

## **Rural Poverty Alleviation and Democracy in Nigeria's Fourth Republic (1999-2009)**

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**Abstract:** This study assesses the impact of poverty alleviation programmes of government on the rural dwellers in Nigeria from 1999 to 2009. It argues that the various poverty alleviation programmes put in place by government have not made any meaningful impact on the lives of majority of rural people who are living below poverty line. Although poverty is a universal phenomenon that affect the socio-economic and political well being of its victims whether in a developed or underdeveloped country, however, available statistics shows that poverty in poor countries is absolute and more pronounced in rural areas. Under the present democratic dispensation, the rural folks that constitutes significant segment of the Nigerian society live in abject poverty and are neglected in terms of socio-economic and political well being. The poverty alleviation programmes of government that suppose to bring succor to rural folks are urban-biased. The paper concludes that democracy cannot thrive in an impoverished society where people live below one dollar (\$1) per day, and where stresses of disease, famine and climatic shock are pervasive. Finally, the research suggests the way forward towards poverty reduction in rural Nigeria.

**Key words:** Democracy, poverty, poverty alleviation, rural

### **INTRODUCTION**

The stability of a fledging democracy depends to a very large extent on the ability of the governing elites to eradicate poverty. For democracy cannot thrive in an impoverished country where people live below \$1 per day, and where stresses of diseases, famine and climatic shock are pervasive (Sachs, 2005). Although poverty is a universal phenomenon that affect socio-economic and political well being of its victims whether in a developed or underdeveloped country, however, available statistics shows that poverty in poor country is absolute and more pronounced in the rural areas. In Nigeria, the rural populations that constitute about 73% of the country's population (Presidential Report, 1999) are backward and underdeveloped. A visit to any rural settlement in Nigeria will reveal dirt and unmotorable roads, women and children walking barefooted and trekking long distance to get water and firewood, pupil studying under trees, a dilapidated and ill equipped health centers and scores of poverty driven problems (Aderonmu, 2007). The rural dwellers suffers on many fronts and are powerless to improve their situation because of ill-health, poor education and lack of access to many opportunities available to them. They are extremely vulnerable to natural disasters and economic upheavals as well as to crime and violence. The rural dwellers are often deprived of the basic rights that urban dwellers take for granted.

Although successive government in Nigeria since independence to date have attempted severally to

eradicate poverty in the country through various programmes, but the assessment of their contributions to poverty reduction is scanty compared to huge amount of resources committed to the programmes. (Egware, 1997). Thus the primary focus of this research is to appraise the various poverty alleviation programmes in Nigeria since 1999 when the country returns to civilian rule. In the light of the above, the paper concludes that poverty alleviation Programmes in the fourth republic have failed to confront the multidimensionality of poverty. Priorities are usually sent from 'the outside', thus being top-down rather than bottom-up approach and unable to respond to the particular needs of the poor. From the foregoing, the paper addresses the following issues:

- Theoretical framework
- Conceptual clarification
- Appraisal of poverty programmes in Nigeria.

### **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

**Theoretical framework:** This study was carried out in May 2009 to investigate the impact of poverty alleviation programmes of government in a decade of Democracy in Nigeria.

However, many theories have been propounded to explain the persistence of poverty in both urban and rural Nigeria. Some of these theories include: Functionalist, Natural Circumstantial, Power theory, urbanized theory etc. These theories have been extremely varied and have evolved over the years.

However, for the purpose of our analysis in this paper, urban-biased theory is adopted. The central argument of this theory is that the governing elite and decision maker concentrates their development efforts in the urban centres to the total neglect of rural areas. The rural dwellers have no basic needs of life compared to their urban counterparts (Aderonmu, 2007). Since independence, successive governments that came to power in Nigeria concentrated their major development and poverty eradication programmes in the urban areas and either neglect or give token to rural areas. This was driven by erroneous belief that rural areas are outside production and therefore contributes little to socio-economic and political development of the country. This has had negative impact on rural dwellers. The young and energetic youths who suppose to work in the productive sector of rural economic development have found their ways to urban centers to look for jobs that are not available.

#### **Conceptual clarification:**

**Poverty:** The concept of poverty like any other concept in social sciences has not lent credence to a universal acceptable definition. Several scholars have provided useful definitions of the concept (Okoh, 1998; Townsend 1962; Narayan 2000; Khan, 2000). However, for the purpose of our analysis in this paper, we adopt the Meier (1983) definition of the concept. The Meier conceived poverty from two different perspectives:

- 'Moneylessness'- means both as an insufficiency of cash and chronic inadequacy of resources of all types to satisfy basic human needs such as nutrition, rest, warmth and body care, and
- 'Powerlessness'- meaning those who lack the opportunities and choices open to them and whose lives seem to be governed by forces and persons outside their control (i.e. people in positions of authority, or by perceived 'evil forces or 'hard luck').

A critical analysis of the above definitions captures the social-economic and political realities of the rural populations. In Nigeria today, the rural populations are economically backward and lack the means of all season's livelihood. They are politically marginalized and vulnerable to political manipulation in favour of their urban counterparts.

**Democracy:** According to Onitiri (1966) leadership by participation (democracy) is most critical in addressing the problems of the grassroot community. It is a system that can most likely bring about sustainable rural development and provide the opportunity for rural communities for better living standard.

It is on this ground that Chafe (1994) observed that the word 'democracy' has become a household word,

which has lend itself to many interpretations. Thus democracy is seen as involving the ability of the electorates to choose freely on a regular basis between competing persons, parties or groups of contestants who offered themselves to steer the wheels of the state. Accountability, universal adult franchise, transparency, respect for human rights and independent and impartial judiciary are the hallmark of democratic government (Dahl, 1989).

The elegance of this definition lies in the fact that electorates are conferred with the right to demand accountability from their elected representatives and also have the power of choice through their votes if they are not satisfied with the performance of their representatives. Therefore democracy is built on constitutional government that provide for human rights and equality of persons before the law (Iorapuu, 2002).

Furthermore, democratic governance most especially as it affects the welfare of grassroot population has attracted fundamental questions in recent times. Such questions include what is our understanding of democracy at the grassroots? Whose democracy- the people or the elite? What is happening to poverty, squalor and human degradation at the grassroot? Though the enigma of its magnitude is inexhaustible, but the late Professor of Political Economy, Claude Ake provides insight to these naughty questions. He argues that:

"Africa is democratizing, but the democratization in Africa does not appear to be in the least emancipation. On the contrary, it is legitimizing the disempowerment of the ordinary people who seem to be worst off than they used to be because their political oppression is no longer perceived on a problem inviting solution, but a solution endowed with a moral and political legitimacy"

The point here is that the logic of democratic society, which is anchored on the advancement of people's rights to self-determination, remained turbulent and contentious. (Dauda, 2007). The dilemma of the rural communities is that they are often not well enlightened to discern the prevailing democratic trends and this has given room for political elites and the state actors to capitalize on their ignorance and poverty, thereby creating a condition in which rural communities becomes so vulnerable to manipulation, marginalization and general impoverishment in social-economic and political survival.

**Appraisal of poverty alleviation programmes in the fourth republic:** The damaging consequence of the effect of poverty on the economic and political development aspirations of most nations often give their leaders a relentless concern and effort towards mitigating the social malaise. Prior to the country's journey to the current democratic dispensation in May 1999, various regimes

both military and civil rules have put in place different programmes in an attempt to fight against poverty. Among such programmes according to Ijaiya and Mobolaji (2004) include the River Basin Development Authority (RBDA), the Operation Feed the Nation, the Green Revolution (GR) the Agricultural Credit Guarantee Scheme (ACGS), the Directorate of Foods, Road and Rural Infrastructure (DIFRRI), National Directorate of Employment (NDE), the Family Support Programme (FSP) and the Family Economic and Advancement Programme (FEAP).

The democratic era under Obasonjo's regime witnessed the introduction of the Poverty Alleviation Programme (PAP) designed to provide employment to 200,000 unemployed youths all over the country. It was also aimed at inculcating and improving better attitudes toward a maintenance culture in urban and rural roads and public buildings. By 2001 PAP was phased out as a result of structural inefficiency and fused into the newly created National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP). The National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP) consists of four schemes namely:

- Youth Empowerment Scheme (YES)
- Rural Infrastructural Development Scheme (RIDS)
- Special Welfare Services Scheme (SOWESS)
- Natural Resources Development and Conservation Scheme (NRDCS)

For the first times in the history of Nigeria's democratic rule, rural areas were accorded special consideration through the creation of Rural Infrastructural Development Scheme in an effort to ameliorate the deteriorating and devastating conditions of life in Nigerian rural areas. The (RIDS) was designed to deal with rural energy and power supply, portable water, irrigation scheme to boost rural agricultural production, rural transportation and communication. The main programmes for implementation were:

- Rural Electrification
- Rural Water Development and Supply
- Rural Transportation, Development
- Rural Communication Development

The question to ask is whether this policy designed under the National Poverty Eradication Programme to accord attention to rural areas was successful. A critical assessment of the performance of NAPEP in the rural areas lives much to be desired. Available evidence shows that rural population still remained polarized and impoverished under the civil democratic rule in Nigeria's Fourth Republic. According to British Broadcasting Corporation World News programme on 10 years of democracy in Nigeria, (01 May, 2009), the level of poverty which stood at 34 million population in 1999

when Nigeria returned to democratic rule has risen to an alarming and astonishing rate of 74 million population within ten years of democratic rule.

The ruling Peoples Democratic Party used the programme For Political patronage. In the comment of Omah (2004), "the Poverty Alleviation Programme funds were used to buy PDP officials at all levels to dispense favour to party loyalists. PDP leaders up to the state and local executives are known to have forwarded the list of party faithful, cronies and family relations for inclusion in the Poverty Alleviation Programme.

In addition to the above, the management of Poverty Eradication Programme was worsened by the adoption of a top-bottom approach in the implementation of the policy. The target groups, who are the poor in the society who are predominantly in the countryside, were hardly reached due to the fact that the programme existed at the state and local government headquarters, but failed to have linkage with the traditional and community leaders for effective penetration of the grassroots (Eze, 2003).

The dismal performance and achievements of the National Poverty Eradication Programme gave impetus to holistic and elaborate conception of the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS) at the federal level. At the state level, it was tagged "State Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (SEEDS) while at the local level, it was coined as Local Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (LEEDS). The programme was holistic and elaborative in the sense that it was designed to address a wide range of socio-economic and political issues in the country most especially in the rural areas by reforming governmental institutions, developing the private sectors, implementation of social charters and value orientation.

In spite of these programmes put in place to address the perennial problem of grinding poverty in the country, there had not been substantial achievements especially at the local level as most of the people in rural areas remained impoverished and socio-economically and politically subjugated and demean.

Furthermore, the present regime of Umar Yar' Adua is also treading the beaten path. Its works with an economic team and has outlined the elements of an economic reform programme without a political reform agenda. It christened it "The Seven Point Agenda". The areas of priority of the agenda of the incumbent regime are: security of life and property; wealth creation; development of human capital, in particular education; land reform; capacity for mass transit that moving beyond road transportation; the situation in Niger Delta (Asobie, 2007). This agenda seems laudable but there is no corresponding political reform agenda and political will to accomplish them. Today, what we are presented with the same scripts read by Obasanjo. For instance the regime retain some of the old programmes of its predecessor that are either inactive or moribund e.g.,

NDE, NAPEP, NEEDS, Millennium Development Goals among others. There is no unmistakable and unambiguous sign of a clear vision of a different and much better possible future for Nigerians. Available statistics suggest that there had not been substantial and effective policy implementation of poverty alleviation to justify the huge resources invested in the policy. The most worrisome about the policy initiative is that while it remained thick in both print and electronic media, it is very light in terms of practical approach and implementation. Against this background, the poverty alleviation programme under Yar'Adua has not made any meaningful impact on the poor masses of Nigeria. The objectives and purposes of the programme ran parallel to the expectation of Nigerians. The implication of this is that Yar'Adua's poverty alleviation programme is treading the same disastrous path as those of his predecessors.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

It is important to discern that the causes of poverty in rural areas in Africa and Nigeria in particular cannot be attributed to population and the recalcitrant attitude of the ruralists for a change and embrace innovations, although these may be contributory factor. However, the major explanatory factor responsible for persistent poverty, hunger and rural underdevelopment in Nigeria is unequal ownership of land and other productive assets, corruption, the pattern of technical innovation and capital accumulation which is biased against labour informed the nature of rural exploitation. In other words, rural poverty is deeply rooted in historical incorporation of Nigeria's economy into the capital system with systematic appropriation of surplus produced by the peasant farmers. Unfortunately, postcolonial Nigerian state failed to pursue patriotic, aggressive rural development policy that can ensure the transformation of the socio-economic and political life of the rural dwellers.

It is against this background that we propose the following strategies for addressing the problem of rural poverty:

In addition to upholding the sanctity of our nascent democracy, there is need for the creation of National Rural Development Commission (NRDC) with specific responsibility of improving rural agricultural production, rural infrastructural and social development, rural investments and development of communications and transportation system.

The Adult Literacy Programme should be vigorously pursued and strengthened to provide opportunity for rural population to improve their intellectual potentials. This will make it easier for adaptation to change and innovation aimed at rural transformation. In addition, rural Community Based Organizations (CBOs) should be included in the initiation and implementation of Poverty

Allegation Programmes. This will give room for meaningful contributions from rural representatives of the poor at the grass root level. The bureaucratization and over-politicization of the operational mechanism of Poverty Alleviation Programmes be minimized to give room for effective and efficient performance. Similarly, funds earmarked for alleviating poverty should be committed into the programme that will practically touch the life of the poor masses and not to be used by party functionaries for political patronage.

There is a need for institutional strategy for checking the influence of elites and bureaucratic officials in the implementation of laudable government programmes on poverty alleviation. This is necessary because most times the benefits and objectives of these programmes are either hijacked or truncated by these social forces.

Government should promote appropriate technological innovations and partnership among the people to enhance sustainability through the people's ownership of productive resources.

Finally, the government and Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) and intellectuals should embark on research to generate data or create information system on the magnitude of rural poverty and target remedial measures.

### **CONCLUSION**

The paper demonstrates that rural poverty is complex and endemic and therefore a pragmatic approach is required for sustainable poverty alleviation programme. And that whatever programme is initiated to transform rural life, must be vigorously, honestly and patriotically pursued to ensure the success of such programme. There can be no viable and workable political system that can address the problem of rural dwellers other than democratic governance. Democracy is not only the best system but also a system that guarantees against exclusion and marginalization of the poor particularly the rural poor. On this note we concur with the argument of Ake (1996) that democracy is not merely desirable, it is necessary. It will not solve all the problems of Africa but non of the major problems can be solved without it".

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