STATUS OF ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH EDUCATION
IN THE EASTERN AFRICA REGION:
OPPORTUNITIES, CHALLENGES
AND THE WAY FORWARD
Abstract

This paper underscores that sustainable environmental health education among African communities requires a shift of perceptions, which are based on people's environmental health norms. The polemic assesses the possibility of using contemporary environmental health education to conscientize religious communities on suitable environmental health ideals through socio-religious institutions.

The paper starts with a highlight of cross cutting cosmological and environmental health beliefs and norms among two communities; concept of good health, causes of sickness and methods of health care practices. Major environmental health challenges are identified, and implications on sustainable wholistic development. The paper then examines how environmental health values; beliefs and norms are disseminated in the indigenous communities and possible ways of using contemporary religious institutions to re-orientate them towards sustainable environmental health practices. In this regard attention is given on formal and informal environmental health education disseminated in religious institutions, CBOs and NGOs. Appropriate intervention measures are recommended.

Introduction

Environmentalists concur that community's worldview largely influence the way people conduct their daily activities, utilization and management of elements of environment as well as their health care practices (GMEF, 2001 and WSSD, 2002). In this regard people's worldviews are founded on their community's socio-religious beliefs and cosmological perceptions (UNEP, 1999). Our discussion focuses on two communities within East Africa, namely, Abakwaya of Mara region in Tanzania and Mijikenda of Coast Province in Kenya. Notably some Muslims and Christians among these communities continue to propagate indigenous environmental health values and norms. As such this phenomenon is common among several other Africa communities (Bourdillon, 1990 and Magesa, 1998, Ongong'a, 1999). This phenomenon is viewed as a challenge to sustainable dissemination and mobilization of communities at grassroots level to adopt contemporary environmental health values and practices.

The specific objectives of the research paper include: To examine the contemporary concept of environmental health education and highlight how it is disseminated among the Abakwaya and Mijikenda communities; To highlight the indigenous cosmological and environmental health norms of the Abakwaya and Mijikenda communities; To discuss the influence of indigenous socio-religious health norms on the Mijikenda Muslims and Abakwaya Christians response to appropriate health care practices; To identify the role of Christian and Muslim religious institutions in dissemination of environmental health education; To recommend possible strategies of using Christian and Muslim religious institutions to re-orientate indigenous health norms.

The research is guided by socio-religious concepts of environmental health norms. It is based on theocentric concept of environmental health and development (Boff 1995; Nyaga, 2003c). This study relied on qualitative data from primary and secondary sources. Primary data was collected through individual interviews, focus group discussions (F.G.Ds) and personal observations while secondary data was obtained through library research. Respondents considered for this study include religious leaders like priests and lay leaders (among the Christians), and Imams and Madrassah tutors (among the Muslims); local sages, farmers and fishermen were also sampled among the Abakwaya and Mijikenda. Qualitative methods of data analysis were used.

Cosmological and Environmental Health Beliefs and Norms

The Abakwaya and Mijikenda believe that the cosmos is linked up by a web of spirits. In this regard, the spiritual world is directly linked up with the physical world and everything in their environment. They have a strong belief in mystical powers, which are beyond the control of ordinary persons. This is underscored in traditional Abakwaya and Mijikenda songs, riddles, proverbs, taboos and folklore. Indeed, most socio-economic and natural phenomena are attributed to mysterious forces, power, which pervade the Abakwaya and Mijikenda ecologies.

The traditional Abakwaya and Mijikenda cosmological perspective therefore underscores that disrupting the order of the physical world destabilizes the natural harmony between physical and spiritual worlds. As such, their worldview expressed in their traditional beliefs, values and customs guides their manner of conducting different socio-economic activities. Hence regulate people's activities when utilizing natural resources like water, flora and fauna. The norms
emphasize moderation and prohibition of extravagancy while using natural resources for the sake of posterity. Such norms constitute what can be regarded as the indigenous environmental principles or ethics.

The research revealed that indigenous environmental norms are still upheld and perpetuated in contemporary period. Different categories of informants among the Mijikenda were unanimous that environmental health norms/principles and their related beliefs are imparted on the children during their socialization. Children are for instance taught beliefs, taboos and principles regulating use and management of water sources to minimize possible contamination, acceptable ways of cultivating the farms, fishing and harvesting forest products. They are also taught issues related to permitted and prohibited foods and drinks, are shown plants with medicinal values, animals and plants which should be revered and protected and the values attached to holy shrines. This was underscored by different categories of informants as illustrated in the following graph.

Figure 1 Showing Informants Responses on Awareness of Indigenous Environmental Norms

The above graph illustrates responses of different categories of people who were interviewed. Our question was: “Are you aware of some indigenous Mijikenda values and principles regulating the use of natural resources within your locality?” It shows that indigenous environmental values are strongly entrenched in African cultural values and practices. However, some elders argued that indigenous environmental values and practices are on the decline due to perpetuation of new ideologies disseminated through world religions like Islam and Christianity; secularists worldviews perpetuated among the youth in schools and colleges who are influenced by ideologies associated with urbanization and globalization.

Status of Environmental Health Education in The Eastern Africa Region

It became apparent that Abakwaya and Mijikenda perceive physical features like ocean, rivers, hills, valleys, caves; wetlands, varied ecological settings, some forests and specific species of trees, among other constituents of their environment as embodiment of mystical powers (Waaijenberg, 1994, C.F.C.U, 1998; Tengeza, 1999; Magesa and Nyaga, 1999; TWESA/CASEC, 1999; Makokha, 2000). These communities' sentimental attachments towards some natural resources is based on traditional myths, values and beliefs of their cultural heritage. Enhancement of this concept and the related norms is viewed as a possible means of fostering conservation of biodiversity and other natural resources among the Mijikenda.

Concept of Good Health, Causes of Sickness and Methods of Health Care Practices.

Abakwaya and Mijikenda have a strong belief in witchcraft. They observe that although they adhere to Christianity or Islam, they still acknowledge the powers of ancestral spirits, magic and witchcraft. Some medical officers in government dispensaries and hospitals advise patients to consult diviners and traditional medicine persons when patients appear to be taking too long to heal. In Bukwaya, some elders explained that traditional diviners and medicine persons treat people and recover from mental and physical illness and with broken bones after accidents (Magesa and Nyaga, 1999). It is further explained that there are many people, who are thought to be mentally sick, yet they are just possessed by evil spirits. This is a challenge to health workers who are involved in dissemination of environmental health education.

Challenges of Introducing New Concepts of Health Care Practices

The two communities have related concepts of body health, appropriate system of diagnosis and treatment of different health conditions. Most people including some young and the educated ones succumb to witchcraft beliefs and practices and associated superstitions. They are known to tolerate witchcraft practices among fellow family members and sometimes send money to their parents to hire the services of diviners and sorcerers/sorceresses whenever there are some medical or social problems requiring diagnosis or some revenge.

Indigenous environmental values and practices, and beliefs in magic and witchcraft have constrained people from adopting contemporary environmental education particularly issues related to personal hygiene styles. Others include liquid and solid waste management (sanitation), awareness and appreciation of sharing of toilets/latrines among some relatives (e.g. in-laws).
Role of Christian and Muslim Institutions in Dissemination of Environmental Education

African heritages reveal some environmental considerations, which were consciously observed in people's daily life (NEAP, 1994; Ongong'a, 1999 and UNEP, 1999). However due to the multi-dimensional changes in our contemporary period, not all traditional beliefs, values and customs are appropriate in encountering prevailing environmental health challenges among communities like Abakwaya and Mijikenda. The following sections highlight the Christian and Islamic teachings on environmental health ideals and role of religious institutions in disseminating the same teachings.

Dissemination of Christian Ideals on Environmental Health

Scholars and theologians have examined the biblical concept of environment and need for the church to be actively involved in dissemination of environmental education (Hallman, 1994; Getau, 2000). This education incorporates appropriate values and ideals of how our environment impacts or influences our health. Hallman (1994); Ongong'a, (1999); and Getau (2000) have broadly analyzed the misinterpretation of biblical teachings as seen in the book of Genesis (1:26, 28). They note that God's commandment to the first human family to have dominion over the rest of creation should not be confused with authority to exercise tyranny over the rest of creation. These biblical passages are followed up by other sections of the bible, which provide guidelines on the need to care for our environment to ensure it supports the present and future generations.

Dissemination of Islamic Ideals on Environmental Health

Islamic ideals on conservation of environment elaborate on the precepts in the Quran and Hadith, which underscore that Allah is the creator and sustainer of everything in the universe. The teachings further provide guidelines on the way human kind should co-exist with the rest of the created order in the environment. (Quran, 2:117; 15:19-25; 20:50 and 88:17-20). Some ideals emphasized include the lawful and unlawful foods and drinks whether from plants or animals; emphasis on cleanliness of body, hygienic practices in handling of water resources, sanitation and one's living environment. In this regard, Islam is explicit on the need to adhere to principles of environmental health for religious reasons and to avoid environmental related diseases.

Islam further provides detailed guidelines on how human beings should utilize different elements of environment such as water, vegetation, forest products, and arable land, marine resources, domestic and wild animals. In addition, Quranic precepts outline principles on the need to adhere to principles of environmental health for religious reasons and to avoid environmental related diseases.

Research on the role of Muslim institutions in dissemination of Islamic environmental principles among its followers' shows that they underscore ideals of environmental health and sustainable socio-economic development based on the Quran and Hadith. Islam therefore underlines ideals of pursuing objectives leading to "health-for- all in the 21st century."

Challenges to effective application of the Islamic environmental health principles are such as: lack of comprehensive formal and informal environmental health education programmes, which can be effectively integrated into local religious institutions and local CBOs to enhance appropriate response to contemporary
environmental health realities; economic constraints (hardships) make some Mijikenda Muslims to contravene Islamic environmental health principles; natural factors like prolonged draughts which dries tree seedlings where agro-forestry is being carried our and general scarcity of water resources making sustainable management of available resources strenuous; and lack of well-integrated and co-ordinated system, which can strengthen cooperation between the government departments and Muslim institutions in matters of dissemination of appropriate environmental health education. This hinders effective mobilization of all people (at grassroots level) to participate in environmental and primary health education programmes.

Government officials ignore the locally based Islamic environmental education, which is imparted on Muslim children in Madrassah institutions. This implies that there lacks systematic harmonization of indigenous norms, Islamic education and contemporary formal environmental health education.

Recommendations on Effective Re-orientation of Indigenous Environmental Health Norms

The search for viable methods of educating rural communities on contemporary environmental health knowledge and practices have become crucial as indigenous African environmental norms; scientific and technological advancements conflict in several ways. Christian and Muslims religious institutions could form an important system of re-orientating local communities' perspectives in environmental health ideals. In regard to the impact of witchcraft beliefs and indigenous health norms on of adoption contemporary environmental health education, there must be a deliberate effort to apply effective strategies of challenging misleading beliefs on mystical powers, magic and sorcery among Abakwaya and Mijikenda.

Conclusion

It is observed that among egalitarian communities like Abakwaya and Mijikenda, the unique socio-religious and socio-economic dynamics must be addressed directly for sustainable dissemination of new ideals. Local communities’ perspectives should form the basis of planning strategic programmes of education and socio-economic empowerment. The study revealed that social organizations of Mijikenda and Abakwaya are strongly founded on local people’s socio-religious or cultural network.

In regard to the impact of rigidity in indigenous cosmological perspectives and belief in mystical powers and witchcraft, the long term strategy to eliminate such beliefs and perceptions lie on development of formal and informal programmes to enlighten as many people as possible.

References


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