

10-1-2009

## Poverty: A Constraint to Sustainable Development of the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria's Socio-Economic Resources During the 21st Century

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### Recommended Citation

Inyang, John (2009) "Poverty: A Constraint to Sustainable Development of the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria's Socio-Economic Resources During the 21st Century," *Academic Leadership: The Online Journal*: Vol. 7: Iss. 4, Article 24.

DOI: 10.58809/SRNI6289

Available at: <https://scholars.fhsu.edu/alj/vol7/iss4/24>

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# Academic Leadership Journal

## Introduction

Poverty has become a major socio-economic problem in present day Nigeria. A disturbing observation about poverty in Nigeria is that it is on the increase, both in incidence and intensity despite the wide variety of national and international measures undertaken to eradicate it during the last three decades. The failure of these measures have been attributed to a multiplicity of causes, of which the most frequently mentioned and emphasized include: inadequate conceptualizations of poverty and development; failure to identify the root causes of the problem; lack of adequate organizational requirement for effective program implementation, wrong prescriptions given as solution to the problem of poverty and various combination of these shortcomings. An excursion through the vast literature on poverty and development would reveal that current perceptions of and approaches to the problem of poverty are partial in scope and often reflect the case of the proverbial blind men and the elephant, in which men mistook the individual parts for the whole beast.

Many national governments in Africa have tended to treat poverty as a purely economic problem that could be overcome by means of careful planned and implemented, economic development programs. But such approach has often led merely to increases in average incomes and gross national product (GNP) but have not led to visible improvement in the living standards of the masses of the people. The general observation indicated clearly that aggregate economic development efforts among developing countries of Africa such as Nigeria, Mali, Kenya etc. does not necessarily lead to poverty reduction and that a better way to assess the impact of rural/economic development programs on the welfare of the people is by examining separately the benefits that have accrued to the various groups, particularly the socially vulnerable groups the children, women and the elderly.

An autopsy of past poverty programs in Nigeria suggests that an effective remedy to the problem during the twenty first century is necessary. It requires carefully analysis, valid diagnosis, pertinent prescriptions and a knowledge and availability of organizational requirements for effective implementation of prescribed programs. In this regard, the following guiding questions will be considered. What is poverty? Who are the poor? What are their distinguishing characteristics? Why are the poor? Where are they located? What can be done to assist them to overcome poverty? And how will society and the poor organize themselves to accomplish this task? Therefore a discussion of the topic: Poverty; a constraint to sustainable Development of Nigerian's Socio-economic resources presents an opportunity for examining more closely the concept and essence of poverty in relation to its socio-economic and political effects on Nigerians.

The objective of this paper therefore is to examine a selection of current views on poverty in general and rural poverty in particular and their implications for present day socio-economic development in Nigeria. The discussion is divided into four parts; The first part considers explanatory conceptualization of the multi-dimensional nature of poverty. The intention is to assist in a proper clarification of the meaning of poverty as it is used in this study. The second part examines the essence, and problems

posed by rural poverty, focusing on factors which have served as remote causes to the social problem. The purpose is to offer sufficient explanation for adequate understanding of factors which have contributed in perpetuating rural poverty. The third part of the discussion deals with issues involved in poverty alleviation and goes on to offer suggestions on what should be done to attain sustainable rural development in present day Nigeria. The fourth and final part of the paper summarizes findings of the study and made recommendations based on research findings in the study.

### **Definition of the Term Poverty**

Poverty has been variously defined in the literature. It is a multi-dimensional concept that denotes a universally undesirable human condition. It describes varying kinds and degrees of human deprivation in society. Poverty is a complex problem because there are many human problem to be found in the inter-disciplinary literature on the subject, each stressing a given kind or degree of deprivation. However, the concept of poverty does not lend itself to any precise definition. There is currently no single index of poverty that is universally accepted. While some talk of poverty in quantitative terms, that is, in terms of calorie intake per day or in terms of a given level of income, others discuss it in qualitative terms, that is in terms of the inability of certain people in society to attain a given economic, cultural, social or other levels. (Muzaale 1987; Onuaha 1995, Abiodun 1998).

Defining poverty in terms of income in a society like Nigeria is grossly inadequate since the economy is not completely monetized. Similarly, there is a problem in assessing the ascertaining the calorie intake need of the poor when compared to the rich. Hence, the qualitative definition of poverty also lacks precision (Abiodun 1993:3). Some scholars have discussed poverty in absolute and others in relative terms. Muzaale (1987:78) and Abiodun (1998:3) have noted that absolute poverty is human deprivation in its extreme and most obvious forms. It refers to a lack, or deficient supply if the basic necessities of human life such as food, safe drinking waters, housing, clothing and health care. A person is said to be in absolute poverty if he or his family cannot supply these basic needs for him. This is a (psychological) definition of poverty. People in absolute poverty suffer from chronic mal-nutrition and are chronically sick; they live in squalor; they are poorly clothed; they lack access to health care, educational facilities and usually live short lives. Rural poverty in Nigeria and most countries in Africa are largely covered by this definition. This takes us to the statement of problem for this study.

### **Statement of Problem**

The problem of poverty is a universal phenomenon as our definition of the concept has indicated in the previous discussion. Generally poverty in Nigeria is a situational syndrome in which the following hardships are combined namely, malnutrition, precarious housing conditions, low educational levels, bad sanitary conditions, unstable participation in the production system, inaccessibility to health care services and major decisions affecting ones welfare and possible adherence to a particular scale of value different to some extent from that held by the rest of the society.

### **Discussions on the Poor**

The poor in Nigeria are found in every group or class and profession. One thing that is common among them is that they are powerless. This means that they do not have access to 'state power'. In Nigeria, where the state is the greatest employer and controller of all major decisions affecting individual welfare, lack of access to state power means poverty. The poor in Nigeria therefore are not only those

who neither own nor control the means of production, but those who do not have access to state power. It is pertinent to recognize the fact that access to state power tends to be the shortest route to success in Nigerian society. The point to be noted here is that even if one owns and controls the means of production in Nigeria without having access to state power, one cannot make it to the top of one's profession. The poor in Nigeria have been excluded not only from the corridors of power, decision making and distribution of the wealth of the nation, but from participating and shaping the political and economic future of their country (Onuha 1995:52).

In the political sphere the poor are considered as objects, rather than subjects of politics. Their opinions and suggestions are never sought on crucial issues of who gets what, how and when. They never participate in the formation of the political parties. Constitution Drafting Committees, Federal Executive Councils and the Nigerian Constitutional Conference (Nnoli 1984:201). In the economic and social spheres the severe socio-economic crisis emanating from this mismanagement of the national economy by the elite in power led to the introduction of Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) which only increased the morbidity and mortality rates of the poor in Nigeria. Today the poor are excluded not only from politics, but from access to decent housing, adequate health care facilities decent meals, educational facilities etc. (Onuoha 1995; The World Bank 1995). All of these factors have contributed to and have worsened the helplessness and powerlessness of this vulnerable group of people. These and other related issues which have compounded the poverty situation of most people in rural Nigeria during the 21<sup>st</sup> century will constitute the focus of our discussions in this paper. Starting with causal analysis of poverty, the paper will consider a number of factors that have contributed to rural poverty in the country.

## **Causes of Poverty**

There is a growing consensus among rural development analyst in the Third World that rural poverty is worsening despite decades of rural development efforts, primarily because such efforts have been founded on poorly conceived causal models. The guiding models of these development efforts particularly in Nigeria and in Africa in general have tended to be single factor explanations of a highly complex problem and have tended to ignore such important variable as the historical, social, national and international context in which poverty and underdevelopment have thrived (Townsend, 1962; Ekong, 1984). It is the intention of this paper to begin this causal analysis by examining briefly the historical context of the rural development economies of Nigeria.

Before the advent of colonial rule in Africa, the rural economies operated independently of the pressures of the international economy and modern state economy. In such independent indigenous economies, families operated as autonomous self-sufficient units. Questions concerning access to productive assets, of production and distribution of output and disposal of surplus production were virtually matters for family decision. Although the pre-colonial economies often suffered from natural disasters such as drought and floods. But the mutual social support systems at the local level did provided reliable safety-net except where such disaster uniformly affected whole communities. Even then, there existed inter-community institutionalized voluntary exchange relationship to cover such contingencies (Rein, 1970; Bibangambah, 1985; Muzaala, 1987).

However, during colonial era the express purpose of colonial administrations was to organize the extraction of the fruits of native labor and natural resources for export as raw materials for the

manufacturing industries of the metro pole countries. This explains why modern sector of most African economy including Nigeria consisted of mining and agricultural production for export which were established together with networks of marketing boards and export taxes. This situation led to the emergence of a dual economies not only in Nigeria but throughout Africa in which subsistence economies co-existed with modern export enclaves in a parasitical relationship. Modern export enclaves developed at the expense of the traditional subsistence sector. Similarly in Nigeria before political independence and prior to the discovery and export of crude oil, agriculture was the backbone of the economy and yielded the bulk of the nation's foreign exchange. The discovery and export of crude oil led to rapid expansion of commercial activities. The crude oil exports increased the revenue available to the government and resulted in an enormous influx of foreign exchange earnings (Ekpenyong,1984:7).

Agriculture gradually ceased to be of export value since the money accruing from crude oil sales was enough to pay for import bills. The decline of agriculture gave rise to the promotion of import substitution industrialization and expansion of manufacturing activities which culminated in the economic crisis of the country as a result of contradictions. In other words, the root cause of the Nigerian economic crisis could be traced to the lopsided approach of the past colonial developmental path which the elite in power had followed. The foundations of this path to development began in 1945's when the state under colonial rule sought and had close agreement with foreign capital to promote import substitution industrialization using peasant surplus to finance the importation of the inputs necessary for growth and expansion of manufacturing activities. This model was carried over into the post-colonial period. Up to the end of 1960's agricultural surplus accruing primarily from peasant cash crop production continued to provide the foreign exchange for sustaining manufacturing activities (Peterson,1982; Griffin and Khan,1978).

However, as the post-colonial import-substitution industrialization process developed, it became clear that its sustainability depended on the ability of the state to earn sufficient foreign exchange to meet its needs, namely, raw materials, spare parts and machinery. These needs grew as the manufacturing sector expanded at the expense of the agricultural sector. The strong dependence of the Nigeria import-substitution industrial sector on external inputs had serious repercussion for the Nigerian economy. Consequently, the collapse of the world oil market prices which resulted in drastic fall in Nigeria's oil earnings triggered a major crisis in industries and the rest of the Nigerian economy (Ekpenyong,1992; Abiodun,1995).

The down turn in the economy led to the introduction of the Structural Adjustment Program in 1986. The increase in fuel price by more than 30% in 1994 further compounded the problems of the poor since such actions has had serious spill-over implications throughout the Nigerian economy. Life became more difficult for everyone especially the poor. The question then was, which strategy should we adopt should it be poverty alleviation?

## **Poverty Alleviation**

Poverty alleviation has been slow in developing nations such as Nigeria, and most countries in Africa because of the role of external power actors such as the World Bank and other 'aid' donors. A number of institutions, agencies and program established to alleviate poverty such as National Directorate of Employment (NDE), Directorate for Food, Roads and Rural Infrastructure (DFRRI), Better Life and Family Support Program (FSP) have not been able to meet the enormous demands of the population,

People and Community Banks are typical examples. Instead of alleviating poverty, they mopped up the little resources of the poor only to go distress leaving the poor depositors in more difficult financial situations. The World Bank and associate agencies have been part of the poverty problem. Their Structural Adjustment Program, (SAP), relieve and poverty alleviation programs have only succeeded in diverting the attention of the poor from the real causes of poverty and the need to find real solution to them (World Bank, 1975; Abasiokong, 1994, 1994; Abiodun, 1998).

Besides the role of external powerful agents; Ekong (1991:23) noted that the cost of effecting development is often extremely disproportional when recurrent expenditures are compared with real capital expenditures (this refers to that aspect of the expenditure that actually goes to assist in the intended rural development). He further pointed out the role which nature could play in inhibiting the progress of poverty alleviation. In many developing nations there is hardly any clear policy objectives in place to take care of the anticipation and mitigation of disasters caused by factors such as drought, fire, flood, erosion, locust infestation, epidemic disease etc. they tend to rely on post factor remedies thereby contributing to fluctuations in food supplies to man and animals. Also, instability of government and its parastatals is another crucial factor. This is because government of most developing nations have become notable for their instability. In such situation, when development policies change suddenly with regimes, it become difficult if not impossible for rural development and poverty alleviation to be implemented effectively. Also, dept burden in developing nations such as Nigeria's experience and the accompanying IMF and World Bank's prescriptions for economic recovery have contributed in retarding poverty alleviation and rural development efforts in most third world countries (Aziz, 1978; Roling and DeZeeuw, 1983; Leagans, 1974; Ekong, 1991).

## **Implication**

One implication of this study in support for rural development is the fact that most inhabitants of Nigeria live in the rural areas. They derive their livelihood form rural agricultural produce. This means that when serious efforts are made by government to develop the rural area such effort will not only reduce poverty, but will contribute greatly in checking rural/urban migration. But since measures of alleviating poverty are matters of political expediency such measure as raising the living standard of the rural poor have not met with success. On the other hand, measures designed to improve the living conditions of the under privileged people in the rural community can be supported on the ground of a voluntary contribution to crime control and public order in the community. (Inyang, 1996).

Despite efforts of many successive governments towards agrarian reform and rural development, there has been widening growth disparities, and a significant proportion of the country's rural population still experience the frightening realities of absolute poverty. Differences in the degree of poverty within the rural population also tends to widen because the little improvement so far achieved with regard to rural development facilities expense of small farmers, land-lords, agricultural laborers and the rest of the rural poor. This unequal development of different segments of the rural population have often led to the situation where the rural poor masses have to depend upon a few rich persons for access to resources necessary for their survival. This extreme form of dependent relationship not only bring about a polarization of relations between different groups and thereby facilitates the exploitation of the poor by the rich, but it also undermines the development of the productive capabilities of the poor.

It is pertinent to point out that rural development can hardly be achieved as long as the majority of the

rural population continues to remain unproductive and under-developed and the traditional social support from extended family being rapidly weakened on account of rural/urban migration (World Bank, 1991). It should also be noted that rural populations are characterized by a predominance of young children who are not producing members of the families. This means that high dependency ratio are presenting a real constraint to progress. While they do not produce, young children need to be fed, they need education and health care services. For this reason, a high dependency ratio, as influenced by the number of very young children, the aged and other unemployables can retard development and contribute to continued rural poverty. Urgent action is therefore needed to alleviate poverty among the rural population. Failure to acknowledge this facts and effectively ameliorate the suffering of the rural masses could become a potential source of civil discontent leading to unexpected public disorder.

## **Conclusion and Recommendation**

Poverty and rural development are important issues in the social and economic development in Nigeria. However, there is no new formula to be prescribed as the most acceptable for tackling poverty and rural development. Most likely a number of useful suggestions have been made in various literature and conferences held around the universe. The problem as Ekong (1991) and most social science scholars have noted is that of adoption and implementation of these useful and brilliant suggestions. Nigeria is a nation with large population of rural poor. Sustainable poverty reduction is the overall objective of this paper. Since development is about people and whether their lives are getting better, the fight against rural poverty is therefore a national responsibility.

Findings in this paper have shown that for poverty reduction to take place the appropriate strategy to deal with the problem of poverty is one that will have a permanent effect. The starting point should focus on the awareness of people to the real cause of poverty; the need to alleviate it and how to go about it should serve as the beginning of any practical action. This should not be restricted to classroom lecturers and academic conferences, only but, the NGO, that is Non Governmental Organization could act under other local agencies to articulate the awareness of the rural population to the realities of their situation. The awareness campaign is necessary because many poor people do not understand the social dynamic that could assist them to exit from poverty. They should therefore be made to recognize their own potentialities and to have confidence in their own abilities to overcome the poverty syndrome. Basically, the establishment of an appropriate instrumentality for the positive mobilization, education and concretization of all segments of the nation's population towards recovery and the development of a new social and political order. Closely linked to the above point, is the organization of the of the rural population particular for co-operative activities commensurate with the prevailing levels of technology.

The institution of a drastic land reform measure to ensure equitable distribution or redistribution of land and land resources particularly in areas where gross inequalities in land ownership existed. The adopted and implementation of the concept of basic needs as the main aim of rural development policy. Also, the laying of infrastructures such as road, water, electricity, health care, housing, education, food production and distribution are basic to the realization of genuine rural development efforts.

The diversification of rural economic activities to ensure increased productivity in the society. This means that rural development cannot be regarded and implemented only as agricultural development projects. Rather, other economic activities such as transportation, retailed trade, industrialization services, etc, must be encouraged. The promotion of social development policies particularly by way of

the expansion of educational employment and health facilities, elimination of oppression and exploitation by middle-men and landlords and the creation of a generally positive social structure which will ensure dignity and self-respect to all members of the society.

The concerted attempt to integrate the rural areas into the rest of the economy by evolving a just theory of and framework for the distribution of wealth protects the legitimate interests of the rural population. The establishment of a monitoring mechanism at the grassroots level by the people to act as control. When all these suggestions and recommendations are implemented, there is strong belief that sustainable development and a genuine reduction of poverty among rural/urban population in Nigeria could be achieved during the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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VN:R\_U [1.9.11\_1134]