



Research Paper

Promoting sustainable environmental health in Nigeria through communication: The media engagement approach

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ABSTRACT

Environmental Health Issues (EHI's) are increasingly and exponentially gaining global currency in public health. According to a Joint Monitoring Programme Report, lack of access to clean water and basic sanitation affects more than 2.6 billion people globally, and kills more children than malaria, HIV/AIDS and TB combined. The report also provides that 4,000 children under the age of five die every day globally, from preventable illnesses such as diarrhoea, typhoid, cholera and dysentery, with Nigeria contributing at least 10 every day. Studies have also shown that Nigerian cities are witnessing high rates of environmental degradation, and are rated among urban areas with lowest liveability index in the world. It has been argued that environmental problems are mostly due to developmental processes and are of local, regional and global effects. These effects are *consequences of human activities*, and are most often, harmful on human beings, livelihoods, animals and plant lives. Accordingly, poor sanitation, flooding, desertification, oil pollution from spills, industrial pollution and improper management of municipal solid waste among others have been identified as critical environmental problems in Nigeria. Of these problems, poor sanitation has been identified as the most prevalent environmental problem facing Nigeria as a nation. As reported by UNICEF, Nigeria loses N455 billion annually or 1.3% of its GDP due to poor sanitation. According to the report, 33 million Nigerians defecate in the open, depositing about 1.7 tons of faeces into the environment annually. The direct consequence of this, the report notes is high morbidity and mortality ratio due to sanitation related diseases such as cholera, diarrhoea, dysentery and typhoid. It observes that children under five are the most vulnerable to the effects of poor sanitation and hygiene, with an estimated 200,000 dying annually due to diarrhoea. The report also notes that about 240,000 young children die in the country annually from respiratory infections that are induced by poor sanitation practices. However, in spite of its pervasiveness, environmental health issues are yet to be placed on the front burner of social discourse in Nigeria as a public health problem. This is where the media come in, and where media engagement becomes critical; the argument being that the media may be used as tools to help activists and government raise awareness and implement programmes on this issue. Consequently, the following strategies were proposed as intervention measures: collaboration and network building between the relevant stakeholders improvement of research collaboration and competencies, consistent prominence (cover page treatment) on environmental health issues, formulation of a media philosophy that will regulate coverage of environmental issues, equipping journalists with the knowledge and skills required to cover environmental issues effectively, integration of oramedia for mobilising rural dwellers for healthy environmental habits.

Key words: Environment, health, environmental health, communication, media.

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INTRODUCTION

Many nations of the World, particularly in the 21st Century, are battling with environmental issues, problems and challenges and the resultant impact of these environmental

issues on health and socioeconomic development. Concerns about the "accelerating deterioration of the human environment and natural resources and the consequences

of that deterioration for economic and social development” were what informed the General Assembly of the United Nations to constitute the World Commission on Environment and Development “(UN, 1987: 1)”. According to the report, the commission had the mandate to:

1. Propose long-term environmental strategies for achieving sustainable development by the year 2000 and beyond;
2. Recommend ways concern for the environment may be translated into greater co-operation among developing countries and between countries at different stages of economical and social development and lead to the achievement of common and mutually supportive objectives that take account of the interrelationships between people, resources, environment, and development;
3. Consider ways and means by which the international community can deal more effectively with environment concerns; and
4. Help define shared perceptions of long-term environmental issues and the appropriate efforts needed to deal successfully with the problems of protecting and enhancing the environment, a long term agenda for action during the coming decades, and aspirational goals for the world community.

A close look at the above reveals to a perceptive reader that the critical concern of the UN and central to the assignment of the World Commission on Environment and Development was the need for a clean and healthy environment. In other words, the Commission clearly articulated the need for environmental health issues to be incorporated into every nation’s socioeconomic development programme. “Wilson (2006: 7-8)” however remarks that unfortunately for mankind, economic considerations continue to be the deciding factors in project initiation and implementation, while ignoring the potential health and environmental hazards of such projects.

The argument here is that most nations initiate socioeconomic development programmes which have negative health and environmental implications without putting in place adequate structures or mechanisms that will address the hazards that will arise from the implementation of such development programmes. Put another way, the socioeconomic transformation of nations is tied to the development process; however, this process brings in its wake activities that impact health and the environment negatively. Unfortunately however, many nations fail to integrate the environmental health component into development planning, which accounts for the myriad of environmental health issues with which they are contending.

What is clear from our discourse so far is the position that most environmental hazards or problems are traceable to human activities, which in turn are occasioned by the

drive for social and economic development. Put differently, most environmental problems are consequences of human activities which arise from the process of development. Mba et al. (2004) for example, identified deforestation resulting from road projects, subsistence activities, logging, mining, and dam construction as constituting the greatest threat to environmental sustainability in the country. Daramola and Ibem (2010) and Kjellstrom and Mercado (2008) have also argued that industrial, mining and domestic activities generate dangerous level of air, land and water pollution, endangering human lives and causing serious damage to the ecosystem. These problems have effects which have geographical and human dimensions. Geographically, environmental effects permeate local, regional and global boundaries; the human dimension however has to do with the harmful effects of environmental problems on the health and general well being of human beings, animals, plants, etc. Arising from the context of the human dimension of environmental problems is the challenge of environmental illnesses. Environmental illnesses are those sicknesses that are induced by poor environmental conditions. According to “Healthy people (2010: 40),” an estimated 25% of preventable illnesses worldwide can be attributed to poor environmental quality. In essence, there is a direct correlation between the health of the people and the quality of the environment in which they live. Whereas, good quality environment has the likelihood of promoting healthy living, and poor environment quality has the likelihood of promoting sickness and disease. A look at global national health indices will drive home the argument that is being made here.

There are indications that environmental health issues are fast gaining global attention in public health. For instance, WHO (2010) reported that environmental hazards are responsible for about quarter of the total burden of disease worldwide, and as much as 30% in regions, such as Sub-Saharan Africa. More recently, a World Health Organisation (WHO, 2012c) report on *Public Health and Environment* says 23% of the global disease burden is attributable to the environment. Further, it attributes 2 million deaths every year to household air pollution burden. In other words, 2 million people die annually as a result of exposure to indoor smoke from cooking fuels. The report also indicates the global mortality and burden of disease from water and sanitation. Consequently, it says 88% of global diarrhoea deaths are due to unsafe water, inappropriate sanitation and lack of hygiene. A (WHO-UNICEF, 2010) Joint Monitoring Programme Report had earlier indicated that lack of access to clean water and basic sanitation affects more than 2.6 billion people globally and kills more children than malaria, HIV/AIDS and TB combined. The report also provided that 4,000 children under the age of five die every day globally, from preventable illnesses, such as diarrhoea, typhoid, cholera and dysentery, with Nigeria contributing at least 10 every day. Studies have also shown that Nigerian cities are

witnessing high rates of environmental degradation, and are rated among urban areas with lowest liveability index in the world (Daramola and Ibem, 2010).

Accordingly, poor sanitation, flooding, desertification, oil pollution from spills, industrial pollution and improper management of municipal solid waste among others have been identified as critical environmental problems in Nigeria (FMoE, 2005; UNICEF, 2011). Of these problems, poor sanitation has been identified as the most prevalent environmental problem facing Nigeria as a nation. According to UNICEF (2011), Nigeria loses N455 billion annually or 1.3% of its GDP due to poor sanitation. According to the report, 33 million Nigerians defecate in the open, depositing about 1.7 tons of faeces into the environment annually. The direct consequence of this, the report notes is high morbidity and mortality ratio due to sanitation related diseases, such as cholera, diarrhoea, dysentery and typhoid. It observes that children under five are the most vulnerable to the effects of poor sanitation and hygiene, with an estimated 200,000 dying annually due to diarrhoea. The report also notes that about 240,000 young children die in the country annually from respiratory infections that are induced by poor sanitation practices. However, in spite of its pervasiveness, environmental health issues are yet to be placed on the front burner of social discourse in Nigeria as a public health problem. This is where the media come in, and where media engagement becomes critical; the argument being that the media may be used as tools to help activists and government raise awareness and implement programmes on this issue. The fundamental objective of this discourse therefore, is to propose strategies for effective media engagement in the quest for sustainable environmental health in Nigeria. This study is important because its findings should form the basis for intervention in the environmental health problems of Nigeria.

The Nigerian constitution and the environment

The "1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria" in Chapter Two, captioned: *Fundamental Objectives and Directive Principles of State Policy* provides the national environmental objective. Accordingly, S. 20 of the constitution states that the State shall protect and improve the environment and safeguard the water, air and land, forest and wildlife of Nigeria. A close look at this provision reveals three basic components as the key assignments of the State in environmental conservation:

1. Protection of the environment,
2. Improvement of the environment, and
3. Safeguarding the water, air and land, as well as forest and wildlife of Nigeria.

The drive for environmental conservation (protection,

improvement and safeguarding of the critical elements of water, air, land, forest and wildlife) led to the formation of agencies with the mandate of achieving these three components. The first of these agencies was the Federal Environmental Protection Agency (FEPA) established in 1988, then the Federal Ministry of Environment in 1999, and eventually the National Environmental Standards and Regulations Enforcement Agency (NESREA).

Prior to the dumping of toxic waste in Koko village, in Delta State, in 1987, Nigeria was ill-equipped to manage serious environmental crisis, as there were no institutional arrangements or mechanisms for environmental protection and enforcement of environmental laws and regulations in the country (NESREA, 2008).

Following the Koko toxic waste episode, the Federal Government promulgated the Harmful Waste Decree 42 of 1988, which facilitated the establishment of the then Federal Environmental Protection Agency (FEPA) through Decree 58 of 1988. In the wisdom of Government, FEPA and other relevant Departments in other Ministries were merged to form the Federal Ministry of Environment in 1999, but without an appropriate enabling law on enforcement issues. This situation however created a vacuum in the effective enforcement of environmental laws, standards and regulations in the country. To address this situation, the National Environmental Standards and Regulations Enforcement Agency (NESREA) was established as a parastatal of the Federal Ministry of Environment, Housing and Urban Development. The NESREA Act was accented to by Mr. President on 30th July, 2007. By the NESREA Act, the FEPA Act Cap F 10 LFN 2004 has been repealed.

NESREA is charged with the responsibility of enforcing all environmental laws, guidelines, policies, standards and regulations in Nigeria. It also has the responsibility to enforce compliance with provisions of international agreements, protocols, conventions and treaties on the environment. The vision of the Agency is to ensure a cleaner and healthier environment for all Nigerians, while the mission is to inspire personal and collective responsibility in building an environmentally conscious society for the achievement of sustainable development in Nigeria.

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The Federal Ministry of Environment on the other hand has the mandate to:

- i). Prepare a comprehensive National Policy for the protection of the environment and conservation of natural resources, including procedure for environmental impact assessment of all developing projects.
- ii). Prepare in accordance with the National Policy on Environment, periodic master plans for redevelopment of environmental science and technology and advise the

Federal Government on the financial requirements for the implementation of such plans.

iii). Advise the Federal Government on National Environmental Policies and priorities, the conservation of natural resources and sustainable development and scientific and technological activities affecting the environment and natural resources.

iv). Promote cooperation in environmental science and conservation technology with similar bodies in other countries and with international bodies connected with the protection of the environment and the conservation of natural resources.

The Nigerian constitution, the media and the environment

The responsibility of the Nigerian media in ensuring environmental conservation has been clearly articulated in "S. 22 of the 1999 Constitution." Though specific reference is not made to environmental conservation, the provision nevertheless holds that:

The press, radio, television and other agencies of the mass media shall at all times be free to uphold the fundamental objectives contained in this Chapter and uphold the responsibility and accountability of the Government to the people.

Environmental objective is one of such objectives, provided for by S. 20, the others being political, economic, social, educational, and foreign policy objectives. It can therefore be inferred that the media have constitutional backing to uphold Nigeria's environmental objective by holding government agencies on environment responsible and accountable for their actions. This provision also implies that the Nigerian media can suggest, through their agenda setting role, effective policy alternatives or more productive approaches or strategies to agencies charged with the responsibility of environmental protection.

Discourse on concepts

Environment

As a concept, environment has plurality of conceptions. Usually, authors, authorities or organisations define it from the perspective of their disciplines. Perhaps it is in recognition of this fact that "Daramola and Ibem (2010: 126)" remarked that: the variety of definitions and conceptions of environment is closely linked to the fact that the study of environment is multi-disciplinary, and thus each discipline tended to develop and adopt definition(s) in line with its interest. "Porteous (1977)" in the light of the foregoing argument stresses the multidisciplinary nature of the concept of environment when he stated that:

the multiplicity of the usage and concept of the term environment have resulted in a variety of adjectival forms which include social environment, molar environment, physical environment home environment, psychological environment, behavioural environment and geographical environment (p.139).

In recognition of the multifarious nature of the concept of environment, Wikipedia (2012a) points out that environment may refer to:

- Environment (biophysical), the physical and biological factors along with their chemical interactions that affect an organism;
- Environment (systems), the surroundings of a physical system that may interact with the system by exchanging mass, energy, or other properties;
- Environments (series), a series of LPs, cassettes and CDs depicting natural sounds;
- Built environment, constructed surroundings that provide the setting for human activity, ranging from the large-scale civic surroundings to the personal places;
- Knowledge environment;
- Social environment, the culture that an individual lives in, and the people and institutions with whom they interact.

Environment has also been defined as the sum total of all surroundings of a living organism, including natural forces and other living things, which provide conditions for development and growth, as well as of danger and damage (<http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/environment.html#ixzz1riImkluT>).

Taking a cue from business dictionary's definition of environment, we adopt for this study (http://jharenvis.nic.in/files/Protectour_environment.pdf) definition of environment which says:

Our Environment is our surrounding. This includes living and non-living things around us. The non-living components of environment are land, water and air. The living components are germs, plants, animals and people. All plants and animals adjust to the environment in which they are born and live. A change in any component of the environment may cause discomfort and affect normal life. Any unfavourable change or degeneration in the environment is known as 'Environmental Pollution.

Environmental health

Studies have shown that physical and social environments play major roles in the health of individuals and communities (Healthy people, 2010). Physical environments have been identified as the air, water, and soil through

which exposure to chemical, biological, and physical agents may occur. Social environment on the other hand has been perceived to include housing, transportation, urban development, land use, industry, and agriculture, degeneration in these elements; it is reported to results in exposures, such as stress, injury and violence. Perhaps it was in recognition of the critical importance the environment plays in the conditioning of human health that Williams (1992) observed that the environment is one of the prime determinants of human health. For instance, it has been reported that poor air quality contributes to respiratory illness, cardiovascular disease, and cancer "(Healthy people, 2010: 41)." Environmental health therefore relates to health issues or negative health effects that arise from the disruption of the homeostasis of the physical and social components of the environment. It may also refer to improvement in the health status of human beings, plant and aquatic life which may result from a deliberately planned, methodically organised, and purposefully coordinated management of the physical and social components of the environment.

According to Wikipedia (2012a), environmental health is a branch of public health that is concerned with all aspects of the natural and built environment that may affect human health. The World Health Organisation "(WHO, 2012: 1b)" says:

Environmental health addresses all the physical, chemical, and biological factors external to a person, and all the related factors impacting behaviours. It encompasses the assessment and control of those environmental factors that can potentially affect health. It is targeted towards preventing disease and creating health-supportive environments.

Inherent from the foregoing is the suggestion that environmental health is primarily concerned with assessing the physical, chemical, and biological factors in the environment that can potentially affect health; deliberately fashioning policies and strategies to control these factors, and repositioning them with the objective of promoting healthy living.

Sustainable environmental health

Sustainable environmental health in this discourse would refer to on-going, dynamic, ever changing, consistent and continuous efforts at assessing, controlling and repositioning environmental factors with the objective of preventing disease and optimising healthy environments.

Communication

Communication is a process of influence. It engages words,

symbols, signs, etc in the process of sharing of meaning or in establishing commonness between individuals, groups, organisations or significant others. According to Akpan (1993), communication is a process in which a source selects a message which he encodes into signals and transmits over a channel to a receiver, who decodes it into a message of his own, which alters his consciousness and behaviour, at least to the point that he responds with a feedback to the source.

Central to Akpan's conception of communication is the alteration of the consciousness and behaviour of parties in a communication transaction. This means when communication is effective, it influences or modifies the behaviour of the receivers in the direction which the source desires. Within the framework of our discourse, it is believed that effective mass mediated communication on sustainable environmental health will influence behavioural change in the poor sanitation habits and other negative attitudes of Nigerians towards environmental conservation.

A look at environmental health issues in Nigeria

As earlier stated, poor sanitation, flooding, desertification, oil pollution from spills, industrial pollution and improper management of municipal solid waste among others have been identified as critical environmental problems in Nigeria (FMoE, 2005; NESREA, 2008; UNICEF, 2011). Of these problems, poor sanitation has been identified as the most prevalent environmental problem facing Nigeria as a nation. According to a report by the Water and Sanitation Programme (2011), 70 million Nigerians use unsanitary or shared latrines, 32 million have no latrine at all and defecate in the open, while the poorest quintile is 10 times more likely to practice open defecation than the richest. The report adds that open defecation costs Nigeria US\$1 billion per year – yet eliminating the practice would require less than 6.5 million latrines to be built and used. In the light of the foregoing background, Enweze (2000) painfully observes that not a single city in Nigeria has a modern central sewage system.

It says every person that practices open defecation spends almost 2.5 days a year finding a private location to defecate, leading to large economic losses. This cost falls disproportionately on women as caregivers who may spend additional time accompanying young children or sick or elderly relatives. This cost is likely to be an underestimation as those without toilets, particularly women, will be obliged to find a private location for urination as well. Further, the report says over 13 million U.S dollars is lost each year due to productivity losses whilst sick or accessing healthcare; thus this includes time absent from work or school due to diarrhoea disease, seeking treatment from a health clinic or hospital, and time spent caring for under-5's suffering from diarrhoea or other sanitation-attributable diseases.

Going further, the report contends that faecal contamination of the environment is the root cause of an annual average of 5,400 cases of cholera affecting Nigeria, with the cost of the necessary response estimated to be US\$3.5 million each year. More worrisome is the position that the economic implications of a cholera outbreak go beyond the immediate health system response – there are also costs related to productivity loss and premature death, diverting expenditures from other essential items and losses in trade and tourism revenue; funeral costs, for instance. The report provides that calculations for the cost of premature death do not take into account funeral costs, which are borne directly by households and can be significant across Africa. It reports a study in South Africa which found that on the average, households spend the equivalent of a year's total expenditure on food and groceries on funerals (measured at median household expenditure). In other words, the report shows that in Nigeria, annual sanitation-related funeral costs (discounted against future funeral costs) are estimated at US\$28.8 million. In relation to water pollution, the report notes that the adverse impact of unsafe excreta disposal on water resources is not included in the cost estimation as figures are not available for Africa. Where this affects drinking water supply, water supply and treatment costs for drinking and other domestic uses will add to the costs associated with poor sanitation.

Flooding has also become a grave environmental health challenge in Nigeria, particularly in the past two years. The nation is yet to recover from the devastating onslaughts of the Lagos and Ibadan floods, which reportedly killed over 25 and 102 people, respectively. The *Vanguard* (2011b) reported over 25 people dead in the Lagos flood, while the Nigerian Red Cross on August 31, 2011 reported at least 102 people dead from the flash floods that resulted from the massive rainfall of Friday 27- Sunday 29 August, 2011 in and around the city of Ibadan in South western Nigeria (Safer Nigeria Resources, 2011). The nation witnessed yet another flood in Ilorin, the Kwara State capital in April 2012. As a result, the Federal Executive Council approved the contract for the channellisation of the Asa River and its tributaries in Ilorin, Kwara State at a total cost of N1, 233,761,817.20 with a completion period of 12 months. In a press briefing, the Minister for Information decried the perennial problem of flooding in Ilorin caused by Asa River and its tributaries and the attendant destruction of lives and properties. He said flooding has been a major concern to the Kwara and Federal governments, noting that the menace of the flood in 2007 and 2008 were particularly so severe that government had to establish shelters for the displaced people in schools, mosques and churches within the town (Dredgingtoday.com).

It is not difficult to see that one of the hazards that accompany floods is the outbreak of cholera, diarrhoea and typhoid which naturally arises from the contamination of water sources by such floods. This was the case in Lagos,

Ibadan and Ilorin, where media reports indicated spontaneous outbreak of related epidemics (Safer Nigeria Resources, 2011).

Human activities have been identified as being essentially responsible for most of the flooding experiences in Nigeria. Oyesiku, a Professor at the Olabisi Onabajo University, Ago Iwoye, Ogun State, for instance identified development before town planning as a major cause of flooding in most cities in Nigeria. According to him the major challenge over the years is that development comes before town planning. There is no drainage, which direction drainages will move or of what quality and quantity “(*Vanguard*, 2011a).” Oyesiku’s convictions were corroborated by the Joshua, the Zonal Director of NESREA, when he said most floods in Nigeria are from “inappropriate human activities. Expatriating on his claim, Joshua argued that:

Aside from the stench that emit from such drainages and the provision of a conducive breeding ground for (disease) vectors, once it rains, the water cannot flow deeply. The water then spills on the main road and the effect of such detrimental act is flood “(*Business day*, 2011).”

Oil companies have also been indicted for exacerbating environmental degradation in the Niger Delta. Ojebode and Adegbola (2010) observed that uncontrolled oil exploration, gas flaring and frequent and devastating oil spillages create severe environmental problems, and make farming, fishing, in fact, living in these areas difficult and hazardous. Wikipedia (2012b) also paints a graphic picture of environmental degradation in the Niger Delta as a result of oil spills. It maintains that oil spillage has a major impact on the ecosystem into which it is released and may constitute ecocide. Immense tracts of the mangrove forests, which are especially susceptible to oil (mainly because it is stored in the soil and re-released annually during inundations), have been destroyed, it argues. It says an estimated 5 to 10% of Nigerian mangrove ecosystems have been wiped out either by settlement or oil and that the rainforest which previously occupied some 7,400 km² of land has disappeared, as well.

Further, it says spills in populated areas often spread out over a wide area, destroying crops and aquacultures through contamination of the groundwater and soils. The consumption of dissolved oxygen by bacteria feeding on the spilled hydrocarbons also contributes to the death of fish. It argues that in agricultural communities, often a year's supply of food can be destroyed instantaneously, adding that because of the careless nature of oil operations in the Delta, the environment is growing increasingly uninhabitable. Consequently, people in the affected areas complain about health issues including breathing problems and skin lesions; many have lost basic human rights such as health, access to food, clean water, and an ability to work (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Environmental_issues_in_the_Niger_Delta).

It has also been observed that pesticides (herbicides, insecticides, fungicides, rodenticides, fertilizers), food additives (preservatives, sweeteners, colouring agents and enhancers), veterinary drugs, industrial chemicals, detergents, household products, etc pose environmental problems in varying degrees (Wilson, 2006). Studies have also indicated poor management of municipal solid waste as a potent cause of the environmental crisis in Nigeria. Accordingly, it has been observed that in Nigerian cities, huge mountains of domestic wastes are common sights along major roads and public places. Where there are refuse collection points, they are left to overflow, sometimes, for months "(Ojebode and Adegbola, 2010: 17)."

The media and environmental health in Nigeria

The fundamental proposition of this paper is that the media have the constitutional backing to uphold Nigeria's environmental objective by holding government agencies on environment responsible and accountable for their actions. It is also a strong contention in this paper that the Nigerian media can suggest, through their agenda setting role, effective policy alternatives or more productive approaches or strategies to agencies charged with the responsibility of environmental protection. Clearly, these arguments show that the media are critical factors in the promotion of healthy environments and by extension environmental health. In other words, the media have deliberate roles to play to ensure that relevant government agencies provide the minimum standard requirements needed for proper environmental hygiene. They also have the mandate to monitor enforcement of environmental policies, and where there are lapses, insist on compliance. The media also have the awesome responsibility of inculcating in Nigerians environmental friendly habits by teaching them how best to relate with their environment positively. In essence, it is the social responsibility of the Nigerian media to create public awareness on such vital environmental issues as: environmental impact assessment, environmental pollution, environmental pollution/degradation prevention, environmental health hazards, and implications of environmental pollution on the health of individuals, communities, and on the general productivity of the nation.

In doing so, the media draw legitimacy from their fundamental functions of information and education, as well as their agenda setting and status conferral roles. Thus, it is expected that the media should set agenda for public discourse on environmental conservation issues by giving prominence to environmental promotion content. It is believed that when this is the case, environmental risks will be reduced; this will in turn ensure proper environmental management. Proper environmental management on the other hand will promote better health and reduce the high disease and mortality burden in the country at the moment.

The point that improvement in environmental health factors will promote better health among individuals,

communities and nations worldwide has eloquently been made by the World Health Organisation (WHO). In its publication titled: *Mortality and Burden of Disease from Water and Sanitation* (WHO, 2012a) argues that improvements related to drinking water, sanitation, hygiene, and water resources management could result in the reduction of almost 10% of the total burden of disease worldwide. Further, it provides that in addition to diarrhoea, an important share of the following diseases could be prevented if adequate water quality and quantity, sanitation facilities, hygiene behaviour, as well as water resource management interventions were implemented: malnutrition, intestinal nematode infections, lymphatic filariasis, trachoma, schistosomiasis, malaria, drowning, and other infectious diseases.

Studies have however shown that the media in Nigeria have not given environmental health issues due prominence which accounts for the state of environmental degradation and the attendant health implications Nigerians are experiencing. In this regard, the Nigerian media have inhibited proper environmental management (McQuail, 1977) and promoted environment related diseases by failing to stand up to their social responsibility of creating public awareness on sensitive environmental health issues. In a study: *Newspaper Coverage of Environmental Degradation in the Niger Delta*, Udoudo (2006) found that no Nigerian newspaper deliberately covered environmental degradation within the study period (1st June 2000 – 31st May, 2001 and 1st June 2004 – 31st May, 2005) representing a study period of two years. Among other things, he found that the five newspapers studied collectively published 0.56% of items on environmental degradation in the Niger Delta, representing one of such items in two days. He concluded that Nigerian newspapers have not contributed significantly to the creation of awareness on environmental degradation in the Niger Delta. One key factor he identified to be responsible for this development was the absence of a media philosophy in environmental management in Nigeria. Anchoring on this finding, he recommended that the mass media in Nigeria should operate within a stated philosophy so as to help contribute to environmental conservation. He emphasised that such philosophy must be entrenched on the principles of development and social responsibility.

Two earlier studies, Udoakah and Batta (2004) and Batta (2004) reached similar conclusions. In their study: *The Nigerian Press and Environmental Reporting*, which was presented at Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria during the World Environment Day 2004, the researchers set to find out how much information was available in the press to people who were affected in different ways by the environmental problems. Findings showed that even at the period when Nigeria was celebrating the World Environment Day, the Nigerian press published only 98 items on environmental issues in two weeks; this figure sharply contrasted with the 5,272 non- environmental items that were published in the same newspapers within the same period. The study

recommended that Nigerian newspapers should improve on their reports on the environment. Specifically, it was recommended that the press should increase reports on environmental problems, as well as proffer solutions to the perennial environmental problems with which the nation is grappling; one of which is environmentally induced sicknesses and diseases.

Batta (2004) in a study titled: *Coverage of Environmental Issues by Select Nigerian News Magazines (1992-2001)* found that environmental issues were not given prominence in magazine covering the environment in Nigeria. For example, he reports that 90% of the environmental stories published by *Newswatch* and 100% published by *Tell* were published on the inside pages. In other words, none of the magazines studied allotted cover stories to environmental issues; however, such cover stories would have conferred status on environmental issues and given the desired prominence. He recommended that news magazines should establish environmental news desks which will be manned by trained ecology journalists. He also recommended that news magazines in Nigeria should give deliberate prominence to environmental issues and allot sufficient number of pages in every edition to environmental issues, problems, and solutions.

The point has been made in the foregoing analysis that the Nigerian media have shirked from the responsibility of creating public awareness on environmental issues. By failing to deliberately report on environmental issues and by deliberately positioning environmental content on inside pages of newspapers and magazines, the Nigerian media have failed to set public agenda and confer the required status on issues of environmental health. Promoting environmental health as the analysis shows requires deliberate, planned, conscious and continuous communication (content) on environmental friendly practices. It is therefore our pious assumption in this study that effective mass mediated communication on sustainable environmental health will influence behavioural change in the poor sanitation habits and other negative attitudes of Nigerians towards environmental conservation. Our position has been acknowledged by Wilson (2006: 9)" who argued that:

Clearly, when we speak about sustainable development as an environmental correlate, we cannot avoid the role of communication in this context. And when we speak of communication, we inescapably must be concerned about the appropriate media and channels that may be desirably used to achieve our goals and objectives.

Herein lays the nexus between sustainable environmental health, communication and media engagement.

Media engagement and sustainable environmental health in Nigeria

The main objective of this segment of the study is to

propose strategies for effective media engagement in the promotion of sustainable environmental health in Nigeria.

Perhaps, the first step in this direction should be the realisation that the media, policy makers and relevant environment agencies cannot plan for ways to improve environmental health without first understanding the extent and nature of environmental health problems in Nigeria. It is also very important for these stakeholders to be clear about the roles they should play in the intervention process and how effectively they can function within available means and resources in accomplishing this lofty objective. In the light of the foregoing, collaboration and network building between the relevant stakeholders is necessary. The reason for this is that many of the key issues in environmental health in Nigeria today cannot be properly investigated without relying on the relevant agencies or stakeholders. The Nigerian media need for instance, to work closely with environmental agencies to acquire functional literacy in environmental management skills. This will empower the journalists concerned and will help them better communicate risk indicators and warning signs to the general public. Journalists will in addition be in possession of relevant information, to this extent; they may be able to provide public information on help lines in cases of epidemic outbreaks or other emergencies. Partnering with health authorities will also help environmental journalists to access and present fairly accurate facts on disease conditions from environmental factors and what the people can do in such situations. A good knowledge of environmental issues through such collaborations may also empower the media to suggest alternatives to pressing environmental challenges.

Closely related to the above, media organisations in Nigeria, print, broadcast, and the new media should seek to improve their research collaboration and competencies. This way lot of resources and effort will be saved. For instance, there is nothing wrong if different media organisations can pool resources and even personnel together to thoroughly investigate issues of environmental degradation. In fact, such measures will prove very productive as they will cut costs and enhance efficiency.

The media can also play proactive roles in promoting sustainable environmental health in Nigeria by consistently giving prominence (cover page treatment) to environmental health issues. They should in addition publish in-depth news stories, features and editorials on key environmental issues. In addition to these, the media can go an extra mile by publishing available environmental and health services and help lines with their up-to-date telephone numbers and addresses.

Media organisations should fashion as a matter of policy and urgency, a philosophy that will regulate coverage of environmental issues. There is also the need to improve communication among journalists working with national, state or local government environmental news sources. This could be done through the existing Nigeria Union of

Journalists structures or by establishing more specialised structures. Special fora may be considered for example, for journalists who report the environment at the national level to share their experiences with those reporting the beat at the state or local government level. This may open up the parties concerned to new and better ways of doing their jobs and will ultimately lead to enhanced productivity.

There is also a dire need for journalists to be equipped with the knowledge and skills to cover environmental issues. The Nigerian environment and its priorities is still an unknown entity for many journalists. They lack the basic knowledge about implementation of environmental policies at the national, state, and local government levels, and how these fit into the global context. This is particularly true with the advent of climate change and global environmental crisis, journalist lack for instance, the knowledge of where and how to get the relevant information quickly. It is with this context in mind that the researchers recommend that media organisations in Nigeria should consider and assiduously work towards creating and training a workforce that is capable of doing research on environmental issues, an integral part of which must be environmental health issues. We also suggest that Nigerian media organisations should take advantage of the internet and stimulate its use as a major information resource on the environment. Agencies on environment should consider the possibility of establishing training centres where journalists on the environment beat can go for special training or where they will take courses on environmental news reporting. The stakeholders should also consider the possibility of establishing structures for working out exchange and internship programmes among media organisations from different countries. It is our conviction that such programmes could help improve the knowledge of Nigerian journalists about environmental conditions on the global scene and will build up contacts which will be useful for local, state, national, regional, and global news research on the environment, and indeed environmental health.

Efforts should also be made to forge partnerships between the media, environmental agencies, developmental agencies, civil society groups, NGOs on environment and communities in the rural areas where the locals will be mobilised for environmental conservation using the traditional forms of communication, also known as the *oramedia*.

Conclusion

This study analysed environmental health issues in Nigeria. It demonstrates that poor sanitation, flooding, desertification, oil pollution from spills, industrial pollution and improper management of municipal solid waste among others have been critical environmental problems in Nigeria. Arising from these states of environmental degradation are debilitating health implications; for instance, UNICEF (2011) reports high morbidity and

mortality ratio due to sanitation related diseases, such as cholera, diarrhoea, dysentery and typhoid. Interestingly however, the paper notes that in spite of its pervasiveness, environmental health issues are yet to be placed on the front burner of social discourse in Nigeria as a public health problem; this served as motivation for this study. The study therefore, anchored on the premise that the media may be used as tools to help activists and government raise awareness and implement programmes on this issue. The fundamental objective of this discourse therefore, was to propose strategies for effective media engagement in the quest for sustainable environmental health in Nigeria. Consequently, six strategies were proposed, it is our considered opinion that implementation of these strategies will foster the much sought intervention in environmental health problems in Nigeria. These strategies include:

- i). Collaboration and network building between the relevant stakeholders;
- ii). Improvement of research collaboration and competencies;
- iii). Consistent prominence (cover page treatment) on environmental health issues;
- iv). Formulation of a media philosophy that will regulate coverage of environmental issues;
- v). Equipping journalists with the knowledge and skills required to cover environmental issues effectively;
- vi). Integration of oramedia for mobilising rural dwellers for healthy environmental habits.

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