

The 2000 Millennium Environment: Time to Act

Introduction

We live in a rapidly changing world, and some of these changes have been so phenomenal that they have fundamentally altered the way we live, work and play. In the last two decades especially, we seem to have been so engaged in trying to cope with those changes around us that we hardly have had the time to stand back and understand what has happened to us, leaving us thoroughly perplexed. The pace of change has created three different classes of people – the very few who make change happen, those who constantly ask what's going on, and those who wonder what happened. Changes happen in all of nature, and sometimes, the changes we are forced to handle are themselves life-threatening. It is little wonder that over time, those creatures unable to cope with the changing environment become dinosaurs. These poor creatures were unable to adapt to the changing environment, but it is an irony that they were responsible for many of the changes in the ecological system around them. Man has lived through periods of fundamental change, but not since the industrial revolution has there been such profound change in life circumstances as we have experienced in the last 20 years, driven by the forces of globalization, liberalization and technology. Given the obvious neglect of the environment over a sustained period of time, this self-induced change will create another generation of dinosaurs, unless we act very fast.

Our environment, our support

Advances of technology have brought comfort and great improvements in quality of life, but it has also divided the world into two unequal halves - the developed world and those that truly strive for development on one hand, and the rest on the other. In recent times, the digital divide spawned by the latest technologies has come to increase the distance between these two, and will perhaps widen the gap even further unless the disadvantaged seize the opportunity to leapfrog.

As technology and industrialization grows, so does the demand on the natural resources, which must now be managed with increasing care. The symptoms are a legion, but the most critical appears to be the depletion of the protective ozone layer especially in the process of generating energy, desert encroachment, pollution of air and surface water, and the bleaching of agricultural land leading to significant decline in productivity. The impact of nuclear power development may never be fully understood. However, going by the ravages of this monster in World War II, and the fact that the

consequences are still being felt today, no one can doubt the responsibility that each generation holds for making life easier for the next.

Desert encroachment is a phenomenon the world has not tackled on a global basis. Current efforts have tended to be isolated, with each community seeking to protect itself and its own territory. But we know that such a view of the environment is grossly defective because the world ultimately has one eco-system. The pollution of air and ground water as a result of industrial activity gives as much concern as desert encroachment if not more, and the loss of productivity of agricultural land puts certain regions of the world at the risk of starvation. The developed world has fared better again because of the consistent effort to study trends and take definitive steps to ameliorate the degradation. The emergence of genetically modified foods is the direct offshoot of the search for high yielding varieties, almost independent of soil conditions. But then GMOs create other concerns. Much of these life-threatening developments are the direct result of economic activity in man's quest for better quality of life. It appears that the capacity of the eco-system to sustain life has progressively dwindled, and the consequences of this continued depletion are better imagined. We are the generation that must bear the responsibility to preserve the environment for the future generations otherwise we either become dinosaurs or they develop unusual capabilities in the natural sequence of adaptation.

Population explosion and the environment

Perhaps the most powerful testimony of the impact of technology and the growth of knowledge is that the world population has risen to 6 billion today, twice what it was in 1960. This attests to the advances in health care delivery systems, better standards of hygiene, and exponential increases in education and awareness levels, resulting in longer life expectancy. An even more scary revelation is that 75% of all human beings that ever lived on earth since the creation of man are alive today. Obviously this is the result of true advances in knowledge, but it also means that the statistics will get even more frightening as time passes. For example, the doubling of world population since 1960 means that the space available to each person on earth has halved in the last forty years. With further advances in medicine, which now suggest that human organs may be reproduced from cells in the laboratory, life expectancy can be expected to rise beyond 90. Some of the impact of the population explosion is doused by the development of more efficient and less resource consuming energy substrates, but the demand may rise to overwhelming proportions.

In spite of this huge growth of population, real per capita incomes are, on average, 60% higher today than they were in 1973, and the pace of growth appears to have picked up somewhat in the post-1985 period. Whereas per capita income grew at about 1.8% per year in the 1973-1985 period, the growth rate accelerated slightly to close to 2% per year after 1985. However, the improvement in the post-1985 period did not benefit all regions of the world. Latin America and Asia enjoyed big gains, while Africa and the Middle East slowed sharply because neither of the two regions was linked to the global surge in trade and investment. And yet there was insufficient intra-regional trade to compensate for this isolation. This decline in the well being of the African means that attention is diverted to basic survival issues and very little attention is paid to matters of the maintaining the eco-system. The relevant statistics is that households in Africa spend 40-60% of the family budget on food. The comparative share in richer nations is 12-20%. Thus households in richer nations can allocate a much larger share of their income to discretionary spending which accounts for 45% of household expenditures in the richest 25% of nations compared to only 16% in poorer nations. What applies to households also applies to governments, and that is why developing nations have paid so little attention to re-invigorating the environment. This is, of course, apart from the problem of ignorance and illiteracy.

The normal process of living and conducting economic activity creates waste, and the world has learnt over time to recycle most of the waste as a deliberate act to relieve the pressure on natural resources. This is yet to begin in Africa where the average per capita waste of 9000 kg is hardly recovered. The developed world has been able to recover at least half of that through recycling and energy re-use, and even the ultimate waste is deployed to rejuvenate the depleting soil quality.

The Nigerian dilemma

I have opened this discussion with this world-view concentrating on the direct results of population, economic development and growth because these are three inter-related phenomena, which have the most impact on the environment. Such a panoramic view also helps to emphasize the growing divide between the developed and the less developed regions of the world. About 10% of the world population lives in Africa, and we already know that every fifth African is a Nigerian. Two-thirds of Africans live below the poverty line defined by the threshold of \$1 a day, and with poverty comes

decease caused by illiteracy. We have witnessed in Nigeria a wholesale destruction of the ecosystem, and no one seems to bother. The impact of the environmental degradation in the Niger Delta area over the years cannot be overlooked. Fish populations have declined sharply, and not only does this diminish the nutrition of people, it actually has destroyed the base of economic activity of many, thus increasing the poverty level even further. Initial attempts to stem the desert encroachment of our northern borders have completely lost momentum, and rather than sustain these laudable initiatives, those who have governed us in the not too distant past have further compounded the problem by their wanton neglect and greed for financial gains. Licenses were granted to individuals to fell trees for export without any plans to replenish the forests. Many of the merchants did not even know where the trees were, but were only interested in selling the piece of paper on which the permit was granted. Unfortunately, this mindless race for economic gain by a few elite has left the rest of the country gasping for the last bits of life sustaining elements.

Closer to home, the UNDP projections indicate that at the current rate of growth, Lagos will be home to 24million people by the year 2015, and would have become the third largest city in the world after Tokyo and Bombay. We are in a race against time. It is enough trouble to handle the 9000Kg of waste that each of the 24million will generate each year. The vehicular density in Lagos is 222 per Km, against a national average of 11. This means that if all the vehicles in Lagos were to be lined up bumper to bumper on the roads, there will not be enough roads to take them. Less than 2% of these vehicles have modern catalytic exhaust, and the amount of carbon monoxide emission is probably in the hundreds of tonnes each day. Sometimes taking an aerial view of Lagos creates real fright if one imagines the consequences of the massive pollution of the smog that covers the city. Our waterways and lagoons are filthy as ever because they have become the dumpsites for septic tank scavengers. Lagos does not even have a proper landfill site. Potable water production at 600 million litres a day is only one-third of the demand of 1800 million litres a day. Each element of the data above has enormous implication for the environment. I have often wondered how long more it will be before we need to wear nose and face masks around Lagos.

Lagos is home to more than 60% of the industrial activity in Nigeria, and therefore carries the burden of the consequences on the environment.

I believe the compelling case for urgent action is easily made, and certainly explaining this any further to this audience is like preaching to the converted. We should therefore turn our attention to the nature of the action required. Let me state upfront that the issue of the environment must engage everyone, public sector, private sector, informal sector, NGOs, students, everyone.

Time to Act.

In tackling the huge problem we are faced with on the environment, I believe we should plan our action on the basis of the urgent and the important.

I would suggest four steps in the category of “important”

1. A master plan for environment management

There is the imperative to create a master plan for managing the environment if one does not exist. Such a plan will identify the various key issues that affect the environment, measure the impact of each one, specify the goals and standards for each dimension and lay out an action plan for returning the current situation towards the standards. Those standards must be specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and time-bound. These standards often relate to industrial emission but must also include standards for public waste treatment facilities. It is true that we are in a hurry to catch up on lost ground, but standards that surpass best practice in the world are certainly not realistic and are not likely to be achievable. There is much to be said also about the mode of enforcing those standards. For example, imposing a blanket environment levy will not produce the desired results, because the implication is that anyone can pollute provided the levy is paid. That is obviously not the goal. The clear objective of any environment management system is to promote voluntary compliance as much as possible, and where enforcement is necessary, it should be designed to elicit compliance. In this respect, I feel that standards should include specifications on industrial materials, and a special focus must be placed on toxic chemicals. Money that is chased for levy to Government should be channeled into effluent treatment.

2. Industry self-regulation

I believe that industrial and commercial concerns must themselves accept responsibility for preserving the environment. The principle ought to be that anyone who creates a mess should clean it up. Running a factory without a

system to neutralize environment-degrading emissions does not portray a socially responsible organization.

Also ozone-depleting materials like CFCs in refrigerant systems based on freon gas, and PCBs will have to be replaced with environment friendly substitutes as soon as the moratorium imposed by international regulatory bodies expire in the next five to seven years. Unfortunately, this will require considerable capital expenditure in new plants, since many of the current refrigeration plants cannot run on the new refrigerants. The threat to the fishery industry, for example, can be phenomenal unless action begins soon.

3. Awareness

The reality of the degradation to the environment and the risk it causes to human existence is not common knowledge. Our fight to preserve the environment must start from generating the awareness among the people. The awareness I speak about goes beyond cleanliness or good hygiene. Normal behaviour on hygiene is poor because of the inadequacy of infrastructure to handle domestic waste over a prolonged period of time, and this has changed habits of people for the worse. Poverty is also a big hindrance here, and efforts to create the right level of awareness will come against these two hurdles. However, my concern is more for creating awareness about the threat to the very existence of the current, let alone future generations. Ignorance of the consequences of our actions on the future of our environment is a huge problem, and there is no quick fix or easy solution. It seems to me that a service similar to the extension service in the agriculture industry is called for in the area of environment management, where specific and targeted education work is undertaken among the critical population segments. Local Governments are strategically placed to play a major role in orchestrating extension services of this nature. This will certainly be a productive venture for them, and a decent service to society instead of dreaming up spurious levies and taxes as they currently do.

4. Infrastructure

The creation of a viable infrastructure for handling solid industrial and domestic wastes is also very crucial in our race against time on matters of the environment. The PSP programme of Lagos State, which permits registered private enterprises to participate in the removal and handling of solid domestic waste is laudable. There is however the need for a more effective coordination of this activity before the industry creates and settles to bad practices. On the other hand, the current monopoly of LAWMA in the removal of industrial solid waste must be broken, in order to pave the way

for greater efficiency. Indeed, LAWMA itself should be privatized without further delay. The role of Government then reverts to prescribing and monitoring standards within the waste management industry, building and managing the landfill sites, incinerators and other infrastructure, as well as generating standards and monitoring overall emissions against standards.

Town and city planning authorities must arrest the largely chaotic situation with regard to the location of commercial and industrial activity. This lack of planned development makes it more difficult to manage industrial waste. Industrial estates should be delineated and must have facilities for central waste management such as was created in Agbara. For the older estates studies must now be conducted on the feasibility of creating central treatment plants with minimal disruption. Where this is not immediately feasible, there should be commitment on the part of the enterprises to establish stand-alone treatment plants within an agreed moratorium period.

In the category of “urgent”, my suggestion will be two.

1. Immediate clean up of our waterways and lagoons.

This is a big task, but the current situation calls for very urgent action to preserve the ecological balance in our immediate environment. The reckless discharge of waste into the body of water around Lagos is a major threat to life and the economy of the State.

2. Development of the physical environment

The current effort to clean up the city must be sustained, and should be orchestrated in a manner that gives a lasting impact. For example the on-going work to clear drains would have been a wasted effort if the debris in the drains were only shoveled onto the side of the road as is currently being done. The debris will end up back in the drain.

The complementary effort to clean up the roads cannot be allowed to lose momentum.

Conclusion

The imperative for urgent action cannot be a matter for debate much longer because time is fast running out. The pronouncement of a World Environment Day by the United Nations is intended to generate such positive action and not just for more talking. The urgency of this action is more pronounced in the developing world, and particularly in Africa.

Nigeria, as the largest nation on the African continent must champion the move to clean up the environment, and prepare the continent fully for participation in the world stage of economic activity. We must do this now before the anticipated economic growth arrives, powered by the forces of globalization, and the imminent liberalization of our economy. As Nigeria gets ready to plug into the modern world economy, creating a sustainable environmental health must be part of the foundation we must lay in our restructuring effort. It gets harder to achieve the same results once industrialization process accelerates, as it will. The place to start from is right here in this room. We are the people that must start the movement and the time to do it is now.

I thank you for your attention.

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