

## **Marxist Theoretical Debates on the Peasantry and the Contradictions of Sustainable Development in Nigeria**

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### **Abstract**

*By the simple fact of constituting the vast majority of the Nigerian population the peasantry should be the focus of sustainable development efforts in Nigeria. Ironically, however, rural transformation policies have never had a progressive impact on these rustic communities, utilising crude implements like the hoe and cutlass, but still feeding the pampered, unproductive and dependent urban dwellers. The fulcrum of the Marxist debate revolves around the continued relevance of the peasantry in a modern society. The crucial issues include their relentless ejection or dispossession by modern ravenous land vendors, proletarianization by an emerging bourgeois genre or modernisation through conscious reformist state policy. This paper seeks to provoke academic and policy thought on the issues surrounding peasant production even as it interrogates the persistent neglect and marginalisation of the peasantry with regard to issues of sustainable development and political power distribution in Nigeria, with the Ogoni in Rivers State as case study. All arguments in the paper are based on the hypothesis that the inability of the Nigerian state to design and implement a comprehensive and progressive policy on rural transformation is largely responsible for Nigeria's economic backwardness, which is also a true reflection of the backwardness of the peasantry. The objectives are to evaluate state policies on the transformation of traditional rural society as the solution to mass misery, poverty and illiteracy and to examine the adequacy of rural farming techniques for greater productivity in order to facilitate the process of development of the national economy. The Marxist political economy provides the theoretical framework for the study. Data gathering method emphasised secondary sources and the method of analysis is mainly historical. This paper is significant for refocusing academic interest on the peasantry as the primary and fundamental target of sustainable development in Nigeria. The paper concludes that until the agrarian issue is frontally tackled sustainable economic development in Nigeria would remain a mirage. It is therefore recommended that the Nigerian state should take a bold decision on the best rural transformation option, implement it and drive the economy to greater heights.*

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**Key words** – Peasantry, Development, Rural poverty, Transformation, Productivity, Agriculture

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### **Background to the Study**

Pre-colonial Africa generally exhibited a peculiar difficulty of attaching particular modes of production to vast territories that had been occupied by identifiable states or stateless communities. Onimode (1983: 10-14) identified three modes of production in pre-colonial Nigeria at various stages of development, overlap and transition. Indeed no Nigerian pre-colonial community could exclusively be identified with one particular mode of production.

Slaves and primitive tribes were found in Kanem-Bornu, Oyo, Benin kingdoms as well as the Hausa/Fulani Emirates overlapping with elements of feudalism. There was always “a particular combination, a specific overlapping of several pure modes of production” subjected under a dominant mode, a situation in Marxian terms referred to as a “social formation” (Poulantzas, 1978: 15; Anderson, 2006: 22). “The slave or captive mode of production prevailed in the Kanem-Borno Empire, from about the 10<sup>th</sup> century and in the Hausa states, as well as in the Oyo and Benin Kingdoms in the south (Onimode, 1983: 12). He argued further that by the 13<sup>th</sup> century these Kingdoms and parts of the East had evolved feudal structures in which social relations were based on bondage and exploitation. The land-owning nobility was made up of feudal vassals who supervised the collection of the chief’s tributes. Tributary extraction became the hallmark of the feudal and semi-feudal states of Africa.

Feudalism in Africa had unique features that distinguished it from European feudalism. Indeed the complexity of the African situation has prompted Coquery-Vidrovitch (in Gutkind & Waterman eds. 1977: 77-92) to suggest that the pre-colonial African economy could distinctly be termed an “African mode of production”, describing it as a;

combination of a patriarchal-communal economy and the exclusive ascendancy of one group over long-distance trade. The form of power at any given moment depends upon the nature of this group. If political authority was in the hands of the heads of kinship groups at the village level, their pre-eminence was then uncontested.

Following Balandier she, however, recognised a “conflict between a kinship-based tribal structure and a territorial organisation with centralising tendencies”, arguing further that “throughout Africa they had gone beyond the stage of primitive community” (ibid. pp. 77-81). This is clearly disputable taking into cognisance the discovery of the isolated, primitive Koma people on a mountain-top by youth corpsers in 1986 in Adamawa State of Nigeria. Nadel (cited in Goody, 1971: 5) actually referred to the Nupe kingdom in Northern Nigeria as a feudal state characterised by the royal house, the nobility, court slaves, fiefs, military service for the king, personal clientele, etc. The development of feudalism was weakened by the fact that Africa “is the one place in the world where agriculture was least liable to produce a surplus. Agriculture and craft techniques were particularly rudimentary (no wheel nor plough: the only tool was the hoe). The necessity of improving production with the aid of new tools or large public works was never felt” Coquery-Vidrovitch (in Gutkind & Waterman eds. 1977: 83).

Weak technological innovation still characterises agricultural and industrial engineering in Africa, several decades after independence. In relations of superiority and subordination it is technology that makes the difference. Colonialism was made possible only with technological superiority and so is it with agriculture and industry.

The absence of the wheel meant that man was not only unable to make use of animal power, but of the power of the wind and water as well. This is why the recent introduction of the lorry, the bicycle and the engine-driven mill has had such a revolutionary effect upon the rural economy in Africa (Goody, 1971: 26-27).

The pervasiveness of slavery throughout Africa has also been noted by Goody (1971:73), who studied the implications of the basic technological differences between Africa and Europe and within Africa, in terms of class differentiation. At the level of production the technological gap was between a shifting agriculture based on the hoe with iron, a scarce and expensive commodity, and an advanced agriculture based on the plough. Rodney (1972: 161) opines that in the centuries before colonial rule while Europe increased its economic capacity

Africa appeared to have remained static. *“The growing technological and economic gap between Western Europe and Africa was part of the trend within capitalism to concentrate or polarise wealth and poverty at opposite ends”*. In Europe machines and factories rather than land made possible the increase in both quality and quantity of goods. Africa’s inability for competitive technological development to facilitate production in both industry and agriculture still puts her at a disadvantage relative to Europe. The inevitable result is dependence on foreign goods, machines, technology and standards of living, with the peasantry at the base.

### **Statement of Research Problem**

By the simple fact of constituting the vast majority of the Nigerian population the peasantry should be the focus of sustainable development efforts in Nigeria. Ironically, however, rural transformation policies have never had a progressive impact on these dejected rustic communities, utilising crude implements like the hoe and cutlass, but still feeding the pampered, unproductive and dependent urban dwellers. In fact Nigeria’s agricultural policy with regard to the peasantry remains fuzzy eleven decades after Independence. The Marxist debate on rural transformation revolves around the best option among several paradigms provided by the experiences of Britain, France, Russia, China and Tanzania (Mabogunje, 1980) or a synthesis of relevant and adaptable elements of two or more of these models. The British example offers a complete dispossession, alienation and ejection of the peasantry, while the French model emphasised accommodation and integration into a capitalist-dominated economy. Russia and China offer collectivisation or co-operative rural communes *“under which members would keep their own dwellings and gardens, but would have their agricultural land and implements in common, farm collectively and share out the crop”* (Mabogunje, 1980: 134).

Tanzania, a close African neighbour, perhaps not as successful as others due mainly to imperialistic antagonism, propaganda and manipulation, still offers yet another model of collectivisation in rural transformation in a Third World setting. What worsens Nigeria’s case is that no such comprehensive rural transformation programme has ever been attempted. Nowhere in any of the examples cited has the experience been easy, but for an ailment to be cured the bitter pill must be swallowed. All the feeble attempts discussed below have left the rural agricultural sector isolated, stagnant and comatose with peasants still cultivating small holdings with hoes and cutlasses as it has been centuries ago. Government has failed to design and execute speedily a comprehensive rural transformation agenda involving the peasantry and their claims and productive activities on land, particularly in the countryside and integrate the same into the national economy as a mechanism for building a modern, integrated and self-reliant economy capable of meeting the needs of the citizenry. The current methods of relentless neglect, ejection and dispossession by modern ravenous land vendors and junkers as well as government administrative and coercive instruments like the draconian Land Use Decree or throwing projects around the rural areas, have achieved very little.

### **Aim and Objectives of Study**

This paper aims to articulate the debate on the most suitable rural development strategy with or without the active participation of the peasantry with particular reference to land management in the rural areas, drawing from the historical experiences of selected countries in Europe, Asia and Africa. The specific objectives of the paper are:

1. To examine the continued relevance of the peasantry to the Nigerian economy
2. To study the implications of a peasant-driven economy in form of an agrarian revolution

3. To properly articulate the issue of rural land possession and utilisation
4. To determine ways of modernizing peasant production for maximum productivity

### **Research Questions**

1. Should the peasantry be wiped out or integrated into the modern economy?
2. Should economic growth in a developing country be driven by peasant production in form of an agrarian revolution?
3. Should the peasantry remain the dominant possessor of rural land?
4. In what ways could peasant production be modernised for maximum productivity?

### **Research Assumptions**

This paper is guided by the following hypotheses:

1. The inability of the Nigerian state to design and implement a comprehensive, speedy and progressive policy on rural transformation is largely responsible for Nigeria's economic backwardness.
2. Where the peasantry is effectively mobilized and organized to drive the process of economic growth in form of an agrarian revolution general economic prosperity would be the result.
3. The resolution of the issue of rural land reform, possession and utilization is the panacea for economic transformation and rural development.
4. The more peasant production is modernized the more the productive capacity of peasants would be maximized.

### **Methodology**

Data gathering method emphasised secondary sources such as newspapers, news magazines, books, internet sources, academic journals, etc. and the method of analysis is mainly qualitative and historical. However, personal observation also served as a useful primary source of data collection from the researcher's familiarity with the Ogoni peasant crisis. Data analysis in this paper is based on the Marxist political economy approach in recognition of the constant and dialectical interaction between economic and political forces in shaping human societies.

### **Significance of Study**

This paper is significant for refocusing academic interest on the peasantry as the primary and fundamental target of sustainable development in Nigeria. The peasantry has hardly been captured in discussions at conferences on sustainable development. This paper is significant for insisting that the peasantry, being the largest segment of the society as well as the source of food and other critical agricultural produce, remains the most crucial element in any discussion on sustainable development in developing countries like Nigeria. It is also significant for the theoretical and policy specificity on the peasantry as a distinct social category rather than generalisations on the agricultural sector or rural development in academic discourses.

### **Conceptual Clarifications**

Sustainable development, as used in this paper maintains the line of the 1987 report of the Brundtland Commission as development "*that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs*". According to Wolf (1966: 3-4) "peasants are rural cultivators whose surpluses are transferred to a dominant group of rulers that uses the surpluses both to underwrite its own standard of living

and to distribute the remainder to groups in society that do not farm but must be fed for their specific goods and services in turn.” Kemp (1993: 26) said; “The wresting of a living from nature by the cultivation of the soil, this basic economic task of mankind, has been the *raison d’être* of the peasantry since settled agriculture began”. Atieno-Odhiambo (in Gutkind & Waterman eds., 1977: 233) saw peasants as “those whose ultimate security and subsistence lies in their having certain rights in land and in the labour of family members on the land, but who are involved, through rights and obligations, in a wider economic system which includes the participation of non-peasants”.

The common filaments that run through these definitions of the peasantry are inseparability from land, production basically for subsistence, dependence on family labour that is essentially unwaged, surplus production that is not profit-motivated but rather to meet obligations imposed by extraneous social forces and the existence of class differentiation as well as the state with its instruments of coercion no matter how rudimentary. Peasant society is therefore to be viewed as a transitional but yet resilient nexus between primitive communalism and capitalism or socialism. Post (in Gutkind & Waterman eds., 1977: 241-250) bases his definition of the peasantry on three sets of dynamic relationships – between the peasant and the land, the market and the state – all of which show a tendency towards a declining control of the producer over the product of his labour, his means of production and his labour power.

His subjugation under coercive instruments of the state is a clear indication that the peasant is also involved in political power relations, which serve to structure him for exploitation (Engels, 1978: 208). The object of analysis in this paper therefore is the peasant as distinct from the primitive cultivator and the agricultural capitalist entrepreneur who might even coexist with the peasant in the rural environment.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The Marxist political economy provides the theoretical framework for the study. Let it be understood from the beginning that there do exist various strands of the concept of political economy. First is the classical political economy of Adam Smith, David Ricardo, Alfred Marshall and John M. Keynes. Political economy is also a field of study dealing with the management of individual national economies and economic relations between states, all in the liberal tradition or simply the production, distribution and exchange of goods and services. Gilpin (in Art & Jervis eds. 2005: 282) summarises it into a relationship between wealth and power or “*absolute gains*”, i.e. economic science as a system of generalised opportunities for profitable business engagements in various degrees on the long run.

However, what Marxist political economy offers is rather a dynamic science with emphasis on human relations in the production process, a relationship that is fundamentally advantageous to a segment of society, exploitative and therefore conflict-oriented. Other elements of Marxist political economy include historical dynamics of social phenomena, the existence and conflict between social class categories. The oppressed people are viewed as the main productive force, their labour sustains society and therefore their material well-being should be the primary basis of socio-economic development. This is the reason the peasantry who constitute majority of the populations of the developing world, who maintain ownership of land in the countryside and who also feed even the urban population (both productive and otherwise), should be the focus of sustainable development. Political economy “*emphasises social actions over those of individuals, the social action being derived from the complex pattern of productive activity into which individuals enter with others*” (Ekekwe, 2009: 19).

More than economic management political economy is about man primarily as a labourer or worker and this is the basis of the explanation of his life. It is what gives meaning to his life (Ake, 1981: 9). Consequently economic development involves the productive capacity of man. He is, in generic terms, not just a target but the embodiment of development i.e. the development of his personal skills, methods, knowledge, instruments, objects and conditions of production. Constant improvement in all these capabilities enables him to impact his environment and transform it to satisfy his needs; this should actually be termed development. It is therefore not given from international donors, development organisations, blue-prints or master-plan documents externally imposed. This appears to be the missing link in Nigeria's agricultural development strategies. Political economy as the theoretical framework for this study is therefore quite germane.

### **Marxist Theoretical Issues on the Peasantry**

Wolf (1966: 12) posed the question whether the peasantry is a threat or a responsibility. From various theoretical perspectives the peasantry has been viewed either as a threat or a burden or a responsibility to the society. Industrialisation or modernisation remains an enduring threat to the survival of the peasant both from demands for surplus and competition from capitalist farms, operated with modern scientific and technological innovations. Olatunbosun (1975: 162) once warned that:

The choices before us are clear: either we have a meaningful rural development plan based on equity and social justice, or must forfeit a golden opportunity to achieve a decent level of living for all men whether they live in urban centres or in the rural areas.

Defective rural development policies that have marginalised and neglected the rural peasantry have been identified as the reason for Nigeria's economic backwardness. As Mabogunje (1980: 94) would argue "*rural development represents perhaps the only logical way of stimulating overall development*". In a well ordered economy this rural sector should be able to provide the food and raw material requirements of the economy for a balanced and integrated economic development. This neglect of the rural sector, lopsided and enclave urban development strategy is a colonial inheritance that has been dedicatedly maintained by contemporary administrations. Anikpo (1984: 27-47) takes the argument beyond the provision of amenities, inputs or funds in the rural areas to the wider class question. Beyond urban bias should be articulated the class bias of rural development efforts, between the social classes both in the urban and rural areas. Executing projects to satisfy the comfort or massage the ego of particular persons, particularly in rural areas is a common phenomenon in Nigeria. Sometimes contracts are awarded to particular individual party members or cronies of those in power as compensation for loyalty rather than a comprehensive policy effort to develop the rural areas.

In an integrated or coherent economy "*there is regional and/or sectoral complementarity and reciprocity*" (Ake, 1981: 43). The agricultural sector provides food for the population and raw materials for the industries. In turn industrial production supports agriculture with the provision of machinery and other agricultural inputs and also converts the primary agricultural produce into manufactured goods, including food. Peasants' role in such an economy is clearly cut out. However, as capitalism develops with increasing use of more machinery in production peasants, who naturally depend on the use of crude implements to produce primarily for subsistence without being motivated by the drive for profit, would be sidelined and gradually eliminated. In most cases it is only a small fraction of the peasantry shrewd enough to take advantage of technological innovations and transform themselves that benefit from the process. The rest are relegated to the background of low

productivity and poverty. Kemp (1993: 26) stated that the peasantry “*has more often been a victim than a beneficiary of economic growth . . . the great majority of the population in a pre-industrial society becomes an obstacle in the way of a more effective use of the land required for economic growth*”.

This is the reason capitalist agriculture or entrepreneurship is favoured in many countries on the path of capitalism, for effective utilization of land for large-scale production to meet the raw material needs of the industries as well as food for the growing population. Consequently, credit is usually selectively provided for this category of agricultural investors. Marx & Engels (1973), followed by Karl Kautsky (1988) and Lenin (1977), have argued that the peasantry was in transition and would cease to exist as capitalism developed to full capacity. Kautsky insists that capitalist industry, with its communications network, railways, post, newspapers, educational and health imperatives, constitutes the source of the inevitable demise of the self-sufficient peasant. Peasant production network is steadily broken up as the need for modern wares and tastes compels peasants to work for more money. Peasant life “*becomes impossible without money*” (Kautsky, 1988: 15).

Ironically the peasantry has shown greater resilience than Marx had anticipated. It is also one of the points of disagreement between the Marxists and Chayanov (1986: 195), who insists that the peasant family economy or “*peasant labour farm*” is a unique mode of production and is not likely to be superseded by the capitalist farm. The pervasive presence of the peasantry in many countries, including some advanced capitalist nations like France and Spain, socialist countries like Russia and China, as well as their domination of the economies of majority of the developing countries even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, appears to vindicate Chayanov.

Peasant production, both in slave, feudal and semi-feudal formations in pre-colonial Nigeria was primarily land-based. In the East and West there was direct land possession by peasant producers guided with traditional rights of inheritance. In the North, the aristocratic nobility controlled the land and through that control extracted surplus from the squatting peasants in form of tributes and taxes such as “*Jangali* (cattle tax), *Kuridin kasa* (land tax), *Zaka* (tithe on corn), *Gado* (death duty), *kuridin Sarauta* (accession duty) and *Sokoto Gaisua* (Sokoto gift/greeting) paid in horses and slaves by all other emirates to Sokoto and Gaudo” (Onimode, 1983: 20). The relationship between peasant producers and landlords was social, economic and political. In peasant societies or societies with substantial peasant presence there was always surplus production and the manner of extraction of this surplus by state officials was generally political, revealing a pattern of power distribution that was asymmetrical.

Peasant land holdings still persist in much of the rural areas in Nigeria, in spite of the Land Use Decree (or Act), which has remained unpopular and generally unacceptable among rural peasant communities. Capitalistic development or transformation is everywhere a serious threat to the peasantry. Wolf (1966: 12) argues that whether transformed or not the peasant still faces a threat from a new class of capitalist farmers or a state and society to be furnished with the “*funds of rent and profit which underwrite the entire social structure*”. Rodney (1972: 264-265) laments the deliberate and orchestrated failure of colonialism to “*improve agricultural tools and methods on behalf of African peasants*”. Consequently transformation of peasant agriculture could take the form of elimination to be replaced with new capitalist farmers, the path which Nigeria appears to favour, or incorporation, organisation and empowerment of existing peasant producers as the backbone of the new self-reliant economy.

Under this strategy the peasantry need not be eliminated or marginalised but rather retained as the main driver and beneficiary of general economic growth and development.

Shanin (1971: 109) recognises the existence of a distinctive African peasantry, *“though it may find itself involved in broader national systems which can have a range of possible characteristics – societies in which the dominant elements will be a variable combination of international corporations, immigrant settlers and immigrant trading groups, indigenes and elites and indigenous national bourgeoisies”*. Thus, the African peasantry is a unique and distinct phenomenon in need of a unique strategy for transformation. China provides the paradigm of creating new organisations among the peasants, establishment of cooperatives and *“presenting the peasants with concrete alternatives to submission and starvation”* (Moore Jr., 1967: 225).

### **Data Presentation and Analysis**

In this section of the paper the historical trends of rural transformation efforts in Nigeria and their success and challenges, will be discussed. Also to receive attention is the agricultural policy of the present administration under the Transformation Agenda as well as a critical examination of the particular case of the Banana Plantation Project of the Rivers State Government in Ogoniland.

### **Trends in Nigeria’s Agricultural Policies**

Nigeria has experimented with so many rural agricultural development strategies right from the colonial period such as integrated rural development, import substitution, export promotion, Green Revolution, Operation Feed the Nation (OFN), mechanised agriculture, etc. Virtually all these agricultural experiments and strategies have tended to neglect the poor peasant producers in the rural areas, who provided the export earnings that serviced Nigeria’s external reserves for over a decade before oil took over from the 1970s (Dudley, 1982: 230). Policies such as the Directorate of Food, Roads and Rural Infrastructure (DFRRI) were designed top-down without proper studies and consultation. Contracts worth billions of Naira were awarded to provide rural infrastructure in DFRRI’s *“sporadic efforts”* that hardly took into consideration the needs and desires of the majority peasant rural dwellers (Ake, 2001: 52-54). For the Green Revolution modern agricultural machines were imported and given to a new breed of capitalist farmers, credit was extended to them and other farm inputs provided to enable them engage in mass food production and possibly supersede the peasants in food production. With the promulgation of the Land Use Decree in 1978 state power was deployed to dispossess the peasants of their land. Fertilizer distribution became big business for a new genre of agricultural contractors to the detriment of the peasants, whose livelihood was tied to the land and who were the primary cultivators of the soil.

### **Nigeria’s Current Agricultural Policy**

Nigeria’s current agricultural policy is part of the Transformation Agenda of the Jonathan administration, which:

currently spends about \$12 million annually on importation of wheat, rice and fish alone. Since the backward integration policy was introduced the export index of these products has been on a steady rise. That of rice, for instance, which was at 90 per cent as at 1995 has grown by 800 per cent since the backward integration was introduced. That of palm oil has grown by 300 per cent while that of sugar has grown by about 500 per cent” (Adesina, TELL, July 30, 2012: 19).

Nigeria, from being a food basket with groundnut pyramids, cocoa, cotton, palm products, etc which she exported and gained foreign exchange, has since lost to other countries like Malaysia, which now earns \$18 million annually. Under the present Goodluck



Jonathan Administration's Transformation Agenda "13 new rice mills have been established by local private sector farmers".

**Table 1: New Rice Mills established by the private sector in Nigeria**

S/No.	Rice Mill	Metric Tons p.a.
1	Auchi	10,000
2	Benue	10,000
3	Ebonyi	30,000
4	Lagos	15,000
5	Uza (Kano)	30,000
6	Others	240,000
	Total	335,000

Source: TELL, July 30, 2012

The Agenda has a projection of 20 million metric tons of food for domestic supply as part of the wider goal of achieving self-sufficiency in food production, particularly rice, by 2015 (Adesina, TELL, July 30, 2012: 20). Cassava production has also increased and Nigeria is currently said to be the largest producer of cassava in the world. The Obasanjo Administration introduced cassava flour but all the SMEs involved folded up due to non-patronage, but the present Administration revived all of the 153 SMEs and established the Cassava Bread Development Fund as development of cassava bread initiative, which is 60 per cent the cost of wheat bread.

A critical aspect of the Transformation agenda is foreign investment in agriculture. Foreign direct investment in Nigeria has grown from \$1.6 a year in the mid-1990s to \$7 billion today. In the agricultural sector the present Administration has been able to "attract an American investor who is investing \$40 million in Taraba to produce rice on 30,000 hectares of land . . . That is a huge investment in Taraba State where 60 new commercial farmers are being supported by the state government . . . In the North they will put up two ethanol plants that will suck up a total of 100,000 hectares of sugarcane per plant" (Adesina, TELL, July 30, 2012: 23).

### **The Peasantry and Agricultural Policies**

The foregoing clearly reveals two trends in official agricultural policy that are at variance with the interests of the peasantry. The policy clearly favours SMEs or private sector investments, both local and foreign, which are not peasant and also encourages land grabbing which is a huge loss to the peasantry. For the Omor Rice Mill in Anambra State the Federal Ministry of Works, through FERMA, had to construct a 14-kilometre asphalt road to link the mill. This is much like the colonial policy of developing infrastructure to link projects with the seaports only for export. Peasant agricultural products rot away in the rural areas due to lack of infrastructure for preservation and easy evacuation to the city and international markets.

Credit facilities are made available mainly to the SMEs at the detriment of the peasants, whose land is appropriated and transferred to the former as well as big investors like the Obasanjos and Danjumas and their foreign partners. At both ends the peasant is the ultimate loser, not because he/she lacks the capacity to produce both to feed the population and for export but because official agricultural policy has decidedly marginalised him/her. His productive capacity, even with the traditional crude implements, has diminished only to the extent to which his valued objects of labour have been deprived him and no effort in terms of

official policy has been made to upgrade and modernise the means of his labour for improved productivity.

Under Former President Yar Adua's 7-Point Agenda, food security strategy was expected to be agrarian-based with emphasis on the utilisation of modern technology, research, development of agricultural inputs to revolutionise the sector, but all ended as mere glib talk. The first target of the 8-Point Millennium Development Goals is the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger by the year 2015, less than a year from now.

### **Case Study of the Land Use Decree and Banana Plantation in Ogoniland**

In 2012 the Rivers State Government acquired 2000 hectares of land in Sogho and Ue-Ken communities in Khana and Tai Local Government Areas for a controversial N20 billion Banana Plantation project. The project is under the Rivers State Sustainable Development Agency (RSSDA) designed to create an Agro-Industrial revolution in the South-South Region of Nigeria, create modern and commercialised agriculture in form of agro-projects in the area and also create employment opportunities for the people. Close to it is the multi-billion Naira Songhai Farms complex in Kpite, Tai Local Government Area. However, the Ogoni, emboldened by their negative experiences with Shell have remained suspicious, sceptical and cynical about the possibility of realisation of the stated objectives of the project. The State Government relied on the Land Use Decree (Act) No. 6 of 29<sup>th</sup> March 1978, which vested the land in each state of the Federation in the Governor of that state. The Decree "*envisage that rights of occupancy which would appear to replace all previous forms of title, would form the basis upon which land was to be held*" (Francis, 1984). It confers both statutory and customary rights of occupancy. The statutory rights of occupancy were to be granted by the State Governor and related principally to urban areas. In contrast the customary rights of occupancy were rights of persons or communities using or occupying land in accordance with customary law and included a customary right of occupancy granted by a local government.

The local governments' customary rights of occupancy could be granted to any person or organisation for agricultural, residential and other purposes with the proviso that grants of land for agricultural or grazing purposes should not exceed 500 or 5000 hectares respectively without the consent of the state governor. With the minor exception of land subject to federal or state claims, the Decree also empowered the local government to "enter upon, use and occupy for public purposes any land within the area of its jurisdiction and to revoke any customary right of occupancy on any such land". More so, the Act empowered the governors to "revoke rights of occupancy for reasons of overriding public interest". Such reasons included alienation by an occupier without approval, a breach of the conditions governing occupancy or the requirement of the land by federal, state or local government for public purposes. Only in the last of these cases would any compensation be due to the holder, and then only for the value of 'unexhausted improvements' on the land and not for the land itself (Part 11 Sec. 6 (5)).

The Land Use Decree as conceived is coercive in nature to force acquisition and occupation of land from the owners in both urban and rural areas by the three tiers of government in Nigeria. This eliminated all the previous ownership structures that were vested in peasant families and communities under which they had right to participate in any resources that accrued from their land. Coercive land acquisition through legislation in modern Nigeria flows from the Enclosure system in England during the transition from feudalism to capitalism (English Received Law being a principal source of Nigerian Law). Enclosure meant joining the strip of the open fields to make larger compact units of land.

These units were then fenced or hedged off from the next person's land. In this way, a farmer had land in one consolidated farm rather than in scattered strips. Kemp (1993) states that:

the final act came with the enclosures of the eighteenth century carried out partly by arrangement but predominantly by means of private Acts of Parliament obtained by the landowners. . . As enclosure was carried out in one village after another in the eighteenth century it only completed the destruction of a class which had begun perhaps five centuries before.

Though enclosure was later denounced by the Church and the government, like the slave trade the denouncement or abrogation came after the purpose had been achieved, which was the firm establishment of capitalism and destruction of the peasantry as a class. Marx defined primitive accumulation as "*the historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production. It appears as primitive, because it forms the prehistoric stage of capital and of the mode of production corresponding with it*" (Marx, Capital Vol. 1, 1996: 501). It was a process that involved the forceful and violent enclosure and acquisition of common lands to facilitate the process of development of capitalism, like the Land Use Decree (Act) in Nigeria.

### **Picture 1: Destructive Communal conflict over Banana Plantation in Ogoniland**



Source: Punch Newspaper February 22, 2015

Against this background it is clear that the stated objective of the Banana Plantation project to launch an agro-industrial revolution was anti-peasant as they were effectively displaced and dispossessed of their land and livelihoods. Rather than the expected benefits of boosting the rural economy and employment, what the Ogoni people experienced were hardship, suffering and increased poverty. Encompassing several villages in Tai and Khana Local Government Areas there have been several bloody communal clashes between supporters (Luusue) and opponents (Gior) of the acquisition, owing to the manner of acquisition as the peasants were neither consulted nor adequate compensation paid. Youths and cultists from the two communities of Luusue and Gior clashed in May 2012 resulting in the death of five persons and destruction of about 50 houses. There were street protests before the actual clash drawing attention to their displeasure arguing that; "*The banana plantation will not benefit us in any way. Our people live by farming. If you take all the land from them how would they survive? Government should go and look for land elsewhere and not in Ogoniland*" (Akasike, [www.punchng.com/feature/ogoni-and-rivers-politics-of-land](http://www.punchng.com/feature/ogoni-and-rivers-politics-of-land) retrieved February 22nd, 2015).

## Conclusion

The paper concludes that until the agrarian issue is frontally tackled sustainable economic development in Nigeria would remain a mirage. Like a surgical operation peasant agricultural transformation has to be decisively and speedily executed to launch Nigeria on the path to greatness. The present strategy of focusing on the SMEs has marginalised the large segment of rural peasant producers, leaving the agrarian question largely unanswered.

## Recommendations

It is therefore recommended that the Nigerian state should take a bold decision on the best rural transformation option, implement it and drive the economy to greater heights.

1. The peasantry should be the focus of rural transformation policies in Nigeria through massive empowerment programmes such as the introduction and utilization of new agricultural techniques, improved crop varieties, education, bank credit facilities, price protection mechanisms, improved transportation network, etc.
2. Rural agricultural policies should also capture the peasantry as essential stakeholders in the Nigerian agricultural industry. The current practice of dispossessing peasants of their land in the name of modernization has failed to achieve food security.
3. Improved and modernised agricultural inputs and facilities should also capture the peasantry. Limiting these inputs to modern mechanised farmers who use their political positions to loot the state treasury and then use modern farming to launder their illicit funds is not healthy for the Nigerian economy.
4. Food preservation facilities should be provided to avoid wastage of perishable farm products. Many rural areas and peasant farms are isolated from the towns and cities due to poor transportation facilities. Peasant farm products also wastefully perish in the rural areas due to the absence of storage facilities, the provision of which is hereby recommended.
5. Peasants should be mobilised to cooperate in order to benefit from government attention. The mobilization of peasants to form co-operative societies and the provision of government empowerment resources could achieve improved production and food security.
6. Peasants should be educated on new and improved methods and seed for rural farming. Proper and effective education and training for peasants on new crop varieties and farming techniques would achieve food security and improvement in peasant lifestyles.

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