

## **An Ethical Approach to Addressing the Environmental Dimension of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Nigeria**

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**Abstract:** The global ecological predicaments gave mankind the opportunity to consider whether our environment is being sustainably managed, a prerequisite to achieving the environmental aspect of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The assessment by some researchers have sufficiently proved that the unsustainable ecological management depends on what people think about themselves and the values they hold dear in relation to their environment. Little is known of huge positive impact ethics could play in the treatment of our environment. This study adopts land ethics as a sine qua non for the achievement of environmental sustainability by 2030. The sources of data for the study were gathered through validated questionnaire administered to 2,873 sampled population of University of Nigeria community, only 1,181 questionnaires were retrieved. The study utilized tables, frequencies and percentages for its data analysis.

**Key words:** Development, ethics, environment, Nigeria, sustainable development goals, achievement

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The activities of anthropogenic organisms and introduction of systems as policy frames to attain a balanced ecosystem have remained futile in achieving the goals of development in human society. Though environmental protection and retreating tendency of losses in environmental resources was MDG's priority to be achieved by 2015 (Udjo and Lalthapersad-Pillay, 2015). The associated variables for the failure of millennium development goals and the initiation of policy statements for achieving green environment and economy have been linked and projected as development possibilities within the emerging robust tenets of the sustainable development goals. The quest for achieving the needs of future generation of Nigerians through the instrumentality of sustainability cannot be adequately accomplished without displaying ethical principles and respects to biodiversity. It is a very alluring possibility for the academia to tincture the ethics of humanity with the values of care for human welfare sustained over eons by the exhaustible resources of the world's ecosystem.

In the field of environmental science scholarship, the construct of ethics has entertained myriad of debates and contributions from scholars. Recently, the introduction of the construct in environmental sciences has depicted something nearing the problematic. According to Ike (2016), he observed how the concept of ethics has become compellingly pervasive in every scheme of things. Accordingly, he notes that:

“The topic of ethics, though ancient in its origin has in our time and clime become a novel and compelling subject both in its theoretical and practical engagements... in ending unethical behavior, conflicts of interest and insider dealings and has become a better way to conduct the affairs of men and women: the ethical way.

The above portrays that there is ethics of everything: the ethic of philosophy, ethic of administration and recently, the ethics of environment. The application of ethics and morality in the environment is a path way to ensuring lasting panacea for achieving sustainability of the ecosystem. The environmentalists insist on moral regeneration of mankind to ensure a just and equitable distribution of resources (Mba, 2006). The ethics of environmental sustainability will be more appreciable when individuals of all countries, inclusive of Nigeria, realize their responsibility to maintain a clean and congenial atmosphere for the globe. That way, they will make it worth living for the present and as well as for future generations yet unborn (Mba, 2006). Environmental ethics is not limited to man only but involves applying moral standards applicable to human beings to other species and organisms such as under animal rights and environmental resources. They should be adequately valued because they are from natural processes rather than from human activities. Even with the poor treatment of other species and environment, it has become obvious that it is disastrous to human beings

instigating catastrophe to human species as well (Olen and Barry, 2002). In their research on 'Philosophy, religion and the environment in Africa: the challenge of human value education and sustainability' Chukwunonyelum *et al.* (2013) rightly observed that:

The environment is the complex set of physical, geographic, biological, social, cultural and political conditions that surround an individual or organism and that ultimately determine its form and the nature of its survival. The environment influences people live and how societies develop. For that reason, people, progress, economic development and the environment are closely linked. The environment also pose risks. Air pollution, waterborne diseases, toxic chemicals and natural disasters are some of the challenges the environment presents for mankind.

This proves, beyond every reasonable doubt that moral consideration is a vital tool for achieving sustainable development in every society. Furthermore, Busoi (2014) noted that "sustainable development is defined based on moral values and principles, a rational use of the resources and environment protection".

This conception, he maintained is a practical moral way of accomplishing the environmental dimension of sustainable development. Morality is a unique feature of the life of human beings. It is deeply influenced by several cultural factors such as history, traditions, education and religious belief. The goal of morality and ethics is much more modest: to explore the nature of moral experience, its universality and its diversity (UNESCO, 2016). However, it is based on these ethical standards that the paper sets to review cogent extant literature in this area of investigation.

**Literature review:** There tend to be myriad of theories and models in available literature for the understanding of man and his environment. Not with standing the availability of other theories and models utilized by scholars, this study aims at taking a paradigm shift from previous theoretical pontifications in the fields of social sciences, environmental sciences and chemistry. However, the adequate appreciation of the study will rely on the theories of land ethic as propounded by Aldo Leopold in his magnum opus; titled: Aldo (1977) and Taylor (1981) in his research; environmental ethics. According to Aldo (1977), he propounded that:

"Humans are to begin thinking themselves as part of a wider community; the biotic community which includes not only all living things but also members of the ecological system including water, soil and air".

This implies that it is high time we began to ponder or think of ourselves ethically as members of a team, living and working harmoniously with others to achieve the ethical management of the human environment and nature (Olen and Barry, 2002). According to Aldo, "land ethics is often considered to be holistic ethics; that is, we have duties not just to individuals but to the whole; the biotic community" (Aldo, 1977; Olen and Barry, 2002). Furthering his postulation, Aldo argues that a new stage of ethical development is required; a stage he claimed that will deal with our relationship to the land. As members of the land, biotic community, we have potential obligations, duties and to adequately preserve its integrity, stability and beauty just as we have obligations to the human community. Also, Taylor (1981), on the ethics of respect for nature presents an alternative theory of environmental ethics to Aldo Leopold's land ethic, through non-anthropocentric channels of being sensitive to ecological issues. It is individualistic rather than holistic (Olen and Barry, 2002). According to Taylor, "the principal moral concern of environmental ethics is individual organisms not the biotic community." He also maintains that:

"Respect is an ultimate attitude, one that is not derived from some other moral norm but is fundamental ... we should adopt attitude of recognition that all living things, not just humans have inherent worth".

The above depicts respects and care for the nature or environment. To care is something more than merely an act or an attitude among other attitudes. Olen and Barry (2002) emphatically quoted that, "we should care about our environment because it is our environment". This means that we must appreciate the tenet of taking care; a fundamental mode of being which is always present and cannot be removed from reality (Boff, 2008). It is understandable that without care for the nature, human being ceases to be a human being and it is for this single reason that to care must be appreciated and understood as part of the human essence. According to Ogungbemi (1997) in his 'African perspective on the environmental crises he opined that ethics of care is essential to traditional understanding of environmental fortification and conservation. He went on to include the ethics of taking more than one needs from nature has its own consequences. Moreover, Olen and Barry (2002) pointed out that incorporating respect into all human decisions that affects the environment is the goal of ethics. Humans only need to treat nature in accordance with an attitude of proper respect as nature isn't here just for human purpose as it has its own integrity which also befits human in many ways, human goods are not the only good all interest should count, it is only ethical, the biotic community is like human community with ecology

teaching, it is well known that each part of ecosystem is a member of a community and they work together to maintain the good of the whole. In emphasizing on the risk of not taking care, Aldo (1977) maintained that:

Each recession of plants types bred erosion, each increment to erosion bred a further recession of plants. The result today is a progressive and mutual deterioration, not only on plants and soils but of the animal community subsiding thereon.

There is no substitute for addressing the environmental dimension of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Nigeria, if ethics is not taking into consideration in all environmental domain.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

**Data and methods:** Due to the moral concerns of the study, the study adopts documentary method; the data were sourced through questionnaire administered to 1,181 University of Nigeria, community. Also secondary sources of data collection were; text books, magazines, internets, journal articles, newspaper, mimeographs were adequately utilized while sourcing for its data (Table 1-4).

**Data presentation:**

Table 1: Percentage distribution of respondents by background characteristics

Socio-economic characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
<b>Sex distribution</b>		
Male	613	51.91
Female	568	48.09
Total	1,181	100.00

Table 2: Age distribution of the respondents

Age distribution (years)	Frequency	Percentage
20-29	216	18.29
30-39	73	6.18
40-49	421	35.65
50-59	385	32.60
60 and above	86	7.28
Total	1,181	100.00

Table 3: Marital status of the respondents

Marital status	Frequency	Percentage
Single	286	24.22
Married	731	61.90
Divorced	69	5.84
Widowed	95	8.04
Total	1,181	100.00

Table 4: Educational qualification of the respondents

Educational qualification	Frequency	Percentage
Ph.D/MSc	86	7.28
BSc/BA/B.Ed/HND	684	57.92
SSCE	258	21.85
FSLCE	153	12.95
Total	1,181	100.00

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Arising from the investigation of the study, it was observed that various policy statements and actions had been adopted to appreciate the operational aspect of environment as contained in the goals of sustainable development. The findings indicate that the adoption of ethical approach while conserving the environment is the only veritable tool of social engineering aimed toward achieving the environmental goals of sustainable development in 2030. The result depicts that, since, ethics and sustainable development are inseparable, sustainable development cannot be achieved without taking adequate cognizance and integration of environmental ethics into each country’s specific policy frameworks (Table 5-7).

The discussion of present outcomes and results is aimed at exploring other contributions to the field of scholarship in investigation, identifying the essence and the lacuna. However, effort will be expended on appreciating the ethical dimension toward achieving the environmental goals of sustainability. To this end, the discussion of the study will be done thematically.

Table 5: Responses of the respondents on the causes of environmental degradation

Variables (V)	No. of respondents	Percentage
Indiscriminate burning of bushes and forests	173	14.65
Hunting of animals for food	216	18.29
Continuous cultivation of land	267	22.61
Indiscriminate emission of gases to the air	311	26.33
Felling of trees	214	18.12
Total	1,181	100.00

Table 6: Responses of the respondents on the effects of environmental degradation

Variables (V)	No. of respondents	Percentage
Encouragement of arid and desertification	195	16.51
Heightening the rate of global warming	203	17.19
Acidic rain	179	15.16
Deterioration of the aesthetics	361	30.56
Extinction of wild lives	61	5.17
Poor yields and productivity	182	15.41
Total	1,181	100.00

Table 7: Institutional policies of SDGs toward free biodiversity

Variables (V)	No. of respondents	Percentage
SDGs has achieved much on protection of the environment, since, 2015	81	6.86
Inconsistency in policy frames undermine the achievement of SDGs environmental policies	238	20.15
Resort to ethical behavior helps sustainability of the environment	513	43.44
Lack of political will in third world countries compromises the actualization of the environment goal of SDGs	187	15.83
SDGs has not evaluated the flaws of MDGs properly for its sustainability of the ecosystem	162	13.72
Total	1,181	100.00

**Environmental ethics and moral justice; The Nexus between anthropocentric and non-anthropocentric:**

The prevailing state of environmental challenges and appreciation of conventional ethical designs to halt ecological havocs bring clearer prospects to contemporary societies. The issue of environmental ethics is momentous and involves moral choices of enormous importance that we can make and even more which we must make (Patra, 2014). Human beings have moral interests over the interest of other species but it is imperative and ethical to respect all life forms including animals. Animals as components of the environment deserve their rights of existence. However, the failure of other previous policy frames in attaining sustainable development was as a product of total negligence of man to apply vital moral values and principles of care and balance in his utilization of mankind's environmental resources. It is only through such ethical decision making platforms that accomplishments of sustainable visions can come through and empower a visceral achievement of the goals of development.

Moreover, it is accepted that biotic and abiotic entities other than humans should be protected, hence, these entities are valuable only due to their provision of benefits for human beings. Accordingly, Rajalakshmi (2016), maintains that the natural resources must be used in a limited way; and that if future generations are to enjoy a high quality of life, then the current generation's plans, programs and policies must guarantee the integrity and balance of mankind's natural resources. For example, on demographic ethics, he avers that to fail to develop ethically sound solutions to the population problem and our relationship with the biosphere is a mistake we cannot afford to make (Rajalakshmi, 2016). Moreover, due to technical gaps in knowledge capacity of the human factors of management, it is important to reconsider ethics and values not only to supply the missing equation in human development matrix but to use and contextualize it as the sustainable solution to the problems of environmental degradation toward achieving sustainable development in our society.

However, according to the reports by UNESCO (2016) we are morally compelled "to prevent a continuing decline of natural resources over time, a drastic change in patterns of production and consumption is necessary; the way we are using natural resources need to be transformed". The report continues further, "to establish the intrinsic ethical value of nature; that nature has a value in and of itself, regardless of any benefits to human. It is therefore, more help to regard sustainable development as an embedded sphere of value in itself and in nature (Heywood and Watson, 1995; UNESCO, 2016). The ethical theory of environmental management posits, therefore, that the environment has an inherent value in itself that gives it a right to be managed ethically and proportionately without excessive commercialization through exploitation. The recent concerns of man toward

his immediate environment, aimed at conservation Foltz (1995) and Rajalakshmi (2016), identified the ethics behind environment for sustainable development. They aver that environmental ethics is maintained via. the equitable utilization of natural resources, prevention of sacrifice of animals, environmental rights of animals, prevention of eco-terrorism etc. However but tressing the above, UNESCO (2016) highlighted basic principles of environmental ethics to include:

**Respect for nature:** The prosperity of human beings depend on the prosperity of nature. Human beings are part of nature and they have the moral duty to conserve and protect the integrity of the ecosystem and its biodiversity.

**Environmental justice:** Environmental benefits and burdens should be equally distributed and opportunities to participate in decision-making concerning environmental issues should be equally provided.

**Intergenerational justice:** Every generation should leave the succeeding generation an equal opportunity to live a happy life and should therefore bequeath a healthy earth (UNESCO, 2016).

**Ethics; Re-tooling a moral engine for achieving green economy:** In the nascent literature on environment, ethics has been conceived to be a driving force and played huge roles in surmounting the further devastation of environment for human habitation. This is to say that ethics and morality are sine qua non for achieving environmental sustainability come 2030. According to Patra (2014), sustainable development is said to be a pattern of resource use that aims to meet human needs while preserving the environment, so that, these needs can be met not only in the present but also for future generations. Implicated herein is that the utilization of the resources of the nature of environment calls for application of ethics and moral justice. There is the need to expand moral consciousness on the use of available dividends of ecosystems in a sustainable manner. Sustainable management of our ecosystem is an ethical management with values that preserve them for the future. However, explicating further on the veritable tool of ethics in enhancing the sustainability of the environment, Jeffery (2005), views sustainable development from environmental ethical perspective. He extends the logic of sustainability of the environment for development from the traditional appreciation of the Brundtland report; taking into cognizance ethical issues relating to a wide range of economic, social and cultural factors which help in achieving goals of sustainable development through values of equity, justice, temperance and wisdom in the choices concerning the environment.

Furthermore, Rajalakshmi (2016), Hargroves and Smith in their related contributions underscored some ethical principles that could help to achieve the goals of

sustainable development. Accordingly, they maintained an integration of environmental, social, human and economic goals in policies and activities, equal opportunity and community participation, dealing transparently and systematically with risk, uncertainty and irreversibility and appropriate evaluation, appreciation and restoration of nature. Defending this stand, Rajalakshmi (2016), felt remorse to establish the relationship between moral choices of good and bad between man and his immediate environment. He avers that ethics as a moral consideration and socially validated instrument for achieving sustainability is always concerned with the traditional dos and don'ts established by human beings to maintain balance and preserve the environment. It is an appreciation of the environmental ethical rights of all biotic and non-biotic factors of the ecosystem; a trending vehicle for achieving the environmental dimension of sustainable development goals.

### **CONCLUSION**

It is a thing to recollect that despite avalanche of techniques and policy frame works to preserve the environment, humans had in recent time drawn a paradigm shift of programs and policies to reconcile man to his environment. But the reverse is then the case, the failure of the policies to accomplish the philosophy of conserving the environment and nature for future generations necessitate the dramatic change and radical crusade on the adoption of ethical approach toward achieving the environmental aspect and goal of sustainable development. It is correctly recommended by Udjoa and Lalthapersad-Pillay (2015) that future goals should be built on a shared vision of development.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

However, arising from the results of the findings, the study herein establishes the following recommendations: Efforts should be reinvigorated to re-educate the minds of the Nigerian youths to imbibe the act of respect for the mother earth. It could be achieved by introducing the teaching of ethics as a general study for all students in tertiary institutions; there should be an adequate care for the community of life with understanding, compassion and love.

Regular ethical evaluation of government's environmental policies/programs should be established to ensure equitable utilization of natural resources. Efforts should be maximized to reduce depletion of non-renewable resources.

Country level and regional legislations should be enacted and implemented for the ethical management of the eco-system. Government policies should have pre-formulation participation and evaluation by the people to ensure that indigenous people's ethical values and care for the environment are integrated into every aspect of development policy.

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