

JOSIAH O. AJIBOYE AND FOLASHADE AFOLABI

16. ENVIRONMENTAL PROBLEMS AND THEIR IMPACT ON PEOPLE'S HEALTH

The Nigerian Context

BACKGROUND

Nigeria, located in West Africa, has a population of 140,431,790, comprised of diverse ethnic groups and about 71 million males and 69 million females (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2009a). The major ethnic groups are Yoruba, Hausa, and Igbo. The official language of communication is English because the country was colonized by the British in the 19th and 20th centuries. Colonization imposed the objectives of Western values and lifestyles on the socioeconomic, political, and environmental structures of the nation ("Tourism," 2002).

The Nigerian environment is blessed with many scenic riches, ranging from the wide ocean coastline, through verdant swamp and moist forest vegetation to lush savanna, culminating in the country's Sahel savannah. These diverse environments are interspersed by rivers, lakes, streams, caves, valleys, and mountains, and enlivened by many birds and animals.

In this chapter, we examine the health and environmental problems facing the people of the Baruten Local Government Area, especially the school-age children. We also consider the school health education curriculum and instructional strategies that teachers could adopt in order to make the curriculum more relevant to people's lives. The chapter is informed by recent research, the findings of which show that use of appropriate instructional strategies, such as entertainment education, inculcates healthy behaviors and attitudes and promotes understanding of health and environmental concepts. These developments are ones that help people apply the knowledge acquired to their real-life situations.

ENVIRONMENTAL AND HEALTH ISSUES FACING BARUTEN

Health and environmental issues are closely related in Baruten, a typical Nigerian community that has experienced little development. Baruten is situated in the northern part of Kwara State, which is located along the middle belt of Nigeria. Kwara has a population of about two million people, just over 200,000 of whom live in Baruten (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2009a).

Baruten is a largely agrarian community that prides itself on producing food and cash crops. In addition to coping with the poverty that is evident in such communities in Nigeria, Baruten faces indiscriminate sewage disposal, which has

resulted in waterborne diseases, among others, and has claimed many lives, generally those of school-age children. As a response to this situation, the government developed a health education curriculum for school students. The curriculum is designed not only to inculcate healthy behaviors and attitudes but also to provide children with strategies that they can apply to real-life situations. The overall aim is to change the lifestyle of people living in this area for the better. However, it appears that the curriculum is not being taught appropriately, and attention has now turned to how it and the way in which it is taught can be made more relevant to the lives, realities, and practices of local people.

The improper disposal of human, domestic, agricultural, and industrial waste has contaminated the underground water system in Baruten (Ahiakwo, 1998). Agu (2000) and Okebukola (1995) note that underground water contamination continues to be a major environmental problem throughout Nigeria and especially in communities such as Baruten. The Federal Government of Nigeria joined the global crusade against environmental degradation when, in 1992, toxic waste was imported into Nigeria and dumped into the country's waterways and onto the land. This event gave impetus to the establishment of Nigeria's Federal Environmental Protection Agency. It also led to the government commissioning the Nigeria Educational Research and Development Council to develop a curriculum for environmental education, using the infusion approach. The government duly approved the curriculum for use in all states in Nigeria.

Another government (both federal and state) initiative, conducted in collaboration with international non-governmental organizations, involved a series of workshops set up to identify and inventory Nigeria's various environmental problems. One outcome, at the state level, involved encouraging various environmental agencies to promote separation of waste materials at the point where they were being generated so as to avoid contamination of stream and river water. Another was the requirement for schools to organize school conservation clubs so that children could gain a better understanding of their environment and take a more active part in resolving the problems affecting it.

These developments were much needed in Baruten, where no one had scientifically tested water purity and where water was being used without concern for waterborne diseases. In general, the people of the area believed that polluted water is harmless. People walked through streams when coming from farms, threw refuse into the waterways, and even washed in them, not minding that the same streams were serving the community's drinking water. Sickness from waterborne diseases was attributed to the gods seeking to punish people, including children, for violating their laws (Petters, 1995). People's efforts to appease the gods by offering sacrifices pointed to the need for both environmental and health education—and enlightenment.

According to the Pulitzer Center (2010), just over 900 million people worldwide lack reliable access to water that is free from disease and industrial waste, and 40% of the world's population does not have access to adequate sanitation facilities. These figures denote one of the world's greatest public health crises; an estimated 4,500 children die daily from waterborne diseases. More specifically, diarrhea kills an estimated 1.5 million people a year in the developing world (Pulitzer Center,