

Poverty Alleviation Strategies and Governance in Nigeria

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Abstract

The paper takes a look at poverty as a global phenomenon but admits that the intensity and scale vary from one society to another. It asserts that there is widespread poverty in Nigeria despite its great endowments. The paper notes that successive regimes in Nigeria have been introducing different programmes to alleviate poverty. It established a link between poverty alleviation programmes (strategies) and governance and blamed the failure of such programmes on absence of good governance. The paper uses secondary data and adopted the elite theory to explain why poverty alleviation programmes fail in Nigeria bearing in mind some of the past programmes. Viable recommendations are made in the paper to ensure the success of future programmes of government.

Key words: Poverty, Alleviation, Governance, Good Governance, Nigeria.

Introduction

The high level of poverty in Nigeria, which has attained an endemic nature, is becoming worrisome. Poverty has made Nigeria to attain an unenviable status as one of the poorest countries in the world, such that no government (no matter the level), organization, community, clan or family can survive effectively without introducing one kind of poverty reduction strategy or the other. This problem is essentially not that of programme and strategies so adapted in poverty reduction efforts. Nigeria has not been known to lack in such efforts; yet she is still ranked among the world's 25 poorest nations (World Bank, 2002; http://article.sapub.org/10.5923.j.economics.20120202.02.html_br).

Political instability and absence of good governance witnessed by Nigeria over time subjected the various poverty alleviation initiatives to fickleness. As a new regime comes on board, it signals a death knell to the past policies irrespective of the successes recorded. Indeed, there is no gain saying the fact that the formulation and implementation of poverty alleviation programmes are part of the important processes of democratic governance in modern nation-state with a desire for socio-economic development and crave the provision of the most needed dividends of democratic governance towards enhancing poverty reduction and national security. Nigeria is a state known to have formulated, articulated policies aimed at providing solutions to her numerous problem and development challenges. In fact, the fate of many policy programmes have been that of poor, callous, haphazard implementation and abandonment majorly as a result of perennial political instability as well as bad governance.

Poverty is a global phenomenon which affects continents, nations, and people differently. It afflicts people in various depth and levels at different times and phases of existence. There is no nation that is absolutely free from poverty. The main difference is the intensity and prevalence of this malaise. Nations in sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia and Latin America are currently with the highest level of poverty and consequently with the lowest level of socio-economic development, violence, and unrest and generally unacceptable low standard of living.

The Central Bank of Nigeria (1999:1) views poverty as:

A state where an individual is not able to cater adequately for his or her basic NEEDS of foods, clothing and shelter; is unable to meet social and economic obligations, lacks gainful employment, skills, assets and self-esteem; and has limited access to social and economic infrastructure such as education, health, potable water, sanitation and consequently has limited chance of advancing his or her welfare to the limit of his or her capabilities.

Nigeria ranked among the 25th poorest countries in the world. The country gained its independence with poverty level of barely 15% of its population in 1960 and is today struggling to bring it down from about 70% of its current teeming population of about 73%. This is concentrated in the rural areas where illiteracy prevalence is high, potable water and health facilities are rarely available, road and electricity infrastructures are either unavailable or ill-managed (http://www.stclements.edu/grad/gradoyem.pdf_br).

No Nigerian Government, be it military or civilian has come without introducing and leaving behind one form of poverty alleviation or reduction programme meant to reduce the level of poverty, give hope and succour to the poor and, or more towards some sort of wealth creation. Strategies, policies and plans have been articulated; programmes and projects have been formulated and executed over the years. For instance, at independence in 1960, poverty eradication efforts in Nigeria centered on education, while Operation Feed the Nation (OFN), the Green Revolution, War Against Indiscipline (WAI), People's Bank of Nigeria (PBN), Community Banks, Directorate of Food Roads and Rural Infrastructure (DIFFRI), Nigerian Agricultural Land Development Authority (NALDA), Family Economic Advancement Programme (FEAP), Better Life for Rural Women, Family Support Programme (FSP) and National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP) were put in place during the period under review. Though, successive governments have tried to address the issue of poverty as captured above, the effect of the strategies and programmes has been that of mixed feelings (http://www.stclements.edu/grad/gradoyem.pdf_br).

Conceptual Clarification

Poverty

Poverty, like most concepts is not easily amenable to a straightforward definition. It has been defined by various authors in different ways. To Marshal (1998:516), poverty is defined as "a state in which resources, usually material but sometimes cultural are lacking and could be delineated into two broad categories of "absolute and relative" terms. Absolute poverty refers to "a state in which an individual lacks the resources necessary for subsistence" while the relative definitions refers to the individual's or groups' lack of resources when compared with that of other members of the society" (Agbiokoro, 2010).

Poverty can also be defined as a condition in which an individual or a group of individuals or community are unable to meet their basic material needs such as foods, potable water, clothing, shelter, basic health care, education, lack of participation in the prevailing social standard of living, dignity and having limited chance of advancing their welfare just to the limit of their capabilities.

Governance and Poverty Reduction

Countries that failed to realize their poverty alleviation goals have invariably suffered yawning deficit of good governance. This is the most single deadly obstacle to sustainable

poverty reduction and all round development (Diamond, 2004). The question of leadership or the absence of committed leaders capable of initiating programmes for socio- political and economic development is the fundamental problem facing Nigeria today. According to Dike (1999), there are many complaints about waste and inefficiency in performing public services in Nigeria. For Nigeria's sorry socio-economic situation to improve, the nation needs honest and God-fearing men to be in charge of her affairs. For development to take place in any society there must be serious transformation in the quality of governance. For every poorly governed country, corruption must be present throughout the system of government. Public infrastructure decay or are never built because the resources at the state's disposal are diverted to private ends.

The leaders that came to power in Nigeria after independence came without any ideology of their own. The colonial masters too did not leave them with any. They came to power without any agenda for development for the people. They were only handed political independence without economic independence. This political independence, they saw as a do or die affair. For one to control the economy, one must have political power. This power, they use arbitrarily for their own selfish ends to the detriment of the people they are supposed to be serving. There is absence of political will, the people are not empowered and there is complete breakdown of trust between the leaders and the people. The leaders have completely abandoned the people.

It is not easy to eradicate poverty in any society no matter the amount of resources available in that country but as Marshal (1998) observes, "there is no moral justification for extreme poverty to exist side by side with great wealth". It is the opinion of many people that the problem with Nigeria is in the area of policy instability, policy implementation and corruption. All these can be solved through good purposive leadership exercised through good governance which Nigeria is in dare need for all round development to take place.

Link between Poverty and Good Governance

There is great concern for good governance in the international community as a result of stagnant economic development, under-development and persistent poverty in most countries in transition and developing world. The general thinking now is that, governance is a pre-condition to achieving sustainable human development and that it must be the people along with their government that have to rise to the challenge of reform (Akpa, 2004). Nigeria has all the resource endowments to overcome poverty, but it is ironically being ravaged by chronic and devastating poverty due to bad governance.

It is reported that over 70 percent of Nigerians are living below poverty line, life expectancy at birth is 51 years, over 40 percent of the population lacks access to potable drinking water and only about 40 percent of the population are literate (El Rufai, 2001). According to Diamond (2004:222), "the deepest root cause of poverty is not lack of resources or international isolation. Rather, it is a lack of good governance – the instability or unwillingness to apply public resources effectively to generate public goods". Public goods include physical structures such as roads, bridges, ports, sanitation, potable water, electricity, public transport, telecommunication; social, economic and political infrastructure – schools, clinics, markets, courts, vaccination programmes, improved agricultural techniques, a neutral and capable state of bureaucracy. All of the above are products of good governance.

As mentioned earlier, good governance consist of the following: capacity of the state to function in the service of the public goods, transparency, accountability, rule of law, mechanism of participation and dialogue to enable the public provide input to the policy

process, policy design and implementation. If good governance is conceptualized in this way, it promotes development and by implication reduces the poverty level of the people.

Practitioners and scholars of development have provided empirical evidence to show the harmful effect of lack of good governance on the issue of poverty (UNDP, 2009; World Bank, 2002). Good governance is an indispensable imperative for the management of a country's resources. It is still a far-cry in Africa because corruption, lack of accountability, lack of transparency, etc have been a thorn in the flesh of development. In the absence of good governance, no nation can effectively design and implement sustainable development policies. This has been a serious challenge for development in Nigeria.

Government Reaction to Poverty

In response to the pervasiveness of poverty in the country, the Nigeria government for over four decades have introduced several programmes, some of which were sector specific and others non-sector specific, with poverty reduction as its centre-piece. Additionally, several poverty reduction approaches have also according to Ogwumike (2005) been utilized in attempt to grapple with the beleaguered poverty situation of the country's citizens. Some of these bordered on economic growth approach, the basic needs approach, the development approach and the targeted group approach and a whole lot of others.

The implementation of some of these approaches stated above were collapsed into objectives demonstrated in the first and fourth national development plans of 1962-1967 and 1981 – 1985 respectively. Other poverty reduction programmes of the pre-SAP era were the River Basin Development Authorities (RBDA), the Agricultural Development Programmes (ADP), the Agricultural Credit Guarantee Scheme (ACGS), the Rural Electrification Scheme (RES), the Operation Feed the Nation (OFN) set up in 1977 and the Green Revolution of 1980. After the pre-SAP era, there were other poverty reduction programmes instituted by the national government of Nigeria as the Directorate for Food, Roads and Rural Infrastructures (DFRRI), the National Directorate for Employment (NDE), the Better Life Programme (BLP), the People's Bank of Nigeria (PBN), the Community banks (CB), the family Economic Advancement Programme (FEAP), etc. In spite of these litanies of programmes of poverty reduction in Nigeria, it has been observed that the incidence of poverty in Nigeria is exacerbating instead of pruning down.

An Overview of Some Past Poverty Alleviation Programmes

Poverty alleviation, however, encapsulates the efforts of government, non-governmental organization and other agencies, directed towards improving the conditions of the poor. This is defined as the creation of general conditions which allow man to live in dignity, where people are free to take their own decisions in life, where the poor gets increasingly empowered enough to participate in social, political and economic decision making.

The central feature of poverty alleviation is empowerment. Empowerment is a multi-dimensional process. It embraces the total transformation of the economic, social, psychological, political and legal circumstances of the powerless. While poverty refers to a situation of lack of essential things that make life worth living, poverty alleviation involves a situation of redeeming the unpleasant situation or making it possible to get those essential things. The overall goal of poverty alleviation is empowerment. Past governments have engaged in glorifying poverty alleviation but failed to deliver. The earliest poverty alleviation programmes were the 1972 Gen. Yakub Gowon's National Accelerated Food Production programme and the Nigeria's Agricultural and Co-operative Bank, entirely

devoted to funding agriculture. The NAFPP turned to be a colossal waste and nothing was achieved. There was much publicized Operation Feed the Nation in 1976 by the then military head of state, General Olusegun Obasanjo, which expended much money and effort in getting ill-prepared university undergraduates to go to the rural areas to teach the peasant farmers how to farm (http://www.nigeriansinamerica.com/articles/2414/1/Poverty-Relief-More-Programs-More-Pains/Page1.html_br).

In 1979, Shehu Shagari's Green Revolution programme had the twin objectives of curtailing food importation while boosting crop and fibre production. The overall objective was big (mechanized) farming. When the programme ended in 1983, 2 billion naira tax payers' money was wasted. Buhari's government introduced the GO Back to Land Programme with variations such as the former, Rivers State Governor, Fidelis Oyakhilome's School to Land Programme and his Lagos State counterpart, Gbolahan Mudashiru's Graduate Farming Scheme. Initially, the Oyakhilome's scheme worked in Rivers, made headline news in some newspaper. But like everything in Nigeria, it fizzled out and died. There is the belief that one of the major reasons for the failure of all these agricultural and poverty reduction programmes was that, they were based on "faulty philosophy". In 1986, Gen. Babangida established the Directorate of Food, Roads and Rural Infrastructure (DFRRI), for rural development. This was meant to provide feeder roads, electricity and potable water and toilet facilities for rural dwellers (http://www.nigeriansinamerica.com/articles/2414/1/Poverty-Relief-More-Programs-More-Pains/Page1.html_br).

The National Directorate for Employment was set up by Decree number 24 of October 19, 1986 established this Directorate, which commenced operations in January, 1987 with the primary role of promoting skill acquisition, self-employment and labour intensive work schemes. It also collects and maintains a data bank on unemployment and vacancies in the country. It has been concerning itself with designing of employment programmes such as school leaver apprentice scheme, entrepreneurs training programmes for graduates, labour-based work programmes and resettlement of trained beneficiaries. The NDE has trained more than 2 million unemployed Nigerians, provided business training for not less than 400,000 people, vocational training in up to 90 different trades, and assistance to more than 40,000 unemployed to set up their own businesses. The Directorate has organized labour-based groups through which 160,000 people benefited. The NDE suffers from inadequate funding from the Federal Government. Its predicament is worsened by the fact that it has over stretched itself by engaging in skills acquisition, granting of loans, procuring and selling agricultural inputs such as fertilizers. It has succeeded in recovering less than 10% of its loans. In 1993, Abacha and his wife set up the Family Support Programme and the Family Economic Advancement Programme. The Nigerian poor again, were taking for a ride. "FSP gulped over N10 billion of tax payers money are a time her husband Abacha was retrenching hapless civil servants nationwide"(Tell Magazine, 3/8/98).

Theoretical Framework

The study adopts the elite theory as a theoretical explanation to understand the link between poverty alleviation strategies and governance in Nigeria. The elite theory of poverty posits that the structure of political power in a society determines the extent and distribution of poverty among the population. In this case, the ruling elite, constituted by the few, establishes and legitimizes an exploitative property system, through which it determines the allocation of opportunities, income and wealth, relying on the use of elite power, including the use of oppressive state agents such as the police and armed forces. Poverty is a socio-

economic phenomenon whereby the resources available to society are used to satisfy the wants of the few while the many do not have their basic needs. So people are poor because certain political, economic and social structures have been imposed on them to be poor and not that they are lazy or choose to be poor.

The essential theme of the elitist theory is that there is in every society a minority of the population which takes the major decisions in the society. As those decisions have political implications, the elite exercise considerable political influence. The important advocates of this theory are Vilfredo Pareto, Geatano Mosca, Robert Michels, James Burnham, Joseph Schumpeter, Raymond Aron, Giovanni Sartori, and Karl Mannheim (Mahajan 2008: 820, Parry 1969:39). The elite approach to politics comes in when there is a conscious effort and practice to exercise exclusive decision making as a prerogative of social position or class. Elitism is discriminatory, pre-emptive, and saviours of a divine right to say what politics ought to be, claim the political office and tend to disregard mass opinion and competence. The elite claim and retain power by perpetuation until circumstances eject them from power (Mbah 2006: 283).

Taking a look at the various poverty alleviation programmes in Nigeria since independence, they have left much to be desired because the elites who have been in charge of the governance of the country enunciate and implement policies that are not realistic. The masses and the poor for whom the programmes are meant are not adequately consulted and are not given the opportunity to take active part in issues that affect them.

In Nigeria, only a negligible clique who finds their ways into positions of authority put policies in place for the people. More so, given that the country was under military rule for a long time, policies were just foisted on the people. As such, the poverty alleviation programmes remain fundamentally defective either in policy conception or their implementation. The consequence is widespread poverty in Nigeria while the negligible cabal amasses the wealth of the country for selfish interest.

Summary

There is no doubt of course that poverty is a global phenomenon and no nation, country or society can be absolutely immune to poverty. However, it varies in scale and intensity from one society to another. This is as a result of a legion of factors and variables which include good governance, bad governance, political instability, political will or otherwise to eradicate poverty or absence of proactive measures to reduce poverty among others.

Even though no universal definition of poverty exists, the bottom line of the views of scholars indicate that poverty depict a situation whereby an individual or a group or community lack the capacity to meet their basic materials needs like food, potable water, clothing, shelter, basic healthcare, education, improved living condition among other necessities. It is also instructive to note that all regimes in Nigeria since independence, be it civilian or military have embarked on one programme or the other with purported intention to reduce the extent of poverty among the citizenry. Some of such programmes include National Accelerated Food Production Programme, the Nigeria Agricultural and Cooperative Bank, operation feed the Nation, Green Revolution, Back to Land, Directorate of food, Roads and Rural infrastructure, Better Life for Rural Women, Family Support Programme and the National Poverty Eradication Programme e t c.

Some of the factors that have caused and exacerbated poverty in Nigeria include corruption, the Structural Adjustment Programme inequitable distribution of oil revenue, primordial cleavages, demographic, pressures, unemployment, globalization, politics and

power play by elite leaders and rulers to mention a few. The quest by Nigeria to eradicate poverty compelled her to formulate the NEEDS strategies for poverty reduction. Described as Nigeria's home grown poverty reduction strategy, the NEEDS derive from the country's long – term goals of poverty reduction, wealth creation, employment generation and value orientation. The federal government also initiated the National Poverty Alleviation Programme (NAPEP) on return to democratic rule in 1999. It was aimed at eradicating absolute poverty and it consists of youth and conservation schemes.

Broadly speaking, as lofty as all poverty alleviation programmes may appear, they have not been able to fundamentally mitigate widespread poverty in Nigeria as indicated by the alarming revelations by various domestic and international agencies such as the National Bureau of Statistics and the World Bank. Given the fact that leadership is the key to the development of societies and all economic problems are believed to have political solutions, the study established a link between the pervasive poverty and failure of poverty alleviation programmes in Nigeria and absence of good governance. Good governance encapsulates the capacity of the state to function in the provision of public goods, transparency, accountability, rule of law, mechanism of participation and negotiation to ensure the public takes active part in policy process, design and implementation.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are proposed as measures that could ensure the effectiveness of poverty Alleviation or Eradication Programme in Nigeria and by implication reduce the scourge of poverty that ravage the Nigerian populace.

- (1) Good governance which will create reliability and cooperation for all parties involved.
- (2) Adequate funding: if possible, all funds ear-marked for any programme should be made completely available before the commencement of the project.
- (3) Committed efforts should be made by all stakeholders to guarantee political stability and continuity of programmes.
- (4) There should be a fundamental infrastructural development.
- (5) Initiation of in-ward looking development programmes that are in line with the yearnings and aspirations of the people and the target population should be actively involved.
- (6) Government should adopt punitive measures and show its willingness and readiness to punish those who sabotage its efforts.

If the above recommendations are embraced by the government and other stakeholders, the war against poverty would be won and poverty alleviation programmes in Nigeria would, to a great extent, achieve their desired objectives.

Conclusion

There is no gainsaying that the level of poverty in Nigeria is at a disturbing frequency. The gap between the rich and the poor is widening at a geometric proportion. Nigerians are suffering in the midst of plenty. As a country endowed with abundant human and material resources, it has failed to harness her potentials to take its right place among the committee of nations. The various poverty alleviation programmes enunciated and implemented by successive governments could be said to be akin to mere window dressing as their impact on the target population have left much to be desired. In spite of the fact that various reasons could be advanced for failure of the poverty alleviation programmes in Nigeria, the lack of good governance in the country is principally responsible for this failure and by extension the alarming level of poverty in Nigeria.

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