

## PARADIGM FOR RURAL POVERTY ALLEVIATION IN NIGERIA: PUTTING THE RURAL PEOPLE AT THE TOP

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### ABSTRACT

The alleviation of poverty in Nigeria has rather proven to be an uphill task as poverty remains endemic, particularly amongst the rural population. This paper interrogates the poverty alleviation programmes of the Nigerian government in the current decade with a view to proposing an alternative paradigm for rural poverty alleviation. Through an observational-theoretical approach, a model of poverty alleviation that is anchored on the perceptions, views and aspirations of the rural people was articulated and presented. The model represents a shift from a conventional top-bottom approach where the "Urban Elites" occupy the top role in the poverty alleviation schemes to put the rural people at the top. It is believed that making rural people major stakeholders in the planning and implementation of poverty alleviation programmes in their domain is key to addressing rural poverty.

**Keywords;** Paradigm; Poverty; Rural; Poverty Alleviation; Nigeria; Model

### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Poverty is by far one of the most debilitating socio-economic malaise plaguing nations of developing economies including Nigeria. The Nigeria poverty story is saddening, embarrassing and paradoxical. Nigeria prides itself as the largest black nation of the world and the giant of Africa-being endowed with the enormity of human and material resources; yet Nigeria occupies the number one position in global poverty ranking in 2018 (World Poverty Lab, 2018). According to the latest report by the National Bureau of Statistics (2020), 40% of Nigerians, about 80 million lived below the poverty line of US \$ 3.20 per day in 2020. However, according to World Bank (2021) report, the adverse effect of the Covid-19 Pandemic has pushed an additional 8 million people below the poverty line taking Nigeria's poverty headcount to about 91 million. More alarming is the report by the World Poverty Tracking System indicating that every minute, an additional 5 Nigerian fall into extreme poverty. The report also shows that Nigeria currently has a poverty escape rate of -4.5 person per minute indicating a possibility of a continuous rise in poverty (World Poverty Lab, 2021).

Nigeria's poverty pattern is largely asymmetrical. There exist a significant rural/urban differential in poverty incidence (Effiong, 2017). In other words, poverty is pervasive in rural areas compared to the urban. According to NBS (2020), rural households account for about 52% of the poverty headcount in Nigeria. Poverty in rural Nigeria is multi-dimensional, covering a wide spectrum ranging from malnutrition, poor housing, poor access to healthcare, education, safe water, and limited livelihood/income opportunities. According to Effiong and

Ituen (2020), rural poverty extends to social, cultural and emotional disgruntle which is difficult to capture and report by western notion of poverty.

Prior to the current decade, the Nigerian government had rolled out "Fantastic" poverty alleviation programmes to address rural poverty and enhance regional integration in the country. The success of the programmes remains an issue of research and debate. In the present dispensation, the government has committed enormous resources to alleviate poverty through a myriad of programmes. These efforts have remained counter-productive as poverty continues to be endemic in Nigeria. Some scholars believe that Nigeria's poverty alleviation efforts will continue to suffer setbacks as it is largely "elitist", "anti-poor" and "Top-bottom" with rural people at the bottom rather than the top. In the light of the above, this paper interrogates the current poverty alleviation programmes of the Nigerian government and proposes a model for rural poverty alleviation that leverage largely on the perception, views, and aspirations of the rural people who are placed at the top of the poverty implementation ladder.

## 2.0 POVERTY AND POVERTY TRIGGERS IN NIGERIA

The conceptualization of poverty has continued to be amorphous and subjective, lacking a generally acceptable definition. However, economists and development experts have applied three indices to define poverty. First, is the "Poverty headcount index", a monetary measure of poverty where people whose daily income/consumption is less than US \$ 3.20 are considered poor/living below the poverty line; Second, is the "multi-dimensional poverty index" that defines the poor as those lacking access to basic livelihood, nutrition, housing, water, sanitation, education, healthcare, electricity and other basic human needs (Effiong, 2020). The third and the most recent concept is the "Happy Planet index". It measures poverty in terms of average subjective life satisfaction, life expectancy at birth and ecological footprint. This concept assumes that an aged person who lives in a hut but reports being happy and satisfied yet having no access to education, healthcare, and wealth cannot be said to be 'poor'; because poverty is in the eye of the beholder (Effiong, Essien and Patrick, 2020). By whatever theoretical lens one views poverty, the fact remains that poverty is a monster that degrades human dignity and integrity. Poverty is worse than a pandemic; it does not obey political boundary and has no respect for tribal mark or ethnicity. However, the factors that trigger poverty are disparaged and vary spatially. For instance, studies by Omoniyi (2018) show that Nigerian poverty is largely structural. Weak economic, social, and political structures are the main poverty triggers in Nigeria. Weak economic structure gives rise to unemployment, corruption, bad governance, low productivity and poor development of human resources. Omoniyi further asserts that structural deficiencies such as environmental degradation, inter-ethnic/communal clashes, weak agriculture and infrastructure setback have been shown to fuel poverty in Nigeria. Esin, Ebong and Uting (2018) believe that rural poverty in Nigeria is largely induced by geographic factors. They argue that rural settlement is characterized by spatial isolation which impede access to livelihood opportunities and that the land use pattern is homogenous and limited to rain-fed agricultural use. Akpan, Udoh and Patrick (2016) opined that rural poverty especially among farming communities is underpinned by the low level of formal education, age, gender of household head, size of household and structure of land tenure. Studies by Effiong (2020) have also highlighted

issues such as witchcraft, misfortune, bad luck and evil curses/covenant as part of the fatalistic causes of poverty reported by rural people in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria.

### 3.0 POVERTY ALLEVIATION PROGRAMMES IN NIGERIA

Prior to the emergence of a stable democratic government in Nigeria, poverty alleviation strategies were tied to rural/agricultural development schemes. For instance, programmes such as the Agricultural Development Projects, and the River Basin Development Programmes. Directorate for Food, Roads and Rural Infrastructure (DFRR), Better Life for Rural Women; The National Directorate of Employment (NDE), were among the poverty alleviation programmes designed to encourage agricultural productivity, other programmes were designed to eradicate mass illiteracy, support rural markets, create rural credit system and construct rural infrastructure in order to reduce rural poverty in Nigeria (Ogunleye, 2016; Hussaini, 2014). When these programmes did not yield significant outcomes in stemming the propagation of poverty in the country, especially among rural dwellers a paradigm shift was activated in the post-democratic era. The advent of democratic governance in 1999 witnessed the first institutional arrangement and proper alignment with an international protocol such as the Millennium Development Guide (MDGs) towards poverty alleviation in Nigeria. The establishment of the National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP) and the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDs) were some of the laudable national commitments toward poverty eradication in Nigeria. Under these schemes, a number of programmes were set up to provide employment to the jobless and also provide reasonable take-home pay for Nigerian workers (Hussaini, 2014). Unfortunately, the gains of these programmes failed to accelerate as the programmes were not Sustained and not well coordinated and implemented. At the expiration of the MDGs and NEEDs initiative in 2015, poverty levels had escalated in Nigeria.

In response to the pervasive nature of poverty, the Nigerian government has in the last 7 years taken far more robust measures to alleviate relative poverty. These include the establishment of a ministry of Disaster Management and Humanitarian Services. Part of the mandate of this 'new ministry' is to coordinate the implementation of social investment programmes (such as conditional cash transfer; temporary graduate employment; school feeding programme, trader moni etc.) designed to alleviate poverty.

Table I displays some of the poverty alleviation programmes and their failure/successes story.

**Table 1: Poverty Alleviation Strategies/Projects/Programme in Nigeria (2015-2022)**

Project/strategy	Sponsor	Anticipated Benefit	Remarks
1. Provision of soft loans/Trader Moni	State government Federal	To serve as a revolving loan that would boost and expand traders stock	Success rate is low as most beneficiaries fail to pay back and most times misused the loan
2. Skills acquisition Training of youth	State government	Designed to empower young people with skills for decent living	The selection of youth beneficiaries is always secretive. Some beneficiaries are often not empowered with capital after training. Besides, the implementers never try to find the actual requirements of the poor. Thus either most of the projects are

			repetition or less effective.
3. Agro-Processing facilities	State government and NDDC	To aid the processing of agro-products and improve rural earnings in agriculture	Some of the projects are ‘political’ and are hardly completed. The benefits may or never reach the targeted beneficiaries. Most times the projects are top to bottom. There is lack of ownership as a result which in turn affect the outcome of the programme
4. Rural Electrification	State government and World Bank	To foster rural development and diversify rural economy	Some of the projects are ‘hardly completed
5. Borehole drilling Rural sector programme	Cross River Basin Authority, Akwa Ibom Rural Water and Sanitation agency; and World Bank	Improve access to water and sanitation in rural areas	Problem of maintenance, poor spatial coverage and unsustainability
6. Provision of hybrids and fertilizer	Federal and State governments	To improve yield and raise the farm earning of rural people	Often shrouded in corruption as they are sometimes sold exorbitantly to the rural poor
7. Provision of market	Local government	To provide opportunity for evacuation and sales of farm produce	Maintenance of the market structures are the key issues
8. Provision of stipends to the poor	Federal government through conditional cash transfer	To ameliorate extreme poverty	Targeting the extreme poor is difficult, hence the strategy has not yielded desired effect
9. Post-Covid household support grant	FGN	Alleviate poverty arising out of covid-19 effect	No level playing ground is provided in the selection of beneficiaries; the coverage is low as many rural households are not captured
10. Free medical care/provision of healthcare services	Churches; NGOs and State government	To make healthcare accessible to the poor	Very encouraging and successful but the coverage is low
11. N-power programmes/social investment programmes/School Feeding Programme	Federal government	Provide temporary job to unemployed graduates, School leavers; encourage school enrolment in the rural areas	Many unemployed graduates are yet to benefit from the scheme; the school feeding programme is not sustainable because of corruption

**Source:** Authors’ Finding

In 2017, the Federal government of Nigeria launched a Social Investment Programme (SIP) aimed at alleviating extreme poverty in the country. Part of the components of the SIP was the provision of stipends to the extremely poor households through conditional cash transfer of N5000 (Five Thousand Naira) monthly, the recruitment/training of unemployed graduates in what is called 'N-Power Programme' with N30,000 financial benefit per month and a home-grown school feeding program of providing a meal per day to all primary school children in the country. These programs lack the consistency and robustness to address rural poverty as a large proportion of the poor in rural backlands are often not captured in the social register for the conditional cash transfer: just as the recruitment of the unemployed graduates for the 'N-Power Scheme lacks transparency and level playing ground for selection.

Furthermore, most the poverty alleviation programs are often shrouded in corruption and nepotism both at the design and implementation phases. For instances, hybrids crops and fertilizers that are subsidized for rural farmers are often diverted and sold to the public at an

exorbitant amount. These perceptions are aligned with Danaan's (2016) assertion that the problem of poverty in

Nigeria is not lacking anti-poverty strategies, but the absence of willpower on the side of the government to make the programs work. In other words, as Sugeng (2017), puts it, poverty alleviation programs in most third world nations are not community-based rather they are designed by the elite; for the elite and executed by the elite without considering the aspirations and opinions of the targeted poor population.

#### 4.0 PROPOSED MODEL FOR RURAL POVERTY ALLEVIATION

In this paper, a model of rural poverty alleviation is constructed and proposed as a poverty alleviation road map for Nigeria and other developing nations. The ideas, themes, and concepts applied in the model were generated by the authors during a purposively designed Focused Group Discussion (FGD) with rural people in some parts of Southern Nigeria in 2020 (Effiong, 2020). The model itself represents a paradigm shift from conventional models of rural development.

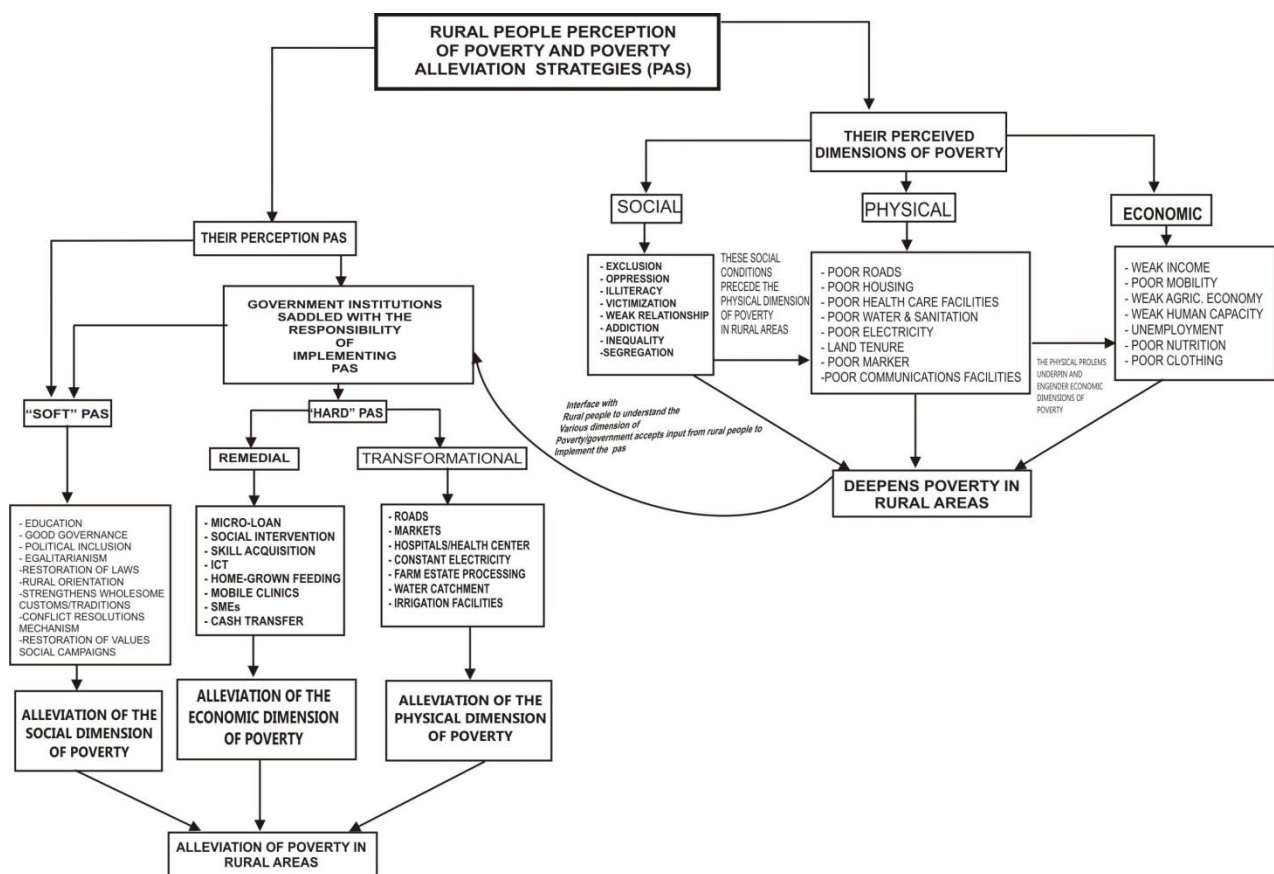


Figure I: Model of Rural Poverty Alleviation

Source: Authors' finding

The model clearly demonstrates the importance of context in understanding poverty. Rather than involving the Federal agencies in combating poverty, the model recommends local

knowledge and perception in developing poverty alleviation programs. This paper has demonstrated the fact that poverty- though an endemic phenomenon, has localized characteristics, and therefore, counter-poverty measures that are concocted at the center (that is, the Federal Government) are bound to miscarry as the process travel down the various levels/stages of implementation. Poverty alleviation strategies should be designed and implemented locally in line with local realities while policies of general economic wellbeing can emanate from the center. In the model proposed in this paper, the people have the responsibility of identifying the specific conditions that perpetuate poverty in their domain as well as thinkers on the specific counter-poverty measures to address them.

The model affirms that poverty manifest in three dimensions- social, physical, and economic; the model presents two strategies/options namely the 'soft strategies' and the 'hard strategies' for alleviating poverty in rural areas. At this point, it is important to discuss these strategies and show how they can alleviate poverty in rural areas.

### **'Soft' Poverty Alleviation Strategies**

"Soft measures" as depicted in the model are those specific efforts targeted at alleviating the social dimension of poverty. The social issues identified in this paper require more of policy legislation rather than physical projects to address them. Essentially, therefore, the term 'soft measures' is conceptualized based on the intangibility of the approaches involved in solving the social dimension of poverty. The term is akin to the 'software' components of a computer system which are largely intellectual than the physical components of the hard wares. For instance, issues like oppression, exclusion of individuals/communities, segregation/victimization, inequality, nepotism, illiteracy, and weak relationship are among the societal vices that precede and underpin the physical and economic dimensions of poverty. Though these issues are often overlooked by most poverty studies, it is now becoming a major research component in poverty analysis.

Evidently, therefore, rural people believe that efforts such as promoting education, good governance, restoration of values, proper orientation of rural people, strengthening wholesome customs/traditions, establishing a robust conflict resolution mechanism and social campaigns alongside the enthronement of political inclusion and egalitarianism can help to weaken the grips of these social vices that define and underpin poverty. Education for instance has been identified as being a catalyst for social engineering and poverty alleviation. It is a powerful driver of development and one of the strongest instruments for reducing poverty and improving health, gender equality, peace, and stability.

Political inclusion and the enthronement of an egalitarian society are antidotes to nepotism, exclusion, and segregation. The establishment of a robust conflict resolution mechanism would improve and strengthen the weak relationships among rural people/communities and also pave way for meaningful development in rural areas. Rural orientation, social campaigns and restoration of values can help improve the bonds of unity, love, and family among rural people and also re-engender the spirit of cooperation and community among rural people.

The model clearly shows that the implementation of these 'soft measures' will ultimately lead to alleviation of the social dimension of poverty which would in turn weakens the foundation of physical and economic conditions of poverty. For instance, when nepotism, exclusion, and

unequal spread of opportunities are tackled through good governance, political inclusion and egalitarianism, the physical condition of poverty such as poor roads, health care facilities, market, electricity, and water would be addressed in neglected rural communities.

## **‘Hard’ Poverty Alleviation Strategies**

In the model shown in Figure I, the ‘Hard Strategies’ are bifurcated into two: the remedial and transformational measures. Based on rural perceptions, the remedial strategy are short-term efforts that can cushion the effect of the economic dimension of poverty while the transformational are long-term strategy for addressing the physical dimension of poverty in rural areas. It is necessary to highlight the importance of the ‘hard strategies’ in alleviating poverty as perceived by the rural people.

### **a. Micro-loan and Skill Acquisition**

Micro-loans and skill acquisition are identified as remedial ‘hard strategies’ for alleviating the economic dimensions of poverty. Specifically, micro-loan offers rural –people access to soft loans necessary for running small businesses, building assets, securing smooth consumption, and invest further in agriculture. Micro-loans if managed properly can help rural households generate further income, feed better and acquire durable clothing. Micro-loans can also help lift people out of poverty. Policy-makers believe that access to microfinance in developing countries empowers the poor (especially women) while supporting income-generating activities, encouraging the entrepreneurial spirit, and reducing vulnerability.

Skill acquisition equips rural people and creates the mindset to undertake the risk of venturing into applying the knowledge and skills gotten in the school or vocational training centers. It also enhances rural capacity by providing individuals with enough training to enable creativity and innovation for self-employment and self-reliance. Skill acquisition provides people with adequate training that will enable them to be creative and innovative in identifying great business opportunities. It serves as a catalyst for economic growth and development, creates jobs and employment opportunities for the rural people, reduces rural-urban migration, and provides rural people with enough training skills and support that will enable them to establish a career in small and medium scale businesses, it incubates the spirit of perseverance in rural people which will enable them to persist in any business venture they embark on and it creates a smooth transition from tradition to a modern industrial economy.

### **b. Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) and Information and Communication Technology (ICT)**

Rural people identified SMEs and ICT as critical for alleviating poverty in their domain. SMEs however, have been acknowledged by economic development experts to be a robust tool for steering growth and alleviating poverty. SMEs require small capital to produce small-scale products enough to serve rural communities and beyond. The small-scale industries are well known for their immense contribution to poverty reduction, development process, and as engines of economic growth, a critical segment of the manufacturing sub-sector, effective strategy for tackling unemployment, and diversifying output. SMEs play a role in improving the socio-economic condition of the poor, creating employment opportunity, a job that creates

greater utilization of local raw materials, and improving the economic growth of the rural areas, which indicates growth/development and reduction of poverty.

The development of ICT in rural areas is a newfound hope for the rural poor. Rural people can be trained in ICT to enhance their human capacity and competitiveness in the modern world. ICT is creating a distance-less world where communication is instantaneous and has placed immense power into the hands of so far the haves and elite. It is impacting all dimensions of life; education, health, quality of family, culture, leisure and arts, scientific and technological world. ICT is helping economies to expand at a fast rate and competitiveness has become the motto of the day. The concept of (the Rural Information Technology Centre) also known as 'Smart Village' has been experimented with in some countries in order to improve rural access to information and innovation. The rural poor can be active participants in designing programs and implementing of ICT programs. For instance, the availability of telephones in rural areas provides people with access to information about the market price for a farmer's crop or news that a relative is ill. Rural people can be trained on telephone repair services, operate telephone kiosks and also sell telephone accessories to neighbors at the market rate and these can earn the rural people income.

Village-based internet business or program, can provide rural villagers access to the internet in search of income-generating activities and as well as acquiring computer-based employment. The internet service cyber kiosks will increase access to agricultural and market information. Farmers will be able to learn the current market price of their products through the internet, resulting in increased economic efficiency.

### **c. Mobile Clinics, Water Catchment, Farm estates, and Market**

Mobile clinics are innovations in health care delivery for rural and remote communities where access to the health center and hospitals are impeded. It involves taking health care services to the doorstep of rural people. It offers flexible and viable options for treating isolated and vulnerable groups. Healthcare has been identified as part of the physical dimension of poverty by rural people. Mobile health clinics can drive better healthcare outcomes, promote value-based care, and improve patient access to care. There is a range of primary health care services mobile clinics can provide for rural people. These include; regular checkups; treatment for minor ailments; lab services; health education/campaigns; immunization; managing chronic disease or condition; prescription renewal and referrals. Mobile clinics improve access to local, on-the-spot primary health care services for rural people. The issue of ensuring that the poor have access to safe drinking water and improved sanitation has rightly been prominent in international discussions and specific targets have been included in the internationally agreed SDGs. The use of 'Water Catchment' can help alleviate the poverty associated with lack of water and sanitation. A catchment is an area where water is collected by the natural landscape. In a catchment, all rain and run-off water eventually flow to a creek, river, lake, or ocean, or into the groundwater system. Rural areas can be grouped based on Catchments either natural or artificial for the provision of clean drinking water.

In the rural areas, water is essential for improving the health and livelihoods of the poor, ensuring wider environmental sustainability, reducing rural squalor, and eradicating hunger. It is also critical in addressing gender inequalities and improving access to education for the



poor. Water availability in rural areas will help women to function effectively in economic activities such as home gardens, livestock, tree crops planting, home-based manufacturing such as pottery and brick making, and services such as laundries and hair salons.

Farm estates and markets are the critical economic structures for rural people. The development of farm estates can increase agricultural productivity and raise farm incomes for rural people. There is a lot of evidence that agriculture can contribute to poverty reduction by having a direct effect on farmers' income. Agricultural development can stimulate economic development outside of the agricultural sector and lead to higher job and growth creation. Increased productivity of agriculture raises farm incomes, increases food supply, reduces food prices, and provides greater employment opportunities in both rural and urban areas. Higher incomes can increase the consumer demand for goods and services produced by sectors other than agriculture.

#### **d. Rural Industrialization, Rural Electricity, roads, Transport and Irrigation Facilities**

Rural industrialization can be of considerable importance for economic development, employment creation, and the reduction of poverty. The rural people have identified the citing of industries in the rural area as one the way to overcome poverty. Industries do not only reduce poverty and income inequality but they also raise the standard of living of poor people. Furthermore, they enable people to make a living with dignity. The rapid development of capital goods industries promotes the growth of agriculture, transport and communication. It also enables the rural people to produce a variety of consumer goods in large quantities and at a low cost. Rural industrialization can provide the rural people with increased employment opportunities in small and large-scale industries. In an industrial economy, industry absorbs unemployed and underemployed people from the agricultural sector thereby increasing the income of the community.

Rural roads provide opportunities for the rural transport sector to develop which in turn benefits both users and operators of rural transport services and the entire rural transport service supply industry. Road access is important for connecting rural production to urban markets to ensure income-generating to help improve living standards and reduce poverty. The provision of roads will provide easy access to markets, and farms thereby boosting commercial activities in the rural areas. Roads are the primary means of transportation. They provide human access to a different place. Roads are the conduit of life's activities. Roads make a crucial contribution to economic development and growth and bring important social benefits.

#### **5.0 CONCLUDING REMARKS**

The paucity of poverty alleviation programs is not the reason for Nigeria's poverty quagmire, rather poverty remains intractable due to an irrelevant and inconsistent paradigm for poverty alleviation. There is new thinking among poverty analysts that the images of poverty as mentally constructed by individuals, groups, and community represents the real concept of poverty which can be relied upon in evolving programs for rural poverty alleviation. The model of poverty alleviation as constructed and proposed in this paper represents a paradigm shift from the conventional model of poverty alleviation programs where the Urban elites occupy the top position and superimpose projects on the rural people. The model advanced in

this paper attempts to put the rural people at the top. The model considers the rural people as major stakeholders whose opinions, thinking, aspirations and perceptions serve as critical assets for implementing poverty alleviation programs. Rural people should be made to take ownership of programs and projects in their domain by involving them in the design of projects for the purpose of sustainability.

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