ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION: A DRIVING TOOL FOR ACHIEVING THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS IN THE 21ST CENTURY NIGERIA

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Abstract

In the 21st century, as Nigeria grapples with the challenges of rapid urbanization, industrialization, and climate change, the importance of environmental education emerges as a crucial driving force for achieving sustainable development goals (SDGs). This paper explores the pivotal role of environmental education in the Nigerian context, emphasizing its potential to address environmental degradation, promote ecological awareness, and contribute to the fulfillment of the SDGs. Nigeria, with its rich biodiversity and diverse ecosystems, faces complex environmental issues that directly impact the well-being of its citizens and the nation's socio-economic development. The integration of environmental education into the national curriculum serves as a proactive strategy to empower the population with the knowledge, skills, and values needed to comprehend, address, and mitigate these environmental challenges. This paper reviews the existing literature on environmental education in Nigeria, highlighting successful initiatives, challenges, and the evolving role of technology in disseminating environmental knowledge. It underscores the importance of fostering a sense of environmental stewardship among citizens to promote sustainable practices and contribute to the achievement of SDGs, particularly those related to clean water and sanitation, affordable and clean energy, climate action, life on land, and life below water. Moreover, the abstract delves into the policy implications and recommendations for enhancing the integration of environmental

education across all levels of the Nigerian education system. It advocates for collaborative efforts between government bodies, educational institutions, NGOs, and the private sector to develop comprehensive and inclusive environmental education programs that empower individuals to become agents of positive change. Ultimately, this abstract contends that environmental education serves as a catalyst for sustainable development in 21st century Nigeria, fostering a generation of environmentally conscious citizens capable of steering the nation towards a future characterized by resilience, resource efficiency, and ecological equilibrium.

Keywords: Driving Tool, Environmental Education (EE), Sustainable Development, sustainability, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Introduction

One of the major contradictions in the twenty-first century is the unique technological advancement and economic growth, which have contributed to devastating socio-environmental impacts on humanity despite accruing numerous benefits for people. In the quest for survival, humankind is significantly exposing the planet to severe climate change threats, which poses issues to energy, ecology security, food, and politics which are impediments to sustainable development. The African continent is also experiencing various and complex environmental challenges, including the threat of significant extinction of species due to the adoption of a global capitalist system that creates a production treadmill due to its increasing urge for enormous profits. The rising demand for products has led to the proliferation of this system in Africa due to its ability to avail products at a lower price (Olise & Emeh, 2020). Nigeria is part of this environmental conundrum due to anthropogenic activities contributing to ecosystem degradation, biodiversity loss, and reduction in agricultural production. Northern Nigeria is under threat due to the Eastward rapid encroachment that threatens sustainable

livelihoods while environmental degradation in the Niger Delta continues making the region prone to conflicts due to quests for resource control and environmental justice (Damilola & Olaitan, 2018). Life-consuming floods and erosions have increasingly become reoccurring issues in environmental challenges that the Southern Eastern Nigeria has been associated with. These challenges raise the need for sustainability education that empowers policymakers and stakeholders in Nigeria to urgently implement environmental protection measures (UNESCO, 2012). Environmental education can serve asa tool for propagating United Nations sustainable development goals (SDGs) in Nigeria, especially those relating to ecological protection, resource conservation and climate change (Leon, 2020). Against this backdrop, this paper seeks to comprehensively examine environmental education in achieving the sustainable development goals in the 21st century Nigeria. This is done in the context that environmental education can play a critical role in reversing the trend of environmental degradation and set the environment towards the path of recovery. Environmental education can also raise awareness of the prolonged effects of unchecked development and environmental degradation.

The United Nations adopted the sustainable development goals (SDGs) in its 2030 agenda with the aim of promoting equity, stability, and prosperity among its member states. In 2015, these goals were established as a blueprint consisting of 17 global objectives to be achieved by 2040, replacing the previous millennium development goals that spanned from 2000 to 2015 (Aguene, 2021). However, the achievement of these SDGs within the specified time frame in Nigeria is facing significant challenges due to the deteriorating state of insecurity and economic difficulties that have plagued the country in recent years. Despite the efforts of successive governments to embrace the principles

of the MDGs/SDGs through various intervention programs targeting wealth creation, national unity, employment opportunities, and overall livelihood improvement, progress in development is being hindered and delayed. This can be attributed in part to ineffective leadership and a lack of efficient strategies to identify and address the multiple factors contributing to poverty and the escalating security concerns. As a struggling third world nation, the unequivocal consensus is for economic stability, food security and improved livelihoods, howbeit the government's overreliance on oil, and the illegal use of natural resources by unpatriotic elements put enormous strain on the environment which is not without far reaching effects (social, biological, climatic) (Afe & Damilola, 2021). Another worrying concern is the conflict of interest implicitly enshrined in ecological imperatives which leads to discordancy in assumptions that industrialization and technological advancement have more intrinsic value to mankind holistically rather than the atomic views of environmental conservation (Akinloye, 2018).

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

The concept of sustainable development is a multidimensional and holistic approach to prosperity encompassing the environmental, economic and social aspects of man's endeavors. Sustainable Development rejects the Oliver Twist mentality of always asking for more without taking responsibility. It embodies the adage “as you lay your bed, so you lie on it.” It calls for proactive actions, wise resource management, and a holistic approach to shape a better future for ourselves and generations to come. In a nutshell it is that important balance of economic growth, environmental Stewardship and social progress for the benefit of society and the world at large (Babalola & Olawuyi, 2021). Voices around the world are demanding leadership on

education, poverty, inequality and climate change. To turn these demands into actions, world leaders gathered on 25 September, 2015, at the United Nations in New York to adopt the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Adebayo, 2018). The 2030 Agenda comprises 17 new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 targets, which will guide policy and funding for the next 15 years to be implemented by "all countries and all stakeholders, acting in collaborative partnership.", beginning with a historic pledge to end poverty everywhere permanently and set out quantitative objectives across the social, economic, and environmental dimensions of sustainable development framework for shared action "for people, planet and prosperity". These goals and targets are "global in nature and universally applicable, taking into account different national realities, capacities and levels of development and respecting national policies and priorities." A set of indicators and a monitoring framework will also accompany the goals (Akinsemolu & Arijeniwa, 2021). The indicators are defined by the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on SDG Indicators (IAEG-SDGs), which will present its recommendations to the UN Statistical Commission in March 2016.

The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2018 analyses gains achieved during the third year of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda. This summary highlights achievements and ongoing challenges across all 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), based on the current evidence available, and discusses some of the interconnections between priorities and targets. The 17 Sustainable Development Goals form a cohesive and integrated package of global aspirations the world commits to achieving by 2030. Building on the accomplishments of their predecessors the MDGs, the SDGs address the most pressing global challenges of our time, calling upon collaborative partnerships across

and between countries to balance the three dimensions of sustainable development - economic growth, environmental sustainability, and social inclusion (The United Nations, 2015).

While people are living better lives overall than they were a decade ago, progress toward ensuring that no one is left behind has not been fast enough to meet the 2030 Agenda targets. Indeed, the rate of global progress is not keeping pace with Agenda ambitions, requiring countries and stakeholders at all levels to take immediate and accelerated action.

Components of SDG and Implementation progress in Nigeria

The SDGs are referred to as transforming our world; The 2030 Agenda for sustainable development (United Nations, 2015) or the global goals (Akinloye, 2018). Sustainable development means better ways of doing things without compromising the health status of the people. Thereafter sustainable development includes economic growth environmental stewardship and social inclusion (Ignatius, 2021) The SDG comprises 17 global goals and 169 targets. The program is a successor to the MDG (2000-2015) and is hinged on building on the achievements of/and filling the gaps in the MDGs. As a policy guiding blueprint with a 15-year agenda (2015-2030), it's aims and objectives are tailored at poverty eradication, addressing social inequality and promoting world peace and environmental. These goals according to UN publication 2015 are shown in Fig. 1.

Fig 1. Sustainable Development Goals (UN, 2015)

Goal 1: End poverty in all its forms everywhere; Goal 2: End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture; Goal 3: Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages; Goal 4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all; Goal 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls; Goal 6: Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all; Goal 7: Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all; Goal 8: Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all; Goal 9: Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation; Goal 10: Reduce inequality within and among countries; Goal 11: Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable; Goal 12: Ensure

sustainable consumption and production patterns; Goal 13: Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts; Goal 14: Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development; Goal 15: Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss; Goal 16: Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels; Goal 17: Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development (Sustainable Development Solutions Network, 2015).

The central focus of the SDGs is improving the standard of living of all people. The UN through its 197 member states proposed a balance between economic growth and the conservation and judicious use of natural resources for sustainable development (poverty alleviation, women empowerment, equality, environmental justice and the boosting of human development index). The SDG progress report for 2022 as per sdgindex.org shows that Nigeria's index rank is 139/163with an index score of 54.2. so far Nigeria has achieved strongly and is on track in SDG-12 (Responsible consumption and production) with good results in waste management (municipal, electronic, plastic, So^2). Also, in SDG-13 (Climate action) Nigeria is on track to maintain its achievements in the area of managing CO2 emissions from fossil fuel combustion and cement production. However, in terms of SDGs 2,3,4,7,8,9,14, and 16 which represents Zero hunger, good health, affordable and clean energy, economic growth, industry, innovation and infrastructure, life below water, peace, justice and strong institution, major challenges remain with scores stagnated at less than 50% of the required rate. For SDG-15, 11

and 1, the scores are decreasing indicating a crisis and regression. SDG 10 report shows there's still a significant challenge. What is most troubling is the current state of education as far as SDG performance is concerned. With the country still grappling with a high illiteracy level, low quality of education and lower secondary completion rate, reaching the 2030 SDG target is a major challenge. It is therefore imperative to prioritize education for sustainable development as it Is the fulcrum for our progress as a nation and for achieving SDGs (Federal government of Nigeria, (FGN), 2020).1

Environmental Education

Education has been identified as an essential component for sustainable development worldwide. The role of education can also positively influence the management of the world's increasingly stressed natural resources through the incorporation of successful techniques of environmental education. Environmental education provides students with the knowledge, skills, and experiences essential to become successful community leaders, as well as making intelligent decisions pertaining to the management of their natural resources. Education has made many valuable contributions to societies and development globally, and is recognized for the important role it has in improving livelihoods worldwide (Obasi & Ogwuche, 2016). Quality education should prepare societies to actively participate in global politics and economics, as well as provide people with the skills necessary to make informed decisions and take responsible actions. Throughout the world, societies have recognized education as a key component of sustainable development. Sustainable development has been promoted since its inception over 30 years ago as an effective means to abate the degradation of human and environmental systems. Sustainable

development concentrates on aspects of the economy, society and environment in order to achieve its goals (Bosah, 2013). However, it can be an often misused or overused statement in the endorsement of policies worldwide, drawing attention away from the 3 original environmental intentions of the strategy and focusing more attention on the social and/or economic aspects. The economic, social, and environmental aspects of sustainable development and policy formation should be equally represented and balanced (Boiyo, 2014).

Environmental education is a multidisciplinary field, drawing from the social, physical and biological sciences. According to the Environmental Education and Training Partnership, (EETAP) environmental education encourages citizens to make knowledgeable and informed decisions about their environmental behaviour based on the awareness, knowledge, skills, and attitudes instilled in them (2000). Environmental education relies on both formal and non-formal teaching techniques to accomplish the ultimate goal of encouraging citizens to make informed and positive actions toward the environment (Abbas & Singh, 2014). Environmental education makes use of many disciplines, techniques, and resources to accomplish its goals. Since students learn from an array of non-traditional, multiple intelligences such as naturalistic, interpersonal, or intrapersonal, environmental education can be a strategy that bridges many learning styles (Onnoghen, Ojong, Omang, Obibessong & Joseph, 2020). Environmental education's methodology and goals can be incorporated into SDGs objectives for sustainable development in education. Education that focuses on sustainable development and critical thought has an increased likelihood of success, and environmental education's multidisciplinary nature makes it an ideal strategy for development.

Key Issues and Challenges with Environmental Education

While teaching for sustainability is vital, how to embed it into learning remains a daunting task for Nigeria. Integrating environmental education into the formal school curriculum as another subject can be viewed as another burden that should be learnt. However, it could be one of the speediest ways for creating awareness of the environmental protection idea for upcoming generations (Beisheim & Simon, 2016). Notwithstanding, it can only become sustainable if taught at all educational levels. Expansion of educational facilities may lead to the risk of conflict in terms of resource use: government therefore need to promote basic schooling in neglected areas and lay emphasis on the need to build up upper-level and technical skills within higher education, that is, providing better equality of opportunity to advocate for efficiency to meet the scarce workforce needs. Awareness should extend beyond classroom borders to the larger population that has not gone through the formal education system since they are important stakeholders that need to know these issues (Afe & Damilola, 2021).

Since Nigerians love entertainment and spend significant time watching television, these values can be taught in a number of indigenous languages using public media through enlightenment films, dramas, and programs. Unchecked and uncontrollable population growth is another challenge that has become a concern for the government of Nigeria. Being the most populous nation in the continent and seventh most populous globally, (with a population of more than 212 million by September 28, 2021), it has been projected that Nigeria is poised to surpass the US by doubling its current size by increasing to 401 million by 2050 (FGN, 2020). This will make it the third most populous country globally during this period. For a nation where more than 50% of citizens live below the poverty line, the anticipated population growth

could spell doom as it may be unable to meet the demands of the burgeoning population.

Environmental Education: A Driver for Achieving SDGs

The ecological crisis and its associated problems in the social, cultural, political and economic spheres is in part, the product of ignorance and as such knowledge of our global dilemma is a prerequisite for addressing it. Indeed, there is need for new ecologically based enlightenment and orientation around the needs of the challenges of unsustainability as a global reality (Barry, 2012) Therefore, environmental education is like an invaluable ingredient in the development of a functional society with responsible citizens that can make sensible compromise in their relationship within the ecosystems (Adger, Hughes, Folke, Carpenter & Rockstrom, 2015). The importance of EE has been broadly reflected in a wide range of national strategies and policy instruments in Nigeria. Nigeria's National Report to the Rio +20 conference, as well as the 2020 Voluntary National Review, specifically identify the aim of the Nigerian government to support a number of implementation imperatives and mechanisms to advance the attainment of all of the SDGs (Babalola & Olawunyi,2021) However, actualizing the SDG, is contingent upon pursuing environmental sustainability and economic stability. From this perspective environmental education is key to imbuing the populace with ideals that forms pro-environmental behaviors and acculturation necessary for sustainable development. To this end, the propagation of environmental ethics based on normative theories and traditional axiology is necessary for sustainable development. Environmental problems stem from a large part from human behavior. In an effort to mitigate the negative consequences of such environmental problems, large scale changes in behavior need to take place (IPCC, 2018). The

multidisciplinary approach in environmental education involves environmental psychology which is crucial in developing the environmental identity, altruistic and biospheric values of individuals especially young kids to whom the baton of sustainable development is passed on to. Values and norms play a critical role in environmental education, serving as catalysts for the achievement of sustainable development goals. Values shape our attitudes and behaviors towards the environment, guiding our decisions and actions. Environmental education promotes values such as stewardship, conservation, and respect for nature, fostering a sense of responsibility and empathy. Norms, on the other hand, establish societal standards for behavior (Shulla, Filho, Lardjane, Sommer & Borgemeister, 2020). Through environmental education, norms can be established that prioritize sustainable practices, motivating individuals to adopt environmentally friendly habits and actively engage in collective efforts for sustainable development. By integrating values and norms, environmental education paves the way for a society that embraces environmental conservation and contributes significantly to the attainment of sustainable development goals. Therefore, if educational programs want to accomplish the goals of both sustainable development and environmental education, they should stress student participation and action in order to create stronger feelings of ownership and empowerment in the learning process (Peter, 2016).

SDGs goal 4 stand to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. Achieving inclusive and quality education for all reaffirms the belief that education is one of the most powerful and proven vehicles for sustainable development. This goal ensures that all girls and boys complete free primary and secondary schooling by 2030. It also aims to provide equal

access to affordable vocational training, and to eliminate gender and wealth disparities with the aim of achieving universal access to a quality higher education. Goal 4 of the UN SDGs commits by all states to not only ensure equitable and inclusive education and enhance lifelong learning opportunities by 2030. Target 4 of this goal seeks to ensure that all students acquire the skills and knowledge required for promoting sustainable development through sustainable lifestyles and education for sustainable development by 2030 (UNESCO, 2017). At the same time, the UNESCO Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) 2030 Framework suggests that ESD is a major component of quality education and a critical enabler for attaining all the SDGs. Notably, the ESD 2030 Framework offers holistic tools and guidance for implementing these ambitious commitments and goals. A number of these instruments acknowledge the significance of environmental education initiatives that seek to promote lifelong, holistic, and systematic understanding and awareness of environmental issues affecting the local population. Arguably, environmental education programs include courses that provide skills and knowledge acquisition on environmental themes, including waste management, water management, responsible consumption, climate change, and recycling and composting. Environmental educators globally are seeking new ways of advancing excellence within EE programs and initiatives to contribute to the achievement of all the SDGs at the global and national levels, particularly SDG 4 on education (Shulla, Filho, Lardjane, Sommer & Borgemeister, 2020).

In order to ensure that all learners acquire knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, there is need for education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence,

global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity. This particular goal cut across all the SDGs horizontally and emerged as one of the most important goal for the achievement of SDGs collectively. As education and human resource development is the key of this goal the different areas related to education viz; education for sustainable development, environmental education, peace education, vocational education, higher education etc. for everyone cutting across all section of society is must for the success of SDGs. In this regard, Environment Education (EE) and Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is one defined field of specialization which directly deals with environmental conservation and protection without a doubt. The concerned organizations responsible to put into practice the courses and the curriculum in Nigeria's education systems would very well list down the initiatives undertaken by them towards achieving this (Leon, 2020). With such overt attention and energy invested to achieve this goal, it is naturally expected that such efforts would bring about environmental literacy and the result would be reflected in our attitude towards the environment and in addressing environmental issues.

For effective implementation and successful endeavour of SDGs it is essential to integrate environmental education into formal education curricula at all levels and across various disciplines. By incorporating environmental education into the education system, students can develop a deep understanding of the interconnectedness between environmental issues with emphasis on local environmental issues which students face daily and empower them with the necessary skill to resolve such issues. With seven (7) years left on the clock and the challenges of insecurity and poverty posing an undermining threat, it suffices to say that prioritizing (goal 4) education as an instrument for environmental awareness will strategically have a ripple effect across

other goals.

Conclusion

Environmental Education (EE) is a lifetime method with the goal of imparting environmental consciousness, ecological understanding, behaviors, principles, actions obligations and ethical responsibility for the fair use of energy and for healthy and sustainable growth to its focus audiences in the formal education sectors. Mere discussing greater issues like global warming and climate change will not bring fruitful results. To attain sustainability, national environmental education strategies must be large-scale, comprehensive, and integrated. The national education strategy needs to be re-examined and improved, while the education curriculum should be formulated for optimal environmental knowledge and understanding. Further, activities which involve exposure of the students to nature must also form a regular feature in the curriculum. Frequent visit of students to nature may instill interest to take up projects which will give positive results in safeguarding the environment as a whole.

The Way Forward

The combination of the need for improved education worldwide and rapid environmental degradation has led to increased opportunities for environmental education programs to enhance both. Programs that focus on familiar environments and communities promote student success and confidence on a local scale, and provide the foundation for solving larger societal and environmental issues in the future. Basing programs on sound structural processes supply students with an opportune learning environment to develop the skills necessary for life. Finally, a commitment of time for the long term development of the students, as

well on resource conservation, provides students with the opportunity to understand, investigate, and resolve issues they face. However, changing or traditional political environments can directly or indirectly influence the educational process, and need to be accounted for. In order for SDGs to meet its goals, citizens worldwide must be provided with the skills necessary to face future challenges. Using the environment as a unifying educational theme can be a successful strategy in providing citizens with those skills. Protection of environment is apparently considered to be an important goal under all stages of education as envisaged by environment education for making SDGs a success. Special courses have also been designed to achieve this goal worldwide; however, there is no visible positive impact on the ground. Several reasons can be attributed for the prevailing situation, which includes our lack of concern and commitment for the environment as an individual and lack of skills to tackle environmental problems, due to ineffective environmental courses and policies. To overcome such barriers, it is essential to relook and redesign environmental courses that are being imparted in the school and higher education.

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