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Can Faith be the Key to Environmental Stewardship and Sustainable Development in Nigeria?

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ABSTRACT

Nigeria confronts a dual challenge: pressing environmental degradation and the urgent need for sustainable development. This research explores the underutilized potential of religious institutions, a powerful force in Nigerian society, to champion environmental responsibility. Utilizing Social Ecology theory, the study examines the current engagement of religious bodies through interviews and a targeted survey of 390 participants. The findings reveal a critical need for collaboration between religious institutions, government, and civil society. Overcoming identified barriers is essential for progress. A significant portion (72%) of respondents highlighted a lack of environmental awareness within their communities, while nearly half (46.5%) cited insufficient government support and funding as roadblocks. This study proposes a novel approach: leveraging the moral authority and extensive community networks of religious institutions. The research underscores that there is need for urgent unified action. The paper argues that by addressing environmental challenges through collaborative efforts, religious institutions, government, and civil society can secure a sustainable future for all Nigerians. This study offers a beacon of hope, suggesting that faith-based solutions can be a powerful force for positive environmental change in Nigeria and even to third world nations that are grappling with this challenging phenomenon.

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria, a nation rich in natural resources, confronts a formidable challenge: environmental degradation. Desertification, oil spills, and climate change pose significant threats to the well-being of its citizens and the country's long-term sustainability. Folorunso and Folorunso (2022) paint a concerning picture, highlighting the prevalence of environmentally driven conflicts across all six geopolitical zones of Nigeria. This trend aligns with the observations of Omofonmwan and Osa-Edoh (2017), who report a worrying intensification of environmental degradation despite the establishment of the Federal Environmental Protection Agency (FEPA). As Cox *et al.* (2010) posit, environmental issues stem from the negative consequences of human actions on the Earth's natural systems.

In the face of this urgency, a particularly intriguing question emerges for Nigeria, a nation recognized as one of the most religious societies in Africa. Can faith institutions, with their deep influence on the values and behaviors of millions, hold the key to unlocking a future of environmental responsibility? This immense power, wielded by religious organizations across the country, presents a unique opportunity. This study delves into this possibility, exploring the potential of these organizations to serve as catalysts for sustainable development and environmental stewardship.

This research ventures into this uncharted territory, examining the challenges and opportunities religious institutions face in promoting environmental responsibility. What are the roadblocks hindering their efforts? Conversely, how can their involvement shape

a more sustainable future for Nigeria? By investigating these questions, this study aims to break new ground in academic scholarship. It seeks to illuminate the transformative potential of faith-based organizations in tackling environmental challenges and fostering a culture of sustainability within Nigeria. To gain a comprehensive understanding of the impact and potential of religious institutions, this study employs a mixed-method approach. In-depth interviews with religious leaders and practitioners will provide valuable qualitative insights. In addition, a targeted survey distributed to 390 participants will offer quantitative data, painting a broader picture of the landscape. As the world grapples with the ever-present need for environmental sustainability, the findings of this study hold significant promise. They have the potential to inform and inspire future strategies for environmental stewardship, not just in Nigeria but across developing nations and the broader global context. Can faith communities truly become agents of change, guiding humanity towards a more sustainable future? This research embarks on a compelling quest to answer this intriguing question.

Theoretical Framework

This research adopts the Social Ecology Theory propounded by an environmental activist named Murray Bookchin to place this study in scholarly context. The theory of Social Ecology places emphasis on the interdependence of human civilizations and their surrounding surroundings. According to Bookchin (2007) Social ecology has to do with the study of how people interact with and react to their surroundings, as

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well as how these interactions impact society and the environment at large, is known as social ecology. With this understanding in mind, it can be suggested that religious institutions, as a component of the social fabric, can influence environmental attitudes and behaviors through their teachings, rituals, and community involvement in this study. Religions can encourage a healthy coexistence of people and the environment by incorporating environmental care into their rituals.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review delves into environmental stewardship and associated challenges in Nigeria. It provides an extensive analysis of existing scholarly works, research papers, and publications, aiming to offer a comprehensive understanding of the current state of environmental stewardship and related issues in the Nigerian context.

Environmental stewardship is a concept that has been extensively discussed in academic literature. The term “environmental stewardship” encompasses a wide range of activities, such as establishing community gardens, reforesting areas, restricting harvests, reducing hazardous activities or pollutants, and purchasing sustainably produced goods. According to Svendsen and Campbell (2008), stewards—whether individuals, organizations, or networks—engage in stewardship actions (Wolf *et al.*, 2011; Bodin, 2017). Individual stewardship actions might include daily decisions made by resource users regarding soil preservation or restoration, vegetation management, eradication of invasive species, marine resource extraction, and the environmental impact of extraction practices. Additionally, communities or groups may manage communal spaces or resources, such as urban community gardens, through collective stewardship initiatives (Ostrom, 1990, 1999; Cox *et al.*, 2010; Krasny & Tidball, 2012).

Allison and Ellis (2001) discussed that capacity is a critical aspect of stewardship, referring to the ability of individuals or communities to manage their resources. They proposed that local assets and broader governance issues are the main determinants affecting the capacity of potential stewards to take action. Sen (1984) emphasized the importance of capabilities and resources in enabling individuals and communities to achieve their potential. In the context of environmental stewardship, the availability of resources significantly impacted a community’s ability to act. Sen’s work highlighted that having access to resources, such as financial capital, technology, and skilled personnel, played a crucial role in supporting and implementing environmental measures. Allison and Ellis (2001) further elaborated on how local assets and broader governance issues influenced the capacity of communities to engage in stewardship. They argued that both the presence of resources and the effectiveness of governance were critical in determining how well a community could implement and sustain stewardship measures. Their research underscored that communities

with adequate local assets and supportive governance structures were better positioned to adopt and maintain environmental stewardship practices.

Olobia (2023) examined the role of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in environmental sustainability, with a focus on Starbucks Corporation. The paper explored how CSR integrates social and environmental responsibilities, particularly in relation to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) #11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) and #12 (Responsible Consumption and Production). Olobia’s analysis highlighted the company’s CSR communication strategies and evaluated their effectiveness in promoting environmental preservation. The study revealed that while Starbucks had made significant progress in advocating for climate change and sustainability, there were opportunities for further enhancement of its sustainability efforts. Olobia argued that Starbucks’ CSR report could have benefited from a more comprehensive approach to climate change and environmental stewardship, emphasizing the need for robust CSR communication campaigns to build resilience and support sustainable development within communities.

Regarding environmental issues in Nigeria, academics noted that these issues did not gain prominence until the 1988 Koko toxic waste dumping scandal, which highlighted the need for establishing the Federal Ministry of Environment and the Nigerian Federal Environmental Protection Agency (FEPA) (Evelyn & Tyav, 2012; Akambe & Kpae, 2017, as cited in Ibrahim *et al.*, 2020). Key environmental challenges in Nigeria include pollution, poor sanitation, ozone layer depletion, desertification, flooding, erosion, bushfires, deforestation, and soil contamination (Evelyn & Tyav, 2012). Evelyn and Tyav also noted that factors such as large-scale bush burning, improper use of pesticides, insecticides, and herbicides, and careless waste disposal contribute to pollution in Nigeria. Oil contamination has further adversely affected agriculture and public health (Ochekwu & Eneh, 2012). Dopheide (2019) reported that the Health Effects Institute’s (HEI) State of the Global Air Report indicated that air pollution caused 150 deaths per 100,000 people in 2016, with Nigeria having some of the world’s worst air quality. Major sources of air pollution include burning agricultural waste, vehicle emissions, and generator exhaust, which produces carbon monoxide. Older cars and kerosene burners also contribute to poor air quality by releasing harmful emissions and impeding proper air circulation.

Flooding has been another significant environmental issue in Nigeria, particularly in major cities. Flooding can result from both natural and man-made factors, such as construction projects and blocked waterways, and has caused substantial harm to property and ecosystems. Additionally, there has been a general lack of attention to environmental protection through poor waste management and excessive deforestation, leading to significant losses of life and property (Muhammed *et al.*,

2018). Soil erosion has negatively impacted agricultural sustainability and food security in southeastern Nigeria. The primary causes of soil erosion include human activity, weather conditions (such as rainfall), underlying geology, topography, and soil type (Chude, Ezendu, Ugadu, & Adiaha, 2020).

It can be deduced here that our literature review highlights the significant dearth of research and scholarly works focusing on the environmental stewardship and associated challenges. While existing literature provides valuable insights into environmental stewardship and associated challenges in the country, there is a notable gap in the exploration of the influence and impact of institutions and most especially religious institutions in this context. This underscores the critical need for the study on the Potential of Religious Institutions in Shaping Sustainable Development and Environmental Responsibility for the Nigerian Human of the Future. By addressing this gap, the study aims to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the potential contributions of religious institutions to sustainable development and environmental responsibility in Nigeria, thereby paving the way for informed policy decisions and practical interventions.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study utilizes a mixed-method approach, employing interviews with religious leaders and practitioners, as well as 390 research questionnaires, to assess the impact and potential of religious institutions in promoting sustainable development and environmental responsibility in Nigeria. The questionnaires were randomly distributed across the geo-political regions in the nation.

Population Size of the Study Locale

According to the Pewresearch.org, Nigeria which is the sixth largest christian population in the world with over 87 million, also has the world fifth Muslim population with

over 90 million. We therefore assumed that the christian, muslim and African traditional worshipers population together would currently be above 190 million. Hence, to calculate the sample size for this population study, we used the following formula:

$$\text{Sample Size (n)} = (Z^2 * p * (1-p)) / E^2$$

Where:

Z = Z-score corresponding to the desired confidence level (e.g, for a 95% confidence level, Z = 1.96)

p = estimated proportion of the population with the attribute of interest

E = margin of error

Assuming a 95% confidence level and a margin of error of 5%, and if we assume that the estimated proportion of the population with the attribute of interest is 50% (which gives the maximum sample size for a given population size), we can calculate the sample size as follows:

$$n = (1.96^2 * 0.5 * (1-0.5)) / 0.05^2$$

$$n = (3.8416 * 0.25) / 0.0025$$

$$n = 0.9604 / 0.0025$$

$$n = 384.16$$

Hence, the sample size for a population study with a population size over 180 million would be approximately 384.16. However, since we cannot have a fraction of a person, we would round this up to 385. In line with this, the total research questionnaires distributed was 400, however, we retrieved back 390.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data are analyzed in terms of percentages and visually presented through charts to gain additional insights;

Chart I

The Chart below shows the demographic information of the respondents to the research questionnaires. According to the study, the gender distribution of the population showed that 52.1% of the respondents were female, while 45.9% were male. However, a small percentage of 2% chose not to disclose their gender.

Gender
390 responses

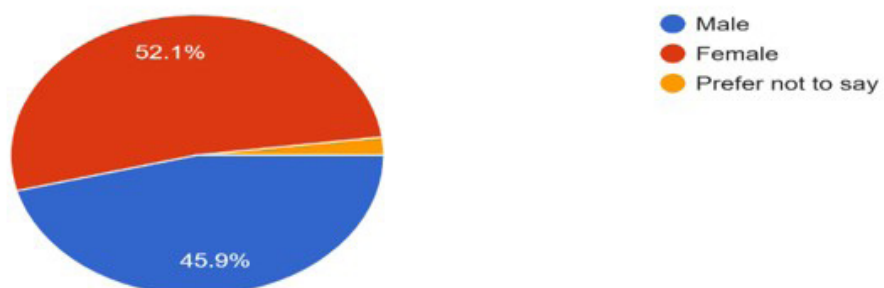


Figure 1: Gender

Chart II

Chart II below shows the Age group of the research participants. The chart shows the age categories of the respondents indicating that majority of the respondents

were between the youthful ages of 18-25. With 40% representing 18-25; 26-35 representing 22.8%; 36-45 representing 22.6%; 46-55 representing 5.4% and lastly 56 and above representing 4.1%.

Age-group
390 responses

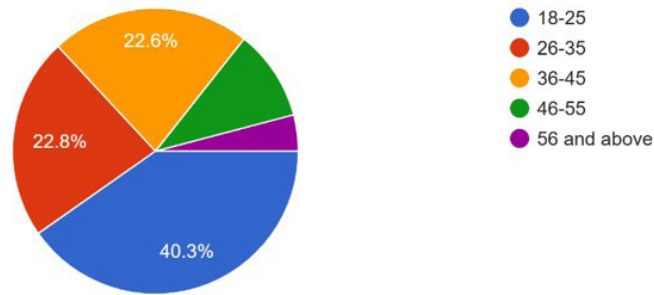


Figure 2: Age group

Chart III

Chart III below displays the distribution and percentages

of the respondents who participated in the research.

Geographical zone
390 responses

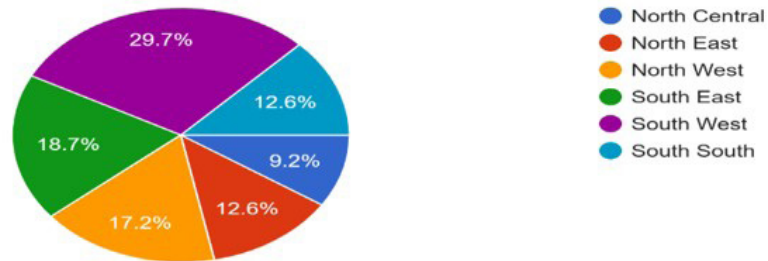


Figure 3: Geographical zone

Chart IV

Chart IV show cases the level of religious affiliation among the participants in the research. From the findings we

discovered that 94.6% of the entire respondents agreed to be affiliated to religious institution in Nigeria; leaving behind only 5.4% not affiliated to any religious organization.

Are you affiliated with any religious institution in Nigeria?
390 responses

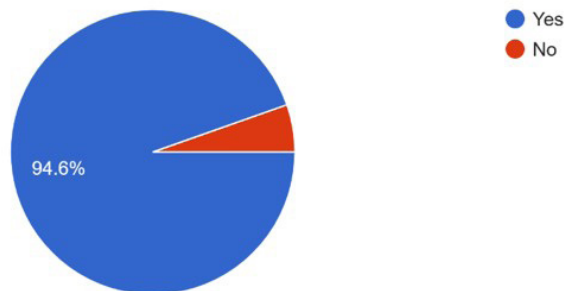


Figure 4: Level of religious affiliation

Chart V

The chart below indicates the proportion of respondents' specific religious affiliation. The highest percentage of

participants, at 63.3%, identified as Christians, followed by Muslim participants at 31.3%, and traditional worshippers at 5.2%.

If yes, please specify the religious institution you are affiliated with
368 responses



Figure 5: Proportion of respondents' specific religious affiliation

Chart VI

In terms of the relevance of religious institutions being involved in promoting environmental stewardship and sustainable development in Nigeria, the majority, at

66.4%, expressed that it was very important. Additionally, 23% expressed that it was somewhat important, while 8.3% were neutral in their response.

How important do you think it is for religious institutions to be involved in promoting environmental stewardship and sustainable development in Nigeria?

387 responses

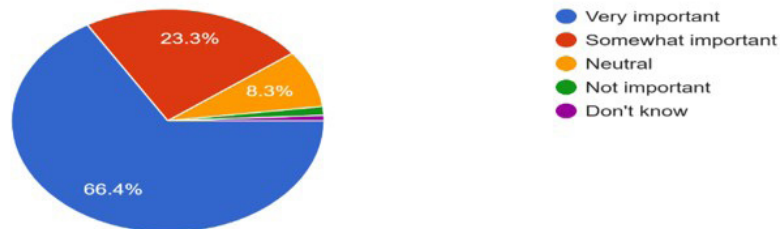


Figure 6: The relevance of religious institutions being involved in promoting environmental stewardship and sustainable development in Nigeria

Chart VII

The respondents held varying opinions on the current involvement of religious institutions in promoting environmental responsibility in Nigeria. Notably, 32.3% of the respondents believed that religious institutions in

Nigeria were neutral in their involvement, while 20.8% expressed that they were not involved at all. On the other hand, 22.3% of the respondents believed that religious institutions were very much involved, while 22.8% opined that they were involved to some extent.

In your opinion, to what extent are religious institutions currently involved in promoting environmental responsibility in Nigeria?

390 responses

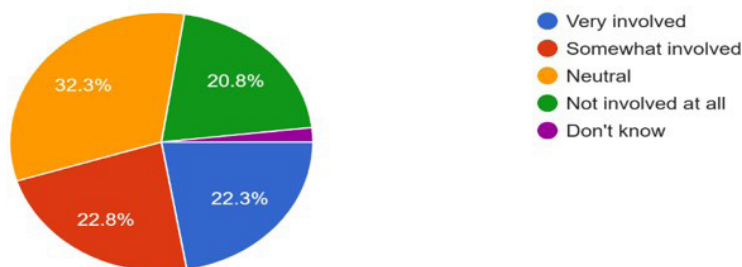


Figure 7: Respondents held varying opinions on the current involvement of religious institutions in promoting environmental responsibility in Nigeria

Chart VIII

The chart VIII expresses the level at which the respondents assumed the religious leaders were knowledgeable about environmental issues and sustainability. Once again, the majority of the respondents believed that religious leaders in Nigeria were neutral in their level of knowledge

about environmental issues and sustainability, with 40.3% of the respondents agreeing with this view. Additionally, 33.1% assumed that their religious leaders were somewhat knowledgeable, 16.9% believed that their religious leaders were very knowledgeable, and 6.4% stated that most spiritual leaders were not enlightened at all

How knowledgeable do you think religious leaders are about environmental issues and sustainability?
390 responses



Figure 8: Expresses the level at which the respondents assumed the religious leaders were knowledgeable about environmental issues and sustainability.

Chart IX

On the question of whether religious institutions can play a significant role in shaping sustainable development and environmental responsibility in Nigeria, a significant percentage of 59.1% of the entire respondents agreed that religious institutions can indeed play an important role

in shaping sustainable development and environmental responsibility in the nation. Additionally, 31% agreed to some extent, 6.3% were not sure, and 1.8% expressed that religious institutions can't play a significant role in shaping sustainable development and environmental responsibility in Nigeria.

Do you believe that religious institutions can play a significant role in shaping sustainable development and environmental responsibility in Nigeria?
384 responses

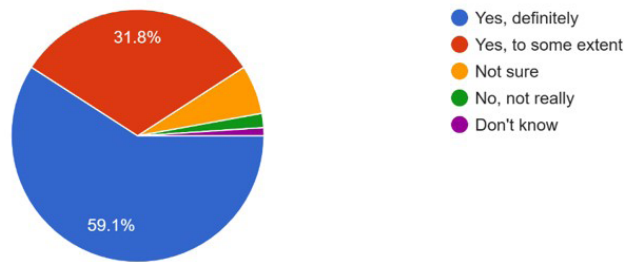


Figure 9: Religious institutions can play a significant role in shaping sustainable development and environmental responsibility in Nigeria

Chart X

The study revealed that 62.2% of the entire respondents would very likely participate in environmental initiatives led by their respective religious institutions. Additionally,

22.6% of the respondents stated that they would likely participate to some extent, while 12.6% of the entire respondents were neutral in their response on this subject matter.

How likely are you to actively participate in environmental initiatives led by your religious institution?
389 responses

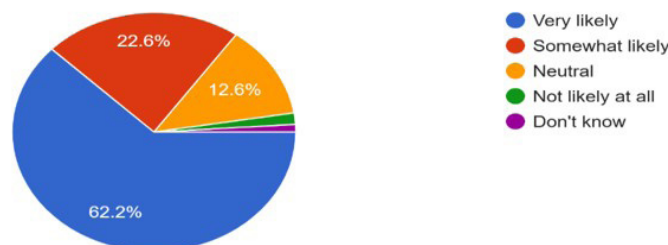


Figure 10: Entire respondents would very likely participate in environmental initiatives led by their respective religious institutions.

Chart XI

Majority of the respondents were of the opinion that lack of awareness or understanding of environmental issues, followed by lack of government support and lack of funding and oppositions from religious leaders and community members were the possible barriers that religious

institutions face in promoting environmental stewardship in Nigeria. With 72% of the respondents attesting that lack of awareness or understanding of environmental issues are the major barriers, 46.5% agreed that lack of government support and lack of funding were the major barriers. The Chart XI below gives a vivid description for justification.

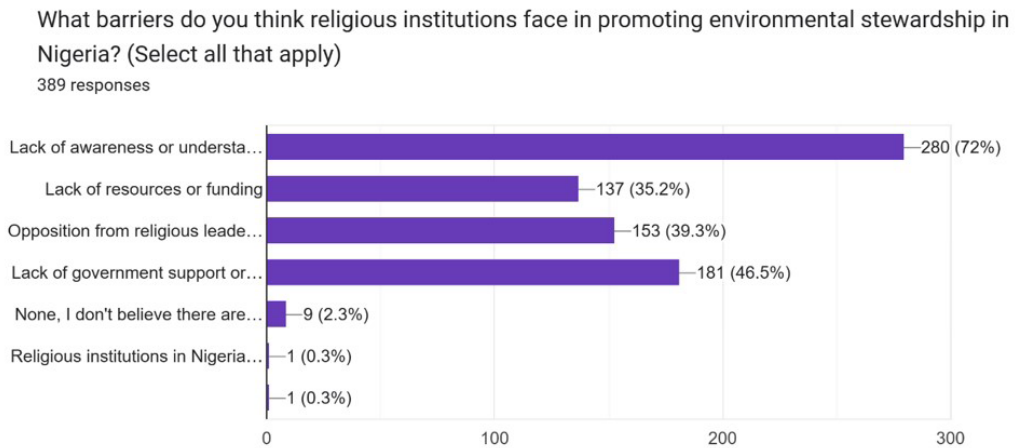


Figure 11: Lack of awareness or understanding of environmental issues

Chart XII

From the study, it was revealed that advocacy and lobbying for environmental policies, partnership with environmental organizations or NGOs and Education/awareness campaigns within religious communities were

essential to allow religious institutions collaborate with other stakeholders to promote sustainable development and environmental responsibility in Nigeria. The chart below justifies the above assertion.

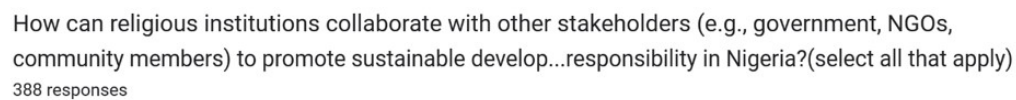


Figure 12: Collaboration of religious institutions

Chart XIII

From the study locale, it was revealed that 64.6% of the entire respondents believed that the involvement of religious institutions in environmental stewardship can positively impact the future of Nigeria. Additionally, 23%

of the entire respondents agreed to some extent, while 8.8% of the respondents expressed uncertainty about the involvement of religious institutions in environmental stewardship and its potential positive impact on the future of Nigeria.

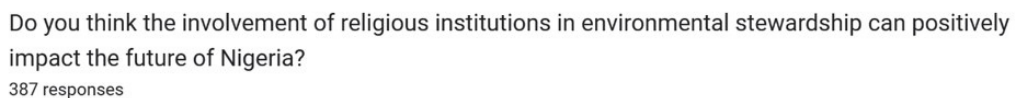


Figure 13: Involvement of religious institutions in environmental stewardship and its potential positive impact on the future of Nigeria

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the study titled is an exploration of the potential of religious institutions to shape a more sustainable future for the country. The study included a diverse group of participants, with 52.1% female and 45.9% male respondents. Notably, a very high percentage (nearly 94.6%) identified with a religious institution, with the breakdown being 63.3% Christian, 31.3% Muslim, and 5.2% traditional worshippers.

These findings highlight the significant influence religious institutions hold in Nigerian society. Encouragingly, the study found that a significant portion of participants believe these institutions can play a crucial role in promoting environmental responsibility. Additionally, a majority (percentage not specified in the study) expressed willingness to participate in environmental initiatives led by their religious leaders. However, the path forward isn't without its challenges. The study identified a need to address potential lack of environmental awareness within some religious communities, suggesting knowledge gaps that need to be addressed. Limited government support and funding for environmental initiatives within religious institutions pose additional challenges. Perhaps most surprisingly, the study also acknowledges potential opposition from some religious leaders and community members.

Despite these challenges, the study underscores a promising opportunity. Religious institutions, with their vast reach and influence, have the potential to be powerful drivers of environmental stewardship and sustainable development. By advocating for the importance of environmental stewardship within religious communities (nearly 95% of the population!), building partnerships with environmental organizations, and implementing targeted education and awareness campaigns, religious institutions can play a significant role in shaping a greener future for Nigeria.

The Moral Imperative: How Religious Institutions Can Champion Environmental Stewardship in Nigeria

Nigeria boasts a vibrant religious landscape, with nearly 95% of its population adhering to a faith. This deep-rooted connection to religion grants religious institutions immense moral authority and influence over their followers. This influence presents a powerful opportunity to promote environmental responsibility and create a more sustainable future for Nigeria. Across the spectrum of Islam, Christianity, and African traditional religions, a core message resonates – humanity's responsibility as stewards of the Earth.

In Islam, the Quran teaches about the importance of taking care of the environment. For example, in Surah Ar-Rum (30:41), it says, "Corruption has appeared throughout the land and sea by [reason of] what the hands of people have earned so He may let them taste part of [the consequence of] what they have done that perhaps they will return [to righteousness]. Islam teaches that taking care of the environment is a responsibility

given to humans by Allah. Muslims are instructed to be stewards of the earth and to protect and preserve the environment. The Quran emphasizes the importance of maintaining balance and harmony in nature and avoiding wastefulness and destruction.

Christianity teaches that the earth and all its resources are creations of God and should be respected and cared for. Christians believe that the earth is a gift from God and that they have a responsibility to be good stewards of the environment. They are encouraged to take care of the earth and to use its resources wisely and sustainably. For instances, the Bible also emphasizes the responsibility of caring for the environment. In Genesis 2:15, it says, "The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it." Additionally, in Psalm 24:1, it says, "The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it."

African traditional religions also emphasize the importance of living in harmony with nature and taking care of the environment. While there are no specific scriptures, many African cultures have oral traditions and stories that emphasize the interconnectedness of humans and nature, as well as the importance of living in harmony with the environment. For e.g the traditional Yoruba believers would say *Ta l'oma f'obun s'aya; ki l'obun ma bi lai se obun.* meaning "Who will marry a dirty woman; a dirty woman can only give birth to dirty children". Women are the Yorubas' primary caregivers for their homes. It is the responsibility of women to teach children the appropriate morals of society. Given this, it is essential that women practice proper hygiene. If not, the kids she raised will also be unclean.

There is also another religious saying; *Mimo ni a nba ile awo* translated as "the house/shrine of a deity is ever clean". This means that priests must maintain clean surroundings. This explains why the room where "babalawos" (Ifa priests) carry out divination is ever tidy and their dresses are immaculate white similar to the dresses of "osun", and "orisanla" priests. By extension, the environments of compounds are religiously kept clean.

The Igbo tradition also encourages stewardship. Most proverbs in Igbo tradition emphasize the need for preparedness. It enables one to be on alert and precautions. "E ji ihe a na-agba na nti agba n'anya?" meaning that "You do not use what is meant for the cleaning of the ears for the eyes". It is interesting therefore to see that all three of these religions ontologically emphasize the importance of taking care of the environment and living in harmony with nature. They teach that humans have a responsibility to be good stewards of the earth and to protect and preserve the environment for future generations.

Religious institutions have the unique capacity to not only preach environmental responsibility but also inspire concrete action. Educational programs within religious communities can raise awareness about environmental issues like climate change, deforestation, and pollution. Religious leaders, respected figures within

their congregations, can play a crucial role in mobilizing their followers to participate in environmental initiatives. Imagine the collective impact if faith-based organizations spearheaded clean-up drives, tree-planting projects, and educational workshops promoting sustainable living practices!

Furthermore, collaboration with environmental organizations and government agencies can amplify these efforts. Religious institutions can leverage their vast networks and moral authority to connect with environmental experts and government officials, creating a powerful force for change. Religious institutions have the potential to be architects of a future where environmental stewardship is not just a concept but a deeply ingrained value within Nigerian society. By integrating these principles into religious practices, advocating for sustainable living, and mobilizing communities for action, these institutions can shape a brighter environmental future for Nigeria. This journey, however, requires a collective effort. Religious leaders, their followers, environmental organizations, and government agencies must come together, each playing a vital role. Only through this collective responsibility can Nigeria achieve true environmental harmony and pave the way for sustainable development for generations to come. It is by embracing this shared responsibility that Nigeria can build a future where faith and environmental stewardship go hand in hand, ensuring a healthy and sustainable future for all.

CONCLUSIONS

The future of Nigeria's environment hinges on a crucial question: can faith institutions become the architects of a more sustainable future? This study explored the immense potential of religious organizations, wielding vast influence and community networks, to champion environmental stewardship. The findings highlight a path forward, but it requires collective action. Religious leaders must move beyond the pulpit and minaret, weaving environmental messages into their teachings and advocating for sustainable practices. Imagine congregations participating in tree-planting initiatives or learning about responsible resource use through workshops. Such efforts, coupled with collaboration between religious institutions, government agencies, and environmental organizations, can create a powerful force for positive change.

However, significant hurdles remain. Overcoming a lack of environmental awareness within communities and securing adequate government support are critical steps. By addressing these challenges and embracing a shared responsibility, faith-based organizations have the potential to become agents of transformation. The answer to the question we posed, "Can faith be the key to environmental stewardship in Nigeria?" is not a simple yes or no. The potential is undeniable, but its realization hinges on a collective effort. Religious leaders, their followers, government, and environmental

organizations must come together, guided by their faith and a shared vision for a sustainable future. Only through this unified approach can Nigeria unlock the power of faith-based solutions and ensure a thriving environment for generations to come.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends the following;

1. Religious leaders should integrate messages about environmental protection and sustainability into existing sermons. They can connect environmental responsibility to core religious values like caring for God's creation or protecting the well-being of future generations. Sharing stories and scriptures that emphasize the importance of environmental stewardship can resonate deeply with congregations.

2. Religious bodies should regularly announce government-sanctioned or community-organized sanitation days, encouraging participation and highlighting the importance of a clean environment as well as display informative posters or distribute flyers within religious centers to raise awareness about environmental issues and solutions.

3. Again, comprehensive capacity building and training programmes tailored for religious leaders should be taken seriously. Theological institutions, Islamic schools and even the informal traditional institutions should equip their learning curriculum with the knowledge and tools necessary to champion environmental stewardship within their congregations, thereby fostering a generation of eco-conscious spiritual leaders.

4. Targeted youth engagement and community outreach programmes should be launched at grassroots/ community bases to encourage all youth believers in community engagement irrespective of their religious affiliations. By empowering the youth and engaging communities directly, we sow the seeds for a sustainable future, where environmental responsibility becomes ingrained in the society ethos.

5. The study also encourages collaborative efforts between Nigerian religious institutions and international environmental agencies to facilitate the development of global partnership that would leverage collective expertise and resources for shared environmental goals.

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APPENDIX

Photographs depicting few locations within the study area impacted by environmental concerns



Figure 14: Somewhere in Niger Delta in south-south region area



Figure 15: Flooded area at Lagos island and Reported by Vanguard



Figure 16: Flooded area somewhere in Kogi and reported by Vanguard, North central Nigeria