the developing countries need to be addressed to guarantee sustainable development.

As aptly pointed out by Osei-Hwedie (1995:4), the operational implications of the concept of sustainable development stresses the need for policy to address and integrate several viewpoints. Prominent among them are the economist viewpoint that focuses on methods to maximize human welfare within the contexts and constraints of current capital stock and technologies; the ecologist framework which emphasizes the need for the preservation of ecological subsystems which are critical for overall stability of the world ecosystem, and the sociological view which stresses that humans are cardinal actors in the environment whose patterns of social organizations are basic to solutions for achieving sustainable development. Within this line of thought, inadequate attention to social factors in the process of development adversely affects projects and programmes.

Since the people are instrument, beneficiaries as well as victims of development, their active involvement in any effort towards sustainability must be considered. The stakeholders should involve the poor people directly in environmental policy formulation and implementation through ensuring that the poor are well catered for in terms of provision of their basic needs. This will go a long way in preventing and curbing environmental degradation in the world.

Conclusion

This study focused on environmental degradation, North- South debate and sustainable development. Evidence from the survey of literature in the subject-matter showed that both parties are responsible for the deplorable state of the environment. The impact of the North's high consumption rate and gas emission along with the South's population explosion and poverty all contribute adversely to the environment. Also due to the deprivation and misery of people in the developing countries which makes

them insensitive to environmental concerns, stakeholders should involve the poor directly in environmental policy formulation and implementation, by firstly ensuring that the poor are well catered for in terms of provision of their basic needs, which will provide incentive for them to engage in government's attempt to conserve the environment which will yield sustainable development.

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Biographical Notes

Efiong A. EDET is a Lecturer in the Department of Political Science, University of Calabar Calabar, NIGERIA. Email: efiongedet@yahoo.com 07060723626

Emmanuel SUNDAY is a Lecturer in the Department of Political Science, University of Calabar, Calabar, NIGERIA. His area of specialization and research interest is Political Economy. Email: emmanuelapochi254@gmail.com