



Faith and Sustainable Development: An African Christian Perspective

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Introduction

Sustainability is becoming a common theme in African Churches today. Less than twenty five years ago, we were taught not to worry about tomorrow, because tomorrow will take care of itself, and to learn from the birds of the air, who have no storage yet they survive (Matthew 6:34). We thus learned to put our trust in God who provides for us, but we failed to recognize that we have an important part to play in caring for His creation. Our preachers tended to only espouse the literal meaning of this scripture, and by implication, suggested that those who talk about sustainability were unnecessarily worrying about tomorrow. These preachers were honestly speaking about God's providence without elaborating the nuanced meaning of 'worry'. There is no doubt that this understanding of the scripture was very popular among our people because we live on a continent where half or more of the population lives in poverty, and we have learned to see every day, every meal and every sunrise and sunset as a celebration. However, sustainability is not about worrying. Rather it is about living happily and responsibly today, and thereby providing for tomorrow by conserving what we have. The second scriptural consideration that influenced our lack of receptiveness towards sustainability was based on the interpretation of the following text:

God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground." Then God said, "I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds in the sky and all the creatures that move along the ground—everything that has the breath of life in it—I give every green plant for food." And it was so. Genesis 1:28-30 (NIV)

Our earlier understanding, on the basis of this text, did not allude to the relevance of sustainability. We saw those who talked about sustainability as restricting us from exercising our God-given rights of subduing and dominating the earth. We were completely oblivious to the responsibility that goes with such rights, in the context of a complex system of interdependence and interconnection called the ecosystem. We rejected any suggestion that human activities can have a negative impact on the earth and its sustainability. Concerns about environmental degradation and ecological disasters, which were even known to our ancient societies, were flatly underplayed.

Consequently, we developed an attitude towards environmental sustainability that was predicated on the limitless, 'divine right' we have over the earth.

Our situation was compounded by the general prevailing global attitude towards sustainability as well at that time. Generated by the Industrial Revolution and further advances in science and technology, the attitude of modern society towards sustainability was characterized by a combination of indifference and ignorance, predicated on the idea that humans can conquer the environment to get what they want without taking cognizance of the consequences of such actions. We simply ignored the trail of our ecological footprint and embarked on 'development', spurred largely by the desire for economic profit. Although the environmental movement began centuries ago³, it was much later, in the 1970s that it started to gain traction and climaxed with the World Commission on Environment and Development report "Our Common Future" in 1987, and the growing recognition that it can no longer be business as usual, and that the environment is not our foe. Hence, the slogan, "environmentally friendly", "green", "organic", "renewable", "recycled" and more became catchphrases⁴. Yet, from Stockholm in 1972 - UN Conference on the Human Environment, Rio de Janeiro in 1992 - UN Conference on Environment and Development, Johannesburg 2002 - the World Summit on Sustainable Development and, more recently the Climate Conferences in Copenhagen in 2009 and Cancun in 2010, the world's journey towards sustainability

3. United Nations, "Environment", Global Issues, <http://www.un.org/en/globalissues/environment/>

4. For more on the emergence of the concept of sustainability see Sarah Lumley and Patrick Armstrong's "Some of the Nineteenth Century Origins of the Sustainability Concept", *Environment, Development and Sustainability* 6: 367-378, 2004. Kluwer Academic Publishers, Netherlands

has been one of great challenge and promise⁵. Using this as a yardstick, we proudly can say that with regard to sustainability the African Churches are in step.

Religion and Sustainable Development - a Biblical Framework

Religion plays a very important role in the lives of most Africans. A survey conducted in 2010 as part of Pew-Templeton Global Religious Futures Project by the US-based research think tank, Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, revealed that Africa constitutes the most religious part of the world. Zooming in on the continent, Sub-Saharan Africa comes out as the most religious place on earth. The study found that in some Sub-Saharan African countries over 90% consider religion as the most important thing in their life⁶. The least religious among the countries surveyed had 67%, clearly a majority, saying religion is the most important thing in their life. Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Religions are the three main religious categories in Africa. Our focus here is on Christianity, and we take that to include Catholics, Protestants, Charismatics, Pentecostals, and African Independent Churches.

Religious convictions shape our attitude and worldview in very profound ways, for better or worse. Therefore, a discussion about environmental sustainability that draws from biblical principles would have a very positive impact on African Christians. The concept of Christian Stewardship enjoins us as humans to be responsible for the world, and take care of it. We are to use the earth's resources in a responsible manner. This means we must interpret the text from Genesis 1:28-30 within

5. For an exhaustive list of international conferences and frameworks on environment see footnote #1.

6. Pew-Templeton Global Religious Futures Project (2010) report accessed from the Pew Forum Web site: <http://pewforum.org/Press-Room/Pew-Forum-in-the-News/Survey-finds-Africa-is-most-religious-part-of-world.aspx#>

the framework of biblical stewardship. At a narrow level, stewardship reflects the belief that the earth and everything in it belongs to the Lord and we must glorify Him through how we use the earth's resources.⁷

In Genesis 2:15, we have a clear instruction of what our attitude ought to be towards the environment. The passage says, "The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it" (NIV). So God gave us what we need, but He also gave us responsibility.

Jesus gave a broad illustration of the concept of stewardship in Matthew 25:14-30 in the "parable of the talents", where a man entrusted his servants with some money. The ones that made good use of the money and yielded profits were commended by their master. We can extend this lesson to how we use the Earth's resources. Using the Earth's resources in ways that honour God also means taking into account the needs of others. This is in tandem with the World Commission on Environment and Development's widely quoted definition of sustainable development as "...development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."⁸ To honour God is to also care about the impact of what we do on others, and share in preserving God's gifts to humanity, both present and future. Therefore, the notion of inter-generational solidarity and responsibility are part and parcel of Christian Stewardship.

Christian Stewardship has two dimensions. The first dimension is "responsibility" – using the earth's resources to God's glory. In the "parable of the talents", Jesus added a second dimension which is "accountability" – implying that how we discharge our responsibility matters, coming to terms with the impacts of our action or inaction.

7. Several passages in the Holy Bible illustrate the concept of Christian Stewardship. Some example are: Psalm 24:1 and Deuteronomy 10:14.

8. World Commission on Environment and Development (1987) Our Common Future, Oxford University Press, Oxford, p. 43.

A Christian approach to sustainable development is therefore anchored on these two cardinal principles of responsibility and accountability towards how we use the earth's resources and the resulting impacts. Above all, sustainable development is holistic, encompassing four dimensions: social, economic, ecological and political⁹.

The nexus and inter-linkages between these four elements can be rendered intelligible in the context of the biblical idea of interdependence and the relationship between the body and its parts, which Apostle Paul described in 1 Corinthians 12:12-27. Verse 26 (NIV) says, "If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honoured, every part rejoices with it." The relationship between the four elements follows this analogy, and therefore we cannot afford to neglect any of the four elements if we want to achieve sustainable development.

Christian ethics also goes a long way in helping Christians to cultivate sustainable lifestyles. We do not have to wait until there is a law to compel us to act responsibly; our ethical values and principles should help us to make right choices. The Earth Charter¹⁰ as an ethical framework for sustainability underscores that our conscience plays a crucial role in the way we relate to our global interdependence and individual responsibility. For example, a law may not limit how much we consume or waste, but we need to set the limits for ourselves. This inner self-regulating mechanism comes from the awareness "... that when basic needs have been met, human development is primarily about being more, not having more" (The Earth Charter).

9. UNESCO, http://www.unesco.org/education/tlsf/TLSF/theme_a/mod02/uncom02to2.htm

10. "The Earth Charter is a declaration of fundamental ethical principles for building a just, sustainable and peaceful global society in the 21st century. It seeks to inspire in all people a new sense of global interdependence and shared responsibility for the well-being of the whole human family, the greater community of life, and future generations. It is a product of a decade-long, worldwide, cross cultural dialogue on common goals and shared values." <http://www.earthcharterinaction.org/content/>

This is consistent with the biblical principle of contentment. The following passages capture the essence of this part of the Earth Charter:

Then he said to them, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions." Luke 12:15 (NIV)

But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. 1 Timothy 6:6-8 (NIV)

Climate Change Actions in African Churches

Environmental degradation and climate change pose serious challenges to Africa. The continent is the most vulnerable region of the world, and the least able to adapt to the impacts of climate change.¹¹

Environmental degradation and climate change can exacerbate communities' fragility in Africa and lead to increased in resource-based conflicts, especially pertaining to water and other natural resources. African Churches are becoming increasingly aware of this, and are taking steps to address these challenges. In a statement issued by the All Africa Conference of Churches in Nairobi in 2008, Christian leaders from across the continent called on governments and donors to make environmental sustainability a priority, and take necessary measures to promote adaptation and mitigation efforts.¹²

Since the late 1970s and early 1980s, many Churches in Africa have been sensitizing their members about environmental protection and tree planting in

response to desertification. Western missionaries had helped their partner Churches in Africa to establish Rural Development Programmes, Agricultural Development Programmes, Faith and Farm, People-Oriented Development Initiatives, Integrated Community Development Programmes, etc. From their tree nurseries, these programmes supply communities with seedlings to encourage tree planting. They set up demonstration farms, where they teach farmers sustainable farming techniques such as alley cropping and compost production. Poultry production and animal husbandry are also important components of the programmes. The range of services provided by these faith-based institutions is available to communities without discrimination on the basis of religion or ethnicity.

These days, a growing number of Churches are mainstreaming environmental sustainability in both development programmes and theological education. In many countries in Africa, one can find projects dedicated to climate change. These projects promote awareness about the environment and climate change issues. They carry out campaigns to sensitize the communities about environmental concerns: distribute Information, Education and Communication (IEC) materials, which convey messages; organize drama and rallies; undertake advocacy activities; organize workshops and seminars; establish orchards and plantations; and participate in local and international climate change conferences. Some Churches combine climate change initiatives with others on peacebuilding, HIV/AIDS, gender, and water and sanitation.

Some theological seminaries have incorporated climate change into their curriculum, training future Church leaders and theologians on the subject. Many Christian denominations have primary and secondary schools, and some even have universities, which have also introduced environmental education. This is in line with the aspiration of the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD), which "...aims to integrate values, activities and principles that

11. Inter-Governmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), Climate Change 2007, Synthesis Report, http://www.ipcc.ch/pdf/assessment-report/ar4/syr/ar4_syr.pdf

12. "African Church Leaders' Statement on Aid Effectiveness", All Africa Conference of Churches, 21-23 May 2008, Nairobi, Kenya. <http://www.caritas.org/includes/pdf/aideffectivenessafrica.pdf>

are inherently linked to sustainable development into all forms of education and learning and help usher in a change in attitudes, behaviours and values to ensure a more sustainable future in social, environmental and economic terms” (UNESCO).¹³

Future Outlook

Faith and Sustainable Development will continue to embrace each other on the African continent. The combination of faith and sustainable lifestyles will help us deal more constructively with the challenges of climate change that confronts humanity. With more people graduating from theological seminaries with a solid understanding of the biblical basis of sustainable development, more pastors teaching about environmental and climate change issues, and young and old people becoming more aware about how to adopt sustainable practices, the future looks hopeful. International organizations that are involved in promoting sustainable development can facilitate this process by supporting various initiatives through training, networking, and funding. This support needs to be extended to other religions as well. There are also numerous sustainable development initiatives among Muslim communities on the continent. African Traditional religions likewise share certain values that can be harnessed to encourage sustainable development.

13. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD) 2005-2014, <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0015/001540/154093e.pdf>