

Poverty Alleviation: The Key To Sustainable Development In Nigeria

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Abstract

Poverty as a concept has continued to present itself as a threat to the socio-economic life of the nation, Nigeria, right from the olden days till date. This has given a leeway to various brands of crimes in our nation especially among the youths and the unemployed who are the worst hit. Almost every military and civilian administration in the country, has delved into this concept by introducing a proposal for the alleviation of poverty among our citizens. Though, some of these poverty alleviation programmes did not in any way have the interest of the impoverished and underdeveloped masses at heart. They were more or less a means of enriching themselves.

This paper however is focused on how to achieve the much desired sustainable development in Nigeria, via the introduction of some more enduring poverty alleviation programmes by the government, as there cannot be sustainable development infrastructural or mentally while the people are greatly mal nourished, underdeveloped and economically downgraded. This paper believes that the sustainable development for the entire country will be achieved, when the different individuals would have been alleviated from poverty at least, or when all the vestiges of poverty would have been totally eradicated. This will entail the government coming in between the citizens and poverty, by developing some sincere and well grounded, systematic and sustainable projects that will help in the reduction of the number of the unemployed and underemployed Nigerian youths such as the technical and vocational education which will raise more job creators than job seekers, hence, the sustainable development via poverty alleviation. We will conclude here that there is no alternative to self employment, which the government and the big business multinationals should create an enabling environment for. Agriculture which was the mainstay of Nigerian economy before the oil discovery and exploration. Should as a matter of fact be revisited, for

poverty to be tackled. we should all contribute our individual and group quotas towards the realization of this much cherished sustainable development in Nigeria.

Introduction

Development in Nigeria seems non sustainable, due to the fact that the yearnings of the people have not been practically addressed. The nation is rich both in human and material resources, especially as we are endowed with minerals like oil, tin and columbite, iron and steel, hides and skin, timber, to mention but a few, one becomes embarrassed when ever on an overseas trip, upon realizing that not many countries of the earth have up to half of the number of solid and oil minerals that Nigeria has, yet our economy is nothing to write home about, our currency is often depreciated and devalued by that of many other countries that are less than Nigeria both in size, population and manpower. The foreign investment fall because, not only that our economy is not stable, but also that they are not sure of the security of their lives and property. This insecurity which ranges from burglary, armed robbery, to kidnapping are having sway over us all, lately because the economy is harsh on the citizens and that the people themselves are lazy, virtually every Nigerian goes to school with the aim of securing the white collar job, otherwise called the white man's job. The tendency is there for us to forget our traditional entrepreneurial wit, which was the mainstay of our economy prior to the coming of the white man, our colonial overlords. The citizens make matters worse in the area of job creation and employment unlike in the past when our forebears depended on palm oil, cocoa, groundnut and cattle rearing for survival.

The Meaning of Poverty

The oxford advanced learners dictionary, defines poverty as "the state of being poor". The term poverty has so many meanings to so many people, depending on the angle from which they consider it. One who has a low mental state, could be said to be mentally poor, so it is for the intellectually down trodden and all, but for the purpose of this paper, we shall concern ourselves with the consideration of poverty as a holistic phenomenon which cuts across the financial, educational, spiritual and mental facets of the society. 'poverty is described as lack of basic necessities to lead an acceptable standard of living conditions for the society over lives"² one who is poor in this context cannot afford food. Shelter, mobility, clothing, good health care and other amenities that are necessary for good and enjoyable life here on earth. There is poverty when there is competition on a very limited source of income, when the leaders are not willing to evenly distribute the wealth of a nation to all and sundry. Poverty is a form of marginalization or alienation against a person or people by themselves or other people in the society. Those who are poor have a different kind of life style, which is often found in the Ghetto or slums, they live and die at the mercy of the society. Those who are poor are often aggressive, restive and struggle through life not being sure of what tomorrow will bring, to the

extent, that when their condition change for good, their mindset about poverty still manifests in their day to day life. The effect of poverty is not just on the individuals who may be the Labourers as against the rich capitalists or the serfs as opposed to the feudal lords or the slaves, contrary to the masters. The people who perpetuate poverty are also indirectly affected by the menace of poverty in a nation and then, the rich will also cry. When there is a serious ravaging poverty in a nation, the government is also in trouble. Attahiru, noted that,

...In the sub-Saharan African countries, which include Nigeria. In these countries, abject poverty has increased, widened, deepened and has become ramified, engulfing and overwhelming majority of the population. It seems to have defied solution, in spite of the massive investment of resources and targeted programs to deal with it. Hence, it has become acute and chronic and it has been contributing significantly to the underdevelopment, generalized insecurity and instability in these countries.³

Many Nigerian citizens are not comfortable today in their homes, the rich and the political class inclusive, largely because the poor people are awake. We now hear of kidnapping, bribery, arson and many other brands of economic crimes. The people, who are frustrated by the harsh economic status in the nation, turn to frustrate others, who may be comfortable. It is on record that, “as much as 70% of Nigerian are said to be living in poverty that is, earning an income of less than the equivalent of one US dollar a day”.⁴ This is for those who have a job at all, many are jobless, beggars, who run the streets and some destitute homes in Nigeria.

In Nigeria, there is social inequality, the gap between the highest and the lowest income earners in any given establishment is too far for instance, the political class that does not constitute up to 0.014 percent of the entire population of the country, take much more money than the other citizens who are on the employ of the state; this has given rise to some civil disobedience such as the strike or industrial action, which is the deliberate withdrawal of labour or services by the labourers, when they feel that the condition of service is no longer favourable to both parties, of the employed and the employer. This strike action is often the last resort by the workers or labourers.

When we talk of poverty eradication, we are also concerned with national poverty which is indicted on the weaker nations by the stronger ones. It is clear that in this age of globalization, most of the third world countries otherwise known as developing countries are finding it extremely difficult to develop both economically and politically, owing to the very fact that we cannot dance more than the drummers beat the drum. In this global village, some are gaining while others are losing. The African countries for instance, are very far from their European and American counterparts, and some other developed Asian countries like China, Japan and even India;

Virtually every African Country is trapped in the vicious circle of endemic poverty, low income, low saving. Low investment and low output. This problem of underdevelopment results in ever exelling standards of living and ever present misery for a majority of the people.⁵

Poverty can be said to be the opposite of prosperity. In a nation where there is no remarkable prosperity, the reason is that they are poor, which could mean mental poverty, political poverty or economic poverty. The global south which compromises about two third of the world population, does not control more than one quarter of the world's wealth, that's to say that they are poor, especially when compared with, "the north", which comprise Europe, North America and Japan, contains about one third of human kind and owns about three quarters of the worlds wealth. The south comprises about two thirds of the human population and owns about a quarter of the world's wealth⁶. The word prosperity which is a negation of poverty should be conceived as a holistic term, which comprises spiritual, moral, intellectual and material wellbeing. It is true that when ever people talk of poverty, what readily comes to mind is material poverty and vice versa when prosperity is mentioned, but we are concerned with the fact that for there to be material poverty, it must have been necessitated by mental, intellectual and moral porousness. The problem of the African man and the Nigerian in particular, is not that God has not endowed us with the requisite human and material resources with which to better the society, but that we have lost the mental articulation of how to harness these resources and make our people rich. How can one explain the fact that in Nigeria, we have agriculture, crude oil, other minerals, like tin and columbine, iron and steal, coal, hides and skin, lime stone, to mention but a few, bout our people still import these materials, the worst is that we export the raw materials and later go to import the finished products, and pay taxes and import duties son them. The explanation is simple. Ours is a poverty of the mind, porosity of experience consumer mentality and lack of preservation and maintenance culture. An average Nigeria would prefer the used of clothes of the white man to the new one that was made in Aba or elsewhere in the country, even when it is dawn on us that most of the Nigerian importers do not mean well for our country, as they ask their producers to reduce the quality of the goods they are producing for Nigerian markets either to make maximum profit or to present the Nigerians with the goods that will not stand the test of time.

Manifestations of poverty:

There are different manifestations of poverty among the people, these are visible signs of a poor nation, the so called rich men in a poor society may have their cash in millions and billions, but once these visible signs of poverty are noticed, the nation is said to be a poor one indeed, some of these signs of poverty which are prevalent in Nigeria are as follows.

1) Hunger

In Africa generally, it is said that, “one out of every three Africans does not get enough to eat. A study covering the period 1988 – 90 showed that some 168 million Africans were the victims of chronic hunger”⁷, the situation is more precarious today, as the population is on the increase and the more educated people become, the tendency to leave agriculture in search of white collar job. Even the white collar job on its own does not solve the problem of hunger, for it more or less enslave the people, before the advent of the white man and his civil service, there was nothing like unemployment and hunger was reduced to the barest minimum. The haves took care of the have-nots. Civil service today creates laxity and makes people not to be entrepreneurial but lazy, waiting to be paid at the end of the month. He who employs people is always better than the employed. Those who employ people, indirectly enslave them, you work for some one or a system, only to be told that you are no more useful at sixty or sixty five as the case may be, then it will be too late for you to start all over again to employ yourself and keep life going. The pension they give, if any cannot solve your financial needs, which the salary could not. Many people have become very retched by starting a business with the gratuity paid to them after working for another person for 35 years, but it does not work out for them. How does it sound that you serve another person for 35 years and one day he will ask you to retire when you one not tired.

2) Disease

The inability of Nigeria and some other African countries to eliminate diseases, both the curable and preventable ones that are prevalent in the continent today, is just a pure manifestation of poverty. A good example is malaria, which “claims something like a million African lives a year. Malaria was once an important disease in the warmer parts of Europe and the USA, but improvements in the living conditions led to its disappearance.”⁸ The low level of life expectancy in Africa, which is said to be about “47”, and the high level of infant mortality rate, is as a result of diseases, which are there because of the menace of poverty. Talking about life expectancy,

The average for Africa is only 50 years while for western Europe and North America it is 77 years. Many African countries have a life expectancy of less than 50 years – for example, Sieraleone 39, Malawi 45, Uganda 45, mali 46. Even the healthiest African countries, such as Kenya (58), Lesotho (61 years) and Botswana (65 years) are far behind western nations.⁹

3) HIV/AIDS

Human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and Acquired Immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) have ranged the sub-Saharan Africa so much that, people may think that is has come to stay in Africa. It is a manifestation of poverty, “we should stop pretending that HIV/AIDS does not exist in Nigeria. All hands must

be on deck to prevent the spread of this killer virus” – Olusegun Obasanjo. Our youths have brandished it, the American invention to discourage sex (AIDS). This informs the continuous erosion of our workforce, on daily basis, just because we are poor. The people who are more prone to this killer virus are the women, the youth and the orphans and the vulnerable children. These are the people whose economic status is next to nothing, unlike the men who are more often than not, employers of labour and family heads and bread winners. Those girls who are on the streets hawking, get seduced and lured into commercial sex work, largely because they are poor, some are sent to Italy and other European countries for prostitution only for money. The women in our society, are not as empowered as the men, some are just house wives, who have little or no education this group of people naturally find it extremely difficult to keep life ongoing in their families, especially when widowed, most of them who are gullible enough, do resort to getting what they want with what they have, which is opening their legs wide for any man who has the cash, thereby distributing HIV/AIDS.

With HIV/AIDS, on our youths and women and children, the total workforce of the nation is in trouble, and the much needed suitable development becomes a mirage. To manage a person with HIV/AIDS is costly, if not that the government and some non-governmental organizations now subsidize the cost, to at least a seemingly affordable rate.

In industrialized countries, the cost of direct medical care for a person with AIDS is estimated between US\$25,000 and US\$150,000. Even with their economic empowerment, only few families there can afford to maintain AIDS patient let alone in Africa where the amount per capital health budget is only a few dollars., in a meeting of the UN joint program on AIDS, UNAIDS, 7th July 2002, it was stated that ten billion US dollars is needed to combat AIDS every year, more than three times the amount allocated to fight the disease in 2002.(10)

This shows that the economy of the nation which is not stable is also being wasted on the management of HIV/AIDS. Those living with HIV/AIDS must be managed by the government as they cannot afford to manage it themselves.

Poverty Alleviation

Having outlined and x-rayed the concept of poverty, especially within the Nigerian context in particular and Africa in general, it is therefore pertinent that we at this time discuss how to alleviate the citizens of Nigeria from the vestiges of this unwanted phenomenon (poverty). At this juncture, mention must be made of the fact that our own brand of poverty, comes from both within and outside us, therefore, we must alleviate or eradicate poverty in Nigeria if and only if our

mindset is changed. Our socio-political and economic ideologies should as well be changed, for good. Ours is a nation whose citizens are not proud of, the rich have little or no interest in developing the nation with their wealth, and they rather prefer stocking it in some foreign banks where they consider it safe. The poor people and the middle class citizens have been brainwashed into believing that whatever comes from outside the shores of this country are better than the home made or home processed goods, this is the height of lack of patriotism in Nigeria. We are often being pushed from one ideology to another. In the first instance, it was slavery, which ravaged the whole of Africa, our youths who constitute the workforce of any nation, were stolen, kidnapped, and sold to far away lands in Europe and America, the result is seen today, in America, where the products of our people are contributing their quota in no small measure, making America what it is today, here are there in the music industries, movie, business health academics and politics, even the American presidency.

After the slave trade was abolished, colonialism came, we were made nations in Africa but stooge nations and vassals to our neocolonial overlords, who, utilized our wealth and manpower to better their own nations, at the expense of our own African nations.

We got our political independence from them, but are economically dependent, neocolonialism became the order of the day, the worst which is multifaceted and hydra headed is the present day, phenomenon called globalization, it preaches the message of common market, easy trade, transportation, information communication, just to mention but a few, but beyond the smiling face, there is bitterness, beyond amusement and laughter, there is sadness, I can at best term globalization, the iron fists in the golden gloves. All these ideologies present better faces to the vulnerable African countries, Nigeria inclusive, but in the final analysis, we are the worst hit. This is because we are not at par with the developed nations in any economic matter and the gap of inequality is widening par day. Having identified the major sources of poverty in Nigeria and Africa at large we should not wait for any body outside of us to come and set us free from poverty. We must brace up with the challenges and hold the bull by the horns if we must salvage our nation. The irony of the whole thing is that even our privileged elites, who are within the political circle, are making the matters worse for the country. How can one explain or intermarry the ravenous unemployment on the side of our teeming youths, with the flamboyant and ostentations lives of our politicians. Where a particular law maker goes about in a convoy of more than twenty expensive cars, lives in a castle, travels home from Abuja in a chattered flight has more domestic staff than the entire employees of a university department. They only take care of his kitchen, laundry, cars, garden, and bed room as the case may be.

One federal law maker takes more money at the end of the month, than the entire civil servants within his constituency. We cannot forge ahead with this mentality. The country is bad, we are to blame. The oil boom in our country has more or less turned to oil doom. It gave rise to the prevalent youth restiveness and disturbances, prevalent amongst which is kidnapping of both the rich and the poor.

Another problem is that our foremost political leaders, were in experienced in politics and governance, they demanded political autonomy and independence, without matching it with economic independence,

With independence came onerous responsibilities for inexperienced leaders who were not ready for what they came to face. Having taken over political control, their citizens started making demands, reminding them of the promises the made during nationalist struggles. They asked for a life free from poverty, hunger and disease; they asked for schools and hospitals, pipe borne water and electricity; they demanded good, motor able roads, recreational facilities, among others. But it is impossible to realize those things without sustained economic growth¹¹

Sustainable Development through Poverty Alleviation

The crux of this paper is on how to achieve sustainable development by the means of poverty alleviation in Nigeria, we shall therefore in this segment of the work, focus our attention on how to achieve the said sustainable development within the country. What informed the title of this paper is the full realization of the impossibility of any sustainable development in the mist of poverty and hunger. When we talk of development, what readily comes to mind is, a situation where the nation will graduate from underdevelopment to a level of economic, political, social and infrastructural well being that will last or stand the test of time, we mean the brand of development that will cut across the nation, from north to south, and from east to west. A type of development that will be felt both in the cities and the sub-orbs, it will be noticed in the educational, economic, material, physical and agricultural sectors, to mention but a few.

It is not an impossible task to achieve this kind of development, but indeed it is going to be difficult. Difficult I mean because, it has to put all hands on deck, the government, non-governmental and the multinationals should get involved in this all important task, the gap between the rich and the poor has to be bridged or at least reduced to the barest minimum there should employment for all the citizens of this country, so as to make all productive, and the nation will have enough to consume and some more to give out to other nations. To remove poverty, unemployment has to be dethroned first of all. As we all know that the government alone cannot employ all that would want the white collar job, there should be some policies that will make it possible for all to be employed, either as direct staff of the government upon graduation or as self sufficient by making them self employed and in turn creators of labour. This will have a multiplier effect and the much talk about unemployment will be a thing of the past. To achieve this, the government to whom the citizens have bequeathed their sovereignty as the social contract theory stipulates, must as a

matter of urgency, start developing some sincere and well grounded and systematic projects, such as, vocational education. On this, I wish to suggest that upon graduation from any Nigerian University, The National Youth service scheme should either be scraped or at most be reshaped to look like a job creating venture. This can be achieved using this system. When a graduate makes a good result, he or she should be given a huge amount of money, such as, N3, 000,000, to one that makes a first class, N2,000,000, to one who makes a second class upper division, and N1,000,000 to one with a second class lower division. We propose that instead of spending one full year serving a father land which no one believes in, and end up with little or nothing, only to pass out with a certificate that only qualifies one to be a job seeker, rather than one who creates job.

The country should concentrate much on the development of the human beings especially the youths who will in time to come become the rulers of this great nation. Then on the other aspects of development. We cannot at this juncture toy with education. More money should be devoted to the education of the citizenry, for it will raise people who will be independent on the other persons, for the more educated one is, the more independent he becomes, those who are educated, would like to show that they can make it on their own. (The philosopher king ideology), when a man is educated his mind is developed, for, "on earth there is nothing great but man. In man, there is nothing great but mind."¹² It is also said that, "what lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us."¹³ Self employment breeds competition in the field of economy, when everybody is on his own, trying to make ends meet, what happens is that the cumulative efforts will result in the general well being of the society, there by enthroning sustainable development, through productivity, which means, "an increasingly efficient and effective use of the resources, i.e., capital, raw materials, labour and technology. It is usually measured in the ratio of output to input."¹⁴

Conclusion

Nigeria as a country is rich both in human and material resources but the problem with her, is that her wealth is not evenly distributed, the rich is continuously becoming richer while the poor is on a daily basis becoming impoverished and pauperized. We attributed this problem to inability of Nigerians to eradicate or alleviate poverty. This paper has been able to point out certain areas of manifestations of poverty which stultify the sustainability of development in the country.

It is my wish to make it crystal clear and categorical, without equivocation, that there is no alternative to self employment. If Nigeria must march out of poverty and access the sustainable development, the country has to return to agriculture which was the bane of our economy prior to the oil discovery and exploration in Nigeria. A return to agriculture by all is the starting point to poverty alleviation and economic well being in Nigeria. The government, non governmental organizations and other well to do individuals should put their hands on deck to eradicate poverty in Nigeria. This I say

because, it is a well known fact that the more unemployed our people are, the more crime and the more prone, the few wealthy individuals become to kidnapping, armed robbery, and other financial crimes. The road to development is the road out of poverty, for the presence of poverty spells underdevelopment.

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