

Why Have Efforts to End Poverty Failed in Nigeria

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Abstract

The paper examines the question why have efforts to end poverty in Nigeria Failed? It defines poverty as condition or circumstances that impede an individual or group of people from exercising their inherent traits to better their lots. The paper contends that the various poverty alleviation or eradication programmes and measures put in place failed because they are directed at the fruits of poverty and not poverty itself. This emanates from the way the concept, poverty is defined because the “what” points to the “Why” which give birth to the “how”. It further argues that poverty eradication is not all about handouts and meeting needs but creating enabling environment that allow the individuals to exercise their inherent traits to better their lots. The enabling environment is not possible to be created because the oppressors (rich) of the oppressed (poor) will not want anyone or anything to change the status quo. Hence efforts to end poverty will continue to fail because the real issue is not addressed.

Introduction

The high incidence of poverty in Nigeria amidst plenty is a pathetic case and call for concerned. About two-third of the Nigerian people are poor, despite living in a country with vast potential wealth. (NEEDS 2004). Although revenues from crude oil sales have been on the increase over the past decades, the citizens of the country have been falling deeper into poverty what an irony. In 1980, an estimated 27 percent of Nigerian lived in poverty. By 1999, about 70 percent of Nigerian has income less than \$1 a day and the figure have risen since then (NEEDS 2004).

The ugly scenario was corroborated by ex-president Olusegun Obasanjo, when he owned up in his media speech that he was aware of the great sufferings of Nigerians. Poverty levels vary across the country, with the highest proportion of poor people in the northwest and the lowest in the southeast. It is this pathetic situation we find ourselves in; that informed Forulkanmi to describe the situation as follows:

.....the stench of povertyis visible on the faces of Nigerians, in the nature of our living conditions, in the decaying morphology of our towns which are over congested and ragged, on the roads which are prone to erosion, untarred with imported junks referred to as motor vehicles..... dearth of drugs in our clinics..... collapse of tertiary education dearth of employment opportunities for able bodies and educated youths most of whom are for want of gainful employment involved in armed robbery and in other unwholesome activities (FORUKANMIM 2003:41).

The objective of this paper is to x-ray why efforts to end poverty in the country failed. The paper is made up of six sections: the first section is the introduction, the second section considers the definition of poverty, the third section discusses some of the theories of poverty, the fourth section dwells on the causes of poverty in Nigeria, the fifth section examines why efforts to end poverty failed and the final section concludes the paper.

2. The Concept of Poverty

The many different and sometimes conflicting definitions of poverty are an indication of the obscurity of poverty (IFE & TESORIERO, 2006). There is no universal acceptable definition of poverty. Some scholars are inclined to cultural definitions, while others preferred the political or statistical definitions of poverty. The truth is that, there is a common ground among researchers and technocrats, that the definition that is given to poverty forms the basis on which intervention is drawn (NYASULU, 2011; IFE & TESORIERO, 2006).

The cultural definition of poverty describes the internal attitudes and behaviour patterns that a person brings to any particular set of circumstances (OKOH, 1997). A statistical definition of poverty tends to use figures, numbers and percentages to define poverty (NYASHLU, 2011; SAUNDERS, 2004; NOBLE, RATCLIFFE & WRIGHT, 2004). Examples of statistical definitions of poverty include the followings:- World Bank defines poverty as any income below US \$1.25 a day for the poorest countries and US \$2 a day for the poor developing countries (RAVALION, 2003; UNDP-HDR, 2005). Thomas (2008) defined poverty as a ‘situation where the total earnings of a family are insufficient to obtain the minimum necessities for the maintenance of merely physical efficiency’.

From the above definition, a person making US \$2.20 a day will be regarded as not poor under the US \$2 a day definition. Some researchers pick hole in the definition, TOWN SEND (1990) observed that the time when these figures were introduced in 1990, the actual value of the US Dollar was \$2.15 but this was rounded down to \$2. He further reiterated that the value of the Dollar has been declining over the years. It is over two decades now since this value was imputed and therefore the same amount of money may not buy what is used to buy two decades ago as a result of inflation. He pointed out that double standard is been applied in the definition.

3. Theories of Poverty

There are several theories explaining poverty but in this paper we shall consider only two theories; Blame the victim theory and Blame society theory. Blame the victim theory is of two versions, the first version is propounded by Hernstein and Murray (1994) in their notorious book 'The Bell Curve'. They argue that genetic deficits in intelligence are central explanation for high poverty rates among black people in America. To them the poor are generally genetically inferior to the non-poor and it is this genetically inferiority that causes poverty and not the social system in which they live and the solution to poverty is to change the person and not the society. The next version of the Blame the Victim theory states that the deficit within poor people is a psychological disposition closely connected to culture. This explanation of poverty earned it the name 'cultural of poverty' thesis. The centre theme here is that poor people have a distinctive pattern of cultural values which creates difficulty in delaying gratification and planning for the future. (RYAN 1976) The Poor don't save. They have difficulty controlling their impulses-for sex, for immediate pleasure, for anger, for obeying the law. BANFIELD (1974) popularized this perspective in his study of poverty in Puerto Rico in the 1950s. He commends that poverty is explained by 'the existence of an outlook and style of life which predominately present-oriented and hence attaches no value to works, sacrifice, self improvement etc. BANFIELD stresses that these attributes may emanate from adaptations to past discrimination of a society or from other sources, but once they are imbibed by the person, to change it becomes difficult. They became internalized psychological tendencies which are passed on in an endless cycle of persistent poverty.

The second perspective of the theory of poverty is the Blame society theory. This theory states that poverty can better be explained by the rules of the game and power relation of society, not the internalized cultural tendencies of poor people. Circumstances of people across classes and economic conditions vary much more than values and personalities (Garfinkle, 1981).

4. Causes of Poverty in Nigeria.

Paul Collier of Oxford University during the 10th Conference of the National Economic Summit Group to study, analyze Nigerian economy and consider ways out of its economic Quagmire posited that:

.....the vast resources available to Nigeria have been used unproductively, to support an elite class who does nothing but gained so much from economic rent open to the class through access to those in authority while the majority of the population have floundered into a (poverty) condition worse than that found elsewhere in Africa (Vanguard October 24, 2003:10). The above citation aptly explained the cause of poverty experience in Nigeria.

Azaiki in his book 'iniquities in Nigerian politics' gave credence to Paul Collier view when he aptly described the situation thus:-

.....the exploration arm of the Nigerian Natural Petroleum Development, the Nigerian Petroleum Development Company established in the 1980s has suffered a stunted growth, unlike similar bodies in Libya and Nigeria. Even the Oil wells and fields they developed in the late 1980s have been handed over to major foreign firms and local operates owned by powerful military officers and their cronies. Regrettably, therefore, after nearly 50years of oil business in the country, Nigerian do not control up to 1% of aggregate assets (Azaiki, 2003:17).

This ugly situation is made worse by the elite class as the ill-gotten wealth from the Nigerian economy were transfer into foreign countries (Aghayere & Idada, 2010).

Poverty has many causes and all of which reinforce one another, hence forming the vicious circle of poverty. One of such myriad cause of poverty is the lack of basic infrastructural services, such as education, clean water, and healthcare. Next is lack of income, including food, shelters, clothing and empowerment. The third is lack of assets, such as land, tools, credit and supportive networks friends and family. (NEEDS, 2004).

Poor economic management, perhaps the greatest impediment to progress in Nigeria is the boom and bust mode of economic management, encouraged by the monolithic nature of the Nigerian economy. The unfriendly nature of the environment discourages private sector growth and this is made possible by the weak and inept nature of the public sector. Entrepreneurs wishing to operate in Nigeria face many constraints and these constraints include the following; inadequate and poor infrastructure such as road networks and electricity supply, poor security networks, corruption and poor judiciary services. These factors serve to discourage

investment in the country

5. Efforts to end Poverty by the Government.

The federal government and its state counterparts have made frantic efforts to end poverty in the country. Some of the programmes and strategies adopted by the government to put an end to poverty include; National Accelerated Food Production Programmes, establishment of Industrial Development Centres, Integrated Rural Development (IRD), Operation Feed the Nation; The Green Revolution, Community Development; Self-reliance Programme; Directorate of Employment (NDA), Oil and Mineral Producing Areas Development Commission; Better Life for Rural Women, (BLRW), National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPP) and the New Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS). Many of these programmes and strategies are moribund as a result of corruption and poor conception of the idea.

6. Why have efforts to end poverty failed?

Warwick (2013) pointed out six reasons in explaining why conventional methods to eradicate poverty have been unsuccessful. The reasons are presented below:-

- (i) Most anti-poverty programmes are planned by people wearing suits in air conditioned offices. Many a time, the planners of poverty alleviation programmes are foreigners who may not speak or understand the local language of the people. Even when anti-poverty programmes are designed by indigenes of the country where they are to be implemented, they may not have an in-depth knowledge about the poor.
- (ii) Anti-poverty programmes are mostly Top-Down hierarchy in nature. Top-down development programmes by government, non-governmental organization or international agencies are always counterproductive because of corruption, bureaucratic bottlenecks and the gap between the planners and the purported beneficiaries.
- (iii) Efforts to eradicate poverty have only rarely been directed at poor people or the challenges they face. Rather than working directly with the poor people, most of the efforts to end poverty adopted the indirect methods by seeking to change the economic environment rather than the poor.
- (iv) Give-aways breed dependence and self-doubt instead of social change. It is impossible to donate people out of poverty; the people need to invest their own time and money in bettering their lot. Teaching a man to fish may not be the answer if the person in question is not serious about fishing.
- (v) There's never enough money available for foreign aid or philanthropy to expand successful anti-poverty programmes. Even the most promising and cost-effective conventional development projects that have real bearing on the poor, fail to make a headway against poverty because of financial constraint. Hence the persistence of poverty amidst several efforts put in place.
- (vi) Anti-poverty efforts have been scattershot and uncoordinated; hence much progress is not achieved at the end of the programme.

The above reasons put forward by Warwick (2013) only help to substantiate the above assertion by Ife and Tesoriero (2006) that there is a common consensus among researchers and technocrats that the definition given to poverty forms the bedrock on which interventions are drawn. According to Nyasulu (2011) the 'what' point to the 'why' which informs the 'how'. The persistence of poverty amidst billion of Nairas and Dollars spent on poverty eradication programmes is disturbing and call for concerned and thought provoking questions. Could the futile efforts at eradication poverty be as a result of wrong diagnosis of the concept 'poverty', which leads to wrong application of programmes and measures? In view of the above and in tandem with Ife and Tesoriero (2006), there is the need for us to revisit the concept 'poverty'.

According to Nyasulu (2011) the definition of poverty is anchor on the culture or state that someone belongs to. The definition of poverty is not about political agenda. It is about the dignity of human spirit and its inherent ability to better itself (Munroe, 2003). Anything short of this is not inherent but rather circumstantial, conditional and tantamount to setting the cart before the horse. Hence poverty is not all about figure, amount of assets or Nairas and dollars at one's disposal, but rather an individual inability to affect positive change in his live. (Kathlen McHigh, 2006, reported on the oracle think quest website n.d)

Poverty therefore refers to conditions or circumstances that impede an individual or group of people from exercising their inherent traits to better their lots. Lack of food, clothing, money and shelter of a wretched type is only fruits of poverty and not poverty per se. It is the circumstances or conditions that hinder the individual or group of individuals from demonstrating their inherent traits to bring about a positive turn around in their lives that is the actual poverty. Therefore to end poverty, these circumstances or conditions must be addressed as to liberate the people and until this is done every effort at ending poverty will always meet a brick wall.

CONCLUSION

The high incidence of poverty in Nigeria despite the billions of Naira spent on all manner of poverty alleviation

programme is a pointer to the fact that the programmes and measures put in place to combat poverty are ineffective and unsustainable in nature. This is because wrong diagnosis of a problem will always leads to wrong application of measures to solve the problem. It is the wrong diagnosis of the concept 'poverty' that leads to wrong application of programmes and measures aim at eradicating it. Remember that the 'what' point to the 'why' which in-turns give birth to the 'how'. We therefore conclude that poverty eradication is not all about handouts and meeting needs but creating enabling environment that will allow the individual to exercise his inherent trait to better his lot. This view is corroborated by King Solomon in the Bible thus: Again I saw all the oppressions that are practiced under the sun. And behold, the tears of the oppressed, and they had no one to comfort them! On the side of their oppressors there was power, and there was no one to comfort..... Then I saw that all toil and all skill in work came from a man's envy of his neighbour (Ecc, 4:1-4) The Bible Reversed Standard Version).

Until the conditions or circumstances that give rise to the oppression of the oppressed (poverty) is addressed, every poverty eradication efforts will prove abortive and not worth the resources committed to it. But the question begging for an answer is can these circumstances or conditions be changed as to put an end to poverty? The answer is crude No because, on the side of their oppressors there was power and there was no one to comfort them. The above nerve breaking answer, is corroborated by King Solomon in Ecclesiastes 1:14,15 when he rightly observed that:

*I have seen all the works that are done under the sun, and behold,
All is vanity and vexation of spirit. That which is crooked cannot be made straight:
And that which is wanting cannot be numbered (Ecclesiastes 1:14,15,.
The Bible authorise King James Version).*

A cursory look at modern efforts to end poverty illustrates this well, because the oppressors (rich) of the oppressed will not want anyone to change the status quo. Hence every effort to end poverty failed.

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