

PROMOTING INDIGENOUS ENVIRONMENTAL INFORMATION IN AFRICA

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Abstract

The fact that there is an environmental crisis impacting the earth in a negative manner is hardly in dispute today. The extent of the crisis could be subject to debate but not its existence. The environmental crisis is impacting negatively on every region of the world. This paper argues that environmental information is necessary to solve the environmental crisis. Both individuals, government, and non-governmental groups need to be made avidly aware of the state of the environmental crisis and how they can take responsibility for mitigating the environmental crisis. This study argues that in providing people with environmental information and making them aware of how they should take responsibility, they should not just be made aware of Western-inspired environmental information but also environmental information rooted in their indigenous and local context. This often is neglected as the environmental studies, environmental ethics, environmental science, and other critical environmental information that people receive are imposed from above and based on their non-indigenous knowledge. Environmental information should also not just be what the government parrots to the people, their own local knowledge of what is happening to the environment in which they live should be taken into consideration. This will enable them to take more positive environmental action. The paper finds that indigenous environmental information is needed to promote environmental awareness. The paper concludes the provision of indigenous environmental information will help to create a better and healthier environment.

Keywords: Indigenous environment, information, Africa, Afroecosolidarity

Introduction

The core argument of this paper is that people in Africa, and in all indigenous communities worldwide have a human right to be environmentally informed. The environmental crisis cannot be thoroughly solved if many individuals in African and other indigenous communities are ignorant of environmental matters and their roles in helping to abate the environmental crisis. Governments and organizations alone cannot solve the environmental problems that inundate Africa and beyond. It is individuals who participate in environmental groups and movements, in organizations, and also in government. For these persons to carry out their environmental duties very well, they need to be well informed. But it is not just enough that individuals are well-informed, the content and manner of environmental information that they receive matters. When African governments, organizations, and even some individuals continue to promote

Eurocentric and Western environmental information to the detriment of African-based environmental information, they affirm that there is no value in native or indigenous environmental knowledge and information. Through their actions, they suppress African-centric or Afroecosolidarity eco-information. The paper does not in any way imply that there are no good dimensions of Western environmental thought. It only argues it should not be promoted to the detriment of indigenous or endogenous African environmental thought or knowledge. The paper argues further that individuals in Africa and elsewhere have knowledge or awareness of environmental information of their indigenous communities is a human right. Africans need not just environmental education or knowledge, but it should be knowledge and environmental education that is grounded in their indigenous knowledge and native place.

Understanding Indigenous Environmental Information (IEI)

Thakur (2023) defines information as: "... data that has been processed in such a way as to be meaningful to the person who receives it. it is anything that is communicated." Data refers to plain or raw facts or ideas that have not been systematized or organized. Librarianship Studies and Information Technology (2020) writes that: "Information is a product of different types of human activities and events. Information is that which informs. In other words, it is the answer to a question of some kind. It is thus related to data and knowledge, as data represents values attributed to parameters, and knowledge signifies understanding of real things or abstract concepts." Information relates to knowledge that you have acquired. Through the human five senses and also mental abilities people get information from their interactions with others and nature. Information is acquired and derived from the natural world/environment and human relations.

What then is environmental information? The University of Edinburgh (2019) cites the 2004 Environmental Information Regulation to state that environmental information refers to:

....the state of elements of the environment and their interaction (air, water, soil, land and landscape, natural sites, flora and fauna) discharges, emissions, noise, radiation, waste measures and activities affecting the environment (e.g. policies, legislation, plans, activities) reports on implementation of environmental legislation cost benefit and economic analyses effects of the environment on conditions of human life (including food, buildings).

The European Parliament and the Council of the European Union (2003) defines environmental information as:

...'Environmental information' shall mean any information in written, visual, aural, electronic or any other material form on: (a) the state of the elements of the environment, such as air and atmosphere, water, soil, land, landscape and natural sites including wetlands, coastal and marine areas, biological diversity and its components, including genetically modified organisms, and the interaction among

these elements; (b) factors, such as substances, energy, noise, radiation or waste, including radioactive waste, emissions, discharges and other releases into the environment, affecting or likely to affect the elements of the environment referred to in (a); (c) measures (including administrative measures), such as policies, legislation, plans, programmes, environmental agreements, and activities affecting or likely to affect the elements and factors referred to in (a) and (b) as well as measures or activities designed to protect those elements; (d) reports on the implementation of environmental legislation; (e) cost-benefit and other economic analyses and assumptions used within the framework of the measures and activities referred to in (c); and (f) the state of human health and safety, including the contamination of the food chain, where relevant, conditions of human life, cultural sites and built structures inasmuch as they are or may be affected by the state of the elements of the environment referred to in (a) or, through those elements, by any of the matters referred to in (b) and (c).

In a simplified form, any information about environmental matters, the state of the natural environment, environmental health, and environmental and human issues is environmental information. Yet, environmental information should not be restricted to official information about the environment coming from government sources. Anything that is written and said about the environment constitutes environmental information. The textbooks, videos, booklets, brochures, journals, books of readings, conferences, workshops, seminars, classes, etc. concerning environmental matters all carry environmental information.

Indigenous environmental information refers to the systematized body of knowledge about environmental issues emanating from indigenous peoples and communities. Indigenous people could be ethnic nations endogenous to the territories that they inhabited before the coming of colonial adventure. This body of knowledge composed of both beliefs and practices should be made known. It should not be hidden. It should be presented and people should be aware of it. Indigenous environmental knowledge should be a subject that people are educated about, schooled about, and informed about. Indigenous environmental information deals with ideas, concepts, notions, beliefs, practices, knowledge, etc. that traditional or indigenous people have concerning the environment. It is not just what they previously held about the environment but also the current state of their relationships with the environment and their perception of what is happening to the environment. Environmental information in the modern State should not only be seen from the perspective of the government and its agencies. It is more than this. The assessment, convictions, and ways of understanding the environment should all constitute environmental information.

Imperative for Indigenous Environmental Information in Africa

There is a need for Africans to be made aware of environmental information in their surroundings. This will enable them to be well-informed on environmental justice and health matters. With this information, they will be prepared to take positive actions on

their environment and health matters. Environmental health depends on the state, status, and conditions of the environment. In much of Africa where mining activities take place in countries like Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Namibia, South Africa, etc the people within the neighbourhood where those activities take place hardly know of the negative effects and implications of those activities to their health. It should be noted that it is the people more than those in government who are most affected by environmental problems. And when they suffer environmental hazards and injuries the poor and the vulnerable are often impeded in terms of finance to access proper health facilities. It is easier for those in government to access and take care of their health. It should be recognized, as McCarthy (2016) writes that:

Citizens are usually the ones affected most by environmental degradation and therefore require proper public involvement in decision-making and environmental governance efforts. Public participation is vital to incorporating local knowledge and practices into formal government and private sector decision-making processes with an emphasis on the sharing and access of environmental information as well as the ability to hold wrongdoers accountable.

This is a vital reason why environmental information is necessary. McCarthy (2016) writes that: “Access to information is a pivotal tool for holding government and private entities accountable for pollution and environmental degradation and allows citizens to enforce their right to a healthy environment. In doing so, the important oversight role of the courts in adjudicating on and balancing interests where environmental protection is concerned.”

A central argument of this paper is that while there is a need for people to be availed of environmental information, such environmental information should go beyond government data to uncover indigenous beliefs, ideas, conceptions, and behaviours about the environment. Environmental information should be defined and understood in a broader form. The government needs to be well informed of the indigenous beliefs and practices of African people. Often in Africa, environmental policies made by the government are based on Western-inspired knowledge of the environment. While Africa should not isolate itself from the West, it should not ignore endogenous environmental knowledge.

One of the main sources of environmental information is the media. The media is inclusive of the mass media, the new media, the social media, the online media, and printed materials (books, textbooks, etc). With particular reference to books and textbooks that students make use of in secondary schools and universities; they are often disproportionately filled with non-indigenous knowledge about the environment. There is a need for this to be reformed and transformed. It is painful to note that many textbooks discuss environmental challenges faced in the West and neglect the peculiar environmental problems that people face in their local contexts.

The Human Right to IEI

IEI is a human and a group right. Every individual in Africa and other indigenous communities has a right to know or be made aware of their indigenous environmental knowledge. Each ethnic nationality group also has this right and should not be deprived of it. The foundation of a right to indigenous environmental information awareness inheres in the right to information and also in the right to environmental health, safety, and wellbeing. International and regional human rights have all endorsed and acknowledged the rights to information, environmental health, safety, and well-being. It could even be argued that the right to life and dignity of a person necessitates that whatever threatens that life such as environmental problems and health hazards are brought to the awareness of the person.

People who live in environmentally degraded places such as much of Africa need to be informed and educated about the risks in those environments. Take for instance Nigeria's Niger Delta which is inundated with gas flaring and pollution coming from oil exploration and drilling activities. The people should be educated on the health hazards that they face and how they can protect themselves, while the government ought to play its part in mitigating these health hazard risks. The United Nations (1972) acknowledges that human beings have a fundamental right to "adequate condition of life in an environment of quality that permits a life of dignity and well-being and he bears a solemn responsibility to protect and improve the environment for present and future generations" (princ 1). This right cannot be effectively exercised if people are ignorant or deficient in knowledge about the environmental matters that affect them. Human rights are inalienable and natural. They are not given by the society or the State, but they should be recognized and endorsed by the State before they can be adequately enjoyed. African States and States elsewhere have an obligation to safeguard human rights. To enjoy the right to an environment of quality, The United Nations (1972) states further that people should be educated in environmental matters and this education should be carried out by the State, the mass media, and all social agents. United Nations (1992) in *The Rio Declaration* emphasizes that:

Indigenous people and their communities and other local communities have a vital role in environmental management and development because of their knowledge and traditional practices. States should recognize and duly support their identity, culture, and interests and enable their effective participation in the achievement of sustainable development.

This paper sees indigenous peoples and their communities in a broad sense. It is not restricted only to people in States who signed the Universal Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. At the time that declaration was signed, the Rio Declaration already existed. Ethnic nationalities in Nigeria and other States who predate colonialism are indigenous to their lands. Many ethnic groups and cultures in Africa predate colonialism and are indigenous to Africa. These people are carriers of indigenous knowledge of environmental management and traditional ecological practices. This knowledge and practices should be recognized and safeguarded by the modern African States. In some

States, ethnic nations are coterminous with the modern nation-state, but in many other cases, they are not. These ethnic nations have a right to their indigenous knowledge. To deprive them of their knowledge forms in favour of Western-inspired knowledge is to perpetuate the negative effects of colonialism. United Kingdom (2004) states in the *Environmental Information Regulations* that individuals have a right to environmental information and public authorities are to give it unless for a grave reason. It also places on the government, the obligation to make this information readily available.

Safeguarding IEI: Afroecosolidarity and Decolonial Perspectives

It is imperative to recognize that first and foremost the State has an obligation to make environmental information available to the citizens. The United Nations (1992) states as follows:

Environmental issues are best handled with participation of all concerned citizens, at the relevant level. At the national level, each individual shall have appropriate access to information concerning the environment that is held by public authorities, including information on hazardous materials and activities in their communities, and the opportunity to participate in decision-making processes. States shall facilitate and encourage public awareness and participation by making information widely available. Effective access to judicial and administrative proceedings, including redress and remedy, shall be provided.

African citizens have a right to have access to information. Federal Republic of Nigeria (2011) has a *Freedom of Information Act* that implies for instance government should allow citizens access to information. This includes vital environmental information that affects their health and well-being. The State is obliged to create public awareness and make environmental information widely available. This information should be inclusive of indigenous environmental knowledge. Odinkalu and Kadiri (2014) state that up to 14 countries in Africa have enacted Freedom of Information laws and these countries include Zimbabwe, Uganda, South Africa, Niger Tunisia, Angola, Ethiopia, Guinea, Liberia, Rwanda, Siera Leone, and Cote d'Ivoire. While enacting laws is important there are poor implementations of the law in most African countries as most African countries are very poor in democratic values.

The government in the African States should implement an indigenous curriculum that gives enough space for indigenous environmental information. The need for curriculum to be decolonized in many African states has been discussed by Ikeke (2023) when he argues that the curriculum in Africa should be Afrocentric and look at issues from the African perspective. The entire education in Africa, as Ikeke (2021) avers, should be done from an Afroecosolidarity perspective. This is the perspective that takes into consideration African values of communalism, *Ubuntu* (I am because we are), *Ujamaa* (brotherhood), *Ukamaa* (I am in relation to everything in existence), and social values. Africans saw themselves as social and communal beings who stood in solidarity and oneness of mind in supporting one another, especially in times of need, and

also collectively acted for the good and wellbeing of the earth. In many communities the earth was seen as a goddess to be revered and also a source of sustenance.

As noted previously, the government and its agencies may limit the definition of environmental information to information emanating from the government on the environment. But this should not be the case. Within the frame of this paper, there is a need to move away from government-inspired environmental information to embrace environmental information coming from the local, traditional, or indigenous peoples who are witnessing environmental pollution and degradation of their lands. Government-inspired environmental information is not enough to solve environmental problems.

Another fundamental way that the right to IEI can be safeguarded is when authors and writers pay attention to what they write in environmental textbooks and provide through various information sources. Textbooks and other printed materials should be written and conferences and seminars should be organized in the light of indigenous environmental information. Indigenous knowledge and data about the environment should be provided and made available to people in books and through all social media. While it is true that people should be educated as global citizens to meet the challenges of a global society; they should also be educated as citizens of their own particular countries and local contexts.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the need to safeguard the right to indigenous environmental information. The paper argued that people need to be made aware of vital environmental information for them to take action for the good of people and the earth. It was argued that the environmental information that people should be given should be grounded in their indigenous environmental knowledge. If people are really made aware of the importance of their indigenous environmental knowledge, they will connect more to it than non-indigenous knowledge. It is important that indigenous environmental information should be protected. This is both a human rights and a responsibility. When this is done, it will help in better protection of the environment.

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