

Local Government and Poverty Eradication in Rural Nigeria

LE GOUVERNEMENT LOCAL ET L'ÉRADICATION DE LA PAUVRETÉ RURALE AU NIGERIA

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Abstract: Poverty is a universal phenomenon that cut across both developed and underdeveloped countries. In Nigeria poverty is deep, widespread and multidimensional, and Nigerians are all victims of this condition in one way or the other even though the degree differs. However, available statistics reveals that poverty is more pronounced among the rural dwellers that form 70% of the country's population. Efforts by successive government to eradicate poverty especially in the rural areas since independence have not yielded any desirable result in spite of huge amount of resources committed to it. This article focuses on the causes of rural poverty as well as strategies adopted to eradicate it by successive regimes in Nigeria. It also analysis some of the main weaknesses of the past attempt aimed at eradicating poverty and highlights the potential role that local government can play in poverty eradication efforts.

Keywords: Poverty; Causes of Poverty; Local Government; Rural Areas and Poverty Alleviation Programmes

Résumé: La pauvreté est un phénomène universel dans les pays développés et sous-développés. Au Nigeria, la pauvreté est profonde, généralisée et multidimensionnelle, et les Nigériens sont tous les victimes de cette condition dans un sens ou dans l'autre, même si le degré diffère. Cependant, les statistiques disponibles révèlent que la pauvreté est plus prononcée chez les habitants des zones rurales qui constituent 70% de la population du pays. Les efforts déployés par les gouvernements successifs pour éradiquer la pauvreté, en particulier dans les zones rurales depuis l'indépendance, n'ont pas donné de résultat souhaitable, en dépit des énormes ressources engagées. Cet article se concentre sur les causes de la pauvreté rurale ainsi que les stratégies adoptées par les régimes successifs au Nigeria pour l'éradiquer. Il analyse également certaines des faiblesses principales de la dernière tentative visant à éradiquer la pauvreté et met en évidence le rôle potentiel que les gouvernements locaux peuvent jouer dans les efforts d'éradication de la pauvreté.

Mots-clés: pauvreté; causes de la pauvreté; gouvernements locaux; zones rurales et programmes de lutte contre la pauvreté

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INTRODUCTION

Over the years, discourse on poverty has continued to engage the attention of scholars, development practitioners, politicians and international development agencies. One consensus reached is that poverty is a universal phenomenon that affects the socio-economic and political well being of its victims whether in a developed or underdeveloped countries. However, a search of relevant social science literatures suggests that poverty in underdeveloped countries is absolute and more pronounced in rural areas. Nigeria, a country once regarded as a model for African development and “Giant in the Sun” (Gana, 1996:16) is a poor country in the midst of abundant resources. Among other things, the country is enormously endowed with human, good weather condition for agriculture, petroleum, gas, and large untapped mineral resources. But rather than recording remarkable progress in the national socio-economic development, Nigeria retrogressed to become one of the poorest countries fifty years after independence, whereas she was among the richest 50 in the early 1970s (Obadan, 2002:1) Furthermore, the rural population that constitute about Seventy percent of the country’s population are ironically backward and underdeveloped in terms of minimum human standard of living. If one goes round the villages in Nigeria today he would witnessed conditions of unmotorable roads, women and children walking barefooted and trekking long distance to get water and firewood, pupil studying under trees, a dilapidated and ill equipped health centres and scores of poverty-driven problems. The rural dwellers suffers on many fronts and are powerless to improve their situation because of ill-health, poor education and lack of access to many opportunities available to them. They are extremely vulnerable to natural disasters and economic upheavals as well as to crime and violence due to neglect and inconsistency in the poverty alleviation policies of successive government that came to power since independence in 1960. Available statistics shows that poverty in the Northern States of Nigeria is comparatively higher than in the South. Generally, the North East zone has the highest Human Poverty Index (HPI) rate of 48.90; followed by North West with 44.15, North Central is third with 34.65, South South 26.61 and South East 26.07. The Geo-political zone of the country with the least HPI is South West with 21.50. Besides, Human Development Index (HDI) of 2008-2009 reveals that Human Development value in the south is higher than that of the north. For instance, the HDI value in the North Central is 0.490, North West 0.42, North East 0.332, South West 0.523, South East 0.471 and South South 0.573 (Human Development Report 2009:10). It can be gleaned from above that the Northern region is worst-off compared to its Southern counterpart.

Although successive governments at local, state and national levels have attempted severally to tackle the problem of poverty through various programmes but the assessment of their contribution to poverty reduction is scanty compared to huge amount of resources committed to the programmes (Egware, 1997: 494). This resulted from laxity in terms of realistic assessment of the problems and needs of the rural populace. Thus the primary focus of this paper is to propose a basic strategy for poverty eradication in the rural areas as well as examine how Local Government Councils and their constitutive elements could serve as a useful tool for poverty eradication in the rural areas anchored on the principles of transparently, respect for fundamental human rights, equality, empowerment of the ordinary people and their involvement in the process of decision-making.

In the light of the above, this paper addresses the following issues:

- Conceptual and theoretical framework
- Causes of poverty in rural areas
- Past attempt at poverty eradication in Nigeria
- Reasons for the failure of past attempt
- Strategies for eradicating rural poverty
- The role of Local Government in poverty eradication

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

It has been thought necessary at this on-set to clarify the key concepts in the paper. The intension here is to put the concepts within the context in which they are used, in order to avoid misunderstanding. Besides, concept may have both cultural and ideological contextualization (Chafe 1994:131).

POVERTY

On the concept of poverty, a search of the relevant literatures reveals that there is no general consensus on any meaningful definition of poverty. Because poverty affects many aspects of human conditions including physical, moral and psychological, hence, a concise and universal definition of poverty is elusive. (Anyanwu; 1997:94) However, the encyclopaedia Britannica (Encarta 2000) defines poverty as a state of one who lack usual or socially acceptable amount of money or material possessions, poor people are often forced to make difficult and agonizing choices: feed the family or send children to school, buy medicine for a sick family member or feed the rest of the family, take a dangerous job or starve. This implies that the poor cannot afford all the basic needs of life at the same time. They have to for-go one in order to have the other. Moreover, poverty is said to exist when people lack the means to satisfy their basic needs. In this context, the poor are identified by a determination to what constitute basic needs. These needs are those necessary for survival such as nutrition, housing, clothing, health and education (Report on Poverty in Northern States – 2006:6) Furthermore, Sachs (2005:20) made distinction between three degrees of poverty – extreme or absolute poverty, moderate poverty and relative poverty. Extreme poverty according to Sachs means that household cannot meet basic needs for survival, they are chemically hungry, unable to access healthcare, lack the amenities of safe drinking water and sanitation, cannot afford education for their children, lack rudimentary shelter, clothing and shoes. Moderate poverty on the other hand, generally refers to conditions of life in which basic needs are met, but just barely.

The third category of poverty- Relative poverty is generally construed as a household income level below a given proportion of average national income. From the above classification, it will not be out of place to conclude that the rural dwellers in Nigeria fall into the category of the first classification, while the working class and politicians who dwell in semi-urban and the urban centres belong to the second and third categories respectively.

Ravallion and Bidani (1994), in their analysis, refer to poverty as lack of command over basic consumption needs. This means that there is an inadequate level of consumption, giving rise to insufficient food, clothing and shelter (Aluko: 1975:21). To Sen (1987), poverty can be understood as lack of certain capabilities, such as being able to participate with dignity in society. In this sense, poverty can be understood as inability of a person to attain a minimum standard of living and high status in a society. (World Bank Development Report, 1990)

One deduction that could be made from the above definitions is that poverty has many dimensions such as inadequate income, malnutrition, lack of access to social services, and lack of social and political status. And that for a given country in a given circumstances, poverty must be conceived, defined, measured in absolute quantitative ways that are relevant and valid for analysis and policy making in that given time and space (Uniamikogbo,1997:19)

So far, we have concerned ourselves with the clarification of the concept of poverty, the next concept is local government.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

The concept of local Government is not only complex but controversial. Different scholars have given diverse definitions base on their historical and cultural orientations. However, the guidelines for local government reforms defines local government as the government at a local level exercising power through representative council, established by law to exercise specific power within a defined areas. (Guidelines 1976:1) In a related development, Ovwasa defines local government as a workable and effective grass root administration and rural development strategy through which national development can be enhanced (Omotola, 2005:7). But for Barber, local government means authority to determine and to execute matter

within a restricted area inside and smaller than the whole... it involves the administering of services on a local basis by local bodies. (Barber; 1974:1) Moreover, section 7 (1) of the 1999 constitution provide that:

“The system of local government by democratically elected local Government Council is under this constitution guaranteed; and accordingly the Government of every state shall ensure their existence under a law which provides for the establishment structure, composition, finance and functions of such councils (Nigerian Constitution 1999 section 7(1))

The above expositions pre-suppose that local governments:

Are essentially meant to facilitate national development

Are established by law and therefore have legal personalities, capable of suing and being sued.

Have power well spelt out, within their own sphere of jurisdiction

Exercise power through representative councils which are largely elected. (Omotola 2005:2)

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Theoretical explanations for the persistence of poverty in both urban and rural Nigeria are woven around the objects and subjects, as well as the nature of the phenomenon (Akeredolu-Ale, 1975); they theories have been extremely varied and have evolved over the years. They include functionalistic theory, Natural-circumstantial theory, power theory and urban bias theory.

The functionalist theory, places the blame for poverty on the poor individual themselves. The central argument of the theory is that those who suffer from abject poverty and low incomes do so because they are lazy and unable and unwilling to provide adequately for their own well being. Herbert Spencer (1971) describes the poor as “bad fellows”, good for nothing, vagrants and sots” and it is unnatural to help those engaged in dissolute living to avoid the consequences of their actions. For Malcolm Darling, poor individual are inferior, stupid, lazy, improvident and dissolute.

Natural circumstantial theory identify such factors in the matrix of poverty induced equations as the geographical locations and natural endowment of the environment in which person live, unemployment, old age and physical disabilities (Tella, 1977: 76). The argument here is that the major causes of poverty are: poor environment, lack of capacity to tap the resources of the environment, inefficient and wasteful exploitation of the environment.

The power 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 state power, including the use of oppressive state agents such as the police and armed forces (Akeredolu – Ale 1975) This position was corroborated by Kuren (1978) who view poverty as 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 central argument of urban-biased theory is that the governing elite and decision maker concentrates their development efforts in the urban centres to the total neglect of rural areas. The rural dwellers have no equal opportunity to basic need of life as their urban counterparts. This explains why poverty is more pronounced in the rural areas than urban centres. This theory captures the reality in Nigeria, where virtually all government development programmes are concentrated in the urban and semi-urban areas to the total neglect of rural areas. This was driven by erroneous belief that rural areas are outside production and therefore contribute little to economic, social and political development of the country.

CAUSES OF RURAL POVERTY

The causes of poverty in rural Nigeria are well known to all Nigerians and to some extent the rest of the enlightened world as well. (Report on Poverty in Northern Nigeria, 2007) However, numerous

characteristic of a country's economy and society, as well as some external influences create and perpetuate rural poverty.

These include:

Desire for a large family size. The consequence of this is that the quality of the household is compromised. When children are many, they cannot eat balanced diet, could not attend good school, and in most cases they cannot afford adequate medicine.

Inadequate access to physical assets such as land and capital. Especially when the right to exploit or make use of productive resources are banned or restricted by court.

Minimal commitment especially on the part of government to rural development, as most development efforts of state and federal governments are concentrated in the urban centres.

Inadequate access to social infrastructural facilities such as electricity, good road, pipe borne water, and education.

Ineffective public policy on natural resources management

Political instability and civil strife such as coup, and ethno-religious violence.

Economic policies that discriminate against or exclude the rural poor from the development process and accentuate the effects of other poverty creating process.

National disaster. Such as drought, flood and climatic change

Systemic discrimination on the basis of gender, ethnicity and religion.

Inadequate access to employment opportunities

Lack of beneficiary participation in developmental programmes.

Corrupt politician and rent- seeking contractors and public bureaucracies which leads to bad governance.

The simultaneous interplay of these factors has imposed catastrophic pressure upon our rural dwellers. The numbers of people living in absolute poverty are continuing to grow in geometrical progression while progress towards curtailing the menace is moving rather slowly. According to World Bank report, in Nigeria today there is a sharp drop in life expectancy from 51 yrs in 2001 to 47 years in 2006. Children are under nourished, no safe water source, people dying of curable diseases, hunger and scores of damage done to rural people as a result of poverty.

What effort has successive Nigerian government made to arrest this ugly situation? This question is answered in the next section.

ATTEMPTS MADE IN THE PAST TO ERADICATE POVERTY IN NIGERIA

Over the years, successive government in Nigeria, in response to eradicating poverty have designed and developed several programmes that are implemented at huge cost. The earliest poverty alleviation programmes were the 1972 General Gowon's National Accelerated Food Production Programme (NAFPP) and the Nigerian Agricultural and Cooperative Bank, which were entirely devoted to funding agriculture. The NAFPP turned out to be a colossal waste and nothing was achieved (Maduagwu, 2000:6). In 1976 General Obasanjo committed about N10m to Operation Feed the Nation. The story was not different from that of Gowon. Equally in 1979 Alhaji Shehu Shagari introduced Green Revolution Programme whose central objective was big farming. By the end of 1983 when Shagari's government was overthrown, about 2 billion naira tax payers money was wasted.

Buhari's `Go back to Land` programme followed the same disastrous path of his predecessors. About N135 billion was squandered through official corruption. In the same vein, Babangida's Directorate of Food, Road and Rural Infrastructure (DFRRI) for rural development, which was meant to provide feeder roads, electricity, portable water and toilets facilities for rural dwellers gulped N1.9billion without any meaningful impact on Nigerians (Maduagwu 2006) Similarly, the twin programme of Family Support

Programme and Family Economic Advancement Programme of Abacha and his wife that were targeted at caring for the poor left pains, and hunger for the poor masses. Lastly, Obasanjo poverty alleviation programmes further worsen the plight of the poor people. Apart from being hijacked by politicians who used it for political patronage, the objectives and purposes ran parallel to the expectation of Nigerians. Although the present administration of Yar' Adua/Goodluck had not only introduced seven point agenda of which poverty alleviation is a component, but also retained some of the poverty alleviation programmes of his predecessor. However, available statistics suggests that the programmes have not impacted positively on the lives of suffering masses of Nigeria.

REASONS FOR THE FAILURE OF PREVIOUS POVERTY ALLEVIATION PROGRAMMES

Some of the reasons for the failures of past attempt at poverty eradication include:

- . A low level of participation by the poor: even though the ultimate stakeholders in the poverty alleviation process are the poor, all too often they are denied a voice in the formulation and even implementation of the programmes

- . Most poverty alleviation programmes have had a single vector of intervention and have failed to confront the multidimensionality of poverty. Priorities are usually sent from 'the outside', thus being top-down rather than bottom-up approach and unable to respond to the particular needs of the poor. (Baas and Rouse, 1997: 78)

- . Lack of political will
- . Corruption and poor accountability
- . Discrimination based on gender, ethnicity, religion and party affiliation.
- . Most programmes have tended to rely on grants and loans from international financial institutions and other donor agencies whose conditions often ended up undermining the needs of the poor.

STRATEGIES FOR ERADICATING RURAL POVERTY

To design or develop policies that have a chance of effectively helping the rural poor, the focus of such policies must be based on the following:

- The rural poor must be directly involved in the identification, designing and implementation of programmes that affect them. This is to ensure effective use of resources and equitable distribution of benefit.

- The infrastructures that directly affect the rural sector's productivity and the rural poor's quality of life such as transport, communication, extension services, irrigation, education, health, water and sanitation must be developed. This is because access of the rural people to infrastructure and public services would have important effect on human capital and productivity in the rural areas.

- Since rural poor are varied in group and face different problem, there is a need for a sustained effort to gather information about the particular problems they face so that they can be adequately addressed.

- Right to adequate land. Many rural dwellers are landless labourers who depend on casual or long-term employment in farm. A broad-based land reform programme including land titling, land redistribution, and fair enforceable tenancy contract are critical for reducing rural poverty. It can equally make small landowners and tenants more efficient producers and raise their standard of living.

- Discouraging some cultural and traditional norms that discriminate against women. Especially the ones that forbid women from inheriting landed property of their late parents and husbands.

- No meaningful development can take place in an environment of chaos and political instability. The cases of ethno-religious violence, the instability in the Niger Delta and the destructive activities of various ethnic militias in virtually all the geo-political zones are threatening the survival of the country. There must be a sustained effort towards peaceful co-existence among various groups in the country. The problem of "indigene/settler" dichotomy should be resolved.

- Institutionalization of proper rule of law. This will not only ensure life and personal security, but will also provide a legal backing for programmes that aimed at alleviating poverty at national and local levels.

- A change in attitudes towards the poor. Most of the time the poor are referred to either as a “social burden” or as being outside the production system” and therefore of little economic or political importance. That type of notion is misleading and need to stop. Analysis of rural production system shows that the poor contribute significantly to economic output and are able and willing to learn. (Baas & Rouse 1997: 78)

The building of sustainable capacities for poverty alleviation requires a well defined and long-term development approach.

Lastly, there is a need for awareness campaign for family planning and reduction in desire rates of fertility. These will reduce rates of child mortality, rising literacy of girls and women. Besides, with few children, a poor household can invest more in the health, nutrition and education that can increase the rural dwellers living standard (Sachs, 2005: 16)

ROLE FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN ERADICATING RURAL POVERTY

Society is changing and becoming increasingly diverse and complex. These changes are driving changes in the scope of local governments. New forms of leadership, institutional forms, and local networks are needed for local governments to cope with emerging trends and challenges of poverty alleviation in the rural areas. (Okoth, 2005:6). Since local government are government at the grass root, their role in poverty alleviation in the rural areas cannot be over emphasized.

- Local government are required to make decisions and set directions for promoting socio-cultural, environmental and economic well-being of their rural communities.

- Local government should earmark resources that will directly meet the needs of the poor. Although this may only offer temporary relief, however more sustained effort can be successful if the institutions of governance are put in place and made more accountable to the citizenry.

- Local Government-Community Relation: Local authorities are local governance institutions, which interact on a daily basis with different actors such as individual, professional associations, NGOs, religion and ethnic associations etc. As such they should provide the enabling environment for the stakeholders to contribute towards local economic and social development. They should go beyond the conventional mobilization for political participation in the form of voting during elections.

- Local government must involve the local communities in the conception, planning, implementation and monitoring of their poverty alleviation programmes. This will give the local people sense of ownership of programmes.

- In the exercise of its regulatory functions, it must not discriminate against anybody irrespective of gender, ethnic, religion, age and social status.

- Local government must ensure that the services provided are managed efficiently and effectively to achieve desired result.

- Local government should mobilize successful farmers to train rural poor on modern way of farming rather than relying on professionals and federal government trainers whose idea may contradict that of local farmers.

- They must provide directly or on behalf of state/federal government adequate, equitable and appropriate services and facilities for their communities. This will stem rural-urban drift especially among the youth.

- Furthermore, local government must also embark on mainstreaming gender into their various activities of poverty eradication.

- Local government should also provide micro credit facilities for the rural dwellers through group formation. The group will collect loan for a member but the group will be mutually responsible for the

repayment of the loan. This has been successful in Bangladesh under Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (Sachs: 2005).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

From our discussion, the success of poverty alleviation in rural Nigeria will depend on a combination of strong and sustained political and operational leadership, adequate technical and financial resources, and active citizen participation. Strong and vibrant local governments are crucial for improving local services, enhancing economic governance, and tackling poverty related concerns such as illiteracy, crime, urban and rural decay, youth delinquency, homelessness among others.

Therefore, if poverty alleviation is still a national concern, local government should be allowed to play active role in the designing, implementing and monitoring of key elements of poverty alleviation programmes.

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