CHALLENGES OF DEFORESTATION IN NIGERIA: AN ETHICAL PERSPECTIVE

Oluwaseun Adeola Anifowose*
&
Taiwo Oluwatosin Ashiru*

Abstract
This paper is centered on the ethical perspective of the challenges of deforestation in Nigeria. There is no doubt that Africa as a continent is endowed with many natural resources more specifically forests since this is the focus of this paper. It points out the various danger posed by continuous deforestation in Nigeria denying us of benefits like economic gain, medicinal and environment benefits. All these we have lost and still losing gradually leaving us with the danger of erosion, flooding and desertification. Considering the aforementioned effects of deforestation, this paper therefore argues that the government need put in place regulations that would check the indiscriminate felling of trees in order to reduce the rate of deforestation. This paper however concludes by suggesting that afforestation should be encouraged in Nigeria; this is to reduce the possibility of the danger posed by deforestation.

Introduction

Africa as a continent has a list of countries that are well endowed with forests. A majority of the countries that make up this list are located in the western part of Africa. Nigeria which occupies the western part of Africa, ranks among the countries on this list. Nigeria is naturally endowed with vast expanse of forest land, the swamp forest in the extreme southern part of the country, the tropical rainforest in the south-western axis and the wooded savanah in the middle belt (Ogundele, Adeolu and Oladipo, 2016: 15). According to the Food and Agriculture Organization, in its assessment of Nigeria, forests occupy about 10 million hectares, representing almost 10% of the total land area of 92,377 hectares (FAO, 2010). Moreover, it also ranks among the highest revenue and employment generating sectors and also serves as resource base for many forest industries (Adeniyi, 2011: 1). FAO further maintained that 2.5% of Nigeria's gross domestic product is accounted for by the forests. Be that as it may, the forests have not been well preserved over the years. Close to 400 thousand of forest cover are lost per annum (Nzeh, Eboh, Nweze, 2015: 24). A large percentage of the areas covered by forests are cleared out annually to accommodate urbanization and infrastructural development. In addition to this, the encroachment of fire into forest areas as a result of farming activities also contributes to the depletion of forests over the years. This has resulted in an alarming reduction in the percentage of land covered by forests over time.

Questions have been raised as to the dangers posed by the continuous deforestation taking place in various parts of Nigeria. Some scholars are of the view that, the benefits derived from deforestation outweighs it seeming negative effects. Others, however hold a contrary opinion, on their part, deforestation does not only affects the trees that make up forests, but it also impacts species of animals and plants that have the forests as their habitat negatively. In this paper, I intend to undertake a careful

look at the challenges posed by deforestation in Nigeria, as well as its effects on the environment, taking into consideration, its ethical implications.

Deforestation: A Conceptual Clarification

A brief consideration of the term "forests" will enhance our understanding of the idea of deforestation, hence the question "what is Forests"? Forests in general are complex and contested entities whose nature cannot be stated in an absolute way (Tidan, 2013: 15). Forests are viewed, defined, assessed and valued through different lenses (Chazdone, Pedro, Laestadius, Curry, Kumar, Moll-rock, Vieira and Wilson, 2016:539).Various interest groups such as the Food and Agriculture Organization have defined the term based on their own conception. While the FAO defined forests putting into consideration only the tree cover, others have a different opinion. According to them, what constitutes forests far exceed just trees. The different species of plants and animals that survive in the forests also constitute what to be referred to as forests is. The complex habitat and abundance of plant resources of tropical rainforest are home to birds, reptiles, amphibians, insects and mammals (Renate, 2017:7). Forests cover almost a third of the earth's land surface (Chakravarty, Ghosh, Suresh, dey, Shuna, 2012: 1). Forests are natural resources which, if properly managed can provide habitats for animals and plants species (Boahene, 1998:247).

Forests provide man with lots of benefits. Some of these include: economic, medicinal, environmental as well as infrastructural benefits. Timber which is a major forest product, when sold yield a lot of financial benefits. Moreover, most of the drugs that are produced in the world today, have their source from the forests. In the same vein, as a result of its tree cover, forests also prevents soil erosion. Having briefly considered the meaning of forests as well as some of its benefits, it will be important to take a look at what deforestation is.

What Is Deforestation?

The term deforestation just like forests, does not have a universally acceptable definition. However, deforestation is generally associated with the clearing out of forests area in order to accommodate new land for farming, infrastructural development and urbanization. One of such definitions that projects this view, defines deforestation as the process by which an area is deprived of existing natural vegetation resources (Ogunwale, 2015: 212). Ibrahim also gave his own definition of deforestation as any activities that disrupts the natural ecology of forests as a result of agricultural, social and economic activities carried out in the name of development (Ibrahim, 2014. Ibrahim, Iheanacho and Bila, 2015: 143) Deforestation is caused by a number of factors. Top on the list of these factors is the need for new land to support farming activities. New virgin lands are often sought after, once the available ones are used up in order to support farming. Moreover, industrialization also constitutes another factor responsible for deforestation. A larger percentage of the trees making up forests, are cut down to serve as raw materials to various industries. Similarly, in most cases, the large expanse of land where industries are located were converted to land from forests. Abere and Opara corroborated this view when they opined that, in Nigeria today, sites presently occupied by petrochemicals, refineries, fertilizer

companies and liquefied natural gas plants were sometime naturally occurring forest ecosystem (Abere and Opara, 2012: 105). Another cause of deforestation is urbanization. Large expanse of forests area are cleared out on an annual basis to accommodate new homes due to the expansion of the urban areas. Bush burning also causes deforestation. Sometimes, when bush are burnt, the fire encroaches into some parts of forests areas, thereby causing damage to the affected parts.

Be that as it may, the causes of deforestation mentioned above are considered to be brought about by man, they are therefore referred to as the man made causes of deforestation. There are however other causes of deforestation. These are regarded as natural causes of deforestation, they include: damage to trees by other plants, climatic factors, damages to trees by mammals and decay of trees. The effects of deforestation are enormous on the environment. While these effects may not be felt immediately, over a long period of time, the absence of vegetation cover in a place previously covered by forests impacts the living as well as the non-living components of that environment in many ways. Deforestation leads to increased human encroachment upon wild areas, increased resource extraction, threat to biodiversity, soil degradation and extinction of species (Anyanwu, Nwobu and Osuiwu, 2013: 23)

Deforestation in Nigeria

The act of clearing out forested areas in Nigeria dates back to the pre-colonial era when crude oil was discovered in Nigeria. After the discovery of crude oil, there was need to construct oil facilities such as refineries, oil pipelines and flow stations, hence the removal of vegetation cover in areas where these facilities were to be constructed. This assertion is in line with the view of Abere and Opara. According to them:

> Since the early 1950's when Nigeria oil industry was developed, its activities have been responsible for crossing the details with oil and gas Pipelines, thereby removing vegetation cover along their paths, facilities such as oil well heads, major pipelines manifold and flow stations have also been cited in previously forested areas (Abere And Opara, 2015: 105-106).

In the same vein, Nigeria being well endowed with forests, also got involved in the exportation of forests products such as timbers and rubber. This also brought about increase in the level of deforestation in Nigeria. Considering the economic benefits that accrued to the country from this, more and more forests products were exported from Nigeria. This consequently led to an increase in the rate of deforestation. The increase in the rate of deforestation resulted in a massive reduction in the country's forest cover over time. According to the 2000-2005 global forest resources assessment of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). Nigeria has the highest annual deforestation (Mohammed, 2014: 94).

Data on the land use and vegetation (LUV) change shows a decline in most of the forest categories from 1976 to 1995 totalling 16% over the period (Nzeh, Eboh, Nweze, 2015: 24). Regional breakdown of changes from 1979 to 1995 shows that the total forest declined by 48% in the north central,7% in the north east, 60% in the north

west, 53% in the south east, 13% in the south-south (Nzeh, Eboh And Nweze, 2015 : 24). This unprecedented decline in the size of forests over time led to the gradual degradation of the environments involved and consequently brought about desertification in the north, as well as soil erosion in the South.

Challenges of Deforestation in Nigeria

It is alarming to know that as at 2005, Nigeria has the highest rate of deforestation in world despites the numerous benefits of forests. This was recorded by Food and Agricultural Organization of the United States (FAO). Our attitudes to forest keeping is very bad making us care less about how it affects our environment. This attitudes is not without its challenges. In spite of its importance, the natural tropical high forest has continued to diminish in the African continent, thus dwindling sustainable forest management (Aliyu, Modibbo, Medugu and Ayo, 2014: 403). As I have stated earlier in this paper, deforestation has a lot of challenges and negative effects on the Nigerian environment. These challenges are mostly felt after a long period of continuous deforestation. These challenges can take different forms. Some of the challenges of deforestation in Nigeria are stated and explain below. This include: erosion, flooding, drought, economic loss and desertification.

Erosion: The removal of vegetative cover as a result of deforestation, exposes the soil to the sun and constant rainfall. This invariably causes the removal of the top soil, thereby resulting in the erosion of the soil.

Flooding: On a local scale, forests and forest soils are capable of reducing runoffs, generally as a result of enhanced infiltrations and storage capacities (FAO, 2008:5).This is another effect of deforestation. Deforestation increases the proportion of water basin as a result of erosion and on the long run leads to siltation. This consequently raises the river bed, thereby raising the risk of a possible flooding. Chakravarty, Ghosh, Suresh, dey, Shukla et al (2012: 16), expressed a similar opinion. According to them: Deforestation can also result into water sheds that are no longer able to sustain and regulate water flows from rivers and streams. Once they are gone, too much Water can result into downstream flooding.

Drought: Erosion which is caused by deforestation lead to the removal of valuable soil, which would have been very useful for agriculture. This often result in non-availability of fertile land for agriculture, which consequently result in drought. Erosion galleys eat back further into agricultural land with each rainstorm and remove valuable top soil. Soil that are exposed to erosion will no doubt have lower fertility potentials as compared to more stable soils protected by good vegetation cover (Abere and Opara, 2012: 108).

Economic loss: The continuous act of deforestation, results in the gradual loss of the resources deposited in the forests. This has a lot of of economic implications on the society. By destroying forests, all potential future revenues and future employment that could be derived from the sustainable management of timber and non-timber products disappear (Chakravarty, ghosh, suresh, Dey and shukla, 2012: 17).

Desertification: Desertification is the encroachment of the desert on land that was once fertile (Balarabe, 2011). It destroys the soil in desert prone areas and causes the encroachment of sand into agricultural land. This is caused by deforestation, trees that are meant to stabilize sand dunes are felled off indiscriminately. This therefore exposes the sand therefore leading to desertification.

Ethical Implications of Deforestation in Nigeria

Haven considered the concept of deforestation, its causes and effects, I will now move into an ethical consideration of the concept. Ethics being a field of study concerned with the rightness or wrongness of an action, provides us with an opportunity to carefully dissect and ascertain the extent of the rightness or wrongness of deforestation. Human being by nature wants to fully express freedom beyond what directly affects them alone to what affects the others in the society; this is largely because of egoistic purpose. This makes this paper to be a lot relevant by focusing not only on directly on how it affects the acting agent but also the effects of such actions on others. This is what environmental ethics queries. The above listed effects of deforestation in Nigeria has a lot of ethical implications on the environment. The question is, is it right to perform actions that affects the others or simply put the larger society? In Nigeria, attention is on personal benefits and not the good of everyone. This makes deforestation morally wrong. In an attempt to do this, I will employ the use of some ethical theories. First on the list of these ethical theories is utilitarianism. Utilitarianism in its most traditional form is both a theory of good and a theory of right (Wolf, 2008: 7). Utilitarianism is the ethical theory which holds that an action is right if it brings, or attempts to bring the greatest amount of good over evil to the greatest number of people in the community (Adegboyega, 2007: 81). Considering that utilitarianism considers what is right to be that which guarantees the happiness of the greater number of people over evil, we can conclude that deforestation is morally wrong. The reason for this is not farfetched, deforestation as an activity, only guarantees the happiness of a little fragment of the society at the expense of greater number of people. The majority which represents the greater number of people in the society, suffer as a result of the negative effects of deforestation on the environment. Flooding and drought, both of which are effects of deforestation bring about pain and suffering to the greatest number of people in the society. Hence, deforestation can be considered to be morally wrong.

Next on the list of these ethical theories is ethical hedonism. The term hedonism, from the Greek word (hedone) for pleasure, refers to several related theories about what is good for us, how we should behave and what motivates to behave in the way that we do (Weijers, 2012 :15).Hedonism is the theory of ethics which holds that what is right is that which guarantees pleasure over pain. In other words, an action can be considered to be right as long as it guarantees pleasure over pain. If this is anything to go by, we can conclude that deforestation is morally wrong. This is because, deforestation as an activity only guarantees pain over pleasure. In most cases when flooding and other negative effects of deforestation occur, it usually causes loss of lives of properties. This consequently leaves the people who suffer such losses in

perpetual pain and agony. Some of them never recover from such losses until their death.

The third of these ethical theories is altruism. Altruism is generally understood to be behavior that benefits others at a personal cost to the behaving individual (Kerr, Smith and Feldman, 2004: 135) It is the ethical theory, which holds that an action is right if it guarantees the interest of others at the expense of the doer of that action. Considering this theory, we can conclude that deforestation is morally wrong. This is because when forests areas are cleared out to open up new land for agriculture, or to accommodate new houses as a result of urbanization, it does not guarantee the interest of other people at the expense of the doer. For instance, when forests are cleared out in order to open up new lands for farming, it is the farmer that benefits from this, every other person is at a disadvantage. Therefore on the basis of this, deforestation can be considered to be morally wrong.

Evaluation

Be that as it may, if subjected to a critical analysis, the arguments above are not without their own flaws. For instance, if we critically examine utilitarianism which considers what is right to be that which guarantees the greatest amount of good over evil for the greatest number of people, we can argue that deforestation is morally right. This owing to the fact that, the revenue which accrue to a country as result of the exportation of forests products such as timbers are used to for the provision of social amenities such as hospitals, good roads, schools and so on. All of these social amenities serve the collective good of members of a society, and ensure that the happiness of the greater number of people is guaranteed.

The same thing holds for ethical hedonism. Since ethical hedonism considers what is right to be that which helps man to maximize pleasure over pain. We can as well say that deforestation is morally right. Through deforestation, raw materials are made available to various industries such as furniture industries, pharmaceutical industries and so on. The products which are manufactured by these industries provides man with a lot of pleasure. Hence, deforestation can be said to be morally right.

Nevertheless, the negative effects of deforestation far exceed its benefits. Even though deforestation appears to guarantee the happiness of the greatest number of people over evil, through the provision of revenue for the development of social amenities, this cannot be compared to the pain and suffering that results from its negative effects of on the environment. At the end of the day, the social amenities that are provided end up being destroyed by these negative effects of deforestation. Considering this line of thought, we can still further conclude that deforestation is morally wrong.

Conclusion

So far, I have carefully considered the idea of deforestation, its causes and effects on the environment. From this exposition, I identified some causes of deforestation to include: need for land to support agriculture, housing, urbanization and industrialization. I also identified some effects of deforestation on the society. Top on this list is erosion and flooding. I also attempted an ethical consideration of this idea, using three ethical theories, namely utilitarianism, ethical hedonism and altruism.

According to these theories, deforestation is morally wrong because it does not conform to what is considered to be morally right. Even though it seem to have some benefits, these are not in any way commensurate to its negative effects.
Haven stated this, it must be noted that considering the negative effects which deforestation has on the society, government need to put in place regulations that would check the indiscriminate felling of trees. These will greatly reduce the rate of deforestation and ensure that the environment is more conducive.

Moreover, afforestation which is the process of replanting trees should be encouraged. This will ensure that trees that are lost due to deforestation are replanted, thereby reducing the probability of the possible danger posed by deforestation.

***Oluwaseun Adeola Anifowose, PhD**
Department of Philosophy, Olabisi Onabanjo University
Ago Iwoye, Ogun State
E-mail: seunfunmiade@yahoo.com

&
***Taiwo Oluwatosin Ashiru**
Department of Philosophy, Olabisi Onabanjo University
Ago Iwoye, Ogun State
E-mail: ashprofjnr4@gmail.com

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