

HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF POVERTY ERADICATION IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Poverty in Nigeria is deep, widespread and multifaceted, and Nigerians are all victims of this condition in one way or the other – the rich elite and the poverty-stricken masses alike – although not to the same degree. A cursory look at the available statistics paints a very gloomy picture of the nature and dynamics of poverty in the country. According to the Human Development Report 2002, no fewer than 70% of the Nigerian populations live below the poverty line.

Keyword: Poverty, Causes of Poverty, Poverty Eradication, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

According to Professor Mbaya Kakwenda, once UNDP's Representative in Nigeria, the country's poverty situation initially deteriorated by 25% despite the inception of democratic rule in 1999. Compared with the figure of 28.1% two decades ago, this is a very serious situation. Life expectancy in Nigeria is 51.7 years and the Human Development Index ranking places the country as 148 on a hierarchy of 173 countries in 2002.

These figures have been highlighted to demonstrate in very graphic terms the nature of the problem, even though there is a sense in which the figures underestimate the crisis, at least in qualitative terms. Although Nigeria remains the sixth largest producer of oil and more oil is being discovered off-shore within the country's oil-producing belt, and its GNP is in the region \$40 – 50 billion, Nigeria retains the potential to be the African region's engine for economic growth and development, the huge resources of this well-endowed country have seldom served its people well.

It is precisely because these resources have failed to deliver services to the poor, either in relation to security and safety, health and education, good governance and development, that there is need to stress that poverty is not just a statistical issue, horrendous as the figures above the sound. Poverty is about people – ordinary Nigerians standing at the thresholds of death and despair. In our view, poverty is, at its root, bred by unequal power relations, the structural and systematic allocation of resources among different groups in society, and the differential access to power and the political process. The distorted distribution of the nation's wealth has resulted in the enrichment of a minority at the expense of an

impoverished majority. There is no doubt that the chronic nature of poverty in Nigeria has a link to historical and continuing mismanagement of resources and contribution. In short, poor governance has had a huge role to play in guaranteeing this parlous state of affairs.

The implication of the above is that any attempt to take poverty reduction or eradication from the ambit of rhetoric to action must recognize the need to locate it within the framework of governance, by bringing politics back into policy-making. As Nigeria is carrying forward its strategy for poverty reduction, the media is one critical player in ensuring that all Nigerians – in their various communities and constituencies – have a role to play in promoting a clearer understanding of the poverty situation. As we understand it, the framers of poverty reduction strategy papers (PRSPs) in the international finance system intend them as national statements of overall plans to reduce poverty based on a process of broad consultations with the people. While there remains a great deal of scepticism about the extent to which PRSPs represent a cure for poverty, as the structural adjustment programmes before it, the idea of subjecting government policy to the yearnings and understanding of the most affected population is one in which actors in the civil society must broadly, but cautiously, welcome.

It is important, in our view, that we first understand what the poor themselves think poverty is and their own strategies for long – term solutions to the problems of chronic and persistent poverty. Yet, consulting the poor and seeking their understanding of poverty is not an end in itself since consultation without participation through independent means of articulation and enforcement amounts to no consultation ultimately. There is indeed some evidence to suggest that we already know what the poor think of poverty in Nigeria. The voices of the poor investigations conducted by the World Bank for the World Development Report 2000/01 demonstrate clearly that the poor have more nuanced perspectives on poverty. The poor, more than any interlocutor, understand the uncertainty, insecurity, marginalization and powerlessness that come with poverty in society.

Across Nigeria, the priority areas for the poor also relate to how best to reduce the shocks that might upset their security: the lack of potable water; inadequate access to education and health; the lack of rural feeder roads; the unavailability of markets for locally made goods; the lack processing facilities; and the lack of agricultural inputs, all of which are on the list of top priorities of the poor. The Interim Reduction Strategy Paper prepared in 2001 by the Nigerian government broadly reflects this view as captured extensively in the voices of the poor consultation of 1999. Ironically, government policy so far, if one takes the efforts of the National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP) as the central pillar of its poverty eradication work, reflects very little pro-poor schemes, leading to poorly designed money guzzling schemes like 'Keke NAPEP' which can hardly contribute to a poverty reduction scheme in the long – term.

This problem of policy not matching the results of the consultation remains a major criticism of the PRSP approach in countries where they have been undertaken so far. A common complaint is that the consultations were neither deep nor widespread, hence the eventual decision on priority areas were also fundamentally flawed. The greatest challenge that this process faces, therefore, is the extent to which it accommodates a procedure that speaks truth to power and seeks to provide a near accurate reflection of the diversity and difference of opinions in various communities and constituencies in Nigeria.

This is where there is a most crucial role for the media. As the most articulate vehicle for addressing the peoples' yearnings to their leaders, the media can be seen as providing the necessary bridge in communicating the peoples' views on poverty and linking up with civil society institutions on bringing these issues to the public domain. Centre for democracy and development's involvement in the civil society is informed by the core values of building partnerships and bridging the gap between government and civil society, which is also a reflection of its role as facilitators and catalysts for the development of the poor in society. Whilst the government's current effort in placing the poor on the agenda is commendable, the policy incoherence in government is also disturbing. Indeed, it reinforces some doubts that the eventual results may not match the hype that has surrounded the process if they are not addressed.

This incoherence brings to bear on the process a great deal of uncertainty as to what the policy objective really is. NAPEP – the central organ of government tasked with the responsibility of addressing the problems of the poor – talks constantly about an agenda for poverty eradication, although its performance to date is anything but committed to poverty eradication. Other government departments talk about poverty reduction. Although it may seem in the realm of mere semantics, this terminological inexactitude betrays the ideological and political underpinnings of these initiatives. For hard-headed monetarists who believe that poverty cannot be eradicated, they concentrate on excessively monetarist and fiscal paradigms which prevent the policy framework from tackling the real roots of poverty and thereby developing policy instruments that tackle poverty on a systematic basis. Even those who talk of eradication in the system only appear to use it as a gimmick to hoodwink people into believing that their condition will be qualitatively better in due course. It is our expectation that the eventual product of the government's process will deal with the sources of risk that affect poor people in a coordinated and integrated fashion, by breaking out of the increasingly artificial separation between poverty elimination, eradication and reduction. A well-informed media is needed to help break down this artificial divide whilst taking a developmental stance on the questions of poverty and its eradication in the country.

Fortunately, the coordinators of the government PRSP are not solely the government's responsibility, but also that of the Nigerian people. The implication of this for actors in civil society is that nothing is cast in stone and that this product will not be based on received wisdom from outside Nigeria. It means, in our view, that we shall not make a fetish of macro-economic stability, especially when the evidence in Nigeria suggests that such stabilization policies have not yielded any significant social and economic benefit to the masses who suffer most from these policies. We hope it is a reassurance that human resource development will be at the core of the strategy through the adoption and application of labour standards; the promotion of equity through tackling the problem of low salaries and wages; tax policies that demonstrate commitment to poverty reduction; the spatial distribution of new investments; a gendered understanding of the impact of poverty, and the solutions to poverty and capacity building and empowerment of the poor for the purpose of monitoring the implementation of the eventual product.

Ultimately, democratic and good governance is pivotal to poverty eradication in Nigeria. Without doubt, the capacity of governments to govern can make a crucial difference both to the trajectory of poverty and to its impact on equitable resource distribution. There is ample evidence in the literature to demonstrate that where governments have ceased to exist, acute

physical insecurity for ordinary individuals and communities is exacerbated, and this leads to the loss of basic services like health and education, the destruction of physical and social capital, and the production of widespread poverty and immiseration.

The greatest assets against shocks and disasters eventually lie in the development of human resources, the better management of natural resource endowments, and the respect for the local ownership of the reform agenda – whether in determining the role of the state or in arriving at the most effective poverty-reducing mechanisms. It is also useful to examine and analyze individual situations on their merit, rather than assume a dogmatic line on privatization. This is, of course, not to suggest the market has no role to play in reforming states structures. It is to say that there are no universal models of the market as providing the best assets against shocks and disasters. Consequently, formulating policies that are not driven by dogma will be central to the eventual ownership of this process by Nigerians.

Yet, in spite of the focus on the eradication of poverty in Nigeria, it must not be forgotten that the country is not an island unto itself, especially in this age of globalization. And, the view is that even when things are gotten right in Nigeria through the design of a political strategy and policy position that ultimately approximates what people want, this has to be located within a wider global framework.

Conventionally, poverty reduction has been promoted through a lopsided focus on macro-economic stability strategies like structural adjustment reform, the propping up of electoral democracies, and the support of measures that seek to provide the enabling environment for foreign direct investment and the global integration of the economy – in short, a mutual pursuit of political and economic liberalization. So far, the logic of trickle-down economics has failed to produce an integrated world economy in which all zones are winners.

This clearly contradicts the core assumption of globalization that wealth would automatically be created when the free market gains universal acceptance in the world. By arguing that the best way to build assets against shocks is not via the creation of local self-sufficiency, but for national economies to concentrate on what they can contribute to the world economy, globalization ignores the comparative advantage of the north, and locks states of the global south into relative powerlessness by creating conditions for conflict which further weaken the mediatory role of the states and extends the frontiers of poverty. Instead, globalization empowers those elites within the state who can form part of the convoluted network in business and government capable of acting independently of the juridical state. We have seen that all too well in the last forty years of Nigeria's independence.

The fallout of this globalizing trend has been the breakdown of social capital and networks, the privatization of security, the proliferation of arms and narcotics, all of which ultimately undermine food security, environmental security, and the security of the individual. It has also helped in deepening the rural-urban divide, fostered inter-generational strife occasioned by the frustration of youths, and exacerbated the scourage of refugees and the internally displaced, all of which have moved the hapless below the poverty line and moved them closer to violence and conflict. In seeing the kids responsible for the carnage in Kaduna in 2002, there is really no need for any further evidence that it is the future of Nigeria that is being endangered when there are no strategies for arresting the frustrations of youths. Joining an international anti-poverty coalition is therefore part of the overall strategy in civil society, in

the quest for sustainable development, and very hopefully the media will see the critical importance of connecting local experiences to the global experience in highlighting the dangers of the path that is currently being trodden in Nigeria.

In conclusion, there is a need to reiterate the view that Nigeria is at a crucial juncture in the effort to move from a translational phase of civilian rule to a consolidated phase of democracy. The extent to which the poverty levels in the country is reduced has a direct correlation to sustainable democracy in Nigeria, and the failure to do so, by implication, is also directly correlated to democratic reversals. Yet, it is equally possible for all of us to be winners in the poverty eradication campaign. In fact, it is in the interest of the elite stratum in society (media and civil society, all) to ensure that poverty is wiped out in society and on the face of the earth. This is not utopian thinking and the first step to take to ensure that this happens is the empowerment of the people to take control of their lives. Raising awareness through every medium – radio, television, newspapers, community papers, etc represents a major way of doing this. But in order to empower the people, the media must also be empowered with the appropriate and accurate information on the nature of the problem and the various solutions possible. Until power is moved from the centre to local communities and constituencies, it would be difficult to tackle the root causes of poverty. The thrust, therefore, is to work with local communities in defining and articulating a nuanced understanding of poverty and adequate responses to it.

This said, while being committed to participating in this process there is also the necessity of underscoring the importance of producing alternative frameworks that can help government sharpen its own findings, whilst working in synergy with the civil society and other critical stakeholders. Based on the above comments, one needs to take the following lessons to mind:

There is a need for conceptual clarity through a comprehensive approach to any anti-poverty strategy in policy and development circles, and the media must help to promote this;

Ultimate poverty eradication is only possible in the context of local empowerment and fiscal decentralization;

The poverty reduction strategy adopted must recognize the need to reconcile economic and social development and enhance the input of non-state actors in policy formulation, in order to enhance social capital rather than entrench the leverage of donor agencies on states;

The poverty reduction strategy adopted must problematize the link between globalization and poverty reduction, rather than assume that it is always going to be positive in the promotion of pro-poor growth;

The poverty reduction strategy must locate the poverty agenda within the democracy and development framework by bringing back accountable politics into policy making; and

An empowerment approach to poverty reduction is a process, whose results will not necessarily be immediate; hence the need for a long-term view by interested stakeholders and anti-poverty strategies.

The government should provide both formal and informal skill acquisition training for members of the communities, as well as provide funds for these skills to be converted into sustainable livelihoods;

Government should provide job opportunities, as well as basic social services and infrastructures;

Security operatives of the government must be more committed in their war against armed banditry;

The government must place restrictions on the importation of foodstuffs that are locally produced, so as to encourage local farmers. Also, agricultural inputs must be made available and at a subsidized rate to farmers.

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