

Editorial

Environmental Attention Deficit Disorder, or Africa's “ADD”

The predominantly inattentive form of Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder, also known popularly as “ADD” is characterized by inability to focus attention on the task at hand, distractibility, disorganization, procrastination, forgetfulness, and chronic lethargy or fatigue (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual. <http://psych.org/MainMenu/Research/DSMIV.aspx> Accessed on 22 December, 2009). Although the ADD diagnosis is typically applied to individuals, a review of global affairs during the first decade of the twenty-first century reveals much of the same symptoms.

The global manifestation of ADD in the past decade began with the much anticipated and feared “Y2K” problem that never materialized in January 2000, to the near collapse of the COP15 climate negotiations in Copenhagen in December 2009. But our attention here is on environmental science and technology, and on this issue too, ADD symptoms are rampant.

The list of environmental problems facing our species on this planet is now the subject of primary school education; climate change, the ozone hole, deforestation, biodiversity decay, desertification, toxic chemical pollution, indoor air pollution, photochemical smog, solid waste, nuclear waste, e-waste, and so on and on (Figure 1). Each of these problems have their own special advocates, all competing for our attention on YouTube, and for dwindling resources teased from increasingly stressed funding organizations and tax revenues.

The consequences of environmental ADD is particularly harrowing for Africa, where many are working hard to improve pressing human health and wellbeing situations, but where governments are more likely than not to sign up for any extramural deal that promises to fill public or private coffers. We have long recognized the environmental problems listed above as urgent issues, and we have pushed for their solution through deft integration of local ingenuity leveraged with global resources.

So, why have the solutions lagged, even as the problems become increasingly complicated, and the size of the impacted population grows? In the decade of 2000 – 2009, we witnessed the decay of natural ecosystems and population destabilization in the Niger Delta; the disastrous conflict in Sudan; emergence of cholera in Zimbabwe; festering toxic legacy of mineral mining operations throughout the continent; and the recent drought in Kenya and Ethiopia. But we also witnessed the emergence of strong multi-tonal voices of Africa in international environmental discourse. What we have yet to see is consensus on prioritization schemes and agenda setting. Given the inherent geographic and socio-economic diversity of African nations, it is reasonable to argue that consensus is a luxury that can neither be reached nor afforded. But this would also be the fate of global environmental issues, where consensus has not been and probably should not be the prerequisite for action.

Of course, there are pharmaceutical prescription drugs for managing ADD in individuals, but the side-effects, including addiction and suicidal thoughts, might stop the meek in their tracks. So also, foreign humanitarian aid has become like a drug with serious side effects to manage environmental ADD at the national and regional levels. Alternately, self-improvement strategies represent essential coping strategies for individual ADD, and their application may also work for local, regional, or even global environmental ADD. Such strategies can only succeed if there is a rank order of issues to address in sequential order. And where there are opportunities for addressing coincidental environmental burdens, that such opportunities are recognized to get the most benefit from singular actions.

For example, the World Health Organization's environmental burden of disease assessments is designed to rank specific diseases on the quantitative basis of their impact on public health, and potential for reducing the burden through environmental remediation. It is not clear, however, that intervention policies are being implemented to take advantage of the scheme. Similarly, the United Nation's Millennium Development Goals established a timeline for solving major social and environmental problems according to their estimated impacts on human health and wellbeing. Time is running

out on the accomplishment of these schemes, and if the new decade is anything like the past one, the term “ADD” will have a new meaning: “Africa’s Decadent Decade.” Let us hope not.

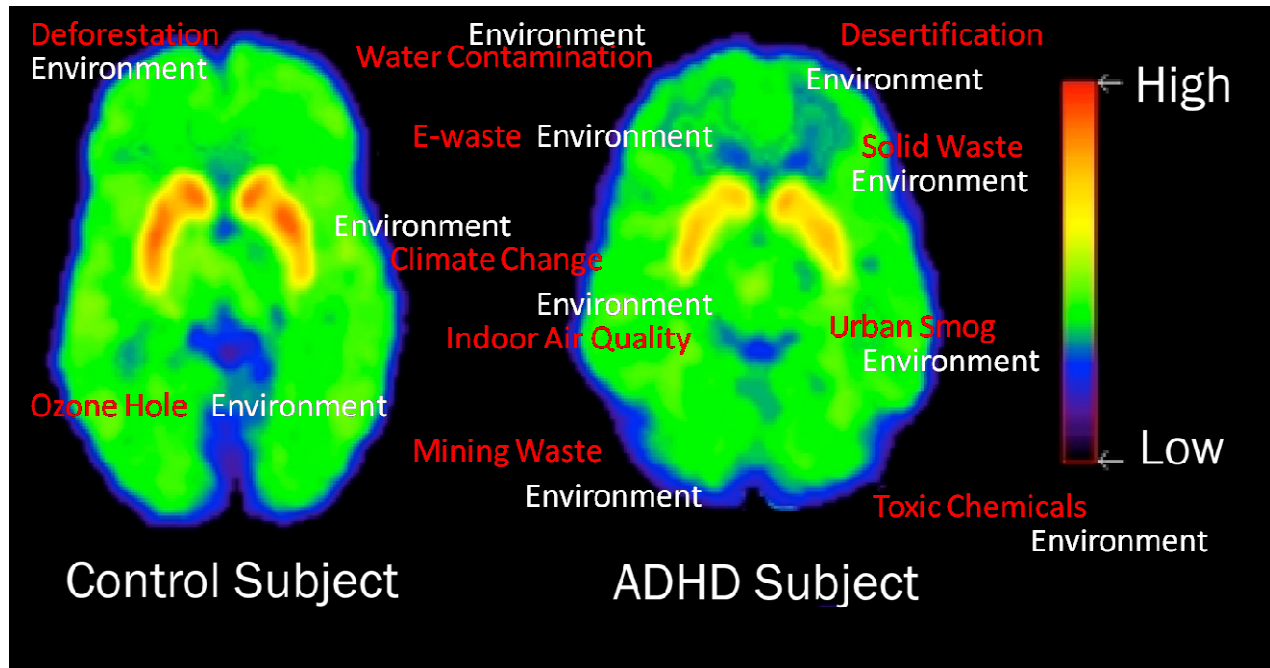


Figure 1. The plethora of environmental issues challenges us to focus on soluble strategies while resisting distraction and mental fatigue associated with conditions of Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD). The background image is by courtesy of Brookhaven National Laboratory (http://www.bnl.gov/bnlweb/pubaf/pr/PR_display.asp?prID=06-124).

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