

LOCAL GOVERNMENTS AND POVERTY REDUCTION IN CROSS RIVER STATE

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ABSTRACT

Poverty as a universal phenomenon has devastating effects on the lives of the people at the grassroots. Over the years, majority of the local people in Cross River State have been living in deplorable social conditions of frustration and deprivation due to lack of qualitative education, ignorance, poor access roads, inadequate health facilities, and lack of portable water. More than this, social amenities and material resources are in abysmal proportion making life miserable at the grassroots. Although government at periodic adjustment tried to initiate programmes aimed at eradicating poverty, yet the social picture created at the grassroots is one of alienation and increasing frustration of the local people. The study on local government and poverty reduction is therefore aimed at examining the efforts of Cross River State Local Government Councils at poverty reduction. It is fundamentally discovered that the distribution of motorbikes and sewing machines as poverty reduction mechanism of Local Government Councils in Cross River State are grossly weak, ephemeral and inadequate. The study therefore recommends that for an enduring poverty reduction strategy, the councils should encourage educational advancement of the rural poor by effective scholarship award and skill acquisition training for those who have no capacity for higher education.

INTRODUCTION

The study of local government and poverty reduction has given rise to various scholarly postulations. This is because poverty as a social problem has led to damaging social conditions of deprivation and frustration of the local people. Interestingly, these series of scholarly postulations have not distorted or changed the meaning and nature of poverty at the grassroots.

Over the years, poverty has been the bane of development. Thus, despite laudable programmes and policies by government to develop the rural sector of the economy, poverty has retarded meaningful socio-economic progress and political advancement of the people. This situation, more often than not, results in social backwardness and low mass mobilization at the grassroots.

Successive governments at periodic adjustments have tried to formulate policies and embarked on programmes that are aimed at eradicating or reducing poverty in the society. Some of these programmes include: Operation Feed the Nation (OFN), National Directorate for Employment (NDE), Family Economic Advancement Programme (FEAP), Primary Health Care Delivery Programme (PHC), etc. More than these, the establishment of the Peoples Bank to offer rural banking services at the grassroots reinforces government determination to eradicate or say "fare well" to poverty. This laudable goal of government is fundamentally intended to give the local people a new lease of life thereby cushioning the harsh effects of poverty at the grassroots.

But despite government's efforts to eradicate or reduce poverty, the people at the grassroots are daily frustrated, oppressed and denied access to potable water, qualitative education and social amenities that guarantee qualitative and healthy living. Ignorance and social violence are dominant characteristics of life at the local areas and these social conditions persist and continue to exist at alarming proportion due to poverty.

Poverty as a social problem has created a vicious cycle that is sometimes very difficult to break. This condition has often resulted in the transmission of poverty from one generation to the other. Consequently, many of our youths that cannot withstand this harsh social condition resort to armed robbery, prostitution, sex hawking and advanced fee fraud to enable them survive.

In Cross River State where about 80 percent of the populations are rural dwellers, poverty has reached an alarming rate. Something possible must be done to ameliorate this deplorable social condition. Majority of the people at the grassroot are poor and material resources exist in abysmal proportion. This condition is so deplorable that many people become alienated from the society. The poor condition among rural dwellers is summarized in a calmer literary manner by Odumoso as follows:

... starvation and death stare him at his face as in medieval times. Indeed, for him, times have not changed since the Dark Ages. And as though these afflictions were not enough, it is he - and this is the greatest agony of all - who gives birth to the largest number of children thus spreading and multiplying misery to a dark universe of destitution. When death comes to him finally, he seems to be happier than those he has left behind him (Odumoso, 1999)

The local government as a tier of government closest to the rural people has a special function of ensuring better life for its local population. This is often expressed in the ability of the local government to institute programs aimed at reducing the monstrous posture of poverty associated with the rural people. In Cross River State, rural poverty is alarming and rural life is highly uninteresting. Any government that allows its people to wallow in poverty is an irresponsible government. The question remains: what have local governments in Cross River State done to reduce the level of poverty among the rural people? Does what we see in local government councils actually go for poverty reduction strategies? How many people are affected positively by council efforts to reduce poverty? The study would attempt to answer some of these questions, but let it be hypothesized that there is a significant relationship between insensitivity of local government councils to rural welfare and the perpetuation of rural poverty.

It is therefore, against this background that this study on local government and poverty reduction is conducted, to examine the role of local government in poverty reduction in Cross River State. The ability to resolve this problem through an integration approach will form our main focus of discourse.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Several theories have been postulated to explain the concept of poverty, especially in bringing to fore the prevailing factors responsible for the dominance of poverty anywhere in the world.

Before the study takes a position, it is pertinent to explain some of the contending theories of poverty.

INDIVIDUAL ATTRIBUTES THEORY

The theory holds the view that the individual plays substantial role in remaining or getting out of the poverty threshold. In other words, one's position in any reward system is determined by the individual. It follows from the above that the qualities possessed by an individual would determine the amount of resources to get. In other words if an individual possesses good aptitude and better abilities, he is likely to be placed on the higher echelon in the income structure of society. On the other hand, an individual with poor aptitude and weak abilities is likely to be placed on the lower side of the income structure of society. The implication is that he would receive low income which might not be enough to address his basic needs. This, results certainly to poverty. It is not in all cases that the assumption of this theory is true. As Akeredolu-Ale (1975) has noted, the individual attributes operate only within a structure of possibilities and limits set and defined by forces outside the scope of the individual.

NATURAL CIRCUMSTANTIAL THEORY

The theory explains poverty from environmental and geographical constraints. The theory postulates that an unfavourable geographical location of an individual and scanty life enhancing natural endowment is capable of making an individual poor. It states further that old age, sex and race are also responsible for the prevalence of poverty. This may be correct but it is not in all cases that those who are old become poor or that because one is a woman or man or that one comes from a particular race makes one to become poor. In the both sexes and in all races of the world, there are people who are rich and some poor. It is therefore misleading to ascribe poverty to a particular sex, race or age differential.

POWER THEORY

The theory holds the view that the distribution and magnitude of poverty in any society is determined by the structure of political power in that society. The assumption of this theory is that the powerful few who holds political power organizes the system and the economy in a manner that places them in positions to amass wealth. It is on this premise that political office holders become very rich when in office even when they assumed offices as wretched of the earth. They manage the economy in a way that keeps the majority in the low income percentiles.

CORRUPTION THEORY

This theory holds the view that corruption fertilizes poverty maximally. The basic argument is that public officials loot state treasuries and deprive the masses of the money that would have been used to transform their lifestyles. The practice of corruption allows money to be trapped in the hands of criminal few to the detriment of the majority who are allowed to wallow in hardship.

However, based on the nature of our problem in Nigeria, this study would rely on the assumptions of the power and corruption theories to explain the effort of Local Governments in Cross River State to reduce poverty. These theories are relevant to this study because they capture in clear terms the use of power and corrupt tendencies by public office holders to Siphon public resources for personal aggrandizement. Were

these looted resources to be directed at useful ventures in these local governments, there would certainly be drastic reduction in the level of poverty among the rural populace.

PERSPECTIVE ON LOCAL GOVERNMENT, POVERTY AND POVERTY REDUCTION

It is operationally necessary to explain some of the concepts used in our study. This will help us to avoid aimless discussion of our subject and provide the grounds on which to situate our discussion. Therefore, the three main concepts to be conceptualized are "local government", "poverty", and "poverty reduction".

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Local government as grassroots government has been severally defined by both local government practitioners and scholars. This lack of singular definition has been due to the bucket list of functions and powers exercised by local government that makes it unique and distinct from other tiers of governments. The United Nation office for Public Administration for instance, defines local government as a political subdivision of a nation or state constituted by law with substantial control of the local affairs, including powers to impose taxes or exact labour for prescribed purposes (cited in Duru, 2001). The 1976 Federal Government Guidelines for the Reform of Local Government in Nigeria opined that local government is government at the local level exercised through representative councils established by law to exercise specific powers within defined areas. Thus the various powers given to the councils are expected to be substantial so as to give local government full control over the affairs and needs of the local people. The philosophy behind this idea is to enable local government initiate and direct programmes that can enhance grassroots development and meet the yearning and aspirations of the people.

N. U. Akpan defines local government as the "breaking down of the country into units or localities for the purpose of administration in which the people of that particular locality participate and exercise full power and functions through their elective representatives" (cited in Agbor, 2004). Hassan (2001) avers that as grassroots government, the word "local" symbolize that councils are meant for small communities while the word "government" shows that councils possess some attributes of government of not only maintaining law and order but meeting the aspirations of the people.

However, these series of scholarly postulations about local government indicates that the local government is first and foremost a unit of government that competes with other tiers of government at the grassroots. It is essentially part of the federal institutional arrangement at the grassroots that is synonymous with bureaucracy (Eteng, 2001). Therefore, these various definitions merely provide the framework for the appreciation and understanding of the concept and role of local government in contemporary Nigeria. They succinctly buttress the assertion that local governments are bureaucratic structures created to be of service to the local people and are essential for the development of an enduring democracy. This is imperative considering the leadership role of various councils at the grassroots. In line with this, local government may be considered as administrative unit created by law to be of service to the needs and aspirations of the local people. This administrative unit acting directly on the citizens is not co-terminus with community management.

POVERTY

Poverty is a universal phenomenon that exists in all societies whether advanced or developing. The difference exists only in terms of magnitude and perhaps the depth of the social problem. Thus, an analysis of this social syndrome shows that even the so called developed nations of the world

suffer some degree of poverty which of course may not be significantly compared with the experiences of the developing countries. Even among the Third World countries, some countries are better off than others.

There is generally no single definition of poverty. This is because scholars view it differently and this is based on their perception of the problem and the nature of the society. This definitional problem is further compounded by the fact that some societies like the feudal group and the caste system practitioners in India or Osu system in Igbo land will want poverty to exist because certain ruling class used that phenomenon to perpetuate class interest and maintain hegemony over others.

Obikeze and Anthony (2004) define poverty as the absence of capacity to acquire the means to sustain a standard of living. The World Development Report (1990) opined that poverty is the inability to attain a minimum standard of living. These include inability to eradicate hunger, stress, unhygienic conditions, as well as inadequate health care delivery system. Adams (2004) maintained that the most visible manifestation of poverty in Nigeria includes deprivation in terms of health care, nutrition, educational attainment as well as access to social amenities like potable water, electricity, etc. He argued that where ever poverty exists, the people are usually haggard looking, and prone to diseases, illiteracy, low productivity, high infant mortality rate, and low life expectancy.

Sancho (1996) defines poverty as the inability of an individual or persons to acquire adequate level of education or satisfy basic health needs. Todaro (1995) defined poverty from an economic perspective as the inability of the people to live above a specific minimum level of income. Sen (1984) opined that poverty is the condition in which an individual lacks certain capabilities to participate with dignity in the affairs of the society.

Poverty as a social problem therefore will refer to a condition of deprivation involving personal or physical, social, economic, political as well as cultural needs of the people. There are two dominant typologies of poverty namely: Absolute poverty and relative poverty.

Absolute poverty This refers to the lack of the minimum physical requirements of an individual or group of people for existence, and is so extreme that those who are adversely affected by this social condition are no longer capable of a life worthy of human dignity (Hemmer 1994). Schubert (1994) views absolute poverty exclusively in terms of a particular individual or group without any comparison between them and others. Ering (2006) argued that "it exists when the lives of those concerned are impaired by physical or socio-cultural deficiencies".

Absolute poverty could be primary or secondary. Primary absolute poverty refers to the absence of physical human needs often expressed in terms of food, shelter, and clothing. The secondary absolute poverty refers to the inability of an individual to functionally participate in normal processes that safeguards or guarantees full attainment of basic necessities of life.

Relative Poverty: Relative poverty is a condition of relative deprivation in which an individual or household's ability to achieve certain needs is lower than that of other person or household when compared. Relative poverty does not imply the absence of certain necessities of life. It is simply that certain people are disadvantaged to some unacceptable level when compared with others.

POVERTY REDUCTION

Poverty reduction has been the concern of all governments, agencies, and other international organizations like UNESCO, UNICEF, etc. This concern has been due to the threat to mankind by poverty as a social monster and the widening gap between the poor and the rich often expressed in terms of nation states. This is why the advanced nations of the world under what may be classified as the New International Economic Order (NIEO) encouraged the transfer of resources from the developed countries to the underdeveloped countries through technical assistance and transfer of technology (Eteng, 2005).

The concept of poverty reduction is both philosophical and psychological depending on the people involved and the nature of the society. It is expedient to have access to good health and quality life. People generally fear poverty than sickness and therefore poverty reduction is an indispensable way of life.

Poverty reduction is a strategy adopted by the government, individual or group to tackle poverty so as to attain an acceptable standard of living. At various historical periods, governments or individuals have adopted various policies to curb poverty. The "operation fare well" to poverty and other social economic programme adopted by the government or the self reliance efforts embarked upon by some individuals highlights the general orientation against poverty. Poverty reduction is therefore a mechanism of curbing poverty through the application of any of the following instruments:

- By developing appropriate technology for the benefit of the citizens
- New national orientation towards self reliance and the discouragement of primitive accumulation of wealth.
- Access to information and creating mass consciousness among the citizens
- Providing education, good health, access roads, and potable water.
- Eradication of diseases, illiteracy and raising the income of the people.
- Providing employment opportunities to the people.
- Providing adequate social security in the form of loans to the citizens at low interest rate and appropriate insurance policies to protect the citizens in case of natural disasters.
- Protect the citizens against exposure to all kinds of hazards especially health or environmental hazards.
- Guaranteeing the safety needs of the citizens through adequate protections against armed robbery or police brutality and extortion.
- Creating a sense of love and belonging through adequate provision of basic physiological needs like food, shelter and clothes. By eradicating hunger, and providing enough houses and clothes to the people, poverty will reasonably be reduced in the society.

POVERTY REDUCTION STRATEGIES OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT COUNCILS IN CROSS RIVER STATE

One of the major roles of any known government is to control the people and harness local resources for the improvement of the welfare of the people. Local government as a tier of government is not exempted from this role. Given the looming poverty scourge which has remained a major feature of local inhabitants of Cross River State, various local government councils in the state have attempted to introduce measures aimed at reducing the poverty of the rural people.

By poverty reduction, we mean an integrated strategy which economically places the citizens in a position that surpasses the poverty threshold. By implication, it could be understood to mean a system of assistance which is packaged

to make the people realize income that can make them live above the one dollar (\$1) poverty line. It is a fact that in Cross River State more than fifty percent of the local inhabitants are stifled by absolute poverty. The cry has always been that the local governments are not thoroughly concerned about lifting the people above the poverty line. The arguments advanced by those who follow the activities of local government council with keen interest is that the type and

magnitude of poverty reduction strategies adopted by local government councils in the state are shallow and weak.

What in the actual sense has Councils in the state been doing in the area of poverty reduction? The table below explains the various poverty reduction strategies adopted by local government councils in Cross River State since the year 2003.

TABLE SHOWING LOCAL GOVERNMENT COUNCILS AND STRATEGIES OF POVERTY REDUCTION FROM 2003-2006

L.G.A	STRATEGIES OF POVERTY REDUCTION 2003 – 2006					
	Motorcycle Qty	Sewing Machine Qty	Hand Out		Manual Labour	
			No of persons	Amt.	No of Persons	Amt
Abi	10	5	80	100,000	-	-
Akamkpa	20	15	120	300,000	-	-
Akpabuyo	8	3	20	30,000	-	-
Bakassi	5	2	50	60,000	-	-
Bekwarra	10	2	60	80,000	-	-
Biase	11	5	30	50,000	-	-
Boki	15	12	200	500,000	-	-
Calabar Municipality	5	6	50	80,000	-	-
Calabar South	5	4	30	50,000	-	-
Etung	10	5	50	60,000	-	-
Ikom	9	3	40	50,000	-	-
Obanliku	9	4	30	60,000	-	-
Obubra	12	5	50	80,000	-	-
Obudu	8	2	30	50,000	-	-
Odukpani	10	10	80	90,000	20	300,000
Ogoja	8	4	50	80,000	-	-
Yakurr	10	5	70	98,000	-	-
Yala	10	6	90	120,000	-	-
Total	183	98	1,160	1,938,000	20	300,000

Source: Ijim – Agbor & Eteng, Field Work, 2006

The table above shows that what goes for poverty reduction strategies among Cross River State Local Government Councils includes the distribution of motorcycles, sewing machines, hand outs in form of petty cash gift and daily paid labour. The table also shows that between 2003 and 2006 about 183 motorcycles were distributed to people as specified against each Local Government on the table above. About 98 sewing machines were also distributed and one thousand, one hundred and sixty persons received petty cash gift of about one million, nine hundred and eighty three thousand naira (₦1,983,000) only. In terms of the petty cash gift, it could be analyzed further that on the average, each person received about one thousand seven hundred and nine naira (₦1,709.00) only during the period under review. On daily paid labour, only one Local Government had engaged about twenty persons on grass cutting for about two hundred and fifty naira (₦250) only a day. Within the period under review the council spent about three hundred thousand naira (₦300,000) only in this direction.

OBSERVATION

It is clearly observed that what commonly constitutes poverty reduction strategy among these local government councils are motorcycle, sewing machines and petty cash distribution. It is also observed that the quantity of these items distributed in the name of poverty reduction is grossly inadequate when compared to the number of the rural poor. Take for instance, Biase Local Government Area with an estimated population of more than one hundred and twenty

thousand (120,000) people with more than fifty percent of that population living below the poverty threshold only eleven motorcycles and five sewing machines were distributed over the period under review as means of reducing poverty in the area.

The same applies to other Local Government Areas whose rural poor constitute more than half of the population. There is no local government area in Cross River State whose population is less than ninety thousand (90,000) yet the highest distribution of motorcycles and sewing machines which comes from Akamkpa Local Government council is 20 and 15 respectively. This suggests that only thirty – five (35) persons who represent 0.04% of the more than 80,000 rural poor have been assisted to come out of absolute poverty. This is grossly inadequate and should not be considered as a meaningful effort at reducing the poverty of the rural people.

Apart from the fact that what goes for poverty alleviation items are highly infinitesimal, what is most frightening is that even the items so distributed do not get to the absolute poor. They find lasting rest in the hands of political faithful and party master riggers. It is often seen as redemption of campaign promises and the beneficiaries of these motorbikes and sewing machines have often been ward chairmen and women leaders respectively of the party in power. This is a manifestation of Prebendal politics among Cross River Local Government Councils. A cursory look at the strategies for poverty reduction adopted by councils shows unidimensional approach. Every local government distributes meager motorcycles, sewing machines and paltry petty cash.

Even if they were to distribute enough, the understanding is that every rural poor would become a commercial motorcyclist, tailor or seamstress. If this is so, who would climb the other and would sew for whom? It should be made clear that when there is a proliferation of motorcycles for commercial purposes where the traveling public is small like what is obtained in the rural areas, there would be no return on investment. If this is so, the rural poor would still be under the claws of poverty as the motorbike would not return what would be enough to maintain the motorcycle as well as sustain the operator and his family.

The proliferation of motorbikes in the first place spells danger. It would certainly lead to increase in road traffic accident as many learners would find their way on the road to look for money.

It is noted that if what is considered as strategies for poverty reduction among Cross River State Local Government Councils is simply the distribution of inadequate motorbikes, sewing machines and paltry handouts, then they cannot boast of affecting the life of the rural poor in terms of assisting them to come out of their precarious state. It could be averred here that in terms of poverty reduction, the councils have not done enough. This failure may not be deliberate even though political office holders are known to be corrupt and self-centred. In Cross River State, Local governments Councils are grossly under funded. The allocation that comes from the federation account is collected and appropriated by the State Government. Major revenue earning points of Local Government Councils have been taken over by the State Government leaving the councils with nothing to call its own source of revenue. This largely accounts for why most councils do not have money to pursue meaningful poverty reduction programmes. The State Government has since 1999 jettison its supervisory role over Local Government Councils to complete usurpation of council functions. What can be done to get out of this unseriousness characterizing Local Government in the state? The answer is provided in the proceeding section.

RECOMMENDATION

In the light of the observation made, it is recommended that if councils are to make monumental impact in the area of poverty reduction, they should be granted complete autonomy to manage their own finances. If the autonomy is granted, the Cross River State Government would no longer have controlling power over the finances of Local governments Councils and therefore, would not divert their allocation any longer. The implication is that Local governments Councils would have enough money to address rural poverty. The situation in Cross River is terrible arising from excessive control. Local government councils have been reduced to mere agency of the state and not a tier of government.

Councils should deemphasize the distribution of petty cash and other gifts such as motorcycles and focus attention on more of vocational training of the rural poor. The advantage of this method of poverty reduction is that it affords the recipient the necessary skill to compete not only in his locality but any where his acquired skill can apply. Also, any knowledge acquired is a knowledge gained. The conception here is that the rural poor should not be given fish rather should be taught how to fish.

Finally, local government councils should as Ijim – Agbor (2006) has suggested focus on development of human capabilities through the instrumentality of effective education. It is our conviction that improved level of education can ensure poverty reduction. The advantage of education in this regard is diverse. First, as argued by Haralambos and Heald (1980:179), Education fosters personal development and self-fulfillment. Second, it encourages the individual to develop his mental, physical, emotional and spiritual talents to the fullest.

Education gives people equal opportunity for developing their capabilities and talents and this would increase their bargaining position in the market (workplace). As ones bargaining power increases so also would his income rise. This would mean a reduction in the level of poverty.

Local government councils should therefore, award scholarship to its local populace as this would help to liberate them from the shackles of poverty.

CONCLUSION

Poverty among the rural poor has remained on the increase in Cross River State. As a social problem efforts by government are geared towards reducing it. The situation seems unabating largely as a result of the weak and inadequate poverty reduction strategies adopted by Local government councils. The provision of motorbikes and sewing machine at that minimal level cannot go for an effective poverty reduction mechanism. The method is simplistic, discouraging and ephemeral. Councils need to do something that can attack poverty perpetually. It is the suggestion of this study that rather than distribute handouts in the name of poverty reduction mechanism, Councils should afford its unemployed populace the opportunity of vocational studies for necessary skill acquisition. Those who have the capability of higher education studies from poor background should be awarded scholarship by the Councils. All these could be possible if Councils are properly funded.

We therefore, suggest that the state government should keep its hand off the allocation accruing to local governments to enable them effectively solve rural problems associated with poverty. When this is done, the role of Local governments in poverty reduction in Cross River State will become a reality. At present, most councils are in the wood and therefore there is need to allocate adequate resources to transform the goals and vision of poverty reduction into a benefiting reality of the rural people.

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