

GENDER EQUITY AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This paper examines the place of gender equity in the strive for sustainable development in Nigeria. In generating data for the study, the secondary source of data was relied upon. The data revealed that beyond nurturing human life, women act as producers, consumers and are equally endowed as agents for fostering a wholesome political, social and economic development in the society. The study also showed that gender equity is critical to sustainable development. However, the situation in Nigeria has not engendered the kind of gender equity required for sustainable development. This is manifested in the various discriminatory practices, inequalities, exclusion and violence suffered by women under the guise of culture and religion. Most national development targets are being frustrated by this high prevalence of gender inequality. To this effect, the paper reviews the current thinking about gender equity as a broader strategy for national development.

Introduction

One essential aspect of the signs of the dynamic nature of the Nigerian society is the discourse on how to achieve sustainable development. From the colonial experience which 'peripheralised' the economic of the Nigerian State emerged a greater consciousness to formulate policies for sustainable development. In spite of the greater consciousness as manifested in the enactment of various policies and actions which seek to recognize gender equity in the country, there are yet so many ways, the population of men and women in the political, economic and social development spheres remain largely discriminatory and unprogressive. In planning and implementing development programmes in Nigeria, the active participation of women is not often sought. This status of women is reflective of the bias they have traditionally suffered in a patriarchal society such as Nigeria where women struggle to gain economic and political resources needed to improve their lives.

According to Ikelegbe and Ikelegbe (2006:181) “Women are in several ways disinherited and propertised, subjugated, exploited and appropriated. For example, women by virtue of inheritance practices, cannot own land and water bodies, two major resources in Africa primary economies”. This structure tends to confine the female to the immediate family thereby, hindering the women’s horizon in life and mission. While men are exposed to early Western education and religious activities, women are uneducated and unenlightened about her rights. The structure allows the subordination and domination of women in terms of status, privileges and other marital practices. It is therefore not surprising that women access to local resources for production such as land, capital and labour are also limited in relation to their male counter parts.

Until recently, women were mostly found in small-scale peasant farming, petty trading and other minor occupations. This role-play according to Ebohon (2006:45)

Tends to condition women to second-rate citizens, not fit for leadership position in government. They are thus conditioned to believe that they are slaves of modern societies. As a consequence, the potentials of women in Africa and indeed the global peace process and as development agents are still largely unexplored.

According to Abu-Lughad (1998:15), “though women constitute about half (49%) of the Nigerian population and about 60% of registered voters in the 1998 – 1999 period, they are grossly under represented in all sectors of the society”. Gender inequalities has therefore erected barriers that made the women, unlike male counterparts, incapable of gaining economic and political resources that would enhance an even and stable national growth.

Nigerian, in the last decade has been marked by a resurgence of the need for women emancipation. Prior to the aforesaid, the Nigerian society, like a typical African state, had shared the myth that the place of women is the “back-yard”, where her voice is hardly heard. Apart from the untapped innate resources accruable to the feminine gender, social, economic, political development and exigencies make it difficult for the Nigerian woman to remain in the shell. This study is not however meant to orchestrate the never-ending argument on the disparity between the male and female genders, but and attempt to put in proper perspective the immense role women could play in the development of the nation. Also, the recommendations put forth in this work are meant to redirect the attention of stakeholders in the Nigerian project to the invaluable resources inherent in the ‘weaker sex’.

Conceptual Framework

Gender is often used to express biological characteristics which defines human as male or female. These biological characteristics are not mutually exclusive however, as there are some individuals who possess both. Societies tend to attribute all kinds of meaning to the two sexes with respect to their roles and identities. These attributes, opportunities and the relationship are socially constructed and learned through

socialization. Overtime, these cultural meaning develop into roles and identities we call masculine and feminine,

The concept of gender was developed by feminists in the 1970s as a means of recognizing that women do not relate to men in the same way in every culture and the position of women in society varied over time. The idea of gender thus posits a social rather than a biological situation of women and men” (Shettima, 1996).

Though, gender is the historically and socially constructed differences between the sexes. It is the sum total of the social and culture characteristics based on sex, be it male or female.

In more specific terms gender is now widely used to designate the culturally defined, socially formed identities of men and women that are highly variable across cultures and continuously subject to change. By implication, it denotes the different and unequal tasks, perceptions, roles, functions, rewards and relevance which a society attributes to men and women whether in public or private life. These roles are not fixed but changeable. And Oakley (1996:37) affirmed that “Gender relations are characterized by unequal powers, thus gender may be referred to as the socially constructed inequality between men and women.

In most societies, the differences and inequalities are not limited to responsibilities assigned and activities undertaken but access to and control over resources as well as major decision – making opportunities. According to Ikelegbe and Ikelegbe (2006:181) “gender is a major basis for inequalities in social status, property ownership, structure and entitlement. In several parts of Africa, gender determines the degree of citizenship, participation status, land – advantage or predicaments”.

Gender equity is the goal of the equality of the genders or sexes (men and women) stemming from the belief in the injustice of myriad forms of gender inequality. It is known as gender equality, gender equalitarianism or sexual equality (Ashford, 1995). Gender equity requires equal enjoyment by women and men of socially valued goods, opportunities, resources and rewards. It does not mean that men and women become the same, but that their opportunities and life chances are equal.

The pursuit of gender equity (equality for women and what constitute women’s rights) has faced intense agitation since the Universal Declaration of Human Right (UDHR) in 1948. Although UDHR clearly states that “every one is entitled to all rights and freedoms set forth in the declaration without distinction of any kind such as race, colour and sex”, the clamour for women’s participation in governance has not received desired results in Nigeria (UNDP, 2004).

The need for gender equity became imperative with the commitment of the United Nation’s General Assembly to address gender injustice in 1979. This commitment was born out of the Convention to Eliminate All forms of Discriminations Against Women (CEDAW) which can be seen as Bill of Rights’ for all women. The CEDAW spelt out the areas in which women experience discrimination and committed countries to construct national gender policies and amend their laws where necessary.

Accordingly, gender equity entails “equal rights between men and women, which include right of self-esteem, freedom right, equal right to participate in development process, right to education, equal right to societal resources, equal right to sharing of power, at all levels, etc. (Adedeji, 1994). Since then, gender equity is placed at the heart of development which has continued to occur in global treaties, covenants, and declaration. It is therefore a means to an end, a corner stone for development. The United Nations Millennium Project has declared gender equity as one of the goals (strategies) to end world poverty by 2015. The project also claimed that “every single goal is directly related to women’s rights, and societies where women are not afforded equal rights as men, can never achieve development in a sustainable manner”. (UNDP Midyear report, 2006).

For several years in Nigeria, political activities witnessed a conscious and deliberate exclusion of women from governance. This is traceable largely to male chauvinism influenced by the African religion and culture. Thus, the inclusion of women in governance was necessitated by the Herculean task of moving the nation forward without the participation of the women who constitute about half of the population. On women’s participation and emancipation, former President Julius Nyerere of Tanzania remarked that “a person does not walk very fast on one leg, how do we expect half the people to develop the nation?” (Elenor, 2007:56). This implies that gender development and equity is absolutely paramount to national development.

The concept of sustainable development came into general usage following the publication of 1987 report of the Brundland Commission, formally known as the World Commission on Environment and Development (CWED). According to World Commission on Environment and Development, sustainable development is “that development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future generation to meet their needs”. It implies that economy grows together with the protection of environmental quality, each reinforcing the other. The essence of this development is a stable relationship between human activities and natural world which does not diminish the prospects for future generations to enjoy a quality of life, at least, as good as that of the generation before. According to Mintzer (1992), many observers believe that only participatory democracy, not dominated by vested interest, is a prerequisite for achieving sustainable development.

Again, Ashford (1995:29) defined sustainable development as “a process of change in which the exploitation of resources, the direction of investments, the orientation of technological development and institutional change are made consistent with the future as well as present needs”. This also corroborates the definition of CWED that development is sustainable only where it meets the needs of the present, without compromising the ability of future generation to meet their own needs.

By implication, sustainable development is a delicate balance between the need to improve life style and feeling of well-being on the one hand and preserving natural resources and ecosystem on which the present and the future generations depend on the other. It is the use of natural resources and national infrastructure in a way that seeks to avoid the exhaustion of these resources. Therefore, only by balancing the competing needs of community, economy and environment can there be, long term quality of life

improvement that recognizes that nature has value, independent of its usefulness to humanity as captured in figure 1 below:

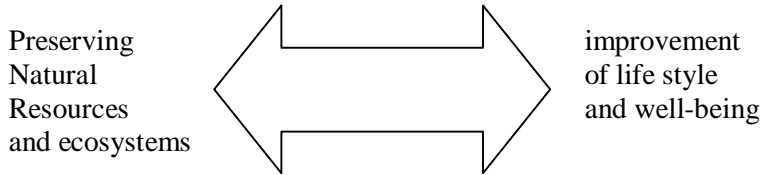


Figure 1: Needs Resource Typology

Gender Equity and Sustainable Development in Nigeria

Every nation's dream is not just to attain maximum development spectrum but the ability to sustain development progressively. This problem has occupied the attention of Nigerian scholars, politicians, development planners, activists and even the international friendly organizations for several decades with an increased tempo since the turn of the millennium. To effectively address this problem, Nigeria has identified with the United Nation Millennium Development Declaration of September, 2000. By that declaration, all the nations of world became committed to eradicate poverty, promote human dignity and equity, and achieve peace, democracy and environmental stability. Nations were enjoined to pursue sustainable development in all ramifications and develop a global partnership for development. Nigeria thus needs a development strategy that would chart the course of sustainability, a state of development whereby poverty level is reduced to the barest minimum while improved health conditions, living standard and enhancing efficiency of public investments are continuously upheld.

Nigeria has no doubt, made remarkable progress in her development strategies/policies towards poverty eradication and equitable development. The past two decades have witnessed laudable programmes such-as the Directorates of Food, Road and Rural infrastructures. (DRRRI), National Directorate of Employment (NDE), Operation Feed the Nation (OFN) and Community Development (CD), the Oil Mineral Area Development Commission (OMPADEC) now Niger-Delta Development Commission (NDDC), National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP), Primary Health Care Scheme (PHCS) and a host of other development policies under the immediate past administration's Millennium Development Goals Plans. Others include: the National Economic Empowerment Development Strategy (NEEDS), the State Economic Empowerment Development Strategy (SEEDS) and the Local Government Economic Empowerment Development Strategy (LEED) which have metamorphosed into the "7" points agenda of the Yar'Adua administration. In the past, the untapped entrepreneurial capacity of women was also given some recognition by the Nigerian government by initiating specific women programmes such as Better Life for Rural Women (BLRW) 1987, the Family Economic Advancement Programme (FEAP) 1990 coupled with the establishment of the National Commission for Women Affairs and Social Development.

Although some of these specialized agencies/programmes did not survive the exit of their initiators in government, the implementations of the on-going programmes/policies seem mere feeble attempts because they lack stamina for breaking the vicious circle of poverty and unstable development. The level of poverty is still on the increase, manifesting in an unsatisfactory economic growth, threatened by environmental problems. The failure of these agencies to meet the desired target of poverty alleviation and eradication in Nigeria may not be far from the fact that the economic, political and social development of the nation is regulated by gender inequity. Any good government, whether by ballot box or the barrel of gun should be driven by people oriented policies. This, in effect, assures maximum participation of a country's citizenry which results in socio-economic benefits for the majority of the people. In spite of the constitutionally established concept of sex equality enshrined in section 17 and 39 of the Nigerian Constitution which has so far been supported by enactments by every Nigerian government, most practices deny these principles. Males and females are not always given equal opportunities to advance socially, educationally, politically, physically and economically. Even when such opportunities exist, they are gender biased, more in favour of males, thus enlarging the disparities between the males and females. Politically, only a small percentage of modern women have participated in government. The reason is not due to lack of adequate qualified and competent women but more largely due to male chauvinism. It is ironical therefore that despite women's aspiration to high level of development (regardless of their percentage in terms of population figure), they are under represented in government. This situation has had a draw back effect on the positive contributions of this category to even and stable national development.

More importantly, making progress towards sustainable development in Nigeria would mean complete elimination of communal and ethnic crises while making plans for lasting peace and security. The UN recognized and emphasized the role of gender equity as a form of lasting plans for peace and security in every nation. Under its "Resolution 1325" (October, 2005), The United Nations Security Council recognized the importance of women's inclusion in peace building measures. By virtue of their status as wives, the Nigerian women unite members of their families and other people. They play the role of unifiers of their various communities if given the opportunity because of their cross-tribal family ties. In the face of conflict resolution processes, women and men should be given equal voices for lasting peace resolution. Women will co-operate with men to make the country grow and remain united. Promotion of women's right and freedom would also lead to economic liberty and poverty eradication on the part of the women folks. In Nigeria while improving women's access to services and economic opportunities, most of the development programmes do not promote gender equity in distribution of benefits for even economic growth, rather, such benefits trickle down to women through their male folks.

In all, gender equality policy, if well pursued will create a balance between improvement of life-style and well-being on the one hand, and the preservation of rural resources and the growth of the economic system on the other. The pursuit of gender equity in Nigeria via the establishment of National Gender Policy has not been given

desired recognition that integrates more women into the main stream of the system of development for nation building. The roles of males and females are complementary and the two have to co-operate to build a harmonious and conducive society.

Conclusion

Sustainable development seeks to meet the needs and aspirations of the present generation without compromising those of the future. Far from requiring the cessation of economic growth, it recognizes that the problems of poverty and underdevelopment cannot be solved unless a country plays an open and large role to satisfy all her citizens without creating domestic conflicts.

Nigeria has made concerted efforts to increase her development strides particularly since the beginning of this millennium. There is, however, growing evidence that poverty is worsening despite the well planned and articulated development policies and poverty reduction programmes. These policies are still largely regulated by values, choices and power arrangements, characterized by male elitism and marked by gross inequality of wealth and income. Women are still widely neglected and more so are their roles in national development.

And sustainable development is possible if and only if human solidarity becomes the prevailing mindset in determining human decisions and actions and such human solidarity starts with equity between men and women. This fact has recently gained much recognition in human history in that there is now increasing consensus from individual scholars, research institutions, and the United Nations on gender equity being both necessary and sufficient condition to make progress towards sustainable development.

In pursuit of sustainable development all policy strategies and interventions should be turned in to sensitize policy makers, programme planners, and all implementers to create a willing and friendly environment for achieving equity in every sector. All sectors should be restricted to favour equal participation of males and females in the process of decision-making and policy formulation. Since development without sustainability is zero development, Nigeria should increase her strides in this cross-gender solidarity as a fundamental key to actualize sustainable development.

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