

African Research Review

An International Multi-Disciplinary Journal , Ethiopia

Vol. 4 (2) April, 2010

ISSN 1994-9057 (Print)

ISSN 2070-0083 (Online)

Towards Sustainable Poverty Alleviation in Nigeria

(Pp. 294-302)

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Abstract

Poverty, a global issue that is complex and multi-dimensional is one of the most dangerous diseases ravaging mankind. The quality of life one lives is greatly tied to whether he is poor or not, as such, government at all levels in Nigeria have on various occasions attempted to roll out programmes that can alleviate poverty. Despite these attempts, the scourge seems unbolting as a result of the negative role of globalization in the economy of Nigeria, disparities in peoples income, gender imbalance as far as access to economic resources is concerned, disparities in access to health and education, macro-economic mis-management on the part of successive government, corruption, neglect of agriculture among others. The study recommends investment in infrastructure, involvement of the people at the grassroot in the design, implementation, monitoring of poverty alleviation programmes, introduction of social grants like old age, child support, disability, unemployment etc, end to privatization of state functions, enhanced probity and accountability and reformation of the polity for sustainable poverty alleviation in Nigeria.

Keywords: Dimensions, poverty, alleviation, sustainable.

Introduction

Poverty, a global phenomenon that is complex and multi-dimensional is not easy to define. Each region of the world has different yardsticks for measuring the level of poverty based on people's ability to have access to basic things of life namely: food, clothing and shelter. However, it is pertinent to note that despite different yardsticks and indices of measuring poverty from region to region all over the world, the fact still remains that the meaning of poverty still tends towards lack and below average and poor standard of living going by the following definitions as posited by scholars. Narsir (2002) defined poverty as 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.

The World Bank Report (1990) 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 (1990) and United Nations (1995) the various manifestations 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. Going by the foregoing definitions and facts about poverty, Ogunleye (2006) concludes that indicators of poverty include: literacy, health status, nutrition status, access to housing, water satisfaction etc Poverty therefore is the inability to attend to or meet up with the basic necessities of life as a result of lack of wherewithals to do so.

Facts about dimensions of poverty in Nigeria

According to African foundation for Population and Development (2005), Nigeria is the tenth most populous country in the world and the largest in sub-saharan Africa. It is one of the fastest growing nations in the world. The Nigerian population had more than doubled since she attained nationhood in 1960. Going by the data obtained from past censuses, the country's population increased sharply from fifty-four (54) million in 1963 to Eighty eight (88) million in 1991. Currently, the country's population has reached one hundred and forty-four (144) Million according to the 2006 population and housing census. With an annual population growth rate of 2.9 percent,

which is nearly the same with the annual GDP growth rate (3.5 percent), Nigeria's population will double in the next twenty-five years.

By 2015 (the year benchmarked for the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), Nigeria's population is estimated to be about 178 million. According to the report, Nigeria though rich in natural resources, is currently ranked among the 13 poorest countries in the world. With per capital income falling significantly to about \$300 (below the sub-sahara average of \$450) approximately more than 90 million of Nigeria's 144 million people are living in absolute poverty i.e. in less than one dollar a day. Corroborating the assertion above, Nasir (2002) noted 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 population is Africans and almost one-third of this number coming from Nigeria alone.

Also, available data from the Federal Office of Statistics, (FOS, 1999), indicates 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 67.85 in 1996. In another development, Nigeria is a country blessed with vast tracks of arable land, abundant human and natural resources. Therefore, Nigeria and poverty should be strage bed fellows. But that is not the case (Tell, Feb. 2, 2009 pg. 53). According to the magazine, Nigeria was regarded as the promising country in the commonwealth ahead of India, Malaysia and Singapore. But, while these countries have made appreciable progress in most indices of growth, Nigeria is still struggling at the bottom of the ladder with most of her citizens unable to meet their basic necessities of food, clothing and shelter.

Going by the facts and figures on dimensions of poverty in Nigeria, the people of the country have suffered untold hardships as a result of the consequences of the scourge on the total well being of the nation. Some of the consequences are physical and psychological. They range from formation of slums in cities, worsening ecological conditions, unemployment and under-employment to upsurge in criminality and increasing mortality rate.

It is against this background that this paper tries to look at past and current government efforts at alleviating poverty in Nigeria, causes of poverty and

elements contributing or promoting poverty in the country and recommends sustainable poverty alleviation strategies in Nigeria.

Past and Current Efforts of Government at Alleviating Poverty in Nigeria

According to Ogunleye (2006), the federal government of Nigeria did not come out boldly to say she was alleviating poverty until recently. This is so perhaps because it is assumed that poverty to some extent is a feature of the rural areas and such is not a problem commanding national significance. The fact that the available urban centers in the country have pockets of infrastructure and a reasonable above average quality of life had encouraged successive governments in the country to tag their poverty alleviation programmes rural development efforts.

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 of the country (Ogunleye, 2006). 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 improve upon 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 Projects (ADPs) as one of the objectives. Akeredolu (1985) 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 fourth National Development Plan (1981-1985) was on man. Poverty alleviation was not seen as merely providing infrastructures and improving agricultural activities but improving the economic life of the rural areas. According to Adeyinka et al (2002), 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 of 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 achieve 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 government of Chief Olusegun Obasanjo at inception in 1999 came out boldly 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. In the same vein, the government of the day believes that Africa's attainment of the Millennium Development Goals depends to a large extent on Nigeria's commitments to poverty reduction. Of utmost significance is the formulation of a homegrown National Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS) which has been described as Nigeria's version of the MDGs. NEEDS was replicated into the state Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (SEEDS) and Local Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (LEEDS) at the state and local government levels respectively. Despite all these laudable programmes, poverty seems not to be removed from the land. No wonder, the Senate (the upper chamber of the Nigerian legislative arm of government) unanimously passed a resolution to probe into the activities of NAPEP since inception in their session of the 17th February, 2009 because poverty seems to be on the increase despite the existence and activities of the agency. The current administration of Alhaji Umaru Musa Yar'Adua is yet to show any flash of seriousness at alleviating poverty despite clearly stating his seven-point agenda on assumption of office in May, 2007.

Elements Contributing to Escalation of Poverty in Nigeria

Despite several attempts of government, international agencies, NGOs at alleviating poverty as noted above, the scourge is still much apparent in the

country. The reasons are numerous, but a few of the most important ones are enumerated as follows:-

1. **The role of globalization in poverty escalation:** The current model of globalization is not sustainable enough in the country and Africa as a whole because the growth it is generating is not creating enough decent jobs for the teeming population.
2. **Disparities in people's income and unemployment:** Generally, the gap between the rich and the poor is so wide in the country that it has been concluded that the middle class does not exist in the country. Quite a number of employable youths are either unemployed or under employed.
3. **Gender:** This is also a prevalent factor in poverty escalation. Overall, women have access to fewer economic resources and have far less social and political power than do men, which greatly restricts their opportunities to climb out of poverty.
4. **Health and education disparities:** In Nigeria the wealthy receive the best schooling and medical care, while many of the poor simply do without. The poor education and health of those living in poverty in turn make it harder for them or their children to advance their economic position. Education is typically seen as a means of narrowing inequalities, however across sub-saharan Africa, Ernest (2006) documented that 37 percent of children did not go to school in 2001, the highest for any world region. Among females the share was 41 percent. Almost all children out of school are from poor families.
5. **Inequalities in power:-** Inequalities in income and human capabilities often reflect inequalities in political power. Poor people, women, rural populations and marginalized ethnic groups are disadvantaged in part because they are badly organized, have a weak political voice and are excluded from major areas of decision making in Nigeria especially those involving the distribution of economic and social resources. Unequal political power leads to the formation of institution that perpetuates inequalities in power, status and wealth. All these are characteristics of Nigeria.

6. The Department for International Development DFID (2001) identified three factors as the bedrock of poverty in Nigeria as Macro-Economic mis-management on the part of successive military and civilian governments, corruption and misuse of oil windfalls. The organisation traced Nigeria's poor economic performance to the failure to productively manage its oil windfall either to improve social infrastructure or encourage non-oil sector economic activities.
7. **Neglect of agriculture:** Before the discovery of oil in the Niger Delta in 1956, agriculture had been the mainstay of the economy of Nigeria. More than 95 percent of the foreign exchange earnings of the country came from the agricultural sector in the first decade of independence, but in the early 70s (during the first oil boom period) the concern of both government and individuals towards agriculture began to dwindle as they saw the "black gold" as an easier and quicker means of getting money. The perception has not changed till today.
8. **Poor infrastructural base:** Good road, portable water, electricity etc no doubt determine the productivity capacity of artisans and the organised private sector. The level of infrastructural development in Nigeria is below average, hence, low level of productivity and poverty escalation.

Sustainable Poverty Alleviation Strategies for Nigeria

The following are some of the sustainable strategies at alleviating poverty in Nigeria.

1. Investment in infrastructure that directly enhances productive capacities (such as water supply, irrigation schemes, prevention of erosion) can have a high economic return through increased agricultural output. Roads and other infrastructures should be extended to geographically remote areas.
2. Economic policies of government should be geared towards creation of jobs.
3. Special attention should be given to the needs of the marginalized, disadvantages and vulnerable segments of the population including women towards their empowerment and self-sufficiency.

4. 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.
5. Formation of social development departments to disburse social grants like old age, pensions, grants for child support, disability un-employment grants etc
6. There is the need to end the folly of privatizing state functions on a large scale and to rebuild the public institutions and services that were dismantled in recent years. It is true that corruption and mismanagement continue to plague many state institutions in Nigeria, but the shift towards multiparty electoral system and the proliferation of programmes to strengthen good governance can improve the accountability and capacity of these institutions.
7. National tax systems should be made moderately progressive so that the rich (many of whom now evade taxes) pay more, thus, generating additional funds for poverty reduction and basic social services.
8. Enhanced probity and accountability at all levels of governance.
9. Political reforms that can make government accountable to the people and also pave way for confidence in the polity so as to attract investment from abroad.

Conclusion

This paper has dealt extensively with the meaning of poverty, its extent in and effects on Nigeria. There is no doubt in the fact that successive government in Nigeria have attempted to alleviate poverty at one time or the other through their poverty alleviation related programmes, the conclusion is that as laudable as some of these programmes are they have not been able to lift the life of majority of Nigerians above the poverty line. The reasons for this are not far fetched; they include; the role of globalisation on the economy, disparities in peoples income, health and education disparities, inequalities in power, macro-economic mismanagement on the part of successive government, corruption, misuse of oil windfalls, neglects of agriculture and poor infrastructural base among others. It is believed that sustainable poverty alleviation is achievable in Nigeria if investment in physical infrastructure is improved

upon, enhanced probity and accountability at all levels of governance is embraced and attempt is made to reform the polity such that government is made to be more accountable to the people.

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