

Perception of the Environmental Health Profession in Nigeria: Integrity, Performance, and Achievement

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Abstract

Original Research Article

Environmental health practice is a core pillar of public health protection in Nigeria, with key responsibilities in sanitation, water safety, waste management, pollution control, and disease prevention. Despite this, the profession often suffers from low public recognition, and its image is shaped as much by conduct and results as by technical mandates. This research determines public perception of environmental health in Nigeria through three constructs: integrity, performance, and achievement. Evidence shows that environmental risks remain major contributors to morbidity and mortality in Nigeria, with air pollution, unsafe water, poor sanitation, and poor hygiene posing persistent threats. The research argues that professional perception improves when practitioners demonstrate ethical conduct, technical competence, accountability, and demonstrable outcomes. However, weak governance, limited visibility of preventive impact, and resource constraints continue to undermine the profession's standing. To strengthen perception and practice, the research recommends stronger ethical codes, improved performance monitoring, strategic public communication, and explicit recognition of environmental health in national health policy.

Keywords: Environmental health, Nigeria, integrity, performance, achievement, public perception, public health.

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1.0 Introduction

Environmental health focuses on managing physical, biological, chemical, and social determinants that influence human health (WHO, 2017). In Nigeria, environmental health practitioners play a central role in disease prevention through sanitation enforcement, premises inspection, food hygiene regulation, waste control, water safety, and health education.

Despite this mandate, the profession is often misunderstood and undervalued within the health system and by the public. The perception of any profession is shaped by trust, visibility, and demonstrable results (Kruk et al., 2018). In public health, trust is critical because

practitioners are expected to protect communities, enforce standards fairly, and communicate risks clearly. When the public perceives environmental health officers as honest, competent, and effective, the profession gains legitimacy. Conversely, perceptions of inconsistency or weak outcomes erode that legitimacy.

Nigeria continues to bear a heavy burden from environmental risk factors. Unsafe water, poor sanitation and hygiene, household air pollution, and ambient air pollution remain leading contributors to illness and premature death (WHO, 2023; Nnaji et al., 2021). This makes environmental health indispensable. Yet because

it's primary success lies in preventing disease, its impact is often invisible compared to curative services. This paper therefore explores perception of the environmental health profession in Nigeria using integrity, performance, and achievement as analytical lenses.

2.0 Integrity and the Image of the Profession

Integrity is foundational to professional credibility. In environmental health, it entails honesty, fairness, consistency, accountability, and commitment to public interest. Practitioners who demonstrate integrity are more likely to earn the confidence of communities, employers, and policymakers.

Environmental health officers in Nigeria interact daily with households, markets, food vendors, and local authorities. These encounters require ethical judgment. Transparent inspections and unbiased enforcement foster public respect. Conversely, perceptions of arbitrariness or personal gain undermine confidence.

Integrity is especially crucial in regulatory work. Officers are mandated to uphold standards in sanitation, waste management, and food safety. Their authority rests not only on legal backing but on public belief that they serve the common good (WHO, 2017). When fairness, dignity, and justice are visible in practice, the profession gains moral authority.

Integrity also requires accurate data management. Reliable recordkeeping supports risk identification, planning, and evaluation. A profession that reports honestly and maintains transparent records appears more trustworthy and professional. Thus, integrity is both an ethical and an operational requirement.

3.0 Performance and Public Perception

Performance refers to how effectively practitioners execute their duties, including technical skill, communication, timeliness, responsiveness, and intersectoral collaboration. Public perception is largely shaped by observable service delivery.

In Nigeria, performance is tested across markets,

schools, communities, health facilities, and industries. The public expects hazards to be identified, risks to be explained clearly, and practical solutions to be provided. Meeting these expectations enhances the profession's image; delays or poor communication weaken it.

Evidence confirms that environmental health challenges in Nigeria remain severe. Environmental risks continue to drive significant mortality and disability, with water, sanitation, hygiene, and air pollution as major contributors (Nnaji et al., 2021). The WHO (2023) country scorecard for Nigeria also highlights critical gaps in air quality, safe drinking water, and clean household energy. This underscores that environmental health is central, not peripheral, to national health goals.

However, performance is not solely an individual issue. It is constrained by institutional capacity. Without vehicles, equipment, protective gear, testing tools, or administrative support, even competent officers struggle. The public often blames the individual rather than the system. Therefore, performance must be understood as the interaction between personal competence and systemic support (WHO, 2018). Strong systems enable good performance, and good performance improves perception.

4.0 Achievement and Professional Recognition

Achievement extends beyond routine tasks to include measurable results, professional advancement, and visible societal impact. A profession earns respect when its contributions can be demonstrated.

A key achievement area is disease prevention. Environmental health interventions reduce exposure to contaminated water, unsafe sanitation, poor waste disposal, and polluted air. Although preventive gains are less visible than curative care, they save lives and reduce pressure on health facilities.

Another dimension is professional development. Practitioners who engage in continuing education, leadership, specialization, and innovation strengthen the field and keep it relevant to emerging threats such as climate change, urbanization, and pollution (Ezeh et al.,

2024). Where career progression is supported, professionals are better positioned to address complex environmental risks.

Achievement is also reflected in institutional inclusion. When environmental health professionals are involved in policy formulation, emergency planning, and intersectoral decision-making, the profession gains visibility and respect. Studies on environmental justice in Nigeria show that poor regulation and unequal exposure to hazards continue to affect vulnerable communities (Ezeh et al., 2024). This reinforces the need for stronger professional engagement and recognition of environmental health as central to equity and justice.

5.0 Current Challenges Affecting Perception in Nigeria

Several factors continue to shape public perception:

- 1. Low public awareness:** Many people do not fully understand the scope of environmental health practice.
- 2. Weak visibility of outcomes:** Preventive successes are rarely attributed to environmental health work.
- 3. Resource limitations:** Inadequate equipment, logistics, and staffing impair service delivery.
- 4. Governance and accountability gaps:** Weak institutions make it difficult to maintain a consistent professional image.
- 5. Environmental pressures:** Pollution, water insecurity, and climate-related hazards intensify the burden on practitioners (WHO, 2023; Ezeh et al., 2024).

6.0 Recommendations

To improve perception and practice, the following are recommended:

1. Professional bodies should enforce codes of conduct emphasizing integrity, fairness, and accountability.
2. Training should address modern challenges, data use, risk communication, and community engagement.

3. Services should be evaluated using outcome-based indicators, not just activity counts.
4. Communities should be educated on the role and importance of environmental health.
5. Include environmental health professionals in policy, planning, and emergency response structures.
6. Provision of equipment, transport, and field support will improve effectiveness and public trust.

7.0 Conclusion

The perception of the environmental health profession in Nigeria hinges on integrity, performance, and achievement. Where practitioners act ethically, deliver effectively, and produce visible health gains, the profession earns respect and trust. Given that environmental risks remain a major public health burden in Nigeria, environmental health is more critical than ever. Improving the profession's image requires strengthening ethics, supporting competence, enhancing visibility, and formally recognizing environmental health as vital to population wellbeing.

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