

POVERTY ALLEVIATION, PLANT RESOURCES AND SUSTAINABILITY IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Poverty in Nigeria remains significant despite high economic growth. Nigeria has one of the world's highest economic growth rates averaging 7.4 percent over the last decade - a well-developed economy, and plenty of natural resources such as oil. However, it retains a high level of poverty, with 63% living on below \$1 daily. There have been attempts at poverty alleviation, most notably with the programmes such as National Acceleration Food Production Programme and the Nigerian Agricultural and Cooperative Bank; Family Support Programme and the Family Economic Advancement Programme, to mention but a few. However, these programmes have largely failed to overcome persistent poverty in Nigeria. This paper establishes substance of poverty in Nigeria. Furthermore, it examines causes of poverty; and how the judicious use of plant resources can serve as an alternative solution, although not solely; towards alleviating poverty in Nigeria. The paper concludes by substantiating fact that, plant resources, which Nigeria is endowed with, if properly tapped and utilized; can reduce or alleviate poverty in Nigeria, to a significant level. Recommendations were offered on how to genuinely tap these resources, bearing in mind the principle of sustainability.

Key Words: Poverty, Plant, Resources, Sustainability, Nigeria.

Introduction

The world is experiencing extremely rapid economic growth. However, the disparity between rich and poor countries continues to grow both within countries and between them. The World Bank reported that 1.29 billion people are still extremely poor as global poverty falls. The share of people living on less than \$ 1.25 a day dropped by half between 1990 and 2010 (World Bank, 2012). Despite this little improvement, Shah (2012) reported that almost half the world over 3 billion people live on less than 2.50 a

day; one billion children live in poverty (one in two children in the world); six hundred and forty million (640, 000.00) live without adequate shelter; four hundred million (400, 000,000) have no access to safe water; two hundred and seventy million (270, 000, 000) have no access to health services.

Nigeria has one of the world's highest economic growth rates averaging 7.4 percent over the last decade - a well developed economy, and plenty of natural resources. However, it retains a high level of poverty with 63% living on below \$ 1 daily

(Wikipedia, 2012); and more than 100 million living on less than £1 per day (DFID, 2011) and about 92% surviving on less than \$ 2 daily while 71% surviving on less than \$ 1 daily (Agbi, 2009; Garcia *et al.*, 2008). Poverty in Nigeria remains significant despite high economic growth, why? Various people including Economists, Historians, Scientists, and many others, have carried out researches and expressed their views on the causes of poverty in Nigeria.

Causes of Poverty in Nigeria

Before we delve into what researchers say about the likely causes of poverty in Nigeria, let us go through the following remarks by Shah (2012): "Poverty is the state for the majority of the world's people and nations. Why is this? Is it enough to blame poor people for their own predicament? Have they been lazy, made poor decisions and been sole responsible for their plight? What about their governments? Have they pursued policies that actually harm successful development? Such causes of poverty and inequality are no doubt real. But deeper and more global causes of poverty are often less discussed".

Shah (2012) also remarked that: "Behind the increasing interconnectedness promised by globalization, are global decisions, policies, and predicts. These are typically influenced, driven, or formulated by rich and powerful. These can be leaders of rich countries or other global actors such as multinational corporations, institutions, and influential people. In the face of such enormous influence, the governments of poor nations and their people are often powerless. As a result, in the global context, a few get wealthy while the majority struggle."

In Nigerian context, it is more or less the same hypothesis. For example, Ajakaiye and

Adeyeye (2002) in their paper: "concepts, measurement and causes of poverty" examined that: there is no one cause of poverty. On the contrary, combinations of several complex factors contribute to poverty. They include low or negative economic growth, inappropriate macroeconomic policies, deficiencies in the labour market resulting in limited job growth, low productivity and low wages in the formal sector, and a lag in human resource development. Other factors which have contributed to a decline in living standards and are structural causes or determinants of poverty include increase in crime and violence, environmental degradation, retrenchment of workers, a fall in the real value of safety nets, and in family structures. These are examined below:

- i. **Low economic growth performance and income inequality:** Growth of economy is a must for poverty reduction. In developing countries such Nigeria, growth employment generating and with export base is desirable in order to achieve growth that is poverty reducing with equity (Ajakaiye and Adeyeye, 2002). Income inequality worsened from 0.43 to 0.49 between 2004 and 2009. This is correlated with differential access to infrastructure and amenities. In particular, there are more rural poor than urban poor (Aigbokhan, 2000).
- ii. **Corruption:** Corruption has become Nigeria's bone of contention. Government funds are being misappropriated on a daily basis by the leaders, who only put the interest of their families and friends at heart while ignoring the masses. In Nigeria, the government's income is generated mostly from natural resource

- revenues. This income, instead of being used for development purposes, it is rather circulated among the political office holders and their families, leaving the rest of the people to wallow in poverty (Ucha, 2008).
- iii. **Macroeconomic shocks and policy failure:** This has been a major cause of poverty in several countries in the world, including Nigeria. As many economies in the world faced microeconomic disequilibrium mostly in the balance of payments due to expensive aggregate demand policies, terms –of – trade shocks, and natural disasters, it becomes necessary to undertake major policy reforms. In the process such economies become vulnerable to poverty. Macroeconomic shocks and policy failure account for poverty largely because they constrain the poor from using their greatest “labour”. Also, monetary policies that adversely affect cost and access to credit by the poor, fiscal policy which results in retrenchment, lay-off and factor substitution, exchange rate policy which raises the domestic cost of production in an import dependent production system will affect the poor negatively (Ajakaiye and Adeyeye, 2002).
 - iv. **Laziness:** It is in Nigeria that everyone wants to be comfortable but many are not ready to work towards it. According to Ucha (2008), this often leads to greed where people will do what ever they can to keep the family wealth for themselves. In most families, every one depends on the bread winner, who works so much to keep the family going and when he dies the family is likely to become poor because of inadequate or lack of funds to maintain the family.
 - v. **Migration:** Migration rates do reduce poverty especially if the majority of individuals who migrate are skilled workers. On the other hand, individuals who emigrate vacate jobs in labour markets. Thus, migration drains on skills. It reduces the pace of economic growth and thus slows the process of overall job creation and affects the long-run development potential in a country (Ajakaiye and Adeyeye, 2002).
 - vi. **Unemployment and Underemployment:** Employment is a key determinant of poverty. Gainful employment is important for individuals to earn income and escape from “income” poverty. While generally in countries of the world the non poor suffers from transitional or involuntary unemployment due to lack of skills or extremely low education levels, medical problems, geographical isolation (which affects some of the rural poor in general and the urban poor due to marginalization) of person living in high-crime neighborhood and in some countries and discrimination based on race or other attributes. Further, underemployment occurs largely in the informal sectors and results in low incomes for an important segment of the labour force, particularly in rural areas (Ajakaiye and Adeyeye, 2002).
 - vii. **Poor Education System:** Poor education is a key to poverty. Education promotes economic growth and as such is central to development. According to the World Bank as cited in Ucha (2008), education also promotes national productivity, innovation, values of democracy and

social problems. The education system in Nigeria, in comparison to that of other countries in the world, can be regarded as a failure. Corbett (2009) posited that without education, most people cannot find income-generating work. Poor people also often forego schooling in order concentrate on minimal living.

viii. **Human Resource Development:** Ajakaiye and Adeyeye (2002) described human resources development, as a key human capital development and capability to escape from poverty. Continued investment in human capital with improvements in efficiency is necessary to sustain reduction in poverty in the labour market. Investment in people can boost living standards of households by expanding opportunities, raising productivity, attracting capital investments, and increasing earning power. In addition, providing additional educational opportunities for adolescents may prevent some youths from associating themselves with gangs, drugs and violence; given the evidence linking the perpetrators of crime with school dropouts.

ix. **Health/Diseases:** Good health is basic human welfare and a fundamental objective of social and economic development. Poor health shackles human capital, reduces returns to learning, impedes entrepreneurial activities and holds back growth and economic development. Diseases cause poverty and vice versa. In Nigeria for instance, AIDS prevalence is about 5.4% with an infected adult population of 2.6 million. This will constrain availability and participation of this segment of the population in

the labour market to earn income (Ajakaiye and Adeyeye, 2002) and thus increase the rate of poor people in the country.

x. **Debt Burden:** In several developing countries of the world, debt burden is assuming increasing importance as a cause of poverty. In such countries servicing of the debt has encroached on the volume of resources needed for socio-economic development. The productive sector such as agriculture, manufacturing, etc., are equally constrained leading to low productivity, low capacity utilization, under employment and low purchasing power thereby subjecting the masses of the people to object poverty. In Nigeria, at the end of December 2000 external debt stood at US \$ 28.5b (about 80% of GDP). Amount required to service this debt annually is enough to hamper government expenditure for the provision of social and physical infrastructure for the poor (Ajakaiye and Adeyeye, 2002).

xi. **Governance:** The persistence and passiveness of poverty in several countries has been linked to the lack of popular participation in governance and decision making as well as weak institutional base. This has led among other things to poor accountability and transparency in resource allocation, weak programme implementation and monitoring. Ultimately, development programmes are rendered ineffective. Poverty reduction initiatives are therefore ineffective and resources wasted (Ajakaiye and Adeyeye, 2002).

xii. **Environmental Degradation:**

Environmental degradation is a cause of accentuated poverty. At the same time, poverty itself can be a cause of environmental degradation. This reverse causality stems from the fact that for poor people in poor countries such as Nigeria, a number of environmental resources are complimentary in production and consumption to other goods and services while a number of environmental resources supplement income most especially in time of acute economic stress (Falconer and Arnold, 1989). In fact, an erosion of the environmental resources base can make certain categories of people destitute even when the economy on the average grows (Dasgupta, 1993). Among the poor, frequent cutting of forest trees with low replanting rate has resulted in scarcity of fuel wood. Immediate effect of this is that poor households turn to alternative fuels such as crop residues, coconut husks, rice hulls or elephant grass. The smoke from these inferior fuels according to Cece (1985), is often more poisonous than that of fuel wood, while emission from all biomass fuels are known to be dangerous sources of air pollution in the house. According to Ajakaiye and Adeyeye (2002), the incessant cutting down of tress for firewood and charcoal have hindered prospect for increased yield and hasten the prospect of the creeping desert while profligate use of the country's resources by industries and industrial pollution from improper waste disposal has further exacerbated the plight of the poor. Other consequences of over exploitation of

environment due to poverty are depletion of fish in local rivers and streams.

xiii. **Non-Diversification of the Economy:**

Before 1970, the Nigerian economy was driven by the agricultural sector. The oil sector which only constituted 1% of the country's export revenue in 1958 rose to 97% by 1984 and has since then not gone below 90%. As Ucha (2008) rightly pointed out, those in power have practically ignored other sources of income, and today, Nigeria depends heavily on exporting oil. This consequently, makes the majority improvised as their products have become irrelevant.

xiv. **Crime and Violence:**

Crime and violence have serious economic costs. A steady increase in crime and violence has degraded the quality of life to a varying extent in many countries of the world. For instance, an increasing proportion of public resources- which are already limited- are required to strengthen police enforcement, support the growing prison population, finance the demands placed on the judicial system, and provide health care for persons injured by violence. Other costs include the expensive security systems and guards now required by business and homes, the loss in potential revenues from foreign investor and tourists who have sought other destination as a result of that crime, and the migration of the urban middle class. Because of the heterogeneous nature of the poor, it is difficult to link poverty, crime and violence directly. However, the adverse social consequence of crime

have been closely associated with poverty e.g. loss of lives at productive age and quantum loss of properties (Ajakaiye, and Adeyeye, 2002).

Nigeria has historically experienced much ethnic conflict (World Bank, 2011). With the return to civilian rule in 1999, militants from religious and ethnic groups have become markedly more violent. While the unrest has its roots in poverty and economic competition (BBC, 2012), its economic and human damages further escalated the problems of poverty (such as increasing the mortality rate). For instance, ethnic unrest and the displeasure of local communities with oil companies has contributed to the conflict over oil trade in the Niger Delta, which threatens the productivity of oil trade. Civil unrest might also have contributed to the adoption of population policy measures which work in the short-run, but impede in poverty alleviation efforts.

- xv. Household Determinants of Poverty: The following have been enumerated by Ajakaiye and Adeyeye (2002) as the household determinants of poverty: Age and education of different household members; number of income earners; household composition and size; assets to basic social services; sex; ethnicity of head; location variable (rural or urban); sector of employment and remittance to household etc.

Poverty Alleviation in Nigeria: Why Previous Programmes Failed?

There have been attempts at poverty alleviation, most notably with the following programmes (Adibe, 2012; Uza, 2008):

- 1972 : National Accelerated Food Production Programme and the Nigerian Agricultural and Cooperative Bank
- 1976 : Operation Feed the Nation: to teach the rural farmers how to use modern farming tools.
- 1979 : Green Revolution programme to reduce food importation and increase local food production
- 1986 : Directorate of Food, Roads and Rural Infrastructure (DFRRI)
- 1993 : Family Support Programme and the Family Economic Advancement Programme
- 2001 : National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP): to replace the previously failed poverty Alleviation Programme
- 1991: National Agricultural Land Development Programme (NALDA).
- 1997 : River Basic Development Authorities (RBDAS)

However, these programmes failed to overcome or alleviate poverty in Nigeria for reasons such as: income inequality, ethnic conflict and civil unrest, and political instability and corruption (Wikipedia, 2012). Agabi (2009) while discussing on reasons why several poverty alleviation initiatives of the post governments (both military and civilian), summed up as follows:

- (i) Poverty alleviation programmes should be pro-poor in all ramifications and appropriately constructed to satisfy the economic needs of the poor and the social requirement of the Nigerian society. Such programmes should not be politically motivated.
- (ii) Situations whereby the cushioning effect facility provided by any poverty

alleviation programme is eroded by lack of adequate public services/social amenities (such as electricity and good roads) that are necessary in production will not help the poor get out of poverty but instead aggravate further the predicament.

Sustainable Use of Plant Resources as An alternative for Alleviating Poverty in Nigeria

The drive to alleviate poverty brings with it that social development and environmental stability must be included as essential elements. It is widely recognized that economic well-being, social development, and environmental stability must be addressed together if development is to be sustainable (WCU, 2010). Sustainable development is to ensure socially responsible economic development while protecting the resource base and the environment for the benefit of future generations. The universally accepted broad definition of sustainable development is ".....development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987).

Plant resources, in the context of this paper, refer to the products and materials derived from plants, which benefits human being. Nigeria is endowed with abundant plants, which are either cultivated or grow wild. These plants are used for food, medicine, timber, forest reserve, beautification, tourism, research etcetera. The numerous benefits derived from these plants, when utilized properly, will serve as alternative for alleviating poverty. For example:

- (i) **Food:** Nigeria is listed by FAO among nations that are at the moment technically unable to meet their food needs from rain-fed production (NINCID, 2010; Abu, 2012). The Nigerian soil is rich in essential mineral nutrients capable of supporting varied cash and food crops; which are cultivated for their nutritional value. These crops if grown and cultivated through the modern techniques of mechanized agriculture, plant breeding, application of chemical fertilizers and irrigation will undoubtedly provide enough food to feed the teeming population and have even surplus for export to generate income.
- (ii) **Forest:** Forest products are useful in our daily lives. For example, fruits, paper and wood, all come from forest. Other products of forest go into the manufacture of medicines, cosmetics, detergents, oil and many drugs (Oriola, 2009). Forests are also useful in industries and for export: pulpwood for news print, papers and boards, containers and textiles; veneer logs for fly wood and furniture; swan timber for lumber furniture, joinery and construction; poles for pit prop transmission poles and residues for particles and boards (Oriola, 2009). Forests also provide habitats to diverse animal species and they also form the source of livelihood for many different settlements as well as for government. They offer watershed protection, timber and non-timber products and various recreational options. They prevent soil erosion, help in maintaining the water cycle and check global warming by using carbon dioxide in photosynthesis (WWF, 2010). All the aforementioned benefits, and of course a host of others; have direct on indirect impact on our economic and social life.

Oriola (2009) remarked: "A nation endowed with large and diverse forest resources has considerable potentials with respect to economic development. This is because such resources are abundantly available to be utilized. Therefore development in Nigeria depends strongly on awareness and understanding of the extent and nature of the endowed forest resource as well as method of exploitation"

Conclusion

It is indisputable that Nigeria is endowed with rich and abundant human and natural resources, which if properly managed and utilized; can be used as an arsenal against poverty. But, unfortunately our singular and most disheartening predicament is mismanagement and failure to imbibe the culture of sustainability. Hence, the recent call for evolution towards "an agriculture machine that is sustainable, market-led and consumer focused" needs to be carefully implemented to avoid social instability. Prosperous agriculture should continue to be the engine for poverty elimination, sustainable development and food security (Nigerian National Committee of ICID (NINCID), 2010). Poverty in Nigeria can be reasonably reduced through wise use of plant resources such as crop and forest resources, bearing in mind the importance

of sustainability. Hence, the following recommendations are offered:

- (i) Since food insecurity in Nigeria is directly related to poverty, government should improve agricultural food production through the use of modern agricultural biotechnology. This involves the use of more resistant and early maturing crops, effective irrigation and reduced over dependence on rain fed agriculture.
- (ii) Government should take environmental sustainability seriously. Sustainable development that enables the poor to improve their vulnerability context and that does not degrade the environment is required. (Kirkland, 2008). Environmental sustainability refers to the maintenance of the ecosystem and the natural resource base (Hardoy *et al.*, 1992);
- (iii) Considering the economic contribution of forest to poverty alleviation in particular and national development in general; Nigeria must discourage the poor attitude of her citizens to environmental management in general and deforestation in particular. Each stakeholder is expected to have a rational but different interest concerning the use and management of the resources (Oriola, 2009).

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