

Strengthening Environmental Health Governance in Nigeria: A Call to Action

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Abstract

Original Research Article

Environmental health governance in Nigeria remains fragmented, under-resourced, and poorly coordinated despite the growing burden of environmental risks. Unsafe water, poor sanitation, air pollution, and inadequate waste management continue to contribute significantly to morbidity and mortality in the country. This paper argues that the persistent public health challenges linked to the environment are not only technical but largely governance failures. Drawing from current literature and practice, it examines the weaknesses in policy, institutional coordination, funding, and professional recognition that undermine environmental health delivery in Nigeria. The paper calls for urgent reforms: strengthening legal frameworks, clarifying institutional roles, investing in workforce capacity, improving data systems, and elevating environmental health in national policy. Without decisive action, Nigeria cannot achieve SDG 3, 6, and 11 or protect its population from preventable environmental diseases.

Keywords: Environmental health, governance, Nigeria, public policy, public utilities, health systems.

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1.0 Introduction

Governance is the way decisions are made, implemented, and enforced to achieve public goals. In environmental health, governance determines whether communities have safe water, clean air, hygienic markets, and functioning waste systems.

In Nigeria, the need for strong environmental health governance has never been more urgent. The World Health Organization (2023) reports that environmental risks such as air pollution, unsafe water, and poor sanitation remain leading contributors to death and disability in Nigeria. Nnaji et al. (2021) similarly noted that Nigeria's environmental health situation is worsening due to weak regulation and poor service delivery.

Yet, environmental health is often treated as an

afterthought in national planning. It is split across multiple ministries, poorly funded, and invisible in policy discussions until there is an outbreak. This paper makes a case that strengthening governance is the missing link between Nigeria's environmental health policies and actual results. It is a call to action for government, professionals, and communities.

2.0 The Current State of Environmental Health Governance in Nigeria

Environmental health governance in Nigeria operates within a complex institutional landscape. Responsibility is shared between the Federal Ministry of Environment, Federal Ministry of Health, State Ministries of Environment and Health, Local Government

Areas, and regulatory agencies like NESREA, NAFDAC, etc.

While this multi-sectoral approach looks good on paper, in practice it leads to duplication, confusion, and inaction. No single agency is clearly accountable for outcomes (Ezeh et al., 2024).

Key weaknesses include:

1. **Weak legal and policy enforcement:** Nigeria has good policies like the National Environmental Health Policy and National Environmental Sanitation Policy, but enforcement is inconsistent.
2. **Fragmented coordination:** Environmental health officers, water agencies, and waste management authorities often work in silos.
3. **Inadequate funding:** Budgetary allocation to environmental health at federal, state, and LGA levels is grossly inadequate.
4. **Low professional recognition:** Environmental Health Officers are often excluded from policy and emergency planning meetings despite being frontline workers.
5. **Poor data and monitoring:** Decisions are rarely based on reliable environmental health data.

3.0 Why Governance Matters Now

The cost of weak governance is visible in our communities. Cholera outbreaks linked to contaminated water, flooding from blocked drainages due to indiscriminate dumping of solid waste (refuse), and respiratory illness from air pollution are all governance failures.

Three reasons make reform urgent:

- a. **First, the disease burden:** Environmental factors account for a large share of Nigeria's disease burden. Without strong governance to regulate water, waste, and pollution, curative health services will remain overwhelmed.

- b. **Second, urbanization and climate change:** Nigeria's cities are growing rapidly. Without coordinated governance, waste will pile up, drainages will fail, and slums will expand. Climate change is also adding new pressures like heat waves and flooding.

- c. **Third, public trust:** When the public sees inconsistent enforcement, dirty markets, and abandoned public utilities, trust in government declines. Strong governance restores that trust by delivering visible results.

4.0 A Call to Action: 6 Priority Areas for Reform

4.1 Strengthen the Legal and Policy Framework

Existing laws must be reviewed, harmonized, and enforced. Nigeria needs a single Environmental Health Act that clearly defines roles, responsibilities, and penalties. The Environmental Health Council of Nigeria should be empowered to regulate practice nationwide.

4.2 Clarify Institutional Roles and Improve Coordination

A National Environmental Health Coordination Platform should be created under the Office of the Vice President or Federal Ministry of Health. This body will align federal, state, and LGA efforts and avoid duplication.

4.3 Invest in Workforce and Infrastructure

Environmental Health Officers are the backbone of the system but often lack vehicles, test kits, and personal protective equipment (PPE). Government must invest in recruitment, training, and logistics. Continuing education on data use, risk communication, and climate health should be mandatory.

4.4 Improve Data, Monitoring and Accountability

We cannot manage what we do not measure. A national environmental health information

system should be established. Performance should be tracked using outcome indicators: % of households with safe water, % of waste collected, reduction in open defecation, etc.

4.5 Increase Funding and Public-Private Partnerships

Environmental health must be prioritized in annual budgets. States should establish Environmental Health Trust Funds. The private sector and NGOs should be engaged in managing public utilities like transfer stations and water supply.

4.6 Raise Public Awareness and Community Participation

People must understand their role. Community health clubs, school programs, and media campaigns should promote hygiene and demand accountability from authorities. Governance works best when citizens are involved.

5.0 Conclusion

Nigeria does not lack policies or professionals in environmental health. What it lacks is governance — the political will, coordination, resources, and accountability to turn plans into results.

The burden of environmental disease will only grow if we continue with business as usual. Strengthening environmental health governance is not a luxury; it is a necessity for health, equity, and development.

This is a call to action for the Federal Government, State Governors, LGA Chairmen, professional bodies, and civil society: put environmental health at the center of governance. Protect the environment, and you protect the people.

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