

# THE INEVITABLE OPTION OF MINIMIZING POVERTY IN NIGERIA

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## **Abstract**

This paper attempts an assessment of government's unsuccessful attempts on poverty alleviation in Nigeria with a view to identifying the problem (s) working against its successful implementation and to proffer useful suggestions that would serve as panacea to the problems. The study revealed that the non-active involvement of target beneficiaries of the programme and entrusting the programme in the hands of a cabal of technocrats, made it impossible to determine the felt needs of the target beneficiaries which would provide vital information for the policy formulation, planning, execution and monitoring of the programme. Economic crisis, political instability and government's lack of determination in the pursuit of the objectives of the programme also contributed to its failure. Suggestions were made to find solution to the above identified problems.

## **Introduction**

Poverty has been variously defined by many scholars and institutions. The Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) in Olowookere (205:40) defined poverty as that situation where by an individual is unable to adequately cater for his or her basic needs of food, clothing and shelter; is unable to meet social and economic obligations; lacks gainful employment skills, assets and self-esteem and limited access to social and economic infrastructures such as health, education, portable water and sanitation as well as limited chances of advancing his or her welfare to the limit of his or her capabilities.

In the same vein, the world bank defined poverty as that situation where by an individual is unable to attain an acceptable minimum standard of living resulting in severe material deprivation, absence of recreational opportunities and lack of access to economic and political power, inferiority complex, isolation and social degradation.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) on the other hand asserts that poverty wields its destructive influence at every stage of human existence from birth to grave. It conspires with the most deadly and painful diseases to bring a wretched existence to all who suffers from it. It went further to say that poverty is an existential condition in which the individual apart from not having money, lacks the skills techno material wherewithal to produce a sustainable living above the poverty line.

Poverty connotes hunger, lack of shelter, being sick and unable to seek medical attention, no access to education, food, shelter, water and lack of

representation and freedom. Poverty is characterized by joblessness, living one at a time and depending on charity in one form or the other to eke out a living.

The United Nation Human Rights Charter (UNHRC) sees poverty as brutal denial of human rights. The economic empowerments and development strategy (NEEDS) revealed that by 1990, over seventy (70) percent Nigerians earn less than a dollar per day. Sadly though, poverty in Nigeria is that paradox because in spite of her abundant human and material resources, a larger percentage of the citizens still live in abject poverty. It was not surprising then that the United Nations Report (UNR) in 1999 ranked Nigeria among the twenty five poorest nations in the world. Within the same period, the federal office of statistics (FOS) placed the life expectancy of Nigerians to fifty one years with seventy percent of her rural populace not having access to portable water, healthcare facilities and electricity (Abdullahi, 2003).

For quite sometime now, every new government in Nigeria had one plan or the other to address the issues of minimizing poverty in the society. Several strategies were put in place with pomp and pageantry gulping huge expenditures with nothing to show for it thereby aggravating the problems it (government) intended to improve (Guardian, 2000:2). It is on this premise that this paper intends to unravel the “missing link” that has been thwarting the efforts of successive governments of Nigeria to minimize the poverty among her citizenry.

### **This Paper is Divided into Five Sections**

The first section talked about poverty in general with emphasis on governments efforts on its alleviation. The second section highlighted why the approaches of federal government failed to achieve its objective. Nigeria’s experience of community participation in development formed the content of the third section. The forth section contained the analysis of hypotheses and its findings as well as the contributions of the study to knowledge. This was followed by conclusion and recommendations that will make poverty reduction in Nigeria a reality.

All over the world the principal objectives of most macroeconomic policies is to attain sustainable economic growth rate capable of reducing the level of poverty and ignorance among the poor and the vulnerable groups of the society. It was believed that the rapid economic growth will automatically transform the living standard of people as they can easily increase their per capital income. The fact remains that high economic growth does not necessarily transform income structure into an equitable distribution of benefits. This was what led to placing more emphasis on the development of human capital as a basic approach to minimizing poverty in the 1970s and early 1980s. In order to actualize this, more investments were made in education, health, nutrition and other social sector activities. This approach was however truncated by the economic crisis of the early 1980s owing to rising debt burden. The main routs to minimizing poverty include: enabling poor people to produce more; providing

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universal access to basic services and enhancing infrastructure relevance to poor people. Though these approaches are capable of enhancing output and redistributing it, what must be realised is that poverty is not just an economic condition. It is associated with issues of vulnerability, social exclusion, powerlessness and insecurity. It is complex, context specific and affected by political, social, gender, seasonal, geographical and environmental factors. Hence, its reduction requires not only will but also, a systematic articulation of strategies, policies, resource allocations, plans and programmes as well as the integrating of the policies and strategies into development plans and programmes of the nation (Booth et al, 1988).

Most developing countries that adopted development programmes for welfare enhancement and poverty reduction directed at the poor, recorded a very low success. This was attributed to inadequate attention of the development policies and programmes to the growing need for poverty alleviation or the programmes did not adequately address the felt need of the people. In another development, it was revealed that the planning process which incorporated poverty alleviation programmes did not identify with and involve the participation of the beneficiaries (Booth et al 1988). This brought the near failure of strategies adopted by Nigerian government into focus.

Poverty is not just having no money rather, it is an existential condition in which an individual lacks the skills and the techno- material wherewithal to reduce to sustain a living above the poverty line. Hence, the major objective of the antipoverty crusade is to generate a sustainable level of technical and financial assistance for the teeming population to remain in productive employment.

It is imperative to emphasize at this juncture that for quite sometime now, every successive government in Nigeria had one plan or the other to pump real productivity from below. The schemes were always started with pomp and pageantry involving huge financial outlay but none ever saw the light of the day. At the end, the poor masses are made poorer while the executors get richer. This culminated in the outright apathy of the people towards any proposed poverty alleviation scheme.

Poverty reduction in the society was not directly addressed in the nation's first national development plan. It however developed opportunities and access to employment, health and education which reduced poverty in the society.

In the fourth national development plan, emphasis was on enhancing the real income of the average Nigerian and minimizing income inequality among other things. During this period, many of the programmes that were put in place benefited the poor. For instance, the River Basin Development Authority (RBDA), the Agricultural Credit Guarantee Scheme(ACGS), the Agricultural Development Programmes (ADP), the Rural Electrification Programme (REP) were designed to cater for employment generation, boosting agricultural output

and income and stemming the tide of rural urban migration which obviously had positive impart on poverty reduction. Though some of these programmes made some remarkable degree of success they could not withstand the test of time consequent upon its primary focus. Other poverty related programmes like Operation Feed the Nation (OFN), Free and Compulsory Primary Education (FCPE) both set up in 1977, followed the green revolution in 1980 and the cost housing scheme, and made some remarkable impact by enhancing the quality of life of many Nigerians. As their predecessors, the programmes could not be sustained due to absence of capital, will and commitment, policy instability, and inadequate involvement of the beneficiaries of these programmes (CBN Enugu 1998). The Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) that was put in place due to the severe economic crisis in the country in the early 1980s further worsened the living conditions of Nigerians and the poor alike. This made the government to design and implement many poverty alleviation programmes between 1986 and 1997 as presented in a tabular form below.

**Poverty Alleviation Programmes In Nigeria Between 1986-1997**

<b>Programme</b>	<b>Year established</b>	<b>Target group</b>	<b>Nature of invention</b>	<b>Degree of success</b>
Director for food, road and infrastructure(DFRRI)	1986	Rural areas	Feeder roads, rural water supply and rural education	Became defunct due to lack of standards for ;project harmonization and effective mechanisms for coordination among the three tires of government and between DFRI and the levels of government (National planning commission 1994)
National directorate of employment(NDE)	1986	Unemployed youths	Training, finance and guidance	The programme failed due to poor funding. It could not cope with the increasing number of applicants in the country.
Better life programme(BLP)	1987	Rural women	Self – help and rural development programmes, skill acquisition and health care.	The programme died as the resources meant for it were diverted and used for personal enrichment(Ogwumike, 1998)
People’s Bank of Nigeria (PBN) and the community Bank(CB)	1989/990	Under privileged in rural and urban areas	Encouraging savings credit facilities	The objective was never realized due to mismanagement, corruption and executive rascality in the management of the

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Family support programme (FSP)	1994	Families in rural areas	Healthcare delivery, child welfare, youth payment, etc.	banks. Could not function properly due to poor funding and trained man power (Egware 1997).
Family economic programme (FEAP)	1997	Rural areas	Credit facilities to support the establishment of cottage industries	Died prematurely due to poor funding.

**Source:** Adapted from Oladeji and Abiola (1998).

The National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPED) came on board in 2001 appreciation of the problems that worked against the success of past poverty alleviation programmes. With the objective of providing “strategies for the eradication of absolute poverty in Nigeria”, this body was assigned the responsibility of coordinating and monitoring of all poverty eradication effort at all levels. It was also to integrate the poor at the grassroots into the nation’s economic development process. The NAPED Multi-partner matching funds (MP-NF) scheme launched in Kaduna in August 2005, was to coordinate and facilitate access to credit for the poor, promote grassroots economic activity and well being, and strengthen the partnership between the federal government and the other tiers of government included: Farmers Empowerment Programme (FEP); capacity acquisition and enhancement programme; the Promise Keepers Programme (PRP).

Another move to rejuvenate the fight poverty in Nigeria, led to the birth of the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS). This home grown reform programme is to mobilize the resource of Nigeria to make fundamental break with the failure of the past and bequeath a united and prosperous nation in generation to come. NEEDS is to lay a solid foundation for sustainable poverty reduction, employment generation, wealth creation and value reorientation (Olusegun Obasanjo, 2005).

Viewing the above effort of the federal government in fighting poverty, it was observed that no matter the nobility of its objective, appreciable and sustainable success is never realized. This forms the basis of this paper to identify the “missing link” that has so long thwarted government’s efforts in minimizing poverty among its people.

**Why Approaches to Poverty Alleviation Failed**

Appreciative of the fact that high economic growth does not necessarily transform income structure into equitable distribution of benefits, led to placing emphasis on human capital development as a fundamental approach to minimize poverty. This approach was how ever aborted by the harsh economic crisis of the

1980s. As a way of stimulating growth, compressive economic structural reforms with the potentials to raise output and redistribute it, were put in place. Reacting to this, booth et al (1998) emphasized that poverty is not just an economic condition, it is associated with issues of vulnerability, social exclusion; powerlessness, and insecurity. Hence, its reduction require not only will, but also, a systematic articulation of strategies, policies, resource allocation, plans and programmes as well as the integration of policies and strategies in the development plans and programmes of the nation. The inability of most developing countries (Nigeria inclusive) to minimize poverty could be attributed to inadequate attention of the development polices and programmes to the rowing needs for poverty reduction or the programmes did not adequately address the felt needs of the people. Hence, it was not embraced.

In another development, it was revealed that the planning processes which incorporate poverty alleviation programmes did not identify with or involve the participation of the beneficiaries (Booth et al 1998).

The top-down approach whereby development planning mechanism is in the hands of a cabal of technocrats and political leadership (especially the military), had little or no impart in the redistribution of growth and meeting the basic needs of the masses. This gave rise to a more deplorable quantitative and qualitative aspect of life inducing poverty, hunger, illiteracy, income inequality and economic dependence. The principal reasons why the plans failed include political instability and lack of grass roots/ community participation in the formulation and implementation of the plans. Other reasons are, inadequate funding, unstable external economic environment, manpower and poor database in plan formulation (Ojo 1998, Obadan 1997). For any development plans to succeed, a participatory approach in which beneficiaries are actively involved in the analysis and policy formulation become a necessity. A growing body of evidence suggests that development effort have a better chance of being a successful in the long run if the key players (government, donors, local people and organisations) feel they have a genuine stake in the outcome. This involves enabling them to share the influence control of the development initiatives, decisions and resources that affect them (Adams and Rietbergen- McCracken 1994, Adubi and Komolafe 1998).

### **Concept of Beneficiaries – Based Vision of Development**

The idea of beneficiaries – based vision of development is when development plans and programmes incorporate the preferences of the target communities in the objectives and philosophy of the development programmes and the pattern of its execution. This implies a high degree of grass roots participation especially at the plan formulation and decision making phase. This attracted various views and reaction. In the opinion of (UN, 1983, Miller, (1979), God and van cent (1983), beneficiaries participation is concerted and organized

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efforts by individuals to control resources and institutions which are outside the control of the community.

According to Mulwa (1987), people's participation is a process by which the marginalized segment of the society takes the initiatives to determine its future.

Fong, (1986) sees people's participation as citizens' efforts at influencing public decisions.

Graves (1972) on the other hand seen people as a clever trick to enlist positive government response to the needs of the people particularly those that are not part of the formal government's decision- making process.

Lisk, (1985) sees people's participation as actively involving people in the making and implementation of decisions.

Uphoff (1989) discussed people's participation as involvement of a significant number of persons in a situations or actions which enhance their wellbeing.

On the part of Agboola (1986), people's participation is the active process of involving target people in the initiation and implementation of decisions.

The divergent opinions created by the above discussions were condensed into three viz: as a means; as an end and as a basic need.

Seeing people's participation as a means is focused on the use of elected rulers and legislators as the only source of effecting people's participation. This was of the view that citizens would be able to control their rulers through the secrete ballot during election. This view did not consider the large illiterate people that constitute the greater bulk of the society, who apart from not knowing their civic rights could be coerced to vote for legislators who would not serve their purpose. This made this view unpopular in poor countries of the world.

The perception of people's participation as an end focused on the education and development of the people. This was based on the belief that it is only when the citizens are well informed that they can participate meaningfully in decision making. Again, this focus did not consider the illiterates that form the greater bulk of the rural populace.

The school of thought that sees people's participation as a basic need holds that developmental objective should apart from satisfying the material needs of the people should also incorporate their reflection as a fundamental input in the designing and operation of the entire development systems.

This implies that in any development programmes and projects, the beneficiaries must be involved in their initiation, planning, execution and monitoring. This is because they (beneficiaries) understand their situation and know that they want better than their political leaders and technocrats. (Agboola 1988). Buttressing this, the United Nations systems (UNS) advocated the use of human development indicators (HDI) which ensures that the wishes and preferences of beneficiaries are adequately catered for in the development plans.

Hence development planners should systematically listen to people and assess the impact of development policies on their qualities of life.

Another approach to community participation is the Community- Driven Development (CDD). It gives control of decisions and resources to community groups. It is a new vision on “creating prosperity by empowering communities”. This is to arrest the unsuccessful top- bottom plans and donor- driving investment programmes as strategies to reduce poverty in Nigerian as in other developing countries. The community-driven development group’s work in partnership with the private sectors Community Based Organisation (CBOs), Non- Governmental Organisations (NGOs), and Elected Local Governments. The CDD is designed to provide social and infrastructure services, to organize economic activity and resource management to empower poor people, improve governance, and enhance security of the poorest (World Bank, 2002)

Reiterating the need for active community involvement in development plans, in a study tagged “voice of the poor”, it was revealed that sequel to government fruitless attempts to alleviate their suffering and poverty they (the poor ) demanded for access to local ownership of funds and direct assistance through community –driven programmes to shape their destinies (Nrayan, 2000).

#### Nigeria Experience of Community Participation in Development

Since the inception of planning in Nigeria in 1946 no agency was specifically set up to represent the collective views of the masses neither has such intended beneficiaries been actively consulted on individual basis. This consequently led to the total neglect of intended beneficiaries’ wishes and perception at both the planning and implementation stages. It is then not surprising why all efforts to alleviate poverty over the years ended in futility. In government’s effort to reverse this ugly trend a home – grown poverty reduction initiative (National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy) was put in place to create wealth and employment, reduce poverty and value re-orientation. For this programme to succeed, it requires the complementary reforms in the electoral and political governance design that are in line with realistic and sustainable democracy. Other sectors include the political class, legislators and the judiciary. The beneficiaries of any development plans and poverty alleviation should be actively involved to avoid a replay of past failed strategies. Obasanjo (2005).

#### **Conclusion**

In this write up it has become obvious that apart from poor funding, lack of focus and ineffective governments commitment to the goals and objectives of poverty alleviation, contributed to its failure. Other major reasons for the failed attempts include, political instability, absence of direct and functional involvement of beneficiaries in the formulation and implementation of programmes and lack of adequate and sustainable commitment of non-governmental (NGOs) and Community Based Organisations (CBOs) to work in

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concert with the three tier of government to make the long over due poverty alleviation in Nigeria a reality.

This study revealed that allowing poverty alleviation programme in the hands of a cabal of technocrats (especially in the military era ) without identifying the felt needs of the programme. It was further revealed that, the non-active involvement of beneficiaries in the planning, policy formulation, execution and monitoring stages of the programme resulted in the mismanagement of the funds meant for the programme. This further worsened the already deplorable situation of the poor and impoverished masses to the advantage of the executors of the programme.

It was also revealed that the abysmal failure of the programme gave rise to anti-social behaviour among the youths such as political thuggery, robbery, kidnapping, oil pipe line vandalization and a general feeling of insecurity in the society. The above findings corroborated the hypotheses formulated for this study.

### **Recommendations**

There should be adequate representation of the target rural poor in the identification and implementation of projects that directly affect their being. This to bring back their lost confidence in government's commitment in alleviating their suffering.

1. Efforts should be geared at employment generation, provision of credits, skill acquisition and enhancing income earning opportunities of the vulnerable groups.
2. The three levels of government, the Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), Community Based Organisations (CBOs) and the general public should adopt a holistic approach in identifying the poor and their unsatisfied needs especially the basic social needs that directly affect their wellbeing.
3. In collaborating with the organized private sector and the community based organisations, the government should embark on encouraging agriculture in the rural environment where the poor resides. This move will apart from providing sustainable employment for the unemployed will also enhance food production and the economic wellbeing of the nation.
4. Government should stop paying lip service to the plight of the rural poor by making good of their intentions through functional and radical approaches.

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