

Africa, Depletable Natural Resources and the Rights of Future Generations

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ABSTRACT : *Economies of African states rest on the exploration of natural resources for their sustenance. Although these resources are in abundant supply, in some cases, yet, with time, due to excessive exploration, they will be depleted. Consequently, in this paper, we draw attention to what the attitude of existing Africans should be to depletable natural resources in order to avoid causing harm to future generations that will need these resources when they come into existence. The positions pushed in the paper are that: future generations have a right to sizeable portion of depletable natural resources; natural resources are only held in trust by existing generations and; future generations need to inherit enough portion of Africa' s natural resources in good conditions in order to meet their basic needs. However, greed on the part of African leaders was identified as a major challenge leading to excessive exploration of natural resources. We, therefore, called for the need to have change in attitude towards exploration of depletable natural resources in Africa*

Keywords: Depletable natural resources, future generations, Africa, African leaders

I. Introduction

As things stand today, the main source of sustenance of economies of African states is exploration of natural resources, which future generations will need when they come. Although these natural resources are in abundant supply in some cases in many African nations, yet, they are not inexhaustible. With time, due to excessive exploration, coal, gold, oil, natural gas, and other natural resources, that Africa possesses, and which have been the main-stay of her economies, will be depleted. What then should be the disposition of the current generation of Africans regarding the use of depletable natural resources in relation to the rights of Africans separated from us by time? Should the present generation of Africans cautiously use natural resources, or should the belief be that existing people have no duty to future persons; that future generations can only have rights to what is available at the time they come into existence after existing persons must have taken theirs as they like?

In this paper, there is the examination of the effects of depleting natural resources on future generations. The central argument pursued, in the paper, is that resources of the earth belong to all- past, present, and future generations- that pass through planet earth and that being a link in the continuum, present persons must ensure that future generations have a fair share of the inheritance that nature makes available to all.

We will consider the argument whether it is not possible that the resource need of future generations will be different from those of current persons, rendering whatever sacrifice we make to conserve resources worthless. Our response to this is that the future will, to a large extent, resemble the present; and this puts a responsibility on existing people to conserve natural resources in order to protect the interest of future generations because just as existing generations need these essential resources so will the survival and improved welfare of future generations depend on meeting substantial quantity of such resources. Future generations, we claim, have a right to life and their right to life is dependent on certain essential resources which will enhance their well-being when they come to exist. The right to life of future generations and right to the essential resources needed for survival are morally significant claims against existing persons which behave the present

generation to leave “ enough as good” for future people in order to enable them “ inherit the earth in at least as good condition as it has been in for any previous generation.”¹

In concluding this work, we express the view that a major problem with the way resources are used in Africa is to the detriment of future generations because tapped resources are not judiciously employed to meet the current basic needs of Africans as a result of greed and waste which lead to over exploration of finite natural resources thereby depleting the rightful portion of future Africans. More efforts, we submit, consequently, need to be directed at restraining consumption of African resources through enhancement of sustainable development which gives primacy to improved governance that will reduce the over-exploitation and waste of natural resources in Africa so that the needs of future generations can be met.

We start the essay by putting forward arguments in defence of the rights of future generation. This is followed by the section in which we consider how the recklessness, greed, and waste of the people in government and African elites lead to over-exploration and consequently the depletion of the rightful portion of future Africans.

II. In Defence of the Rights of Future Generations

A major argument against the rights of future generations sees their non-existence as an issue. Rights, it is claimed, belong to existing people and it is to them that we have obligations. Future generations are only contingent persons; they are remote and indeterminate beings; they are mere potential people and, as such, have no rights. According to Bodunrin, “ the problem is that as ordinarily conceived, rights belong to persons, future persons are mere possibilities. In what sense could possible beings be said to have rights?”² In a way, an interpretation of the argument against future generations which sees their non-existence as an issue boils down to asking whether future generations have rights *now*; for the basis on which there is a dispute regarding their rights is whether they are rights that hold now or they are rights that are obtainable in the future, when they eventually come into existence. Is there a present existence of the rights of future people?

Richard T. De George is an antagonist of the claim that future generations have rights now. For him, “ the argument in favour of the principle that only existing entities have rights is straightforward and simple. Non-existent entities by definition do not exist. What does not exist cannot be the subject or bearer of anything. Hence, it cannot be the subject or bearer of rights.”³ Ruth Maclin shares this view. For her, “ the ascription of rights is properly to be made to actual persons- not possible persons. Since future generations can only be viewed as consisting of possible persons, from any vantage point at which the description ‘ future generations’ is applicable, it would follow... that rights cannot properly be ascribed to future generations.”⁴ Is there anything in the notion of rights that makes it applicable to existing generation only, and excludes its applicability to future people?

One may defend the rights of future generations by claiming that their rights exist now, and put a burden on existing persons to respect them; while recognising that whenever future beings come to exist they become recipients of those rights. Since their rights exist now, their rights should constrain present actions. This is because “ it is more than a fair bet that there will be people around in the future who do not presently exist.”⁵ In fact, as Partridge argues, there is a mistake in the position of those who hold the view that future generations are possible beings. The mistake inheres in believing that that which is possible may not become certain. Future generations, to him, are possible and certain beings. It is only as a result of catastrophe, arising from nuclear annihilation, which is within the power of present generation to avoid, that the possibility and certainty of future beings may be stopped.⁶

In any case, it is safer to work with the belief that future persons will come to exist than with the belief that since the membership of the class “ future generations” is null now and since we have no certainty they will exist then we need not live with caution regarding how natural resources are depleted. For if they eventually come to exist we would have done irreparable damage to them and there would have been “ violations of rights

¹ Edith Brown Weiss, “ Our Rights and Obligation to Future Generations for the Environment,” *American Journal of International Law*, Vol. 84, No. 1 (Jan., 1990), p. 84.

² P.O. Bodunrin, “ Philosophy: Meaning and Method,” *Ibadan Journal of Humanistic Studies*, No. 1 (1981), pp. 14-15.

³ Richard T. De George, “ Do We Owe the Future Anything?” in James P. Sterba (ed.), *Morality in Practice*. Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1980, p. 90.

⁴ Ernest Partridge, “ On the Right of Future Generations.” *Upstream/Downstream: Issues in Environmental Ethics*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press 1990, p. 52.

⁵ Robert Elliot, “ The Rights of Future People,” *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (1989.), p. 161.

⁶ Partridge, “ On the Right of Future Generations,”

flowing from our actions and policies.⁷ Future generations should be seen as members of our moral community that deserve moral consideration now and that can be made worse off or better with our actions. Since our actions have effects on them, we need to be cautious in ensuring that the effects of our actions are not in the negative. “As members of the extended moral community, we have obligations at the least to do no damage to the potential interests of future generations”⁸ It is only commitment to this that can guarantee that future generations will have equal opportunities and benefits as we and at the same time ensure that we “preserve nature and the environment so as to enable future generations to live on the same standard as we claim today.”⁹

To have a right is to have an inalienable claim to something that belongs to one and the most basic of one's rights is the right to life. It is upon this fundamental right that other rights come to rest. Once, individuals in the class future generations are given birth to they will each have a right to life. By having a right to life, future generations also have a right to receive resources that are necessary for satisfying their basic needs that will keep them alive. This is because “a person's basic needs are those which must be satisfied in order not to seriously endanger his health or sanity. Thus, receiving goods and resources that are necessary for satisfying his basic needs would preserve a person's life in the fullest sense.”¹⁰ It is important to note, as pointed out by Richard P. Hikes, that rights exist in order to protect individuals from experiencing harm to their “physical well-being, political equality, or sense of dignity.”¹¹ Thus, if we continue to wantonly explore depletable natural resources we are likely to cause some harm to future beings. This is even more so because a lot of our actions in complex modern society have increased the danger that can be posed to future generations due to increased population, more economic activities and industrialisation, and higher demand on natural resources. Lothar Gundling notes in this regard that, “humanity has accumulated a monstrous potential to destroy life on earth and... it is using natural resources and the environment in a way that threatens the survival of future generations.”¹² As a result of our activities, the world is now faced with various challenges like deforestation, water pollution and deteriorating water quality, acid rain, soil degradation, as well as loss of natural animal and plant species, ozone layer depletion and climate change.¹³ And these, according to David Narum means that, “the planet is under an assault that could lead to its inability to support life as we know it.”¹⁴ This being the case, the right to life of future persons behoves the present generation to begin to live a life of modesty that ensures that future generations inherit a fair portion of the resources of the earth which can sustain their means of livelihood.

This right also imposes on government and its agencies the necessity to take appropriate decisions that will lead to the conservation of resources. For instance, as far as oil is concerned, “it is obvious that there can be worthwhile arrangements which are not dependent on oil.”¹⁵ The thing to do is to encourage research into alternatives which will enable us to sustain civilisation as we know it with more easily renewable resources. In the case of oil, for instance, Frederickson posits that “...we are entitled to use oil reserves if, ... we invest in the research and development required to find an affordable substitute...”¹⁶ The inability to conserve resources that can be depleted will no doubt lead to reducing the quality of life that future generations will have and this would have denied future generations what Robert Elliot calls “the right to a life worth living.”¹⁷

There is, however, the argument that present persons have no duty to conserve resources because future persons will only have rights to whatever is left when they eventually surface. To this position, we may respond that the resources of the earth, which our ancestors have made use of, belong, not only to us, who are mere links in the continuum, but also to our descendants. We, thus, share the position of Edith Brown Weiss that “we, the human species, hold the natural environment of our planet in common with all members of our species: past

⁷ Elliot, “The Rights of Future People,” p. 162.

⁸ H. George Frederickson, “Can Public Officials Correctly Be Said to Have Obligation to Future Generations?” *Public Administration Review*. Vol. 54, No. 5 (1994), p. 459.

⁹ Lothar Gundling, “Our Responsibility to Future Generations,” *The American Journal of International Law*, Vol. 84, No. 1. (Jan., 1990), p. 211.

¹⁰ James P. Sterba, “The Welfare Rights of Distant People and Future Generations: Moral Side-Constraints on Social Policy,” *Social Theory and Practice*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (1981), p. 101.

¹¹ Richard P. Hikes, “Environmental Rights, Intergenerational Justice, and Reciprocity with the Future,” *Public Affairs Quarterly*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (July, 2015.), p.182.

¹² Gundling, “Our Responsibility to Future Generations,” p. 208.

¹³ Stuart Harris, “Natural Resources and Energy- And Sustainable Development,” *The Australian Quarterly*, Vol. 63, No. 4, pp. 400-401.

¹⁴ David Narum, “International Cooperation on Global Warming and the Rights of Future Generations,” *Policy Sciences*, Vol. 26, No. 1, p. 21.

¹⁵ Elliot, “The Rights of Future People,” p. 165.

¹⁶ Frederickson, “Can Public Officials Correctly be Said to Have Obligation to Future Generations?,” p. 462.

¹⁷ Elliot, “The Rights of Future People,” p. 166.

generations, the present generation, and future generations. As members of the present generation, we hold the earth in trust for future generations.”¹⁸ Indeed as a former British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, puts it “no generation has a freehold on the earth. All we have is a life tenancy- with full repairing lease.”¹⁹ This view finds justification in John Locke’s position which allows one to mix one’s labour with, and make use of, natural resources, in as much as one leaves enough and as good for others. According to Frederickson, what this position of Locke points to is “a state of nature in which we are moral equals, equally entitled to use the earth and its resources.”²⁰

There’s however the position that there is nothing that makes it fool proof that the needs of the present generation will inevitably coincide with the needs of future generations. And as such the present generation cannot adequately guess that the resources that they have denied themselves will be needed by people who come in the future. Sterba captures this dilemma in the following words:

we cannot know for sure what effects our actions will have on future generations. For example, we may at some cost to ourselves conserve resources that will be of little value to future generations who have developed different technologies. Or, because we regard them as useless, we may destroy or deplete resources that future generations will find to be essential to their well-being.²¹

However, our lack of knowledge about whether future generations will need exactly the same resources we are dependent on should not in any way deter us from being proactive in foreseeing the future as a replica of our current situation. The civilisation that we currently have is dependent on certain resources, and if we pass on this civilisation to those coming immediately after us and they in turn pass it on to those after them, then the resources on which we are dependent will be required to sustain civilisation as it is handed over to future persons from us. Our thinking about future beings needs to change, we need to “stop thinking of generations as monoliths and give due consideration to the fact that generations overlap.”²² It is not impossible that outcome of Research and Development in the future will lead to the discovery of other means of sustaining this civilisation but truth is that we do not know that for certain. Therefore, the safer thing to do is to act based on the knowledge we possess now and not “expect that future generations will develop the knowledge and technology necessary to cope with all the problems they inherit from us.”²³ We can only justifiably believe that since existing civilisation is dependent on certain resources, and since future generations will inherit civilisation as we know it, they will need the resources with which we sustained civilisation in our time.

It appears that our belief that future generations will require some of the things with which we have sustained our civilisation is the reason why we are painstaking in documenting and passing on to our offspring some of the knowledge we possess in the hope that our knowledge reservoir will be useful in some ways, not only to the present generation but also to future persons. If we are so careful in passing on requisite knowledge for the sustenance of civilisation as we know it, we should also endeavour to make sacrifice to pass on tangible resources that will be useful for our distant successors. In any case, it is important to act conscious of the needs of future persons than to be negligent and culpable of jeopardising their existence. We thus agree with Sterba that:

the best approach...is to use the knowledge that we presently have and assume that future generations will also require those basic resources we now find to be valuable. If it turns out that future generations will require different resources to meet their basic needs from those we were led to expect, then at least we will not be blamable for acting on the basis of the knowledge we had.²⁴

III. Africa, the Problem of Finite Natural Resources and the Rights of Future Africans

¹⁸ Weiss, “Our Rights and Obligation to Future Generations for the Environment,” p. 84.

¹⁹ Margaret Thatcher, “Speech to Conservative Party Conference.” A speech delivered on the 14th of October, 1988 at the Conference Centre, Brighton. www.margaerthatcher.org/document/107352. Accessed on the 17th of July, 2016.

²⁰ Frederickson, “Can Public Officials Correctly Be Said to Have Obligation to Future Generations?,” p. 458.

²¹ Sterba, “The Welfare Rights of Distant People and Future Generations: Moral Side-Constraints on Social Policy,” p. 106.

²² Joseph Mazon, “Liberal Justice, Future People, and Natural Resource Conservation,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, Vol. 38, No. 4, p. 408.

²³ Gundling, “Our Responsibility to Future Generations,” p. 211.

²⁴ Sterba, “The Welfare Rights of Distant People and Future Generations: Moral Side-Constraints on Social Policy,” p. 106.

Dependence on natural resources has proven to be cataclysmic for the economies of some African states. For instance, Nigeria's economy has been thrown into disarray because the United States of America, a major buyer of Nigeria's oil, stopped buying oil from Nigeria. There has also been a fall in the price of oil in the world market. In addition, there has been the incidence of violence in the Niger Delta region which has resulted in the disruption of oil production. The trouble that Nigeria is facing as a result of the events in the oil sector is a pointer to the fact that there is over-dependence on oil exploration in the country. The over-exploration of oil is because other legitimate means of funding the economy are ignored. Many other African states are in similar situations- they depend on the exploration of one natural resource or the other to sustain their economies. This over-dependence on oil resources, in the case of Nigeria, and other natural resources in the case of other African countries, makes one reason that there is over-exploration of natural resources for the sake of meeting the current needs of the present generation. The implication of this over-dependence on the exploration of natural resources is that more than is necessary is explored, than would have been if only other sources of income generation are accessed.

The over-exploration of Africa's natural resources is however exacerbated due to greed on the part of, as well as corruption and capital flight caused by, African leaders. According to Dauda Abubakar, the tragedy with post-colonial African states... is that they lack visionary political leaders who will transcend personalist and primordial interests to transform the state into a viable vehicle that could address the basic needs of the citizenry through the provision of adequate health facilities, qualitative education, shelter, food, good roads, water, telecommunication facilities and security of lives and property. Post-independence leaders of Africa not only personalised power, but also privatised the state for the purpose of primitive accumulation, clientelism and repression of all forms of opposition. Instead of using the state for initiation of development, African leaders utilised it as a vehicle for terrorising the citizenry, thereby leading to the disengagement of the populace from the public realm.²⁵

Unfortunately, the selfishness and the avarice of the ruling elites in Africa can only have the consequence of depleting the rightful portion of future generations in their attempt to satisfy what Clark Wolf calls " adventitious needs," which are " things that it is necessary to have in order to enjoy benefits beyond what is necessary to live an adequate and decent human life."²⁶ These elites, through corruption, source for, and amass wealth for themselves through rent seeking from depletable natural resources. And in order to get more, they explore more thereby hastening the rate of consumption of Africa's natural resources with the ultimate consequence of short-changing future generations. African political leaders and elite often forget that " a much larger group of resource-rich countries have [just] enough income from resources to take them to the middle-income status, but not beyond. To fully develop they would need to harness the resource wealth for growth."²⁷ The implication of this is that when income from Africa's depletable natural resources are not judiciously employed to end poverty, pursue development, and improve the lives of Africans as well as make investment for the future, then there will be serious crisis when eventually these resources are depleted. This crisis may however not happen in the lifetime of the presently living Africans, it may happen in the lifetime of our offspring. Consequently, we would have caused serious damage to the ability of our future generations to survive and thrive.

It is important to add that in the course of the exploration of these resources there is pollution of the environment, and since the environment connects not just living persons but connects the present generation with future people, there is some damage done to the ability of future generations to depend and survive on the environment they inherit.

The solution to this quagmire resulting in the violation of the rights of future Africans is to heed Gundlings recommendation by taking " preventive action, or more precisely, precautionary action, which will ensure that natural resources are used sparingly and that degradation of the environment is reduced to a minimum."²⁸ Heeding this advice will require that African states review and change fundamentally the

²⁵ Dauda Abubakar, " Leadership and the Challenge of Rebuilding a Nation," in A.A.B. Agbaje, L. Diamond. E. Onwudiwe (eds.), *Nigeria's Struggle for Democracy and Good Governance: a Festschrift for Oyeleye Oyediran*. Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 2004. p. 154.

²⁶ Clark Wolf, " Contemporary Property Rights, Lockean Provisos, and the Interests of Future Generations," *Ethics*, Vol. 105, No. 4, p. 807.

²⁷ Paul Collier, *The Bottom Billion: Why the Poorest Countries are Failing and What Can Be Done About It*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 38.

²⁸ Gundling, " Our Responsibility to Future Generations," p. 211.

overdependence of Africa's economy on depletable natural resources. As part of this, the diversification of the economy is crucial. Likewise, there is the need for investment in renewable energy.

This requires also that incomes from tapped resources are judiciously used for investment and developmental purposes. This is because it is only through investment that the average African polity can be developed sufficiently to enhance better living not only for the present generations but also for future generations. It is important for African leaders to realise that "investment is evidently particularly important since this is how the resource surplus can be transformed into sustained increases in income."²⁹ In furtherance of this, the elite in Africa ought to realise that "we may have valid claims to use and control appropriated resources and to enjoy their fruits, but our rights include no claim to use these resources in ways that might inexcusably deprive future persons of what they need to survive and to live adequate lives."³⁰ In addition, there is the need to give devotion to "conservation of options," by conserving as much as possible the diversity of resources so that future people have access to diverse resources and also "so that it does not unduly restrict the options available to future generations in solving their problems and satisfying their own values."³¹

IV. Conclusion

According to Clark Wolf, "if we have an opportunity to use our resources at sustainable rates so that they will be preserved for the future, we ought to do this rather than squandering them."³² But contrary to this expectation, what political leaders and elites in Africa do is to explore African resources at unsustainable rates, and rather than using the proceeds for pursuing the development of African states, they have ended up in personal accounts. Some have found their ways to foreign coffers through capital flight caused by the ruling class. Thus, our effort in the paper has been directed at arguing that Africa should begin to think and take serious steps towards controlling the effects of natural resource depletion on future generations. It was argued, in defence of the rights of future generation, that future generations have a right to sizeable portion of depletable natural resources; that the resources that nature endows humanity with is only held in trust by any existing generation; and that future generations will need to inherit enough in good condition to meet their basic needs. It was also shown that the attitude of Africa's leadership to exploration of depletable natural resources has to change because in some way the rightful portion of future Africans is being depleted in order to fund a life of greed of these leaders.

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²⁹ Collier, *The Bottom Billion*, p. 44.

³⁰ Wolf, "Contemporary Property Rights, Lockean Provisos, and the Interests of Future Generations," p. 811.

³¹ Weiss, "Our Rights and Obligation to Future Generations for the Environment," p. 202.

³² Wolf, "Contemporary Property Rights, Lockean Provisos, and the Interests of Future Generations," p. 810.