SOCIAL WORK INTERVENTION AND ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY IN NIGERIA: PROSPECTS, CHALLENGES AND WAY FORWARD

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**Abstract**

Environmental sustainability has become a global concern the world over such that, it is recognized in Sustainable Development Goals 11, 13 and 15. This paper takes a look at how social work practice can be used to ensure environmental sustainability. In other words, social workers have certain roles to play in ensuring that the natural environment is exploited in a way that is beneficial to both the present and future generations. The paper adopts qualitative approach utilizing secondary data only. The paper contend that challenges that impedes environmental sustainability such as irresponsible deforestation, poaching, and other waste management practices can be addressed using social work practice. Thus, it is recommended that social workers should be involved in the systematic efforts made by government and other stakeholders to protect the environment for the benefit of future generations. It further recommends that social workers should be trained and retrained on basic strategies that can be adopted to enhance environmental sustainability (Word count: 158).

Key words: Challenges; Environmental; Intervention; Prospects; Social work; Sustainability; Way forward.

1. **Introduction**

Despite the relationship and interdependence that have always existed between man and the environment, it was not until the 19th and 20th century that environmental sustainability became a global concern. This concern was motivated by the reality that if man did not become sensitive in his exploitation of the environment, he may end up endangering his own survival. some of the major factors that have challenged environmental sustainability include industrializations, man’s push for good life, population expansion, deforestation, civilization, poor waste management practices and irresponsible exploitation of natural resources (WESS, 2015; Rambaree, 2020). These factors have necessitated the need for intentional and collective efforts towards achieving a sustainable environment for all. A sustainable environment is one that is able to viably carter for the needs of the present day generation without compromising the opportunities for and ability of future generations to also benefit from the environment.

The protection and sustainability of the environment have remained poor despite all the efforts and investment of government at both national and international levels on it. Worst still is the fact that most of these efforts in terms of formulations of policies, regulations and laws were unenforceable or badly implemented. As a matter of fact the implementation of sustainable development programs in Nigeria has remained an issue of concern to both scholars and policy makers alike. This is because a greater number of people are not well informed, are poor and totally dependent on the environmental resources for survival while some are ignorant of its benefit to humanity. Indeed, one of the recurrent problems of sustainable environment acceptability by all has been the logic to growth phenomena. Proponents of this logic posit that resources are infinite as far as there is technological advancement and innovations. Worst still is the fact that sustainable environmental programs tend to have been politicized to the extent that a lot of persons doubt the sincerity of government and those purporting to support it. More so, the poor implementation of some of the programs has created many unavoidable problems some of which are extreme poverty, high rate of poor health, high morbidity and low income sustainability, especially to the poor. With the poor handling of the program, some deviations occur at high level proportions.

Despite the fact that there are many measures put in place to change the narrative and make the environment sustainable, yet the problem still persisted. It is on this premise that social work intervention is proposed by this paper to address the challenges facing environmental sustainability.

Social work interventions are multifaceted covering advocacy services, referral services, counseling services, rehabilitation services and awareness creations, education, sensitization among others. These social work intervention measures are goal directed towards attaining environmental sustainability goals which include to manage environmental resources in such a way that the future generation will also enjoy them. Thus, the social worker’s intervention roles in the protection and sustainability of the environment are enormous and engaging. Basically, it involves the application of skills, techniques and practice models. This paper therefore attempts a look at how social work in Nigeria can effectively face this new and unique demand made of it by environmental issues. It is concerned with how social work can be applied to cause environmental sustainability. It does so in the light of prospects, challenges and way forward.

1. **Literature review**
   1. **Concept of environment and environmental sustainability**

A reflection of the United Nation’s Sustainable Development Goals shows that the environment is divided into climate action, life below water and life on land which makes up goals number 13, 14 and 15 respectively. The implication is that, every divide of the environment must not only work well, but be sustainable and that, in attempting to achieve the other goals, particularly, goals number 7 which focus on “affordable and clean energy”; goal number 9 which deals with “industry, innovation and infrastructure”; goal number 11 centered on “sustainable cities and communities” as well as goal number 12 which focuses on “responsible consumption and production”. All these sustainable development goals emphasize the importance of the present day generation not to compromise the environment such that the ability of future generations to benefit from the environment is hindered.

**2.2. Concept of social work practice**

The spectrum of social work is rather broad and in its broadness are lots of prospects. Social work covers engagement with people with disabilities, mental health issues, addiction and lots more. It covers engagement with people as concern their cultural or traditional practices as well as environmental issues like climate change. Consequently, depending on the area of specialization, there exist social workers such as community social workers, indigenous social workers, child, school and family social workers, disability social workers, mental health and addiction social workers, indigenous social workers and environmental or green social workers. The point is that, wherever a problem exists, there is prospect for social work. This is supported by Inyang (2023) that observed that, prospects in social work professional practices are the availability of challenges/anomalies which the professionals can bring their expertise to bear in a bid to, either completely correct the anomaly or contend it.

Modern understanding of social work has been more encompassing. For instance, the International Federation of Social Workers, International Association of Social Work and Australian Association of Social Workers, conceptualize social work as practice based and academic profession out to cause and promote social change, development, social cohesion, and the empowerment of people. These institutions see social work as predicated on the principles of social justice, human rights, respect for cultural diversities and collective responsibilities (IFSW & IASSW, 2014). Ornellas et.al (2018) attempting a definition of social work as apply to modern realities, recognized social work as an applied profession of helping individuals, groups and communities, improve the entirety of their wellbeing through facilitation and empowerments that connect them with appropriate systems.

One of the early definitions of social work that captured this thinking was given in 1973 by National Association of Social Workers. The definition placed on the shoulders of social work the burden enhancing or restoring to their capacity for social functioning, individuals, families, groups and communities facilitating the creation of favorable societal conditions. To deliver effectively what is required of it, social work needs knowledge on human development and behavior; knowledge on economic and cultural institutions and knowledge on the interaction of all these factors.

* 1. **Factors inimical to environmental sustainability**

The reality is that, despite the global concerns on environment, some African countries are yet to contend with practices that are inimical to environmental sustainability (Bell et. al 2019). One of such county is Nigeria. While industrial activities in Nigeria have yet made significant contribution to global warming which is a leading cause of climatic change, the few industrial activities in Nigeria have none the less telling consequences on the immediate environment where the company exist (Okili et.al, 2020). This is more pronounced with oil companies as oil companies host communities continue to cry the waste of their land and water bodies as a result of oil exploration activities. Aside industrial activities, civilization, cultural practices, population growth, expansion in cities, poor attitude towards environment, illiteracy and ignorance have equally not helped in achieving a sustainable environment in Nigeria; if anything, the aforementioned have help in the steady and gradual destruction of the environment (Ramsay & Boddy, 2017; Janardhana et. al, 2019).

In Nigeria, manmade environmental problems abound. There exists the irresponsible deforestation, poaching and waste management challenges. There is also the challenge of open defecation, the challenge of fishing with chemicals that are armful not only to fishes, but to other water bodies and even humans; the challenge of gas flaring, oil spillage, and bush burning. These challenges affect climate, life on land, life below water and all call need immediate action to stem the tide (Rocha, 2018; Wu &Greig, 2022).

* 1. **Efforts towards environmental sustainability**

To stem the tide, Non-governmental organizations and government have made efforts. For instance successive governments in Nigeria came up with various environmental policies pursued through various environmental programs and outreaches. Most of the outstanding environmental policies in Nigeria have legal backings. Examples include: The Federal Environment Control and Protection Act (1993), The Oil in Navigable Waters Decree (1968), The Petroleum Decree (1997), The Associate Gas Re-injection Action (1980), The Federal Environmental Protection Agency Decree (1983), Petroleum Industry Bill (2009) and National Policy On The environment (1999).

Aidonojie et.al (2020) referencing Ugoh and Ukpere (2012) observe that, the federal government has adopted a number of measures to tackle environmental pollution and degradation including the stipulation of procedures for the reclamation and the restoration of land, top soil and vegetation of mined out areas; the maintenance of regular environmental audit to ensure the adoption of sound environmental practices in all mining operatives; the promotion of safe and pollution free operation in energy production and use; ensuring effective monitoring and assessment of environmental protection program in upstream and downstream activities in the petroleum industry are indicative that, governments of the nation have always had the interests of its nation’s environment and all that constitute the environment at heart. Nigerian governments are interested in the air, water, land, vegetation waste management and climatic conditions of the country (Wonah, 2017).

The Nigerian government interest in addressing environmental interest is not only felt in the areas of the formulation of policies that have legal backing but also in the creation of executive institutions to help engineer and drive the policies and programs aimed at ensuring sustainable environment in Nigeria. Some of these executive institutions include the Federal Ministry of Environment and its agencies, the State ministries of environment and their agencies. One of the most outstanding agencies of the Federal Ministry of Environment is the Federal Environment Protection Agency and there is the Niger Delta Development Commission which is now under the Ministry of Niger Delta.

Most environmental sustainability programs in Nigeria are government driven or internationally sponsored (Inyang, 2023). The few driven by private individuals are more profit driven environmentally conscious. It is not a bad thing for government to drive environmental sustainable program, but given the reality and the challenges often faced by government driven programs in Nigeria, allowing crucial concerns like environmental sustainability solely to government is not the best way to go (Sleebey, 2008; Witkin & Iversen, 2008; Monisha, 2017).

This reality challenges social worker in the wise that, left to government alone, most times, its only politicians who will be involved in the program and sometimes this politicians may not be grounded on what to do, or may be grounded on the involvement of the program, but not have the sincere commitment to executing the program.

* 1. **Consequences of environmental un-sustainability**

The consequences of environmental un-sustainability cannot be overemphasize for it’s negative effects cut across both natural and artificial aspects on earth in terms of living and non-living things, human beings inclusive irrespective of the gender. These environmental un-sustainability comes most often than not as a result of environmental pollution in form of Air pollution, Water pollution, Soil pollution, Noise pollution and even Endocrine-disrupting chemicals (EDCs). Some of the consequences had been noted by some researchers like Aidonojie et.al (2020) and Wonah (2017) who note the following as some of the consequences of not tending properly to the environment: Health challenges of human being resident around the area, biomagnifications, decreased pH of the earth’s Ocean, global warming, reduced biodiversity, changed species composition of ecosystems, reduction in the amount of sunlight received by plants, soil infertility, and acid rain. For me, besides what had been researched by earlier mentioned researchers, the most dangerous negative consequences of environmental sustainability is it negative effects on Human fertility caused by Endocrine-Disrupting Chemicals (EDCs). These negative effects that differ depending on the gender may come in various ways. Like for males, according to NIEHS( 2020) these chemicals perform the following:

* Increased risk of infertility and miscarriage
* Damaging of Deoxyribose Nucleic Acid (DNA) and mutation of genetic
* Hormone levels (testosterone, estrogen) alteration,
* Sperm count and quality decrease

While that of Female Fertility according to ASRM (2019) come in many ways. Some of such are:

* Decline in egg quality and Ovary dysfunction.
* Promote Menstrual irregularities and polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS)
* Risk of miscarriage and stillbirth increase
* Hormonal imbalances (estrogen, progesterone)

Since environmental unsustainability is what can hamper human population in the world by negatively affecting the procreation speed or rate, promote or instigate marital instability through the gingering of barrenness, contribute to increase of street urchin as a result of broken or unstable homes due to marital turbulence to list but a few, and since even the GROSS DOMESTICE PRODUCT(GDP) of a Country can be affected on the negative, it’s neglect should be a thing of concern to all and be treated as such,

* 1. **Challenges facing social work intervention in environmental sustainability**

A number of factors pose as challenges for the effective use of social work intervention in

ensuring environmental sustainability. For example, there are insufficient numbers of social workers experienced in the subject matter of environmental sustainability.Like any profession, social work has various areas of specialization in which environmental social work is one. Unfortunately, this area of specialization does not have many specialists. Rocha (2018) observes that, this can be traced to the origin and perception of social work. Social work originated from the west and was at incipient merely concerned with helping indigents feed, clothe and shelter. This laid the foundation of the perception and conception of social work as socialite activities engaged in by the rich and targeted at the poor. This perception naturally came to associate social work with philanthropic institutions and charitable societies. This perception successfully removed the application of social work in the area of culture, economic and environmental issues.

Despite the new perceptions and orientations of social work, most social workers in Nigeria, still chose to specialize in areas within the precinct of western concept of social work. This creates the problem of having few social workers that special in environmental issues. Hence this poses a challenge for the use of social work interventions in ensuring environmental sustainability. Environmental issues round the globe usually requires technical skills to manage and technical skills requires having some specialized training which is not readily available in Nigeria. Another challenge has been that most foreign sponsored social work inventions tilt more towards philanthropic giving and other such engagements that enhance the living conditions of individual not the person’s environment (Teixeira & Krings, 2015; Chandler et.al, 2017). Given this scenario, social workers in Nigeria who chose to specialize in environmental issues may just as well be ready to go hungry or remain jobless.

The conceptualization, planning, execution, supervision and evaluation of environmental programs geared at contending environmental challenges are often done without the inclusion of social workers or counselor. In event where they are involved, they are not allowed to play key roles, often their inclusion is an afterthought and they are brought in to play a script, regardless of their opinions. This is not a problem peculiar to social work alone in Nigeria. The following works indicate that, this challenge is endemic in Nigeria: Orina (2016), Olukanni et.al (2016), Olang (2015), Okoli et.al (2020), Oke (2019) and Ochonogor (2019). These scholars argue that corruption, misplaced priorities, nepotism, perfunctory commitments to duties and lack of will power have caused these realities of a challenge in Nigeria. Much as social work holds lots of prospect for the environmental sustainability, social workers will not be able to take advantage of these prospects if they are not allowed to participate effectively in environmental sustainability programs. Another challenge is that, because of the high monetary involvement, social workers are not financial capable to independently undertake environmental programs that will ensure environmental sustainability.

Infrastructure remains a challenge in every sector of the most developing countries, including Nigeria. This challenges social work because, if a social worker is to show how, there must be the infrastructure to practice. If a social worker is to be effective in discouraging environment unhealthy traditional practice or equipment, the social worker must be able to show an alternative environmental friendly infrastructure. Failure to show such will have little or no impact on the individuals, group or communities the social worker wants to change or influence positively.

* 1. **Social work interventions: Way forward**

The efforts made so far have not been able to arrest the environmental challenges in Nigeria and to turn them towards sustainable environment. The need therefore for a different approach, like the use of social work approach which according to Rocha(2018) have been proven to birth desirable result in developed countries. Rocha (2018) observed that, one of the prevailing and encouraged approaches to social work is the holistic glimpse at whatever social work concerns targeted. The social work approach does not only leans itself towards addressing the environmental challenges, since it stresses first, a look at the environment of life, but also stresses calls for the deliberate involvement of indigenous people in the local politics, urbanism and conscious effort at achieving theoretical conceptions of social work that would be compatible with sustainability.

The world has changed drastically today. A lot of old ways no longer hold sway and new challenges emerge. These task every area of human endeavor including social work. The realities of social change and its implications on general systems, ecology and ego psychology all make the emergence of new ways and foray in social work practice crucial (Gunarathne, 2019; Forman, 2023). The practice of social work today is first tasked with recognizing their roles and responsibilities to local social problems and opportunities linked to the overall development of economic and environmental issues.

Social work holds lots of potentials for environmental stability. Who is better disposed to show how certain practices ruin the environment if not a social worker? Who is better disposed to show how best to dispose of waste, how best to plant trees, how best to fish if not a social worker? When it comes to engaging people to ascertain why they engage in practices inimical to their environment, social workers will do a great job. Besides finding out why the people do what they do, social workers are also trained to how to subtly convince people out of their indulgences. However, the ability and capacity of social workers to influence environmental sustainability is highly dependent on the extent to which they are allowed to participate fully in the environmental programs.

The way forward with regards using social work to address environmental sustainability issues in Nigeria have three cardinals. These cardinals are unity of purpose, inclusion of counselors/social workers in systematic efforts aim at ensuring environmental sustainability and the training of social workers on how social work can be applied to environmental sustainability. There should be unity of purpose and direction that will be clear on which perspectives of environmental sustainability for development is the country pursing. Is the country better suited for and is the countries apply social work to. A lot of other players will come in to make the work of environmental sustainability work well for social work. For instance, development communication could be employed to streamline perspectives; counselling will be used to determine the reasons for environmental unfriendly indulgences and how best it can be discourage and social work will be applied to show how what is proposed for environmental sustainability can or is to be done. All parties involved must work in unity.

Inclusion of social workers in systematic efforts aim at ensuring environmental sustainabilitywill allow these twin experts bring their expertise to bear on environmental sustainability programs in ways that only them are trained and better disposed to. Social work should be used to advocate for the development earns that favour environmental sustainability as reflects on an individual, group and community interaction with their environment (Weber, 2012; Michailakis & Schirmer, 2014; Jeevan, 2023; IFSW, 2023). The application of social work intervention to ensure environmental sustainability should be such that does not only cause a detailed plan for the pursuit of development through waste management, but one that details how the plan is to be executed, the responsible personnel and the resources needed. Social work can contribute to development through enhancing environmental sustainability if it establishes network among key stakeholders and sparks ideas that lead to indigenous and ingenious methods that are positively sensitive to the environment. Training of social workers on environmental sustainability programs and advocacy for their inclusion are other activities that will chat a positive way forward.

* 1. **Theoretical perspectives**

In the analyzes of social work intervention and environmental sustainability in Nigeria: prospects, challenges and way forward, the following The liberal, radical, structural functionalism and limit to growth hypothesis theories/models are used:

* Liberal approach: This approach is concern with such environmental problems that impedes environmental sustainability. These include galloping of human population with its attendant problems, resource consumption and environmental pollution. It expresses fears about the dangers of man’s activities on the environment and predict severe consequences of environmental neglect and abuse, especially if man does not change his ways. The liberal approach also assumes that though productive technologies could solve environmental problems, but with population and production rise, environmental quality will decline, thus impeding the goals of environmental sustainability. The liberal approach is relevant to this paper in the sense that it calls for reforms on a number of areas such as conservation efforts, pollution and limits on the consumption of natural environment and also advocates for enactment of enabling laws and policies that can protect the environment from destruction.
* Radical approach: This approaches even though it accepts the views of the liberalist but doubted the ability of reforms in solving the problem. Rather it argues that environmental sustainability is impossible under a capitalist economic system that places profits above all other considerations. It believes in advanced technology in solving environmental problems and sustaining environmental resources. It believes that technology can only be useful in environmental sustainability if it is directed by economic and political systems that represent the interest of the people as a whole and not a privileged few. The theory further assumes that the solution to all the challenges facing environmental sustainability lies in the replacement of the capitalist economy and when the interest of social justice and environmental safety and wealth are equitably distributed.
* Structural functionalism: This theory is connected to environmental issues in three different ways namely technology, culture and social patterns. Technologically, it posits that technology has a powerful effect on the environment and environmental sustainability. E.g. combustion engines burn fossil fuels such as coal and oil that affects the environment, the release of pollutants into the atmosphere.

Culture is also found to affects the environmental sustainability. Examples include our values and beliefs that guide human actions. Thus, the state of the environment reflects our attitudes about the natural world. Also, deforestation, irrigation, buildings and conspicuous consumption which affect the environment are influenced by our values and beliefs.

Logic of growth versus limit to growth: The logic of growth explains why people are against the notion of environmental sustainability. It view the natural environment as full of infinite resources and that people can freely use and abuse them, the resources will not be finished. It emphasizes the need for humans to enrich themselves and enjoy life. It believes on the idea of progress through science and technological explorations and holds that powerful technology has improved our lives and brought new discoveries, promotes material affluence. However, the “Limit to Growth” does not believe that the Earth resources are infinite. It argues that the earth resources are finite and will exhaust if we continue to pursue growth at any cost. It states that humanity must implement policies to control the growth of population, production and use of resources to avoid environmental collapse which may likely affect future generations.

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1. **Conclusion**

The paper concludes that social workers have significant roles to play in ensuring environmental sustainability in Nigeria. Social work services in form of advocacy, rehabilitation, counseling, referral, education, interface sensitizations can be utilized towards the enhancement of a sustained environment. Social work intervention measures can change the behavioral patterns of people towards the environment. In other words, social work practice is critical to guarantee a sustainable environment.

1. **Recommendations**

The following recommendations are made in this article:

* Social workers should make intentional and concerted efforts to improve their knowledge and relevance in the push at ensuring environmental sustainability.
* Social workers should be included in the conception, planning, execution, supervision and evaluation of programs geared at ensuring environmental sustainability.
* Social work should pay particular attention to highlighting the strength, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of environmental issues of the nation with a view to leveraging on the strengths and opportunities while downplaying the weaknesses and threats.
* Social Workers should as a matter of urgency inform and educate the Public through frequent Seminars and Workshops on the negative effect of environmental unsustainability on family and the World at large as regards procreation and Nation’s Gross Domestic Products (GDP).
* Social Workers should beseech the Government through Communique for Exclusive Areas for Industrial Activities.
* Private individuals and multinational entities should become seriously involved in the intervention programs aim at tackling environmental menace and ensuring environmental stability.

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