

Media, Environmental Sustainability and National Development in Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper takes a look at Media, Environmental sustainability and Nigeria National development against the backdrop of a rapidly changing climate, with dire consequences for human comfort and survival. The theoretical framework for the qualitative study is the development media theory which attempts to explain the normative behaviour of the mass media in the developing countries. Relying on existing published work as well as observations, certain conclusions were inevitable. The paper found that the state of the environment is pitiable. Ironically, human beings, the greatest beneficiaries of the earth's resources, are the most guilty in destroying it through such actions as water/air pollution, over grazing, illegal felling of trees, excessive and unapproved hunting, etc. All these activities put the flora and fauna at risk, and deplete the ozone layer. The realization that the earth is endangered has prompted several human reactions including the convening of summits to address the problem and proffer appropriate solutions. It is suggested that persons in authority must think through the problem of environmental sustainability and come up with incisive and workable solutions in addition to other approaches.

INTRODUCTION

TIME, the authoritative international news magazine based in New York, devoted its entire November 1997 edition to the earth and its sustainability. The special issue, entitled "Our Precious Planet: why saving the Environment will be the next century's biggest challenge", drew attention to the threat faced by Planet Earth as a result of human activities. Published just a little over two years into the 21st century, the story was obviously the most comprehensive on issues of the environment. Its editor, Charles Alexander had noted, "this special issue is our most comprehensive look yet at what could be the biggest story of the 21st century: the fight to save our endangered planet".

Indeed, Alexander could not have been more correct. Sixteen years since the story was printed and with the 21st century already in its second decade, issues of environmental sustainability remain in the front burner of national and global agendas. Governments, non-governmental agencies and other interested persons have often made verbal commitments to protecting the earth – our fragile inheritance from nature. The challenge has been how the present generation may use the environment and hand it over to future generations without compromising it in any way.

But the reality on ground tends to portray the contrary. For instance, a lot of environmental degradation is going on. The tropical forests are fast disappearing; soil erosion is becoming more devastating; the rivers and oceans are bursting in their seams with terrible consequences on those living several kilometres from rivers, dams and oceans. Out of ignorance, carelessness, idleness or sheer mischief, many persons have contributed in no small measure, to the environmental degradation that hurts humanity today. Through different human activities, the ozone layer which protects the earth from the harshness of the sun, has been brutally depleted, air and water sources have been polluted, floods have washed off topsoil leaving unfertile soil unable to sustain crops as well as degrade land and destroy human habitations.

The mass media, across different geographical regions, in their social responsibility obligations, have frequently drawn attention to the need to be more environmental friendly in all activities. This is not only necessary but imperative if human survival will not be impaired in the nearest future.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

At this juncture, there is need to define some of the concepts that are key to this presentation. These are mass media, environment and development.

Mass Media: According to Raufu (2003, p.8) "mass media are the modern means of giving information to a large number of people". Essentially, this suggests that the mass media are all the channels, through which public information is disseminated often to a 'mass' audience. Of course, such is possible through advanced technology that has been developed for that purpose. Indeed, the mass media are usually classified into print and electronic media. Print media include newspapers, magazines, circulars, pamphlets, direct mail, billboards, sky-writing and any technical device that carries a message to the masses by appealing to their sense of sight. Electronic media refer to radio – audio recordings that appeal to the sense of sound – and television i.e. motion

pictures and video recordings that appeal to both the sense of sound and the sense of sight (Alabi, 2006, p.96).

Environment: Former American Vice President Al Gore (1997) describes environment thus:

when we consider a subject as sweeping as the environment, we often focus on its most tangible aspects – the air we breathe, the water we drink, the food we put on the table. Those things are critically important. But to me the environment is about something less tangible, though not less important. It is about our sense of community – the obligation we have to each other, and to future generations, to safeguard God’s earth.

Such a thoughtful and holistic explanation of the environment is needful in appreciating our responsibility to ensure the continuation of the human race through the presentation of the environment.

According to Adaikpoh, (2012, p.4) environment is our surroundings which include all forms of life (plants, animals and human beings) air, water, land, buildings, parks, vehicles, etc. Adegroye (1997, p.12) sees it as the aggregate of the physical and biological entities of the outside of man and supporting the existence of man whether on land, in water or air”. Taken together, environment would suggest all the natural endowments and those provided by men in his efforts to make life more meaningful and comfortable. It means everything that affects man in anyway – land, water, air, trees, forests, grasses, houses, cars and others.

Development: The quest for development is a perpetual concern of humanity. From the pre-historic time to the industrial age and now the information communication and technology era, man has always sought to improve human conditions. Amucheazi (1980 p.4) sees development as a multi-dimensional process, involving the totality of man in his political, economic, psychological, social relations, among others”.

In the same vein, the United Nations defines development as “multidimensional undertaking to achieve a higher quality of life for all people”. Economic development, social development and environmental protection are interdependent and mutually reinforcing components of sustainable development. Such growth should be broadly based so as to benefit all people through the eradication of poverty, hunger, disease and illiteracy, the provision of adequate shelter and secure employment for all and the preservation of the integrity of the environment (Ajana, 2001). Appropriately, the foregoing definition emphasizes environmental integrity as an essential component of development. Besides, development has to be sustainable in such a way that it “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Ajana, 2001). Similarly the environment must be used and managed in a sustainable manner. This is not only necessary but imperative.

Theoretical Framework: There is a healthy relationship between theory and practice because both should be mutually reinforcing. Given the topic of interest which focuses on media and environmental sustainability in national development efforts, the theoretical underpinnings revolve around the development media theory which is generally in operation in developing countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America.

The development media theory, according to Folarin (2002, p.35), seeks to explain the normative behaviour of the mass media in countries that are conventionally classified as ‘developing’ or ‘third world’ countries. The theory takes into consideration the special or difficult circumstances under which media organizations operate in the emerging countries. Relying on McQuail (1987), Folarin (2002, p.35) outlines the major tenets of development media theory to include:

- i. Media must accept and carry out positive development tasks in line with nationally established policies.
- ii. Freedom of the media should be open to economic priorities and development needs of the society.
- iii. Media should give priority in their content to the national culture and language(s).
- iv. Media should give priority in news and information to links with other developing countries, which are close geographically, culturally or politically.
- v. Journalists and other media workers have responsibilities as well as freedom in their information gathering and dissemination tasks.
- vi. In the interest of development ends, the state has a right to intervene in, or restrict media operation; and devices of censorship, subsidy and direct control can be justified.

Nwanne (2012) noted that, the idea of development media takes into account the peculiar, often restricting, circumstances under which media organizations in developing countries operate. Apart from the different circumstances under which media operate in different socio-political environments, the media, irrespective of location, have an undying desire to protect the polity, enhance and ensure environmental sustainability.

State of the Environment

A cursory observation would reveal that maintaining environmental integrity does not seem to be one of

the strongest points of policy maker in Nigeria, There seems to be a disequilibrium between man's activities and consumption and the level of replenishment of the earth resources. Indeed, there seems also to be a clear threat to the biodiversity. According to Adaikpoh (2012, p.34):

Biodiversity describes the three essential groups necessary to preserve the ecologic system. These are (i) generic diversity which is a measure of the variety of different versions on the same genes within individual species (ii) species diversity which is the number of different kinds of organisms within individual communities or ecosystems; and (iii) ecological diversity which is the amount of richness and complexity of a biological community; including the number of niches, tropic levels, and ecological processes that capture energy, sustain food webs and recycle materials within this system.

The need to protect the biodiversity is crucial for human survival and as such all must be involved in this process. From the spiritual and physical dimensions, the human species is the most important on earth. Everything was created just for the comfort of man but this may be compromised if the carelessness about nature and its most important resource – earth – is not reversed. Even though the earth is meant for human comfort, ironically, humans have been 'implicated' in running down the earth's resources. According to an earlier research carried out by Benjamin Santer and his team of scientists under the aegis of the United Nations (1995) reviewed one of the most controversial theories ever to emerge from the halls of science: the bold contention that carbon dioxide and other so called green-house gases produced in huge quantities by industrial societies are inexorably warming the planet" (Time Magazine, special edition 1997, p.38). If there was any doubt about the influence of human activities such misgivings should have dissipated after the confident and unequivocal conclusion of Santer's multi-national panel of scientists to the effect that " the balance of evidence suggests that there is a discernable human influence on global climate"

In the past few decades, scientists and other lovers of the earth have warned about climate change which may portend some levels of discomfort or outright harm to the human race. According to the special issue of *Time Magazine* "The US State department warns that unless significant steps are taken soon, greenhouse gas concentrations will very likely triple in a hundred years, reaching levels higher than at any time in the last 50 million years.

The impact is just beginning to be felt: a 5°C warming over the last century. That increase may seem modest, but a 3°C cooling brought on the most recent Ice Age. Not only has the temperature risen on average, but the warming is becoming more intense. The sultriest three years in the century have occurred in the last decade (1987-1997), and the hottest year ever recorded was 1995. Since the special report was published in 1997, ecological issues have continued to command more print space and air time in the media of mass communication. With the buzzword of climate change, the ecosystem is being tempered with or altered in important ways in the globe. Even as far back as 1997, *Time Magazine* had stated that:

There are the unusual frequent bouts of unusually nasty weather: flooding in Central Europe, vicious cyclones in South East Asia, freak sprink snowstorms in the American plains. It's not all certain that the severity of these storms has anything to do with long term climate change, but scientists have a possible explanation. If the earth is indeed warming, some of the heat raises the air temperature a bit, but more of it causes increased evaporation of water. In fact, scientists have found that the amount of moisture in the air has gone up 10% in the last 20 years (1977-1997). The extra moisture could disrupt weather patterns, producing stronger, more frequent storms in some areas and drought in other places.

Given the above scenario, in the second decade of the 21st century, it would seem that climate change has become a reality, with its unexpected and usually unpleasant consequences. As a result of its pervasiveness, climate change is a subject in which practically everyone seems to be a practitioner, ranging from the politician seeking votes to the house wife who does not wish to be left behind in the present knowledge economy.

In Nigeria, climate change was initially discussed as one of those idle talks of arm chair analysts and scholars. Not much was heard about the subject even among the political and economic elites. But in the past few years its reality has become so obvious that it can only be ignored at the peril of those concerned. Somehow, the rainy and dry seasons in Nigeria have been altered to some extent. At times, the rainy season begins a little earlier while the dry spell drags on for a little longer

Assault on the Environment

The state of the environment in Nigeria today is saddening. Human activities have had negative effects. The rain forest belt with its hitherto rich biodiversity is fast disappearing. The implication for the continued

survival and sustenance of the human race is grim. Indeed if the earth is not used in a sustainable manner, human survival would be at great risk as air is polluted, water is contaminated, the oxygen-producing plants disappear as well as the depletion and ultimately the disappearance of fishes and animal life. The implication of this for food security is frightening, especially in Sub-Sahara Africa where food security appears to be a luxury, due largely to poor planning and agricultural practices and a debilitating level of poverty. The poor state of the environment is sharply reflected in the level of flooding, de-forestation, soil erosion, pollution and other evidence of assaults on the planet.

Flooding and Erosion: Many coastal states in Nigeria were flooded beyond imagination in the 2012 rainy season. The problem affected states such as Delta, Benue, Kogi, Adamawa and even some Northern States such as Sokoto, Kaduna where the usual problems are desertification and aridity, were not spared.

Ozone Layer Depletion: According to Adaikpoh (2012,p.17), the ozone layer is basically found at a height of about 20-30 km above sea level. The ozone layer provides a protective layer, which prevents the penetration of the sun's harmful ultraviolet rays". The understanding here is that the ozone layer is nature's protection against the direct effects of the harsh rays of the sun. By so doing, the rays that hit the earth will have been 'moderated' before reaching the human beings. But as a result of harmful practices such as pollution, there is a gradual destruction of the protective layer. Adaikpoh's (2012) explanation that the pollution of the atmosphere from the release of the chloroform carbons (CFCS) gases causes the depletion of the ozone layers and this results in environmental degradation. Ukpong (1994) strengthens the above point with his observation that the low productivity in agriculture is caused by ultraviolet rays. Also an increase in ultraviolet radiation affects water bodies, disturbs aquatic life, which supports the food chain, and causes the death of fishes that feed us Over exposure to ultraviolet rays can cause skin cancer and eye problems like cataract and blindness. It also results in stunted growth of plants.

Reclaiming the Environment

The realization that the earth is endangered has prompted several human reactions. According to Osuntokun (1999. p.153) as cited in Ajibade (2003, p.21), concerns over environmental degradation reached a crescendo in 1972 when the United Nations sponsored a conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm Sweden. A major outcome of the conference was the setting up of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) which has its headquarters in Nairobi, Kenya. Other efforts include the Earth Day of 1990 and of course the widely reported Earth Summit of 1992.

Ajibade (2003, p.21) captured the event thus:

...a world-wide environment summit tagged Earth Summit, or formally, United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), was convened in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil to address Global concerns on environmental pollution. A major achievement of the summit is the preparation of a document known as Agenda 21, which contains provisions on how to address environmental degradation by all nations of the world

Despite the well thought out ideas contained in the document, it does not seem that many countries, especially the developing countries, are doing much to uphold the integrity of the document. The heaps of refuse, thoughtless deforestation and other acts inimical to the environment do not suggest that great lessons have been learnt in managing the environment.

The Role of the Mass Media in Environmental Sustainability

The media in Nigeria and internationally have made gallant efforts in bringing ecological issues to the front burner of national discourse. The recent flooding of towns along coastal area has attracted media attention. Many of such stories commanded front page attention in the newspapers and magazines while a lot of air time had been devoted to the problem. Besides news programmes, many radio and television stations have used their media to rally support for the victims of ecological infractions, urging citizens to donate whatever they could to the unfortunate victims. Bronze FM, a radio Station based in Benin City, Midwest Nigeria frequently airs public service announcement urging residents to "stop dumping refuse into the drains" so as not to worsen the problem of flooding. Different media organizations made airtime and space available to draw attention to the huge floods of 2012 and other environment issues in the country.

Expectedly, newspaper, magazines radio and television stations in Nigeria gave adequate coverage to the devastating floods in many states

As the *Sunday Sun* (September 30, 2012), Nigeria's tabloid reported:

Nothing can better describe the condition of Anambra riverine communities than anguish, pain and poverty. These resulted from flooding when the River Niger overflowed its banks. Many communities in some local government

areas of the state have been at the mercy of flooding and erosion and other ecological disasters since the beginning of the rainy season.

Indeed the same incident has occurred in many other coastal states of Nigeria, causing a huge humanitarian crisis. The floods swept away villages and communities. The respective governments at different levels have responded by setting up rehabilitation camps on higher grounds to assuage or mitigate the sufferings of the victims. The floods were so serious that lives were lost in many instances. Apart from the immediate impact of the angry floods, a middle term problem is the inevitable outcome of the floods on the farmlands of the communities who are naturally farmers. Given the country's inconsistent agricultural policies that do not seem to worry about food security issues, the loss of those farmlands has clearly unpalatable effects on the food security situation of the country. At the moment, prices of foodstuffs are sky-high as a result of short fall in supply. The prices of food items will be better imagined in the next season. There is nothing to suggest the government of the day is taking any strategic measure to avoid a looming famine.

The fore going problem has been quite serious in the past few years. Apart from the occasional 'anger' of the lagoon in Lagos, Nigeria's former capital, increase in the level of rainfall especially in the south west in the last quarter of 2011 has brought unprecedented misery for residents of Ogun and Lagos States. According to a *Sunday Tribune* report on September 30, 2011:

while Lagos being a coastal city, has been under the mercy of the rains that came in the year, the sleepy city of Ibadan, the Oyo State Capital, was rudely woken up to its detriment when on August 26, the city witnessed increased rainfall, leading to the death of hundreds and the destruction of possessions. The once sleepy city is yet to recover from the wreckage

However, despite the innocuous reportage of the flooding and other problems and occurrences, some victims do not even want their problems to be brought to public attention. According to a *Sunday Tribune* report:

Angered by the media reports of their predicament, one of the residents – a carpenter –warned this reporter not to ask questions or take snapshots because, according to him, “we don't want any media coverage anymore. This has made things worse for us. Instead of getting government support, all we get are intimidations.

This scenario suggests the low level of government's responsiveness to the problems of the people in Nigeria. In a more organized society, government officials would treat victims of flood, which was not caused by them, with a measure of care and consideration rather than intimidation.

Time Magazine draws attention to the fact that lofty ideas proposed at summits and other gatherings are often not executed effectively when they are executed at all. The special edition of the international magazine on its 13th page draws attention to five salient issues raised at the Rio de Janeiro summit and how those issues have generally been handled.

On Biodiversity

“Rhetoric: The current decline in biodiversity is largely the result of human activity and represents a severe threat to human development.

Reality: The loss of species is accelerating as humans encroach in habitats and carve up ecosystems into fragments. A weak convention on Biological Diversity has been ratified by 161 countries (but not by the US)”

Climate

“Rhetoric: Recognizing global warming as a potential problem, delegates approved a toothless resolution on climate change calling on nations to voluntarily reduce emissions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases to 1990 levels.

Reality: Nations have roundly ignored the goals and released greenhouse gases as if Rio never happened. Governments promised to decide on a tougher plan in Kyoto, Japan this December (1997)”.

“Deforestation

Rhetoric: Noting the destruction of woodlands, delegates called for 'urgent' action and laid the initial plan for negotiating a forest convention.

Reality: The world continues to destroy expanse of forest the size of Nepal every year. Asia has lost almost 95% of its frontier woodlands, according to the World Resources Institution. Efforts to draft a forest agreement have run out of steam”.

Financing

“Rhetoric: Getting unusually specific, delegates called on rich nations to increase development aid to 7% of their gross national product.

Reality: Such aid, now covering 3% of GNP, has been dropping steadily. US official assistance to other countries declined 37% between 1992-1995”.

Populations

“Rhetoric: Because of the sensitivities of the Vatican and some developing nations, recommendations for population control were muted by fuzzy bureaucratic language calling for “appropriate demographic policies”.

Reality: This is a potential bright spot. Although the ranks of humanity still grow by about 80 million a year, an unexpected and rapid drop in birth rate continues around the world.”

The above presentation suggests clearly that governmental efforts at enforcing mutually agreed strategies and actions to enhance the environment have not been encouraging. But that should not mean that the struggle to protect the environment should be halted. If anything, current happenings have even made environmental sustainability not only necessary but imperative.

Summary and Conclusion

The need to protect the environment is becoming more crucial by the day. This is based on the well reasoned assumption that human survival is intricately tied to the integrity of the environment. How? If water and air are polluted, biodiversity disorganized, deforestation encouraged human survival would be in jeopardy, hence the need to protect this great resource.

In keeping with its social responsibility to its environment, the mass media have drawn global attention to the need to maintain and protect the environment for the good of all. The essence is to ensure sustainability, to use the earth’s resources by current generation in such a way and manner that does not imperil the environment for future generations.

In order to achieve a measure of conceptual clarity, an attempt has been made to define mass media, environment and development. Also, in providing a theoretical framework for this work, the development media theory which seeks to explain the normative behaviour of the mass media in countries generally classified as ‘developing’ was explored. It must be noted here, however, that irrespective of locations, the mass media generally worry about issues that affect their environment.

At the moment, the state of the environment is not encouraging because of the several assaults unleashed knowingly or unknowingly, on the environment. Over the years, human activities such as tree felling, unrestrained hunting, over-grazing, bush burning etc have caused a huge distortion of the ecosystem. In specific terms, it has caused among others, climate change which has led to unusual flooding, global warming and other undesirable situations to humans. With high population, especially in Africa, Asia and Latin America, food shortages are no longer entirely strange.

Indeed, for the next decade or thereabout, climate change and other related issues will receive increased attention in the developing countries of Asia, Latin America and Africa. This is more so in Nigeria, the most populous country in Africa, which grapples with such daunting challenges as endemic corruption, poor leadership and a largely frustrated populace. Indeed, climate change is intricately tied to issues of politics, economy, social and even existential questions. By September/October of 2012, many states in Nigeria, hitherto thought to be ‘safe’ from flooding and erosion, became ‘victims’ of flooding, estimated to be the worst in the country for over 50 years. This has, expectedly, created a refugee crisis of monumental proportion.

Given man’s quest for material development, the need to protect the earth’s biosphere must always be considered. The massive, and often thoughtless, destruction of the flora and fauna, the selfish art of pollution and other dangerous activities of man must be put under check. As *Time Magazine* puts it “man’s only choice is to live in harmony with nature, not to conquer it”.

Recommendations

Arising from the above presentation, and in order that our greatest resource – the Earth – is preserved for future generations, it is germane to put forward the following recommendations.

1. Given the controlling role of politics and government in any environment, it is hereby suggested that policy makers must leave their ‘comfort zones’ and think through and come up with fresh, incisive and workable policies, matched with appropriate actions, in response to the clear and present danger posed by issues of environmental sustainability.
2. Apart from coming up with implementable policies on the environment, the government must embark on a sustained media campaign to protect the environment. Some years ago, the Nigerian government embarked on a tree planting campaign but this was soon abandoned-the fate that usually befalls good programmes in Nigeria. This is perhaps time to revive the campaign and others such as ‘stop burning’, ‘stop indiscriminate hunting’, ‘green environment campaigns’ etc. If such campaigns are stepped up on a sustainable basis, there is a chance that the people’s understanding,

- and attitudes, towards the issues of the environment, might be better.
3. There is need to catch the children young through the introduction of environment studies in school curriculum in Nigeria. If children are taught environmental issues in the school, they will grow with it and hopefully, behave correctly in managing the environment.
 4. Nigerians should be less gluttonous in their consumption pattern especially among the privileged few. This group of people often over eat and even have much for the dustbin while there are many who are embarking on 'compulsory fasting' as a result of poverty. If all the available resources are consumed today this may jeopardize food security tomorrow.
 5. It seems reasonable to add that our attitude towards nature and the environment should be that of 'complementarity' rather than the present condescending position which makes us take more than our fair share. As Harvard Biologist, Stephen Jay Gould (1997) puts it, "we cannot win this battle to save species and environments without forging an emotional bond between ourselves and nature".

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