

Community Environmental Education and Awareness: A Panacea for Transformation in Nigeria

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Abstract

The paper discusses Environmental Education as education from the environment, about the environment and for the environment. Holistic approach to environmental issues are presented by identifying groups within the community who will become advocates and active participant of environmental conservation in order to guarantee sustainable national transformation. The principle of environmental education, strategies or creating environmental awareness, developing knowledge and skills in environmental conservation and the role of the grassroot populations on sustainable environmental conservation through traditional practices such as taboos, superstitions, ways of recycling and proper disposal of waste in the community are also discussed. Community environmental education and awareness as a panacea for national transformation is given prominence in the concluding part of the paper. Suggestions on the way forward include; adoption of community Environmental Education in science curriculum and incentives for people at the grass root who adhere strictly to environmental management principles.

Keywords: Environmental Education, Environmental Awareness, National transformation

Introduction

Prehistoric man developed knowledge and strategies for exploiting the natural environment consciously or unconsciously. The strategies include taboos, superstitions, common right and law to regulate environmental resources used by people so as to bring about environmental sustainability. The environment refers to the "sum total of all conditions living and nonliving that surround man at a given time. It is the common heritage of mankind, therefore it is the duty of mankind to maintain, protect and improve the quality of the environment as a contribution to the protection of human life and the safe guarding of the ecological balance. Environmental issues like the green house effects, ozone layer depletion, land, air and water pollution, land degradation and erosion just to mention a few have been on the front burner of public as discourse.

It is in recognition of the importance of the environment to man that the Federal Government of Nigeria mandated the Federal Ministry of Environment and other relevant agencies like Federal Environmental Protection Agency (FEPA) to tackle environmentally related issues such as environmental pollution, flooding, erosion, bush burning, desertification, deforestation just to mention a few. As human population increases, the rate of exploitation of the environment increases especially in this era of urbanization and industrialization which leads to environmental abuse and pollution with its corresponding effects on human lives and other living organisms, (Ocheri, 2003).

It is also observed that indiscriminate dumping of refuse, excreta and animal dung as well as unrestricted use of pesticides, insecticides, herbicides and large scale bush burning make the environment unsafe for mankind (Jande 2005)

Lack of awareness, poverty and illiteracy in Nigeria seem to be directly linked to the current level of environmental pollution and degradation in the country. The poor and the illiterate often exploit the environment for their daily survival not minding the effects it has on man: This lack of awareness leads to serious environmental abuse which in turn breeds more environmental problems. The above assertion is supported by World Development Report (1992) which reported that annually, more than 2 million deaths and many illnesses such as typhoid, river blindness and cholera are associated to water pollution, poor household hygiene as well as poor attitudes to environmental management. A number of important questions beg for answers; do we continue in this way? If not what is the way out? Or do we revert to the old ways of using taboos and superstitions to regulate the environment? (Some countries employ cut one plant, plant two). Since environmental education and awareness can lead to good environmental management and consequently reduced illnesses that could result from environmental abuse efforts should be intensified to educate and create adequate awareness for the entire populace

Community Environmental Education

Inyang - Abia and Umaren, (1994) in Wushishi (2009) sees environmental education as education from the environment, about the environment and for the environment. Education from the environment is related to the experiences learned from the environment. While education about the environment is related to the knowledge received about the environment and its utility to man. Education for the environment is related to man's commitment to environmental protection and conservation for sustainable development as well as national transformation (Wushishi 2009). Hence, Community environmental education demonstrates the interdependence of conservation and development through providing positive and feasible alternatives to environmental management to overcome threats to human existence as a result of human activities by communities that may result in problems such as land degradation, pollution, deforestation, desertification, flood, global warming/ climate change and drought (Burney, 1990) From the foregoing it is expected that individuals within a community should develop responsible environmental behaviors such as cut one tree plant two in order to create a conducive environment for national transformation.

Principles of Environmental Education

Environmental Education must involve everyone:- By its very nature and importance, environmental education cannot be confined to any one group in our society. It is a responsibility for everyone – government, industry, the media, educational institutions and community groups- right down to the level of the individual at the grassroots.

Environmental Education must be lifelong. Information about environmental problems is forever improving as we learn from our past experiences and mistakes. As we develop and apply better environmental technologies, the ability of society and individuals to respond effectively also improves

Environmental Education must be practical. One of the most fundamental defining characteristics of effective environmental education is that it must lead to actions such as afforestation, good waste disposal, avoidance of bush burning which will improve environmental sustainability and serve as the yardstick by which we are able to measure the effectiveness of our efforts in environmental education and creating awareness.

Creating Awareness

Every state of the Federation suffers from one form of environmental problem or the other in varying degrees, for instance in the last two years, there was severe flooding where lives and property worth millions of naira were washed away in some parts of Niger, Benue and Kogi States all in the North Central zone. Also serious erosion challenges are found in the east, desertification in the North and oil spillage in the Niger Delta. NEST, (1991) in Babalola, Babalola & Okhale (2010) reported that urban cities and towns in Nigeria are increasingly threatened by pollution of air and water and improper disposal of solid wastes while the rural areas are plagued by soil erosion, deforestation, and bush burning.

In order to contend with these environmental problem, there is the need to create awareness, so that community environmental educators must find partners within the community who will become important advocates of environmental conservation ethics. These partners in the Non-formal education settings include: the media and environmental interest group and organization.

The Media

The Media has a particular responsibility for advancing environmental education in our community because of its pre-eminent role in the dissemination of information. This can be done effectively using local languages to feature stories or documentaries which will highlight the appreciation of natural heritage and create awareness about environmental problems. The Media like television and radio are among the most powerful educational tools that can be used to educate the community about environmental matters through community service announcements. Research findings has shown that television and radio are the most effective tool in creating awareness about environmental issues (Ugboma, 2002; McCarthy & Brennan, 2009 & Babalola, Babalola & Okhale,2010). The effectiveness can be attributed to its cost effectiveness and its ability to cover a wide geographical area compared to the print media. This can be done effectively in partnership with community groups and government agencies.

Environmental Interest Groups and Organization

A major function of any effective environmental interest group is to promote the importance of environmental education and awareness in anyway possible. This can be done through seminars, symposium, town hall meetings, just to mention a few. In order for these interest groups to function effectively, human and financial resources need to be provided Environmental NGO's also have the opportunity to collaborate with other community groups, the government, as well as businessmen to enhance environmental awareness.

Other Community Organizations, Scientific and Cultural groups

Every community organization in Nigeria can make a positive contribution to environmental education irrespective of their primary function, whether it be a Scout Troop, a Church parish or cultural group by incorporating good environmental management habits into their activities and decisions. By fostering a concern for local natural and cultural heritage, through decisions about material use and recycling, as well as encouraging effective participation in environment management in the wider community. Where possible, community groups (especially service organizations) should look to forge productive links with other groups specifically devoted to environmental monitoring and repair.

The Home

The possibilities for environmental education in the home environment are virtually endless. Almost every decision which householders make about purchasing, consuming and disposing presents an opportunity to improve environmental performance. Given the

enormous range and number of decisions made in the average household, adults and Children should constantly be looking for ways to teach each other how to make more environmentally friendly choices.

In addition to looking for ways to re-use, recycle, and reduce waste in the home through choices at the supermarket and decisions about waste disposal, households can also contribute to local ecosystems- for example through decisions made in the garden. By planting native trees and shrubs, and using alternative means to chemicals where possible.

Information on managing the environment in the grassroots can be passed via village heads, clan leaders as well as town-criers in the villages or hamlets.

The Concept of National Transformation in Nigeria

Transformation means a drastic change from one situation to another, a total departure from poor practices to best practice but this requires deliberate effort that will help an individual or a nation achieve its goals. Transformation calls for proactive steps that go beyond mere verbal pronouncements, it requires action that will yield positive results.

“Nigeria vision 20:2020 is aimed at setting goals that will bring about the transformation of the nation with the sole aim of becoming one of the 20 largest economies in the world and establish itself as a significant player in the global market.” The parameters of vision 20:2020 stipulates that; a health sector that supports and sustains a life expectancy of not less than 70 years and which reduces to the minimum the spread of infectious diseases such as HIV/AIDS, malaria, tuberculosis, typhoid, cholera. For instance, life expectancy in Nigeria according to international estimates is 46.94 years; by comparison in Malaysia, a nation which gained independence at about the same time as Nigeria, life expectancy is 74 years. Nigeria as a nation by 2020 hopes to overtake Malaysia by raising its life expectancy from 46.94 to 74 years, this can only be achieved by adequate environmental management attitudes.

Agriculturally, by 2020 modern technologies that will exploit the vast agricultural resources of the nation to ensure national food security and which contributes significantly to foreign exchange earnings are also provided by whom? The Nigerian vision 20:2020 is a reflection of the desire of Federal Government to achieve a broad goal among others which includes; developing her human and natural resources to achieve rapid economic growth. In other words, developing human resource that will exploit our rich natural resources to guarantee high standard of living and self reliance. With this, it is important to note that no society can survive if its natural resources are rendered unfit for use by its people.

The Environment and National Transformation

The environment provides the basis for human exploits for agricultural, industrial, commercial, technological and tourism development of a nation. Hence the relationship between man and the environment is of mutual benefit. Human existence is supported by the environment it will fail to sustain the environment the environment we fail to sustain us. Therefore, it is the basis for national transformation.

According to World Development Report (1992), in Babalola et al (2010) reported that annually, more than 2 million deaths and billions of illnesses such as typhoid, cholera, river blindness and guinea worm are attributed to water pollution and poor household hygiene. Major public health problems are associated with poor environmental sanitation. For example the funds that will be used by government to construct roads and schools will be used to fight diseases like typhoid, malaria etc. which result from poor management of the environment. To support this assertion Gbehe (2004), Ocheri (2003) and Ityavyar, E. M. & Tyav, T. T. (nd) observed that human activities can pollute the environment beyond reasonable doubt and consequently impede national transformation. Hence, it is only through environmental education and awareness that we can create the consciousness of good

environmental management which will help us raise our life expectancy from 47 to 74 years as stipulated in the national transformation agenda.

Conclusion

Environmental education and awareness is a condition for pro-environmental behaviour and sustainable environmental management as well as national transformation,

The objectives of community environmental education is to increase public awareness of environmental problems as well as possible solutions and to lay the foundation for a fully informed and active participation of individuals in the protection of the environment as well as prudent and rational use of natural resources. The paper highlights community environmental education as creating environmental awareness in the rural population which is one of the best options for curbing environmental problems, or educating the public on how to manage, and improving the mutual relationship between human society and the environment in a sustainable manner.

The development of environmental effects (problems) in the twentieth century by modern means of production such as industrialization, use of chemicals by farmers and so on, made it putting environmental management in its proper perspective critical. Developmental effects are coordinated and given focus by environmental management in order to improve human well being and prevent further damage to the environment. Environmental awareness should be holistic; involving everyone literate or illiterate, young or old as well as living in the rural or urban centre so as to create environmental consciousness that enables and supports conservation and management of our rich natural resources as well as habitat to enhance national transformation.

In view of the foregoing it is clear that environmental awareness and education is the panacea for national transformation. Hence, environmental issues requires a holistic approach; involving every aspect of life and everyone within the formal and non formal school setting as well as those in the grassroots.

Recommendations

From the foregoing the following recommendations are made:

- The government (Federal, State and Local Government) and other interest groups should intensify efforts at public enlightenment through the use of local languages to enhance effective communication. Particular emphasis should be placed on the effects of domestic activities that will lead to environmental degradation
- There is need for adoption of Environmental education in science curriculum.
- Government and all stake holders should develop good political will towards environmental issues as well as provide incentives for people in the grassroots who adhere strictly to environmental management principles.
- Providing alternatives for hunters who burn bushes by teaching them how to rear rabbits, rats, squirrels, domestic birds and so on.

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