Environmental Education: A Veritable Tool for Fostering Youth Ecopreneurship in the Current Economic Uncertainty

By

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Abstract

Environmental Education is the development of environmentally literate citizens in skills, knowledge, attitudes and values. The process of entrepreneurship applied to create businesses that solve environmental problems or operate sustainably is termed ecoprenuership. When youths are given proper environmental education, they can avail themselves of environmental job opportunities in several areas including waste collection, environmental consultancy, air pollution analyst, natural resource manager, waste recycler and nature conservation officer without necessarily earning a degree. Nigeria has enormous environmental problems which youths could leverage to make a living but only about less than 2% venture into it. Government and NGOs can help the youths to have access to such opportunities by granting them loans and organizing training and workshops on the various skill acquisition programmes on environmental jobs. Youth are therefore enjoined to look inward and acquire the “ecopreneural" spirit that would enable them to tap into the treasure hidden therein.

Keywords: Education, Environmental, Ecopreneurship, Youth, Empowerment,

Introduction

Environmental sustainability is a key issue for societies throughout the 21st-century world. Education and learning are the key ingredients in becoming more sustainable. In the past few decades, the environment has attracted the attention of decision-makers, scientists and even laymen in many parts of the world. In response to a growing understanding that the environment is being negatively impacted by human activities, a specific part of education termed environmental education has become focused on how to reduce our impact on the environment to promote a more sustainable future. The whole and core idea behind Environmental Education is the development of environmentally literate citizens in skills, knowledge, attitudes and values (Carter and Simmons, 2010)

Environmental scientists find solutions to problems across a wide array of themes- cost-benefit analysis, environmental impact assessment, risk management, eco-auditing, life-cycle analysis and waste management (Timothy, 2000). This allows environmental scientists to find new job opportunities as managers and environmental assessors, often called environmental entrepreneurs.

Environmental entrepreneurship (otherwise referred to as "ecopreneurship") can be defined as the process of entrepreneurship applied to create businesses that solve environmental problems or operate sustainably. The rate of unemployment in Nigeria is high and has promoted social vices which include cultism, drug peddling, kidnapping, armed robbery, child trafficking and ritual killing (Ogbuanya & Ofonmbuk, 2015). These have constituted a serious threat to national security. Nigeria has enormous environmental problems which youths could leverage to make a living but only about less than 2% venture into it. This paper x-rays the opportunity that abounds in keying into several environmental jobs available in Nigeria, especially in this period of economic uncertainty

Highlights on Environmental Education

In the development of the worldwide environmental movement, there have been a few especially significant turning points. One of these was the Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment of the United Nations, which took place in 1972. It was the first international gathering to make the environment a top priority. It was at this conference that environmental education was declared a "tool" to address global environmental problems. The following definition of environmental education was approved during the conference: "Environmental education is the process of recognizing values and clarifying concepts to develop skills and attitudes necessary to understand and appreciate the inter-relatedness among man, his culture and his biophysical surroundings. Environmental education also entails practice in decision-making and self-formulation of a code of behaviour about issues concerning environmental quality."

The conference made the recommendation that environmental education be incorporated into all educational levels and programs, as well as informal and non-formal educational activities. Additionally, it called for the creation of environmental education curricula, resources, instructional techniques, and training, in addition to calling for international collaboration and exchange in this area. This was noted in Principle 19 of the Declaration which states "Education in environmental matters is essential 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."

Additionally, the Stockholm Declaration provided the framework and direction for other international initiatives and activities related to environmental education, such as the Tbilisi Declaration of 1977 which was the world's first intergovernmental conference on environmental education organized by the United Nations Education, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in cooperation with the U.N. Environment Programme.
The Conference endorsed the following goals and objectives for environmental education.
The goals of environmental education are:

a) to foster clear awareness of, and concern about, economic, social, political, and ecological interdependence in urban and rural areas;
b) to provide every person with opportunities to acquire the knowledge, values, attitudes, commitment, and skills needed to protect and improve the environment;
c) to create new patterns of behaviour of individuals, groups, and society as a whole towards the environment.

The environmental education objectives are categorized thus:

Awareness—to help social groups and individuals acquire an awareness and sensitivity to the total environment and its allied problems.

Knowledge—to help social groups and individuals gain a variety of experiences, and acquire a basic understanding of, the environment and its associated problems.

Attitudes— to help social groups and individuals acquire a set of values and feelings of concern for the environment and the motivation for actively participating in environmental improvement and protection.

Skills— to help social groups and individuals acquire the skills for identifying and solving environmental problems.

Participation—to provide social groups and individuals with an opportunity to be actively involved at all levels in working toward the resolution of environmental problems.

Education is widely seen as a means of eradicating both national and international problems associated with our environment, industrialization, insecurity and food insecurity. Education for

sustainable development comprises the subjects of environmental protection, the efficient utilization of natural resources, the maintenance of the ecosystem and responsible attitudes among members of society and the business community. Environmental education is thus an integral aspect of sustainable development (Sarma, 2011)

Understanding environmental issues and being aware of them serve as the foundation for taking effective environmental action and committing to environmentally friendly and sustainable development. Hence, there is a need to get the youths acquainted with environmental education so that they would be inspired to key into the opportunity of helping themselves in this current situation of economic hardship.

Benefits of Youth Ecoprenership in Nigeria

There is a global consensus that young people are the greatest assets any nation could rely on for meaningful development. The underdevelopment of this demographic segment portends huge dangers for the overall national well-being (Kolapo, 2016). It is therefore worrisome that young people in Nigeria have long battled the unwholesome impacts of unemployment, hunger and poverty, and outright negligence by the elderly political class. Nigeria is the most populated black African nation in the world with a population of over 180 million. Estimates show that youth constitute over half of the total population. Despite this pool of active human resources, much has not been achieved in channelling this useful resource to contribute to the expected overall economy (Kolapo, 2016) as well as the security, political and sustainable development of Nigeria.

Unemployment in Nigeria today has become every youth's nightmare. It is no longer about going to school and graduating or learning a trade, but about how to face the reality of graduating and joining the brigade of unemployed youths. Political instability and inconsistencies in the social-economic policies of the successive government led to the emergence of high-level unemployment in Nigeria (Arogundade, 2011). Evidence in Nigeria shows that in economic crisis, young people are the first to be laid off perhaps due to inadequate experience which is" the last-in-first-out" syndrome. Hence, many young people are simply pushed into self-employment thereby becoming "entrepreneurs by necessity" rather than" by choice" (Clemensson & Christensen, 2010).

As much as 90% of the pressure groups like Boko Haram, IPOB, OPC, MEND etc. that are currently threatening the peaceful co-existence of the nation are youths. Their activities have resulted in threatened freedoms, wasted lives, violation of rights, maiming and killing of citizens, and abject poverty to mention but a few. If at least 30% of the population involved in these problems avail themselves of environmental empowerment programs, the level of insecurity would drastically reduce

Potentials for Youth Empowerment in Environmental Sciences

Youths can avail themselves of environmental job opportunities in several areas including environmental consultancy, air pollution analysis, natural resource management, waste recycling,

environmental education, nature conservation officer and environmental engineering. Youths can earn a living as waste recyclers, natural resource managers or nature conservation officers.

Municipal solid waste management is one of the most crucial environmental challenges facing Nigeria. In most cities, the urban population is growing faster than the urban authorities' capacity for waste collection and disposal, a condition which has led to inadequate waste management (Okoye, 2015). The mountainous heaps of solid waste that deface Nigerian cities are a clear indication that the solid waste management system is unsustainable and grossly inefficient.

There is a hidden treasure in waste. Very little attention is paid to the fact that wastes are resources and waste management could be a veritable source of income generation which leads to cleaner and healthier cities. Capacity building in solid waste management is a key strategy in ensuring permanent solutions to solid waste management problems, unemployment and over-exploitation of resources and persistent poverty in the country.

People create wealth from waste through activities ranging from informal waste collection, scavenging, recycling and others. Scavenging has the potential to create jobs, reduce poverty, save municipalities' expenditure, supply inexpensive raw materials to industry promoting its competitiveness, conserve natural resources and help clean up the urban environment. Studies reveal that some scavengers make as much as ₦52000 - ₦75,000 per month while the middlemen make as much as ₦2,200,000 per trip. One can compare this with what civil servants earn in a month. Thus, scavenging can be socially desirable, economically viable and environmentally sound. Though some scavengers are poor, their poverty is often due to their exploitation by middlemen, repressive government policies and their inability to organize themselves. According to Medina (2007) when scavengers get organised and are supported by authorities, they can get over poverty and contribute more to sustainable development.

In most cities in Nigeria, evacuation of waste by municipal authorities is only partial. This is a result of the poor road network, improper routing and shortage of funds. Informal refuse collectors in most cases are paid by the residents to evacuate these wastes with the aid of wheelbarrows or pick-up Keke. Informal waste collection can be a profitable venture if properly organized and trained. An informal waste collector in Awka (the capital of Anambra state) was interviewed in the course of this write-up. The 28-year-old man who was very happy with his job revealed that at ₦200 per flat, he covers 20 flats on average and makes ₦4,000 every day. Thus, according to him, excluding four Sundays in the month, he makes ₦104,000 in a month. Another interesting example is that of a Youth Corper (NYSC) who embarked on informal waste collection in the Government Reserved Area of one of the northern states where he did his youth service. He was making an average of NGN 75,000 every month, an amount which was more than his monthly allowance. This implies that young graduates and other job seekers can venture into such businesses while they wait for better jobs.

Government or NGOs can sponsor capacity-building workshops for youth empowerment in solid waste management in the areas of recycling various wastes ranging from paddy husk for briquettes and cement substitutes; Conversion of Organic waste to organic fertilizer; Plastic waste recycling into plastic chips, ebonite rubber and pellets; Nylon waste recycling into nylon flakes and pellets; Electronic waste recycling; Machine designs for solid waste recycling through indigenous technologies; black Soap Production from Organic Waste etc. On the whole, this has several advantages to offer the country and the youths which among others include: peace and security; environmental protection; resource conservation; income generation; employment generation and poverty eradication; vocational training opportunity; opportunity for carbon credit/ CDM application etc. A book titled "Entrepreneurship in Waste Recycling" is available and could be a veritable resource material that youths can leverage to help themselves. States are therefore enjoined to embark on capacity building on entrepreneurship in waste recycling.

Conclusion

Environmental education can enable the youths to leverage the Employment opportunities created by environmental sciences to empower themselves. This can drastically reduce crime, conserve the environment, and be a source of livelihood for them. Government and NGOs can help the youths to have access to such opportunities by granting them loans and organizing training and workshops on the various aforementioned environmental skills. Youth are therefore enjoined to look inward and acquire the “ecopreneur" spirit that would allow them to tap into the treasure hidden therein.

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