

## THE MEDIA'S FUNDAMENTAL ROLE OF SHAPING ENVIRONMENTALISM

### AGENDA

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### ABSTRACT

Key environmental setbacks including unsustainable use of scarce resources and ecosystem degradation such as felling of trees without sufficient reforestation and soil degradation continue to threaten the livelihoods of a population. Low levels of education, advocacy and awareness by the media platforms to the citizens are partly to blame for these environmental challenges. This paper is an integrative literature review that explores the causes and results of environmental degradation. It further interrogates the media's critical role of enlightening individuals on the importance of protecting and conserving their environment. It is cognizant to have a media that exudes debates and discussions around these emotive environmental matters. It is essential to stress the negative impacts brought about by the destruction of environment. The realization of the consequences of resource depletion and environmental degradation will invariably propel environmentalism as a key agenda for meeting social livelihoods and sustainable development in general.

**Key words:** Environmental degradation, conservation, education

## 1. Introduction

The first two decades of the twenty-first century has witnessed massive natural resource exploitation that has led to numerous human-environment conflicts, poor environmental conservation and unsustainable development. Environmental education and awareness has been advocated as one sure way of ending these conflicts [1]. According to the Canadian Grantmakers' Network [2], resolving this day's environmental problems in addition to moving the society towards sustainability should not be left to the environment experts alone. The immense support and dynamic participation of an educated and an informed individual is greatly needed as well. Therefore, the mass media has a huge pedestal in the global biodiversity conservation via its role of increasing awareness on matters that hinder environmental sustainability and enabling changes on human attitudes towards environmental concerns (ibid).

While the focus on environmental education and public awareness remain pertinent in school systems, it is unfortunate that many researchers and scholars fail to interrogate the important role the media may play in environmental conservation [3]. This research gap may be attributed to the insufficient environmental information and/or subject existent on the various forms of the media (ibid). It is further regrettable that many media reports on the environment tend to concentrate on crises or challenges rather than dwelling more on problem solving mechanisms. The intensity of environmental broadcasting and stories on the print media remain below par and the media's constant attention on sensationalism and confrontations need to be reversed [4].

It is however prudent to note that in spite of the above criticism, the mass media may still demonstrate utter effectiveness at educating individuals on the need to preserve their environment (ibid). Alternatively, environmental organizations may still use the media to

disseminate critical information to the public that can help alter their negative habits, views and decisions towards the environment [5].

Effective interaction between these organizations and the media establishments may play a fundamental role of catalyzing action among the individuals residing in a given area. It is therefore expected that the media radiates an open and free exchange of information (ibid). It should be understood that the general public that remains unformed may fail to contribute to any environmentally sustainable activity [6]. In addition, no appropriate content geared towards natural resources conservation can be successful without the full support of individuals (ibid).

The significance of this paper is hinged on the mass media's role in fighting for environmental conservation. The media establishments have the ability to disseminate a wide range of environment policies by communicating them to the citizens as well as making them comprehend the said strategies [7].

It is however regrettable that the greatest effects on individual's health and well-being are also linked to environmental degradation. The causes of environmental degradation as established include an increase in population, global warming, and unsustainable agricultural activities among many more practices. The consequences include an overwhelming growth in the poverty index, unprecedented weather extremes, famine and an unstable global condition. This paper therefore suggests the need for individuals to be educated by the media on the importance of conserving their environment so as to prevent the occurrence of such fatalities [8].

The paper provides an impetus for the coverage of environmental matters by the mass media since environmental concerns continue to gain prominence and hence environmental protection. Many global environmental forums, e.g. on climate change continue to be held and all point to

the importance of environmental matters. Many environmental organizations have since comprehended the significance of environmental issues as per their numerous communications on social and environmental issues [9].

This paper argues that in attaining environmental protection and conservation, the media is expected to report on precise environmental developments. In protecting the environment, the media ought to convey clear information on environmental issues and particularly when there is an environmental disaster. Indeed, this paper indicates that the mass media has a responsibility of mirroring and shaping the public priorities relating to the environment and setting the environmental issues as the public agenda (ibid).

## **2. Methodology**

This paper is developed from a review of scholarly articles that are relevant to the area of environmental degradation, conservation awareness, sustainable development, media and information dissemination. It provides a succinct account, summary and critical evaluation of the selected articles in relation to the research problem. The article fuses the topic's related literature in an integrated way where perspectives on the research area are brought out clearly. It encompasses studies chosen on the global scale that address the media's role in advancing the environmentalism agenda. In addition, the paper is organized to meet the standards of research that entail clarity, rigor as well as replication. In summary, this paper formulates a research problem that is necessary for scrutiny, searches relevant literature, evaluates data that offer significant contribution, interprets findings and presents conclusions.

### **3. Causes and results of environmental degradation**

The continued accumulation of greenhouse gases in our atmosphere poses a greater risk for global warming. Most of these gases including methane, nitrous oxide, chlorofluorocarbons and carbon dioxide results to a greenhouse effect due to the fact that these gases block some of the radiated heat from the earth [10]. It is unfortunate that the human activities including forest clearance which decreases the absorption of carbon dioxide, the burning of fossil fuel for energy and the use of technology in industries that leads to pollution are among the issues that escalates the emission of these greenhouse gases. As pointed out by the Inter-government panel on climate change (IPCC), the previous two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were recorded as the hottest in the history [11]. It should be noted that global warming results to soil erosion, drought, flooding and a rise in the seawater level. The depletion of the ozone layer is the other consequence brought about by the degradation of the environment.

Essentially the ozone layer sits at a distance approximated at 20-30 kilometers above the sea level. It is argued that the ozone layer acts as a shielding layer from the destructive ultra-violet rays. The continuous release of Chlorofluoro carbons (CFCS) gases that pollutes the atmosphere contributes to the degradation of our environment [10]. Alongside most of the skin ailments and low agricultural productivity, an increase in Ultra-violet rays radiation also affects the water bodies, destructs the aquatic life by killing the fishes which act as food as well. In addition, ultra-violet radiation leads to the deterioration of synthetic materials and other building equipment thereby resulting to a deterioration delivery to an ever increasing population [12].

Land degradation is another adverse effect brought about by lack of or poor conservation of the environment. [10] quotes a case in Nigeria where over 40 million people are affected due to this

impediment. Land degradation is indeed a catastrophe that continues to face a majority of the people in the world today (ibid).The spiraling use of delicate and marginal ecosystems contributes to desertification of marginal lands even during the periods of adequate rainfall. Many environmentalists insinuate that the destruction instigated by drought and an increase in population may result in a great loss of valuable plant species. It is further dreaded that the pressure exerted on the diminishing resources in the arid prone areas can fuel a number of obnoxious socio-political challenges and acrimonies which brings forth huge economic losses [10].

Land dilapidation can be caused by many factors that range from, unacceptable logging of trees, overgrazing of livestock, improper use of available resources, flooding, and over-cropping. In most occasions land degradation also occurs due to wind erosion, over use of pesticides and fertilizers on a piece of land, devastation of wetlands as well as landslides [12]. There are other indirect causes of land degradation that are also tied to population increase, issues on properties ownership, poor enforcement measures resulting from lack of authority and inappropriate farming technologies (ibid).

It is further argued that the incessant use of firewood in cooking, boiling of water, use of it for heat and light contributes to environmental degradation. The low income group use biomass energy sources for domestic purposes due to the high cost of gas and electricity and therefore degrading the environment in the process [13]. As elucidated by [14] a growing number of people comprising of more than 8% of African population are still using the obnoxious fuel wood for heating and cooking. It is regrettable that the uses of this source of energy potent a greater harm to the population. Other environmental effects related with wood and biomass on individuals' health is that it leads to respiratory and eye disease as well and more so those people

using these alternative forms of energy. Furthermore, a continued exposure of the wood fuel may lead to pneumonia, bronchitis and even death in that the event the respiratory defense becomes impaired. It is prudent to note that the women who have been exposed to this kind of energy since young stand a risk of contracting nasopharyngeal cancer [10]. Many rural women use the fuel wood for cooking and heating and in most instances you may find them carrying heavy loads of firewood even surpassing 35kgs. The weight of 20kgs is approved by the ILO (ILO, 1966) because more than that has an adverse effect on women as it damages the spine besides resulting to problems with bearing of children. The excruciating work involved with collecting, transporting and cutting of wood, demonstrated by poor nutrition further propagates health challenges. Since many women specifically from the rural areas are involved in these activities that also consume a lot of time, the environmental problems touch on their health as well [10].

The incompatible usage of land in urban areas encourages the explosion of craft stands and small trade that include open mechanic workshops, gas sales, stalls and stores among many more enterprises. Besides generating income, these activities however cause environmental degradation due to the spillage of toxic battery acids, engine oil, grease, petroleum and underground water. Ideally, all of these may bring forth disasters including death (ibid).

#### **4. Media's role in encouraging environmentalism**

The issues on biodiversity conservation and protection have started to gain prominence and do stand a chance of attracting media coverage as well. Incidentally, the coverage of these environmental conservation programmes continue to attract the media's attention today unlike in the early 1990s when the same programmes could be given a wide berth [15]. The mass media

has a key role of conveying vital content that addresses environmental concerns which is in essence vital for the decision makers as well [16].

Media has a mandate of educating and informing its audience and many citizens can access government information via these media platforms. As indicated by [17], it is prudent for environmental organizations to have a cordial relationship with the media so as to ensure that their messages get to the general public via the media.

Arguably, the mass media remains influential in effecting strategies on environmental conservation through its capacity of reaching out to the decision-makers and opinion leaders in the society [18]. For instance, the opinion leaders in the urban areas subscribe to the newspapers and televisions which are their favorite channels for news while those in the rural areas tune in to national or local radios (ibid). Engendering of positive behavior geared towards the environment needs an all-inclusive approach involving taking all the stakeholders on board. The undisputable way of decreasing the loss of biodiversity and enactment of National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans (NBSAPs) is by integrating the goodwill of organizations, groups and individuals in one accord [1]. Communication, education, and public awareness are considered key in initiating a significant adjustment in the society. The watchdog role of the media where government officials and other leaders in general can be held accountable for any decisions on environmentalism is critical as well. The media has the capacity of gathering information from a given nation's planning records, news on local environmental matters and pollution accounts [19].

By conveying a factual environmental report as well as inviting the public to a policy discussion, the media then becomes more effective by ensuring that the citizens preserve their own



environment (ibid). Further, the mass media should guarantee an extensive conveyance of environmental information to its audience thereby speeding up the much anticipated positive action in safeguarding the environment. Ideally, the information on the need to protect our environmental is the heart of any environmental accomplishment [20].

It is therefore critical to note that environmental sustainability can be greatly achieved only if the public is engaged on public debates, informed and educated. As explained by [21], to attain social change, the media ought to carry out a vigorous promotions and campaigns linked to justifiable development. One of the suggested strategies is the identification of a target group and then tailoring the message to reach to that specific audience. The mass media is fundamental in effecting and strengthening environmental messages meant to foster awareness of the matters on preservation in the wider society [22].

Overall, it is important to note that deforestation may not be a problem and the activity in itself could be vital for any nation's economic growth. However, when felling of trees occur at a rate where both the ecological and economic systems become jeopardized, then it becomes imperative to appreciate why unsustainable deforestation activities should be discouraged. The formulation of the necessary policies to help curb such activities can be arrived at only when individuals comprehend the dynamics involved with these unsustainable activities [23].

It is vital to find out why individuals continue with such activities in spite of their immense contribution to environmental degradation. Dominant studies indicate that logging is an activity connected to the unsustainable deforestation in many parts of the world. For instance in Himalayas, commercial interests that are also driven by the government's policies are to blame

for the deforestation [24]. Similarly [25] asserts that logging was also the reason for the unsustainable deforestation in parts of Central Africa and Southeast Asia.

Unsustainable deforestation activities contribute to soil erosion, the loss of vital vegetation and watershed protection. Forests, and most importantly the tropical moist forest serve as an important water catchment area and the loss of the forest cover interrupts the hydrological cycle. Extreme deforestation may also heighten the chances for flooding in the lowlands. Soil erosion can also result due to a rampant loss of the forest cover. The continuous loss of the fertile top soil therefore implies a great dent and drop in the agricultural productivity as viewed from the economic perspective [23].

## **5. Conclusions and Recommendations**

This paper argues that deforestation, air pollution, water pollution, and improper disposal of waste that contributes to global warming can be arrested via the media's role of education and awareness creation to the citizens. Individuals should ensure that they protect and conserve their environment and hence prevent its degradation. The article concludes that education is a vital component that should be taken up by the media and thereby instilling respect towards the environment and individual's responsibility of safeguarding it.

In addition to the formulation of crucial policies required for sustainable development, the panacea to these environmental concerns also rest with the media's role of awareness creation and education of the citizens. In order to overcome the challenges brought about by environmental degradation, the media should embrace the teaching function. We strongly recommend that the guidelines on environmentalism should be clearly conveyed across clearly by all the media platforms. It is crucial for the environmental content to be grasped, and as such,

it has to be firm and flawless. To achieve this, the media content should project the challenges brought about by degradation of the environment, further illustrate why such activities are taking place, and suggest steps necessary in curbing them and finally present the conclusion. This conclusion should capture the results brought about by the successful achievement of curbing the environmental vices. Lastly it is important for the media practitioners to give information obtained from the experts' opinions which in most cases may be obtained from carrying out in depth interviews with them.

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