



ECOLOGICAL SUSTAINABILITY: REINVIGORATE AND EMULATE AFRICAN PRINCIPLES OF LIFE OR CEASE TO EXIST?

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ABSTRACT

This contribution presupposes that revitalization of African principles of life would significantly enhance ecological sustainability. It has argued that for ecological sustainability to be achieved there is need to revitalize and emulate African principles of life which appreciated and operated within nature's limits, if the world is not to go extinct, as survival and a decent life depends on sustainable harnessing of nature and nature's provision of stable resources. The paper concedes that leaving the African principle of life idle and latent is just as good as committing suicide as modern ways of life prove to be contrasting approaches to ecological sustainability. The paper also revealed that growing economies through competitive global capitalism with its associated model of development based on principles of individualism, greediness, competition, exploitation and inequality are proving unsustainable thereby necessitating a relook to the south for alternative approaches to development and ways of life that are equitable and sustainable. The paper creates a space for critical, innovative and reflexive deliberations, on new development models that incorporates African perspectives by contending that development models must strive to consolidate what was good in traditional Africa with present ideals if the future is to remain meaningful, certain and realistic. It must be acknowledged however that the hallmark of this paper is reflexivity and not a recipe.

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Keywords: Ecological sustainability, African worldview, Holism, Communalism, Solidarity, Participation and postcolonial theory

Contribution/ Originality

The primacy of the paper is to contribute to sustainable development debates by arguing that unsustainable use of ecological services poses significant threats to the livelihoods of the current generation. It argues that there is need to rethink African principles and model these into development otherwise humanity faces extinction

1. INTRODUCTION

Prospects of a sustainable future for the whole world are arguably embedded in natural resources and ecological systems. Despite the prevalence of socio-political crises and economic challenges, there are glimpses for the call for an African approach towards the development agenda. Goal seven of the millennium development goals advocate for environmental sustainability, this paper, discerns from literature and ongoing debates that this goal appears to be not only a distant, but also a receding goal for the world at large. [Salim \(2002\)](#), noted that development as implemented in the 20th century was not sustainable. It has followed only the economic track and has left behind social and environmental instability resulting in rising poverty, inequality in income and development, natural disasters through rising flood levels affected by the sea rise due to global warming. While, [Rosenburg \(2004\)](#) notes that current models of development are resource intensive, overshooting the earth's capacity to regenerate and act as a sink for the wastes produced. More resources than the earth can renew are being consumed by the human race. The author further laments that the bulk of this overconsumption is enjoyed by only 20% of the world's population who consumes 80% of its resources. [Lotz-Sisitka et al. \(2006a\)](#), share the same sentiments with [Rosenburg \(2004\)](#), that there has been increasing consensus at the global level that human development is not progressing as effectively as western economic models of progress and development would have us believe instead trends indicate that the neo-liberal model and the way it is being implemented is creating a global trend towards escalating poverty, inequality, crime and unemployment and these have negative impacts on the environment ,threatening ecological sustainability and holding back sustainable development. Economic growth under the contemporary neoliberal model does not appear to be abating these sustainability issues, although much has been said about ecological integrity, economic viability and a social just society in sustainable development discourses. [Rosenburg \(2004\)](#) observes that dominant models of development appear to be based on fundamental principles of exploitation and inequality that are simply not sustainable and an alternative approach to development which is more equitable and can be sustainable must be found. It is against the backdrop of this grim impasse that this paper argues that it is high time that the international community reflects on African principles of life and sifts how these principles could be reinvigorated into our modern way of life, to attain environmental sustainability; otherwise this goal will be a mirage. To argue this case out, the paper sets the agenda of the discussion by defining the concept ecological sustainability. This is followed by an attempt to unpack the African worldview and try to show how the African principles of life can come to the salvage of the world from ecological problems that the world grapples with today. To make these points clear the paper will provide a brief literary account of the entailed problems of modern society and continues to contextualize these in relation to the African worldview. This is done to continue to argue the case that there is needed to revitalize the African worldview least society ceases to exist.

2. ECOLOGICAL SUSTAINABILITY EXPLAINED

Sustainability refers to the capacity of socio-ecological systems to persist unimpaired into the future ([Raskin et al., 1996](#)). It is a term that describes something's ability to endure. It is the ability

of something's long term state of well-being. Ecological sustainability on the other hand can be taken to mean the maintenance of the ecosystem and the natural resources in it. Environmental degradation which manifest through depletion of resources, overuse of the waste absorbing capacity of the environment, reduction in biodiversity and pollution signify failure in ecological sustainability. Ecological sustainability has become a buzzword in development discourse. According to Ekosse (2009) sustainability is the use of resources by the current generation in a way that there is no reduction of the capability of future generation. When applied to ecology, ecological sustainability then becomes the maintenance of life support systems and the achievement of a natural extinction rate. Ecological sustainability is the capacity of ecosystems to maintain their essential function and processes and retain their biodiversity in full measure over the long term, making it a dimension of sustainable development.

3. ECOLOGICAL SUSTAINABILITY –WHY THE CONCERN?

Ecological sustainability should be pursued for the benefit of both humans and other species on the planet. Our practices and activities today are causing widespread extinction of a wide variety of species. The biosphere of the earth is being destroyed at a steadily increasing rate. The rate of consumption today is exceeding the earth's carrying capacity. Our actions are holding back sustainable development as they are likely to deny future generations the richness and diversity of the world as we know and experience it today. Our patterns of behavior have become unsustainable, hindering ecological sustainability. The world today, Africa not spared has not escaped the onslaught of a myriad of environmental and developmental problems and issues.

Sustainability issues that relate directly to the human need for jobs, food, energy, water, health, safety, education and shelter have become a common parlance. These sustainability issues are somehow linked to failure to attain ecological sustainability. For example lack of jobs and poverty has led to some people to resort to gold panning leading to environmental problems that include unsightly landscapes, river siltation, and soil erosion and because of poverty, poor agricultural processes are used such as river bank cultivation. Poverty pollutes the environment creating environmental stress in a different way. The poor and hungry often destroy their immediate environment in order to survive. For example they will overuse marginal land with cumulative far reaching effects on the environment thus making poverty a major global and sustainability scourge

These processes result in environmental problems such as soil degradation, floods, water and air pollution, depletion of forests, water sources and biodiversity. These problems impact on the lives of both the present and future generations, thus holding back sustainable development. It is against this backdrop that this paper argues that all these challenges can be reduced if African principles of life are enshrined in modern life. Thus the paper calls for the reawakening of African principles before the world ceases to exist as resources become depleted and sink in wastes. There is need to borrow a leaf from African way of life if sustainable development in the form of ecological sustainability is to be enlisted. The perspective of the paper is to scope features of the African worldview that can be emulated to salvage contemporary socio-ecological, socio-political and socio-economic and other contemporary problems experienced by humanity at the wake of the 21st century.

4. AFRICAN WORLDVIEW AND ECOLOGICAL SUSTAINABILITY: THE INTERFACE

This paper is founded in the post-colonial theory and African worldview. Post-colonial theory is about the colonized announcing their presence, identity and claiming their lost or distorted past (Mapara, 2009). Subedi and Daza in Mhlauri and Muchado (2013), acknowledge that post-colonial theory advocates for the decolonization of knowledge and production of transformative knowledge. This resonates well with the thrust of this paper, which seeks to interrogate the traditional African worldview and see what could be filtered for the benefit of ecological sustainability, a buzzword in sustainable discourses of the day? Post-colonial theory presents the West as unappreciative of past achievements and traditional ways of doing things by the formerly colonized. This paper by bringing attention to the positive aspects of the past that could be smuggled into ecological sustainability efforts and initiatives is an attempt to push the international community to realize the need to merge indigenous and conventional development models, so as to enlist sustainable development at the end of the day.

The African Worldview emphasized on holism, communalism, solidarity, participation and pragmatism (Hallen, 2002; Higgs, 2003). These principles sew together the social fabric to ensure the welfare and security of the social order. The African principle of holism sees the world as one organic whole, things are not separate in the African worldview but oneness was emphasized. The guiding principle here was that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts (Hallen, 2002). With this recognition of humans and nature as one whole, there was eagerness to protect the environment. People lived closer to their natural environment, and this minimized destruction of the environment. According to Chandler and Wane (2002), traditional societies had intimate understanding of both the biophysical and social environment. This oneness between humans and nature was recognized, acknowledged and celebrated in such a way that there were lesser environmental problems as witnessed by today's generation.

Additionally, people were taught knowledge as a body, no specialization was encouraged, and hence issues of unemployment which also leads to ecological sustainability today were unheard of. NEPAD's Action Plan in Lotz-Sisitka *et al.* (2006a), notes that education in Africa has deteriorated, graduates at all levels are unemployable because of poor quality education they received, aggravating unemployment. This paper argues that the individualistic and highly specialist training is leading to this high unemployment. Training the whole person in traditional Africa made them a jack of all trades and masters of all. The all-round trained individuals were functional in society and flexible to fit in many trades. Participation was another principle of the African worldview. Participation in community issues by all individuals was imperative as life was seen as a total package not as a menu (Hallen, 2002). Yet, research after research has shown that women's interests and needs are not always taken into account in environmental issues today (Mamphela, 2004; Momsen, 2004). Kasama (2008) reports that, it has been observed that technological changes and instruments that are being proposed to mitigate the impact of climate change are gender discriminatory and may negatively affect females or bypass them. Three years later the same sentiments were raised by Misiaszek (2011) who argues that the majority of climate change adaptations strategies currently do not incorporate a gender perspective. Available

Literature shows that women continue to be marginalized in the environmental issues (Kraub, 2011; Mwangi *et al.*, 2011; Dankelman, 2012; Khaledi *et al.*, 2012).

Depriving women access to community environmental education for example simultaneously denies them the opportunity to develop related skills and knowledge and reduces their ability to contribute to a reflexive review of society which subsequently increases environmental degradation, threatening ecological sustainability. This claim is also echoed by the UNDP (2007) which acknowledges that existing gender inequalities in accessing training despite their more dependence on natural resources make worse the consequences of climate change. This lack of access to environmental knowledge and skills also increases their vulnerability to environmental risks thereby exacerbating poverty. Participation of all individuals in traditional Africa ensured fullness of experience of all individuals for the benefit of the communities not just the individual. The spirit of participation encouraged humans to pursue ecological sustainability for the benefit of both humans and the other species, as Khan (1990), acknowledges that the Africans enjoyed a nurturing and symbiotic relationship with land and its natural resources.

Solidarity which denotes oneness, unit and togetherness in the people was also emphasized. In conjunction with their principle of communalism that gave primacy to the community; the individual person was seen as part and parcel of the community. The community was primary. It came first, was more superior and more important than the individual. What was good for the society was to come first and individual had just to follow. The spirit curbed greediness, individualism and competition which are the underlying causes of today's environmental problems. Today ecology is under threat because people are no longer feeding need but greed. Throat-cut competition in society today among individuals has resulted in large ecological footprints on the planet. In African tradition sets ups, ownership of resources was communal. For example if one person buys a Landover that would be seen as a benefit to the community and would serve the community as a whole. Due to the competition and individualism today, when one individual buys a Landover, it triggers competition and everyone would want to compete leading to more land rovers hence a bigger ecological footprint.

The principle of communalism also facilitated equal sharing of resources, hence, such concepts like poverty vis-à-vis overconsumption were unknown which are the major culprits in the environmental degradation today. Under communalism African traditional set ups aimed at fair sharing of the benefits and costs of use of natural resources. According to Sachs (2002), biophysical life support systems and access to them are threatened by increased poverty and its delinquent sister overconsumption linked to global inequality. Poverty presents a particular challenge for environmental management. Fakir (2002) notes that environment and poverty linkages can only be understood in terms of risk and vulnerability and that the poor people face when trying to secure sustainable livelihoods. Momsen (2004), concurs with Fakir by elaborating further that methods used by the poor endanger the ecosystem as woodlands and forests which are sources of valuable products like timber for construction, fuel wood, leaves for stock feeding, bedding and organic material for gardens, sources of wild plants, medicinal use, mushroom and honey to obtain some extra cash are depleted. As the poor turn to the environment for survival, this spells doom for ecosystems and its environmental resources. To illustrate the impact of poverty on

the environment, [Feresu \(2010\)](#), argues that the poor in their search for means to sustain themselves often engage in activities that unintentionally damage the environment in ways that are costly to repair. According to [CGIAR \(2011\)](#), reports that, it is estimated that forty-four million people would have fallen into extreme poverty by 2010, if there are no effective poverty and environmental mitigation strategies. Overconsumption on the other hand is not only leading to depletion of the environmental resources but also creating wastes at a rate that the earth cannot absorb causing further environmental problems. There is also a rise in disease due to rich diets This paper in agreement with [Terreblanche \(2002\)](#)'s observation that in pre-colonial period ,the social and economic lives of indigenous people were organized on a communal basis such that people did not experience the multiple deprivation and humiliation associated with poverty in the modern world despite the meager living standards and famines that occurred from time to time, argues that this can only be reversed if the underlying causes of the inequalities are addressed. There is need to mend the ethic of communalism so as to avoid circumstances of poverty which have a cascading effect onto the environment

Individualism has led to the breakdown of the fabric of solidarity and community among people and reinforced by greediness has led to the emergence of new sustainability issues like, crime, wars, conflicts, corruption and bribery which further threatens ecological sustainability. High crime rates including violent crimes are associated with wide income gaps which affect quality of life and security. Many civil wars today are driven by individual pursuing power in order to possess and exploit natural resources. Such wars leave millions of poor people at its wake as well as population displacement and damage to the ecosystem, compelling people to move in search of livelihood opportunities which brews further sustainability challenges like overcrowding in certain sections of the planet, which have a negative impact on the environment and causes other challenges to sustainable development like emergence of diseases like HIV/AIDS and Tuberculosis. Fines against ecological destruction are not effectively enforced due to corruption and bribery.

5. CONCLUSION

This paper has tried to bring out how the African way of life can help mitigate some of the ecological problems that the world face today .It has come out that cooperation, collective responsibility and interdependence made up the fabric of life that helped to maintain ecosystem long back. Given the way African principles can be of use in informing strategies to fight depletion of ecosystems. This paper concludes that to continue to survive in this planet there is need to reawaken these African principles of life in our modern times to attain ecologically sustainability or else we cease to exist as ecological support systems and services contract and collapse. In agreement with Capra and Berry in [Chandler and Wane \(2002\)](#), who argue that solutions to major environmental issues require a profound shift to remnants of traditional values, beliefs and Indigenous knowledge that are still found all over the world. This paper notes that to move beyond the impasse created by the so called development era which destroys the environment at an alarming rate, a global rethink of the practices nested in the contexts of African worldviews is long overdue.

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