

LOCAL DISPOSITION TO ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION, POVERTY ALLEVIATION AND OTHER ISSUES IN THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AGENDA IN ONDO STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract: Sustainable development is the global agenda designed to ensure that the world's climate is not irretrievably damaged and future generations have equal access to the world's resources for their own development. The institutionalisation of measures to promote sustainable development has however not had unanimous cooperation. This study therefore investigated the attitude of officials at the local government level to topical issues in the sustainable development agenda in Ondo State, Nigeria, as a pointer to entrenched attitudes in the Third World. Prioritisation of issues varied between localities but premium was placed on poverty alleviation more than on climate change or power generation. People were more concerned with the improvement of their general well-being including health. Respondents indicated that most of the topical issues on the sustainable development agenda could be addressed at the local level thereby lending support for the notion that local action can contribute to global action. However, inclusive measures to promote positive action need to be institutionalised.

Keywords: Agenda 21, Local Agenda 21, Ondo State, poverty alleviation, sustainable development

Introduction

In statements to the fifth (1997) and eighth (2000) sessions of the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development, the Nigerian government delegation declared:

....Nigeria, like most developing countries, is however faced with the dilemma of striving to meet the needs of its poor millions, who have to eke their living from primary productive activities, and maintaining resource and environmental integrity. Striking a balance between poverty alleviation and environmental protection is indeed an onerous task... (UN 2005).

The official attitude above aptly represents the reality of the situation in sub-Saharan Africa. There is need to elucidate the causative factors in order to prescribe an acceptable programme which will address the immediate needs of the people while concurrently promoting sustainable development.

Practitioners have argued that the drive for sustainable development must be a worldwide agenda if success must be achieved. Unfortunately, the exploitation of the world's resources

has been lopsided in favour of Western countries to the detriment of Third World economies. This paradigm has however discounted the reality that, hitherto, in a majority of occasions resources have been exploited for the basic necessities of life without seriously endangering the survival of humanity whereas it is the drive for greater comfort and pleasures that have resulted in the crisis situation in which humankind finds itself.

In a review (IUCN/IISD/SEI/SDC, 2003), it was concluded that global climate changes would impact natural and human systems directly or in synergy with other determinants to alter the productivity, diversity and functions of many ecosystems and livelihoods around the world. Yet these impacts will not be distributed or felt uniformly, as certain ecosystems and populations exhibit higher degree of vulnerability. More importantly, these causative factors may be far remote from the impact environments.

It has therefore become evident that in addressing the issue of sustainable development, action on every continent and at the local level cannot be discountenanced. However there may be a general apathy towards this approach because of the general feeling that the industrialised nations have been grossly unfair in sequestering the resources of the world for their own development. Secondly the perception exists that individual actions at the local level may be too little to have an impact on the global environment. Predictably, the Local Agenda 21 (LA21) action plan is focused on tackling global problems by working at a local level (Fisher 1999) bringing about the apt catch-phrase "Think globally, act locally" quoted by Church and Elster (2002). However, according to Cooper (2001) reconciling the need to take account of global issues in local decision making will be difficult, particularly in deprived areas. The apparent result will be a bias in favour of issues of immediate local relevance such as hunger, especially in the Third World, to the exclusion of local-global problems such as energy use and climate change (Pinfield and Saunders, 2000). If government had acted as prescribed in the Agenda 21 document (UNCED, 1992) there ought to have been progress on sustainable development issues. Unfortunately, as enunciated in an earlier paper (Olumekun et al., 2008) there has been no concerted action.

In spite of all these shortcomings, the importance of local action can not be over-emphasised. In the concluding part of a study on several local authorities in the UK, Church and Elster (2002) suggested that local action can play an important part in making sustainable development work by implementing projects that meet local needs; induce individuals to take action and promote inclusion.

This study therefore sought to unravel the Nigerian attitude to global environmental issues and to evaluate the causative factors. It will also make recommendations on the way forward in generating interest in the less privileged areas of the world on issues of global citizenship.

Methodology

The study, conducted in Ondo State, Nigeria (ODSG, 2010) adopted a questionnaire which was a modification of the reporting guidelines issued for the assessment of progress on the status of the National Strategy for Sustainable Development by the United Nations (UN, 2004) to bring to the fore, views at the local government level.

Questionnaire Administration

Questionnaire administration was carried out in two local governments per senatorial district, making a total of six local governments as follows:

- *North Senatorial district:* Owo and Akoko
- *Central Senatorial District:* Akure South and Ondo West
- *South Senatorial District:* Okitipupa and Odigbo

The six local governments, besides Akoko North East, are the largest in population and land area or have the highest revenue allocation from the Federation Account (FMF, 2010). The following officials of each local government were approached to complete the questionnaires: Chairman, Vice-Chairman, Speaker of the Local Legislature, Supervisory Councillor for Health and Environment, Supervisory Councillor for Works, Secretary of the Local Government, Director of Personnel management, Public Health Coordinator (PHC) and Treasurer,

Data have been presented in percentage form and simple summarisations were made, where appropriate.

Results

This study elucidated the respondents' attitudes towards Waste Management, Transportation, Poverty Alleviation, Job Creation, Housing, Hunger, Roads, Health, Energy



Figure 1. An outline map of Nigeria showing the location of Ondo State (darker colour: source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:NigeriaOndo.png>)

Generation and Climate Change at the local government level. The results indicate that the topical issues each had relative importance in the different local government areas (Figure 2). The overwhelming issues of importance across board were Poverty Alleviation, Health and Job Creation while the least important was Climate Change. The results also show

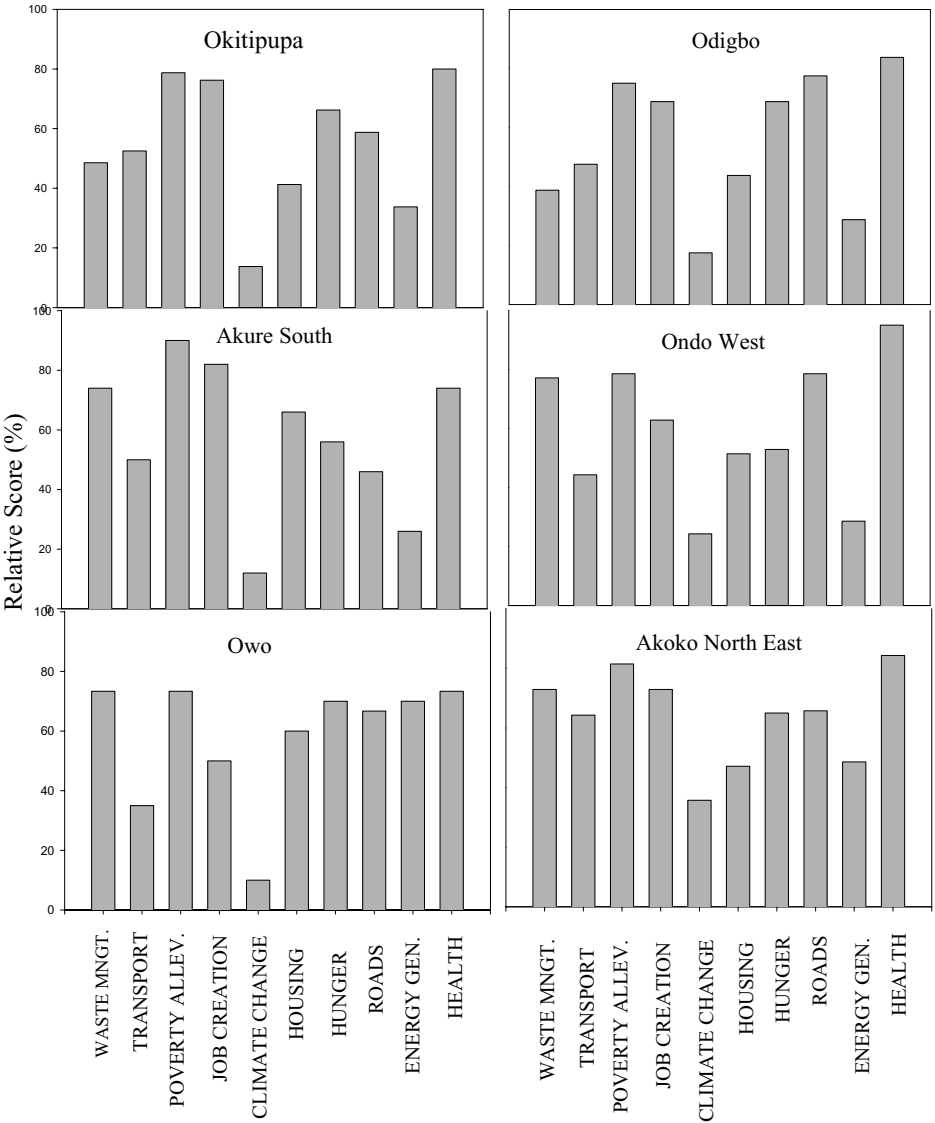


Figure 2. The relative importance of some topical development issues among the various local governments in Ondo State

that Energy Generation was not a priority issue at the local government level. Most of the important issues therefore centred on economic empowerment although there were some fine differences in the priorities of each local government.

When the respondents were requested to assess the practicality of addressing each of the topical issues at the local government level, the results show that optimism varied from local

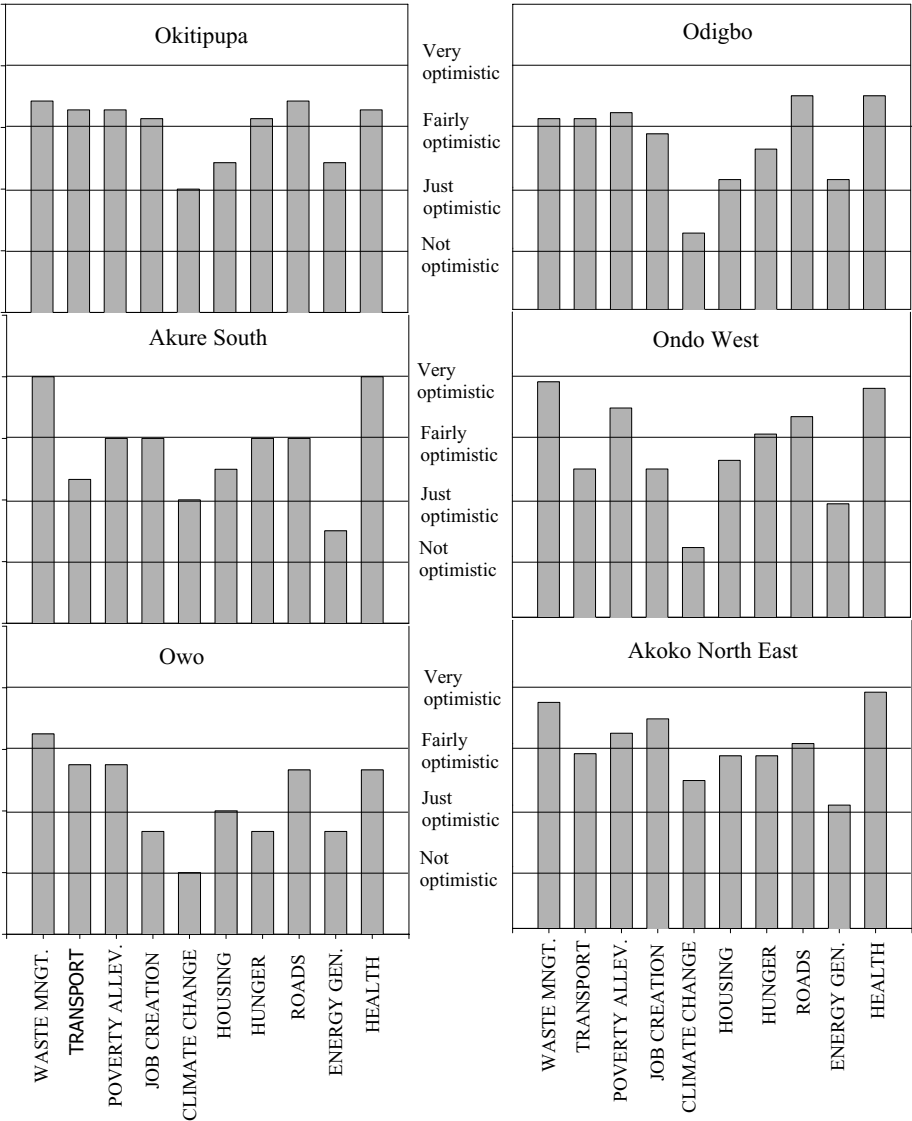


Figure 3. The relative optimism of local governments staff on the ability of local governments to address certain topical issues of development in Ondo State

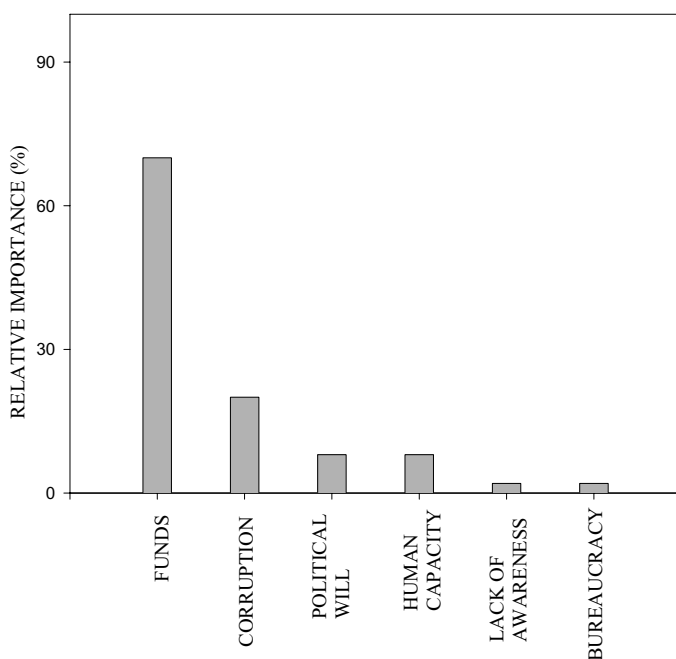


Figure 4. Identification of the major constraints to the implementation of any strategy at the local government level in Ondo State

government to local government although the majority (78.7%) expressed the desire to see a strategy addressing the issues mentioned above at the local government level. However, the respondents were not overly optimistic that Climate Change, Electricity Generation, Housing and Transport could be adequately addressed by local governments (Figure 3). Apparently the respondents believed that issues that will uplift the economic base of the individual could be adequately addressed at local level.

Inadequate funding followed by corruption/injudicious fund application, lack of capacity development and political will in that order (Figure 4) were identified as the major constraints to the implementation of any strategy at the local government level. On the existence of an Environmental Action Plan (EAP) in their respective local governments 57.4% of the respondents believed there was an environmental action plan in place while 37.7% believed there was none and 4.9% abstained. However, personal investigations revealed that there was no Environmental Action Plan in any of the local governments at the time of this study. What was in existence was a National Environmental Sanitation Policy launched in 2005, which was being confused with the EAP. When asked to indicate the desirability of an EAP the response was overwhelmingly positive (95.1%).

Discussion

This study has demonstrated that fine differences exist in priorities and perceptions from local government to local government. These might be tied to the peculiar situation in each location. For instance, Health, which was the issue that had the most relevance across board, was secondary to Poverty alleviation and Job Creation in Akure South local government. This might be due to the higher concentration of medical centres in Akure, which is the seat of the state government. The view that health and waste management could be adequately addressed at the local government level (Figure 3) suggests that a centralised Waste Management Authority, as presently operated, might not be essential if it could easily be addressed at the local government level. It is therefore imperative to encourage each local area to choose its priorities in project execution. Apart from promoting inclusiveness, this approach will engender more participation from the community and encourage contributions in cash and kind. The modalities however need to be worked out in compliance with the constitution which allocated clearly defined responsibilities to the various tiers of government (FGN 1999) with minimal overlap.

This study has again highlighted the negative attitude of people in the Third World to the issue of climate change as enunciated by Pinfield and Saunders (2000). It is apparent that in Ondo State issues of health and economic empowerment are of primary concern while people have been dismissive of their own relevance in preventing climate change or on issues such as biodiversity loss. On several occasions people have expressed the opinion that the environment has been abused by people in the developed world and its restoration is therefore their sole responsibility.

Lucas *et al.* (2001) believed that as a result of the environmental bias, LA21 initiatives have often struggled to make links with those who do not see this focus as relevant to them. Church and Elster (2002) also concluded that even at the local level, environmental programmes have often been viewed with deep suspicion and have failed to make impact even when they integrate social issues. In the face of all these negative attitudes, Church and Elster (2002) still held the belief that solutions could still be found for this apathy. This is why, according to Selman (1998), the LA21 agenda has broadened to encompass quality of life, a diffuse concept which studies have shown to relate to environmental quality, crime, local health care, education, employment prospects and housing availability. In recognition of the need for an integrated approach, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) therefore advocated the reinforcing of poverty-environmental linkages into development strategy and policy frameworks (UNDP, 2004) and this has formed the basis of its partnerships with developing countries.

Among the continents of the world it is only in Africa that poverty has been projected to increase in the 21st century (Onibokun 2003). In spite of global initiatives to chart a strategic direction in solving this inequality, many African countries have not been able to deliver dividends to their nationals in the area of poverty reduction (Onibokun 2003). Commendable as it is, focus on poverty alleviation to the exclusion of other pillars of sustainable development will be counterproductive in the attainment of the lofty ideals of LA21, as it will bring the issue of development back to the original disjointed square. Church and Elster (2002) believed that linkage between social and environmental activity has been the weakest part of many

LA21 programmes and this is traceable to clashes between environmental concerns and the economic goals of inclusion and regeneration programmes (Church and Young, 2000). It was the view of Selman (1998) that the concerns of LA21 must embrace much wider issues of active citizenship and quality of life including environmental stewardship. Any meaningful action must therefore encompass environmental quality, crime, local health care, education, employment prospects and housing availability (Rogerson 1997) among others.

Balance of Poverty?

Many government policies designed to align with globalisation have evoked negative passions from the people of the Third World especially on such issues as petroleum, when governments insist on making citizens pay the international market price even in countries where they are locally produced. Such initiatives only serve to impoverish them. It is this same suspicion that has followed initiatives to reduce the depletion of the ozone layer. Very often, governments come out with import prohibition orders on such basic products as used cars, used refrigerators and used clothes among others, whereas, people are more concerned with eking out a living than with environmental protection. When the poor in the developed world are compared with the poor in Africa the balance becomes grossly uneven!

There is the general perception that the prescription for development by the industrialised world and UN agencies are generally lopsided against Third World economies. For example, in Western Europe, farmers at a time were paid to “Set-Aside” agricultural land (Chruscinski 2011; Living Countryside 2011 and RPA-DEFRA 2009), whereas, subsidies of any kind in Third World countries, even of basic agricultural inputs, were discouraged. Meanwhile, initiatives such as the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) which have been designed to compensate the least developed nations for non-pollution have not had justifiable subscription by African nations (Oppennoorth et al. 2007).

The Third World is therefore being presented with the “Burden of Environmental Protection” which may stymie growth and development at a time when they are daily bombarded by the “Burden of Existence”. This is why according to Olumekun et al. (2007) people are wont to engage in the “scooping” of spilled petroleum products in the Niger Delta or openly prospect for lead in Sokoto, Nigeria, even in the face of the deadly consequences. It is therefore a case of “Whether we eat, we die, whether we don’t, we die; so let’s eat and die”.

In order to resolve this impasse there must be a concerted global approach to ensure the “redistribution of pleasure” so as to get Third World citizens to cooperate in the agenda for sustainable development. This will entail institutionalising the recycling of basic necessities which find their way into landfills in Europe and America for the benefit of the less privileged in the Third World.

Third World Criticisms of the Sustainable Development/Environmental Protection Agenda

Could sustainable development/environmental protection be a “Trojan Horse”, ploy or pre-emptive action of the industrialised countries to tell the whole world that they recognise the damage they have collectively inflicted upon the world in the quest for their development

and comfort, and are thus seeking to stem the tide of agitation by providing an interesting issue on which to waste precious time, as a diversionary tactic? The reason for this opinion is that, as presently designed, the concept does not prescribe limits and targets and seems to scratch the surface when dealing with issues of global poverty yet foreclosing discussions on certain key areas where the strategic military interests, economic interests, comfort and livelihoods of industrialised countries are threatened. Could this be why the USA, the greatest polluter, the greatest consumer of energy and the greatest generator of waste, has consistently frustrated policies and refused to initial basic protocols designed to reduce the emission of greenhouse gases, yet has been very vocal in promoting global trade liberalisation; the workings of which appear to be against the economic interests of Third World countries which Agenda 21 is supposedly in sympathy with?

According to Bossel (1999),

If we would achieve environmental sustainability coupled with a continuation of present trends, where a small minority lives in luxury, partly at the expense of an underprivileged majority, this would be socially unsustainable in the long run because of the stresses caused by the institutionalised injustice. And an equitable, environmentally and physically sustainable society that exploits the environment at the maximum sustainable rate would still be psychologically and culturally unsustainable.

To the people living in the Third World, since western countries have achieved development at the expense of others, there is therefore no drive to focus on sustainability when it literally puts the brakes on their own development/basic existence. It is therefore imperative to present a global front in tackling this problem.

In order to encourage a more positive attitude to conservation issues subtle measures must therefore be adopted, as a brazen approach may be counterproductive since there is the general belief that the man who is hungry has no business talking about conservation. These measures may be by way of bringing to light the damage already done to the environment and to enlighten people on the implication to humankind's survival through subtle publicity programmes on television, radio and other news media. Such programmes must however prompt the industrialised nations to own up to their responsibilities and present a concerted forum to pay some form of "reparation" to the less developed states.

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