

Challenges of Poverty Alleviation in Nigeria

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Abstract: Poverty, a global phenomenon that is dynamic, complex and multi-dimensional is currently one of the most serious problems in the world. In view of the above, efforts are being made at the levels of government, the organized private sector, international donor agencies and NGOs to alleviate poverty so that man can live a meaningful life on the earth space. Despite various strategies employed by successive government and other agencies at alleviating poverty in Nigeria, the scourge seems unbolting as a result of lack of seriousness on the part of government, lack of reliable population figures as benchmark for planning, corruption and neglect among others. The study recommends conducting a reliable and acceptable census, back to the land policy, transparency and elimination of corruption among others for sustainable poverty alleviation in Nigeria.

Key words: Challenges, poverty, alleviation, unbolting

INTRODUCTION

Poverty is a global phenomenon that is dynamic, complex and multi-dimensional. It is one of the most serious problems facing humanity in the world in recent times. Poverty is a concept that entails socio-economic and political deprivation which may affect individuals, households, or communities and which may result in lack of access to the basic necessities of life^[1]. The World Bank^[2] report sees poverty as hunger, lack of shelter, being sick and not being able to go to school, not knowing how to read, not being able to speak properly, not having a job, having fear for the future, losing a child to illness brought about by unclean water, powerlessness, lack of representation and freedom. According to World Bank^[2] and United Nations^[3] the various manifestation of poverty include: lack of income and productive resources sufficient to ensure sustainable livelihood, hunger and malnutrition and other basic services, homelessness and unsafe degraded environment among others. From the above, it is clear that indicators of poverty include: literacy, health status, nutrition status, access to housing, water sanitation etc. Poverty therefore is the inability to attend to, or meet up with the basic necessities of life as a result of lack of the wherewithal to do so.

It is saddening to note that about 1.5 billion people live below the poverty line of less than one dollar per day Worldwide, out of this number, 250 million constituting 17% of the World's total poor population are in Africa^[1]. The Department for International Development (DFID), Britain's agency for fighting poverty globally, disclosed that 90 million Nigerians live in absolute poverty, the figure represents the number of people living on less than one dollar a day. For this, the Agency warned that if nothing is done quickly to combat poverty the

Millennium Development goal will not be achieved in Africa or globally^[4]. Also, available data from the Federal Office of Statistics^[5] indicate that majority of the poor are located in the rural areas of Nigeria. In 1985 for instance, 49.9% of the population in rural areas were poor, declining to 46.1% in 1992 only to rise to 67.8% in 1996. In another development, the editorial comments of The Punch Newspaper of Thursday, January 19,^[6] reviewed the level of poverty among Nigerians as follows:

- There is too much poverty in the land and is unacceptable. Military pensioners in Lagos Kwara, Ondo and other states protested Federal Government's negligence in paying them 42 months of accrued pensions. Many other Nigerians have not fared better. The epileptic public power supply has sent out of business several artisans and operators of small-scale industries nationwide. Many communities in Ogun State and other parts of the country, which were recently ravaged by cholera, would have been saved if a fraction of the huge oil windfall had been spent on the provision of deep wells, boreholes and other cheap sources of potable water.

Obadan^[7] sees the causes of poverty in sub-sahara Africa as inadequate access to employment opportunities, inadequate access to markets where the poor can sell goods and services, low endowment of capital, destruction of natural resources leading to environmental degradation and reduced productivity. Poverty cannot but have some consequences they are: physical and psychological misery, consequence on the national economy of effected country arising through the formation of slums in cities, worsening ecological

problems and political and social consequence i.e., mass poverty tends to preserve existing power structures and thus the privileges of a minority of the population^[8]. The revelations above perhaps have opened the eyes of both government and donor agencies to the need to find a means of alleviating poverty at one time or the other in the history of Nigeria. Infact, several federal ministries, specialized agencies and international donor agencies have been identified as being core to poverty alleviation in country in recent times. Their effort have been noticeable but have not been able to tackle poverty from the root. It is against this background that this paper tries to examine the various past and present efforts at alleviating poverty in Nigeria, why the scourge is unbolting and to make recommendations for sustainable poverty alleviation in the country.

Review of past and current attempts at poverty alleviation in Nigeria: Not until recently has the Federal Government of Nigeria came out boldly to say she was alleviating poverty. This is so perhaps because it is assumed that poverty to some extent, is a feature of the rural areas. The fact that the available urban centers in the country have a pocket of infrastructures coupled with the fact that the quality of life of some urban dwellers is a bit above average has encouraged successive governments in the country to tag their poverty alleviation programmes rural development efforts'. Judging from the review of past rural development efforts of governments in Nigeria, little or no achievement had been made at improving the lots of the rural dwellers.

Rural development is persistently erroneously perceived as achieving higher agricultural output. That was why even from the colonial period, the only traces of poverty alleviation of the era was the concentration of the then authorities on opening up of communication routes that can encourage the movement of agricultural products from the hinterlands to the port of exportation. The period, post World War II till the end of the second National Development Plan in 1975 witnessed increasing agricultural production. This encouraged the establishment of farm settlement schemes in the Western and Eastern parts on the country. These schemes have little impacts on their surrounding areas despite huge investments. In the third National Development Plan (1975-1980), greater attention was given to integrated rural development. The vision was to raise agricultural productivity and provision of basic social amenities such as water, medical services, schools, electricity, etc.

In order to achieve the above, the Federal Government set up Agricultural Development Project (ADPs) as one of the objectives. Akeredolu^[9] documented that some of the ADPs were successful in agricultural

production but refused to transform the quality of life of the people in terms of social and economic development. The focus of the rural development policy of the fourth National Development Plan (1981-1985) was on man. Poverty alleviation was not seen as merely providing infrastructures and improving on agricultural activities but improving economic life of the rural areas. According to Adeyinka *et al.*^[10], cooperative development and community development programmes were given more priorities. Despite all these, the standard of living of an average rural dweller did not improve.

When Gen. I. B. Babangida assumed the leadership mantle of Nigeria in 1985, he came up with a plan on poverty alleviation in continuance of the previous development plans. The blueprint of the Babangida's rural development and poverty alleviation policy centered on encouraging the role of women, eradication of rural illiteracy, supporting rural markets, rural construction and infrastructures creation of rural credit system that is grassroots oriented etc. To achieved this goal, several agencies such as the Directorate for Food, Roads and Rural Infrastructures (DFRRI), Better Life for Rural Women, National Directorate of Employment (NDE) were created, yet no meaningful development was noticed.

The present government of the Federal Republic of Nigeria came out boldly at inception in 1999 in anticipation of combating poverty with a programme tagged Poverty Alleviation Programme (PAP). This was later amended further to National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP). These programmes were aimed at providing employment to the jobless Nigerians and to make the take home pay of Nigerian workers a reasonable one among others. Ajakaye and Adeyeye^[11] documented that a major pitfall of the programme is the apparent lack of ownership of the programme by the major stakeholders, i.e., the beneficiaries which may create an impression that it is their own share of the national cake. In a nutshell, the number of the unemployed in the country continue to be on the increase and poverty seems not to be removed from the land.

Why poverty is unbolting in Nigeria: Despite several attempts of government, donor agencies, NGOs and other related bodies at alleviating poverty as noted above the scourge is still much apparent in the country. The reason are numerous but, a few of the most important ones are:- Poverty Alleviation policies of successive government has always remained a mere political slogan or statement. Government at the Federal, State and Local Government levels in Nigeria have always introduced one form of poverty alleviation programme to better the lots of the people, but, no sooner had these policies are formulated

and lunched with fun-fare than they are abandoned. The implementation aspect of the policies have been weak as people who manage the programmes at one level or the other continue to pursue their own personal benefits at the expense of the government. The Department for International Development (DFID) identified three factors as the bedrock of poverty in Nigeria. They include; Macro-economic mismanagement, on the part of successive military and civilian governments, corruption and misuse of oil windfalls. The agency traced Nigeria, poor economic performance to the failure to productively manage its oil windfall either to improve social infrastructure or encourage non-oil sector economic activities^[4]. This statement is corroborated by yet another share of N240b by the Federal, State and Local Government which always end up being unaccounted for^[6].

According to the report, Nigeria is the World's 13th largest oil producer and the 6th largest in the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), she has estimated proven reserves of 32 billion barrel which should be sufficient for 37 years at the current rate of production. Nigerian gas reserves when fully exploited, will place it in the World's top 10 gas producers. It is estimated that gas reserves are 174 trillion cubic feet and will last for 110 years at current rates of production. The anticipated diversification of Nigeria's economy as a result of Gas productions and exportations will end up a ruse because, it will not end Nigeria's dependence on extractive industries for the generation of foreign exchange and government revenues. It will potentially exacerbate the effect of 'Dutch disease', a form of social syndrome that makes a nation abandons other productive sectors as a result of free flowing mineral discovery^[4].

Lack of proper funding on the part of government is also a problem. As good as the latest policy of the Federal Government on Poverty Alleviation (NAPEP) would have been, co-ordinators at state and local government levels have turned the exercise to their property and they do and undo at the stage of servicing the people the programme was meant to serve.

Another reason why poverty is still manifest in Nigeria is because of the unavailability of reliable population data as a benchmark for proper planning. A census figure released by the National Population Commission at the end of every head court has always being a subject of controversy. They are always marred with irregularities because both population officials and the people to be counted always display their level of untruthfulness for ulterior motives. For example, Udo^[12] documented that the main failure of the 1973 Census could be attributed to

- The composition of the membership of the National Census Board.

- The refusal of General Gowon to take the advice of the National Census Board; and
- Inflation of Census figures in the field

The national headcount of 1991 (the latest in the country) which put the country at 88.5 million is adjudged to be the best planned, well executed and widely accepted census in the country^[13]. It is too old to help government plan effectively for the needs of the masses. There is no provision in the Nigerian system that allows whoever cares to know the number of the unemployed, the underemployed and even the dependants. With all these in place, there could not be improved quality of life of the citizenry.

Another reason for perpetual poverty in Nigeria is the neglect of agriculture. Before the discovery of oil in the Niger Delta in 1956, agriculture has been the mainstay of the economy of Nigeria. More than 95% of the foreign exchange earnings of the country comes from the agricultural sector. But shortly after the discovery of oil and more importantly from the early 70s (during the oil boom period), the concern of both government and individuals for agriculture began to dwindle because they saw the 'black gold' as an easier means of getting money. People who are even unemployed prefer cities to going back to the land for the purpose of agricultural practices. Political instability and lack of confidence in sustainable democracy is yet another threat to improved quality of life in Nigeria. The various efforts of government to boost the international image of the country so as to attract investors to the country will continue to meet brick walls until something positive is done to improve on the transparency and accountability levels of governance.

An average investor always wants to invest in an atmosphere that is predictable and peaceful. The current political system in Nigeria calls for skepticism on the part of investors because the democratic system that operates fall short of sustainability. This is most apparent in the 'daily' allegations of misconduct, corruption and immorality on the part of Nigerians and the key players in Nigerian governance. When all these are present in a country, the overall effect is always on the masses of the country who would have been opportuned to expand the economic scope in the event of huge investments.

Poor infrastructural development always hinder economic expansion. Good roads, electricity, portable water, etc. no doubt determine the productivity level of artisans and even the organized private sector. The level of infrastructure development in Nigeria falls below average. Electricity is under-supplied, road network in deplorable condition in most places hence, people always produce below capacity in every sector of the economy. When this prevails, poverty continues to escalate instead of reducing.

The way forward: For poverty to be alleviated in Nigeria, the following recommendations are inevitable.

- Investment in infrastructure that directly enhance productive capacities (such as water supply and irrigation schemes, prevention of erosion) can have a high economic return through increased agricultural output. Other infrastructure such as access roads from farm to market centers can stimulate and promote productive activities hence, lasting employment. Social infrastructures (such as school building, health centers) creates some permanent jobs in addition to meeting the basic needs of rural communities.
- Special attention should be given to the needs of the marginalized, disadvantaged and vulnerable segments of the population including women, towards their empowerment and self-sufficiency.
- Formation of social development department to disburse social grants as old age pensions and grants for child support, disability etc.
- A minimum of twenty-five percent of the Federal budget should be committed to agriculture, rural development and poverty alleviation programmes to meet the recommendation of the 21st FAO regional conference for Africa held in Younde Cameroon in 2000.
- The community must be the center piece of all poverty eradication efforts with the grassroots being involved in the design, implementation, monitoring and elevation of those efforts.
- Conduct of a reliable and acceptable population census that can be a benchmark for planning.
- Alternative sources of population data on which planning could be done should be embraced. A methodology for the monitoring of urban growth^[13] which has also served as a technique for urban population estimates through application of remote sensing is recommended.
- Enhanced probity and accountability at all levels of government.
- Political reforms that will pave way for confidence in the polity so as to attract investments from abroad.

CONCLUSION

This study has dealt extensively on the challenges of poverty alleviation in Nigeria. The meaning, causes and consequences of poverty have been vividly discussed. The reasons why the level of poverty has refused to reduce in the country has also been itemized. They include: lack of sincerity on the part of government and her officials in their effort at alleviating poverty, mismanagement of crude oil money (especially the excess that is usually shared among the three tiers of

government), lack of adequate population figures on which adequate planning could be done. The study recommends enhanced probity and accountability at all levels of government, making communities the center piece of poverty eradication, allocation of twenty-five percent of the Federal budget to agriculture, rural development and poverty alleviation programmes among others. When these and others are considered the scourge of poverty in our society will be reduced to the minimum.

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