

POVERTY ALLEVIATION: A CRITICAL ISSUE IN THE SUSTENANCE OF DEMOCRACY FOR NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

Everywhere we look across Nigeria, the stark realities stare us in the face: poverty, hunger, degradation, squalor, unemployment, crime, social ills and vices and untimely death. Almost all indices of human growth and development show that in Nigeria, the quality of life is on a serious decline, survival itself has become far more precarious now than it ever was. Nigeria's attempt at a democracy is yet to bring about a desired change aimed at improving the lot of the masses. With a ruling elite in the grip of a gargantuan appetite, corruption gnaws at the resources of the state with precision of a combined harvester chewing up both human and natural resources and leaving in its wake increase poverty and misery which is a serious impediment to sustainable democracy and national development. This paper discussed the need for an urgent practical poverty alleviation programme, if democracy is to be sustained. It concluded with some recommendations that could help sustain democracy and pave way for the achievement of national development objectives.

Introduction

The process of democratization in Nigeria rather than alleviating the sufferings of the masses and enabling them to engage in participatory, governance has only succeeded in further widening the gap between the rich and poor (Ogwumike, 2001). Ogwumike (2001) further observed that it is rather pathetic that with this divine blessing, the vast majority of her population are suffering from the pervasive and high incidence of poverty, ignorance, disease, squalor, poor diet and poor shelter.

A critical assessment of the economic conditions in Nigeria are pointers to the fact that they are non-supportive of sustainable democracy and development. Politics involve popular participation - or at least the formal approval of the electorate; and successful democratic politics involves the acceptance of decisions which do not always favour one's own interest. Obviously this is easier done where levels of economic development and well-being are high and rising. According to Lipset and Solari (1967) the more well-to-do a nation, and ready to take care of the vast majority of its population, the greater the chances that it will sustain democracy. It is a lot easier to accept the legitimacy of other people's economic interest when you do not feel that your own back is to the wall.

At the inception of the current democratic government, many Nigerians were made to believe that poverty alleviation is the ultimate goal of the present government. The government embarked on Poverty Alleviation Programme (PAP), which aimed at job creation. However, at the end of 2000 budget implementation many Nigerians were yet to feel the impact of government poverty alleviation programme, like the monster called fuel shortage, poverty seem to have defied all efforts of the current government. Several reasons may be responsible for this including the failure to identify the poor and the nature of their poverty. There is no doubt that unemployment is a major problem in Nigeria today. Although poverty is not synonymous with unemployment, some of the poor could be employed and some unemployed. Sustainable poverty reduction will therefore, require not only the identification of the poor, but also a multi-pronged approach given the multidimensional nature of the poverty problem.

The present government has already taken steps to rationalize the various agencies whose activities impact on poverty alleviation. There is still need to examine the laws that give rise to, or perpetuate poverty. This will require radical review of ownership of assets, across to social services with particular emphasis on health and education.

The government has also tried to reduce poverty in recent times through upward review of salaries and wages. For example, those who were pushed into temporary or transitory poverty, especially in the civil service and during Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) are gradually being moved out of poverty through this process.

The efforts of governments at alleviating poverty in Nigeria can only reflect development and sustain democracy if government is able to set its priorities right. In order to achieve effective poverty reduction in Nigeria, government should first and foremost identify who are the poor and the nature of their poverty. This will go a long way in planning a functional Poverty Alleviation Programme for majority of the population.

Conceptual Issues

Poverty

Poverty has been perceived differently by different scholars, because it affects many aspects of the human condition, including physical, moral and psychological. Most follow the conventional view of poverty as a result of insufficient income for securing basic goods and services. Others view it, in part, as a function of education, health, life expectancy, child mortality etc. Blackwood and Lynch (1994) identify the poor using the criteria of the levels of consumption and expenditure. Sen (1983) relates poverty to entitlements which are taken to be the various bundles of goods and services over which one has command, taking into cognizance the means by which such goods are acquired and the availability of the needed goods. World Bank (1996) sees poverty in very broad terms, such as being unable to meet basic needs -physical (food, healthcare, education, shelter etc) and non-physical (participation, identity etc.) requirements for a meaningful life. The World Bank currently uses a figure of one U.S. dollar per day (purchasing power) for absolute poverty. The alternative will be to define poverty as relative deprivation. It therefore, characterizes poverty as a situation in which an individual or household is unable to attain an acceptable minimum standard of living; giving rise to severe material deprivation; absence of recreational opportunities; lack of access to economic as well as political power; and inferiority complex, isolation and social degradation.

A typically poor nation exhibits features of widespread mass penury reflected in the pauperization of the working and professional classes including artisans. In such a nation, the phenomena of unemployment and underemployment are widespread. It lacks adequate welfare services. The health status of the average citizen is low as reflected in a high rate of infant mortality and low life expectancy at birth. The opportunities for sound and beneficial education are very low.

Also, a poor nation is characterized by poor infrastructural facilities having inadequate supply of pure water; inadequate and poor housing facilities, inadequate transportation facilities, poor telecommunication system and inadequate supply of electricity for both household and business uses. The national product of a poor nation is low reflecting the low productivity of its average labour force. More importantly, the distribution of the gross national product is highly skewed, indicating a small proportion of the population as having command over the bulk of the income of the nation and consequently leaving the great majority of the people at subsistence or below subsistence level.

Poverty Alleviation

For any nation to achieve its goal of poverty alleviation, it must evolve a stable democracy that must be backed up by a strong process of economic growth and development. The depth and severity of the poverty of a nation cannot be alleviated where acute inequality of income distribution, not only persists, but also worsens over time. This is the situation in Nigeria where there is growth but absence of development. Economic growth must be accompanied by a more equitable income distribution in order to alleviate poverty.

The World Bank (1990) outlined four ways by which the income of the poor in the society can be raised.

- * Increase in the demand for the labour of the poor class and thereby raise their price i.e. wage rates.
- * Increase in the poor's access to physical assets such as land in order to raise their productivity.
- * Provision of basic social services such as education and health to the poor; and
- * Transfer of current income to the poor in the form of cash or food subsidies.

In another study, the World Bank recommended a number of measures to be included in an action programme for poverty alleviation. The highlights of the measures are:-

- * Income and wealth redistribution, in order to minimize inequality and remove socio-political unrest;
- * Simultaneous pursuit of growth and development;
- * Redistribution of the benefits of growth in favour of the poor;
- * Adjustment of the pattern of growth to give emphasis to the growth of the rural area, *encourage* labour intensive methods of agricultural production; increase access of women to productive resources including technology; increase the access of the poor to land and credit; and improve rural infrastructure; and
- * Rural improvement through better access to education, health, water, electric power; credit facilities and markets.

Development

Development is a goal that every individual, social group or nation or strives to achieve. It is all encompassing, embracing the transformation of the economic, social, political and cultural aspects of the society leading to improvement in the quality of the life of the people. A society cannot be said to be developed if it cannot provide its people with basic life sustaining elements.

Seers (1977) perceived development as involving not only economic growth but also conditions in which people in a country have adequate food and job and the income inequality among them is greatly reduced. According to him, the questions to ask about a country's development are three namely: what has been happening to inequality? What has been happening to unemployment? What has been happening to poverty? If all three have declined from high levels, then the country has witnessed a period of development. He later on added the element of self-reliance to his view. This entails that the main emphasis in development should no longer be on overall economic growth rates or on patterns of distributions rather as a process leading to sustainability of social structures and institutions.

In order to give a conceptual basis and practical guide in understanding the in-depth meaning of development, Groulet (1971) in Todaro (1977) have at least suggested three basic core values of development. These are:

- a. Life Sustenance; this has to do with the development of a necessary condition for the continuous improvement in the quality of life.
- b. Self-esteem: this has to do with a sense of worth and self-respect of not being used as a tool by others for their own end.
- c. Freedom: it is freedom from alienating material conditions of life, freedom from the social servitudes of men to nature, ignorance, other men, misery, institutional and dogmatic beliefs.

Poverty Alleviation and Democratic Sustenance in Nigeria

The most difficult and most challenging factor facing any government is on how to effectively mobilize its citizenry for national development. Democracy is said to be a government of the people, by the people and for the people. If this is looked at critically, it means the government should first and foremost aim at programmes that would improve the living standard of the people. It should also be able to mobilize and harness both human and material resources for national development.

Though the government has been making efforts by bringing on some poverty alleviation programmes with a 'human face'. Its implementation has not turned out successfully because those at the helm of affairs always circumvent such to satisfy their selfish interest. For instance, the River Basin Development Authorities (RBDA), the Agricultural Credit Guarantee Scheme (ACGS), the Rural Banking Programme (RBP). Most of these programmes were designed to take care of such objectives as employment generation, enhancing agricultural output and income (Ogwumike, 2001). Other notable poverty related programmes that were put in place in Nigeria before the advent of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) include Operation Feed the Nation (OFN) in 1977, Free and Compulsory Primary Education (FCPE) in 1977, Green Revolution in 1980, and Low Cost Housing Scheme. These programmes could not be sustained due to lack of political will and commitment, political instability and insufficient involvement of the beneficiaries in these programmes (CBN, 1998).

Poverty prevents a nation and individuals from realizing their full human potentialities. Poverty is associated with physical and mental diseases, low life expectancy and loss of productive capacity. In Nigeria, the majority are drastically poor, while the few rich ones display their affluence arrogantly.

The political class has turned round to abuse the democratic process, because of the level of poverty in the country. This they do through acts of bribery and corruption, since the hungry man is willing to sell his electoral right and conscience because of the need to alleviate poverty which has brought about protracted cases of political instability and increase in crime rates, assassination of opponents, negative godfatherism, whereby the rich sponsor the poor for political office, as an avenue for further enrichment. This is a clear case of the effect of poverty on the people. There is lack of transparency and accountability in fiscal operation, this always leaves the economy in a state of disappointing performance with unimpressive and slow growth and a lack of development.

In Nigeria there is lack of articulated policy on income distribution. The rate of unemployment especially among the youth who should be seen as leaders of tomorrow is alarming. Rather than embarking upon programmes that will aim at creating employment in substantial numbers to absorb the increasing population of employment in substantial numbers to absorb the increasing population of unemployed, the political class uses them as a tool to create civil unrest and termed them as 'miscreants' or 'area boys'. This cannot sustain democracy and therefore not augur well for national development. Their energies can be effectively channeled towards functional development efforts.

Another factor working against poverty reduction programmes are sectoral problems. These are manifest in Nigeria's over dependence on the petroleum industry, neglect of agricultural development, lack of industrial development due largely to lack of technological breakthrough and inadequate infrastructure.

The existing poverty reduction programmes are inadequate. These include lack of consistency, continuity and co-ordination of the innumerable so-called poverty alleviation programmes that have emerged over the past decade and half. Apart from competing with the available meagre resources, they are in most cases poorly conceived and formulated and lack transparency in application of the funds mobilized. Actions and resources often directed at poverty reduction are not commensurate with the verbal commitment to poverty alleviation.

From the above, if government wants to sustain democracy so that the poor will not one day help it in destroying the achievement so far made, it must address urgently such areas of concern.

Conclusion

An appraisal of poverty and poverty alleviation in Nigeria has been provided, although not exhaustively, it provides some basis for further discussion and work on the issue of strategies for poverty alleviation in the sustenance of our present democratic dispensation inspite of the expressed concern of both past and present governments and the plethora of programmes and policies that have a bearing on poverty, the incidence and scourge of poverty have continued to worsen over the years. This is a threat to our toddler democracy and does not augur well for national development. Some of the factors which have constrained the effectiveness of the programmes and policies have already been outlined.

The critical question to ask ourselves is with the National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP) being the centrepiece of the present government's efforts at poverty reduction, what are the prospects of achieving the national and international goal of halving the incidence of poverty by 2015? This question is pertinent against the backdrop of the Nigerian economy, which is characterized by low economic growth, rapid population growth, mismanagement of available resources, increased cases of unemployment and crime rates and large scale corruption. Therefore, for NAPEP to make a meaningful impact on poverty, the programmes and policies should be implemented within the framework of rapid economic growth with equity, controlled population growth, sound economic management and good governance among others.

Recommendations

There is need to sustain the existing democracy with good governance and disciplined fiscal operations in order to lay a firm foundation in the pursuit of poverty alleviation. In particular such efforts must include among others:

- * Government should fashion out programmes aimed at generating income earning opportunities for the poor, make job creation possible, and thereby make use of their most abundant asset labour.
- * Produce additional resources for the government to use for social programmes aimed at overcoming poverty. This ensures the provision of adequate infrastructure and other policy measures that will enable the private sector develop as engine of growth.
- * Maintenance of market and foreign investment friendly environment in order to mobilize adequate external resources to supplement the inadequate domestic finance and technology.
- * Continued pursuit of structural reforms that can bring about agrarian revolution, industrialization, diversification of exports and lessen dependence on imports.
- * Concerted efforts by both the public and private sector to combat unemployment, which is the cause of the increasing wave of crimes and insecurity in both the rural as well as the urban areas of the country.

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