

## **Environmental Ethics, Employers and Employees in Nigeria**

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### **Abstract**

The works of employers and employees in times of environmental crisis cannot be judged by profitability and productivity. Businesses have great impact on the environment. The reality is that most of the predicaments that humanity and the environment are facing now are caused by businesses. The obligations and responsibilities of employers and employees have to be judged by their levels of ecological responsibility. This is the challenge that this study deals with. It uses a critical analytical method to propose the need to rethink and redefine the tasks of employers and employees from an environmental ethical perspective. The study discovers that it is important to moderate business with ecocentric values. It concludes that unless the work of employers and employees are redefined the environmental crisis will continue unabated.

**Keywords:** Environmental Ethics, employers, employees, Nigeria, work, obligations.

### **Introduction**

Environmental ethics is a relatively new sub-discipline of philosophy that came into prominence in the 1970s in the light of the environmental crisis that was faced by humanity and the planet. Environmental ethics is an extension of ethics. Human obligations and duties can no longer be considered solely through human interests. The interests and well-being of non-human life, and the entire ecosystem must be taken into consideration. Unless humanity rises to the challenge of combating environmental degradation, pollution, and other ills, humanity risks destroying the planet and making it uninhabitable for future generations. Combating environmental crisis has become the responsibility not only of environmentalists, but that of all. Everyone should be interested in the environment and see it as a common concern and challenge. Whatever happens to the environment affects all. Imagine the disastrous effect of climate change on an international scale. The drought and the consequent famine that follows precipitate death and forced migration of people from their localities to other areas. Migration poses challenges of overpopulation, shortage of housing and food supply. Many who fled from the Horn of Africa for reasons of war or drought are either stranded in the Sahara Desert, Sinai or face housing problems in southern Europe.

In training workers for gainful employment, self-employment or self-productivity, it will be socially irresponsible not to take issues of environmental ethics and socio-economic justice into consideration. This is because every form of production has environmental implications. The Wikipedia Contributors (2012) are right when they argue that every form of production, whether self-employed or employed in factories, and industries has serious environmental implications. They argue that:

Production may have environmental impacts, including pollution, habitat destruction and urban sprawl. The downstream effects of technologies, nuclear power, genetically modified food and mobile phones may not be well understood. While the precautionary principle may prohibit introducing new technology whose consequences are not fully understood, that principle would have prohibited most new technology introduced since the industrial revolution. Product testing protocols have been attacked for violating the rights of both humans and animals.

The task of this paper is to show that environmental ethical concerns and principles should inform capacity building or training of people to enhance their employability and self-productivity in Nigeria. It also argues that employers of labour must base their corporate business decisions on the tenets of environmental ethics

### **The Impact of Employer-Employee Work on the Environment**

Writing on the need for business ethics, Wikipedia contributors (2012) opine that business ethics usually deal with the duties of a company to ensure that products and production processes do not needlessly cause harm. Since few goods and services can be produced and consumed with zero risk, determining the ethical course can be problematic. In some cases consumers demand for products that may harm them such as tobacco products, alcohol, drugs, etc.

The impact of business, the decisions of employers, and the workers who carry out the decisions of employers have disastrous consequences for the environment; if they are done without consideration of the natural world. This is why it is very important to emphasize corporate environmental social responsibility for businesses to be regulated by environmental ethical principles. *The Gale Encyclopaedia of Small Business* (2006) states that; employers face serious and complex ethical dilemmas in the workplace. These dilemmas have negative repercussions for society and other groups unless they are taken with the fairness principle in mind. As important as taking fairness into consideration, it is not simply what is beneficial to humans, but what is beneficial to the entire ecosystem. After all, every human, being as the United Nations Environment Programme (1992) proclaims, has a right to a healthy environment to flourish. There is a serious debate on whether the environment should be preserved for the health of humans or for the well being of all life forms. For whatever reason the environment is preserved, the important thing is that the environment is preserved and protected from excessive human encroachment. Once the environment is preserved from degradation and spoilage, it serves the good of the entire natural world, and human persons inclusive.

Fieser (n.d) is right to argue that: "The greatest damage done to the environment is inflicted by business and industry, and not from domestic activities. Businesses exact the greatest tolls in terms of energy consumption, toxic waste, air and water pollution, and deforestation." Think of Nigeria's Niger Delta region, the oil spillage that causes contamination of rivers and streams, devastation of farmlands and sea animals, and precipitate ethnic agitations and oil militancy is caused by big oil multinational companies. In the whole of Nigeria, environmental standards are hardly enforced and implemented. The result is that all the mining companies, oil companies and

petrochemical factories release poisonous chemicals into the atmosphere, thus contributing to global warming.

All over Nigeria, small and medium businesses lack any form of environmental standard or regulation. They release their excess waste and contaminated water into the roads and gutters nearby. Many of these business owners and the employees who work for them know little or nothing about environmental preservation. They cut down trees indiscriminately to make way for their sheds and products. Many vans and buses used in the cities in Nigeria to transfer manufactured products, and agricultural products are hazards on the roads as they emit excessive and dangerous fumes. Most of these buses and vans are not road worthy. They are hardly maintained by their owners. Thus they constitute hazard to their environment.

### **Broadening the Obligations of Employers and Employees**

In the light of the environmental challenges that employers and employees face, it is no longer satisfactory to define the roles of the employers and employees as simply that of a contractual relationship in which the employer employs the employees for a certain job or business in order to receive an income. The *BusinessDictionary.com* (2012) defines the word employer as “a legal entity that controls and directs a servant or worker under an expressed or implied contract of employment and pays (or is obligated to pay) him or her salary or wages in compensation.” It defines employee as “an individual who works part-time or full-time under a contract of employment, whether oral or written, expressed or implied, and has recognized rights and duties.” The understanding of the meaning of employer and employee should be extended to include ecological sensibilities. The obligation of the employee is not simply to carry out the will of his employers without consideration for social and environmental concerns of society. Equally, employers can no longer carry out their work or business activities without respect for corporate environmental business ethics.

As noted earlier, business activities which are carried out by employers and employees have serious impact and implications for the natural world and the environment in which they are carried out. This is why the emphasis of society should not just be placed on jobs. The emphasis placed on skill acquisition for the workplace should include acquisition of environmental skills and awareness. Training programmes and other processes directed at empowering youths must be re-engineered to include ecological literacy and skills. In today’s world, an employee that is not a good environmental citizen of his country will be a burden and a drawback on his/her nation and the business venture that such a person represents. Rolston (2010), the originator of academic environmental philosophy has argued forcefully that:

In the next millennium, it will not be enough to be a good ‘citizen,’ or ‘humanist,’ because neither of these terms have enough ‘nature,’ enough ‘earthiness’ in them. ‘Citizen’ is only half the truth; the other half is that we are ‘residents’ on landscapes. Humans are Earthlings. Earth is our dwelling place. From here onward, there is no such a thing as civic competence without ecological competence. Many a

citizen who is celebrated for his or her humanity is quite insensitive to the boding ecological crisis, or, even when there is no crisis, in enjoying the values that the natural world carries all around them. Until that happens, no one is educated for the next century in which many of these problems will have to be solved-if ever they are solved. Somewhat paradoxically, the two new areas in an undergraduate education of the past century is that graduate need to be (1) computer literate and (2) environmentally literate. (p.572)

Nigeria like every other nation expects all her citizens, including the employers and employees, to be faithful citizens that keep the nation clean and work to ameliorate environmental crisis. This is clear from the mandate and vision of the National Environmental Standards and Regulations Enforcement Agency (NESREA). The website of NESREA (2008) enunciates that:

The National Environmental Standards and Regulations Enforcement Agency (NESREA), an Agency of the Ministry of Environment, Housing and Urban Development, is charged with the responsibility of enforcing environmental Laws, regulations and standard in deterring people, industries and organizations from polluting and degrading the environment.

When it comes to the pollution of the environment and violation of environmental standards, industries, businesses, factories, and enterprises are major offenders. Yet, it should be understood that industries, businesses, factories, and other offenders are 'inanimate' bodies. It is people (employers and employees) who operate and run them. It is to these people then that their obligations in the business world must be redefined.

Gainful employment cannot fully express the place and purpose of the human person on earth. The employability of a person in this time of environmental degradation should be questioned if the person lacks environmental skills and sensibilities. An employee without environmental sensibilities may be able to produce goods and services but at a grievous risks to the environment and health of others. Imagine an employee that litters the workplace and streets of the city with papers, operates machines in the factory without concern for energy and power, cuts down the trees in the workplace indiscriminately, throws garbage and waste into the rivers and does not bother about observing environmental sanitation days. It is not enough for employees to be useful to their employers or companies. They should be useful to the general community in helping in environmental protection.

### **Environmental Ethics Applied to Employer-Employee Decisions and Activities**

The foregoing reveals clearly that it is important to relate and moderate the decisions and actions of employers and employees in the workplaces with environmental principles. This will help society to drastically reduce environmental pollution and degradation. It is important that environmental ethical principles be applied to employer-employee and business practices. But more often, they are simply concerned about profit and the drive to cut cost by all means. Many businesses are not willing to go beyond what the law requires of them. Fieser (n.d) states that:

Since the 1960's, our society has become increasingly more environmentally conscious and now, we simply take it for granted that we

all are responsible for maintaining the integrity of the environment. However, conservative business people commonly feel that their responsibility to the environment is limited. Typically, they give two distinct arguments for their views. First, they argue that businesses do not have an obligation to protect the environment above what the law requires. Although laws are strict concerning environmental regulation, they are not perfect and they allow for many kinds of environment judgement calls. If businesses showed special concern for the environment beyond what the law requires, then this would interfere with their ability to compete.

While there may be divergences on the level to which businesses and employers and employees may go to protect the environment, the question that is of cardinal concern here is what environmental ethical principles should govern businesses and employers? Environmental ethics is not a monolithic body of ethics. Like every other field of study, there is pluralism in environmental ethics. Three philosophical theories amongst others are presented here. These three are representatives as many other environmental philosophical theories can be subsumed under them. These theories are anthropocentric, animal rights, and ecocentric environmental ethics.

Anthropocentric environmental ethics views nature from the sole perspective and interest of human persons. It is human consideration that comes first and it is the only thing that matters. When employers are taking business decisions, what they should consider is the impact of their production activities on other human persons. If there is any damage or harm to the natural environment, it should be judged by the impact it has on human beings. The human being has a right to a healthy environment in which to live and flourish. Here the human being has no direct obligations or duties to the natural world. Duties are to fellow human beings and not to the natural world.

On the other hand, the animal rights theorists argue that anthropocentric theory is too limited. They argue that animals and even lower animals have moral standing and so human beings ought to take them into consideration when making economic decisions. Singer (1975) a major proponent of animal rights argues that animals like human persons have the capacity to suffer pain and human beings should avoid causing them pain. For human beings to take only their interest into consideration amount to speciesism. This is akin to racism and slavery. Here, business decisions should be taken not just on the basis of the impact they have for human beings but also on the impact they have on the animal world, for animals equally can feel pleasure and pain.

Ecocentric environmental theorists move the argument further than the first two theorists. It is not simply the interests of human beings and animals that should count. The interests and well being of the entire natural world, including human persons, animals, rocks, plants, organisms, and all ecosystem should count and be taken into consideration. The natural world, as Rolston argues, has intrinsic value. It has value not simply because of human persons. Humans are a late arrival in the evolutionary history. The earth was already valuable before human beings arrived on earth. It is because the earth has value that human beings find it to be valuable. Deep ecology propounded by Arne Naess in 1973 is a form of ecocentric ethics. In his paper, "The Shallow and the Deep, Long-

Range Ecology Movement,” Naess (1973) argues that the entire environment has inherent worth and intrinsic value. Every being in the planet whether human, animal, vegetable or any other form of life has equal right to live and flourish. Humans are not more important than other aspects of nature. Humans are simply a part of nature and all species have a right to exist whether they are useful to human persons or not. Naess proposes that human population on earth should be regulated. The goals of economic growth should be abandoned. Diversity of species should be conserved. Humans should live in small and self-reliant communities. The human imprint on the earth should be very light.

Each of the theories has its own strengths and weaknesses. Environmental pragmatism and pluralism require that there should be nothing like environmental dogmatism. It is important to protect the environment whether this is done for the human good or the good of all nature. Yet, it should be acknowledged that there is need to move beyond anthropocentric ethics. Business and economic decisions cannot just be taken on the basis of human interests alone. If they are based solely on human interests, much of the natural environment will be damaged and inevitably it is human beings who will also suffer. For instance, there are species and organisms in nature today that may not be useful to humans now. But they may become useful for people in the future. Using the criteria of anthropocentrism, they would have been destroyed. It is equally problematic using only the anthropocentric criteria in deciding business issues. Human interests at times can be in conflict. For example, for multinational corporations that are prospecting and exploiting oil and gas resources or a multinational company prospecting for iron ore or limestone, whose interest should come first? Is it that of the company that is simply motivated by profit for its shareholders or the interest of the locals who desire that their valuable ancestral sacred sites and environment should be preserved? It is important to take this into consideration in decision making so that little or no damage is done to the environment. In most African traditions like that of the Urhobo peoples of the Niger Delta region in Nigeria, the earth is considered to be sacred. It is not simply a resource to be used. It is not to be abused, and there were places in nature that carry higher spiritual potency like sacred groves and streams. The earth has more than a utilitarian value. In African cosmology, human persons were intimately related to the earth. Taboos were set in place to protect creation, not simply for human interest but for the good of creation. In African culture, if the earth is harmed and abused sacrifices are to be performed to restore her fertility. By their consciousness human beings have a responsibility to nature. They occupy a higher position than the non-human world not in terms of domination or superiority but service and stewardship towards creation.

There is a strong basis to affirm that the natural world needs to be preserved and protected. The *World Charter on Nature* adopted by the United Nations (1982) calls upon all peoples to respect nature, avoid harming the genetic viability of natural processes, protect the habitats and ecosystems, and protect nature from degradation. The United Nations’ *Convention on the Law of the Sea* (1982), *The Vienna Convention for the Protection of the Ozone Layer* (2001) and the United Nations’ *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* affirm the need to protect the earth from damage and to employ only clean technology in all business operations. The *Vienna Convention* tends towards

ecocentric ethics when it states that the significance of the earth goes beyond human utility.

Discernable from the discussion so far is the distinction between anthropocentric and ecocentric approaches. The anthropocentric operates from the vantage point of human rights to the environment, while the ecocentric operates from the vantage point of the entire natural environment. The insight of Kusumalayam (2008) is appropriate here. He argues that:

We have many international treaties and conventions related to the right to a healthy and safe environment that take into consideration the conservation and preservation of natural eco-systems and non-human species, granting intrinsic worth to the environment itself. All of them are not exclusively for human benefits.” (p. 138-139)

The main concern to all is the fact that the environment needs to be preserved. It should be preserved by employers and employees, and all business and corporate bodies. Ethical consideration should come into play in the work of employers and employees to ensure that in all their work, they strive to do less damage to the earth and the environment in which they work.

### **Recommendations**

From the discussion so far, the following vital recommendations are suggested to protect the environment by employers and employees. (1) The education and training of the workforce should include a course on environmental ethics in relation to business ethics. (2) The concerns raised by ecocentric ethics should dominate in the course on environmental ethics. (3) There should be continuous on-the-job training and update for employees on the current state of environmental ethics. (4) Entrepreneurs and employers of labour should ensure that their seminars, board room meetings and management retreats incorporate the issues raised in environmental ethics. (5) Environmental ethicists and philosophers should not limit their work to the ivory towers; they should write and engage the public square especially that of businesses. (6) The government should ensure that her environmental agencies actually carry out their duties and are empowered to implement environmental regulatory laws. (7) More research, seminars and conferences should be organized on the relationship between environmental ethics and business issues. (8) Business schools and colleges should embrace environmental ethics as a core course in their programmes. (9) Many self-employed people and sole-proprietors who may not have had formal education should be availed the means by both government and non-governmental bodies for them to encounter the issues in environmental ethics. (10) Environmental ethics should be made to transform the life of all citizens.

### **Concluding Reflections**

This paper has examined the need to broaden the definition and understanding of employers/employees to include environmental obligations and responsibilities. The reasons for these important re-definitions were also given. Principally, it is a fact that the entire work and production of employers and employees or businesses have a great impact on the environment. Very often, the impact is a negative one on the environment.

It is a fundamental challenge for societies and all its agents to ensure that the environmental crisis is abated. Abating the crisis requires the reformation of the business world, and the agenda of employers and employees. Some of the vital ways this can be done have been given in the recommendations. Consequently, this study asserts that the work of employers and employees cannot be divorced from environmental concerns. This being the case, the engagement of employers and employees should be informed by the values of environmental ethics.

There is no gainsaying the fact that there is an environmental crisis. This environmental crisis has an impact on every area in the world. Nigeria is not excluded from the pains of the environmental crisis. Nigeria is impacted by oil and gas pollution in the Niger Delta, soil erosion in places like Eastern Nigeria and elsewhere, desertification in the North, ethnic conflicts over grazing farmlands, etc. The employers, employees, businesses and corporations among others have a role to play in ameliorating the crisis. They have a corporate social responsibility not to contribute to the crisis. This is why they must put the environment in the fore-ground of their business discussions. This invariably will also benefit the businesses.

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