

A Critical Appraisal Of Rural Poverty in Nigeria

Ugomma Ebirim

Abstract

This paper tried to look at the meaning of poverty, who the poor is, the incidence of poverty as reported by United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) from 1980 – 1996, causes, effects of rural poverty and proffered some suggestions. The paper perceived an association between rural poverty and lack of development. The rural people have been marginalized and kept off development efforts, neither contributing to national development nor benefiting from it. Rural poverty is a very serious social, economic, health, education problem etc, rural poverty does not seem to have received appropriate attention from the Nigerian government for practical solution. Even if there have been meaningful efforts, implementation strategies have not been favourable. Many recommendations ranging from employment opportunities, adequate assets were made.

Introduction

It will be difficult to appreciate the stark realities of rural poverty without understanding poverty per se. Poverty is a social problem which precise and universally acceptable definition. It is relative and its meaning depends on the social and economic setting of respective societies. Poverty according to Okafor (2004) is an abject state of being in which an individual is incapable of utilizing resources around him to improve himself economically, socially, politically or otherwise. It could be due to lack of opportunity for education which is basic to human development.

Poverty entails the absence of the basic requirements essential for the survival, and to an extent the comfort of man. Poverty is hunger and starvation. It is squalor and it is the non-availability of basic medicine. The poor are those who do not enjoy the minimum standard of living consistent with human dignity, those families whose total earnings are insufficient to meet minimum necessities for the maintenance of mere physical efficiency. The person affected by poverty will be in a condition in which basic needs of food, shelter, water and health can hardly be met even at a minimum level required for survival. Poverty therefore should be viewed as a state of want, need and deprivation (Soludo, 2004).

In the rural areas, rural dwellers are under-served in terms of social and economic activities like welfare and other forms of reforms such as trade and industry; electricity and pipe borne water. Absence of these make them more prone to poverty (Olaitan, Ali, Onyemachi & Nwachukwu, 2000).

In an economic sense, poverty is regarded as a state of chronic insufficiency, economic inequality, a condition of want, scarcity, a dependence on others for every necessity of life. However, poverty as it exists in the Nigerian society and developing

countries are not just a matter of low income alone, it means much more than that. People may be seen as being poor even if they are assured of the minimum required for physical survival. Consequently, poverty line is now viewed not as a minimum required for subsistence, but as a minimum level of health and decency. Thus, in addition to being a condition of want, deprivation, grossly low income and inadequacy, poverty also connotes generally very poor level of living, inaccessibility of social, infrastructural and educational facilities from which people can benefit for their individual or collective development (Clausen, 1985:8).

In Nigeria, while a segment of the population live in affluence, a large proportion live in penury; suffer from malnutrition, lives in deplorable houses and environment. The greatest proportion of Nigerians live in the rural areas; they include small-scale farmers, carpenters etc. There is no doubt that these group of people are the most hit by HIV/AIDS and other terminal diseases resulting from ignorance and absolute lack of awareness.

Oreh (2008) was of the view that the rural people are about the most deprived of all Nigerians. She believed that they have the least access to soft and micro loans, agricultural inputs, housing substandard and their life expectancy is low. The rural poor is therefore, that segment of the rural population who find themselves under the above conditions.

The pathetic condition of rural poor is reflected by the fact that fifty (50) years after attainment of independence, millions of Nigerians in the rural areas trek several kilometres every day in search of good drinking water, etc. Some even collect and store flood water during the raining season for use. Due to the non-availability of clean water, thousands of such rural Nigerians are always victims of water-borne diseases. People, who have not stayed in the rural areas for a reasonable time and interacted well with the rural poor, will not appreciate the realities of the abhorable nature of rural poverty. Visiting the rural areas in the dry season and seeing houses cited close to the roads, are not enough yardsticks to measure the hopelessness of the rural dweller neither are the brief visits of government officials allow for meaningful appraisal of the situation in the rural areas. A visit to the interior of the rural areas like Umukabia the home of the former INEC Chairman, Nzerem, Ikpem, Umuofeke and Agbaja etc all in Ehime-Mbano in Imo State during the raining season will reveal the hopelessness of the condition of the rural poor. Among the rural dwellers are the aged, widow/widowers, some of whom have no children to look after them. They also include those who have no assets, those who sold off their lands and are heavily indebted to other people, those who are too weak and incapable of getting one good meal for two days or more (Oreh, 2006).

A national data provided by UNDP (2004) reveal that the incidence of poverty increased sharply both between 1950 and 1985, 1992 and 1996. However, according to that the proportion of people living in poverty rose from 28.1% in 1980 to 46.3% in 1995 but dropped to 42.7% in 1985 before rising to 65.6% in 1996. This translated to 17.7 million poor people in 1980 and 34.7 million poor people in 1985. Despite the drop in poverty level in 1992, the population in poverty was about 5 million higher than 1985 figure. By 1996, the population in poverty had increased sharply to 67.1 million. Poverty according to the report is more prevalent in rural areas compared to urban areas. Poverty according to the report is more prevalent in rural areas compared to urban areas. Rural poverty which increased by 22 percent points over the period of 1980 – 1985, decreased slightly during the 1985 – 1992, but soared in the following four-year period 1992 – 1996. In 1980 the proportion of poor people in rural areas was 29.3%; it rose to 51.4% in 1985 and fell to 46.1% in 1992.

However, by 1996, the rural population in poverty had increased to 69.8%. In urban areas, poverty rose between 1980 and 1985, remained at about the same level between 1985 and 1992 and rose again between 1992 and 1996. The proportion of poor people rose from 17.6% in 1980 to 37.8% in 1985, 37.5% in 1992 and 55.2% in 1996. These figures as indicated by the report show that the gains of the economic measures of 1996 to 1992 went more to the rural people than to the urban populace.

A survey carried out by the Nigerian Institute of Social Economic Research (NISER) and Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) (2004) confirms that rural areas gained more during the early periods of the Structural Adjustment Programmes, although there was an increase in poverty after this period. On the whole, between 1980 – 1996, rural poverty was higher than urban poverty. As a matter of reality, a nation's first goal must be to end poverty and satisfy the most pressing needs of all her citizenry in a way that will not jeopardize the opportunity for future generations to meet the same objectives. The purpose of this paper therefore, is to critically appraise rural poverty in Nigeria.

Causes of Poverty

The factors responsible for rural poverty are many and sometimes interact in a complex way to perpetuate poverty among the rural poor. These include colonial/political, economic, psychological, government, natural disasters, social stratification, biological/health factors. Some of these causal factors, also turn out to be consequences of rural poverty.

Colonial and Political Factors

It is necessary to begin by saying that the sharp distinction between the urban and rural areas is traceable to the British colonialists who influenced the political and economic structure of Nigeria. Although the living conditions in the pre-colonial traditional society are not comparable to the civilized standards of present-day society, people lived well in their traditional communities in the past. They did not experience the helplessness which rural poverty has brought upon the contemporary rural poor, because at that time, they lived communally.

On arrival, the colonialists settled down in what was regarded as European quarters, from where they pursued their trade and commercial objective which was the extraction and transfer of agricultural and mineral products from the rural area to overseas to serve the industrial raw materials for European industries. They equipped themselves with basic needs and infrastructures such as food, pipe-borne water, good residential buildings, electricity, hospitals, access roads and means of transportation. Any area they settled, soon acquired an urban status. As a matter of deliberate policy, rural areas were neglected for most of the years between 1900 and 1960. Community development both in theory and practice were not a priority of the colonial authorities. The role in the development of education was very marginal as was also in other aspects of social and economic development such as roads, agriculture, etc.

The exploitation of the rural poor and indeed the aggravation of rural poverty therefore, dated back to the advent of colonialists. The extension of basic infrastructural facilities to the rural areas (if any) was only undertaken when it served their exploitative interest and long-term goals of the colonial power.

It was expected that by the independence, the urban-rural dichotomy would be broken by Nigerian politicians who look over the leadership mantle from then. Unfortunately, they preferred the sustenance of the status quo and the enhancement of the dichotomy and social inequalities to the disadvantage of the rural poor. The emergent Nigerian elites saw themselves as constituting a class and also saw their position as that of the masters servant or rich-poor relationship with the Nigerian society and fail to embark on even progressive development of both areas (Anyanwu, 1985). The conservative posture of the neo-colonialists has ensured sustained social stratification based on social economic status which reflects a continuum from extremes of wealth to the extremes of poverty – a development which conditioned the poor to a lot of disadvantaged (Garuba, 2004:12-14).

Economic Factors

The economic factor is easily the strongest factor responsible for rural poverty. In view of its power of exchange, money can purchase a person's needs or services. With money one can build a good house, afford good food, obtain good medical attention, get good education etc. Rural dwellers who are predominantly farmers etc depend on their agricultural activities as their source of generating income. Unfortunately, most of these people are uneducated, unexposed and ill equipped to launch their agricultural activities into viable commercial ventures. Unfortunately, not much economic activities take place in the rural areas. The rural markets hold every forth or eight days and the rural dwellers depend on the city dwellers who rush in from urban areas to buy off the agricultural products (Ezeorah, 2000).

Biological/Health/Death Factors

For some rural dwellers, their poor living condition is as a result of physical or genetic defects such as blindness, paralysis, poor medication; physical deformity, leprosy etc are capable of causing rural poverty as well as being the effects of rural poverty to the rural poor.

Death may in fact, pose a greater threat. This is because it will suddenly terminate the life of the breadwinner on whom other members of the family depend on for survival. By such a sudden twist, children could drop out of school, a man could become a helpless widower and a woman, a widow. The entire living condition of the family could fall drastically.

Natural Disasters

Since rural dwellers thrive mostly on subsistence farming, natural disasters such as draught, extreme heavy rainfall, bush burning, landslides, erosion, river overflow, epidemics, post invasion etc and adversely affect the agricultural efforts of rural areas. In the South-Eastern parts of Nigeria, farmlands have been swept off or displaced by erosion and landslides. The cases of Nanka and Agulu in Anambra State, Isikweabor and Arochukwu in Abia State are well known. These loses usually suffered are sometimes inestimable and hard to recover from. So are the effects of draught during which farm plants and crops are burnt up leaving the rural poor much poorer than before.

Government's Insensitivity/Bad Policy and Poor Policy Implementation

Government's insensitivity to the needs of the poor, bad policy, poor policy implementation and inability to evenly develop the urban and rural areas, contribute to poor standard of living in the rural areas was not taken seriously by the Nigerian rulers. Rural areas were probably only seen as a home for farmers.

A new view of rural development has however emerged. Rural development now equated with the transformation of social and economic structures, educational institutions, political and religious processes in the rural areas. Government officials and policy makers have exhibited lack of perception and appreciation of the nature and extend of rural poverty. Visits to the rural areas are normally published for cheap political gains. During such visits, they are welcomed by school children with flags lining up the road. At every stop, they are surrounded by local chieftains and after being entertained in traditional dances and gala nights, they rush off without getting good idea of the true condition of the rural dwellers. The obvious consequences are that policies that are unfavourable to development and improvement of life in the rural areas are formulated. Even when favourable ones are formulated, proper implementation of such policies becomes a problem. The poverty alleviation programme of the present government is a common example. The new conditions for getting land are unfavourable to the poor. Though government claims to be giving loans from the banks, the conditions tied to it make it impossible for poor rural dwellers or even jobless graduates to obtain. The rural dwellers continue to lack basic facilities, industries and commercial incentives.

Illiteracy/Lack of Education

The educational system has in fact come to occupy a strategic position as the central determinant of the economic, political, social and cultural character of a society. The importance of education in human development and the process of modernization is unquestionable. Education here means both general education and specialized education and training for a specific purpose in the process of socio-economic development. Production increase requires new techniques and increased investment. New techniques are comprehended through learning processes and education while increased investment means the creation of new power supplies that work, building of more factories, plants and industries, more efficient information communication technologies, development of natural resources and most importantly, the training of personnel who will in turn be able to produce more.

Just like general education and specialized education and training, literacy establishes the conditions for growth and development by helping one understand and apply new techniques as well as appreciate modernization process. On the other hand, illiteracy is one of the greatest handicaps of the rural dwellers. Unfortunately, Nigeria has a problem of both low level of education and literacy rate among the rural poor. Illiteracy impedes efforts to eradicate ignorance and promote the uptake of innovations. The illiterates are unable to appreciate and apply new production techniques, to obtain and use banks loans as one of the options open to them for raising capital for commercial ventures. Although ignorance, illiteracy and lack of education cause rural poverty, they are also consequences of rural poverty.

Effects of Rural Poverty

The effects of rural poverty are of economic, social/educational, health and psychological.

Economic Effects of Rural Poor

The nature of rural poverty itself – a condition in which one lacks good food, shelter, water, assets, cash, education, medical attention and other infrastructural facilities beget and perpetuate rural poverty. The fact is that since the rural people live at a subsistence level, they do not have enough, let alone the extra-funds to cope with heavy domestic and social responsibilities which should enhance their general wellbeing and those of their children.

They cannot improve on their own of farming nor can they buy or hire mechanized tools – bulldozers, mowers and harvesters for increased output. Generally, the farmers, fishermen etc cannot afford to pay or buy labour and other necessities to increase output. They are unable to raise loans and in fact may be unable to pay back even if they receive any since they are likely to use it to settle accumulated debts and needs. Rural poverty leads to further improvement and perpetuation of poverty. A poor family or individual has a high probability of staying poor. Poor parents have a greater likelihood of not giving their children the opportunity (in a capitalist society) for better health and education need to improve their lots. The cruel legacy of poverty is thus passed from parent to children (Ebirim, 2008).

Medical Effects

These include deteriorating physical and health condition. A good medication costs money which the poor rural dwellers do not have. They are unable therefore to give themselves good medication. They tend to shy away from the hospitals, indulge in self-medication and prefer traditional doctors. Some pregnant women still prefer herbalists to antenatal check-ups which lead to high mortality rate. They do not eat balanced diets and therefore suffer malnutrition, vulnerable to disease etc.

Rural poverty leads to inadequate post-natal medical attention until the recent introduction of Expanded Programme on Immunization. Very few mothers could afford to take preventive medical measures for themselves and their children. The rural poor are often victims of water and air-borne diseases such as diarrhoea, guinea worm, cholera, cerebra-spinal meningitis etc. Lack of good and urgent medical attention also leads to death and may be responsible for frequent early deaths and low life expectancy – a position that is consistent with the view that in Sub-Saharan Africa as a whole, life expectancy at birth is 49 years (Ume, 2004).

Social/Educational Effects

The social and educational effects of rural poverty include lack of formal education, very low level of education, unemployment, population explosion, high bride price, high rate of crime and corruption. Lack of education limits the extent to which the rural poor can cope with innovations, Information Communication Technologies (ICT) which can lead to improvement in the rural life and standard. Ignorance of new approaches and techniques and refusal to apply new inputs make it impossible to improve beyond subsistence.

Prior to the prevailing economic hardship which has led to the family planning campaign, most rural dwellers were ignorant of the need for and benefit of family planning. They held strongly to the Biblical injunction to increase and multiply to produce offspring beyond their abilities. Armed robbery, kidnapping, and other criminal activities are also dangerous consequences. Lack of job openings which lead to unemployment can be the major cause of youth restiveness in many parts of Nigeria (Adeniyi, 1983).

The social consequences may be incomplete without mentioning high bride price in some parts of Igbo-land. Those doing it are doing so largely due to poverty. They are their daughters as good and viable sources of making money through outrageously high prices.

Psychological Effects

The psychological effects of rural poverty include frustration, loss of confidence in the system and oneself, depression, juvenile delinquency, unmotivatedness and poor academic performance. Perhaps the most potent of effects is frustration which sets in when one's effort to meet one's needs is blocked.

Conclusion and Way Forward

To recapitulate, within the limits of available space, this paper has discussed rural poverty in every ramification, the incidence of poverty in Nigeria from 1980 – 1996, causes and effects of rural poverty on the rural dwellers. The paper perceived an association between rural poverty and lack of development in the rural areas. In Nigeria, the rural people have been marginalized and kept off development efforts, neither contributing to national development nor benefiting from it. Although it is a very serious social problem, rural poverty does not seem to have received appropriate attention from the Nigerian government for practical solutions.

The following suggestions are therefore proffered:

1. More access to employment opportunities should be provided by all arms of government.
2. Adequate physical assets, such as land and capital and minimal access to by the poor (especially women) to credit even on a small scale should be made available to them by all the three tiers of government.
3. Development should be spread evenly to both the urban and rural areas by enhancing the means of supporting rural development by donor agencies and private bodies.
4. More efforts should be made towards the improvement of rural roads to the markets where the poor can sell their goods and services by the ministry of works.
5. Investment of human capital should be improved upon for sustainable economic development.
6. Destruction of natural resources leading to environmental degradation and reduced productivity should be seriously controlled or eradicated especially in the Niger-Delta area.
7. Provision of assistance for those living in the margin and those victimized by disasters should be of paramount importance to the government.

8. Those living in the rural areas should participate in designing, implementing and monitoring development programmes concerning them etc.

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