



**AN ASSESSMENT OF UNITED NATIONS INVOLVEMENT IN PROTECTING  
THE NIGERIA ENVIRONMENT: THE ROLES AND WAY FORWARD**

By

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**ABSTRACT**

*This paper presents the assessment of the United Nations' involvement in environmental protection in Nigeria, examining the roles and way forward. The UN has played a pivotal role in supporting environmental sustainability efforts. Through partnerships with national governments and local stakeholders, the UN has contributed to policy development, capacity building, and the implementation of international environmental agreements. In the context of carrying out this research, numerous subheads were taken into consideration, among which are the concepts of environmental preservation, environmental degradation, and sustainable development. The study mentioned the challenges faced in environmental protection, which include; Legislative and Policy Challenges, Enforcement and Compliance Issues and Emerging Environmental Concerns The mitigation strategies include enhancing environmental education and awareness, International Agreements and Global Cooperation, Enhancing Enforcement and Compliance Mechanisms and Legislative Reforms and Policy Strengthening. The study concluded that the United Nations has played a crucial role in addressing Nigeria's environmental challenges through various initiatives and collaborations. One of the recommendations made was that the UN should foster greater collaboration between the Nigerian government, local communities, civil society, and the private sector. Establishing inclusive platforms for joint decision-making will ensure that environmental policies are relevant and supported by all stakeholders, particularly communities most affected by environmental degradation.*

**KEYWORDS: United Nations (UN), Environmental Degradation, Environmental Protection, Nigeria, and Sustainable Development.**

**INTRODUCTION**

Environmental degradation remains one of the most pressing issues facing nations worldwide, particularly in developing countries like Nigeria. The environment provides all life support systems with air, water and land as well as the materials for fulfilling all developmental aspirations of man. As in most other countries of the world, the Nigerian environment today presents a grim litany of woes. The United Nations (UN) played a pivotal role in addressing environmental challenges in Nigeria, particularly those arising from extensive oil exploration and ecological degradation. The UN's involvement encompassed policy development, environmental assessments, and capacity building to foster sustainable environmental practices (Sharma & Ruud, 2003). The environmental challenges confronting Nigeria, such as deforestation, desertification, oil pollution, and the adverse effects of climate change, have profound implications for the nation's



sustainable development, public health, and economic growth. As a result, international cooperation in environmental protection has become a critical focus for global organisations, with the United Nations (UN) playing a significant role in shaping global environmental governance. Through its agencies, the UN has been involved in supporting Nigeria's environmental protection efforts, offering technical expertise, funding, and advocacy for sustainable policies.

A key initiative during this period was Nigeria's adoption of the Global Programme of Action (GPA) for the Protection of the Marine Environment from Land-based Activities, established by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). This program aimed to mitigate marine pollution and promote sustainable coastal management. Nigeria also benefited from UNEP-led environmental assessments, which highlighted the impact of oil spills and recommended measures to address ecosystem degradation (Sharma & Ruud, 2003). Since its establishment, the United Nations has worked with various countries, including Nigeria, to promote the sustainable management of natural resources and to mitigate the effects of environmental degradation. Nigeria, a country rich in natural resources, is grappling with the consequences of both anthropogenic activities and the growing impact of climate change.

From oil spills in the Niger Delta to the devastating effects of desertification in the northern regions. One of the most notable interventions by the United Nations in Nigeria's environmental space is the UNEP-led environmental assessment of the Niger Delta. This report provided comprehensive data on the environmental devastation caused by decades of oil spills and gas flaring. UNEP's recommendations, which called for urgent remediation efforts, highlighted the need for both local and international stakeholders to prioritize environmental restoration in the region. The Nigerian government, in partnership with the UN, launched the Niger Delta Environmental Restoration Programme to address some of these concerns, although progress has been slow.

Additionally, the UN played a crucial role in supporting Nigeria's participation in the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) Action Plan for the Environment, which outlined strategies to tackle deforestation, biodiversity loss, and industrial pollution (United Nations, 2001). In 2003, Nigeria submitted its First National Communication to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), demonstrating its commitment to addressing greenhouse gas emissions and enhancing climate resilience (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2003). Moreover, the UNDP's work in Nigeria has included supporting the government in the implementation of climate change mitigation and adaptation strategies. However, the UNDP and the Nigerian government jointly launched the Nigeria Climate Change Policy Response and Strategy, which outlines strategies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions while enhancing the resilience of vulnerable populations.

However, despite these ongoing initiatives, the question remains whether the United Nations' involvement has been sufficient to address Nigeria's environmental challenges. The effectiveness of UN interventions in Nigeria is often limited by a range of factors, including inadequate funding, insufficient political will, and an ineffective regulatory framework. Additionally, Nigeria's dependence on oil revenue often conflicts with the nation's environmental policies, as economic interests take precedence over environmental considerations. The oil and gas sector, in particular, remains a major contributor to environmental harm, including the destruction of ecosystems, air and water pollution, and displacement of communities.



This paper seeks to assess the role of the United Nations in protecting Nigeria's environment, critically evaluating the successes, challenges, and limitations of its engagement. By focusing on key UN agencies involved in Nigeria's environmental governance, this paper will provide a detailed examination of the impact of their interventions. Furthermore, this assessment will explore the barriers to success and offer recommendations on how the UN can enhance its support for environmental sustainability in Nigeria. The role of international cooperation in addressing global environmental challenges, particularly in developing countries like Nigeria, is more critical than ever. This analysis will contribute to the ongoing dialogue on improving the efficacy of UN-backed environmental programs and enhancing local ownership of environmental conservation efforts.

### CONCEPT OF ENVIRONMENT

Environment encompasses the interaction of biotic (living organisms) and abiotic (non-living elements) factors within ecosystems, societal frameworks, and global dynamics. It integrates natural elements such as land, water, air, plants, and animals with human-made structures and systems. Environment has evolved significantly over time, reflecting the growing awareness of its complexities and interconnectedness with human activities. The environment encompasses both the living and non-living components that form the Earth's ecosystems. The relationships among organisms and their surroundings, such as those seen in food webs and nutrient cycles, underscore the dynamic balance within the natural world. The environment is a socio-ecological interconnectedness of the environment and state engagement, which includes actions like sustainable practices and community-led conservation initiatives. This viewpoint emphasises how socio-environmental interdependencies call for coordinated efforts to tackle global issues like resource depletion and climate change, which promote information exchange to efficiently manage environmental risks.

The environment is the surrounding conditions, influences, and factors that affect the life, development, and behaviour of organisms. It includes both natural elements (like air, water, and climate) and human-made elements (like buildings, roads, and cities). However, the environment is the total sum of external conditions and factors that both living and non-living things affect and influence the growth, development, and survival of organisms in a specific area. .

The environment refers to the complex system of physical, chemical, biological, and social factors that surround and influence the life and activities of organisms. It includes all natural elements such as air, water, land, climate, and ecosystems, as well as human-made structures and modifications like cities, roads, and technology. The environment encompasses both the living components, such as plants, animals, and microorganisms, and the non-living aspects, including soil, sunlight, and atmospheric conditions. It plays a vital role in shaping the behaviours, survival, and evolution of living organisms and serves as the context in which all interactions between organisms and their surroundings occur.

Broadly defined, the environment encompasses all the external conditions, resources, and influences that surround and affect living organisms, including humans (Lewontin, 2000). Understanding the environment is crucial because it is directly linked to sustainability, resource management, and the preservation of life on Earth. This exploration seeks to delve into the multifaceted concept of the environment, considering



its natural, social, and ecological dimensions. At its core, the natural environment refers to the earth's biophysical surroundings, which include the atmosphere, hydrosphere, lithosphere, and biosphere.

Moreover, the natural environment provides vital resources such as air, water, and fertile soil, which are essential for the survival of human societies. The deterioration of these resources due to pollution, deforestation, and over-exploitation highlights the growing challenge of maintaining a balance between development and conservation (Alongi, 2002). While the natural environment sets the stage for human activities, the social environment shapes the way people use and relate to natural resources. Environmental policies and practices are largely influenced by social systems, cultural values, and economic priorities. For example, urbanization and industrialization, fueled by growing populations and economic demands, have contributed significantly to environmental degradation. However, these challenges also sparked movements advocating for social and environmental justice, calling for equity in environmental protection efforts (Agyeman, 2003).

### **CONCEPT OF ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION**

Environmental protection refers to the practices and strategies that aim to preserve, protect, and manage the natural environment in a way that ensures its sustainability for future generations. This includes efforts to reduce pollution, conserve natural resources, promote biodiversity, and mitigate the impacts of human activity on the planet. Environmental protection can be defined as the efforts made to preserve and restore the health of the natural environment by reducing the negative impact of human activities (Adler, 2000). Environmental protection involves measures taken to ensure that natural resources are used in a way that does not deplete or degrade them, while minimizing the harm caused by pollution and deforestation. These efforts also include the maintenance of air, water, and soil quality, as well as the protection of biodiversity and ecosystems. The primary aim is to create a balance between human development and ecological integrity.

It is also referred to the practice of safeguarding the natural world from human activities that cause harm, ensuring that ecosystems remain healthy and resilient. Environmental protection encompasses a wide range of strategies and policies aimed at preserving natural resources, reducing pollution, and maintaining biodiversity. As global environmental challenges continue to intensify, the need for effective environmental protection has become more urgent.

### **CONCEPT OF ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION**

Environmental degradation refers to the deterioration of the natural environment through the depletion of resources, the destruction of ecosystems, and the contamination of air, water, and soil. This degradation results from human activities that harm the environment and reduce its ability to support life and provide essential services. Environmental degradation is a complex and multifaceted issue that encompasses a variety of environmental problems, including pollution, deforestation, soil erosion, and the loss of biodiversity.



Environmental degradation can be defined as the process by which the natural environment is reduced in quality and capacity due to human activities and natural forces. According to research, it occurs when the environment no longer performs the functions necessary for human well-being and the survival of species. This process can be slow, as in the case of climate change or soil erosion, or rapid, as seen with deforestation and oil spills. Environmental degradation involves the depletion of non-renewable resources, the reduction in the resilience of ecosystems, and the loss of biodiversity, all of which threaten the stability of the planet's natural systems. The effects of environmental degradation are often far-reaching, impacting both ecosystems and human societies. For instance, pollution can cause health issues for communities, while deforestation can lead to the loss of vital ecological services such as carbon sequestration, water purification, and soil fertility (Chivian, 2002).

Environmental degradation manifests in various forms, each contributing to the decline in environmental quality. These include: pollution, deforestation, Soil Degradation, Biodiversity Loss and climate change. According to Kennish, (2002), pollution affects human health, disrupts ecosystems, and contributes to long-term environmental damage. Air pollution, for example, can cause respiratory diseases, while water pollution can destroy aquatic life and contaminate drinking water sources. Deforestation not only reduces the Earth's capacity to absorb carbon dioxide but also disrupts biodiversity by destroying habitats for many species as the forests plays a vital role in regulating the water cycle, maintaining soil fertility, and preserving ecosystems. The loss of forests due to logging and land conversion for agriculture has led to soil erosion, loss of biodiversity, and the release of carbon stored in trees, which contributes to climate change.

However, the primary causes of environmental degradation are linked to human activities, often driven by industrialization, urbanization, and unsustainable consumption patterns. Environmental degradation, particularly air and water pollution, has direct health consequences for humans as exposure to polluted air can lead to respiratory diseases, while contaminated water can cause waterborne diseases. According to Raven et al. (2000), environmental degradation is a major cause of death and illness worldwide, especially in developing countries with limited access to clean water and healthcare. The United Nations (2002), mentioned that climate change has far-reaching consequences, including rising sea levels, more frequent extreme weather events, and disruptions to agricultural production as these changes exacerbate environmental degradation by threatening ecosystems and human livelihoods. The degradation of ecosystems leads to a loss of ecosystem services that are essential for human survival. These services include clean air and water, pollination of crops, climate regulation, and soil fertility. As ecosystems are destroyed, these services become less reliable, leading to food and water insecurity, economic instability, and climate change. Ultimately, environmental degradation is a complex and multifaceted issue that poses significant challenges to the health of the planet and the well-being of future generations.

### **ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION STRATEGIES**

Environmental protection strategies evolved significantly, emphasizing sustainable development, pollution prevention, and legislative enforcement. These



strategies were driven by national policies, international cooperation, and scientific advancements aimed at mitigating environmental degradation.

- **Pollution Prevention and Sustainable Development**

A key focus during this period was pollution prevention through proactive strategies rather than reactive measures. The United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD), established after the 1992 Earth Summit, played a crucial role in integrating environmental concerns into economic policies (Barber, 2003). Nigeria and other developing nations benefited from technical assistance programs aimed at improving environmental governance and industrial pollution control. Additionally, sustainable development policies promoted the use of cleaner production technologies and resource efficiency to reduce ecological footprints.

- **Legislative Measures and Environmental Justice**

Environmental protection laws saw significant improvements during this period. The Environment Protection Act of 1993 established stricter regulations for industrial waste management and air quality standards (Federal Government of Nigeria, 1993). To address environmental justice, the Act mandated environmental impact assessments (EIAs) for major projects, ensuring that vulnerable communities were not disproportionately affected by pollution and hazardous waste disposal (Federal Government of Nigeria, 1993).

- **International Environmental Agreements and Climate Action**

During this decade, countries worldwide, including Nigeria, committed to international environmental agreements such as the Kyoto Protocol of 1997, which set binding emission reduction targets to combat global warming. Nigeria, in its First National Communication to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in 2003, outlined its strategy for reducing greenhouse gas emissions and adapting to climate change.

- **Biodiversity Conservation and Natural Resource Management**

Efforts to protect biodiversity and manage natural resources sustainably were strengthened through the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), which Nigeria ratified in 1994. This led to the establishment of conservation programs focusing on forest management, wildlife protection, and the reduction of deforestation rates, particularly in the Niger Delta and Sahel regions.

## CHALLENGES FACED IN ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

Environmental protection efforts faced several challenges, including weak legislative frameworks, poor enforcement mechanisms, and emerging environmental threats such as climate change and biodiversity loss. These challenges hindered the effectiveness of environmental policies and sustainable development initiatives.

- **Legislative and Policy Challenges**

A significant challenge during this period was the difficulty in passing and implementing comprehensive environmental laws. For example, the Department of Environmental Protection Act of 1993 sought to establish the Office of Environmental Justice to address environmental inequalities, yet it faced strong political opposition, delaying its effectiveness. Many developing nations, including Nigeria, struggled with outdated environmental laws that lacked stringent penalties for industrial pollution and deforestation, making enforcement ineffective (Federal Government of Nigeria, 1999).



- **Climate change and Overpopulation**

Global warming due to the accumulation of greenhouse gases leads to extreme weather patterns, sea-level rise, and disruptions to ecosystems. The challenge of reducing emissions while balancing economic growth remains a significant hurdle. However, rapid population growth puts pressure on natural resources like water, land, and energy, leading to deforestation, overfishing, and depletion of biodiversity. Increased waste and pollution are consequences of overpopulation.

- **Enforcement and Compliance Issues**

Weak enforcement of environmental regulations was another major obstacle. While policies existed, their implementation was often undermined by limited financial resources and lack of political will. Agencies such as the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the Nigerian Federal Environmental Protection Agency (FEPA) frequently encountered challenges in ensuring compliance with industrial pollution controls. Reports highlighted that in many regions, businesses continued harmful environmental practices due to lax enforcement and corruption, leading to worsening air and water pollution.

- **Emerging Environmental Concerns**

New environmental issues gained prominence in the late 1990s, requiring urgent global attention. Climate change, for example, was officially recognized as a serious threat through the Kyoto Protocol of 1997, which set emission reduction targets. However, many countries, including the U.S., faced resistance from industries reluctant to adopt costly emission reduction measures (United Nations, 2000). Additionally, biodiversity loss became a growing concern, with deforestation and habitat destruction accelerating due to weak conservation policies (UNEP, 2003).

- **Pollution and depletion of Natural resources**

Air, water, and soil pollution from industrial activities, transportation, and agricultural practices lead to environmental degradation and health issues. Waste management, especially in urban areas, is a significant challenge, as landfill space becomes limited and recycling rates remain low.

Although, over-exploitation of resources such as fossil fuels, minerals, and fresh water leads to their depletion, threatening long-term sustainability. The unsustainable consumption of resources, particularly in developed countries, accelerates the depletion process.

## MITIGATING STRATEGIES TO THE CHALLENGES FACED IN ENVIRONMENTAL

Environmental protection efforts were hampered by weak legislation, poor enforcement, and emerging environmental crises. To address these challenges, governments, international organizations, and environmental agencies implemented various mitigating strategies. These included policy reforms, strengthened enforcement mechanisms, international collaborations, and technological innovations to promote sustainable environmental management.

- **Legislative Reforms and Policy Strengthening**

One of the key strategies for mitigating environmental challenges during this period was the enactment and strengthening of environmental laws. The Department of Environmental Protection Act of 1993 in the United States aimed to enhance regulatory



oversight and establish the Office of Environmental Justice to address environmental inequalities. Similarly, Nigeria introduced the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Act in 1999, which mandated that all major development projects undergo rigorous environmental impact evaluations before approval (Federal Government of Nigeria, 2000). These legislative measures sought to create a more structured and accountable environmental governance framework.

- **Enhancing Enforcement and Compliance Mechanisms**

To address weak enforcement, governments invested in building institutional capacity for environmental monitoring. The establishment of the Environmental Protection Authority (EPA) in various nations helped to strengthen regulatory compliance and ensure industrial accountability (Weiss & Jacobson, 2000). In Nigeria, the Federal Environmental Protection Agency (FEPA) was restructured to improve its capacity for pollution control and resource management. These measures facilitated stricter compliance with environmental standards, reducing instances of illegal dumping and industrial pollution.

- **International Agreements and Global Cooperation**

Mitigating environmental challenges required global cooperation. One of the most significant international strategies was the adoption of the Kyoto Protocol in 1997, which set legally binding emission reduction targets for industrialized nations. Nigeria and other developing nations also participated in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), which provided funding and technical support for climate adaptation projects (United Nations, 2001). These agreements fostered a collective approach to addressing climate change, deforestation, and pollution on a global scale.

- **Technological Innovations and Sustainable Practices**

Advancements in technology aimed at reducing environmental harm. The promotion of cleaner production technologies and renewable energy sources, such as solar and wind power, gained traction in several countries (UNEP, 2003). In addition, pollution prevention programs encouraged industries to adopt waste minimization techniques, reducing environmental degradation. These efforts contributed to lowering carbon emissions and reducing dependency on fossil fuels.

- **Public Awareness and Environmental Education**

Governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) played a vital role in raising environmental awareness. The National Environmental Education Act of the U.S. promoted environmental education and awareness campaigns. In Nigeria, awareness campaigns on deforestation, desertification, and pollution were intensified to encourage communities to adopt sustainable practices (Federal Government of Nigeria, 2001). This period saw increased engagement from civil society in environmental advocacy, leading to greater public participation in conservation efforts.

## CONCLUSION

The United Nations has played a crucial role in protecting Nigeria's environment through policy support, funding initiatives, and capacity-building programs. Agencies such as UNEP, UNDP, and FAO have contributed to combating deforestation, pollution, and climate change while promoting sustainable development. However, challenges such as weak enforcement of environmental laws, inadequate local participation, and funding constraints persist. Moving forward, a more integrated approach is needed, emphasizing



stronger collaboration between the Nigerian government, the private sector, and international partners. Strengthening environmental governance, enhancing technological innovation, and increasing public awareness will be vital in ensuring long-term environmental sustainability in Nigeria.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. The Nigerian government should enhance the enforcement of environmental laws by improving regulatory frameworks and increasing compliance monitoring with support from UN agencies.
2. The UN should facilitate more financial support and technological assistance for Nigeria's environmental programs, ensuring the effective execution of sustainability projects.
3. Strengthening community involvement in environmental initiatives through education, capacity-building, and incentives will foster long-term sustainability and grassroots engagement.
4. Encouraging the adoption of clean energy solutions and eco-friendly technologies will reduce pollution and mitigate climate change effects in Nigeria.
5. It is advised to create and encourage stronger partnerships between the UN, Nigerian government, private sector, and civil society will enhance knowledge-sharing, resource mobilization, and the implementation of impactful environmental strategies.



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