

Leadership Will Remain a Key Factor in Attaining Global Environmental Sustainability: What are the Stakes?

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ABSTRACT Leadership will remain a central factor in the efforts of achieving environmental sustainability. The paper tackles the subject of environmental sustainability from a global perspective and will argue that the power dynamics obtaining in the so called 'Global village' are critical in examining and charting the way forward for a sustainable environment. The paper seeks to point out that sustainability will be achievable only if the pockets of power in the global political economy take a leadership role in adhering to environmental sustainability conventions and not only through adherence but also through engaging in innovative ways of pursuing alternative economic activities that are environmentally friendly. A number of scholarly papers are examined together with other official reports to advance the thesis that the key to achieving global environmental sustainability rest with the change of attitude from the most influential countries of the world who happen to be the worst perpetrators of environmental degradation especially in the third world. The central argument of this article is that while every country in the globe has a role to play, the leading nations of the world should be pace setters in the pursuit of a globally safe environment.

INTRODUCTION

Extensive researches on environmental issues across the globe continue to point out the definite consequences of unsustainable activities (International Protocol on Climate Change (IPCC) 2007). The 2013 reflections by the IPCC (2013) indicate that greenhouse gases have increased with carbon dioxide reaching 40% rise since the pre-industrial times and the sea level rise since the mid-19th century has been larger than the mean rate for the previous two millennia. The primary contributor to the rise was identified as fossil fuel emissions followed by net land use. Despite environmental sustainability featuring in the United Nations conference in 2000, it appears to be the least understood and worst lagging of the millennium development goals in terms of implementation (Nelson 2007). The problems associated with environmentally unsustainable activities tend to be severe especially in developing and transition economies (Department of Environmental Affairs Republic of South Africa 2004). There is a growing consensus on the dangers of the environmentally unsustainable activities and that some preventive and corrective measures ought to be taken. Using Sustainable Development lenses and global governance approaches, the paper presents three main arguments. Firstly, it argues that the

effects of unsustainable activities do not affect groups of people the same way. This is a fact which brings about reluctance in adhering to conventions on sustainable environment. Secondly, the article posits that selfish capitalists are attracted to economic gains at the expense of the environment. Most of the time, the impact of their activities affect or will affect others in different geographical locations and time who may not have participated in the unsustainable activities. Thirdly, it is the contestation of the paper that diverse ways and magnitude of environmental harm the world over requires a leadership commitment to champion the cause of environmental sustainability. In other words, the paper acknowledges the presence of different leadership and power groups in the global environmental affairs but cautions that without leadership will, the conventions and agreements will be null and void.

Environment can be defined as the place where people live, work, play, worship, go to school, as well as physical and natural world (Bullard 2008). Environment is used in this paper to refer to the physical and natural world within which people carry out their different aspects of life. Environmental challenges facing the globe include among others climate change which has received a lot of attention from academia and other sections of the society. Other

environmental challenges have also become more serious, from local air and water pollution to soil erosion, water scarcity and deforestation, and loss of biodiversity (Department of Environment RSA 2004). Environmental sustainability therefore refers to changing human activities so that they no longer threaten the natural resource base and ecological systems upon which economic development, human health and social well-being depends (Raskin et al. 1998).

Objectives

The paper seeks to discuss the challenges of attaining a globally sustainable environment. It aims to discuss the current and projected threats of environmentally unsustainable activities and how leadership at global scale have responded to the real and predicted threats. Importantly the paper's objective is to try and answer the question whether there has been leadership willingness to confront the risks posed by environmentally unsustainable activities. Finally the paper seeks to make recommendations on the possible strategies or measures of dealing with the current environmental challenges and threats.

THE COST OF ENVIRONMENTALLY UNSUSTAINABLE ACTIVITIES

For years there has been a debate on the magnitude of the negative effects of environmentally unsustainable activities. Perhaps one of the most debated environmental issues is climate change. Green (2008) writes that while climate models are so new that specific events can still seldom be pinned on a single cause, it is beyond doubt that climate is changing with enormous ramifications. Some scientific warnings have been dismissed as overstating the danger of unsustainable human activities. Skeptics of the verity of the dangers associated with unsustainable human activity like the effects of climate change have tried to delink such effects from human activity. The recent survey findings published in the Environmental Research Letters have concluded that there is a near consensus on anthropogenic global warming (Cook et al. 2013) which in a way silences a lot of doubts about the human element in climate change. The research points out that the researches on climate change published in peer reviewed jour-

nals over a period of 21 years have near unanimous position (97.1%) that human activity cause global warming. The survey confirms the IPCC's statement in 2007 that human-induced climate change is now unequivocal, is already underway and is occurring faster than expected (IPCC 2007). The growing evidence on the dangers of such activities has prompted a search for a more responsible way of ensuring that these effects are mitigated. According to the World Bank, some of the dangers include the possible disappearing of some low lying states such as Kiribati, Maldives and Tuvalu and the devastation of coasts faced by countries like Egypt and Viet Nam, an estimated 1 metre rise in the sea level would flood 10% of their populations' homes, inundating major cities and prompting massive refugee crises (Green 2008). Furthermore, the warming and precipitation trends attributable to man-made climate change over the past hundreds of thousands of years mostly affect people from poor countries (Green 2008). The glaring evidence of growing numbers and intensity of disasters like flooding, extreme heat, extinction of some species witnessed in different parts of the globe has prompted a universal effort to deal with the threats. The IPCC (2007) tabled a summary for policy makers in 2007 whose contents indicate that

- ♦ By 2020, between 75 and 250 million people in Africa are projected to be exposed to increased water stress due to climate change
- ♦ By 2020, in some countries, yields from rain-fed agriculture could be reduced by up to 50%. Agricultural production, including access to food in many countries is projected to be severely compromised. This would further adversely affect food security and exacerbate malnutrition.
- ♦ Towards the end of the 21st century, projected sea level rise will affect low lying coastal regions with large populations.
- ♦ By 2080 an increase of 5 to 8% of arid and semiarid land in Africa is projected under a range of climate scenarios
- ♦ The cost of adaptation could amount to at least 5-10% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP)

This summary indicates the challenges affecting the African region and there are other challenges experienced in other parts of the world as well. A call for sustainable development as a response to reduce the anthropogenic effects

of climate change and other associated environmental ills has seen efforts being made by the United Nations to have a practical response to unsustainable activities. However, as observed by Sneddon et al. (2006) while the broad goals were widely embraced, critics argue that their implementation will be thwarted by a renewed call for economic growth in developing countries and enhanced levels of ecological conservation. Inattention to power relations in the local and global actors and institutions supporting unsustainable development is also identified as one of the hindrances to the practical measures towards sustainable development (Sneddon et al. 2006). Some of the global attempts at creating an environmentally friendly world include the United Nations conventions arrived at in the earth summits over more than 20 years.

THE UNEQUAL WORLD

Despite a growing campaign for environmental sustainable activities, reluctance from some sections of the globe is evident. Such reluctance was evident on the process of arriving at specific targets on cutting emissions of greenhouse gases by developed countries where the USA was for the stabilization of emissions whereas the EU was proposing a 15 % reduction. The final agreement was 5.2% (Prizzia 2012). The Brundtland Report of 1987 which came as a result of the 1972 UN conference made recommendations of harmonizing the economic growth, social development and environmental protection by way of integrated policy strategies (Beisheim and Susanne 2012). The report advocated for development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs and shape their own lives. A number of explanations have arisen as to why some nation states have dragged their feet in committing to or supporting sustainable development conventions and other programs like the protection of the climate, seas and other natural resources.

The constructivist scholars have linked such reluctance to the fact that the negatives of unsustainable human activity affect groups of people differently and perpetrators of the environment are seldom the victims of such activities. This saw the rise of the theories of environmental racism and the North-South divide on the

environmental governance. Those who benefit from unsustainable activities like industries which emit poisonous gases are never affected severely by the resultant climate patterns. The issue of sustainable environment can be approached from an international law perspective. Green (2008) argues that the injustice of climate for example is that those with the least historical responsibility stand to suffer most from its predicted consequences, for example, the citizens of developing countries in the equatorial regions, who historically produced very low levels of greenhouse gases per capita, will be hardest hit. Warpner (1997) in view of this argues that international law has generally failed to raise, in a sustained manner, issues of moral duty, principles of appropriate conduct as it relates to the causes of and responses to transnational environmental issues. Furthermore, people rarely solve environmental problems so much as they displace them by transporting them either through space to poorer regions of the globe or through time to future generations (Warpner 1997). In either case some people benefit while others suffer raising issues of justice. The case of environmental racism is further exacerbated by the financial weakness of the victims and lack of political muscle to bring the depletion of resources to a halt. Corruption has been reported in the unlawful dumping of hazardous substances in poor regions, with leaders of such areas liaising with corrupt capital to cheaply dispose of their dangerous waste.

As noted in the Brundtland Report that inequality is the main environmental problem and it is futile to attempt to deal with environmental problems without a broader perspective that encompasses underlying world poverty and international inequality (Okereke 2008). Despite this finding, the free market approaches to the global economy makes these inequalities a perpetual feature. It is worthwhile to examine some of the challenges affecting the environmental sustainability at a global scale.

THE HANDICAP OF GLOBAL ENVIRONMENTAL GOVERNANCE

The achievement of environmental sustainability is highly complicated by the globalization and global governance system. Environmental challenges themselves cannot be fully dealt with at the level of nation state as they

have an international dimension. Due to international trade and inter-territorial effects of human activities that threaten environmental sustainability a global outlook to the corrective and preventive measures is required. Global governance can be understood from the concept of globalisation. Globalisation can be viewed as a phenomenon that encourages international integration by way of free trade and communication across borders (Thai et al. 2007). The liberation of trade and international businesses have created somewhat of a borderless world and increased economic competition in the world. The impact of globalization in the pursuit of a sustainable environment is debatable, with scholars seeing it as a positive contributor to achieving sustainability while others strongly attacking it for promoting unsustainable activities. The fact that the World Trade Organisation (WTO) supports and pursues agreements that enhance trade liberalization, with rules that do not address the value of such things as clean air and fresh water, stands as a big threat to the pursuit of environmental sustainability (Smith and Taylor 2007). Haque (1999) argues that the industrialization process is becoming more extensive due to increased global market competition, whereby the pursuit of greater profit margins leads to more intensive exploitation of natural resources which in turn, leads to ecological and environmental degradation.

Given the global nature of the environmental threats and challenges, a global perspective to governance had to be envisioned. However, as observed by Okereke (2008), the global governance has been shaped by the prevailing neo-liberal economic order. The norms of liberal environmentalism predicate international environmental protection on the promotion and maintenance of liberal economic order (Bernstein 2002). Furthermore, it is this order that translates to the general responsibility deficit currently experienced in environmental governance system which is consequential to the co-option of global equity norms by neo-liberalism. The neoliberal approach to the challenge of environmental sustainability is such that economic achievements or pursuits precede sustainability concerns in the order of importance.

Haque (1999) noted this as early as 1999, arguing that cooperative global environmental governance envisioned in the earth summit in Rio was still in an institutional incubator while

neo-liberal economic globalization had become fully operational. The competition between renewed call for economic growth in developing countries and enhanced levels of ecological conservation coupled with inattention to power relations among local and global actors and institutions supporting unsustainable development are at the core of sustainability challenges. This state of affairs is associated with the increasing inequalities in the access to economic opportunities between most societies which has made it very difficult to make meaningful progress towards pragmatic governance and environmental goals (Sneddon et al. 2006).

As observed by Adil (2005) global environmental debates are very much a subject of 'North-South' politics which is also seen as the division between the 'haves and have nots'. The plight of the South who exists in the periphery of the global system has been that of correcting imbalances of voice in the international system (Adil 2005). Sustainability became important in global governance as it became a compromise on the deadlock that came due to the Southern governments who perceived the Northern governments' environmental concerns as pausing an obstacle to development (Conca 2005).

It can be argued here therefore that the handicap of global environmental governance is in striking a healthy balance between the pursuits of economic growth and environmental sustainability. The Rio earth summit institutionalized the view that liberalization in trade and finance is consistent with and necessary for global environmental protection, and that both are compatible with the overall goal of sustained economic growth (Bernstein 2002). Through neo-liberal tradition the most influential forces are bent towards economic growth and pay lip service to environmental sustainability. Sneddon et al. (2006) note that while more attention is being given now to environmental consequences of particular development projects, the primary environmental degradation drivers- energy and material use have increased. The argument that economic gains will assist in dealing with environmental threats does not always hold as observed by Sneddon et al. (2006) that despite the better preparedness of the global North research, shows that there is an inadequate integration of environmental concerns with economic sectors and decision making. The neo-liberal global governance system overlooks or undermines the

importance of environment sustainability. Okereke (2008) points out that despite the unambiguous mention in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and its Kyoto Protocol, significant portions of these documents nevertheless read as though they are an appendix to a World Trade Organisation agreement. It is this market orientation that affects the efforts towards environmental sustainability at local and international levels.

THE CASE FOR LEADERSHIP WILL

“We didn’t get the Future we want in Rio, because we do not have the leaders we need. The leaders of most powerful countries supported business as usual, shamefully putting private profit before people and the planet” Green Peace International Executive Director Kumi Naidoo (Watts and Ford 2012).

The above quote captures some of the challenges facing the efforts of ensuring environmentally sustainable activities. Given the growing realization that definite measures need to be taken to lessen the risk of environmentally unsustainable human activity, there was a lot of expectation on the outcome of the 2012 Earth summit held in Rio de Janeiro. However, the resolutions made were far from satisfactory especially from the perspective of environmental activists, poverty campaigners and a host of other involved parties and observers. The comment by Naidoo brings out the question of leadership will. Are the world leaders sincerely committed to the practical efforts of dealing with threats to the sustainability of the environment?

The role of business or industry in influencing the environmental sustainability course poses one of the greatest obstacles. Industry has been accused of strenuous lobbying to undermine the science behind anthropogenic climate change (Goldernberg 2013). This lobbying affects perception on the human causes of climate change which creates lukewarm responses to curb such activities or drive for alternative environmental friendly business. The same ‘over the fence’ response on climate change is experienced over other unsustainable activities like overfishing and other ecologically destabilizing activities. In a way, the various environmental factors link up; the physical environment has an impact on the social environment as well. As Green (2008) writes the predictable physical environ-

mental ills like floods and droughts will displace huge populations thereby causing heavy migration which may lead to other social catastrophes like conflict.

Perhaps the challenge is not so much on appreciating the alarming risks and threats of unsustainable human activities but facing the costs and demands of pursuing alternative socio-economic activities that are environmentally sustainable. As observed by the sociologist Robert Brulle (Goldenberg 2013) the challenge is not so much of information inadequacy as the information deficit model may seem to suggest rather having elite leaders call for climate change action will be more powerful.

The issue of leadership centrality to the call for environmental sustainability should proceed from the logical premise that the global political landscape is a very uneven one. In as far as leadership is concerned, it is also paramount to examine the structures that do exist and channels of influence as far as the global environmental governance is concerned. In this paper, leadership is viewed essentially as the ability to influence. It is no secret that the Global governance is shaped by market forces and nation states are divided into North and South. The inequalities in terms of influence which is highly a subject of political and economic power determines what gets binding internationally and what is voluntary. The quest for sustainable environment is no exception to the global politics; in fact it is highly dependent on the state of the power relations obtaining in the nations of the world.

The influence of the government leaders of the elite nations of the world has hugely determined the course of sustainability efforts. Burchell (2005) observed the middle man indecision between environment and economy by America and Australia in the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg as a matter of concern. The reluctance to take a clear position on sustainability binding targets became a concern for the third world whose position was that sustainability should work for all. Given the influence of USA in the global politics, its preference of economy over sustainability left some vacuum in the environmental leadership globally with calls from some NGOs on the European Union to spearhead the cause for environment (Burchel 2005). Where these elites have made a remarkable effort towards achiev-

ing environmental sustainability, it has been in the format of Wapner (1997)'s "Not In My Back Yard" activism where environmental harm is forced to the global South. The case of South East Peru where mineral resources were exploited by multi-national companies in the name of development at the expense of the environment is quite instructive in this analysis (Aljazeera 2011). The exploitation of mineral resources with the promise of alleviation of poverty has actually turned out to be a further exploitation of the poor themselves whose standards of living have actually declined instead of improving. The mineral wealth has only benefitted the economies of the sending countries and brought the environment problems to the host nations. The exclusion of third world countries from some environmentally binding conventions on the grounds of their incapacity to finance the sustainability programs needs to be critically examined. While incapacity appears a genuine reason to exclude the poorer or less developed countries of the world, it unfortunately opens them up for exploitation by multinational businesses. The exclusion of poorer countries from binding conventions while it is said to help them grow their economies on the ground, it benefits the sending countries of big international corporations who get no restrictions on environmentally hazardous economic activities which serve to benefit the 1st world sending country. In the long run, there is likely to be depletion of resources and the poorer country will find itself worse capable of dealing with resultant environmental effects than the case would have been if environmental convention requirements were adhered to.

A more responsible way forward in terms of global environmental governance is to influence well integrated economic and environmental policies where economic growth is not pursued at the expense of sustainable environment. This is possible when the elite leaders at the global political level champion the cause for environmental sustainability. Perhaps one of the key issues that need to be addressed is how the question of leadership will can be tackled to ensure environmental sustainability calls go beyond the rhetoric into commitments and implementation. The possible routes in dealing with the question of leadership will may take some of the forms discussed below.

PLURALISTIC APPROACHES IN ADDRESSING GLOBAL ENVIRONMENTAL CHALLENGES

The challenge facing the world today with regards to environmental sustainability is not so much that of inability rather than of willingness to make the right decisions and commit to them regardless of temporal discomfort such decisions may cause. The huge challenge is how to harness the different powers obtaining in the global governance arena to work towards a sustainable environment and development. This calls for influence. As observed by Conca (2005), the United Nations Environmental Program, although playing a critical role on specific instances, has neither the capacity nor the mandate to catalyse system-wide coherence.

The leaders of less developed countries have an important role to play in the promotion of environmentally sustainable socio-economic activities. One way of promoting that is by setting clear policies that incentivize businesses that promote a safe environment. Secondly, they severely bill all economic activities that are a threat to environmental sustainability especially by compelling any such corporations to invest in mitigating the effects of their activities. The innovation effort by Nissan South Africa in partnership with the Department of Environmental Affairs (DEA) that saw the launch of 100% emission free Green cars in February 2013, is a worth step on the right direction (DEA 2013). The view that developing countries or the countries in non-annexure 1 of the Kyoto Protocol are not required to adopt emission reduction or limitation targets, either of a voluntary or binding nature (Environment Department RSA 2004) needs to be critically analyzed. The justification for this position is that non-annexure 1 countries are much more vulnerable to economic disruption through the imposition of climate change mitigation measures and all the direct and indirect costs involved than developed countries. The challenge with this exemption is that it comes across as a "grow first then clean later" approach which may be problematic. Firstly, this is so because by the time the growth and development status and capacity reach inclusion stage, a lot of harm would have been done to the environment which may not be reversible. Secondly, the decision is in the long run working not for the countries in this category but for

those without, whose corporations can operate in the non-protected environment causing environmental harm. The host country will be the worst affected yet, economically, the sending country will profit.

The global political landscape requires strong lobbying, so for the 3rd world countries to escape the negative effects of industrial activities on their environment there is a need for lobbying as a united front and persuade the global economic powers to take responsibility for the environmental threats caused by mainly corporations from the first world. Leadership commitment should be demonstrated through funding the activism like the green lobby or sustainability lobby. In the previous environmental summit as noted by Burchall (2007), the business lobby by US and EU corporations managed to influence decision-making such that less focus was given to business unfriendly aspects of sustainable development because of strong funding. The opportunity that these less developed countries have is their natural resources which should be used to negotiate for responsible dealings with the rest of the world. The neo-liberal approach is blamed for weakening the abilities of 3rd world states to have an effective voice in the global political environment. This is substantiated by Sneddon et al. (2008)'s argument that the failure to stem the tide of unsustainable activities is linked to lack of effective institutions and the question of leadership will on the part of governments and citizens. It is only when governments individually and collectively commit to sustainable environmental policies and move from rhetoric to implementation strategies that environmental sustainability can become a reality.

The citizens' role is to lobby for sustainability. Development should be pursued with and by the people adhering to the tenets of environmental sustainability. It is when the collective efforts of citizens with the help of Non-Governmental Organisations catch the attention of political leadership and compel leaders to act, that sustainable environment can be attained.

The influence of the leadership of the most powerful nations of the world is critical in moving towards environmental sustainability. This point is underscored by Beishem (2008) who argues that despite the good resolutions on sustainability from the UN conferences leadership still lacks the necessary muscle and means of effectively

driving their implementation. The inadequate institutional framework to provide support and harness political will remains a missing link in the UN efforts on sustainable development.

CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that there is agreement internationally on the need for mitigating environmentally unsustainable activities, however, the implementation or action in that regard has been hampered mainly by lack of leadership will. Furthermore, the paper's findings indicate that at the root of this lack of leadership will is the direct and indirect costs of mitigating unsustainable activities which makes most world leaders prefer economic growth over the environment. The paper has also identified that given the fact that the effects of unsustainable activities may not necessarily be experienced by the perpetrators directly, those who benefit from such activities find little motivation to reconsider their activities. This is made possible given the free market tradition globally. The paper has also questioned the exemption of the third world or non-annexure1 countries from binding and voluntary UN resolutions arguing that while it appears as a way of lessening the burden of the costs involved in mitigating unsustainable activities it actually works against the development of these countries given the unequal trade relations between South and North.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In terms of making headway in mitigating unsustainable activities both developed and developing countries have a role to play. The influence of the economically and politically powerful countries has a huge bearing on what will get done globally in as far as environmental sustainability is concerned. Pressure from NGOs and citizens should lead government leaders to move from their inertia and reluctance to mitigate environmentally unsustainable activities. Moreover, the developing countries whose economy relies much on extraction industries should use these resources to negotiate for investment in sustainable economic activities and bill unsustainable activities. This will take a united front where the developing world speaks with one voice and lobby for more responsible economic

activities among themselves and with the developed world. Given the connectivity between the natural environment and human well being it is the recommendation of this article that more investment needs to be channeled towards environmentally sustainable development.

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