

RE-DIRECTING SOCIETAL VALUES AND ATTITUDES FOR THE RESPECT OF THE BIO-ENVIRONMENT

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Introduction

The human environment has both living and non-living components. The non-living environment includes all the natural resources while the living environment includes all groups of individuals of any one kind of organism. The functional relations between these constitutes an ecological system and ensures its sustainability.

Walter takes the issue further and distinguishes three major components of an ecosystem thus: the physical and chemical factors of the atmosphere and the soil, the producers of the system (i.e. autotrophic organisms or plants) and the consumers (i.e. the heterotrophic organisms including animals and micro-organisms). Nature is structured so that it is essential to maintain an ecological balance at all times to ensure the continued existence of all these major components. That is to say that there is always a need for a balance in their quality as well as their sustainability.

The problem of imbalance

Since the U.N. Conference on Desertification (UNCOD) of Nairobi in 1977, a lot of concern has been expressed, the world over, about the degradation and impoverishment of the human environment with the resultant threat to the very survival and existence of man. Land degradation saps the land of its ability to sustain agriculture and human habitation. It is estimated that in Africa alone about 150 million are threatened with starvation and malnutrition.

The ecosystem has been interfered with in man's quest for productive arable land, pasture for livestock, wood for fuel and wood for construction. The system has been destroyed to establish urban settlements as a result of population pressures and also to establish industrial plants, to develop hydroelectric power and to exploit the mineral wealth of the land. Multi-species and multi-storied forest formations are reduced to mono-cultures to meet the demand for industrial raw materials. All these cause a state of imbalance in the ecosystems. This imbalance is tilted further by the most recent (at least to the developing world) danger of atmospheric pollution and uncontrolled fires. The ozone layer is consistently being depleted by atmospheric pollution.

History has shown that some desert regions of today were once forested. Eckholm and Brown, for example, make reference to ancient records of a once heavily forested Carthaginian Coast; comfortable rides from Tripoli to the Atlantic in deep shade of trees; wild beasts captured from Tunisian forests to amuse the populace in Roman arenas and, of course, the fertile Palestinian lands of Biblical times. All these areas are now either deserts or are in highly advanced stages of desertification. What prevents other presently forested areas from becoming deserts by the close of the 22nd century for instance?

Let me emphasize that the problem of environmental and atmospheric pollution as a result of industrial or technological progress was minimal in most developing countries, particularly in Africa, until recently. Our greatest problems had been drought, desertification and land degradation. But the situation has been made more complex and more alarming by some unfortunate developments of recent. The developed world, pushed perhaps by the instinct of self-survival, has of late started a campaign of dumping their industrial wastes secretly on the people of the developing world. All possible dubious means are used in this campaign. There was an incident in one coastal town of my country recently. The fishing net of some fishermen caught up a big crate while they were fishing. Out of curiosity, these unsuspecting fishermen dragged the crate to the shore and opened it. Almost immediately, those around the crate began to vomit vigorously. They were only lucky that assistance in the form of medical services was mustered within minutes.

The sources of the problem

We shall turn attention first to the problems of desertification and land degradation. Desertification is caused by long terms climatic changes (cyclic fluctuations in climate and periodic drought) and destructive consequences of human activities including over-use and impoverishment

of the top soil, overgrazing and uncontrolled fires. Added to these is the indiscriminate use of modern technology especially in cultivation. The destruction of the vegetation cover and the creation of barren lands promote wind and water erosion and cause desertification. This is the reason that the fact that droughts affect two-thirds of countries of Africa should be seen with genuine alarm.

In the words of Eckholm and Brown, however, "desertification is a human as well as an ecological problem. People cause it, people suffer it and people can reverse it." Similarly, land degradation can result from drought or can be man induced, that is through the successive breakdown of the ecological balance of the land. In most cases, however, land degradation is set in motion by man's misuse of the land. It is not yet certain as to what extent all these unfavorable changes in the environment have been affected by natural climatic and other phenomena uninfluenced by human intervention. One thing that is certain, however, is that one cannot under-estimate man's contribution to a destruction of favorable ecosystems and a degradation of the earth's environment. Certainly, it is within the ability of man to reverse this trend.

The other dimension of the problem - that is, the pollution of the atmosphere and the resultant depletion of the ozone layer is the direct consequence of technological advancements. It is man-created and can only be stopped by man. It is postulated that this depletion of reduction in the ozone layer is responsible for the relatively hotter atmospheric conditions of recent times.

Suggested remedies to the problem

The belief is held by a schools of thought that climatic conditions such as drought or good raining seasons come in cycles and that nature will eventually provide solutions to these climatic problems and their consequences. But it should be said also that, we could be heading for an even worse situation if we entrust the future solely to nature's intervention and solution. We have a responsibility and I should say with certainty that we also have the know-how and means to assist nature. We have to evolve a strategy which while completely eliminating the factors which have led to the serious ecological degradations guarantees that the needs of man are not denied him.

Problems caused by man are best solved by man. In the same way, problems caused by the masses and, in fact, everybody should be addressed by everybody if a meaningful and lasting solution is to be got. To some extent, the ecological problems facing mankind and the entire ecosystem have been created, over the years, by the generality of people. It is necessary, therefore, that the general public, the world over, should be actively involved in the attempts to arrest the situation and possibly evolve solutions.

It should be pointed out that man's activities that tend to destroy the ecosystems have been carried out generally, with an unconsciousness of their effect on the environment. This is to say that man does not set out with a conscious effort to destroy the environment. The destruction occurs in the process of man's bid to produce things to satisfy his wants. These production activities in the Third World, especially Africa, with regards to the environment have been actively encouraged by people of the developed countries.

In some cases these people even initiate these activities. I am of course referring to the prevailing international economic order. As the developed world shoot ahead in technological progress, so does their need for industrial raw materials increase. In order to ensure that the African and other Third World producers of these raw materials keep pace with their demands, the industrialized nations have persistently raised the prices of their goods to force us to encroach more and more on our environments. We are forced to cut more trees for timber to destroy more forests to cultivate the crops they need and to dig up more of our soil in search of minerals for the developed world. Isn't it sad that the industrialized world continues to justify increase in the prices of their goods and yet fail to appreciate the higher risks of environmental danger that increased production of raw materials pose? We want to reiterate that, while we in the less developed economies do not intend to allow our environments to be converted into a huge natural reserve to be tapped by the developed world at their own convenience, we do not enjoy the over exploitation of these same environments to satisfy the current need of our economic manipulators. The challenge now is to strike a balance between the ideal and the practical solution that faces us in the year 2000.

If realistic headway in evolving solutions should be made, it becomes imperative that, alternatives to some of the rather destructive human activities have to be found. Man must make sure that in all his productive activities, he makes a careful planning and adopts the most appropriate procedures that will guarantee adequate protection for the ecological system.

It also demands that the developed economies should revise their policies and make some allowance for a fairer deal in international trade and the economic order generally. It is high time they also agreed to make some sacrifices. They should show sympathy towards the environments that have done so much to support and sustain their economies. Any attempts at solution of the problems of the ecosystems, be it proposals from the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) or the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resource (IUCN), that fails to make allowance for this is most likely to fail. This is because, people of the developing economies, in a bid to generate funds to meet the high costs of imported goods, and undertake viable projects will continue to exploit the environment to the full and damn the consequences.

There is, therefore, the urgent need for an attitudinal change among the generality of people which in turn calls for a serious review, re-direction and even recreation of value systems in society, both locally and internationally. Review of societal values is being advocated for here because it is my belief that most of our activities, be they productive or consumption oriented are influenced largely by the value systems

of the particular society. For example, if society places the highest premium on the acquisition of wealth, the individual will direct all his activities to this and remain blind to any adverse consequences. We will need to put an end to our selfishness in scheming at all times for our survival without giving consideration to other things around us. We need a change in our perceptions about the world, about the feeling of our singular importance among all other components of the ecosystems and about our productive habits and practices.

It should be pointed out that societal values, like society itself are very dynamic. They reflect the goals and aspirations of any given society in the context of the problems confronting that society. History has, for instance, mirrored the greatness of people and societies at different periods in varying perspectives. The acquisition of empires constituted the criteria for greatness at one time in history. At other times, it was monopoly in world trade, dominance in technological progress or being superior in the arms race i.e. being a super-power. These criteria were reflections of societal values during those periods. But it is important to note that in each of these circumstances, man had tried to address himself to a pressing need or problem of the time. Thus it can be said that societal needs dictated the nature of the societal values and ideas. These in turn influence people's productive activities and other habits.

To carry this ideal of greatness further, one may want to advocate that the ability to address and evolve solutions to the present ecological problems could be accepted as international criteria for greatness. This will mean for instance, that military aids from one country to another should make way for aids that prevent or counter drought, desertification, air and water pollution, dumping of toxic wastes, etc. Similarly, technological progress should not be directed merely at satisfying consumption needs of mankind but also at satisfying the protection and stabilizing needs of the environment.

In short, we need a change in our mental attitudes towards the use of the environment, keeping in mind that it is as much in our own interests as in the interest of the ecosystems to do so.

As a prerequisite to such a change, man needs to be helped to identify himself with the fate of the ecosystem to be able to reach his independent conclusion that his own survival depends on the survival of the system. He needs to be adequately prepared, mentally and morally. This preparation is needed for men as individuals and also in the group context. This calls for a serious public awareness campaign which should go beyond the forums of governments and international organisations and institutions.

It is really heartening to note that since the 1977 U.N. Conference on Desertification, there have been very favorable responses in governmental circles. A number of NGOs have also tried to address themselves to the situation. All these have resulted in quite a good number of measures being taken by various organisations to combat at least the threat of desertification indeed. But I consider them as the first step in the crusade.

The next and perhaps most important step should focus on the individuals in society. This should be particularly so of the rural societies. It is they, as individuals, who need most the change in attitudes and habits of productive activities. They have a need to become aware of and understand the implications of the threat to the ecosystem. The change will naturally follow, if the strategies for establishing the awareness are effective enough. This stage in the campaign is advocated because the bulk of the masses, especially in the rural areas, continue to see these phenomena and problems as being remote and unrelated to them. In my country, for instance, the masses get involved in organised tree planting exercises not so much because they understand the need for it but because they do not want to be seen as refusing to support a government directive.

In view of the foregoing arguments, I present the following suggestions on strategies to effect attitudinal changes and carry out an effective awareness campaign with the masses as the target:

- A. B.I.O. should sponsor regional and sub-regional workshops of experts to examine the agricultural cultures of the various regions and subregions, identify activities within the cultures considered to be unfavorable for the sustenance of the quality of the environment and recommend alternative activities to satisfy the same needs. This could be conceived within the framework of a rural development programme.
- B. Branches of B.I.O. should be set up throughout the world to take up the challenges of:
 1. undertaking the campaign of public awareness in the respective regions and sub-regions;
 2. serving as watch-dogs against environment degradation and pollution.
- C. Literature on the basic facts about the ecosystem, environmental pollution, land degradation, etc. as well as the reports of the regional workshops on agricultural cultures to be organised should be translated into as many languages as possible.
- D. An international curriculum programme which focuses on developing appropriate curriculum that encourages and ensures environmental protection should be set up. Thereafter, Education Ministries of various countries can be invited to join the programme.
- E. Finally, it should be possible, should suggestion (D) become a reality, to request of Education Ministries to put a lot of emphasis on environmental education in their schools. Possibly, it could be made a compulsory subject at the pre-university level of education.

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