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## Poverty and Climate Change, Which is a Greater Evil?

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### **Abstract**

*This paper examined two issues poverty and climate change. Extensive reviews were made on climate change and on poverty especially on how poverty has impacted on and exacerbated hunger and malnutrition, access to water and basic sanitation, disease burden, illiteracy, homelessness, environmental degradation, and how so much global attention has been diverted to climate change, another serious developmental issue that the people of the world are currently experiencing. This study compared the deaths that result annually from poverty related issues such as hunger, malnutrition, poor sanitation and preventable diseases especially in the developing countries of Africa, Latin America, Asia and war ravaged middle East with those from climate change and conclude that poverty is a much greater evil than climate change at least for now.*

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### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Extreme Poverty is perhaps the greatest tragedy of humanity. Poverty is essentially about human deprivation. It is about lack or limited access to essential capabilities that could facilitate long and healthy life (Nigeria Millennium Goals Report, 2005). In the remotest past, extreme poverty pervaded all peoples of the world because peoples of the world had neither technology nor requisite knowledge for the extraction of resources for the transformation of their lives and their environment.

Two hundred years ago, poverty was widespread across the world. That time just everybody was poor with the exception of very small minorities of rulers and large landowners. Life was as difficult in much of Europe as it was in India or China. Our great-great grandparents were with very few exceptions, most likely poor and living on farms (Sachs, 2005)

One could say here that the prosperity of some nations especially Western Europe started with the Industrial Revolution which started first in England from about 1750 to 1850 and from the mid-1800s to about 1914, the revolution spread to other nations of Western Europe and the United States (Beers,1991).

Worldwide, some 340-470 million people constitute the chronically poor, trapped below the poverty line with little immediate escape. Poverty exists in all regions but is heavily concentrated in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa (Green, 2008).

Many regions of the world have lifted their people out of poverty through good governance and strategic economic policies that emphasized inclusiveness and not just growth because economic growth alone has been found to be ineffective in pulling people out of poverty. For examples, Brazil under governments of Fernando Henrique Cardoso and Luiz Inacio Lular da Silva has used a mixture of good economic management (controlling inflation and redistribution of income to poor people and (family monthly stipend). In Lular da Silva's first term, some five million Brazilians were lifted out of poverty, and inequality fell to its lowest level in 30years (Green, 2008)

India was another country that lifted many of its country men from poverty, ignorance and disease. India emerged as an economic power house via liberalizing the economy, opening the telecoms, airlines and banking and the stock market and cutting tariffs and taxes. The changes put in place between 1991 and 1993 allowed new businesses to spring up and by 2006 and 2007, India was growing at more than 9 percent. Following the reform in India, the proportion of Indians living in absolute poverty fell from 60 percent to 42 percent (Rachman, 2010).

China another poverty ridden country even in the 1970s and in 1978, embarked on economic reforms under Deng Xiaoping. Deng saw no virtue in a hypocritical embrace of poverty. To Deng poverty is not communism He justified abandonment of orthodox Marxism and embraced free enterprise, foreign investment and export-driven growth. The reforms initiated by Deng Xiaoping were widely reckoned to have pulled as many as 200 million Chinese out of absolute poverty (Rachman, 2010).

Many countries including Brazil, India and China have pulled many of their people out of poverty in the last 30 years via programmatic economic reforms and democratic governance but not much has been heard about Africa in respect of escape from poverty and extreme inequality. In fact, Acemoglu and Robinson (2013) have drawn attention of worsening African poverty by stating that if you make a list of the poorest 30 countries in the world, you will find almost all of them in sub-Saharan Africa. They will be joined by countries such as Afghanistan, Haiti and Nepal, which though not in Africa, all share something critical with African nations.

Climate change is another issue that is drawing global attention just as poverty. In fact, climate is now regarded a major global developmental challenge (Nwafor 2006, Ajadike, 2014). But climate change was not even seen as serious environmental issue until very recently following the formation of Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change in 1988; the 1992 Rio Conference and the formation of United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). Other important landmarks include The Kyoto Protocol of 1997 but ratified in 2005. The UNFCCC has organized about 22 conferences called Conference of Parties (COP). Two of the conferences received special global publicity and these are COP 15 in Copenhagen, Denmark in 2009 which produced Copenhagen Accord and COP 21 in Paris France, which produced the Climatic Change Agreement of December, 2015.

The truth is that climate change issue has dominated the world in terms of publicity and funding to almost at the detriment of poverty which is another serious developmental issue.

The focus of this paper is therefore to examine the twin problems of poverty and climate change with a view to establishing which of the two is greater evil especially in the short run.

## **2.0: Poverty and Disease Burden**

According to Rachman (2010) there is some strong relationship between persistent poverty and poverty and pandemic disease.

Todaro and Smith (2011) admitted that absolute poverty plays a central role in most health problems faced by the developing countries and that this fact is recognized in the international classification of diseases with a code Z59.5 – extreme poverty.

Many preventable diseases such as malaria, cholera, diarrhea, typhoid fever, Ebola, Lassa fever dengue fever afflict millions yearly in poverty ridden households in sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America and South Asia. Most of the listed diseases are water borne and hence transmitted through contact with contaminated water or through poor hygiene. For example, the Ebola outbreak in Guinea, Sierra Leone, Liberia and Nigeria between 2014 and 2016

killed more than 11,000 people in West Africa. In Nigeria, Lassa fever kills many people anytime there was an outbreak and in 2017, the outbreak of celebros-spinal meningitis killed more than 800 people in the northern and central states of the country.

From the World Health Organization Data and reported by Todaro and Smith (2011), malaria kills over one million people annually in Africa, diarrhea about 2 million each year and ascariasis (round worm parasites) afflict up to 1.2 billion people in developing world especially children between 3 to 8 years.

Tropical diseases cause much suffering and high rates of infant mortality in Africa and they attribute the high disease burden to poverty and governments unwillingness to undertake public health measures necessary to eradicate the diseases.

### **3.0 Poverty induced –Hunger and Malnutrition**

Hunger is a serious global issue. To underline the seriousness of hunger, it was embedded in Millennium Development Goal No 1 which is to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger and it is made more specific in Target 2 which is to halve between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of people who suffer from hunger (MDGs Report, 2010).

Again in yet to be implemented Seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Goal 2 is to end hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture.

The MDGs were concluded in 2015 not much was achieved, but there is strong indication that both the scourge of hunger and malnutrition are on the increase especially in sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America and Asia. This is true because there were increase in the number of internally displaced people (IDPs) and refugees as a result of wars, terrorism, natural disasters, civil strifes and related issues. In IDP camps in Nigeria's North East, Congo Democratic Republic, Syria, South Sudan, Yemen and other troubled regions of the world one watches the video clips of emaciated children who are walking on social media and on television. According to Global Hunger Index (2010) a child dies of starvation every six seconds and almost six million children die every year because of starvation (Shokunb, 2010).

Malnutrition causes serious harms to children including growth failure manifested as low birth weight, stunted growth and low brain development and these deficiencies can work against the child later in life and make the child not to thrive and live to full potential (Ugboeze, 2017).

In Nigeria, the annual deaths attributed to malnutrition are quite high in every single day, about 2,300 under five year olds die and about 145 women of child bearing age die in Nigeria (Onuora, 2017).

### **4.0 Poverty and Illiteracy**

Poverty prevents millions from going to school and contributes in making them not to develop to their full potentials in life. Not having access to education means that many poor families will not have access to good paying jobs, political positions in executive, legislative and judicial arms of government. The uneducated most likely cannot join most professions because certain level of education is required for admission into the professional bodies such as accountancy, medicine, law, engineering, surveying etc. What not having access to education by the poor is that it creates a situation of inter-generational poverty where poverty cycle is not broken from generation to generation. And many families in developing countries of sub Saharan African, Asia and Latin America are plagued by cyclic poverty because of not having access to education.

Many developing countries now have universal free education at the primary level but because of poverty and the desire to start earning money early in life, drop out of school. In

Nigeria, school enrolment may be very high but many do not complete their school even at primary level and this explains why there are about as many as 10 million out of school children in Nigeria.

### **5.0 Poverty and Access to Water and Sanitation**

Water is life and access to clean water and sanitation is life more secure and more abundant. Indeed, access to water for life is a basic human need and a fundamental human right (Human Development Report, 2006).

Though access to water and sanitation has improved considerably across the globe as high as 1.1 billion still lacks access to clean water and about 2.6 still lack access to basic sanitation and nearly 5000 children die every day due to intake of dirty water (Green, 2008).

And because billions of people spread across poor households and neighborhoods across Asia, Africa and Latin America still lack access to clean water and basic sanitation, millions die yearly majority of the children from water borne diseases such as cholera, typhoid fever and diarrhea, diseases that are easily prevented by access to clean water and basic sanitation.

The Human Development Report (2006) concludes that the root cause of water crisis is traceable to poverty, inequality and unequal power relationships, as well as flawed water management policies that exacerbate scarcity.

### **6.0 Poverty, Homelessness and Development and Enlargement of Slums in Towns and Cities.**

Poverty excludes millions from having access to decent housing and dwelling places in rural and urban centres. The importance of decent accommodation was not captured in the concluded (2000-2015) Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) but that oversight did not happen again in the Sustainable Development Goals (2015– 2030) as Goal No 11 says that cities and human settlements should be inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable.

Poverty prevents millions if not billions from living decently in cities including the mega cities such as Rio de Janeiro, Mumbai, Lagos and Djakarta.

Slums are very characteristic of cities in the developing world. Slums lack the most basic of social infrastructure and they are usually the dens of criminals, prostitutes and drug addicts.

### **7.0 Poverty and Environmental Degradation**

The poor cannot protect their environment. Their immediate concern is to meet their short term survival needs. The poor cut their forests to harvest fire wood and source wood for making of charcoal. The poor because of landlessness will cultivate degraded slopes and further expose the slopes to soil erosion. Also the poor do not have the resources for conservation such as to purchase fertilizer to enhance soil fertility.

According to Cunningham and Cunningham (2004) poverty and protecting our common environment are inextricably interlinked because poor people are both the victims and agents of environmental degradation. And Indira Gandhi at the 1972, United Nations Conference on Human Environment in Stockholm described poverty as the worst form of pollution (Adams and Solomon, 1991)

### **8.0 Discussion and Conclusion**

China and India no doubt have lifted millions of their citizens from extreme poverty, but the same cannot be said for sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Middle East where the number of absolute poor are actually rising because of wars, natural disasters, terrorism, drought, bad governance, corruption and dwindling prices of commodities in the international market.

For example, the various wars in the Middle East especially in Syria, Iraq and terrorism in the Middle East and in Africa (Nigeria, Mali, and Somalia) have created serious humanitarian crises such as IDPs (internally displaced persons) refugees and migrants and these have increased the number of the poor and the number of people dependent on aids and international humanitarian support.

The irony is that when poverty situation is worsening and the number of the poor needing supports in the form of aids, grants, Official Direct Assistance (ODA), international donor assistants from the United Nation Agencies, the World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF) Development Banks and the European Union are actually dwindling.

The truth is that aids are drying up because some developed countries are in serious economic crisis because of the 2008 economic crunch that affected the entire world.

Also, important is that climate change, another serious development issue is currently receiving more global attention in terms of publicity, funding and pledges for future funding.

For example, the developed countries committed to mobilizing about 100 million United States Dollars annually to developing countries for fighting climate change (Egenhofer and Georgier, 2009). And during the United Nations Conference on Climate Change (Conference of Parties 21) in Paris, France in 2015 in which the latest Climate Change Agreement was signed, billions of US Dollars were pledged by developed countries as part of the ways of mitigating climate change especially in the developing world starting from 2020 when the agreement becomes operational. But there is no evidence of or any strong commitment or even pledges for reducing poverty in the developing world by the developed regions of the world.

In conclusion, this paper chronicled deaths from poverty-induced hunger and malnutrition, poverty-induced diseases and resulting deaths and morbidity; poverty – induced in access to clean water and basic sanitation and recorded deaths especially of children and has come to submit that millions of deaths are recorded on annual basis in the poor developing countries of Africa, Asia, Latin America and war ravaged countries of Middle East but on the contrary, there is no evidence that climate change has killed as much anywhere in the world including the developing regions. This paper has proven therefore that poverty is a greater evil and should attract more global attention than climate change.

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