Mass Poverty in Nigeria: Cultural Bases, Causes and Remedies

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Abstract

This paper examines the issue of poverty in contemporary Nigerian society. The new thing about poverty in Nigeria now is that it has become a large-scale affliction. Mass poverty in the country has its genesis in the oil glut of the 80's and the subsequent introduction of economic structural adjustment which, far from being a remedy, has pushed Nigerians, with the exception of the ruling class, further into poverty. Apart from these, mass poverty in Nigeria, is tacitly encouraged by the government whose various policies and programmes have been tailored to further impoverish the masses. The widespread poverty in Nigeria is webbed around a culture that situates people and their offsprings in a particular social strata and engenders certain norms and practices that ensure that they not only remain there but accept their situation as normal. The best ways out of mass poverty in Nigeria may be in the provision of good leadership, equitable distribution of resources, improvements in amenities and more importantly, a cultural revival aimed at tackling wrong norms that support poverty.

Introduction

Nigeria, with a population of 88.5 million people as at 1991, occupies an area of 924,000 square kilometres (NPC, 1991). It has over two hundred ethnic groups, though the three major ones are Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo. The name, Nigeria is derived from the historic River Niger, which constitutes the most remarkable geographical feature of the country (Nwankwo, 1984).

The name was coined by the wife of the then British Governor - General in Nigeria at the 1914 amalgamation of the Southem and Northem protectorates into which Nigeria has been divided and administered prior to 1914. Nigeria was eventually granted independence from British rule in 1960.

While still grappling with the idea of nation-state after independence, the country became engulfed in a bloody and bitter 30 months civil war in 1967.

At the end of the war in 1970, Nigeria looked set to join the comity of nations on the march toward meaningful development, anchored on a resilient culture that emphasized hard work, dedication, and collective survival. The task of development was made easier in the 70's with the influx of petro-dollars. Urban towns blossomed over-night; city congestion (human and auto), physical and social infrastructure, and a pampered working class were all features of that brief period. In fact, a Nigerian President reportedly told the foreign press that the problem facing Nigeria then was not money but what to do with money.

Ironically, this self - posturing arrogant statement was more like a prophecy. The petro-dollars were wasted on unviable ventures, grandiose cultural festivals smacking of pretence, and self- enrichment. As a result, this period produced industries without sources of raw materials or with obsolete foreign technologies. Lavish state entertainments, docile and over-pampered workers, leadership corruption, cash flight and economic mismanagement were the order of the day. Therefore, when the oil glut occurred it sounded the death knell of the once booming economy. The Nigerian leader and his followers as a whole were caught unawares and unprepared.

The ideal Nigerian culture that emphasizes hard work, equity, collective survival and self reliance was already on the retreat as a result of the assault from imported material and non-material cultural values. This was the genesis of mass poverty in Nigeria.

Poverty, whether seen as a condition that is as old as society or as the product of a certain socio-economic order, becomes worrisome when it afflicts whole segments of the population of a nation, especially when certain values and norms are spawned to support this affliction. It is in this sense that the culture of poverty becomes not only an affront to national development but to the genuine cultural traits of a people. This paper therefore draws attention to the negative effects that the perpetuation of the culture of poverty in Nigeria has on development and cultural values. From this standpoint, suggestions will be proffered on the way out of this dilemma. Such suggestions will highlight the task facing both government and scholars of culture in this regard. As Uchendu (1982:51) rightly pointed out, the greatest strength of the social sciences lies in their ability to revise the prevailing images of the world. Such a revision by social scientists in Nigeria will draw attention to the need to project and use the noble traits of culture in any meaningful effort at development.

Thus, this paper departs from the orthodox economist view of poverty, important as it is, to look at the phenomenon from a largely socio-cultural perspective.

Poverty and its Explanation

Poverty may be seen as a situation where people spend one-third of their income on food (Eitzen and Zinn, 1989). But this conception of poverty is seriously inadequate since it may not aptly describe the measurement or incidence of poverty in developing nations where food is a major consumer of people's income. In fact, some people in some third world countries spend as much as more than half of their incomes on food and are not seen as poor viz.-a- viz. others in the same society. Poverty is one concept that defies a universal definition.

Hence, it varies from one cultural group to another, from one economic group to another and from one nation to another. Its complexity is captured in the fact that, Persians have thirty words for it and most African languages have three or four, five, the Torah has eight and in Medieval times, there were forty in Latin (The Courier, 1994). This may have led Sahlins (1972), an anthropologist, to see poverty as an invention of civilization. He argued that although the primitive economy was under-productive, it was not an economy of penury but a society of abundance that was able to meet essential needs. But no matter how poverty is defined, it is both socially humiliating and physically debilitating. According to Badjan-Young (1996), the social exclusion that accompanies poverty constitutes both a violation of human dignity and a threat to life itself. Despite its obvious complexity, poverty is a social fact that can be easily perceived.

The poor are those who somehow lack the things the rich have, they are also those who may not meet the basic necessities of life or may barely meet same, whether one looks at it from the basic needs approach, or from that which constitutes necessity in a particular socio-cultural milieu. Poverty, as a result of the peculiarities of the Third World, is defined usually in terms of the quality of life (The Courier, 1994) available to a given people at a given period of time. One of the surest ways to perceive poverty is to look at it through the basic needs approach. Basic needs in this sense refer to the ability of the individual to acquire the basics in terms of shelter, clothing and food.

It is worth highlighting that poverty is not just an economic or material concept but also a sociological and psychological concept. Hence, it encompasses exclusion not just from goods and services, but also from rights, activities, and privileges coupled with feelings or emotional states that arise and are often expressed in terms of values and norms justifying poverty.

An explanation of poverty that has not received much contemporary scientific attention is the theory of social Darwinism. This theory is attributable to the ideas of the British philosopher and sociologist, Herbert

Spencer (Eitzen and Zinn, 1989). In a nutshell, the theory argues that the poor are people who are biologically inferior or whose culture fails them by promoting character traits that impede their progress in society. Poverty is then seen as the natural medium of excreting unhealthy, imbecile and other less endowed members of society. In fact, Spencer preached against help to the poor in form of either state or private charity.

This theory, though lacking any strict scientific basis, has been given a further boost by scholars like Jensen (1980) and Hermstein (1973). These two Americans have used explanations akin to the theory of social Darwinism in explaining poverty especially among blacks and ethnic minorities in contemporary American society. They argue that poverty is best explained by heredity rather than environmental influences.·

While this may not be a proper place for a critique of these ideas, it is worthwhile to mention that much of its so-called support derives from ethnocentric scholarship. Again it is a theory that blames rather than empathizes with the victim, and its belief that poverty is inevitable and inborn grossly negates the best principles informing ameliorative measures and even constructive academic research. Finally, as Eitzen and Zinn (1989:179) have argued, *"this thesis divides Americans farther by appealing to bigots. It provides scientific justification for their beliefs in the racial superiority of some groups and the inferiority of others."*

Another explanation of poverty is one that blames a sub-structure of society for poverty.

Therefore, some people are poor because the society has failed to provide equality in opportunities. This is the 'culture of poverty' hypothesis that contends that the poor are qualitatively different in values and lifestyles from the rest of society and that these cultural differences explain continued poverty (Eitzen and Zinn, 1989). It sees the poor as adapting to their conditions and imbibing and internalising character traits and cultural patterns that squarely locate them and their offsprings in poverty. In this sense, the poor may be more permissive in raising their children, less verbal, more fatalistic, less able to defer gratification, and may seek fulfilment in endeavours scorned or neglected by other citizens. This theory, more than anything else contends that poverty is transmitted from generation to generation. Hence, the perpetuation of poverty is through defects in the lifestyles of those who are poor. Gallup Report (1985) shows that the poor are so because they are possessors of a deviant system of values that encourages behaviours amenable to poverty.

Similar to the above explanation are the various structural theories of poverty that locate poverty in the way society is organized which makes certain people vulnerable. Such orientations argue that the customary ways

of doing things, prevailing attitudes and expectations and other accepted structural arrangements work to the disadvantage of the poor. Harrington (1963) using a structural frame of reference argues that the poor are so because they made the mistake of being born to the wrong parents, in the wrong section of the country, in the wrong industry or in the wrong racial or ethnic group. Obviously one thing that is clear is the fact that poverty especially mass poverty is the product of the social system. And poverty gives rise to some peculiar value systems and lifestyles supportive of it. Tackling poverty then entails eradicating such values' that are inherently pervasive.

Poverty in Nigeria

Poverty as a fact of social existence has always existed in Nigeria and in any other society for that matter. What is new about poverty in Nigeria now is the fact that more and more Nigerians are daily becoming pauperised. Hence, Nigeria has a case of mass poverty.

Mass poverty in Nigeria can be traced to the oil glut which heralded the introduction of the Structural Adjustment Programme, which far from facilitating economic recovery pushed Nigerians, with the exception of the ruling class, further down the ladder of penury.

Prior to the introduction of the adjustment programme, the socio-economic situation in Nigeria was favoured by the prominence of petroleum in the international market. The revenue accruing from the oil sales somehow trickled down to the masses and the living standard of the average Nigerian was then one of the highest in Africa (Newswatch, 1992). Nigerians were not very familiar with galloping inflation, unemployment, acute shortage of basic social amenities, nor widespread leadership corruption. Hence the socio-economic terrain in Nigeria was relatively favourable, peaceful and stable. But the structural adjustment coupled with harsh leadership and corruption changed things for worse. The adjustment programme was introduced in 1986 as a macro-economic policy at the prodding of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. Following the devaluation of the Naira in pursuit of a 'realistic foreign exchange value', there is now a galloping inflation that has made nonsense of the average workers' earning (Anugwom, 1994:2). In addition to this, there is partial embargo on promotion, below bread line wages, acute and widespread unemployment, an all-out-quest for money through dubious means, and widespread leadership corruption. Therefore, the Structural Adjustment Programme introduced in 1986 signalled the advent of mass poverty in Nigeria.

This has been sustained by the current liberalization or post - adjustment programmes driven by globalisation.

The rulers who gain from it encourage mass poverty both tacitly and boldly. For one thing, it gives them a population that has been made docile by hunger and is resigned to its fate (which is one sure sign of the culture of poverty). This ensures that nobody actively challenges them. Secondly, it makes the rulers demigods and monopolists in the appropriation of national resources. But one wonders if they are actually aware of the impact of the culture of poverty in the long - term development of the country.

In view of the above, it is worth emphasizing that poverty and underdevelopment are both faces of the same coin everywhere. Assessing poverty in the developing nations, Badjan-Young (1996:6) posits that even though poverty affects families and individuals everywhere, most of the poorest people live in the developing world, where they represent one third of the population. This is even more crucial when it is realised that widespread poverty negates meaningful development (The Courier, 1994). No wonder Nigeria and other African countries with widespread poverty are engaged in what Kankwenda (1994) has rightly dubbed "trafficking in development". Here development becomes highly subjected to trial and error methods that lead to swift changes from one direction to another. But unfortunately, none seems to work. Development cannot be achieved without situating it within the cultural realities of the people.

The Culture of Poverty in Nigeria

While the culture of poverty in Nigeria may not clearly be seen as leadership induced, it is nevertheless leadership perpetuated and sustained. The socio-economic policies of the government since the era of the oil glut have been geared toward reinforcing inequality and preaching the need for people to calmly endure their sufferings. One of such policies was the Structural Adjustment Programme that the leadership has mismanaged. According to Hugon (1989:20) austerity measures in developing countries had, in fact, penalised the poorest members of the society.

Recently in appraising the Nigerian government's budget and economic policies, Ogbugwo (1996:11) saw them as bold acts of tightening the noose on the country's already impoverished masses. This sort of budgeting, which results from a coincidence of the demands of economic globalisation and leadership greed, has not changed even in the present democratic dispensation. The culture of poverty has made the realization of basic needs no longer within the cultural or cognitive reach of the people. Basic needs according to ILO (1977) include two crucial elements: first, certain

minimum requirements of a family for private consumption, adequate food, shelter, clothing, household equipment and furniture; second, essential services provided by and for the community at large such as safe drinking water, sanitation, public transport, health and educational facilities. While Nigerians are progressively and daily being denied the first, they are being brainwashed into believing that the second are only available to those who can afford their exorbitant costs and are not for everybody.

Government, through various radio jingles, has reinforced values and attitudes that are consistent with poverty. Such government sponsored clichés as 'hard times do not last', 'tighten your belts', and 'sacrifice for your nation', are all tailored to suit the values of poverty and the selfish aims of rulers. They preach, by implication, the doctrine of passivity i.e. hard times are made to sound normal and people are exhorted to calmly accept their situations in life. Even when government calls on the people to help themselves, it has been done without an appraisal of the possibility of this in a choking socio-economic reality. So such calls are not matched with the provision of the enabling socio-economic environment. Surveying the realities of present day Nigeria, Chukwuezi (1996:15) argues that, "... in the face of naked brutality and repression, people find any other means to survive whether by hook or crook." This comment is an appropriate tribute to the influence of bad leadership and its adverse effects on the people and their perception of their situation. Currently, the government in a confused bid to deregulate the oil sector is promoting petroleum products price regime that is well beyond the economic ability of vast majority of Nigerians.

The culture of poverty in Nigeria can easily be seen mainly in the various city hovels and slums that dot the length and breadth of the country's urban areas. In such squalid environments, Nigerians devise a sub-culture that is in keeping with the realities of their existence. Such cultural patterns or sub-cultures and adaptive mechanisms are easily internalised and passed on to younger ones who may invariably grow up to be prototypes of their parents.

The slum area in Nigeria is generally an area of physical, social and moral degradation.

It is characterised by physical and social blight. Slum dwelling brings with it what has been referred to as the slum sub-culture that can rightly be equated with the culture of poverty in view of its effects on the human beings in such areas. People in the slum area face the form of poverty characterized as poverty amidst wealth (on a national level) and the persistent long term poverty of the marginalised that perform menial work for little or no pay (Badjan-Young, 1996).

The slum culture seems to have been well captured by Clinard (1966:15) when he argued:

> *The attitude of the slum dweller toward the slum itself, towards the city of which the slum is a part, towards his own chances of getting out, towards the people who control things, towards the system as an element which as much as anything also will determine whether or not it is possible to do something about slums. This is what makes slums a human problem rather than a problem of finance and real estate.*

Imbued in the above statement is the fact that slum dwelling has certain value systems that go with it. It is such values that we see as also consistent with those of the slum sub-culture and by implication the culture of poverty. Some slum children may escape the situation, but a majority of them will fall prey to this culture that is based on an unwholesome digestion of a normative pattern that sees neither anything wrong in slum dwelling nor in poverty. The argument then is that the slum and other city hovels are the bastions of the culture that supports poverty.

The culture of poverty here is not primarily concerned with the effective transmission of poverty to future generations, but with the existence of beliefs and values that justify poverty and may aid its perpetuation. The basic notion then is that the culture of poverty as found in the slum areas and elsewhere in Nigeria, will persist until meaningful change in the values and beliefs of the inhabitants is effected.

While this fact has been recognised, the government, rather than address the problem through the provision of good physical facilities and a committed programme aimed at tackling the problem, has put in place policies that further entrench and perpetuate this culture of poverty. Urban renewal or slum clearance, which is one way of riding the slums and hovels of their negative cultural life patterns, have been seen by successive Nigerian governments as ways of acquiring urban residential plots for the wealthy. Even the tackling of the problems that would lead to the deterioration of the few habitable areas of the urban environment has been grossly neglected. This has bred a situation where, "social services and infrastructure have broken down completely." While recognising the need for the rejuvenation of the positive cultural values of the people that have been eroded by the prevailing state of moral bankruptcy and get-rich-quick-by-all-means syndrome, the government has focused attention mainly on those areas of cultural rejuvenation that would ensure that the ruling class clings on to power.

In this sense, the people are exhorted to take their fate stoically and co-operate with the government in its chosen paths and programmes. Therefore, mobilization programmes, instead of tackling the needed cultural revival, have focused on inculcating a culture of passivity and acquiescence

on the people. Such government sponsored agencies as the moribund Directorate of Mass Mobilisation for Economic Recovery and Social Justice (MAMSER), and the present National Orientation Agency (NOA) were set up to achieve this objective.

The Way Out

The way out of the present dilemma of poverty is through the provision of good leadership, the equitable distribution of resources, improvements in general social and physical amenities and, more fundamentally, a profound cultural revival. The cultural revival advocated in this paper should be seen as transcending what Obiajulu (1994:10) describes as the euphoria surrounding masquerading, calendarical and critical title taking or what Adepitan (1996) refers to as fiesta. Genuine cultural revival should be seen as a situation wherewe Nigerians are taught why we are poor, ignorant, hungry, and running away from societal challenges as well as why we are corrupt and callous, all of which are in disharmony with the African concept of being (Obiajulu, 1994).

Cultural revival involves looking back at the culture of the people and emphasizing those values that are germane to sustainable development and which give real meaning to the existence of the people as a group. At this point in its national history and faced with the seeming endemic problem of development, a way out may be for the Nigerian government to look back at the culture of the people and use it as a solid base for development programmes. There is no gainsaying the fact that human resources or manpower remains a most crucial element in the development of a nation (see Damachi and Diejomah, 1978; Dean, 1972). If this is given, then a situation where a sizeable proportion of the nation's citizenry see themselves as marginalized and live in a state of accepted poverty does not augur well for development. Any attempt to situate development within the framework of culture should look back at the culture of the people and use it as a mechanism for expunging from the minds of Nigerians of the culture of poverty and the belief in corrupt routes to success.

People like Agbese (1995:13), who has argued that culture creates several faces of the word 'corruption' and that it reflects the moral decay in a society would be persuaded to see corruption as not in the genuine culture of any group in Nigeria and to understand that moral decay in Nigeria is synonymous with leadership decay which obviously predated it.

Cultural revival, in the sense being proposed, would encompass not only the projection of the enabling features of our culture but also a conscious and dedicated effort to strip ourselves of those negative traits of culture that negate national life and general development. Therefore, one calls for a

jettisoning of those traits of our culture that Iwe (nd: 5) sees as gross, gruesome, and cruel. A few decades ago, these would mean practices like infanticide destruction of twins, ethnic strives, cannibalism, nudity, illiteracy, idolatry, human sacrifice, etc. Presently, it would include such things as quest for immediate gratification, get-rich-quick mania, corruption (especially in high places), ethnic schism, poverty of leadership, unbridled quest for material wealth, mass poverty, a tendency towards reaping where one did not sow or what Kukah (1996:11) has labelled 'extravagant celebration', religious intolerance, poor personal and official ethics etc. Some of these are not in any way genuine features of Nigerian culture but are perverted abstractions or corrupted extrapolations from cultural features particularly tailored to suit present 'realities'.

This invariably boils down to the issue of poverty of leadership. In approaching leadership, modem day Nigerians seem to have forgotten the democratic traditions of various Nigerian ethnic groups that emphasize group oriented leadership and selfless service. Maybe it was this realisation that made Etiehet (1996:6) and Achebe (1983) see leadership as the Nigerian problem. Achebe in an incisive examination of the Nigerian malaise locates it in leadership. To him therefore, all the woes being suffered by the country and its citizens emanate from bad leadership and corruption among leaders. Echoing him, Obasanjo (1994:4) ironically argues, in a manner that smacks of a self-fulfilling prophecy that:

> *I have often heard that poverty is our problem and not political administration, I beg to disagree. If those who manage our politics and hence our economy impoverish us in the process, we cannot blame our inadequacy on material poverty, but on poverty of leadership. Other nations -whose level of material poverty were similar to ours at independence and which are less endowed in resources, have made greater strides because they are better led politically.*

The culture of poverty, as a description of the mass poverty in Nigeria is tenable when one realizes that culture is practically a human response to the biological-environmental conditions and requirements of his existence (Iwe, nd). Culture then is nothing but the total configuration of institutions that people in society share in common (Mussen, 1963). The Nigerian culture, that is, an embodiment of the cultural configuration of the values, beliefs, norms and practices of all groups in Nigeria has its own authentic institutions, patterns of behaviour and solid values.

In this sense, it values the ideals of hard work, truth, liberty, social justice, democracy, achievement, honesty, people-oriented and visionary leadership, sacrifice, commitment, dedication, ability to rise beyond one's

misfortune, brother's keeper syndrome (the extended family typifies this) etc. Moreover, Enahoro et al (1987) have done an exhaustive study outlining the features of Nigerian indigenous culture that is advantageous to development. Such cultural traits as honesty, love of hard work, cohesiveness, strong ethics, brotherhood inclinations etc were identified. The above cultural features should be the focus of a cultural revival. Their existence lends credence to the belief that poverty is not in our culture but in our character so shaped by the ruling class in direct connivance and co-operation with foreign personages and cultures.

CONCLUSION

The cultural revival so far stressed can be made up of two vital parts: education of the populace, through a committed programme, on the need for general moral and ethical improvements both in personal and business life; a media and tactical action directed at riveting attention to the positive cultural values of Nigeria. In addition to these, general improvements in social and physical infrastructure should be tackled as institutional actions directed at poverty.

The first two measures will give the less fortunate Nigerians the cultural and moral courage to face their social existence, knowing that there is no desirable ethos or pride in poverty and also lessen the prevalence of corruption and other negative traits associated with current cultural aberrations. A drastic reduction in corruption may eventually lead to a situation where the available resources in the country may at least trickle down to the less privileged. Also, the utilization of such resources on the provision of social and physical services as well as welfare for the aged, the handicapped, and the less privileged would greatly reduce poverty. But more than anything else, the emphasis to be given to the positive cultural values of the people would lead to a questioning of the values and beliefs which justify poverty and make it transmittable from generation to generation. This is necessary since mass poverty spells doom for the future of any nation.

After all, poverty can also be linked to the recent upsurge in unrest and crises in many parts of Africa. Hence a culture of poverty, whether inadvertently perpetuated or strategically manipulated means eventual doom for the people concerned. Poverty is at the root of most social stress, and social conflict is a symptom of wrong values, particularly intolerance.

Therefore, there is need for the education of people towards solidarity, tolerance, co-operation, sharing with others, caring about others, honesty in private and public life, accountability as well as striving to improve one's

social position through socially approved means. These then should form part of the agenda of an urgently needed cultural revival in Nigeria.

In addition to the above, Badjan-Young (1996:6) argues that, "there is an urgent need for more even development and more equitable distribution of resources". This is more like restating the views of Corm (1994:10) that non-urban civilizations in Africa contrived to handle poverty by managing the natural resources they had available in egalitarian and highly knowledgeable ways.

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