

# THE FAMILY AS AGENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL COMMUNICATION IN NIGERIA

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## Abstract

*The environmental crisis remains unabated in most parts of the world including Nigeria. In Nigeria, the environmental crisis manifests itself in ecological problems such as desertification, deforestation, soil erosion, mismanagement of solid and chemical waste, gas flaring, land and marine pollution, unplanned urbanization, and so forth. Amid the environmental problems, every social agent has a role to play in abating the problems. One social agent whose role is often ignored and not mainstream is the family. This paper argues that the role of the family should be highlighted and the family should engage in environmental communication in promoting healthy environmental values. A critical hermeneutical method is used to interpret the concepts, while an analysis is used to discuss the issues involved in the work. The paper finds that the role of the family as an environmental communicator is sidelined. It concludes that this role should be highlighted to enhance environmental protection in Nigeria.*

**Keywords:** Family, environment, communication, ecology, and Nigeria

## Introduction

One of the most basic units or cells of society is the family. Without family, there is no society. The individuals that makeup society come from families. The family is a vital part or organ of society. Its role is vital to the effective functioning of society and national development. Yet its role often is conceived in terms of its social, economic, and cultural aspects to the detriment of its environmental mission. The frontal argument of this paper is that the family has an environmental function and in light of the contemporary environmental crisis affecting every region of the world, it is crucial to highlight this role of the family.

This paper looks at the role of the family in promoting and communicating environmental values and protection in Nigeria. Nigeria is negatively affected by many environmental problems such as oil pollution, land and marine degradation, noise pollution, soil erosion, etc. The environmental problems affecting Nigeria include climate change, oil pollution, desertification, soil erosion, overpopulation, mismanagement of solid and chemical waste, etc. Other authors such as Ikeke (2023), and Folorunso and Folorunso (2022) have discussed some of these problems in their works.

The family as an agent of environmental communication in Nigeria is not an issue that is well mainstreamed and common. Unless families are made aware that part of their responsibility is to communicate and foster environmental protection, they will rarely do so. The state of environmental awareness in Nigeria among families leaves much to be desired. If there is a high level of environmental communication by families, why are there so many environmental problems in the nation? Is it that people have failed to implement what is taught them in their families about the environment? The family certainly communicates about the environment. But the concern here is the deliberate communication about environmental values to foster environmental protection.

It is extremely difficult to find books, journal articles, and other resources on the environmental role of the family in communicating environmental values. While there are abundant of resources on the traditional role of the family such as social, economic, political, and cultural roles there is hardly any on the ecological role. At the time of search on the phrase, “the family as an agent of environmental communication in Nigeria,” more than 6 million searches came up in Google search engine on Wednesday, 3rd January 2024 at 1.50 pm, in more than 30 of the first ones there is no one that directly deals with the role of the family as an agent of environmental communication. It is likely to be so in the consequent results. The family as an agent of ecological restoration and environmental protection is hardly spoken about. This is a big lacuna in both the environmental media and public space. It needs to be attended to. When the search is reversed to “the family as an agent of social development in Nigeria,” in more than 8 million search results you have things that directly speak of the family as a social agent such as its role in the socialization process, social welfare, children social development, peace culture, etc. The family is highly regarded as a social agent. This is highly commendable. But the definition of what is social needs to be widened. Humans live in the environment and whatever affects the environment invariably affects human beings, so the environment should be seen also as a social issue.

The environmental question should not be separated from the social question. Take for instance the discipline of social studies. It studies human beings and their environment. This environment should not be restricted to the social environment but includes the natural environment. This being the case in discussing the social functions of the family, there should also be a discussion of environmental questions such as pollution, overpopulation, domestic and industrial waste, etc. The understanding of the role of the family in Nigeria is too restrictive. The implications of this are obvious, families often communicate on social issues and their social functions to the detriment of their environmental functions. When the role of the family is discussed in relationship to the environment, it is often the social and built environment as it affects especially children that is the focus point. What about the natural environment?

### **Conceptualization of Terms**

William (2022) writes that: “Environmental communication is "the dissemination of

information and the implementation of communication practices that are related to the environment” (p. 1). Environmental communication is transmitting information, ideas, values, beliefs, and notions about the environment to others. It is a given that every individual and group offers information about the environment to others daily. What you communicate depends on your beliefs and attitudes. Shukla (2016) writes that environmental communication is “the sharing of information, insights and opinions on environmental issues, trends, conditions and solutions using any means of communications, ranging from inter-personal methods to means of mass communication using the modern as well as traditional media”(p.1). Shanahan (2019) states that: “the field of environmental communication involves the study of existing communication about environmental issues and the identification of methods for improved communication about environmental issues”(p.1).

The next concept that requires explication is family. Jary and Jary (2005) write that the family is “a group of people, related by kinship or similar close ties, in which the adults assume responsibility for the care and upbringing of their natural or adopted children” (p. 209). Barnard (2023) states that fundamentally the family is normally made up of two married male and female adults who come from different ancestral lineages together with their offerings. This is the nuclear family, there is also the extended family which includes children and descendants of the married adults who have left home and are living apart and have created their own families. Health Resources and Services Administration (2023) defines it as: “A family is a group of two or more persons related by birth, marriage, or adoption who live together; all such related persons are considered as members of one family” (p.1). Beyond the nuclear family, there is the extended family. Ikeke (2022b) notes that this type of family includes others who are related to the nuclear family through ancestry and also includes persons who have been adopted into the family.

### **Family as an Agent of Environmental Communication**

Makwanga (2021) states:

If issues of invading forests to exploit forest resources cannot be discussed at the family nucleus level, then children will never know what is bad for the environment. Although forest products should improve people's quality of life, a family with more than seven children will obviously use more natural resources, hence it needs to have knowledge of how it should use natural resources responsibly. Therefore, educating the family about the importance of environmental conservation should be done at the family level before the information is shared by communities.

Makwanga (2021) writes further that:

Good environmental choices and interventions emanate from inquiring and soliciting the wisdom of the elders in the home and later with community knowledge banks. It is also in the home where family

members are motivated by the power of their stories, articulating their history, identity and culture, in the framework of their worldview. From these conversations, people learn how to learn from each other and value one another's contribution. In these environments, participants will learn that conversations are not wars to be won or lost and also that having different points of view is not enmity but just varying perspectives and the diversity of humans as products of God's creation. Knowledge of the forests, physical features and landscapes and their sacredness should be included in family conversations guided by the local systems of knowledge for resilience building purposes.

It should be indisputable that the family should be engaged in environmental communication and transmission of environmental values to family members, especially children. Guven and Yilmaz (2017) cite Gulay and Oznacar saying that families have a responsibility to introduce their children in their formative years to be sensitive to the environment, to love the environment, and to protect it.

Most individuals in life encounter their families and homes daily. It is to their families or home that they return from their daily tasks and work whether they are living in the diaspora or their native country. The environmental crisis has become an important issue that should not be ignored. The family must take up this serious responsibility and not abdicate it. When there are health problems and sicknesses arising from poor hygiene and environmental surroundings, the family should take responsibility. Guven and Yilmaz (2017) write that: “Children learn what is happening in their surroundings primarily through communication with their parents. For this reason, home education sets out the seeds of children's behaviour and moral shaping in the future” (p.110).

The duty of engaging in family education, especially to children and the younger ones cannot be taken away from the family. The family is an important social unit and is the first place for moral education. True moral education should help children and other family members know of their environmental duties. Family members live in the environment, the natural world. Their behaviours such as disposal of domestic waste, fetching water from the stream or the tap, use of household items, etc all impact the environment. Wanton cutting of trees, and careless killing of insects, reptiles, birds, and other animals by family members are unacceptable. The home should be a place to communicate environmental values. The family has a responsibility to engage their children in environmental sanitation. Children should be taught and cautioned on proper environmental habits. When children lack proper environmental habits they are likely going to engage in environmentally destructive behaviours. Often you can see children at school and home catching and killing grasshoppers and other insects. They stone lizards for fun. They don't care about the harm and suffering they cause to insects and other animals when they pursue them.

The paper has noted the lack of effective environmental communication in Nigeria. What is written in this section is directed at fostering family environmental communication in Nigeria. Every family is expected to perform some basic functions. Barnard (2023) opines that the family provides psychological and emotional security by showing love, care, companionship, and warmth to family members; socio-political functions through procreation and regulating sexual conducts; socialization of children into society; humanitarian functions of caring for sick and challenged members; economically provides food, clothing, shelter and security for members and promote social order and societal stability. About the functions of the family, Langford (2023) writes that three main functions of the family are: “reproduction and sexual relationship,” “care and socialization of children,” and “physical, emotional, and economic provision.” Imoletitan (n.d) states that the functions of the family include biological, and sexual desires satisfaction, reproduction, nurturing of children, psychological security, physical care, provision of shelter, economic division of labour, determination of inheritance, social control, etc.

It ought to be noted that the forms and shapes of the family have not always been the same but have evolved. Today there are single-parent families, families in diaspora but with links to their nuclear family, families facing pressures from the forces of globalization and the capitalist market forces. In some societies the family is patriarchal and women are denied and deprived of basic fundamental human rights. In some families, matriarchy is the rule of the day. In previous times when society had not become fully urbanized the way it is today, family members lived close to their ancestral home, and family members easily could visit. The case is different today.

The functions of the family have also evolved. While in times past the functions were simply conceived in terms of socio-economic, political, and psychological functions, today the family cannot but be attentive to the issues of the environmental crisis. All family behaviours have implications for the environment. The family is always communicating environmental messages negatively or positively. This is why it is important to examine the role of the family as an environmental agent.

Every individual and group in society has a role to play in environmental management. Since every individual has a role to play in ameliorating environmental problems, parents, children, and other family members have a role to play. The family should be the first place where people can learn about the environment. From the family, family members can learn about the management of domestic waste, water management, good hygiene, and prudent use of resources such as paper, food, electronic gadgets, etc. The ways these things are used all have implications for environmental preservation. The more papers that families use, the more trees that are been felled. Furniture comes from trees. Maybe taking one family may seem minimal, but combining all families in their uses of resources has a cumulative effect. Aghayeeabiareh and Talebi (2020) state that:

...results of the published manuscripts revealed that family plays an

important role in environmentalism. Parents and children influence each other, and this varies according to the culture and parenting style.... Overall findings indicated that family plays an important role in environmentalism, and that parents and children influence each other. Both culture and parenting styles proved to be factors in how and to what extent children influence their parents. “The more the parents are open, the more the children are influential” (p.1).

Khairunnisa&Hufad write that: “Family plays an important role in educating and forming the good behavior of its members in handling (managing) the waste that they had produced” (p. 35). Actions it is said, speak louder than voice. Children are more influenced by examples than by words. This is not to in any way discountance the place of teaching. It is the responsibility of the family to educate children on environmental attitudes and actions. Dilleggi, Rosa and Santos (2020) write that the family provides emotional, social, physical, and social support to family members within this context it should foster the right use of resources.

Education is a vital way to promote environmental communication. The United Nations (1972) states that: “Education in environmental matters, for the younger generation as well as adults, giving due consideration to the underprivileged, is essential in order to broaden the basis for an enlightened opinion and responsible conduct by individuals, enterprises and communities in protecting and improving the environment in its full human dimension” (p.5). It is important to remark that this duty to educate on environmental matters should not just be left to the government and its agencies. The family should see itself as an important social agent that should communicate environmental values and ideas to its members and the broader society. Saleh and Hidayati (2023) state that: “In planting the love of nature to children, of course, the role of the family is needed which is the first education for children in making a generation that loves the environment. ....This paper concludes that environmental education which has been built on families and society is the main foundation in building character and environmental ethics in present and future generations”

African indigenous families and families among indigenous people were sources of environmental communication. These families were deeply connected to nature and so environmental communication was intrinsic to their nature. African family elders at moonlight in the village compounds and in the village square told their children tales, myths, and stories that promoted environmental values. However, this cultural practice is deeply dying away as a result of the pressures of globalization. Colonialism, etc. Ikeke (2023) writes that:

African children are growing up in a world in which there is continuous encroachment on the traditional values of their continent. A great aspect of African traditional values that is often neglected in the educational curriculum in Africa is environmental values. African environmental values of earth-keeping, preservation, great sense of solidarity with

fellow humans and other beings and species in the universe is described in this paper as Afroecosolidarity (p. 404).

These values were often passed by the family elders during moonlight tales. There is a need to restore this culture to a certain degree. Parents should gather their children in the evenings and teach them about environmental values. It is a reality that in the evenings in African families nowadays children and even parents watch television. Some of this time can be devoted to telling environmentally-based stories. African elders and other indigenous elders have a profound sense of environmental care. They know about the plants and animals. They know when to harvest particular plants. They have profound reverence for sacred trees and sacred sites. Ikeke (2013), Ikeke (2015), Ikeke (2018), Ikeke and Ukutsemuya (2024), Ikeke (2023b), Ikeke, Darah, and Brume (2022), and Ikeke (2022) have all highlighted the role that African indigenous knowledge can play in environmental protection. African elders and families are a repository of traditional ecological knowledge. This fact should never be forgotten. This is one of the cardinal reasons why the role of the family in environmental communication should be mainstreamed.

The family should foster a life of prudent and ethical consumption in its members. No family that does not engage in the consumption of food and other material resources. Yet this is one of the areas where there is so much wastage. The family has a responsibility to inculcate environmental values. Matthies and Wallis (2015) argue that consumption patterns have environmental impacts and are transferred in the family to children by their parents. They state that children can also be taught the values of sharing, giving, and reusing resources. One place where character education takes place is the family. Husinand Indriyani (2022) write that “Frugal attitudes and behaviors towards the use of materials/objects (water, electricity, gases), affection for living things (animals and plants), and activities related in-house activities related to reuse, reduce, recycle” should be encouraged in the family (p. 219).

### **Conclusion**

This paper has examined the role of the family in promoting environmental communication. It showed that environmental problems are confronting Nigeria such as soil erosion, desertification, deforestation, climate change, marine and land pollution, unplanned urbanization, etc. It is painfully noted that while the family is greatly seen as a social agent, its ecological or environmental function is often ignored. The family needs to be seen as an environmental agent. The family is the first place where children and other family members are socialized. The paper also noted that African elders are from families that are a great repository of indigenous ecological knowledge. For the family to play this educative role of communicating environmental values, the family should be made aware of its responsibility in this area more than ever. This done a better environment will be created in Nigeria.

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