ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS AND POVERTY AS A CHALLENGE IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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Abstract

Whether the human person as a moral agent defines the societal values or otherwise, is a major issue that confronts philosophers in the face of countless changes of the present world. This article highlights how humanity's quest for survival impacts the environment and raises questions about the moral and rational agency of the individual in the face of poverty. It underscores the need for a harmonious coexistence between humans and their environment through sustainable practices. It also emphasizes the necessity of environmental education, policy development, and ethical awareness in addressing these issues. By examining cultural, socio-economic, and political factors, it offers a multifaceted approach to combating environmental degradation and promoting a sustainable and equitable future. With the methods of analysis and hermeneutics, this paper looks at the dignity of humans about their values as moral agents. In the end, the paper proffers a solution where humans will be at peace with the environment as every change will be the procreation of a better human, which never finishing rather a bundle of possibilities in a better world.

Keywords: Environment, environmental ethics, poverty, environmental degradation, sustainability, 21ST century.

Introduction

Today, critical analysis concerning our modern environment presents us with situations that question the relationship of the human person to his/her environment concerning his/her dignity

as an entity characterized by values that outside the society deprive the essence and quiditude of human life. The 21st century with its resultant effect of global change manifests in every sphere of human endeavour, especially in those areas that relate to the environment and human values. The failure of the human person to situate and affirm herself properly amid these situations gave rise to not just material poverty but has resulted in intellectual (mental) poverty which will soon affect every institution that upholds the dignity of his being.

Poverty and degradation of the environment are among the major problems confronting our world today. In the necessary quest to satisfy our human needs, human beings interact and engage with the environment. It is the desire of every rational person to live in a comfortable environment that provides clean water, hygienic food, breathable air, and the overall necessities of life. However, it is somewhat impossible to comfortably or conveniently live in our environment without having an effect, whether positive or negative, on its structure. It is to this end that the dictates of environmentalism hold that convenience and comfort can still be achieved within the ambiance of sustainability, preservation, and conservation.

A major factor that influences the outcome of human being's interaction with the environment is poverty. It affects even the most rational and dignified human person, thereby, testing the human person's dignity and ability to cater to his/her environment amidst its presence. Thus, the human person's status as a moral and rational agent, capable of caring for himself/herself and his/her environment, is questioned in the face of poverty. And since it is a fact that Africa has the highest extreme poverty rates globally (Outreach International, 2023), environmental problems are more prevalent therein. This paper therefore aims to delineate the challenges compounding environmental ethics in our contemporary society with a major focus on poverty.

Conceptual Analysis

Environmental Ethics
Environmental ethics is the discipline in Philosophy that studies the interaction of human beings to and with the environment. It seeks to understand the moral relationship of human beings, and also the value and moral status of the environment and its non-human contents. (Brennan and

Norva, 2004). Environmental ethics explores the moral relationship between humans and the natural world. It considers questions about how we ought to interact with the environment, what responsibilities we have towards other living beings and ecosystems, and how we should balance human needs with the protection of nature. (Brennan and Norva,2004). And since it is the 'ought' of human behaviour about his/her environment, its study guides decision-making in various fields such as environmental policy, resource management, conservation efforts, and sustainable development. In other words, environmental ethics prompts individuals, organizations, and governments to consider the ethical implications of their actions on the environment and to strive for practices that promote ecological integrity and social justice.

Poverty

According to Chen (2024), poverty refers to a state or condition of financial insufficiency, where individuals or communities lack the resources to meet basic needs such as food, shelter, and clothing. It also encompasses a lack of access to education, healthcare, and other essential services, leading to social and economic disadvantages. For him, poverty is a socio-economic condition that is the result of multiple factors, not just income.

Poverty is both an individual concern as well as a social problem. At the former level, not being able to make ends meet can lead to a range of social, physical, and mental issues. At the latter level, a high poverty rate can damper economic growth and be associated with problems like crime, unemployment, urban decay, poor education, and poor public health. On a broader scope, however, poverty could mean more than just a lack of necessities. It could be an absence of genuine hope for a better life. It is in this sense that we speak of mental poverty.

Mental poverty is a term used to describe a state of lacking intellectual stimulation, creativity, or critical thinking skills. It can refer to situations where individuals or communities have limited access to education, exposure to new ideas, or opportunities for personal development, leading to a narrow worldview or limited capacity for problem-solving and innovation. It shows itself in the incapability of seeing oneself outside the current context (one cannot be more than what he/she currently is). Mental poverty fears change. Change is risk and risk is to be avoided at the peril of

mere survival. Even the hope of success can seem a risky venture; this says nothing of the path required to find that success. You see your survival as contingent upon your adherence to what has sustained your life to that point. (Olarenwaju, 2004).

Society

By "society", we refer to Africa, precisely Nigeria. This paper proffers steps that could halt the inflicting causes of modernization as well as ameliorate the difficulties the poor man faces in his/her attempt to care for the environment. In Nigeria, education is not given the value that it once had. This itself, leads to mental poverty. Characterized by limited access to education and information, mental poverty can hinder individuals' understanding of environmental issues and their ethical implications. Without access to quality education and awareness-raising initiatives, people may lack the knowledge and awareness needed to make informed decisions about environmental conservation and sustainability.

Factors Affecting Environmental Ethics

Several factors influence environmental ethics, shaping how individuals and societies perceive and act toward the environment:

1. **Cultural and Religious Beliefs:** Cultural traditions and religious teachings often influence people's attitudes and behaviours towards nature and the environment. For example, some cultures view nature as sacred and emphasize harmony with the natural world, while others may prioritize human dominance over nature.

2. **Socio-economic Factors:** Economic status and access to resources can influence environmental attitudes and behaviours. People facing poverty may prioritize immediate survival over long-term environmental concerns, while those with greater wealth and resources may have the means to prioritize environmental conservation.

3. **Education and Awareness:** Knowledge and understanding of environmental issues play a significant role in shaping environmental ethics. Education and awareness-raising efforts can lead to a greater appreciation for the value of nature and promote environmentally responsible behaviours.

4. **Political and Legal Frameworks:** Government policies, laws, and regulations related to environmental protection can shape societal norms and behaviours. Strong environmental

regulations can incentivize sustainable practices and deter environmentally harmful activities.

5. **Technological Advancements:** Technological developments can both contribute to environmental degradation and offer solutions for environmental challenges. For instance, advances in renewable energy technologies can reduce dependence on fossil fuels and mitigate climate change.

6. **Globalization and Interconnectedness:** Globalization has increased interconnectedness among societies and ecosystems, highlighting the importance of international cooperation in addressing environmental issues. Pollution, biodiversity loss, and climate change are examples of environmental challenges that require global solutions.

7. **Ethics and Values:** Personal values and ethical beliefs influence individual attitudes towards the environment. Some ethical frameworks prioritize human-centric perspectives, while others emphasize the intrinsic value of nature and advocate for environmental stewardship.

These factors interact in complex ways, shaping environmental ethics at individual, societal, and global levels. Promoting environmental sustainability often requires addressing multiple factors simultaneously and fostering a deeper understanding of humanity's interconnectedness with the natural world.

Environmental Care and Human Failure

Despite the vast socio-political, cultural, and individual differences, humans share one common ground and one common home (Earth). Just like any home, it is our responsibility to take care of Earth. Our failure to be good stewards and ambassadors of the environment often leads to devastating consequences.

From observation, humanity is failing to care for the environment in several ways. In the first instance, industrial and household activities have resulted in the release of pollutants into the air, water, and soil, leading to general harmful impacts on the ecosystems, wildlife, and human health.

Deforestation is another angle where humans are failing to care for their home (earth). Widespread deforestation for agriculture, urbanization, and logging purposes has led to habitat loss, decline in biodiversity, and disruptions to the ecosystem. Trees play an important role in regulating the Earth's climate by absorbing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. When these trees are cut down or burned, the stored carbons are released into the atmosphere, leading to global warming and climate change. The former refers to "a gradual increase in the overall temperature of the Earth's atmosphere caused by an increased level of carbon dioxide. While the latter means a significant change in global temperature, wind patterns, and other measures of climate that occur over several decades or longer." (Ufiofio, 2020). Also, tree roots help to hold the structure of the soil. When this natural protection of the soil is removed, it may lead to natural disasters e.g. flooding, earthquakes, etc.

Again, overexploitation of natural resources such as freshwater, fish stocks, and minerals has depleted these resources faster than they can be replenished, leading to scarcity and ecological imbalances. There is an uncontrolled habit and desire to harvest from earth's resources without a commensurate habit of replenishing. Undoubtedly, this will lead to an imbalance. It is an obvious reality that Africa struggles to deal with proper waste management practices. Improper disposal of plastic waste, electronic waste, and hazardous materials, have led to pollution of land, waterways, and oceans, posing threats to wildlife and human health. Addressing these failures requires concerted efforts at individual, community, national, and global levels to adopt sustainable practices, promote environmental stewardship, and mitigate the impacts of human activities on the planet.

Nexus Between Poverty and Environmental Degradation

Poverty has become a global issue. Many international communities have sprung up in a bid to eradicate poverty, setting out targets that could make life convenient for all or a significant majority of the earth's populace. Poverty and hunger can indeed force the hand of a very dignified human person to resort to practices that degrade the environment. With poverty, comes a sense of hoarding, which in turn leads to the act of overexploitation. This cycle of madness can only be understood from the lens of poverty and hunger. For survival's sake and for the uncertainty of

tomorrow, individuals, groups, and communities may prioritize immediate sustenance over long-term environmental sustainability.

In many cases, poverty is accompanied by limited education and awareness about environmental issues. Without understanding the long-term consequences of their actions on the environment, impoverished communities may engage in environmentally harmful practices out of necessity or ignorance, perpetuating a cycle of environmental degradation.

As Omotor (2000) rightly puts it, "The environment is the totality of all the factors and circumstances that surround, influence and direct the growth of individual beings, species, and communities". The ways humans interact with the environment determine how friendly and beneficial the environment will be to them. The connection between poverty and environmental degradation is rather complex and multifaceted. Poverty often leads to unsustainable resource use as people prioritize immediate survival over long-term environmental concerns. There is little or no measurement or restriction on how to utilize the earth's resources. This can result in deforestation, overfishing, pollution, and other forms of environmental degradation. Conversely, environmental degradation can exacerbate poverty by reducing access to clean water, fertile land, and other natural resources essential for livelihoods.

The environment-poverty nexus is a two-way relationship that affects each other. From careful observation, the environment affects poverty situations among individuals in three distinct ways: By providing sources of livelihood to poor people, by affecting their health, and by influencing their vulnerability. On the other hand, poverty affects the environment by forcing people to degrade the environment, by encouraging countries to promote economic growth at the expense of the environment, by inducing societies to downgrade environmental concerns, and by failing to channel resources to address such concerns. If humanity is ever going to live harmoniously with nature, proper and adequate concern should be placed on actions that pose a threat to environmental sustainability.

It seems humanity has not fully grasped that nature gives back to humans what humans give to it. In other words, whatever act we individually or collectively carry out on Mother Earth, she pays

back to us in a similar kind. Breaking this cycle requires addressing both poverty and environmental sustainability simultaneously through policies that promote economic development while conserving natural resources.

Steps to Combating Environmental Degradation

Combating environmental degradation would require a multifaceted approach involving different strategies at different levels. In the first instance, there should be a promotion of environmental education and awareness-raising campaigns that would serve to increase understanding of environmental issues and their impacts. This includes educating individuals, communities, businesses, and policymakers about sustainable practices and the importance of conservation.

Again, we must develop and enforce environmental policies and regulations at local, national, and international levels. These policies should address key environmental challenges such as pollution, deforestation, habitat destruction, and climate change as well as implement mechanisms for monitoring and enforcing compliance with environmental laws.

There must also be actions aimed towards protecting and restoring ecosystems and biodiversity through conservation measures such as establishing protected areas, wildlife reserves, and marine sanctuaries. Implement habitat restoration projects to rehabilitate degraded ecosystems and enhance their resilience to environmental stresses.

Individually and collectively, humans must encourage themselves and businesses to adopt environmentally friendly behaviours and practices in their daily lives and operations. Humans must promote a culture of recycling, waste reduction, energy conservation, sustainable transportation, and responsible consumption patterns to minimize ecological footprints.

By implementing these steps comprehensively and collaboratively, societies can effectively combat environmental degradation and work towards a more sustainable and resilient future for all.

Conclusion

We often speak of economic poverty as being a major factor affecting the health of the environment. But one must not forget that sometimes our actions or inactions put us in the gruesome arms of poverty; and since humans must exist and survive in the environment, it is pertinent that humans make judicious use of the resources within the environment. Humans must possess a positive mentality and think ecologically about the environment. This ecological way of thinking about the environment is not a herculean task meant to prevent the human race from reaping the fruits of nature. Rather, it is an ethical consideration of the obligations of mankind as he/she interrelates with nature. It shows the need for a symbiotic human-environment interaction and awareness that the environment and the resources therein should be valued logically.

Environmental ethics emphasizes the moral responsibility of individuals and societies to protect and preserve the environment for present and future generations. Mental poverty, rooted in a lack of awareness, education, and ethical consciousness, can lead to apathy, indifference, and neglect towards environmental concerns, undermining efforts to promote responsible stewardship of natural resources. Addressing mental poverty is therefore essential for fostering a culture of environmental ethics and promoting sustainable development. By promoting education, awareness, and empowerment, societies can empower individuals to understand, appreciate, and uphold ethical principles that promote environmental conservation, justice, and stewardship. By promoting environmental ethics, human beings, as moral agents, contribute to addressing mental poverty by fostering a sense of purpose, responsibility, and connectedness to the natural world, leading to more sustainable and equitable societies.

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