

## FORESTRY: A VERITABLE TOOL FOR SUSTAINABLE RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

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### **Abstract**

Forest forms a very significant part of human ecosystem. In fact, man's existence without forestry resources is unthinkable as man depends on these resources for most of his needs – food, shelter, fibre, medicine, fuelwood, etc. This paper critically appraises the overall contributions of forestry to rural development in Nigeria. It also spotlights some of the factors militating against meaningful development of forestry in Nigeria. Notable amongst these factors include illegal indiscriminate felling of trees and intensive logging, lack of proper forest conservation strategy and inadequate fund allocation. Others are dearth of qualified manpower in key areas, difficulties associated with acquisition of land for forestry development and corruption. The paper argues that in view of the critical importance and pivotal role of forestry in rural development in Nigeria, the sector ought to be accorded the attention it deserves. Amongst the recommendations proffered to enhance forestry development in Nigeria include checking the nefarious activities of illegal tree fellers and loggers; total re-evaluation of government conservation policy; acquisition of more lands by government for forestry development and encouragement of mass participation in tree planting. Others are increased funding for forestry development; enlargement of opportunities for training of forestry personnel and combating corruption through proper motivation of dedicated staff via prompt payment of salaries and allowances and offering of fringe benefits.

**Key words:** Forestry, tool, sustainable, rural, development.

### **Introduction**

Incontrovertibly, one of the nagging problems facing Nigeria, like most other developing countries is how to adequately overcome the worrisome issue of rural-urban migration. The condition (rural-urban migration) is known for its

deleterious effects on developmental efforts of Third World Countries.

In a bid to effectively combat the socio-economic malady, Nigeria has adopted two principal strategies. First, is the creation and expansion of job opportunities for rural dwellers especially through agricultural modernization and rural industrialization. This is aimed at enhancing their income-generation capabilities. Next is massive provision of socio-economic infrastructural facilities that make life worth living particularly electricity, good drinking water, modern health centres, banks, recreational centres and schools in the rural areas. This measure which acts as counterpoise between the urban and rural areas discourages rural-urban flight of youths. The underlying assumption in the words of Nwonwu, (1986) is that the agricultural sector possesses the capacity to absorb abundant labour in the rural areas. The infrastructural facilities on the other hand, are expected to perform the dual roles of providing services for the agricultural sector and creating an attractive environment where the youths can live and work. The expectation is that agriculture will act as a catalyst for establishment of agro-allied industries. As the industries derive their raw materials from agriculture, they serve as vents for the surplus agricultural labour. By so doing, agriculture becomes the ultimate lender of labour to the industrial sector under the two sector model.

But unfortunately, in Nigeria, agriculture is yet to develop to an appreciable level to enhance this inter-sector labour mobility and transfer. In an attempt to reverse the ugly trend, government has through aggressive and effective public enlightenment programmes appealed to Nigerians to embrace agriculture. This is in addition to taking certain radical measures aimed at encouraging optimal food production. It is against this backdrop that forestry plays a pivotal role by making land available for meaningful agricultural production. Apart from making fertile and productive land available for agricultural production, forestry via its

multiplicity of products and benefits has made and is expected to continue to make significant contributions towards rural transformation in Nigeria. This is particularly with regard to provision of food, fodder, medicine, fuelwood, shelter, game and wild life, raw materials for industries and employment for ruralites in Nigeria.

This study, therefore, highlights the overall role and importance of forestry in rural development and the strategies to enhance such role.

#### Role and Importance of Forestry in Rural Development

Forestry plays a variety of vital roles in rural development through: provision of food and fodder, medicine, fuelwood, wood working, timber, game and wildlife, raw materials for industries and employment. These roles are discussed in turn below:

Nigerian forests are a profusion of wide and edible food complexes - fruits, roots, green leafy vegetables, spices and mushrooms for human and animal consumption. Okafor (1980) has identified 150 species of indigenous woody plants with edible fruits of high nutritive values. Amongst the several indigenous trees and woody plants that are extensively cultivated for edible fruits of importance to man include coconut (*Cocos nucifera*), African bread fruit (*Treculia Africana*), oil bean tree (*Pentaclethra macrophylla*), mango (*Mangifera indica*), oranges (citrus), oil palm (*Elaeis guinensis*), etc. The fruits of some of these tree plants are processed as soft drinks. Examples are mango and orange juices. The oil extracted from the oil palm is used in the manufacture of soap, cooking oil and margarine. The important beverages obtained from some forest trees include, cocoa (*Theobroma cocoa*) which is the source of cocoa and chocolate, coffee (various species of coffee) and tea (*Camellia sinensis*). The fruits of kola trees (*Cola nitida* and *acuminata*) and bitter kola (*Garcina kola*) are chewed as stimulants. As Okafor (1991) points out, these forest plants are important and cheap sources of vitamins, minerals, carbohydrates, proteins and fat.

Leaves of several forest trees and shrubs particularly legumes are also eaten as vegetables by many Nigerians. Women (especially married ones) take great delight in the extraction and sale of such leaves as cassia spp. *Gnetum Africana* (Okazi-Igbo) and *Amarantus Spp.* (Tete - Yoruba). *Gongronema latifolium* (Utazi-Igbo) is famous for its spicy flavour. Also, some varieties of trees and shrubs provide fodder for livestock and wild life. Amongst these plants are *Accacia spp.*, of which the gum Arabic plant is the most common.

Another essential contribution of forestry to rural development in Nigeria is in the sphere of traditional medicine. According to Gbile (1988), the use of forest plants for medicinal purposes in Nigeria has long historical roots especially amongst the rural dwellers. The barks, leaves and roots of some forest plants are used in traditional medicine. Corroborating this view, Okunlola (1992) avers that the tropical forest of which Nigeria is a major part has about 15,000 plants that currently supply some kind of non-timber use many of which have been selected for medicinal use to manufacture drugs for malaria, leukemia amoebic, dysentery, mental disorders, asthma, cough, convulsion, amongst others. Thus, despite the advent of western/orthodox medicine and the attendant establishment of modern health centres, many Nigerians still fall back to unorthodox/traditional medicine. This is partly due to the socio-economic status of the people as well as the tremendous confidence placed on herbs which according to them have stood the test of time. In recognition of the potency of traditional medicine, frantic efforts are being made by government to integrate it into Nigeria's health system.

Fuelwood, also known as firewood is a major source of energy for cooking, heating and even lighting for rural dwellers and the urban poor. In Nigeria, just as in other Third World Countries about 80 percent of all wood extracted from the forests go for fuel.

Socio-economic and cultural factors account for high dependence on fuelwood as domestic energy supply in Nigeria. First, is the issue of poverty amongst rural and urban dwellers who cannot afford alternative domestic energy sources like kerosene, electricity and liquefied petroleum gas. Second is the strong traditional attachment to firewood usage creating preference for food cooked from wood to other means. Third has to do with social attitude of the people in ceremonies and festivals promoting open-air preparation for participants and finally traditional taboos restricting traditional rulers and title holders to eat food prepared only with firewood. What is discernible from the above is that fuel wood will continue to serve as a major source of domestic energy supply for majority of Nigerians. This is notwithstanding the fact that it poses great danger to the stability of the ecosystem.

Wood working is certainly one of the oldest and widespread of Nigeria's traditional arts and crafts. There is hardly any community of some size that does not have its wood workers and carvers. The reasons for this are ubiquity of raw materials and variety of products which are put to various uses. Whilst some of the products are utilitarian, others are symbolic and serve socio-religious and cultural

functions. Amongst the wide range of products are domestic utensils and household furniture like mortars and pestles, ladles, spoons, saucers, trays and bowls. Cultural rejuvenation appears to have given a boost for the industry as it has become a status symbol to have doors and furniture carved of wood.

Forest trees also serve as a source of timber used all over the globe for construction of houses, bridges, boats and furniture. The well-known examples of timber trees include Iroko (*Chlorophora excelsa*) African mahogany (*Khaya ivorensis*) and obeche (*Triplochiton scleroxylon*).

Hunting and trapping of animals form another essential socio-economic activity in many parts of Nigeria. The forests of Nigeria harbour various genres of animals – big and small, dangerous and harmless. Game animals usually hunted are antelopes, porcupines, snakes, elephants, rodents, etc. Hunting is pursued on a part-time basis and as an adjunct to farming.

Apart from being hunted mainly for meat or as a source of protein, some of the animals are hunted for other reasons. A typical example is the elephant, a source of ivory, which in the estimation of Njoku (2001) is a highly prized domestic and export trade item. He further asserts that elephant tusks as well as ivory armbands and anklets form part of the regalia of titled men in parts of Southern Nigeria. Similarly, Adeyoju (1975) contends that hundreds of live wild animals and animal products are exported from Nigeria annually to earn foreign exchange (forex), in addition to the aesthetic satisfaction people derive from visits to game reserves.

Cottage industries are common in most parts of Nigeria. Majority of the raw materials used by these industries are obtained from forest plants. Typical examples are *Elaeis guinensis* and *Raffia* spp., which serve as raw materials for industries that manufacture brooms, sponges, ropes, cane chains, calabash, chewing sticks, etc.

Forestry is also a large employer of labour. In Nigeria, not less than 50 percent of the medium-scale industry interact one way or the other with the forestry sector.

Other forest products of immense economic value include tanning and dyeing materials, great assortment of useful gums, resins, oil preservatives, cork and latex products.

#### Factors Militating Against Meaningful Development of Forestry in Nigeria

Multiplicity of problems and constraints confront forestry development in Nigeria. These obstacles stem from illegal / indiscriminate tree felling and intensive logging, lack of proper forest conservation policy, inadequate fund allocation,

dearth of qualified manpower in key areas, difficulties associated with acquisition of land for forestry development to corruption. These issues are discussed in turn below:

Illegal/Indiscriminate tree felling and intensive logging is one of the most worrisome problems confronting forestry development in Nigeria. Obaseki (1966) has stressed that there has been alterable illegal felling of trees which has been on the increase from year to year since the 1940s. For instance, in a survey, Adebago (1992), showed that a total of 298 trees with a basal area of 4,933sq metres, comprising 19 different valuable species of unknown log dimensions were illegally extracted in 1990 in the Supoba Forestry Reserve area of Edo State. Ikumoguniyi (1980) has attributed illegal felling and stealing mainly to such factors as lucrative nature of timber business, disregard for forestry laws, questionable integrity of forestry staff, inadequacy of uniformed staff to effectively police forestry reserves and absence of a purposeful and rigorously pursued conservative policy.

Illegal felling of trees has brought about far-reaching adverse and harmful impact on wood supply, soil protection and environmental conservation as a whole. Beside the heavy losses resulting from illegal extraction of timber, it creates destabilization of the ecosystem and leads to excessive leaching of soil nutrients.

At present in Nigeria, there appears not be an appropriate forest conservation policy. This situation has created untold consequences for the industry.

One of the most nagging problems facing forestry development in Nigeria is paucity of funds. Funding forestry programmes and projects is capital-intensive. Much money is required for tree planting and forest restoration. Nigerian economy is unfortunately non-diversified and a monolithic one, relying almost entirely on a single item earner (crude oil). Consequently development projects/programmes are compelled to share from crude oil earnings in stiff competition with other sectors of the economy. Whenever oil glut occurs in the world market, revenue accruable from oil also plummets. Correspondingly, allocations to forestry as well as other development projects and programmes also dwindle. So, brushing aside the issue of improper funding of forestry development and preaching the gospel of sustainable forestry development will remain a mirage.

Undeniably, human resources constitute the ultimate basis of production activities. Capital and natural resources are in themselves passive factors of production. Human beings on the other hand, are active agents who accumulate capital, exploit natural

resources, build social, economic and political organizations and carry forward societal development. In a nutshell, human resources are more important than physical and financial resources. Without the required human capital in the form of stocks of skills possessed by human beings, physical capital in the form of machines and other technologies will not give rise to rapid economic growth and development. Economists (especially development economists) have tended in their analysis of Nigeria's economic woes to concentrate mainly on the difficulties arising from dearth of financial resources. Implicit in this line of argument is the assumption that if financial resources were available in sufficient quantities, they would be well managed. Research according to Emeghara (2006) has however, revealed that problems arising from shortage of skilled manpower especially in the scientific, engineering, technical and managerial areas are indeed more critical and serious than those associated and connected with mere scarcity of capital.

With specific regard to forest development, there is ample evidence that Nigeria lacks adequate number of trained, qualified and competent personnel such as forestry officers, conservators, plant pathologists, soil chemists, etc. In view of this handicap, meaningful development of forestry becomes difficult, if not impossible.

Another serious impediment to meaningful forestry development in Nigeria is the difficulty associated with the acquisition of land. Forestry is a land-intensive venture but land tenure practices and patterns in Nigeria, especially in the Southern part pose serious problems as it pertains to the acquisition of land for forestry development and / or expansion.

The Land Use Decree was enacted in March 1978 to reform the land tenure system in order to make land accessible to people for developmental purposes particularly for agricultural ventures. Empirical evidence would however, reveal that the decree has not yet made the desired impact in this regard. Little wonder it is being reviewed.

Corruption has a debilitating and crippling effect on Nigeria's overall development. The degree of corruption in the country is alarming as it is almost institutionalized. As Njoku (2001) rightly states, corruption is a pervasive cankerworm which has burrowed into the very foundation of the Nigerian society virulently, sapping its strength and vitality. Corruption leads to diversion of resources (especially funds) meant for forestry development into private use.

## Conclusion

In this study, the author has made good attempt to highlight the contributions of forestry to rural development in Nigeria. Also he has been able to demonstrate that multiplicity of problems confront forestry development in Nigeria. The author is of the view that for appreciable and sustainable rural transformation to be possible in Nigeria, forestry development ought to be accorded the attention it rightly deserves. In order to make this possible, the researcher makes the following suggestions:

Effective check of the nefarious activities of illegal tree fellers and loggers through collaborative efforts of the three tiers of government particularly in the area of public enlightenment on the dangers of posed by illegal / indiscriminate felling of trees.

Undertaking a total re-evaluation of government conservation policy with a view to closing the loopholes that currently aid illegal felling of trees.

Re-organisation of entire staff of the forestry sector in order to engage and maintain only the effective, efficient, dedicated and honest ones.

Acquisition of more lands for forestry development by government.

Encouragement of mass participation in tree planting by public enlightenment campaigns. The use of fast-growing and quick-maturing species of trees should be encouraged. Apart from making regeneration proceed at a higher rate than that of exploitation, it also reduces to the barest minimum the problem of wood shortage in the country.

Improvement of funding of forestry projects and programmes by stepping up budgetary allocation.

Combating corruption via upward review and prompt payment of remuneration and allowances of forestry personnel.

Finally, is enlargement of opportunities for training of forestry staff, through in-service training and establishment of more Colleges of Forestry and Forestry Research Institutes in Nigeria.

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