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AN ASSESSMENT OF POVERTY AS A THREAT TO NIGERIAN FLEDGING DEMOCRACY

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the concept of poverty as a threat to democratic governance. Poverty (a social problem) as observed in this study, is a great hindrance to democracy. To this extent, the problem of poverty needs be addressed if true democratic governance is required. it is worthy to note that, the only form of government that guarantees sustainable economic development is democracy and in order to achieve this, the governance issues must resolve the problems of corruption, lack of commitment to the nation's service, agricultural sector and poor state of infrastructural facilities.

Keywords: poverty, democracy, government, development

INTRODUCTION

Poverty is defined as insufficient income for securing the basic necessities of life, such as food, portable water, cloth and unemployment. It also refers to hunger, lack of shelter, not being able to speak properly, not having a job, fear for the future, losing a child to illness (brought about by unclean water), powerlessness, lack of representation and freedom (Jhingan,2001). These problems of illiteracy, hunger, poverty stricken and survival-oriented people are equally applicable to Nigeria. Although, poverty is a world-wide phenomenon, it has been observed that Nigeria is one of the poorest countries in the world. The situation has reached an alarming proportion as more than 45% of the population live below the poverty line, while 67% of the poor are extremely poor. Federal Office of Statistics Report for the period 1980-1996 indicates that about 67 million Nigerians are living below the poverty level. This report also shows that, between 1980-1985, the percentage of the rural dwellers and urban inhabitants in the core poverty bracket rose from 6.5 and 3.0 percent to 14.8 and 7.5 percent respectively (FOS, 1999).

Feeding has been a major problem in most Nigerian homes. House keeping allowances of housewives are competing with other

needs like school fees, house rents and social responsibilities. Unemployment is rising daily in Nigeria. According to the National Directorate of Employment (NDE) as quoted by the News Magazine, about 1,817,395 Nigerians are currently unemployed. The statistics of the agency showed that, an average of 50,000 unemployed persons registered in each state of the federation and Abuja (The News, 2002). In addition to this, National Population Commission (NPC) report of 1991, indicates that overall dependency ratio in Nigeria is 234 dependants per 100 gainfully employed persons. In the rural areas, it is 286 dependants per 100, while in the urban centre it is 219 per 100 workers. It is 302 and 222 dependants per workers in rural and urban centre respectively. This means that a gainfully employed person in Nigeria is saddled with the responsibilities of about 234, 286, 219, 302 or 222 dependants respectively depending on the location and age bracket (NPC, 1991).

Meanwhile, good health, education, sanitation, adequate food intake, adequate water supply and housing are the major determinants of a nation's development. The development of a nation is retarded if it fails to provide these basic needs of life. The economic calamity experienced by Nigerians, prompt them to feel that there is no hope. The hope gives birth to expectation of good governance. This expectation induces them to embrace democracy. They reasoned that with good governance, equity, fairness and justice in the land, there would be economic prosperity, which would in turn enable individuals to translate their innate human potentials into concrete realities, which summed effect would be better living standard. It was as a result of this belief that democratic government was adopted in May 29th 1999 after a long period of military regime. It was envisaged that this system would bring the greatest happiness to the greater number of people. And citizenry would have opportunity to control government through their representatives, irrespective of their social status.

It is against this background that this paper now takes a cursory look at the concept of democracy and poverty, good governance and development with particularly emphasis on the causes of poverty as well as its impact on democracy in Nigeria.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to examine the relationship between Poverty and Democracy, it is necessary first to discuss the meaning of poverty and democracy in the different senses in which the terms are being used.

Democracy means involvement of the people in the running of political, socio-economic, and cultural affairs of the society (Chik...

1994). Usifoh (2005) defines democracy as an institutional arrangement, where citizens choose representative accountable to them in the discharge of their duties and expected to articulate the interest of their constituency. Held (1993) views democracy as "a cluster of rules and institutions permitting the broader of the majority of citizens in the selection of representatives who alone can make political decisions. The cluster include: elected government: free and fair elections in which every citizen's irrespective of distinctions in race, religions, class, sex and so on: freedom of conscience, information and expression on all public matters broadly defined: the right to form independent associations including social movements, interest groups and political parties". However, Edmond (1991) defines democracy as a political system where the state's intrusion into the lives of citizens is minimal, and its activities are circumscribed by the rule of law. In addition, individual liberty is paramount and basic human and political rights are constitutional protected. Democracy, according to the World Bank (1997), could make reform more feasible in several ways, political checks and balances, free press, and open debates on the costs and benefits of government policy could give a wider public a stake in reform. The need to produce good results in order to be re-elected could help, rather than hinder economic change. It increases government's incentive to perform well and keep predatory behaviour in check. These definitions show that democracy consists of a set of ideas, institutions and process of government that allow people to choose their leaders. It also focuses on political right of citizenry and development.

On the other hand, poverty is a living condition in which an entity is faced with economic, social, political, cultural and environmental deprivation. It is a state of involuntary deprivation to which a person, household, community or nation can be subjected (Olu and Ade 1999). Traditionally, poverty is defined as having insufficient income for securing the basic necessities of life such as food, portable water, clothing and shelter. Oladunni (1999), Englama and Bamidele (1997) define poverty as a situation where an individual is not able to cater for his/her needs. His/her basic needs according to Burkey (1993) may include clean air water an adequate and balance diet, emotional and physical security and appropriate clothing and shelter. Similarly, UNDP (1996) defines poverty as a state of being deprived of the essentials of well-being such as adequate housing, food sufficient income, employment, access to required social services and social status. Therefore, democracy has a better potential for a whole development strategy and result, because, it is an arrangement which

makes leaders to be accountable to the people. But where it fails to perform the necessary functions, its recognition will be eroded.

The quality of governance is the major determinant of a country's economic development. The institution and supportive framework of the state are essential for production and investment to aid development. The role of government in the provision of public goods and the establishment of rules for proper management of markets is a pre-condition for economic success. World Bank (1992) sees good governance as an efficient and accountable management by the public sector and a predicable and transparent policy work frame. Olomola (1996) refers to development as advancement through progressive and qualitative changes in economic, social, cultural, technological and political conditions of a society, leading to an improvement in welfare of the citizen. Kamar (2005) also sees development as the fulfillment of the necessary conditions for the potential of human personality, which translates into reduction in poverty, inequality and unemployment. Security of life and properties is fundamental to good governance.

The duty of the state to put all available resources together in order to create a peaceful political environment is an incentive that would bring development to the state. Poor governance generates insecurity and risky environment discourages foreign investors. A report issued by an International Consortium ranked Nigeria as the most political risky country in the world (Charles, 2003). Meanwhile, the ability to attract foreign investment is often used as a barometer to measure the quality of governance of receiving country (Onitiri, 2003). Since development is the change from a less to a desirable state, this change involves people who will co-ordinate the available resources for the changes and bring development to the state. Though, it is difficult to achieve where ability to guarantee law and order is lacking. Ake (1996) asserts that the principle we need most not only to resolve the national question, but also to address the bane of Africa generally, and Nigeria in particular, namely our insistence on consuming without producing. In his own view, Akanbi (2004) asserts that good governance is the ability of a government to maintain social peace, guarantee law and order, promote or create conditions necessary for economic growth and ensure a minimum level of social security. Where good governance has been lacking, progress (be it economic, social or cultural) has not taken place. Many governments claimed to be democratic in nature, but their actions do not reflect what they preached. Such governments take decision unilaterally without consulting or considering the opinion of the masses. For instance, in

1988, President Babangida went for IMF loan. The future of the country was mortgaged and the money that was supposed to be used for development projects was diverted to service the debt. At present, Nigeria's debts service obligations in US \$1.6 billions per annum (CBN online). Therefore, good governance is an ingredient that provides conducive environment for foreign investors, which can promote economic growth and development.

Poverty is not a natural condition nor is the poor makers of their own misfortunes or the victims of their own faults and weaknesses (CHRI, 2005). Therefore, corruption, greediness, neglect of agricultural sector and poor state of infrastructure are identified as the causes of poverty in Nigeria.

Corruption is a social problem that creates a foundation for the existence of poverty. This is because the resources meant for development are being diverted to private uses. Government officers are concentrating more on obstructing public welfare and engaging in personal gains rather than legal obligations. Based on this, Adebayo (2000) said Nigeria's main problem is not its federalism, but rather its visionless and impossible political elite who have manipulated its politics, economy, and religion to serve their own parochial interest stashing away billions of dollars in foreign bank accounts while urging the masses to endure two decades of austerity and structural adjustment. The priorities of government's policy lack ethics and often resulted in expenditures that are not in line with people needs. For instance, the sum of ₦10 billion was released by the federal government in 1999 to implement Poverty Alleviation Programme (PAP). This money was reportedly shared among the members of the ruling party (*The Punch*, 2004). Similarly, Randle (2003) asserted that, most Nigerian's external debts were tainted with fraud and corruption by both the lender and borrower. He added that, he was aware of a particular occasion when US \$1 billion was shared in Switzerland without a single dollar ever reaching Nigeria. The people were also denied access to economic and social welfare; money was usually collected from them before official duties were discharged to them. This reduces the number of citizenry that benefited from governmental programmes that are design for the poor in the society.

Most government projects that have capacity of reducing poverty in the society were not executed by the corrupt officers and none of these contractors/officers have been prosecuted for non execution of the contracts (Oshiomole, 2003). Rather, it is the poor man that carries the burdens of the corrupt officials.

Greediness of our leaders is another factor that causes poverty in Nigeria. Greed is the condition or behaviour where a human being plans to have more than he/she deserves. It is a form of behaviour that usually thrives in a society where the principle of equity and the fairness of being your country's lover are prohibited. It is a behaviour pattern that kicks against the principle of rule of law, yet embraced by our leaders. The interest of the masses is no longer protected, they want to acquire wealth that cannot be exhausted by their third generation. This was supported by Jibrin (2003) who quoted Ogwuna, former CBN governor that the late General Sanni Abacha signed personally for the monies in his capacity as the Chief Accounting Officer. This shows that the smart ones and the privileged members of the society have a bright opportunity for grabbing and diverting resources that are allocated for development to their personal accounts.

Other vices of greed in the society are armed robbery, prostitution and so on, in a bid to satisfy the survival instinct of human being. A society that has greedy leadership hold the potential of creating wide gap between the haves and the have not.

Neglect of agricultural sector also constitutes economic problem in Nigeria. In some years back, poverty was limited to the rural areas not until recently, precisely in the 1980s, that this economic problem spread its wings to urban cities in Nigeria (Abayomi, 1997). The fact is that people migrated to urban areas to have access to better facilities. Farming, which used to be a major occupation in the rural areas, has become unprofitable due to past harvest losses and poor government policy. The contribution of this sector to GDP dropped from 70percent in early 1974 as a result of bumping the mining and manufacturing sectors (Abayomi, 1997). Government's interest in mining and manufacturing sectors reduced the production capacity of agricultural sector in the processing of food and raw-material for local industries. The under production of agricultural sector increased the rate of unemployment in the country. Industries that depend on local materials were closed down due to lack of raw materials, and this resulted to retrenchment of workers in such industries.

Poor state of infrastructure is another factor that causes poverty in Nigeria society. Bad roads, poor supply of electricity, lack of drinkable water, poor telecommunication facilities, and ill-equipped hospitals and so on, have created serious upsets in the country. Apart from the fact that lack of these facilities discourages foreign investors, it makes living very stressful. Let us ask ourselves at this point, why it is difficult for the government to provide these essential facilities in the face of its huge earnings from the oil export and taxation? It is clearly

believed that the problem of poor infrastructure is not exactly due to lack of funds. Rather, it is due to the poor management of the agencies vested with the task of supervising or providing them. Therefore, inadequate infrastructural development increases poverty among the rural dwellers of Nigerian society because goods and services could not get to where they were needed.

Similarly, many people that engage in self-employment needing electricity also face economic problem due to poor supply of electricity. Those who engage in such jobs find it difficult to make money that would cater for their immediate needs no to talk of having plan for the expansion of their business.

AN OVERVIEW OF POVERTY IN RELATION TO DEMOCRACY

The first aspect of poverty that is relevant with respect to democracy is food security. Food is necessary for man's health, growth and normal functioning. More than 70% of Nigerian's population is engaged in farming, yet the country is still facing the problem of food shortage. The problem of food shortage originated from the crude method of farming, which does not increase production to cope with the increasing population. Poor state of infrastructure affects free movement of food items in the country. Meanwhile, inadequate food intake could be attributed to poverty. The effort of government to eliminate poverty leads to importation of food. The imported food in Nigeria accounted for 10% of total importation, which rose to #88 billion in 1996 (Nnamani, 2003).

The implication of this is that democracy becomes meaningless to hungry population. Man cannot philosophize on empty stomach and as long as democracy fails to provide his basic needs and bail him out of the vicious cycle of poverty, he will certainly not be a vanguard of democracy but a democratic hurdle.

Another important issue is crime. Crime is an adverse effect of economic, socio-cultural backwardness. The correlation between poverty and crime rates show that the dimension of criminal activities in Nigeria varies. It ranges from act of theft to armed robbery, cultism, smuggling, child trafficking and hooliganism to mention but a few. Material poverty creates insecurity and he who lacks basic needs of life is not free in his choice of how to survive. Mass poverty served to condition the minds and attitudes of Nigerians and made them susceptible to elite manipulation and mobilization of negative identities (Jega, 2002).

For instance, the case of poor parents who voluntarily hand over their children to the human traffickers under the agreement of returns at the end of each year is a manifestation of negative attitude caused by poverty. This was buttressed in an open forum organized at Oron Local Government Secretariat, when a woman courageously challenged the organizer (ILO/IPECL) team to provide visible alternatives to giving away their children to traffickers. She said; "we have no money to send them to school. Tell us what to do with them" (Tell, 2004). Human right, which democracy is agitating for, is no longer respected again by parents, because they can not avoid taking care of their children due to economic problem. Also, poverty has torn the moral fabric of the society and it now threatens the existence of the country with violent eruptions and conflicts among different groups. Violence can also be explained by joblessness and intense competition over the scarce resources and services in the society.

Hence, a state where there is frequent occurrence of violence can not experience development, because violent environment does not attract foreign investors, which democracy has been clamoring for since 1999. The absence of foreign investors makes the dividend of democracy becomes mirage.

Health is another critical factor in relation to poverty and democracy. Democracy can not work in a country where the citizens are trodden down with all sort of illness. Besides food, health is part of the basic needs of a people that permits them (the poor) to maintain their only monopoly, that is, their labour power. Poor state of health of a country's population reduces the level of natural and human resources, because, the level at which people will participate in the production of goods and services will be very low. The way a healthy worker will perform his function will definitely differ from that of unhealthy one. A population that is familiar with ill-health and death will prefer to settle with consumption rather than invest their resources. They embrace this economic choice because of uncertainty of their future.

Efforts should be made to improve the standard of health care delivery in the country. It is the duty of government to adopt different health programmes and policies that would spread to the grass root level. But this can only be achieved under a democratic dispensation because as (Aremu 20004) rightly noted, democracy and development are mutually re-enforcing.

Yet, another important issue is democracy and rural development. The development of rural areas in Nigeria is now a serious challenge to the democratic government. Previous governments

had attempted to achieve this by opening up rural feeder roads and assisting rural dwellers with farming equipment. For instance, Operation Feed the Nation (OFN), The Directorate of Food, Roads and Rural Infrastructure (DFRRI), Petroleum Trust Fund (PTF), Family Support Programmes (FSP) and so on. However, this trend did not continue. As a result, the rate of rural-urban drift has reached alarming rate that many Nigeria rural areas have been depopulated of the youths. These youths, most of them without employable skills, are in urban centers literally doing nothing. They turned themselves into thugs and assassin and have therefore, become ready made tools in the hands of political anarchists whose sole aim is to truncate the democratic process.

The implication of poor state of rural development posted a great challenge to democratic government. Deliberate steps must therefore, be taken to encourage people to stay in rural areas. This will take the form of embarking on programmes and projects that will address the needs of rural dwellers.

The social problem of unemployment is also critical in the direction of poverty and democracy. The link between expansion of employment and poverty reduction has been established. Streeten (1994) has attempted to broaden strategic thinking on the links between employment and poverty by placing employment in the context of anti-poverty strategy with a mix of four components: structural reforms, employment creation, social services and participation. In Nigeria, many employment oriented programmes have been established by civilian government to reduce nation-wide poverty. Among this programme is Poverty Alleviation Programme (PAP), which was later replaced with National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP), as a result of failure of the later to achieve the desired objective. These programmes turn to anti-job creation when it started to drain government account (News 2002).

Nigeria currently has one of the largest rates of unemployment in the third world countries. Yet the government is bent on going ahead with the so-called 'right-sizing' of the present work force thereby swelling the army of unemployment in the society. This army of unemployed youths cannot be expected to support democratic stability since democracy has failed to cater for their needs (New Age 2005).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Poverty has been a major problem in Nigeria for years. Though, its dimension changes along with technological advancement in the world. The chameleonic nature of poverty makes it difficult for

democracy to sweep it's way once and for all, rather, it takes grādual process. For instance, the anti-corruption crusade (through EFCC and ICPC) by the government has yielded encouraging results. Globally, Nigeria moved from 1.6 to 1.9 in her effort to fight corruption when compared with Mexico (Peter, 2005).

In addressing the problem of poverty there is the need to adopt growth and social service oriented policies that will enable Nigerians to improve their welfare. As indicated earlier, democracy is the only form of government that guarantees sustainable economic development. The preliminary analysis has shown that if the economy is to be put on the path of sustainable growth and development, then governance issues must resolve the problems of corruption (by ensuring transparency and accountability), lack of commitment to the nation's service, agriculture sector and poor state of infrastructural facilities.

Finally, to guide against the Wole Soyinka's philosophy in Abiku", consistent macro-economic environment must also be created and maintained, otherwise, misery and poverty will persist and Nigerians will say "Na democracy we go chop".

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