Values, norms and poverty  
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Poverty and The Environment: Making Development Work in Africa  

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The issue of poverty alleviation has continued to receive global attention because of its place in promoting and sustaining human development. It is in this regard that I commend the World Banks' World Development Report 2001 (WDR2001) due out in October, 2001 as a bold step in the new drive towards a participatory approach for developing sustainable development strategies.

For decades Africans have chosen cheaper and excruciating options to sustainable development because of poverty and ignorance. The situation with the African continent is so unique that pro-poor development initiatives, experiments and interventions that have worked in developing countries elsewhere have consistently failed to make the desired impact in the continent. This paper addresses the poverty and development issues from an African environmental perspective.

Today, there are cross-cutting linkages between the problems of poverty, population and environment, which form a cycle of cause and result. These problems are so inter-related that to denominate them separately is to risk misconstruing the threat that they present to millions of people in the South. Poverty provides the impetus to rapid population growth, which in turn provides a new impetus to poverty and increased environmental stress. This reacts synergistically with population growth. Other linkages include lack of security, break down of community, loss of dignity health anxiety and stress.

Poverty reduction did not originate, as a target of environmentalists at the turn of the century when conservation had became popular because at that time, the status of poverty had not attained the monumental proportions of today. Environmental groups have now entered fully into the arena of poverty reduction in so much that it has evolved to become a major focus.

Over the years as conservationists struggled to implement strategies, which were generally elitist and top down, two key lessons, emerged. One was that participation of communities by integrating them into mainstream conservation was necessary to develop an ownership structure, which would
assure long term sustainability even after project initiators had left.

The second lesson which also made the first even more significant was that increasing poverty was a serious threat to conservation and therefore urgent attention was needed to address poverty reduction through economic empowerment, awareness and education. Today, you would find that any serious conservation programme builds in significant if not majority of its budget to address these issues.

Recognising that poverty reduction is an integral component of successful conservation has led to the understanding that it should be participatory and should adopt the premise that real development is a widely shared growth strategy which should utilise the huge labour capacity of the rural populace.

Poverty reduction from a conservationist's viewpoint involves a number of intricately woven factors, which determine how the project will be developed and its cost benefit. Secondly, conservationists recognise existing capacities within a community, and utilise Marginalised groups such as women and youths who are often more receptive to these issues.

A third factor which conservationists use is to encourage self-accounting and self-monitoring, thus building pride and ownership. Other critical factors include traditional beliefs, religion and a host of social and economic indices, which also form a critical part of poverty reduction. Most environmentalists believe that there cannot be conservation without empowerment of the people to manage their resources for posterity.

For example, the highly successful Campfire project in Zimbabwe evolved by conservationists involves recognising, utilising and building upon traditional systems of conservation, and with some incentives such as economic benefits and awareness. Another example is the Ekuri initiative in Nigeria. This is a forestry conservation project in Nigeria, which has used the Campfire style to achieve conservation and significant economic benefits to the people.

The major factors, which determine value, norms and measurements of poverty reduction as a strategy for conservation, are broadly grouped as economic, social and environmental. These give an average indication for weighing the viability of a project. Let's look at these indices:

The economic index: the population of the community, the predominant means of livelihood, the average disposable income, the quality of life in relation to these factors and to their social behaviours.

The social index: measurements include access to social amenities; access to potable water either through waterborne systems or natural streams;
access to health care facilities; infant and maternal mortality; general education and trends in educating young girls; transportation and feeder roads; vocational skills; and so on. The extent of social indices to be used depends very much on the economic status of the community because these can differ quite radically from one community to the other.

The environment index: status of environmental degradation through interaction with rural populace is critical to planning of a project. The economic occupation is also very indicative of the type of interaction expected of the community and its long-term impact on the environment.

In Nigeria for example, the three key regions North, South West and South East are radically different with factors such as multi-ethnicity, multiple language (over 800 spoken), cultural diversity, various religious and traditional beliefs, all playing key roles in economic, social and environmental impact. This is not the case in central African countries like Rwanda where there are only two predominant ethnic groups. In fact I tend to believe that the conflicts that exist there are easy to perpetuate because of this factor, while in a country like Nigeria, worse things have happened and have still not lead to such catastrophes. Therefore poverty reduction strategies must recognise these factors and use them integrally in project planning.

Poverty reduction should build on the need to utilise a widely shared growth strategy by empowering its rural populace. In this way they will have the skills to become relevant to the development of their societies.

One very successful approach which environmentalists have adopted is a combination of rural development strategy, which recognises existing capacities of the rural people and enhancing that by utilising the Marginalised groups as channels of intervention for programmes and capacity building. Furthermore, conservationists build networks of these rural groups and encourage them to exchange information and strengthen their capacities. Also, we give grants, help develop vocational skills and provide other incentives for economic development.

Inevitably, our work has expanded to include the huge responsibility of co-ordinating the several networks that usually emerge from this strategy, but then this is what empowerment is all about.

The lessons derived from our strategy are numerous and significant. Local communities require empowerment through awareness; Gender empowerment calls for the integration of women and other Marginalised groups into all activities of poverty reduction at the community level; Micro-financing is required to build and strengthen economic empowerment.
When these structures are in place, the local populace will not only have ownership of projects sited in their communities, but will be fully entrenched or integrated in the development process which will now translate into the local people utilising their own initiatives in poverty reduction.

The way forward

It cannot be over emphasised that poverty reduction in Africa should have a broad-based strategy that involves the rural poor, develops their vocational capacity, and provides social amenities to improve their quality of life.

There is therefore a need to redefine the understanding and scope of poverty reduction in Africa through further in-country consultations. These must include assurances that people's respect for the environment will return and thus development becomes a reality. But there are several issues that must be addressed to achieve this goal:

* Participatory approach as a process of development. This requires that development projects must integrate the participation of primary stakeholders and take all necessary action to ensure that rural people are carried along. It should no longer be treated as package or project to avoid it remaining a top-down measure with little impact as it has been in many cases.
* Common strategy approach. International development institutions should adopt similar policies so that the collective impact of their strategy will maximise effectiveness in poverty alleviation projects.
* Budget Transparency. Budget transparency on the part of development institutions is important in implementation, monitoring and evaluation.
* Leading the process. Countries in the South should play the key role in devising and developing strategies for poverty reduction in their own countries with extensive in-country consultations with all relevant stakeholders. Therefore national and sub regional consultations with relevant stakeholders are extremely important to evolve participatory strategies. Conservation of the fragile ecosystem of the Niger Delta has been a nightmare for environmentalists because its problem has been compounded by its economic value to the country. Other problems include persistent environmental degradation by oil exploitation, restive and rampaging youths, poverty, poor and weakly implemented policies and a poor response by government to abuse of environmental rights. However, government and oil companies are now heeding calls to address the Niger Delta's environmental degradation by integrating huge economic and social benefits into a program for these environmentally sensitised people.
* Recognising existing capacities. Differences in cultural, historical, and traditional trends should be appraised and built into country-specific
strategies.
* Empowerment as a tool for development. Because development is about empowering people, self-accounting and self-monitoring must be encouraged. Marginalised groups should also be recognised and integrated, while capacity building should provide incentives for livelihoods.
* Expanding participation in poverty reduction to integrate other stakeholders such as the organised private sector, NGOs, and civil society to support governments. For example, in Nigeria, the Shell Petroleum and Development Company alone has a budget of $40 million annually for community development. Large banks with a collective capacity of over 4000 branches nation-wide are capable of providing institutional support for micro-financing and/or rural banking which has become so popular in the rural sector as an effective means of economic empowerment. Others in the private sector have attributes that can be similarly tapped.
* Awareness and networking. Poverty reduction needs to be communicated effectively through networking and awareness programmes to keep sentiments alive and encourage participation.

Participation must be meaningful at the grassroots; providing access to information and creating avenues for real influence over policies affecting poverty. Thus empowered the poor would have a sense of safety in knowing that they can take decisions which affect their lives.