

# Addressing Environmental Crises and Economic Injustice in the Third World: An Ethical Paradigm

*Philomena A. OJOMO, PhD*

## Abstract

*This paper examines the nature of the relationship between environmental crisis and economic injustice. It attempts to show how degradation of the environment reinforces deeper existential crises in human deprivation and eco-vulnerability of the poor. The paper establishes that there is symmetric relationship between economic injustice and environmental injustice; and that environmental crisis is a bane of economic development in the developing countries. While this paper recognizes the importance of environmental restoration efforts, it highlights the inadequacies of such interventions in the face of global capitalist ideology that underpins unsustainable practices of ill-distribution of environmental risks and benefits in contemporary world. A strong case is made for an earth-eco-socialist re-examination of the unfair imperialistic political order and economic system under which environmental injustice and human abuse have continued to thrive in the developing nations. This paper concludes that to achieve authentic human development, environmental justice within and across regions should be accorded serious attention. Social and economic equalities and fair distribution of the common goods can only be sine qua non for environmental protection if there is a synergy of socialist-grounded eco-political values, collective and spirited actions by the international community on the environment.*

*Keywords: environmental crisis, economic injustice, environmental injustice, Third World*

## Introduction

Environmental degradation is one of the greatest challenges confronting the world today. Pollution, ozone depletion and the alteration of the planet's major chemical cycles are some of the results of human activities. Industrialization, urbanization, and the drive for profit have generated waste materials which threaten the biotic community. The massive generation and ill disposal of such environmental wastes have often times resulted in environmental injustice. Environmental justice, broadly construed, is the "conceptual connection and causal relationship between environmental issues and social justice" (Figueroa & Mills, 2001:427) in both domestic and global space. Injustices of environmental kind, usually arise from the environmental impacts of the activities of some multinational corporations,

toxic waste exports, and environmental laws. A fundamental question that arises from the reality of environmental injustice, which often than not culminates in environmental crisis is: are the distribution of environmental burdens and benefits causally implicated in the promotion or inhibition of economic injustice? This paper attempts to answer this question from a philosophical standpoint. It critically examines the nature of the relationship between environmental crisis and economic injustice. It argues that the degradation of the environment reinforces not only environmental injustice but it is also pivotal to the deeper existential crises in human deprivation and eco-vulnerability of the poor. It further establishes that there is a symmetric relationship between economic injustice and environmental injustice. Using the developing countries as an example, the paper establishes the position that environmental crisis is a bane of economic development.

While the paper recognizes the importance of environmental restoration efforts, it highlights the inadequacies of such efforts in the face of global capitalist ideology that underpins unsustainable practices of ill distribution of environmental risks and benefits in contemporary world. A strong case is, therefore, made for an earth-eco-socialist re-examination of the unfair imperialistic political order and economic system under which environmental injustice and human abuse have continued to thrive in the developing countries.

Following this introduction, this paper is organized in four sections. The first section provides some conceptual framework of the notions of environmental and economic justices. The second section is an explication of environmental crises in the developing countries and how such crises are a function of environmental injustice. In the third section, this paper discusses how best to philosophically address the twin challenges of environmental injustice and economic injustice by an adoption of earth-eco-socialist ethical paradigm. It argues that social and economic equalities and fair distribution of the common goods can only be a *sine qua non* for environmental protection if there is a synergy of socialist-grounded eco-political values, collective and public spirited actions by the international community. In the last section, the paper concludes that in achieving authentic human development in contemporary world, environmental justice within and across regions should be accorded serious attention.

### **The Notions of Economic and Environmental Justices**

Economic justice is part of social justice. It is a set of moral principles for building economic institutions, the ultimate goal of which is to create a sufficient material foundation upon which to have a dignified, productive

and creative life (<https://www.investopedia.com>). In other words, there is a connection between the concept of economic justice and economic prosperity. It means that a society that creates opportunities for all its members to flourish is more likely to experience economic prosperity than a society where wealth is concentrated in the hands of a few. Justice has other dimensions; environmental justice is another fundamental aspect of justice.

Environmental Justice emerged as a concept in the United States in the early 1980s. The term is commonly used when describing a social movement that focuses on the fair distribution of environmental benefits and burdens. Environmental justice movement was started by individuals, mostly people of colour, who wanted to address the problem of injustice - the inequity of environmental protection in their communities.

Worthy of note in the development of environmental justice movement's history is the 1991 First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit. The meeting outlined its major concerns as the struggle against toxics, issues of public health, workers' safety, land use, transportation, housing, resource allocation, and community empowerment (Alston 1992, cited in Kelbessa, 2012).

The United States Environmental Protection Agency defines environmental justice as:

The fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies." From another perspective, environmental justice is "the equitable distribution of environmental risks and benefits; fair and meaningful participation in environmental decision-making; recognition of community ways of life, local knowledge, and cultural difference; and the capability of communities and individuals to function and flourish in society (<https://en.m.wikipedia.org>).

The point here is that fairness and equity are indispensable in environmental issues. The recent conflicts between farmers and Fulani herdsmen, particularly, in the North-Eastern part of Nigeria could be traced to migration resulting from drought and climate change. Lake Chad, which was once the sixth largest lake in the world, providing freshwater for millions of people across Nigeria, Chad, Niger and Cameroon began to shrink in the 1960s as a result of changes in climatic conditions (Obaji, 2018). With the shrinking of the lake, the herders had to search for alternative pastures and sources of water for their cattle, thereby encroaching on settlements and farmlands.

The point is that economics is about human beings and the society. It is true that climate change is affecting everything - human and nonhuman,

but something can be done to prevent cattle from moving about, rendering people homeless and jobless. Why have there not been any significant efforts to replenish Lake Chad since the plan to do so was announced by Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC) in 1984 (<https://buzznigeria.com/fulani-herdsmen-attack/amp/>)? Who is benefitting from this condition?<sup>1</sup>

### **Environmental Injustice and the Developing Countries**

'The Third World countries' is construed to mean countries that are considered to be least advantaged in terms of technology, medicine, economic development, among others. Today, the Third World is divided into five regions: East Asia and the Pacific; South Asia; the Middle East and North Africa; Sub-Saharan Africa; Latin America and the Caribbean (Millet & Toussaint, 2004:1).

Countries, which are mostly in African and Asian continents, are categorized as the 'Third World' simply because the standard of living of their citizens is low when compared to their counterparts in developed countries such as Britain, United States of America, Japan, Germany, France and Belgium. Today, many authors have traced the root of underdevelopment of the Third World countries to the activities of the developed nations. Many scholars of socialist persuasion concede that the Third World countries are not necessarily backward (or naturally so), but that the wealth and resources of these regions have been drained and are still being exploited by some advanced countries of the world.

In this respect, Patrick Bond cited Tony Blair's Commission for Africa (CFA) in 2005 which suggests that, "Africa is poor, ultimately, because its economy has not grown" (Bond, 2006:1). Against this, Bond argues an externalist thesis that, instead, Africa is poor, ultimately, because its economy and society have been ravaged and pillaged by international capital as well as local elites who are often propped up by foreign powers." According to Michael Parenti:

If Third World nations are impoverished, then, it is not because of their climate or culture or national temperament or some other 'natural condition' but because of the highly unnatural things imperialism has been doing to them. ...as in parts of Africa south of the Sahara, the land has been so ruthlessly plundered that it too is now impoverished, making life all the more desperate for its inhabitants (Parenti, 1989:15).

With these positions, it is clear that the reasons alluded for the Third World

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1 While the full answer to this question is not explored in this paper, it is important to note that there was desertification in Israel but it was converted to arable land. Similar thing was done in Libya where Gadhafi turned desert into oasis.

backwardness and environmental problems, especially by the externalist account, lie in economic manipulation of these regions by the advanced or developed countries. The externalist account of Africa's underdevelopment by Rodney, for instance, shows clearly how the interlopers have depleted the land and economy of the people, thus making it impossible for the people to develop their land and continent. In consonance with Rodney, Claude Ake remarks that:

...it was inevitable that the capitalist, forever bent on profit maximization, would look for a new environment in which the process of accumulation could proceed apace. Capitalists turned to foreign lands, attacked and subjugated them and integrated their economies to those of Western Europe. To date, the experience of Western imperialism, particularly colonization, remains the most decisive event in the history of Africa (Ake, 1981:19).

One cannot deny the fact that colonialism has had a great effect on the history and experience of the Black people and Asians. While some scholars, mostly Europeans, have tried to justify Western colonization and subjugation of the Third World, it is arguable that colonialism is rather a curse than a blessing. There is a need to note further that the politico-economic exploitation of Africa does not have just economic implications in terms of underdevelopment; indeed, it also has in its wake cluster of environmental problems.

Today, the issues of greenhouse effect and resource depletions are global concerns. According to the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2010:657), greenhouse effect refers to "the problem of gradual rise in temperature of the earth's atmosphere, caused by an increase of gases such as carbon dioxide in the air surrounding the earth, which trap the heat of the sun." Greenhouse effect often leads to global warming. K. N. Don-Pedro notes that, "The growing atmospheric concentration of carbon dioxide is now generally agreed to be the main force behind global near surface temperature warming (Don-Pedro, 2009:244). Consequently, global warming is the increase in temperature of the earth's atmosphere that is caused by the increase of particular gases, notably carbon dioxide. These increases in temperature could lead to climate change if not properly addressed. Chemicals that are found in automobiles, refrigerators, industrial machines, among others, are now known to be major causes of greenhouse effects. According to David Watson:

CFCs are an example of a combination of the grand economy and capitalist greed. The refusal to stop using chlorine-based compounds is certainly a kind of denial based on greed. But CFCs were originally a result of fragmented, problem-solving science, produced to replace

toxic compounds with an environmentally more benign alternative, not simply to generate profits (Watson, 2005: 487).

Once the chemicals, especially dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane (DDT), methane, carbon dioxide, etc. are released into the atmosphere; their impacts on humans and the environment are naturally mitigated by wilderness, plants and trees. The negative impacts of chemicals on the land are minute if the ecosystem's health is sound. However, when water, soil, trees, wilderness, etc. have been degraded beyond a certain limit by human activities, the heat generated by machines remain in the atmosphere, and as a consequence, ecological hazards, such as global warming ensue. As Leopold A. has rightly noted, "Evolutionary changes, however, are usually slow and local; however, man's invention of tools has enabled him to make changes of unprecedented violence, rapidity, and scope (Leopold, 1949:217). Douglas I. O. Anele (1998:260) notes that, "...the earth, generally speaking, consists of air, earth and land. Each of these is necessary for the very survival of plants and animals, including man. Any untoward changes in the composition of any of these by other substances will render them unsuitable for life processes." Leopold reiterates that:

Fertility is the ability of soil to receive, store, and release energy. Agriculture, by overdrafts on the soil or by too radical a substitution of domestic for native species in the superstructure, may derange the channels of flow or deplete storage. Soils depleted of their storage, or of the organic matter which anchors it, wash away faster than they form. This is erosion. Waters, like soil, are part of the energy circuit. Industry, by polluting waters or obstructing them with dams, may exclude the plants and animal necessary to keep energy in circulation. Transportation brings about another basic change: the plants or animals grown in one region are now consumed and returned to the soil in another, Transportation taps the energy stored in rocks, and in the air, and uses it elsewhere; thus we fertilize the garden with nitrogen gleaned by the guano birds from the fishes of seas on the other side of the Equator. Thus the formerly localized and self-contained circuits are pooled on a world-wide scale (Leopold, 1949:217-218).

In order to make our lives better, to attain development and civilization, we have destroyed most of the wilderness, such that chemicals which are formerly absorbed by plants, trees and wilderness now remain in the atmosphere, thereby leading to environmental problems today. These actions are intensified and further worsened by the desire to produce commodities at lower cost for the sake of super profit. We use technology which is destructive to natural resources as well as the climate itself in various parts of the world,

especially in the Third World nations. The problems currently bedeviling developing and underdeveloped societies are mainly caused by capitalist exploitation of the land and people of such regions. The truth is that these badly affected regions have no leverage on the industrialized nations of the world. And the costs involved in ameliorating these crises are huge. As David Watson rightly observes:

Local communities affected by disasters are forced into rear-guard, defensive struggles while having to survive under severely deteriorated conditions. The rest of us, not directly affected, go on with 'normal life,' holding out the faint hope that the oil spill, toxic cloud, contaminated water, etc, won't drift in our direction (Watson, 2005 480).

It is now apparent that:

Most ecological problems, as well as the socioeconomic problems that are both cause and effect of the ecological problems, cannot be solved at the local level alone. Regional, national, and international planning is also necessary. The heart of ecology, after all is the interdependence of specific sites and problems and the need to situate local responses in regional, national, and international context, that is, to sublimate the local and the central into new democratic socioeconomic and political forms (O'Connor, 2005 456).

The danger of greenhouse effect and resource depletion is increasing in most parts of the world, especially in the Third World countries.

In this part of the world, being poor is more than having a low standard of living or relatively low per capital income compared to her counterparts across the world. In addition to the low standard of living, the poor experiences some impediments. These setbacks may include inadequate or lack of modern technological and medical facilities to detect, diagnose or treat ailments of different sorts, lack of nutritious foods and fertile soil for enhanced food production, poor educational facilities and well trained personnel, and inadequate security, among others. There is also the inability to meet the people's social, economic, environmental and political challenges. This state of affairs hinders development and growth. In this case, only countries that are economically developed can address meaningfully the environmental challenges confronting them. Now, Third World countries, more often than not, are still battling with basic economic and social challenges they are experiencing, with little resources left for confronting other issues such as environmental crises. Poverty and economic backwardness always have causes. The causes may be natural or unnatural. The natural causes include lack of arable or fertile land, bad weather, inadequate natural resources such

as coal, gold, crude oil, timber, cocoa, rubber, iron, zinc, copper, etc. to meet local consumption. However, when societies that have abundant resources are economically backward, man-made causes become dominant. In this respect, misuse of these resources and imperialism come to the fore.

Indeed, the situation in the Third World countries is worsening. Ben Jackson posits:

The destruction of the tropical rainforests is now one of the world's best-known environmental problems; many believe it is the most serious. Every day more than 150 square miles of tropical rainforest are wiped out or seriously degraded. An area the size of the British Isles is lost every year, and the rate of destruction is increasing. Forests are being laid waste for commercial profit and land speculation, to earn foreign currency to pay off debt and to meet the needs of large-scale industrial development (Jackson, 1990:16).

Furthermore:

Potentially, the consequences of the destruction of the rainforests could hit everyone. How, then, can it still be continuing? The reasons for the destruction of the rainforests show that Third World environments are squeezed from both sides. The powerful - the rich, businessmen, bureaucrats, politicians, Western banks, and development experts - steal and destroy the most basic inheritance of the poor, the Earth. At the same time the poorest people - the hungry, the landless, women and the urban unemployed - destroy their environment because they are powerless to look beyond tomorrow. They have to cut down trees or over-use land they know to be fragile, just to survive. From the point of view of powerful profit-makers and powerless livelihood seekers there are strong economic incentives for destroying the environment... (Ibid.30).

Jackson points out that environmental destruction in the Third World cannot be prevented without addressing the economic and political pressures that underlie it: from unequal land distribution to international debt and unfair trade. Here, we come to the issue of conflict of interest: is global trade entered into in the spirit of cooperation or competition?

Although much of the challenges in the Third World countries have been attributed to Western interlopers by Rodney and others, it is worth quoting Maass P., who laments the outrageous happenings in the Third World thus:

I lived in Asia for several years and wondered, if oil was such a blessing to countries possessing it, how South Korea, which has no oil, became an economic tiger, as well as Japan, whose oil reserves are minuscule.



Their prosperity in the last fifty years was in contrast to oil exporters like Iraq, Iran and Nigeria, which did not have the profiles of winners. Among their humiliations, the most absurd is that they have shortages of gasoline (Ibid.5).

Maass observed the economic and environmental injustice in Nigeria thus: "...the people of the Niger Delta became poorer, watching as their land and water become polluted by an industry they did not own, had no control over and derived almost no income from" (Ibid. 56-57).

African environmentalists ought to bring into focus the regional cum racial economic interests that are at the core of ecological destruction in Africa. While underscoring the urgency of this issue, a sophisticated method should be employed in addressing it such that it will not lead to further environmental problems.

### **Earth-eco-socialism as a Viable Ethical Paradigm for Addressing Economic and Environmental Injustices**

In this section, I shall argue that Earth-eco-socialism is new environmental ethical paradigm that serves as a viable alternative for practically addressing economic and environmental injustices in the Third World. It is an environmental ethical doctrine that seeks the protection of the earth. It postulates that socialist ideology, ecological action and an understanding of the intrinsic value of the earth are indispensable in our quest for environmental sustainability. It is based on the understanding of the word 'environment' as earth-centred, such that the physical features, climate, vegetation, population, economic features, cultural system as well as political atmosphere are included. Earth-eco-socialist ethics is borne out of the consciousness of the relatedness of different elements of the earth. It is a moral orientation that combines care of the earth with activism. As a synthesis of ethical thought and ecological action, it appropriates the fundamental gains of Marxism, Leopoldian land ethic and Darwin's evolutionary thought, and avoids the theoretical errors and utopias implicit in them. In other words, earth-eco-socialism is an eclectic of salient fronts in the fundamental ideas of Leopold's land ethic, Marxian socialism and the gains of critical ecology with penchant for practical environmental activism.

Earth-eco-socialism is not an undiluted assimilation of Marx's socialism applied to ecology. Rather, it involves a critical revision of some aspects such as the traditional Marxist conception of 'productive forces', the revolutionist and possessive power of the proletariat, the logic of bureaucratic authoritarianism and the ideology of total break from linear

progress entailed in the technological and economic paradigm of modern industrial civilization. All these are conceived as incompatible with the need to safeguard the natural environment. Instead, earth-eco-socialism sees the earth as not something the proletariat or the bourgeoisie owns. Earth does not belong to any class; rather, the various members of the biotic community belong to it and belong on it. At stake here is not an issue of property but rather propriety. The acquisitive and domineering proclivities purportedly latent in humans as capitalist agents in seeking to optimally exploit the earth as a property resource will be suppressed in the light of the new earth-eco-socialist orientation to that of valued residence of a biotic community.

Earth-eco-socialism seeks to engender an ecologically rational society founded on democratic control, social equality, and the predominance of use-value. It appreciates democratically reached agreement on what, how much and how to produce, how much energy and how many resources are to be allocated to what (Sarkar & Bruno, 2008:28). Against commodity fetishism and the attendant consequences of neoliberal policies, earth-eco-socialism prioritizes economic considerations without attenuation for the ecological and extra-economic criteria of human wellbeing. Technological innovation is not an aberration in earth-eco-socialism. In fact, earth-eco-socialism emphasises a profound technological re-orientation, which is aimed at the replacement of present energy sources with other non-polluting and renewable ones - wind or solar energy. In such an environmental economy, the burden of the control of the means of production, especially decisions on technological innovations and investment, does not lie in the hands of capitalist alliances nor market forces. Rather, it would be founded on the democratic choice of priorities and investments by the population itself. In addition to the radical change required at the level of production, earth-eco-socialism reinforces a new orientation at the realm of consumption as well. Contrary to the assumption that limit on consumption is an antidote to population growing consumption in industrialised societies, earth-eco-socialism normatively argues against the prevalent ostentatious, accumulationist obsession underpinning consumption in the contemporary world.

As a further explication of the foregoing, this work is grounded in the socialist moral attitude, communalistic in nature and committed to the holistic survival of habitats of the environment. This humanistic heritage is a departure from and incompatible with the prevailing capitalist exploitative-expansionist orientation which has provided the building blocks for the destruction of the environment. Earth-eco-socialism is advocating use-value instead of exchange value. In this, production would be organised as

a function of social needs and the requirements of environmental protection and integrity.

Earth-eco-socialist ethics is robustly centred on a common theme which gives consideration to the relationship among the inhabitants of the biotic community and all there is in cosmic existence. A common assumption in this relationship is the ranking of human beings as first in the cosmic hierarchy. As a result, every other existence takes its value from the well-being of human beings. Put differently, all values derive from human interests while human fellowship is the most important of human needs.

Earth-eco-socialism has a cogent understanding of the value of human beings and hence the promotion of the natural environment with a view to producing the best results for mutual convenience. This holistic concern in maintaining and enhancing the symbiotic relationship between humanity and other members of the biotic community - animals, plants, etc. is a noble one with insightful lesson for profit-driven world to imbibe. Interpreted from an earth-eco-socialist point of view, the present appalling and disintegrating condition of the environment may be seen as a reaction to the insensitivity of a few (minority who control the economy) to other members of the biotic community and the dangerous role they have assumed over not only nature but the poor as well.

### Conclusion

This paper discovers that earth-eco-socialistic heritage provides a plausible paradigm suitable for addressing the environmentally induced problem of economic injustice. To achieve authentic human economic development, environmental justice within and across regions should be accorded serious attention. Social and economic equalities and fair distribution of the common goods can only be a *sine qua non* for environmental protection if there is a synergy of socialist-grounded eco-political values, collective and public spirited actions by the international community on the environment.

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