ACHIEVING UN-SDG 13 IN NIGERIA: ROLES OF RELIGIOUS LEADERS IN ADDRESSING CLIMATE CHANGE CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

Religious leaders have major roles to play in enabling the world's societies to take necessary actions to address climate change causes, impacts, and related issues effectively and ethically. This study investigates the roles they can play in achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 13 (Climate Action) in Nigeria. The study adopted a descriptive survey research design, it involved 300 participants; 150 religious leaders each from the Muslim and Christian communities in the three geopolitical zones of northern Nigeria (northwest, northeast and north-central). A structured questionnaire was used in collecting information from these leaders. Simple descriptive and One-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) statistics were used in analyzing the obtained data. Findings reveal that religious leaders (Muslims and Christians) do not differ in their perception about the causes of climate change in Nigeria ($F = 2.37$, $p = <0.05$); and as well do not differ in their perception of its impact ($F = 1.54$, $p = <0.01$). Although almost all (94%) of the religious leaders involved in this study strongly agree that they have an important role to play in achieving the UN-SDG 13 target, they however varied in agreeing to pressure the government on exploring an all-inclusive solution ($F = 19.56$, $p = >0.05$). The study also reveals that 21% of the respondents have already started some work in addressing climate change, 75% show strong interest in commencing activities in the areas of awareness, formulating community-based adaptation strategies, and engaging policymakers.

Keywords: Religion, Religious Leaders, Climate Change, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

The United Nations (UN) sets new global goals – the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in 2015. The agenda has 17 Goals and 169 targets that replace the 15-year Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and captured all that which was not achieved by the MDGs. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are aimed to end poverty in all its forms everywhere; achieve food security; promote sustainable agriculture; ensure inclusive and quality education for all and promote lifelong learning; achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls; promote just, peaceful and inclusive societies; and to take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts; among others.

Achieving these goals is of paramount importance to the human race, as such stakeholders need to be involved and engaged towards its full realizations. It's unequivocal that religious leaders have a strong influence on their followers as religion is a major cultural, social, political and economic factor in many countries, especially Nigeria. As such appreciating the relevance of faith dynamics and the role of faith leaders is crucial to achieving the UN-SDGs. Religious leaders have a potential impact in achieving the SDGs, they can advocate,

educate and collaborate both among themselves with broader initiatives. They can also play a role in tasking political leaders and policymakers of their moral imperative in achieving the Goals. Religious leaders also can deepen community investment through their institutions to help end poverty and also mobilize and engage youth to move from awareness to action.

Even though climate change is a universal phenomenon, Africa is one of the most vulnerable continents to this change (Diffenbaugh and Giorgi, 2012). The social, economic, domestic and political lives of the people have all received a blow from the phenomenon of climate change. This is made worse by the fact that the continent has ~~an obviously~~ low adaptive capacity. Indeed, the impacts of climate change in Africa are enormous. These impacts range from decreases in grain yields, changes in runoff and water availability in the Mediterranean and southern countries of Africa, to increased stresses resulting from increased droughts and floods; and significant plant and animal species extinctions and associated livelihood impacts (Jenkins, 2013). Developing countries in Africa, including Nigeria, are particularly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change (IPCC, 2014; Niang et al.

2014; Serdeczny et al. 2016). It has been projected that climate change will undermine development efforts in Africa and will hit the most vulnerable sectors such as agriculture, water, energy, health, wildlife, and tourism (Madzwamuse, 2010; NEST, 2011). This is as a result of the limited adaptive capacity (Ojomo et al. (2015) or the socioeconomic, political, and cultural conditions in these countries.

Nigeria has been classified as one of the hot spots for climate change due to its number of vulnerabilities and will be highly impacted. This is because of its economy's high dependence on climate-sensitive sectors such as agriculture and water resources, and the low adaptive capacity of its population and ecosystems. Despite the country's active participation in all treaties regarding climate change in the global community, the population is largely unaware of the issue; talk less of taking proactive action. In context, the levels of climate change awareness are still low amongst the communities. This does not imply that the effects are not felt: the impacts are evident, but the link between lifestyle and climate change needs to be demystified to enable the effective adoption of related approaches to adapt to the effects.

Almost all religions address the issue of the creation of the universe in different forms and with varying degrees of clarity or detail. However, all religions agree that creation is an act of God and should be treated as such.   For example, in Christianity, there are approximately a hundred verses in the bible that speaks about the protection of the environment. Christians, therefore, have environmental responsibility and encourage behavioral change for the good of the future. Some of the specific commands in the Bible includes "When they had all had enough to eat, he said to his disciples, Gather the pieces that are left over. Let nothing be wasted." (John, 6:12)*;* "We must treat nature with the same awe and wonder that we reserve for human beings. And we do not need this insight to believe in God or to prove his existence. We need it to breathe; we need it for us simply to be." (Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, 2010)

Islam approaches the environment from a stewardship perspective, and many Qur'anic verses support the protection of the environment. The earth is God's creation, and as humans, we have been entrusted to preserve it as we found it. The responsibility of humanity is to protect and ensure the unity (*Tawheed*) of God's creation. Moreover, Islam prohibits the excessive consumption of resources the planet provides to humanity (Qur'an 7:31, 6:141, 17:26-27, 40:34). In fact, Qur'an mentions wasteful consumption (*Isrāf*) as the thirty-second greatest sin. Some of the specific commands in the Quran include **"**Devote thyself single-mindedly to the Faith, and thus follow the nature designed by Allah, the nature according to which He has fashioned mankind. There is no altering the creation of Allah." (Qur'an, 30:30); "Do not strut arrogantly on the earth. You will never split the earth apart nor will you ever rival the mountains' stature" (Qur'an, 17: 37).

Religion concerning the Nigerian milieu plays a lot of roles in the life of many individuals and families in the society. Religion influences the decision and the way of life of so many people in Nigeria. Many scholars such as (Ottuh and Ottuh, 2012; Dasgupta and Ramanathan, 2014; King, 2015; Sideris, 2015) found that religious leaders have a role to play in passing out the message of environmental preservation for the development of their physical and social environment. Just as Sideris (2015) has observed in a similar issue, "many environmentalists (not just transition advocates) view the environmental crisis as a product of our dysfunctional cultural myths or narratives." While scientists and technologists invent the concrete way forward, the conscience and character of those who live in the environment should be addressed by religions. Religious leaders at all levels are critical to the success of ~~the~~ global solidarity for an ethical, moral and spiritual commitment to protect the environment and God's creation. These leaders can become observers, make public commitments, share the story of their commitments and the challenges and joys of keeping them, and invite others to join them. In addition, they can display their sustainable behaviors, serving as role models for their followers and the public.

Nigeria, the largest black nation on earth is currently having an estimated population of over 200 million and a diverse cultural and ethnic group (Figure 1). Due to its current socioeconomic situations, ethnoreligious conflicts, and environmental problems, the nation needs the realization of the UN-SDGs more than any other country.   In the past, different mass awareness methods have been used by the government and NGOs in the country in fighting diseases such as HIV/AIDS and Malaria, so far anecdotal information has shown that the best and effective way is by engaging religious leaders, Considering the importance of the SDGs and the need for more engagement opportunities between the two main religious leaders in the country.

Considering the importance of religious leaders in climate action globally, this study seeks to investigate the roles religious leaders can play in achieving the UN-SDG 13 (Climate Action) in Nigeria. Information the understanding of religious leaders on climate change and willingness to participate in fighting is very necessary for achieving the Nigeria's goals towards addressing climate change issues in the country, and that is what this study intends to provide.
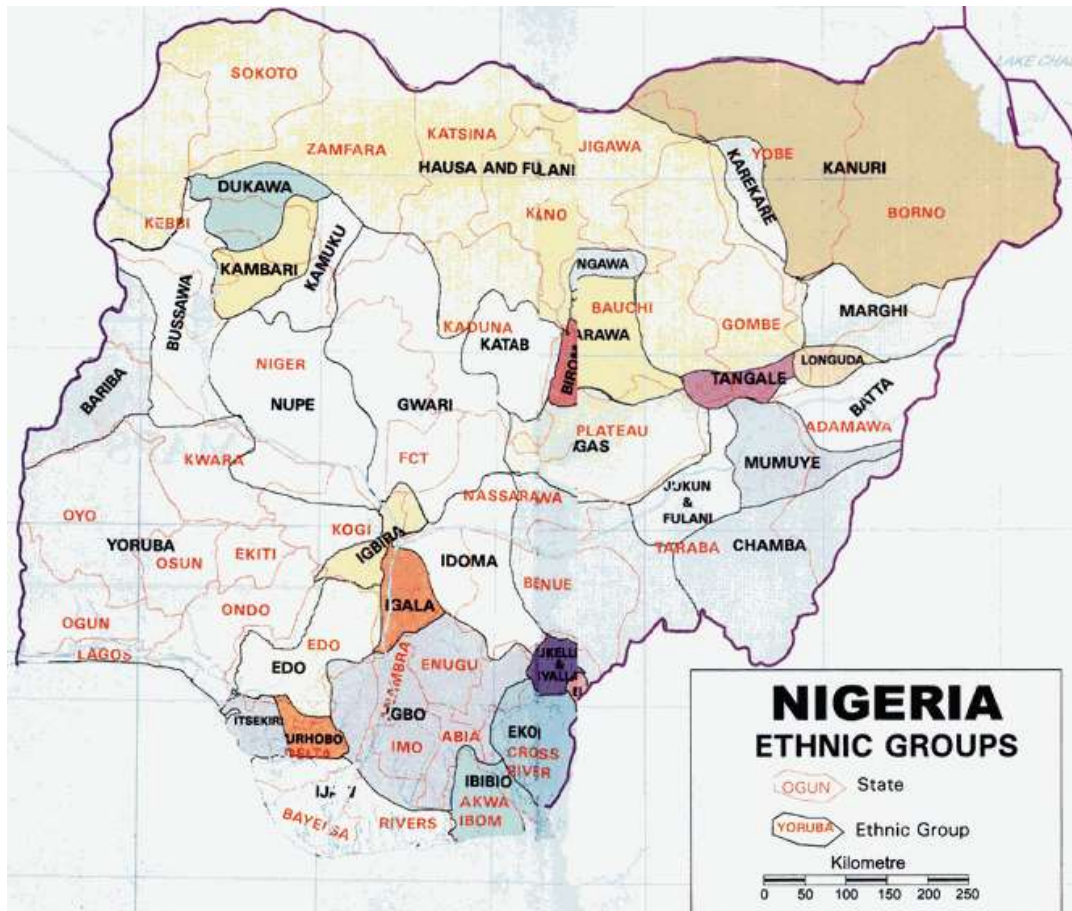
Figure 1: Map of Nigeria showing diversity of ethnic groups
Source: https://onlinenigeria.com/mapethnic.php Community portal of Nigeria

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study investigates the roles religious leaders can play in achieving the climate UN-SDG 13 (Climate Action) in Nigeria. The study adopted the descriptive survey research design, it involved 300 purposefully selected participants; 150 religious leaders each from the Muslim and Christian communities across the country. The survey took advantage of a training workshop for religious leaders in the country organized by an interfaith non-governmental organization on UN-SDGs in Kano, Plateau, and Lagos States, each attended by 100 high-level religious leaders (50 Muslims and 50 Christians).

A structured questionnaire was used in collecting information from these leaders. The questionnaire consisted of two main parts; Section A sought the respondents' demographic data such as Religion, Denomination, Age and Location. Section B consisted of three parts of 10 items each, the first part sought respondents' perception on causes of climate change, part two on the impact of climate change and part three on roles of religious leaders in reducing the impact of climate change. All items were based on a scale of 1 -5, (1-Strongly disagree, 2-Disagree, 3-Neither agree nor disagree, 4-Agree, 5-Strongly

agree). Simple descriptive and one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) statistics was used in analyzing the obtained data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Religious leaders have remained a formidable force in ~~the~~ Nigerian society, because of the respect and trust they are commanding from their followers. Because of the failure in governance, people tend to seek consolation from their respective religions. Faith leaders in Nigeria have proven to be very effective stakeholders in assisting the government in implementing its policies; as such they could play a very important role in the realization of the UN-SDGs. Their role could be through advocacy, educating and collaborating among themselves with broader initiatives. They could also play a role in holding political leaders and policymakers to their responsibilities moral imperative in achieving the Goals. Religious leaders also can deepen community investment through their institutions to help end poverty and also mobilize and engage youth to move from awareness to action. Anecdotal information has revealed that most of these religious leaders in Nigeria are not aware of the UN-SDGs talk less of supporting or promoting it. This study is likely the first of its kind in the

country to investigate the level of awareness and actions religious leaders could play in realizing the UN-SDG 13 (Climate Action).

Table 1: Religious Leaders' Opinions about Climate Change in Nigeria

	Question	Muslim	Christian	Overall	F-Stat
1	Believed that climate change is real and is negatively affecting Nigeria	[a]4.1 [b](81%)	[a]3.9 [b](79%)	[a]4.0 [b](80%)	[c]1.54*
2	Believed that climate change is caused mostly by human activities	4.2 (82%)	3.8 (88%)	4.05 (85%)	2.37**
3	Have perceived the impact of climate change directly or indirectly	3.1 (84%)	3.8 (80%)	3.95 (82%)	21.04
4	Believed that climate change is purely an act of God	1.9 (91%)	2.2 (89%)	2.05 (90%)	23.51*
5	It requires urgent and concerted attention from both government and communities	4.3 (94%)	4.6 (96%)	4.45 (95%)	2.33**
6	My religion teachings have a solution to climate change	4.2 (90%)	3.9 (82%)	4.05 (88%)	1.54
7	Religious leaders have a major role to play in combating climate change	4.8 (84%)	4.6 (86%)	4.7 (85%)	1.44**
8	My congregation have commenced activities on Climate Action	0.8 (91%)	1.3 (93%)	1.05 (92%)	3.67*
9	Certainly, religious leaders need to be actionable about climate change	4.0 (90%)	4.5 (90%)	4.25 (90%)	1.39**
10	Believe that Muslim and Christians religious leaders can work together on this issue	3.7 (94%)	3.9 (90%)	3.8 (92%)	7.14*
11	Agreed to pressure the government on exploring an all-inclusive solution to climate change	2.9 (80%)	3.4 (84%)	3.15 (82%)	19.56
12	Agreed to get involved in mitigation and adaptation campaigns in the country	4.2 (96%)	4.4 (98%)	4.3 (97%)	1.51*

[a]Average opinion of respondents on a scale of 1 – 5, (1-Strongly disagree, 2-Disagree, 3-Neither agree nor disagree, 4-Agree, 5-Strongly agree)
[b]Percentage of respondents out of; Muslims (150), Christians (150), Overall (300)
[c]F-statistics
*Significant at <0.01 level, **Significant at <0.05 level

This study investigated the roles of religious leaders in achieving this sustainable goal in Nigeria. In the current climate change discourse, especially in developing countries, the most important thing is the level of understanding and belief of people about climate change before even talking about action. It is quite interesting that the collection of religious leaders that participated in this research have one way or the other learned about climate change (mostly via media houses). Table 1 above reveals that there is no statistically significant variation in responses of these leaders (both inter and intra) about believing in the existence of climate change and that is negatively impacting society. It was found that the religious leaders do not differ in their perception of the causes of climate change in Nigeria (F = 1.54, p<0.01). The majority (85%) of the participants say that climate change is caused by human activity (F = 2.37, p<0.05) (i.e., anthropogenic climate change), although some have inaccurate information about which human activities contribute to climate change. Most of the clerics disagree that changes in the climatic conditions is purely an act

of God, hence human are to be blamed. Some participants in the current study expressed their views on the impacts of climate change, which included flood and erosion, the unpredictability of rainfall, elevated temperature, and disease prevalence and resurgence. Flooding was heavily cited by the participants as the most common consequence of climate change. This finding is in line with those of Madzwamuse, 2010; NEST, 2011; IPCC, 2014; Niang et al. 2014; Ojomo et al. 2015; and Serdeczny et al. 2016.

In Nigeria, religious beliefs are the main drivers for cultural values, social inclusion, political engagement, and economic prosperity. An almost all religions agree that the sanctity of nature is an act of divinity and should be treated as such. Dozens of faith-based organizations are already providing the needed socio-economic and environmental support; however, these activities are often uncoordinated, fragmented and competing. For over a decade now, there is an increasing call for religious leaders to lend their voices globally on issues that concern our environment especially on climate change, yet relatively few

religious traditions offered official statements regarding climate change (Casey and Musser, 2018). These leaders have an important role play in this regard, for example, under the Paris Agreement, there are two main paths for climate change mitigation and adaptation. The first is through the emissions reductions committed by each national government, and while religious leaders can certainly continue to advocate for the implementation of these reduction goals, there is less they can do to foster national compliance (Casey and Musser, 2018). This study also reveals that religious leaders varied in their opinions ($F = 19.56$, $p > 0.05$) and are not sure in answering the question of whether they agreed to pressure the government on exploring an all-inclusive solution to climate change. The second pathway is through the funding of particular projects in the developing world, which is overseen by the Green Climate Fund (GCF). The GCF seeks to engage regional, national, and international organizations at numerous stages of its internal processes. Entities including faith-based organizations can apply for observer status, which allows them access to non-public information as well as participation in board meetings of the GCF. This study reveals that religious leaders in Nigeria are willing to initiate and or participate in activities at all levels in helping to combat climate change issues.

One of the most important findings of this study is that religious leaders attested to the fact that their respective religious teachings offer a fundamental solution to addressing climate change issue ($F = 1.54$, $p = <0.01$). Participants expressed their opinions on the role of the religious leaders in addressing climate change to include awareness creation, the charity for disaster victims, and prayer are the major roles the participants although expressed them in different words such as enlightenment, education, sensitization, preaching, teaching among others (Ottuh and Ottuh, 2012; Dasgupta and Ramanathan, 2014; King, 2015; Sideris, 2015). Some of them also alluded to the fact religious leaders can help in mitigation by promoting and reducing their ~~own~~ carbon footprints in their respective worship places and encouraging climate-friendly projects and policies in their communities.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of the study, it could be deduced that religious leaders in Nigeria are aware of the causes and impacts of climate change and are also willing to play their roles in achieving the UN-SDG 13 in Nigeria. Almost all religions agree that the sanctity of nature is an act of divinity and should be treated as such, that is why some of the religious leaders reveal that organizations under their supervision are already providing the needed socio-economic and environmental support; however, these activities are often uncoordinated and fragmented. For these contributions to be more impactful religious leaders need to encourage both inter and intrafaith collaborations in executing their activities towards climate action.

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