

Challenges of Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals in Nigeria

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Abstract

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were formally born at the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development in Rio de Janeiro in 2012. The objective was to produce a set of universal goals that meet the urgent environmental, political and economic challenges bedeviling the world. These include poverty, increasing inequality, environmental and human health degradation. The thrust of this paper is to examine the challenges to sustainable development in Nigeria. The objectives of the study are to: explain the concept of sustainable development, trace the evolution of sustainable development in Nigeria, explain the challenges to sustainable development in Nigeria and identify and explain strategies for the realization of sustainable development in Nigeria. The study established that the level of sustainable development in Nigeria is seriously affected by plethora of challenges, which can be minimized if the strategies identified and explained are adequately utilized. The study relied on secondary sources of data which included: text books, and reputable journal publications from recognized data bases.

Keywords: Achieving, Sustainable Development Goals, Challenges, Strategies, Nigeria

Introduction

In a world where the term ‘sustainability’ is as common as ‘innovation’, understanding how to truly achieve sustainable development is more critical than ever. The journey towards a sustainable future is paved with myriad challenges. It is on the basis of the aforementioned statement that this paper takes a careful look at these challenges to sustainable development and also elaborately examine the strategies of achieving sustainable development in Nigeria. For the purpose of clarity, the paper is segmented as follows; introduction, the concept of sustainable development, the evolution of sustainable development, challenges of sustainable development in Nigeria, strategies for achieving sustainable development in Nigeria and conclusion.

The Concept of Sustainable Development

Sustainable Development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It contains within it two key concepts: (i) the concept of ‘**needs**’, in particular the essential needs of the world’s poor, to which overriding priority should be given; and (ii) the idea of limitations imposed by the state of technology and social organization on the environment’s ability to meet present and future needs. According to the Brundtland (2006) definition of Sustainable Development, it means that the needs of the present generation should be met without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their own needs. It is about safeguarding the earth’s capacity to support life in all its diversity and is based on the principles of democracy, gender equality, solidarity, the rule of law and respect for fundamental human rights, including freedom and equal opportunities for all. It aims at the continuous improvement of the quality of life and well being on Earth for present and future generations. To that end, it promotes a dynamic economy, with full employment and a high level of education, health protection, social and territorial cohesion and environmental protection in a peaceful and secure world, respecting cultural diversity.

Sustainable economic development is the process in which the exploitation of natural resources, the direction of investment, the orientation of technological development, and institutional change or reform are all in coordination and harmony and enhance both the current and future potential for meeting human needs. The goal of sustainable development is to secure a good living opportunity for present and future generations, that is, using natural resources

sustainably. Economic sustainability refers to balanced growth that is not based on the loss of resources or indebtedness (<https://www.ykliitto.fi/yk-teemat/kestava-kehitys>).

Cameron (1993) opines that, sustainable development encompasses the progressive economic and social development of human society through maintaining the security of livelihood for all peoples and by enabling them to meet their present needs, together with a quality of life in accordance with their dignity and well being, without compromising the ability of future generations to do likewise. Without questioning the principle of “ development” as a method for satisfying the needs of current generations, it explicitly recognizes that future generations also have interests and even rights deserving protection in this new model of development.

The essential features of sustainable development according to Idisi (2002) and Offiong (2001) include the following:

- i. ecological integrity and sustainability;
- ii. equity and distributive justice at all levels;
- iii. socially-relevant economic productivity and technological development;
- iv. popular participation and collective autonomy and
- v. prevalence and institutionalization of human development.

The Evolution of Sustainable Development

Historically, the 1972 Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm, Sweden, attended by 113 states and representatives from 19 International Organizations, was the first genuine International Conference devoted exclusively to environmental issues. There, a group of 27 experts articulated the nexus between environment and development stating that : “although in individual instances there were conflicts between environmental and economic priorities , they were intrinsically two sides of the same coin” (Dillion, 2019). Another result of the Stockholm Conference was the creation of the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP), which had the mission “ to provide leadership and encourage partnership in caring for the environment by inspiring, informing and enabling nations and peoples to improve their quality of life without compromising that of the future generations”.

This conference marked a significant turning point in the origin of Sustainable development as it played a catalytic role in promoting the subsequent adoption of International agreements

concerned with ocean dumping, pollution from ships, and the endangered species trade ((Moga., Bala, & Dantsoho,2023). It also adopted the “ Stockholm Declaration on the Human Environment”, which included forward-looking principles, such as Principle 13167, that declared the need for integration and coordination in development planning to allow for environmental protection. However, “the Stockholm Conference was limited in its effectiveness because environmental protection and the need for development, especially in developing countries, were seen as competing needs and thus were dealt with in a separate, uncoordinated fashion”. Some critics concluded that “the conference was more concerned with identifying trade-offs between environment and development than with promoting harmonious linkages between the two”(Dillion ,2019). Even UN documents acknowledged after the Stockholm conference that little was accomplished to concretely integrate environmental concerns into development policies and plans. A more integrated perspective that incorporated both economic development and environmental sensitivities was clearly needed.

In 1983, the UN General Assembly created the World Commission on Environment and Development which was later known as the Brundtland Commission, named after its Chair, Gro Harlem Brundtland, then Prime Minister of Norway and later head of the World Health Organization. In 1987, the commission published the Brundtland Report, entitled ‘**Our Common Future**’. It built upon what had been achieved at Stockholm and provided the most politically significant of all definitions of sustainable development: “ sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”. The definition contains two major concepts: firstly, the concept of ‘**needs**’, in particular the essential needs of the world’s poor, to whom overriding priority should be given; and secondly the idea of limitations imposed by the state of technology and social organization on the environment’s ability to meet present and future needs (Singh, 2016) and (Moga., Bala, & Dantsoho, 2023).

In that period, the concept of sustainable development acquired political momentum “ through rising public concern in the developed countries over the new and alarming phenomenon of global environmental change, and in some ways it replaced fears of nuclear war that had prevailed in the early 1980s”.

Some critics argue that “the Brundtland Commission Report’s discussion of sustainability is both optimistic and vague. The Commission probably felt that, in order to be accepted, the

discussion had to be optimistic, but given the facts, it was necessary to be vague and contradictory in order not to appear to be pessimistic” (Bartlett, 2006).

The year 1992 also featured prominently in the evolution of the concept of sustainable development. In this year, the UN Conference on the Environment and Development (UNCED), was held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, with an unprecedented attendance of 114 heads of state, including 10,000 representatives from 178 countries and 1400 nongovernmental organizations represented by additional thousands.

The conference itself proved to be an international event on an unprecedented scale as heads of government tried to make their mark on what was dubbed the Rio Earth Summit. The association in the title “Connecting Environment and Development, was indicative of North-South bargaining at the UN, in which demands for international action on the environment, were set against claims for additional development aid and technology transfer”(Singh, 2016). The major outputs of the conference were: the Rio Declaration, Agenda 21, and the Commission on Sustainable Development. All were quite explicitly concerned with sustainable development and it is thus, at the conclusion of the Earth Summit that the concept truly arrived at the international scene.

The commitment of leaders from around the world to sustainable development was clearly articulated in Agenda 21, the key document of the summit- a 500 paged collection of agreed healthy practices and pieces of advice for achieving sustainable development in almost any area on the surface of the earth. Agenda 21 activities are organized under environmental and development themes: quality of life, efficient use of natural resources, protection of the global commons, management of human settlements, and sustainable economic growth. It recognizes that the persistence of severe poverty in several parts of the world alongside a standard of living based on wasteful consumption of resources in other parts is not a sustainable model, and that environmental management must be practiced in developing and industrial countries alike.

During the 1992 conference, it was agreed that to implement Agenda 21, countries should prepare a national sustainable development strategy (Singh, 2016). While sustainable development was conceived as a unifying principle during the Rio conference, there was disagreement about its meaning and implications. The UNCED process attempted to provide guidance in implementing sustainable development by laying out a set of principles and a plan of action based on the concept. Indeed, Rio was less about debating the definition of sustainable development than it was about developing approaches to ensure its implementation. Some

critics argue that “ implementing the principles of equity and living within ecological limits can only be accomplished if social, political, and economic systems have the flexibility to be redirected toward sustainability as well as integrated with each other and the environment” (Singh, 2016).

In the 1997 Kyoto conference on climate change, developed countries agreed on specific targets for cutting their emissions of greenhouse gases, resulting in a general framework, which became known as the Kyoto Protocol, with specifics to be detailed over the next few years. The U.S. proposed to stabilize emissions only and not to cut them at all, while the European Union called for a 15 % cut. In the end, there was a trade off, and industrialized countries were committed to an overall reduction of emissions of greenhouse gases to 5.2% below 1990 levels for the period 2008-2012. However, the complexity of the negotiations created considerable confusion over compliance even after the Kyoto Protocol itself as adopted because it only outlined the basic features for compliance but did not explain the all- important rules of how they would operate. Although, 84 countries signed the protocol, indicating the intent to ratify it, many others were reluctant to even this step.

Unfortunately, the USA has refused to ratify the Kyoto Protocol. The EU has ratified the Kyoto Protocol but this has not been enough. The Union has failed to reduce CO₂ emissions. In relation to 1990 figures, the US’s contribution to CO₂ emissions is most likely to increase by 50%, compared to an 18% EU increase (Singh,2016). The Kyoto conference remains one of the most debated international agreements between the “greens” and the neo-liberals”.

In September 2000 at the Millennium Summit held in New York, world leaders agreed on the Millennium Development Goals, most of which had the year 2015 as a time-frame and used 1990 as a benchmark. The Millennium Development Goals demonstrate that “ the livelihoods and well-being of the world’s poor are now conceptualized in terms of access to opportunity and absence of insecurity and vulnerability” (Adger,2007). They represent a more practical expression of the principle of equilibrium between the economic, social and environmental pillars of sustainable development. They include (i) having the proportion of people living on less than a dollar a day and those suffering from hunger, (ii) achieving universal primary education and promoting gender equality, (iii) reducing child mortality and improving maternity health, (iv) reversing the spread of HIV/AIDS, (v) integrating the principles of sustainable development into country policies and (vi) reducing by half the proportion of

people without access to portable drinking water. It is heartbreaking that even with the laudable pillars, the world still has to tackle “ this dangerous blend of indifference (Gorbachev, 2006).

The World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg in 2002 was a landmark in the business of forging partnerships between the United Nations, governments, business and NGOs to gather resources for addressing global environmental, health and poverty challenges. The Johannesburg Summit reconfirmed the Millennium goals and complemented them by setting a number of additional ones such as halving the proportions of people lacking access to basic sanitation; minimizing harmful effects from chemicals; and halting the loss of biodiversity. As opined by (Asefa,2005), the Johannesburg Conference was apt in different ramifications: (i) the conference was a progress in moving the concept of Sustainable Development toward a more productive exploration of the relationship between economic development and environmental quality, (ii) the WSSD filled some gaps in the Agenda 21 and the Millennium Development Goals and addressed some newly emerging issues, including to halve the proportion of people without access to basic sanitation, (iii) to use and produce chemicals in ways that do not lead to significant adverse effects on human health and the environment; (iv) to maintain or restore depleted fish stocks to levels that can produce the maximum sustainable yields on an urgent basis.

The Johannesburg Conference confirmed a trend, which appeared since the 1992 Conference, of the increasing importance of the socio-economic pillars of sustainable development. The environmental agenda of the two previous UN conferences had been sustained by peaks in the public ‘attention cycle’ of major developed countries. The WSSD incorporated the concept of sustainable development throughout its deliberations and was initially dubbed “the implementation summit” (Singh, 2016).

Diagrammatic View of the Sustainable Development Goals



Source:https://www.researchgate.net/figure/The-17-Sustainable-Development-Goals-SDGs_fig1_339653671

Challenges of Sustainable Development in Nigeria

One of the key challenges to sustainable development in Nigeria is the readiness and ability of the Nigeria government to evolve and judiciously implement policies and programmes that can significantly free Nigerians from the shackles of abject poverty. Many Nigerians still wallow in abject poverty and perhaps do not receive sufficient nutritious diet to alleviate diseases. To achieve sustainable development, the following factors has to be urgently addressed:

a. Abject Poverty

Abject poverty must be tackled to enable the underprivileged the opportunity produce or purchase food, clothing and housing necessary to ensure health and self-respect. Ending abject poverty in Nigeria therefore calls for improved access to education, healthcare, clean water, and sanitation (Ukertor and Vambe, 2018).

B. Degraded Agrarian and Production Environment

Another obstacle to sustainable development in Nigeria is the threatened and degraded agrarian and production environment evident by poor leadership, mismanagement and pauperization of the populace and inconsistent policies that have taken a great toll on the environment. For

instance, Nigeria's Niger Delta area has been in the news. The nation's mangrove forests are being destroyed following poor exploitation of crude oil and gas in the region. The agrarian system in the area is being destroyed. Against this backdrop, the region has to depend on other regions for food supplies. Again, the nation has to forgo most of the rubber and oil-palm plantations. Clearly, this depicts the lapses of uncoordinated policy formulation reminiscent of poor leadership.

C. Deforestation

This is another challenge hindering the achievement of sustainable development in Nigeria. Deforestation can lead to a number of environmental maladies that over time can greatly lower agricultural yields and increase rural hardships. For example, clearing of vegetation at high elevations has the potential to increase the exposure of cultivated lands at lower attitudes. Soil that has been carried away by heavy rains may silt rivers and pollute drinking water. Plants help to retain rainfall, which percolates down through the soil into underground reserves of groundwater. The water in turn tapped by a variety of plants during dry seasons in arid regions. The subsequent drop in the water level also leads to the death of plants with shallow root systems, including young trees (Ogujiuba, Ehigiamusoe and Udefuna, 2013). In Northern Nigeria, desertification processes are prevalent, and coupled with heavy fuel wood harvest, poor farming techniques and annual bush burning, the land is being destroyed. In eastern Nigeria, heavy gully erosion coupled with overpopulation prevail. The results have been failing rural and agrarian sector, mass poverty of the rural populace, heavy food importation, poor implementation of agrarian policies and indeed a mass of bandits emerging from the rural areas.

D. Societal Greed for Quick and Cheap Money

Even for the industrial and modern sector environments, the society's greed for quick and cheap money has led to abandoning of standards especially as seen in the emission of toxic materials into the environment. Sub-standard goods are being produced and imported, thus in Nigeria, it is not so much the quality of life that is at risk but everything that has to do with our existence as a nation.

E. Anti-Development Activities

Also worthy to mention as obstacle to the quest for sustainable development in Nigeria are instances of anti-development activities such as the constant feud between the Executive and

Legislature arms of government both at the Federal and State levels, disrespect for the rule of law and the constitution, poor welfare package, and visionless leadership (Ukertor and Vambe, 2018).

F. Intra-Tribal and Inter-Religious Crises

Other instances are inter-tribal as well as inter-religious crises that prevail in most parts of Nigeria. Some glaring examples of such crisis include: the Kaduna crisis in 2000, the Tiv/Jukun crisis in Taraba State in 1999, and the Jos crisis in 2004. Arguably, more financial and material resources are wasted and economic activities were brought to a halt during such period in question. This in turn affects sustainable development in the country.

G. Global Economic Crisis

The financial crisis that occurred during the post-corona virus also features as one of the numerous issues that affects sustainable economic development. Take for example the downturn in the United States and its impact on other nations which Nigeria was not an exemption during the period. As a result of the interconnectedness of world trade, there are many synergies between nations around the world, hence what affects one country can also impact another indirectly (Blogger,2022).

H. Rapid Population Growth

in Nigeria, this is another fundamental challenge to the nation's sustainable development agenda. Nigeria's population has been experiencing astronomically growth rate since the early 1990s and this has great consequences on sustainable development in the country. This rapid population growth has put a lot of stress on the nation's ecosystem. Issues such as food security, land tenure, environmental degradation and lack of water supply are often related issues of high rates population growth in Nigeria (Ogujiuba, Ehigiamusoe and Udefuna, 2013). Continuing on our present part of acceleratory environmental degradation would severely compromise the need ability of present and future generations to meet their needs.

I. Rapid Urbanization/ Urban Development

This is another challenge to sustainable development in Nigeria. The majority of Nigeria's population growth is concentrated in the urban areas largely due to rural-urban migration. It is

important to note that the rapid population increases accompanied by heavy rural migration often leads to unprecedented rates of urban population growth, sometimes at twice the rate of national growth. The resulting environmental ills pose extreme health hazards for growing numbers of people exposed to them. Such conditions threaten to precipitate the collapse of the existing urban infrastructure and create circumstances ripe for epidemics and natural health crises. Congestion, vehicular and industrial emissions, crime rate increase, and poorly ventilated household stoves also inflate the tremendously high environmental cost of urban crowding.

J. Lack of Accountability Among Public Employees

Also considered as a challenge to sustainable development in Nigeria is lack of accountability among public employees; despite the huge reliance on crude oil and natural gas for economic growth, the government has failed to ensure a proper accountability framework for the sector to be accountable in terms of revenue derived. The implication of poor accountability culture by public officials on nation's quest for development is that public resources meant for development are often diverted for individual use, which hinders sustainable development in the country (Olamilekan, 2021). Closely linked to the aforementioned point is the high cost of governance. It is observed that about 70% of the government revenues are spent on the government itself, while only less than 20% of the country's population benefit significantly from the government's revenue.

K. Poor leadership

Poor leadership also takes a greater portion of the challenges to sustainable development in Nigeria. Government lacks the capacity to perform, which is rooted in a lack of ability to innovate and harness available resources. Besides, those in leadership position appears to have no regard whatsoever to the principles of good governance- openness, transparency, accountability and the rule of law; which together form the crucial factors that foster sustainable development in any nation. Hence, the lack of an open and accountable government has paved the way for corruption and bad governance where public resources are being routinely misappropriated at the expense of the masses.

Strategies for achieving sustainable development in Nigeria

One of the strategies is that policies and programmes designed to address the challenges of sustainable development should be comprehensive and integrating all stakeholders. There

should be greater involvement and participation of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO's). Civil Society organizations and community groups in local governance, greater transparency and accountability in both planning and implementation of local policy and the devolution of responsibility for urban affairs from state or national level to the local level are inevitable, as the challenges of sustainable development can only be dealt with in an atmosphere of peace, better leadership and freedom, especially in a politically frayed and frazzled country as Nigeria.

Another strategy is that Nigeria could go the way of Europe by establishing the Sustainable Development Trust Fund; the policy trust could be to establish a national body/agency with a management tool and point of reference that will help it assess the progress that is being made in mainstreaming sustainable development in the three-tripartite aspects of Nigeria's national life. The wisdom behind the establishment of the Sovereign Wealth Fund is laudable as it strives to retain some funds for the nation's future generation, but it did not make provisions for social and environmental sustainability. The aims and objectives of the plan could be patterned in a manner to help ensure that the Nigeria sustainable development programme comply with structural fund regulatory requirements concerning sustainable development and the environment.

Much more importantly is for the government to fulfill its commitments to promoting sustainable development through a dual approach to mainstreaming. Ultimately, the mainstreaming approach should help ensure certain key strategic priorities such as promoting work and skills which are delivered in a way which minimizes any negative impacts on the economy, social and environment by sustainable Development Trust Fund (SDF). This should also maximize positive impacts. In addition, the mainstreaming approach should help to support a number environmental projects which promote jobs or skills. In the operational context of SDF, sustainable development could be seen as development which provides opportunities to allow everyone fulfill their potentials, social justice, environmental protection and the skills that businesses demand and require – now and in the future (Ogujiuba, Ehigiamusoe and Udefuna, 2013).

There is also the need for urban regeneration and enhanced infrastructural development. As the population of an urban centre increases, its need for infrastructure such as transportation, water, sewage and facilities such as housing, commerce, health, schools, recreation and others increases (Ogujiuba, Ehigiamusoe and Udefuna, 2013); therefore, increasing the

environmental carrying capacity of the urban areas is necessary for enhancing the live ability of cities in Nigeria. Massive rehabilitation and expansion of urban infrastructure in the country should be taken more seriously. This should be done to address the challenges of urbanization, urban governance, land management and shelter in Nigeria. The issues of poverty (rural and urban) and sustainable urban cities should continue to receive the attention of the government, just as the political will and commitment to formulate and implement programmes and policies for development planning, housing, infrastructural development and urban management should be accelerated.

Another strategy of achieving sustainable development in Nigeria is to practice waste reduction and recycling. Reducing waste and implementing recycling practices are pivotal steps in fostering sustainability. By adopting a waste reduction approach that includes recycling, reusing items, composting, and favouring products with minimal packaging, individuals and communities contribute significantly to lessening their environmental impact. Recycling materials such as paper, plastic, glass, and metal reduces the volume of waste sent to landfills and conserves resources by turning used items into new products. Additionally, reusing items and composting organic waste minimizes landfill contributions and enriches soil health for agriculture. By advocating and participating in these waste reduction strategies, individuals actively contribute to a more sustainable future, conserving resources, reducing pollution, and lessening environmental impact (Emily, 2023).

Support sustainable agriculture; promoting sustainable agriculture involves championing local and organic farming practices and prioritizing environmental health and biodiversity. By supporting local farmers committed to organic methods, we advocate for reducing harmful chemicals and pesticides in food production. These methods not only benefit the immediate environment but also enhance the nutritional quality of the produce. Organic farming preserves soil integrity, allowing for increased soil fertility, moisture retention, and long-term sustainability. By steering away from chemical fertilizers and pesticides, local and organic farming practices encourage the growth of diverse ecosystems, protecting and fostering biodiversity. This approach supports the natural habitats of various species, promoting a healthier and more balanced environment. Supporting sustainable agriculture benefits the quality of our food. It also plays a pivotal role in conserving our planet's ecosystems and resources, ensuring a more resilient and harmonious relationship between agriculture and the natural world.

Educate and raise awareness, informing and engaging communities about the importance of sustainable living fosters understanding and collective action. Education on environmental issues and sustainable practices is key in this regard. Also important is that of ensuring gender equality and providing women and girls access to education and healthcare which is certain to lead to more sustainable communities and economic growth. Furthermore, there should be adequate investment on innovation. Thus, supporting research in sustainable technologies and practices can lead to significant advancements in achieving environmental and social goals.

One other way to achieve sustainable development in Nigeria is to advocate for responsible policies. Government should encourage businesses to adopt sustainable policies, including regulations supporting renewable energy, emissions reduction, and environmental conservation. Also important to achieving sustainable development in Nigeria is the need to embrace renewable energy sources such as solar, wind, and hydroelectric power. Embracing these renewable energy alternatives lessens the environmental impact associated with fossil fuel extraction and combustion and promotes energy independence and sustainability. By reducing reliance on finite and environmentally harmful resources, integrating renewable energy sources fosters a cleaner, greener future while aligning with global efforts to mitigate climate change, ensuring a more resilient and sustainable planet for current and future generation.

Conclusion

This paper sees sustainable development as the development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Ecological integrity and sustainability, equity and distributive justice at all levels, socially –relevant economic productivity and technological development, popular participation and collective autonomy and prevalence and institutionalization of human development were identified as the key features of sustainable development.

The first International Conference on sustainable development took place in Sweden in 1972. Among the challenges of sustainable development considered in this study include; the readiness and ability of Nigeria government to evolve and judiciously implement policies and programmes that can significantly free Nigerians from the shackles of poverty, the threatened and degraded agrarian and production environment, deforestation, global economy crisis, the rapid population growth e.t.c.

On strategies of achieving sustainable development in Nigeria, the following issues were identified and discussed; greater participation of Non- Governmental Organizations in the implementation of local policy and devolution of responsibility, establishment of Sustainable Development Trust Fund, fulfillment of government in promoting sustainable development through dual approach, urban regeneration and enhanced infrastructural development e.t.c.

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