



## Poverty Reduction in Nigeria: A Religious Imperative

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### Abstract

The study explores the incidence of poverty in Nigeria which harbors some devastating manifestations in the search for national cohesion and sustainable development. The manifestations include: lack of adequate food and nutrition, high rates of unemployment, high infant and maternal mortality. This poses the danger of compromising the harmony of the future that would reinforce the elements of disintegrative tendencies such as conflict shocks, coup d'état, brain drain, and child labor. The failure of government to alleviate poverty in Nigeria calls for every sector of society especially Faith Based Organizations (FBOs) in creating innovative new programs and partnerships in communities around the country. Hence, poverty reduction in Nigeria has become a religious imperative of humankind. Accordingly, is action for poverty reduction an integral part of living the faith? Therefore, this study intends to demonstrate how FBOs have evolved informed interventions in basic health, education, and agricultural inputs to reduce poverty pervading the nation's development agenda. This study will achieve this objective by focusing on the structural functional theory of religion using descriptive phenomenological method. The finding reveals that reducing poverty is achievable through socio-economic and institutional reforms, reduction of corruption, conflict shocks, and by making poor people to directly participate in, contributes to and benefit from growth processes. The study recommends that the war against poverty should be intensified through national ethical values and good governance. This will ultimately bring about social stability, sustainable development, and equitable distribution of resources.

**Keywords:** Compassion, Nigeria, Poverty, Poverty Reduction, Religious Imperative

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### Introduction

In Nigeria, poverty and unemployment levels are extremely high and two of the nation's most pressing problems. Poverty has been rising steadily over the years and seems to have become a way of life for many Nigerians. This is due to stagnation, unemployment and poor quality of life



arising from shortages of essential goods and facilities, an unhealthy environment, and government insensitivity (Iroanya, 2015). Kale (2012) disclosed at a news conference while presenting the Nigeria Poverty Profile Report that in total 93.9 percent of Nigerians considered themselves to be poor in 2010 against 75.5 percent in 2004 (Iroanya, 2015; Onah, Okwuosa & Uroko, 2018; Ayoo, 2021). The Federal Government of Nigeria through the National Bureau of Statistics on November 17, 2022 launched the results of the 2022 Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) Survey. Highlights of the 2022 MPI Survey:

63 percent of persons living in Nigeria (133 million people) are multi-dimensionally poor. The National MPI is 0.257, indicating that poor people in Nigeria experience just over one-quarter of all possible deprivations. 65 percent of the poor (86 million people) live in the North, while 35 percent (nearly 47 million) live in the South. Poverty levels across states vary significantly with the incidence of multi-dimensional poverty ranging from a low of 27 percent in Ondo to a high of 91 percent in Sokoto. Over half of the population of Nigeria are multi-dimensionally poor and cook with dung, wood or charcoal, rather than cleaner energy (Iched, 2022, P.1).

Ostensibly, Nigeria has the awful distinction of being the world capital of poverty, with 71 million Nigerians living in extreme poverty, surviving below \$1.90 per day, while 133million are multi-dimensionally poor (Lain, Schoch & Vishwanath, 2022). The petrol subsidy removal and naira unification rates policies has plunged 7.1million Nigerians into extreme poverty, adding to the 133 MPI. Essentially, the rate of poverty in Nigeria is significantly greater if it is assessed using a \$3.20 a day poverty line. Ayoo (2021) argues that \$3.20 a day is a more realistic yardstick for assessing poverty than the \$1.90 a day poverty line that is too low for standard of living assessments. Meeting the basic human needs of these groups of Nigerians has been quite difficult and their descent into the poverty trap has become a reality.

Similarly, unemployment bites harder on Nigeria's youthful population, with 33.3 percent of the labor force unable to find a job at the prevailing wage. Inflation of 28.90 percent in December 2023 is making a mess of household disposable income, workers' salary, and the 2019 minimum wage of ₦30, 000.00. In a post-COVID-19 economy, stagnation, and poverty have worsened especially in Northern Nigeria where many Nigerians lack education and access to basic



infrastructure such as electricity, safe drinking water and improved sanitation (Lain, Schoch & Vishwanath, 2022; Akpata, 2023). The incidence of poverty has been aggravated by the removal of fuel subsidy by President Bola Tinubu on May 29, 2023, which has led to high cost of food prices, transportation, housing, and hike in school fees.

Against this backdrop, the effect of poverty is felt in the life of every Nigerian. These devastating manifestations include; lack of income and productive assets to ensure sustainable livelihoods, chronic hunger and malnutrition, homelessness, lack of durable goods, diseases, lack of access to clean water, lack of education, low life expectancy, social exclusion and discrimination, high levels of unemployment, lack of participation in decision-making. Others include lack of access to adequate shelter, low literacy rates, high infant and maternal mortality, high rates of a feeling of vulnerability, and disempowerment (Nkwede, 2014; Iroanya, 2015; Onah, Okwuosa & Uroko, 2018; Ayoo 2021). The point being strenuously affirmed is that poverty has deleterious impacts on human well-being. Its reduction has been identified as an ethical, social, economic, political, and religious imperative of humankind. Accordingly, poverty reduction and hunger were key targets in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) subsequently adopted in September 2000. Poverty reduction continues to be a priority in the pursuit of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that the UNGA subsequently adopted in January 1, 2016 (Aderounmu, Azuh, Onanuga, Oluwatomisin, Ebenezer & Azuh, 2021).

Also, the commemoration of the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty worldwide every 17<sup>th</sup> October holds deep significance for Nigeria. Nigeria's experience with poverty reduction programs has been one of monumental waste, massive corruption and indiscipline, low productivity, opacity, reckless politics, and inefficiencies. The failure of the government to alleviate poverty in Nigeria calls for all social actors to design a simple, implementable, and sustainable poverty reduction model. In this regard, poverty reduction in Nigeria has become a religious imperative. To be a religious imperative, however, an action must be capable of being performed. Against this background, religion has the obligation to fight for a society that will enable every Nigerian to live with dignity and well-being. Religion has to work for the



eradication of exploitation, oppression of the weak and poor, social inequality and exclusion. To underscore this,

Justice for those in our society who live in poverty is for all of us, a deeply held religious belief on which we are firmly united. We affirm God's vision of a good society offered to us by the Prophet Isaiah. His words are as relevant today as they were 3000 years ago, and show us the way forward (see Isa. 65:20-23) (Wallis, 2005, P.239).

Therefore, for religion to be relevant in the present Nigeria, it must address the present cleavage between the rich and the poor. Religion must challenge the oppression of the electorate by the political bigwigs and the defenseless masses in the face of minor sicknesses. Religion must provide answers to the dreaded diseases, the exploitation of women and child abuse, corruption and a host of other precarious exposures to the masses. In this direction, the question is: can religion speak audibly to African society? Is there a distinctive and substantive contribution that religion can make to the world's search for poverty reduction? Or is action for poverty reduction and social inclusion an integral part of living the faith? Various authors have examined poverty reduction strategies in Nigeria, according to different perspectives.

Ogwuiké (1999) examined the effects of macro-level government policies on rural development and poverty alleviation. Iwe (1999) assessed the role of the church as the vanguard of human rights in Nigeria. Mustapha (2011) dealt with poverty alleviation as machinery for economic reconstruction in Nigeria. Onyemenam (2013) focused on poverty reduction programs in Nigeria. Onah, Okwuosa & Uroko (2018) discussed the church and poverty reduction in Nigeria. However, none of these studies saw poverty reduction in Nigeria as a religious imperative. This gap this study intends to fill. Accordingly, the objective of the study is to spotlight how Faith Based Organizations have evolved informed interventions to reduce poverty pervading the nation's sustainable development agenda, leading to the achievement of the SDGs on poverty. The study will achieve this purpose by focusing on the integrative functions of religion using the descriptive phenomenological method. Impliedly, any poverty reduction program must rest on a set of moral beliefs which ground the political order on a transcendent ground. Also, the study will identify some challenges to poverty reduction strategies in Nigeria and propose fundamental remedial imperatives. This sets the tone for the research methodology of the study.



## Methodology

This study adopted a descriptive phenomenological method of social research. It is theoretical and descriptive in nature. It generated its data from secondary sources including: newspapers, journal publications, textbooks, conference papers, internet sources, and participant observations with Faith Based Organizations (hereafter FBOs) in poverty reduction programs over the years. This qualitative approach is historical, sociological, and phenomenological. The data were collected and analyzed descriptively. This present study is novel in providing a comprehensive framework on how FBOs have challenged poverty and human rights violations in Nigeria by providing development interventions such as investment in basic education, health, agricultural inputs, and communication services. The result of the study can be utilized in conducting empowerment strategies aimed at poverty reduction in Nigeria. Accordingly, the current study will be very beneficial for further research in this sector and structuring the work of government Ministries, Departments and Agencies, stakeholders, and the people involved in the sector within Nigeria.

## Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

A clear definition of poverty is vital to identifying the causes of poverty, measuring its extent, and in assessing progress towards its eradication. Poverty often appears as “an elusive concept, especially from the perspective of researchers and policy makers in developing countries” (Jerome, 2011, p.7). The best definition of poverty remains a matter of considerable academic argument. Perhaps the only point of general agreement is that people who live in poverty must be in a state of deprivation, that is, a state in which their standard of living falls below minimum acceptable standard (Scott & Marshall, 2005). Notably, poverty is a condition of social, economic, political, emotional and spiritual deprivation resulting from want. In this regard, poverty according to the World Bank (2001) is “pronounced deprivation in well-being, where well-being can be measured by an individual possession of income, health, nutrition, education, assets, housing, and certain rights in a society” (Jerome, 2011, p.8). These accounts for why the concept of poverty is a topic far beyond mere employment, national minimum wage, sick benefits or pension, as it is not a problem for the poor alone. This is why there is bewildering



ambiguity with which the term ‘poverty’ is used and by the peculiar indicator proposed to monitor it like the international poverty line as already identified.

Accordingly, it is useful to distinguish between the degrees of poverty; extreme (absolute poverty), consensual poverty, and relative poverty. Extreme poverty means that households cannot meet basic needs for survival. The poor are chronically hungry, unable to access health care, lack the amenities for safe drinking water and sanitation, cannot afford education for some or all of their children, and perhaps lack rudimentary shelter. Moderate poverty generally refers to conditions of life in which basic needs are met, but just barely. Relative poverty is generally construed as a household income below a given proportion of average national income. Relatively poor households lack access to cultural goods, entertainment, recreation, and to quality health care, education, and other prerequisites for upward social mobility (Sachs, 2005; Jerome, 2018). Therefore, poverty leads to inadequate standard of living for individuals, families and communities. For example, children living in poverty, lack access to the basic necessities of life. Such necessities includes access to housing that ensures adequate health and safety, the best possible education, the right to play in safety and opportunities for them to participate in social activities. Hence, poverty affects the child’s total life, their mental response, their sex drive, and ability to concentrate at school.

Impliedly, poverty is “the knockout punch in an uneven encounter. It leaves the poor flat on their backs or at the very least, too demoralized to fight back” (Mooneyham, 1975, p.36). In a gripping poignant description of poverty and despair, Mooneyham (1975, p.45) contends that poverty is “a bleeding wound which never heals, hemorrhaging strength and life out of the body and contributing to chronic sickness of society”. Poverty further entails lack of representation and freedom. Indeed, the poor themselves see powerlessness and noiselessness as key aspects of their poverty. In this direction, UNDP (2006) in Ngwoke and Numonde (2011, p.132) conceives poverty as “encouraging issues of discrimination, neglect, and lack of a voice”. In particular, poverty is “often embedded in social structures. Social exclusion can be understood as the processes of discrimination that deprive people of their human rights and result in inequitable and fragmented societies” (Jerome, 2011, p.8). Gender discrimination is the most common form



of discrimination worldwide. Obasi (2014, p.14) remark you are more likely “to be poor if you are a woman and as a woman, you are likely to be doing most of the work. Girls are too often denied access to education, health and nutrition from birth.” Fundamentally, poverty is a negative term denoting absence or lack of material wealth. Such absence, however, is seldom absolute and the term is usually employed to describe much more frequent situation of insufficiency either in possession of wealth or in the flow of income.

Nevertheless, in this study, poverty is more than lack of money or material resources, insecurity, and lack of political voice. In this study, poverty denotes hopelessness, lack of control over life, mental enslavement, and inability to change or to work. Poverty is the fundamental denial of choices and opportunities, a violation of the human dignity. It is also a pronounced deprivation in well-being in a multi-dimensional manner. Poverty in this study includes low incomes and the inability to acquire the basic goods and services necessary for survival with dignity. Obviously, the poor include vulnerable groups such as widows, women and children, the unemployed, rural dwellers and people living with disabilities. Against this background, the prevalence of poverty in Nigeria despite her rich human and natural endowment; being a natural and attractive hub for foreign investment and one-stop market access to over 50 countries, is a critical challenge that needs to be addressed urgently because of its adverse implications on human well-being (Ayoo, 2021; Aderounmu, Azuh, Onanuga, Oluwatomisin, Ebenezer & Azuh, 2021; Elumoye, 2022). This calls for a comprehensive plan for change, involving every sector, including the government, the markets, Faith Based Organizations (FBOs), Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), the academia, women and youth organizations in creating innovative new programs and partnerships in communities around the country.

Hereto, poverty reduction is about rights, dignity and giving the people economic, social, political, ethical, and spiritual empowerment. Combating poverty is the promotion of a planned and balanced economic development that secures the maximum welfare, freedom and happiness of every citizen on the basis of social justice and equality of status and opportunity. Poverty reduction includes securing adequate means of livelihood as well as adequate opportunity to





secure suitable employment for all citizens without discrimination on any group whatsoever (Iroanya, 2015). Furthermore, sustainable poverty reduction is increased government funding of pro-poor causes as health, education and infrastructure as well as bolstering information communication technologies (Lain, Schoch & Vishwanath, 2021). Sachs (2005) has muted the idea and we share in his insight that combating poverty is making the necessary investments in six major kinds of capital. They are: human capital, business capital, infrastructure capital, natural capital, public institutional capital and knowledge capital. Maathai (2012) is categorical that sustainable poverty reduction needs poor people to be both the agents and beneficiaries of economic growth to directly participate in, contribute to and benefit from growth processes. Strengthening poor people's organizations, providing them with more control over assets and promoting their influence in economic governance will improve the terms on which they engage in markets.

This economic empowerment combined with political and social empowerment will make growth much more effective in reducing poverty. Against this background, structural functionalists' explanation fits into the role of religion in poverty reduction in Nigeria. Structural functionalism has a long history in sociology. It is prominent in the work of Auguste Comte (1798 -1857) and Herbert Spencer (1820 -1903). However, the structural functional approach to religion has its roots in Emile Durkheim's (1858 -1917) work on religion. In the *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, first published in 1912, Durkheim argued that societies divide the world into two categories: the sacred and the profane. The functionalist perspective sees society as a system that needs all its parts to function. In this context, religion is necessary to allow society to function smoothly. Functionalists suggest that the norms and values in religion are 'social glue' that bonds people together by creating shared interests and values. Shared interests and values create a consensus. Emile Durkheim called this 'the collective consciousness of society.' Durkheim stated that it is this collective consciousness that socializes people into 'proper' behavior and prevents society from descending into turmoil, or anomie (Iroanya, 2015). Applied to poverty reduction, FBOs as part of the society, plays a vital function of maintaining stability





and contributing to the survival of the society by providing vital services such as education, healthcare delivery, promotion of family values and moral values in society.

According to Wallis (2005, p.239) poverty is “becoming the defining moral issue for many in the faith community” and “Church leaders are declaring a determined ‘unity’ to make poverty a religious issue”. The author affirms that making poverty a religious issue is “a faith that does prioritize the needs of the poorest among us, a faith that includes compassion and a faith that does justice.” This is evident in the priority of the poor among the historical and contemporary fast-growing Churches in Nigeria. To underscore this, Ituma (2007, p,26) asserts that “Christians are the ones that will present the Jesus of Nazareth to the modern African in a manner that will reveal His ever lively living cares to hostile and malevolent society”. Given the foregoing, religion is indeed essential to poverty reduction and nation-building in Nigeria through its sacred or ultimate commitment to some set of norms, values and beliefs. Religion is a great political mobilizer in terms of campaign hustling, party affiliation, voting behavior, pressure groups and diplomatic relations. Consequently, religion contributes to general public opinion operating in society to safeguard the use of power and economic resources. In this vein, FBOs have challenged poverty and human rights violations by providing development interventions such as investment in basic health, education, agricultural inputs, communication services as well as safe drinking water and sanitation.

### **Overview of Poverty Reduction Strategies in Nigeria**

Strategies, policies and plans, programs and projects has been formulated and executed over the years on poverty reduction in Nigeria. They include: Operation Feed the Nation (OFN), Green Revolution, Directorate of Rural Infrastructure (DFFRI), Mass Mobilization for Social and Economic Reliance (MAMSER), Structural Adjustment Program and so on. For instance, two years after independence, the first National Development Plan Policy was formulated between 1962 and 1968 with objectives of development opportunities in health, education, employment and improving access to these opportunities. The plan failed because fifty percent of resources needed to finance the plan was to come from external sources, and only fourteen percent of the external finance was received (Oggunike, 1995). Subsequently, the second National



Development plan 1970-1974 was launched with priorities in agriculture, industry, transport, manpower, defense, electricity, communication and water supply and provision of social services. This also failed due to inadequate funding. Thereafter, the third and fourth plans were also launched. As these did not achieve its objectives, the approach changed to institutionalized poverty reduction strategies. This accounts for multiple programs, agencies and institutions established to reduce the incidence of poverty by various governments such as National Directorate of Employment (NDE), Peoples Bank of Nigeria, Better Life Program, Family Support Program, Agricultural Development Program, and National Agricultural Land Development Authority among others.

The emergence of Nigeria's Fourth Republic ushered in new ideas and decisive means of poverty reduction and social integration. The Federal Government introduced Poverty Alleviation Program (PAP) in 2000. Later, National Poverty Eradication Program (NAPEP) was established. NAPEP by establishment was aimed at; coordinating and monitoring poverty reduction program of the Federal, State and Local Governments and the efforts of NGOs toward poverty reduction,; assist in formulating policies aimed at poverty reduction; intervene through specific activities to spur economic development at grassroots (Ugwu; 2008). Additionally, NAPEP and NEEDS sought to realize the United Nations MDGs of having the proportion of people living in poverty by the year 2015. Based on the above mandate, NAPEP designed the following schemes: Youth Empowerment Scheme (YES), Community Enlightenment and Sensitization Scheme (COMESS), Capacity Enhancing Scheme (CES), Social Welfare Scheme (SOWOSS), Rural Infrastructural Development for the Rural Dwellers and Micro-finance Coordination Scheme (MFICOS). During President Goodluck Jonathan administration (2011-2015), there was a linkage between the seven point transformation agenda with the vision 20:2020. The vision was aimed at a strong Nigerian economy encapsulated in accelerated economic growth, employment creation, improved business environment, e-government, application of modern technology in agriculture, innovative techniques in indigenous practices, strong linkage between science, technology and industry (Iroanya, 2015).



Despite the plethora of poverty reduction programs governments had initiated and implemented, Nigeria's development indicators are definitely not looking good, as the numbers are below the peer meridian mark on human development indicators. The myth of growth and development is so entrenched that the nation's history passes for the history of development strategies (Onyemenam, 2013). Hence, in deeply moving words, Lawal & Oluwatoyin (2011, p.2) asserts that Nigeria "seems the only country where virtually all notions and models of development have been experienced". The failure of most social and economic policies in Nigeria since independence lends credence to the fact that the distribution of wealth, income and other social benefits is hampered by the massive corrupt practices of the political elites. Corruption and the Federal Government's habitual deficiency in collecting its due revenues from diverse sources poses an existential challenge to Nigeria's depressed economy. For instance, the 2021 Oil and Gas Industry Report by NEITI showed that NNPC and 13 other MDAs did not remit \$9.85 billion dollars due to the treasury that year, while 60 revenue generating agencies serially fail to remit funds (Punch Editorial Board of September 22, 2023). These plutocrats most times deliberately distort the processes of implementation of social, economic and even industrial policies that have direct impact on the masses. This explains why Nigeria remains a sad example of countries where pauperization seems to be vigorously pursued as a public policy. Mefor (2013, p.2) notes that "in Nigeria, government only pays lip service to poverty alleviation and has deliberately chosen the path of profligacy which reinforces poverty in the land".

In this regard, Raymond (2013, p.19) writes for these elites, "poverty and ignorance are highly functional as a means of preserving their privileged positions of power and authority while guaranteeing their subjects remain perpetually subservient and highly dependent on their master's charity." In this light, one could well say that the elites have adopted the much quoted statement of John Calvin that "only when the people, that is, the mass of laborers and craftsmen were poor did they remain obedient to God" (Weber, 1958, p.177). More so, policy inconsistency in Nigeria is too much and it is not healthy for the nation. However, a careful study of the Nigerian situation shows most of these policies and programs are avenues for siphoning public funds (Akuta 2009). Furthermore, Onyemenam (2013, p.4) observes that inadequate involvement of the poor in the design of development programs is a factor that



hinders effective success of the program. This is often exacerbated in the decision, preparation, design and implementation of programs that will affect them. As stated by Mustapha (2011, p.2) “by and large, the local people were not included in the identification of projects meaning that the ones identified were in most cases, inappropriate and unsustainable. To reinforce this, the International Monetary Fund (2022) said that “agricultural credit in the country had not succeeded in increasing production due to difficulty in reaching the targeted farmers” (Guardian News of September 18, 2023).

Ayoo (2021) has muted the idea and we share in his insight that these poverty reduction strategies have not been effective in reducing poverty because they were initiated as a condition for development assistance under the debt relief initiative of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank (WB). Accordingly, the programs were designed, targeted and implemented without identifying who the poor are; assessing the extent of poverty in the community; determining both the root causes of poverty and the opportunities that exist for reducing the incidences of poverty and improving the standards of living; and removing the various obstacles to poverty reduction. The worsening situation has been further compounded by a combination of factors such as widespread use of obsolete technologies in agriculture, instability in the foreign exchange market, lack of Foreign Direct Investment framework, low human capital, lack of access to productive resources such as land and capital, fiscal trap, climate change, government failures and conflict shocks. In Nigeria, conflict shocks have been accentuated in particular by insurgency, terrorism, banditry and herders-farmers clashes. The Boko Haram terrorism has been smoldering for the last 14 years. The scale of slaughter and the frequency with which the country is being bathed in blood is hard for the world to comprehend, given that the country is not at war, civil or with any other nation.

This insurgency has decimated whole communities, destroyed food crops, killed cattle and forced farmers to flee to protective camps. Markets and schools have been closed and custom duties have dwindled (James, 2022; Odifa, 2022). These are all problems that do not respect borders and from which the better off cannot insulate themselves. Simmon (1995) and Sachs (2005) cautions that if the present trends are allowed to continue unchallenged, the future is a



frightening prospect. It will be a world of deep divisions, of societies segregated between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots', between those with skill and opportunities, jobs and wealth and those with none, between those who count in economic, social and political terms, and those who do not. This is a prescription for increasing misery and deepening instability. From the foregoing, it suffices to conclude that Nigeria's poverty is self-inflicted. Abundant in natural and human resources, its successive Federal Governments have been inefficient, corrupt and failed to drive the economy productively. Its sub-national governments are worse; indolent, wasteful, unproductive and very corrupt. They revel in the perverse system of sharing crude oil revenue from a central pot instead of running productive, self-sufficient economies (see Punch Editorial Board of October 17, 2023). Accordingly, the various poverty reduction strategies have failed to lift at least 133 million multi-dimensionally poor Nigerians despite billions of naira invested in the schemes. In the light of the failure of government to alleviate poverty in Nigeria, the role of FBOs in wealth creation and employment becomes pertinent.

### **The Role of Religion in Poverty Reduction: the Nigerian Experience**

The study would briefly explore how FBOs had challenged the problem of poverty to reflect the social concern of God to His people.

#### **1. Humanitarian Institutions**

The many schools, hospitals and agricultural projects by the pioneering missionaries and the early recipients of the Gospel they proclaimed had led to the emancipation of the people and the development of the nation. The Church in Nigeria in particular has been keenly aware of the helpless, miserable and deplorable human conditions in which many Nigerians live. This has been compounded by epidemics of various diseases such as measles, diarrhea, tetanus, diphtheria, hepatitis B, dysentery, smallpox, cholera, malaria, HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis (TB), childhood pneumonia as well as the increasing number of helpless orphans, lepers and social outcasts (Iwe, 1999; Iroanya, 2015). To the above inhuman and miserable situations, the Church in her mission has responded with medical and humanitarian institutions such as the following: dispensaries, hospitals, orphanages, leper colonies, and sanatoria where invalids are cared for. For instance, the Baptist Medical Centre in Ogbomosho remains one leading hospital in Nigeria



and the University Teaching Hospital of Bowen University, Iwo. The Baptist Church operates other top flight medical centers with Schools of Nursing and Midwifery located at Eku, Saki and several other Baptist hospitals across Nigeria (Iroanya, 2015). In the same vein, Obuba (1996, p.84) succinctly opines that “when the Presbyterian missionaries arrived Uburu, the community was very hostile. The Chief only ‘mellowed down’ after free medical treatment was given to his subjects.” Hence, health programs are veritable tools in the hand of the Church for salvation.

The point here is that the Church, her institutions and organizations are major providers of health care to the world poor. These include providing antenatal and obstetric care, moral formation, education and advocacy, community based care, dealing with the consequences of botched abortion and caring for people living with HIV/AIDS (Beattie, 2014). Equally, the Nigerian Church integrates “disaster mitigation and emergency relief activities in sustainable community development for long-term effectiveness. This approach institute the reign of acceptance, forgiveness, love and justice” (Gwynne, 2008, p.162). More importantly, the strategies and approaches affirm “the dignity and worth of people as created in the image of God” (Alvarse, Avarientos & McAlpine, 2008, p.57). Without fear of contradiction, the present study demonstrate how the Church through its hospitals, health centers and health institutions has sought to cleanse, heal, and bind the wounds of the nation physically and psychologically. They have done this through such hospitals as: Royal Cross Hospital Uzuakoli, Mater Dei Hospital, Afikpo, Presbyterian Mission Hospital, Ivenger, Benue State, Immaculate Heart Hospital and Maternity, Nkpo, and Mary Slessor Joint Hospital, Itu, Akwa Ibom State. What is breath-taking in this position is that the purpose of medical mission is to prevent maternal and infant mortality as well as morbidity, which are higher in rural and undeserved areas due to poverty, ignorance and the resultant diseases. Again, it is for the actualization of the SDGs which seeks to combat and correct the negative indices especially in children and women.



## 2. Agriculture and Rural Improvement

The fact that agriculture is the dominant economic sector in most poor communities in Nigeria, implies that efforts to combat extreme poverty need to be directed towards increasing agricultural production and productivity. The Church has used the Bible and the plough to combat extreme poverty in Nigeria. The Church use of agriculture as method of evangelism can be liken to the confidential letter of Thomas Jefferson (1742-1826), the third United States President (1801-1809), Congress

First, to encourage them to abandon hunting to apply to the raising stock, to agriculture and domestic manufacture, and thereby prove to themselves that less land and labor will maintain them in this, better than in their former mode of living. The extensive forests necessary in the hunting life will then become useless, and they will see advantage in exchanging them for the means of improving their farms, and of increasing their domestic comfort . . . in leading them thus to agriculture, to manufacturing and civilization, in bringing together theirs and our settlements, and in preparing them ultimately to participate in the benefit of our government; I trust and believe we are acting for their greatest good (Allis, 2015, p.1).

The above citation leads to the new methods of farming and new crops that were introduced as well as demonstration farms that were established. The Church Missionary Society established vegetable gardens, introduced the cultivation of swamp rice and onions, and a steel corn mill for public use. On the other hand, the Church of Scottish Mission established the Presbyterian Farms Itu, Rural Training Centre, Asaba, Rural Improvement Mission and Yakurr Agricultural Projects (Iroanya, 2016).

The Church has preached the Good News of salvation, love, peace and justice; and taught the people how to work to improve their general well-being. Some concrete ways they achieved this was through promoting the adoption of high yielding crop varieties and the use of complementary inputs such as fertilizers and pesticides; intensifying the use of land through technological improvements such as increased use of irrigation where water is a constraint to agricultural production; and, adoption of post-harvest measures that reduce the loss of agricultural produce. For instance, in Nsukka Diocese of the Roman Catholic Mission in Nigeria, there are *garri* processing machines in Opi-Agu and rice mills at Adani and Eha-Amufu, Enugu





State. Similarly, Enugu North Presbyterial Men's Christian Association of the Presbyterian Church of Nigeria operates a cassava plantation at Eha-Amufu, Enugu State. Current finding reveal that through these agricultural and rural improvement projects, many people have been taken off from the streets, rehabilitated and employed in many Church establishments. Understandably, the Church has contributed immensely in agricultural transformation as well as in providing food security in the country. They have taught the people the preparation and manufacture of natural products such as cocoa, roots, starch, tapioca, tiger nuts, and palm oil. A corollary to this is information and communication technology.

### **3. Information and Communication Technology**

According to Eme (2008) in Iroanya (2016, p.105) communication is “the life-wire of the human society and is vital in the life of any organization or institution.” This interpretation is established by the fact that in the absence of communication, man as a social being “would not be able to understand one another. In other words, if there is no communication, there will be no social coherence and cohesion in society. Communication therefore, makes human society and keeps it alive” (Ottuh, 2012, p.45). Current finding reveals how FBOs through their educational, medical, religious and communication institutions such as the Presbyterian Joint Hospital, Uburu; St. Patrick Hospital Mile 4, Abakaliki, both in Ebonyi State, are carriers and publicists of programs such as Primary Health Care, Expanded Program on Immunization, Family Support Program, NAPEP and many others. For instance, through her cable television and communication media such as Presby Press Calabar, Citizens' Advocate, Abakaliki, The Presbyterian Today, Aba, Scripture Union Press and Books Ltd, Ibadan among others, they spread such programs among the mass of the population. Through these they promote national integration, nation-building, peaceful co-existence and understanding. Accordingly, the proper understanding and application of information and communication technology by the Church at all levels has without equivocation contributed to building a more humane and just society by boosting access to jobs and markets, and supporting the roll-out of key government policies, including social protection. As a matter of fact, it has succeeded by developing the foundations of trust in the government; sequencing policies to support the poor first, alongside clear 'communication strategies.



## **The Implications and Socio-economic Cost of Poverty in Nigeria**

Among the many adverse implications of poverty on human well-being in Nigeria, the study would briefly highlight the following.

### **1. Poverty Poses the Danger of Compromising the Future and Democracy in Nigeria**

The incidence of poverty and social inequality in Nigeria harbors some devastating implications in the search for national cohesion and sustainable development. It poses the danger of compromising the harmony of the future and Nigeria will be headed for a permanence of instability, which reinforces the elements of disintegrative tendencies. All too often, rising poverty gives rise to violent conflicts such as the Boko Haram attack in the North East, banditry in the North-West, herders-farmers clashes in the North-Central, militancy in the Niger Delta, trade in narcotic drugs in the South-West and separatist agitations in the South East. A corollary to conflict shocks is the recent upsurge of coup d'état in Africa as a result of disregard for the rule of law; 'deficiencies in governance' along with "greed, selfishness, mismanagement of diversity, mismanagement of opportunity, marginalization, abuse of human rights, refusal to accept electoral defeat, manipulation of constitution . . . to serve narrow interests and corruption" (African Union Peace and Security Council, 2014 in Ojo, 2023, p.1). Unfortunately, there is recrudescence of military takeover in Sudan, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Tunisia, Guinea and Gabon of recent. Again, the existence of extreme poverty in Nigeria has a strong influence in the emergence of those who see themselves as 'owners' of governments where citizens are incapable of taking care of their basic needs. The activities of those who are materially endowed, which lead to the single-handed installation of government through the funding of political mobilization, campaigns, manipulation of the information flow, distortion of the values as well as the eventual upsurge in contending interests remain the exclusive preserve of the rich, the moneybags and the daring.

Thus, Nigeria's democracy is fractured because of lack of people-driven, participatory and inclusive growth to drive prosperity and sustainable development. Furthermore, the effect of poverty on the electoral behavior of the less-endowed can be considered in two main dimensions, namely: the psychological and the physical. The psychological effect is rooted in the poverty of



awareness, which forecloses the ability of the poor citizens to appreciate the dangers inherent in the abdication of civil responsibilities as they often engage in (Nnamani, 2006). Resultantly, the present study suggest that the poor citizens tend to see government as a remote enterprise created for the elite by the elite rather than as an institution built for them and which they have to be a part of. The point being stressed is that where poverty, hunger and economic hardship exist, the electorates could climb down on their desire for a better Nigeria. Accentuating to this fact, Alikor (2023, p.1) opines that “the integrity of extremely poor voters on election day will stagger to money in exchange for their vote . . . poverty will be used as a tool to coerce poor Nigerians in the South and North to sell their votes.” Fastidiously, the credibility of candidates means nothing to hungry voter with an option to “sell his vote” and or do the “right thing” on election day. Jacob and Esau’s story in the Holy Bible exemplifies this fact. Hence, if mental and financial poverty remains unchallenged in Nigeria, an eligible voter’s thinking cap will be lost to sight. The present finding reveals that the resultant outcome is the persistence of the physical dimension of poverty which consists in the constant shortfall in access to means of adequate livelihood. This impairs their energy to take active part in making and sustenance of government.

## **2. Malnutrition and High Infant Mortality**

A July 2013 report by the Federal Ministry of Health reveals that 41 percent of Nigerian children under age five suffer stunted growth as a result of malnutrition. The report showed that there is acute malnutrition among children in all the states in the North. This is said to be as high as 80 percent of the child population. This is not surprising. Yet, it is indefensible in a country that raked in about N9 trillion in federal revenues in 2012 and approximately ₦10.3 trillion by the end of 2019 (Sasu; 2023). Malnutrition which manifests in some children as kwashiorkor, affects the cognitive ability of children to learn in school; and the leading cause of death among Nigerian children under the age of five. Odifa (2022, p.1) has highlighted the consequences of the prevalence of undernourishment in Nigeria thus “undernourishment constrains mental capacity and cognitive development in children impending them from reaching their full potential and incapacitating them on the long run from contributing to the productivity of the country.” Sadly enough, over 100 million Nigerians faced food insecurity as at the end of 2020. Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nation 2021 report on the “State of Food



Security and Nutrition in the World”, puts the number of moderately or severely food insecure people in Nigeria at 116 million people, a 75 percent increase from 61 million people in 2016 (Odifa, 2022). From the foregoing, malnutrition and undernourishment reduces the poor’s economic potential and perpetuates the poverty cycle.

The issue is more complex for children who suffer stunted growth and illnesses associated with deficiencies of vital vitamins and minerals. For instance, vitamin A deficiency is one of the public health problems in Nigeria. According to Alli (2008:1) it accounts for 197/1000 mortality rates of under-five children in the country. The author reveals that UNICEF has estimated that over 300,000 Nigerian children will die in the next 10 years because of vitamin A deficiency. In Nigeria, the prevalence of vitamin A deficiency among less than five was estimated at above 30 percent in 2018. Till date, vitamin A supplementation coverage remains low in Nigeria at 45 percent. Relatedly, malaria is another killer disease in Nigeria. It accounts for about 25 percent of under-five mortality in the country and major public health problem. In 2021, for instance, around 247 million cases of malaria were reported and about 619,000 people died. Four African countries accounted for just over half of all malaria deaths worldwide: Nigeria (31.3 percent), the Democratic Republic of the Congo (12.6 percent), Tanzania (4.1 percent) and Niger (3.9 percent) (Oyedeji, 2023). Causes of the malaria burden in Nigeria includes: the climate, high transmission potential, socio-economic development, an overstretched health care system and displaced populations. The problem has been exacerbated by poor sanitation which spreads infectious diseases that cause diarrhea. Regrettably, it is very costly to society that low-income children end up getting sick prematurely and die younger than other citizens.

### **3. High Food Import Bill and Brain Drain**

The consequence of malnutrition in Nigeria is high food import bill as well as brain drain (*Japa*). To underscore why the majority of the population of a country as naturally endowed as Nigeria wallow in poverty, look no further than the staggering import bill. The Nigerian economy has witnessed a rapid deterioration. Purchasing power has plummeted with inflation rates hitting 28.90 percent in December 2023 and escalating debts, now standing at ₦87.39 trillion. Fuel and food import prices have reflected global price surges but equally significant is the further



deterioration in security and logistics infrastructure which has made the production and distribution of the most basic commodities more expensive. Heightened insecurity across the food production regions in Northern Nigeria, impact food production, the logistics of food distribution and increased levels of post-harvest food losses and waste. The high levels of post-harvest losses and waste are significantly impacting the country's efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and are contributing to growing landfills (Akpata, 2023). With this precarious situation

The stage is set for stagflation with high unemployment, slow growth and galloping inflation. Higher prices should serve to incentivize food production, but a lack of functioning distribution infrastructure (roads, rails, seaports) means that any increase in production would effectively be lost. Exports are also being stymied by trade constraints, especially food safety related issues, imposed by European Union countries on exports of primary goods originating from Nigeria (Akpata, 2023, p.1).

Implicated in the foregoing, is that despite being touted as the food basket of Africa; Nigeria has spent over N7.8 trillion in the past six years on food import (Ekugbe, 2023).

The staggering sum is a clear demonstration that the Nigerian government is yet to put the nation on the right path of eradicating hunger by 2030 as stipulated by the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. On the other side of the ledger, Nigeria is battling rising unemployment and brain drain. For instance, 65,929 Nigerians are on approved study on United Kingdom as of June 2022, while the United States issued 6,915 non-immigrants visas to Nigerians in June 2022. This is as economic slowdown, low remuneration, de-industrialization, poor education, human rights violations, rising insecurity and the twin challenges of food insecurity and acute malnutrition intensify brain drain. With the situation not abating, findings by Adepetun and Nwafor (2022) has shown that Nigerians, especially within the age bracket of 25 and 45, are exploring offshore jobs abroad, forcing them to leave the country in droves. The brain drain in Nigeria is setting the country up for a disaster. Manifestly, both the young and old are leaving the country in droves because they have no sense of security and hope. The leaders who are purveyors of the situation of hopelessness are also in the “*Japa*” train. For instance, a video of the immediate past governor



of Anambra State, Willie Obiano walking a dog in the United States of America has gone viral in the social media. He relocated there upon leaving office in 2021.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The existence of extreme poverty in Nigeria is a critical challenge that calls for a comprehensive plan for change, involving every sector of society, including: the government, markets, churches, civil society organizations, Non-Governmental Organizations among others in taking new responsibility and listening to new approaches that transcends political boundaries. In view of the failure of government to alleviate poverty in Nigeria, poverty reduction in Nigeria has become a religious imperative. The study has highlighted how FBOs have evolved informed interventions to reduce poverty pervading the nation's sustainable development agenda, leading towards the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals on poverty. Accordingly, religious organizations and institutions are bridging the gap by providing succor and complimenting government efforts through provision of quality education, health institutions, agricultural inputs and rural improvement to the people government ordinarily cannot access. Therefore, in view of the need to move Nigeria forward in its poverty reduction efforts and to position the economy for sustainable growth, the following recommendations are made.

Religious institutions should partner with government and development agencies to design programs aimed at unlocking the people's creativity and genuinely set them on the part of self-employment and self-reliance through micro and small-scale enterprises which can readily adapt to the dynamism of the time and survive global economic meltdown and recession.

FBOs should collaborate with government to institute a variety of national programs to redistribute resources to combat social problems including instituting a national health care program and defending the vulnerable in the deep conviction that the human race is the epicenter and principle of the society.

The war against poverty should be intensified through national ethical values and good governance which ultimately brings about social stability, effective development and equitable



distribution. This would take the country out of the era of unbridled corruption and political ineptitude to one of moral unction and economic prosperity.

In the same vein, leaders across board should initiate and promote commitment to excellence, innovation and sensitivity to ethical and cultural values through design of reward schemes, monitoring and accountability mechanisms that reduce the opportunities and incentives for rent-seeking.

Since family breakdown is a cause of poverty and further traps single parents and their children in a continuing cycle of improvement, even when other social and economic factors are involved, the promotion of marriage and stable heterogeneous families as an anti-poverty measure becomes imperative.

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