
Democracy as an Instrument of Poverty Reduction in Africa: An Appraisal of the Nigerian Experience

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ABSTRACT

The term Poverty means different things to different people and at different places. It exists when one is not able to provide the basic need of life – food, clothing and shelter. Democracy as a system of governance uses its tenets and tentacle to eradicate the menaces of poverty in the society. The study also examines the role of democracy as a veritable instrument and vehicle for poverty reduction in Africa. This is done with reference to Nigerian experience. The study x-ray the concept of poverty and what constitutes poverty, causes of poverty in Nigeria and the global world and the role of democracy in poverty reduction. The efforts of Nigerian Government at tackling poverty are also assessed. The paper relied on secondary data sourced from array of published and unpublished materials such as text books, news papers, magazines, Journals, conference and seminar papers, internet materials and a lot of others. The paper concludes that in order to alleviate the menaces of poverty properly in a democratic setting, there is the need for the joint effort of individuals, NGO's, Faith base organization and government. Recommendations such as reform of education curriculum, sensitization, proper implementation of policies and a lot of others were proffered to ameliorate the problems of poverty in Nigeria.

Keywords: Democracy, Poverty and Good Governance.

1. INTRODUCTION

Poverty poses a big problem to Africa, one of the most thickly populated continents in the world. The Nigerian scene portrays the situation very adequately. Despite her abundant natural resources and rich environment, the economy of the country has not quiet taken off (Dare, 2002). The democratic governance which is a sin qua non for economic development is at its formative stage. The process of developing a good democratic structure in the third world countries generally and African countries in particular has been very rough. The experience has been from colonization to uneasy political independence; through turbulent republics which often ends in military coups d'état and sit tight reactionary rulers (Oyediran, 2002)

Since the decade of freedom, as the 1960s are often described for Africa, more than half of the independent countries on the continent have experienced military rule and the persistence challenges of poverty in the continent. The trend of military intervention in politics has become so wide-spread that it is almost becoming a norm. Nigeria alone has recorded eight (8) known coup d'état from 1966 to 1998. Five were successful and three unsuccessful. Each time a coup is announced, the leaders have always listed several reasons to justify their rationale for snatching power. The impression usually given is that the new set of coup plotters has come to reduce the country from intolerable clutches of mal-

administration, and describing their regimes as corrective despite the plethora nature of poverty in the society (Dare, 2010).

In the past few years, however, Nigerians have started to query very loudly, the overall usefulness of military rule and its contribution to poverty reduction and questions such as: Are coup plotters always motivated by the patriotic act to eradicate the menaces of poverty in the society? Do they have the real answers to the problems of poverty, that is have their solutions so far been truly efficient in reducing poverty in the society and is military rule really preferable to a democratic political process with reference to poverty reduction (Oyediran, 2002). Yet, with, 21 years of military rule out of the total of 30 as an independent State, the country still suffer from the menaces of poverty. In this work, we shall discuss the important roles of democracy in poverty reduction in Nigeria.

2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

One of the fundamental problems which prompted this study is the prevalence of poverty in Nigeria and how it has affected virtually all the productive forces and sectors of the economy. Nigeria as a nation has a long history of military administrations and these administrations are mostly one-sided and authoritative in nature. They ignore and care less about issues that affect the well being of the people and societal development.

There is also the existence of bad governance which often comes in the forms of corruption, mismanagement, ethno-religious violence, inequitable distribution of resources and a lot of others. All the aforementioned menaces are killjoy to the growth and development of democracy in Nigeria. It is against this backdrop that the following research questions were posited:

- (a) What are the underlying causes of poverty in Nigeria?
- (b) What is the relationship between Democracy and poverty reduction in Nigeria?

3. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The central objective of the study is to examine the impact of democracy on poverty reduction in Nigeria.

The specific objectives include to:

- (a) Find out the causes of poverty in Nigeria
- (b) Examine the role of democracy in ameliorating the menaces of poverty in Nigeria.
- (c) Find out how good governance can be use as a tool for poverty reduction in Nigeria.

4. METHODOLOGY

This study used combination of methods. First, the study employed a qualitative approach. This entails the usage of data generated from documentary method. This comprises of data drawn from array of published and unpublished materials such as text books, newspaper, journals, magazines, conference and seminar paper, internet materials and a lot of others.

The study also utilized historical method that was critical and analytical in providing descriptive and historical details. The qualitative and historical method provides us with clear perspective into our research problem by giving us the opportunity to understand the historical details and accurate account of the past and use it to discuss the present

5. CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

(a) The Concept of Poverty

The Oxford Advance Learner Dictionary of Current English stressed that the word poverty was a coinage of a French word ‘poverté’ which denotes the state of being poor, the state of lacking in quality or amount. The term suffers from a lot of misconception, Poverty as a concept is multi-dimensional. It connotes inadequacy such as lack of money under social usage. It shows the inequality of persons in a given society, the relationship between those who “have” and they have not. It is a state of lack in which a person is unable to meet the basic minimum requirement for food, health, shelter, education and clothing. According to Akanke (2003), it is a material and non – material deprivation, which is mainly characterized by food insecurity, lack of access to health services, poor and adequate education, lack of basic needs, physical, psychological experience of violence and insecurity. In the work of Taylor (1990), poverty means different things at different places. However, in a general term, he sees poverty as a state when a person is unable, for whatever reasons, to provide the basic essentials of life – food, clothing and shelter. Taylor goes ahead to emphasize that poverty can be brought about by any of one or combination of the following factors : *old age, sickness, infirmity* and total depression leading to *unemployment, Laziness, low wages or high prices* ,family circumstance such as choice/ separation.

Oyemomi (2004) advocates that poverty is a state where an individual is unable to provide adequately for his/ her needs of food, clothing and shelter i.e. the inability to meet social and economic obligations, lack of gainful employment, skills, assets, self – esteem and limited access to social and economic infrastructure such as education, health, portable water, sanitation and consequently, has limited chance of advancing in the welfare to the limit of his/ her capabilities. Poverty can either be in absolute or relative terms. Absolute poverty is a condition where a person or group of persons are unable to satisfy their human survival needs in terms of food, clothing, shelter, health, transport, education and recreation. Relative poverty is a complete state of lack and deprivation among individuals or groups. This tends to tandem with the view of Babashola (1997) a resident representative of UNDP – who defines poverty as a condition of life characterized by malnutrition, disease, illiteracy, low life expectancy and high infant mortality beneath any national explanation of human decency.

(b) Who are the Poor?

The word “poor” is derived from the Latin word ‘pour’ which simply denotes having very little, low standard or quality, lacking, deserving pity or sympathy. The Federal Republic of Nigeria in 2004 acknowledged that the poor people tend to live in dirty localities which exert pressure on the physical environment, contributing to environmental degradation. The poor especially farmers perceive their economic circumstance *to be straight with uncertainty* affected by events over which they have no control such as *falls in* primary commodity price, the volume of rainfall, pest attacks, outbreaks, change in soil condition and social convict. A proper and clearer definition is the one captured by Cinjel (2004) in his work – It will rain today. He enthused:

Who are the poor? The poor are those that lack food to eat, they are not those that do not have clothing’s or shelter. They are those who have but do not want to help the needy. They are those who live in abundance and careless about those who could not afford two meals a day. They are those who refuse to throw smiles on the faces of those who do not have (have not). They are those who disobey their parents and our constituted authority. They are the office thieves who siphon public fund for their selfish interest. They are the stingy and frugal people. They are those who collect bribe and also give bribe. They are the heartless robbers who robe

the innocent of their belongings. They are the corruptible personalities who are depriving us of the joy of enjoying the fruits of our mother land. They are the prostituting men and women who are spreading diseases in the society. They are the flirtatious people and people of impure morality. They are the idle men and women who do not want to contribute their quotas in nation building.

This definition equated the state of being poor as a condition of abnormality or amorality in which things fails to work normal for the benefit of the society, i.e. a deviation from a normal way of life.

6. EMERGENCE OF DEMOCRACY IN NIGERIA: A HISTORICAL EXPLORATION

Democracy, as a system of government, which encourages the exercise of governing power by the people, either directly or indirectly has long been aspired by Nigerians. This may have been influenced by the failure of the military institution, which had dominated the Nigerian polity since the attainment of independence in 1960. The principal feature of a military administrative system is more directional than participatory and development oriented. Apart from the fact that power is concentrated in the military council, the military see themselves as the only viable options in terms of the capacity of stemming a dangerous slide to national catastrophe and possible disintegration (Usman, 1986). Whereas nation building entails a careful husbandry of opposing elements and views, the utilization of military modality to solve a nations problem that does not tolerate opposition. Grievances that arose from human rights abuses by the military were not possible of redress, even though they were reasonable, largely because of the ouster clause in the enabling Decrees (Izibili, Ubhenin and Aiya, 2004).

The call for democracy reached its apogee during the infamous regime of late General Sani Abacha, the Nigerian dictator in November, 1995 following the execution of *Ken Saro-wiwa*, an environmental activist and 8 other persons at the *Ogoni*. The environmental activist and 8 others cried against exploitation of petroleum resource in their land, which led to environmental degradation of their communities. In spite of strong international appeal that they should be forgiven of their alleged offences, the military went ahead with the execution. As a result, Nigeria was blacklisted among the comity of nations (Izibili, Ubhenin and Aiya, 2004). It would be recalled that *Abacha* had termed his regime as a child of necessity occasioned by the Annulment of June 12, 1993 presidential election in Nigeria widely acclaimed to have been won by *M.K.O Abiola*, who was later incarcerated and charged for treason for declaring himself the democratic elected president of the federal Republic of Nigeria. Human right abuses reached unprecedented height, there was no political freedom of association and the press was restricted. Following the death of *Abacha* in 1998, his successor, General *Abdulsalami Abubakar* instituted a fresh transition programme which eventually ushered in a democratically elected administration on May 29, 1999. This signifies great succour for Nigerians. There have been reasons to recount the element of democracy thus: freedom of choice between alternative, freedom from ignorance and want, empowerment and capability; respect for the rule of law; equality before the law, promotion and defense of human rights; leadership accountability, decentralization of power and authority, periodic election, representative; and independent judiciary (Izibili, Ubhenin and Aiya, 2004)

The present democracy is guaranteed by the constitution of the Republic of Nigeria, 1999 which states in section 14 *inter alia* that:

- a. Sovereignty belongs to the people of Nigeria from whom government, through this constitution derives all its powers and authority
- b. The security and welfare of the people shall be the primary purpose of government; and
- c. The participation by the people in their government shall be ensured...(Nigeria,1999:S 14)

A cursory examination of these objectives depicts that they could serve as a parameters for assessing the responsibilities of our democracy, people's participation, poverty reduction and development imperatives.

7. CAUSES OF POVERTY IN NIGERIA

Saguaro (2002) outlines nine (9) man – made reasons for poverty. They are as follows:

- (a) Inability to use undeveloped talent and undeveloped potentials for money.
- (b) Ignorance of viable income – generating programmes, projects and activities.
- (c) The roles of wicked spiritual power from the underworld.
- (d) Laziness, carelessness and misuse of good chances and opportunities.
- (e) Lack of exposure an contact with the outside world and people
- (f) Job insecurity and civil service mentality
- (g) Total consumption habit – MR and MRS eat all
- (h) Poor investment culture.

He further stressed that there is nothing as bad as poverty and that a poor man is the lowers estate of the society. He is a foot – mat of the people and human dustbin in which all types of social trash are dumped; Example, insults and retrogressive remarks.

Poverty in Nigeria is associated with high unemployment, poor governance, corruption, lack of acceptability, gross violation of human right, nepotism and a *skewed income distribution*.

Table2.Relative Incidence by Occupation of Household

Occupation	1980	1985	1992	1996	2004
Professional and technical	17.3	35.6	35.7	51.8	34.2
Administration	45.0	25.3	22.3	33.5	45.3
Clerical & Related	10.0	29.1	34.4	60.1	39.2
Sales workers	15.0	36.6	33.5	56.7	44.2
Services industry	21.3	38.0	38.2	71.4	43.0
Agriculture & Forestry	31.5	53.5	47.9	71.0	67.0
Production & Transport	23.5	46.6	40.8	65.8	44.2
Manufacturing & Processing	12.4	31.7	33.2	49.4	44.2
Others	1.5	36.8	42.8	61.2	49.1
Students and Apprentices	15.	36.8	42.8	61.2	49.1
Total	27.2	46.3	42.7	65.6	54.4

Source: National Bureau for Statistics, 2012.

NEEDS (2004) identify the factors which contributed to poverty in Nigeria to include:

- (a) **Problem in the Productive Sectors:** The limited growths of investment and technological innovation have exacerbated poverty more especially in urban areas.

- (b) **Income Distribution:** The widening income inequality has contributed significantly to an increase in poverty in Nigeria. Economic growth has tended to benefit people who work in public sector management and Fiscal policies have not promoted income distribution.
- (c) **Weak Governance:** Weak governance (Including corruption) is believed to have contributed inversely to poverty in Nigeria. Governance problem has been among the major reasons why past poverty alleviation programmes have little effect.
- (d) **Social Conduct:** Social conducts have relatively affected the economic well-being of individuals and businesses in various ways. Conflict often leads to death of principal income earners, a distribution and loss of major assets such as house or land.
- (e) **Gender:** Women in Nigeria are more likely than men to be poor. They also have fewer options than men for escaping poverty. Partly due to tradition property rights and inheritance practices, widows are more vulnerable to poverty than widowers. Another reason is that women have less formal education than their male counterparts. Women generally benefit less from using employment to fight poverty.
- (f) **Environment Factor:** Empirical evidence shows that poverty and environment degradation are inextricable links in Nigeria. Environment degradation reduces opportunities for poor people to earn sustainable income.

8. EFFORTS AT REDUCING POVERTY IN NIGERIA

Poverty reduction is the most difficult challenge facing Nigeria and its people and is the greatest obstacle to the pursuit of sustainable socio-economic growth.

According to National Economic Empowerment Development Strategy (NEEDS 2004:33-34), the response of various administrations to poverty appears to be largely *ad hoc* and un-coordinated. Several State governments have also put poverty reduction schemes in place.

Programmes such as *Community Banks, Family Support Programmes, the National Directorate of Employment, the Peoples Bank, Better Life for Rural Women* and the *Directorate for Foods Roads and Rural Infrastructure* were established by different governments to address various manifestations of poverty such as: unemployment, lack of access to credit facilities, etc. With the advent of democratic government in 1999, measures were adopted to streamline poverty related issues in the country.

Table 1: Incidence of Poverty in Nigeria

S/N	Years	Incidence
1	2007	54.0
2	2008	54.0
3	2009	54.0
4	2010	69.0
5	2011	71.5
6	2012	72.0
7	2013	72.0
8	2014	72.0
9	2015	NA

Source: CBN Annual Report and Statement of Account, 2015

According to Oyemomi, (2004:5), no Nigerian government be it military or civilian has come without introducing and living behind one form of poverty alleviation or reduction programme meant to reduce the level of poverty, give hope to the poor, and to move towards

some sort of wealth creation. Strategies, policies and plans have been articulated; programmes and projects have been formulated and executed over the years. This has been in collaboration with international agencies. Oyemomi further made it clear that the committee established to review poverty alleviation agencies at the inception of present administration otherwise called the Joha – panel, identified about eighteen (18) institutions and agencies that have mandate directly on poverty alleviation, in addition to some other institutions that complement the activities of the case poverty alleviation agencies.

The Federal Government's pursuit of a National economic Employment and Development Strategy (NEEDS) over the period of 2004 – 2007 underpinned a sustainable macro – economic framework. The goals of NEEDS include: poverty reduction, employment generation, and wealth creation based on (i) reforming the way of government works (ii) expanding the private sectors, and (iii) implement a social charts/ human development agents. Each state of the Federation is expected to develop State Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (SEEDS) inconsistent with the overall National Development agencies (UNDP, 204:5).

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations were proffered:

- a. Government should reform school curriculum in such a manner that it will educate the society towards enterprising jobs rather waiting and relying on the national cake.
- b. The society should be sensitized and conscientize on how to venture into productive enterprises.
- c. Government should set proper machinery in motion to monitor the implementation and execution of its poverty programmes.
- d. NGO's, commercial banks, cooperative banks and government at all levels should create palliative measures such as easy accessibility to loan, agric programmes, setting of local industries etc. This will enable people to venture into meaningful projects.
- e. The habit of savings and planning should be inculcated to the society.

10. CONCLUSION

Poverty eradication has become an important goal of international organization and United Nation. In the follow-up of the UN conference and summits, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has made the eradication of poverty its paramount priority to aids development. The government of the Federal Republic of Nigeria has been among the most responsive States who have tried to implement the policies. Despite government effort to reduce the level of poverty, there are some factors that hindered its success. These are:

- a. Poor Coordination
- b. The absence of a comprehensive policy framework
- c. Excessive political interference
- d. In effective targeting of the poor leading to leakage of the benefits to unintended beneficiaries.
- e. The unwieldy slope of programmes which cause resources to be thinly special across too many projects
- f. Overlapping functions which led to institutional rivalry and conflicts
- g. The absence of sustainable mechanism in programmes and project
- h. Lack of involvement of beneficiaries in project design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

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