

POVERTY ALLEVIATION IN THE 21ST CENTURY NIGERIA: THE EDUCATION IMPERATIVE

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Abstract

Poverty is a fact of our national existence and, in fact, oilier nations of the world especial!) the Third World! countries of Asia, Latin America and Africa. Nigeria which is the most populous African nation, sadly, has almost half its population operating at less than \$1 per day and occupying the unenviable position of the 18th poorest country of the world in spite of its vast natural and human resources. Fortunately, the government has not been insensitive to the plight of the large population of poverty stricken people. It has been involved in several poverty alleviation programmes and projects, is a signatory to some international agreements and declarations on poverty and illiteracy reduction. The education content of the poverty alleviation programmes are not yet strong enough and too narrow to produce significant outcomes. They must be expanded to include those disciplines like entrepreneurial studies, English language, social studies etc. that will really equip individual to operate with confidence when the intervention is over and be able to translate the knowledge, skills and values into money-making devices.

Introduction

Eradicating poverty has remained the greatest challenge facing developed and developing countries of the world. The gravity may very well vary from country to country but its existence is unquestionable. In most Third World countries where poverty ravages large populations of the people with resources remaining grossly inadequate to meet (the myriad of needs, national governments have resorted to poverty alleviation using various strategies with a view to totally eradicating poverty in the near future. The fact that poverty has always been a sore issue must be appreciated. Even in the traditional Africa, poverty or wealth has been a significant factor in whether one is accorded social recognition or not among peers or the community, having access to other privileges, maintaining a good health and determining the family into which one marries. In every society, apart from those whose stratification values are based on religion, like India, poverty or wealth has remained a significant factor that determines access to social benefits.

However, since the mid 1940s up until now, intra-ethnic and inter- ethnic wars, natural disasters like earthquakes, bush fires, floods and market failures within the nations and at the international level have contributed to enlarge the reaches of poverty. Rapid urbanization and illiteracy have created large populations of urban poor and aggravated the problems of particularly the rural poor. Past Nigerian governments have these four decades instituted several strategies to alleviate poverty. Some states of the federation have even created ministries of Poverty Alleviation. However, the education factor in poverty alleviation has not been sufficiently and consistently addressed. The fact that poverty still advances and attacks many more people shows that the right things especially education has not yet been applied. This paper intends to address the issue of the right type of education that sufficiently combines with other factors to address poverty among the people. It is much better to teach someone how to fish, equip him to fish in twelve months rather than give him fish everyday for the rest of his life.

The Concept of Poverty

Poverty has been described as a state of not having enough to meet basic needs; a condition where basic necessities of life are insufficient. The World Bank (1999), sees poverty as, hunger, being sick, not being able to go to school, and fear of the future.

For Orduen (2005: 147), poverty can be seen as a condition and process where people suffer deprivations in: access to education, knowledge, human right, confidence, dignity and, self-esteem. The UNDP Human Development Report (1997), described poverty as the denial of opportunities and choices most basic to development such as health, nutrition, life expectancy access to water, school attendance and literacy. Destremau (2002:3), believes poverty could also be defined in human right terms which may then be seen as denial of human rights in which people cannot lead a secure existence, make use of opportunities, have choices, freedom, dignity and self-respect or have access to resources needed for a descent standard of living. • Narayan (2000), asserts that poverty has traditionally been associated with lack of income which translates into lack of food, clothing, shelter and other basic needs. In fact estimating poverty in terms of purchasing power is the most common measure of poverty. However, World Bank (2004), believes that the poverty concept has moved from a narrow focus on income poverty in the 1980s to the multidimensional concept which includes human development, security, voice and participation,

being vulnerable and helpless, being powerless and plagued by anger and frustration. Poverty can then be described as a state of inability to possess and appropriate the factors of living and contributing to the maintenance and development of those factors. From the above perception, poverty occurs at the individual, community or national levels and its gravity varies from one to another. It is even-more serious at the individual level as it includes, poor housing, children reduced to hawking, begging or foraging in dust-bins, general destruction.

The World Bank had in 1968 divided the world into four categories, namely, rich middle income, poor, very poor, while Uphoff (2004<http://www.fao.org>) has five categories, rich, middle class, subsistence, very poor (semi-landless), destitute (landless).

Today, the world is divided into First, Second and Third World countries. While the First and Second world countries are rich and powerful the Third world countries are being strangled by poverty. Such areas as Asia, Latin America and Africa fall into this category.

Commission for Africa Report (2005), laments that Africa remains the only continent in the world that has grown poorer over the past 25 years despite its vast resources. According to this report one in two people survive on less than \$1 a day in Africa. These categorizations point to the reality of poverty in most nations of the world and the gravity of it. Narayana (2000), estimated that out of the 6 billion people in the world, 2.9 billion live on less than \$2 per day, 1.2 billion live on less than \$1 a day. The issue of poverty in the individual communities and nations is very critical. Commission for Africa Report (2005), noted that African poverty and stagnation is the greatest tragedy of our time and that poverty on such a scale as exists in Africa demands a forceful response. This is more so because while extreme poverty has declined in Asia, it has actually increased in Africa (see Fig 1) (*Attached*). Nigeria, the most populous African country is fully identified as almost consumed by poverty. It is ranked the 18th poorest country of the world and must therefore put herself to task in developing the people and resources. Francis (1996), noted that the incidence of poverty in Nigeria in 1992 was 34% with 16% of the population suffering extreme poverty. Poverty concerns have necessitated international conferences, workshops and agreements, declarations, to which Nigeria is a signatory and intensive strategizing on its eradication or at least, alleviation.

Causes of Poverty

Several factors could be mentioned for causing poverty among the nations. These include natural and social forces. According to Zhang. (2008), natural causes of poverty include, scarce resources, natural disasters like earthquakes, fire disasters, floods etc., lack of labour, illness, lack of "education "for both parents*and children. The Third National Health Services Survey reported that in a place like China, lack of labour, illness and natural factors accounted for 77.7%of poverty in 2003, rising from a 61.6% shares in 1998. Illness-related poverty increased the most, surging from 21.6% in 1998 to 33.4% in 2003 (Zhang 2008). For Animalu, Abdullah! and Adeoba (2005:167), the active player in the urban area who may have attained a stable urban economic life but gets suddenly transported to the rural area will be reduced to the deprived poor status.

NEED NIGERIA (2004:20), believes that one source of poverty is the lack of basic services such as clean water, education and health care. Others include lack of asserts such as land, tools, credits and supportive networks of friend and family. In addition to all these factors one potent factor that has firmly kept most people operating below the poverty line is illiteracy or lack of education which really equips the individual with skills abilities, values and attitudes that will enable him benefit from the abundant resources in his environment and also contribute to the development of his nation.

The United Nations Declaration Human Rights to which Nigeria is a signatory enshrines the right of the child to education:-Nigeria has accordingly entrenched this in the constitution and made it a significant objective in the National Policy on Education. However, in spite of these noble

declarations the conduct of the affairs of the people by government leads to the impoverishment of the people. For years now, no day passes without one or more government official being accused (at least) of financial impropriety that borders on thieving at the detriment of the people particularly people in (he rural communities. Corruption seems to have been institutionalized while poverty remains part of the Nigerian national colour.

Dimensions of Poverty

NEED NIGERIA (2004:22), outlined the dimensions of poverty to include, income, schooling, health, clean water, empowerment, population matters and admits that 2/3 of the Nigerian population (126m in 2001) are poor despite living in a country with vast potential wealth and increased revenue from crude oil. According to this document in 19X0 an estimated 27% of Nigerians lived in poverty. By 1999 70% of the

population had income less than US \$1 a day and is sure that the proportion has risen since then.

The Vision 2010 Committee set up in 1997 by the Abacha regime observed that 50% of Nigerians live below the poverty line with a monthly household spending capacity of only ₦767.00 and that 4 out of every 10 Nigerians are core poor or critically poor with only ₦33.00 to spend in a whole month. (The poverty line is the marginal income at which an adequate living standard is almost impossible). Living below the poverty line is actually living in destitution. This is where most Nigerians are and is actually concentrated in the rural communities and urban slums. The committee actually noted that 95% of the core or critically poor live in rural areas while urban poverty increased from 28.2% in 1990 to 69.3% in 1996, just before the commission was instituted. According to Francis (1996), poverty incidence in rural areas in 1995 was 36% while in the urban area it was 30% (a growth rate of 2.2% in 1995 for urban areas) with extreme poverty placed at 15% and 11% for rural and urban areas respectively within the same time. In 1992, rural poverty was estimated at 66% while extreme poverty was placed at 69% (Etesike and Ogugua 2005:1X5). These figures are frightening and with retrenchments and retirements without alternative jobs the hordes of people slipping below the poverty line has increased substantially.

Poverty Alleviation Trends in Nigeria

Nigerian governments have not been insensitive to the frightening scenario as outlined above. Since end of the civil war in 1970 government has instituted programmes to reduce the devastating effects of the war and reduce the level of poverty that resulted from it among its citizenry. The 3R (reconstruction, rehabilitation and reconciliation) strategy of the General Yakubu Gowon regime aimed at not only the reconstruction of the physical structures that were demolished by the civil war but also the rehabilitation of the people who had been traumatized, dehumanized and pauperized by that same war. The approach was both mental and material but was not pursued to its logical conclusion because of political developments at that time.

In 1976, the Mohammed- Obasanjo regime instituted the Operation Feed Nation (OFN) to empower rural farmers to increase food production and in 1978 promulgated the Land Use Decree to create easy access to land by government for the same reason. However, these laudable programmes were hijacked by multinational companies (MNCs) who had unlimited financial resources and through indigenous collaborators frustrated local farmers and groups out of the projects (Agu, 2006). This period also saw the rise of Agricultural Development Projects (ADPs) and River Basin Development Authorities (RBDAs) which many states adopted to enhance food production create employments and reduce rural poverty but these projects were largely ruined by corruption.

The Babangida period saw well-intended programmes like the Better Life for Rural Women Programme geared toward empowering rural women both economically and politically using non-formal education strategy as its guiding force but was marred by unnecessary flamboyancy of the operators which ultimately excluded the rural women who were the primary target of the programme. This period also saw the establishment of the Directorate for Food, Roads and Rural Infrastructure (DFRRI) which had the mandate to open up existing rural roads and construct new ones to enable rural farmers transport their produce to urban markets. It was also to give electricity and portable water to the rural communities and assist their agricultural projects.

The National Directorate for Employment (NDE) was established to retrain school leavers in non-formal setting through the Open Apprenticeship Scheme and ultimately source self employment

opportunities for them by supplying the necessary equipments like machines, sewing machines, driers, refrigerators etc. This scheme is still in operation, but the state at which it is now, it cannot address the issue of unemployment in the country.

The Peoples' Bank of Nigeria which was created to grant credit facilities to small scale industrialists in—order-to encourage the growth-of the industrial sector and thereby reduce unemployment and poverty fumbled and faltered all the way until it was scrapped.

The Family Support Programme (FSP) with its financial empowerment department, Family Economic Advancement Programme (F.EAP) surpassed all the others in scope and reach. Almost all the banks, from the Central Bank right down, and all allied financial institutions were partners, SMEDAN and RMRDC and their allies in the corporate world were involved and as Mrs Maryam Abacha under whose auspices the programme came into being emphasised money given to subscribers to programme was not a gift but a loan to be done business with and paid back. The nation was agog and believed it was Uhuru. Animalu, Abdullah!, and Adeoba (2005), observed that each of these programmes received heavy media presence and publicity without the requisite local touch and instant viability. Today, Nigeria is still gearing to pursue very vigorously the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) part of which is to.

Halve by the 2015, the proportion of the world's people whose income is less than \$1 a day and the

proportion of people who suffer from hunger and, by the same date, to halve the proportion of people without access to safe drinking water (and) achieve universal primary education. This coming after almost two decades of the struggle to alleviate poverty in Nigeria.

The fact that we have missed it somewhere must be appreciated. That Nigeria is among the E-9 countries is a pointer to the fact that education holds the key to effective poverty eradication or at least, alleviation

The Education Imperative

Education has remained the fastest and the most effective instrument in human development. Yesufu, (cited in Etesike and Ogugua 2005), sees education as both a learning process and a basic instrument for the development of the human personality. Aboho and Okwu (2003), see education as a process that develops the human mind, the personality, the potentials and impart useful and relevant skills to the individuals thereby enhancing the growth of society. The education, therefore, that must squarely address the issue of poverty among the people of Nigeria must draw from both human and environmental potentials in order to effectively equip the individual, family or community to address those areas that sustain poverty, in their lives. Presently, this is not the case rather state and national governments spend material and financial resources to provide, electricity, roads, water (borehole not pipe-borne), motorcycles, cash, farm inputs and others in this category without the proper attention to the human person, to develop his intellect, his personal capacities and bring him to the level of using the knowledge he has to access higher levels of knowledge that will consistently keep him above the poverty line when economic changes that are inevitable take place. This is the reason for large-scale abandonment and discontinuation of poverty alleviation programmes and projects. What if the borehole, motorcycle, roads etc break down, who will repair them especially when raw cash is not available. What is the use of the education the people have received if it remains unconnected to immediate challenge^{^j^}

This is the crux of the matter, an issue

that must receive urgent attention if people must come out of poverty through the numerous poverty alleviation programmes the government is providing for them. There is even a widely but wrongly held notion among development experts that rural and under privileged people do not participate in development because of apathy. This not strictly true. The problem is that they are incapacitated by both ignorance and illiteracy. -Lack of education (basic or otherwise) is the issue in which the people have not been prepared to participate in the programmes and appropriate the benefits therein, therefore they abandon them "or even fight against them. For example, research reports (cited in Uphoff <http://www.fao.org>), show that parents believe that the sacrifice of keeping the children in school was not worth it. It is already on record that an estimated 100 million school age children mostly in developing countries do not go to school (Snel 2002) and the few that go drop out before they graduate. Parents argue that children who complete school will not be better placed financially than those who go directly to learn trade such as carpentry, weaving or welding. Put differently it means that the education they are receiving cannot remove poverty from their lives. The lack of survival skills by these groups of people turn them either into beggars/ destitute or criminals. The reason is because the education that is offered to the people under poverty alleviation programmes cannot be transferred into their means of livelihood in such a way that significant differences will be noticed in their income levels. Some cannot even use what they have gotten from formal or non-formal educational setting. This is why the poor keeps getting poorer in the face of severe economic change.

In view of the case made here for a more serious education of the people under poverty alleviation, the education should include in addition to the major area of skill acquisition be it welding , agriculture, poultry, computer, home economics etc.

1. English language which is the official language of communication in Nigeria and which will enable the people access knowledge relevant to their growth.
2. Mathematics for simple business transaction like replacement of damaged parts of machines or purchase of new ones, payments or being paid for jobs.
3. Citizenship education which will inculcate in the values of patriotism, hardwork, honesty, dignity of labour patience (not the get-rich-quick lifestyle of most people).
4. Religious studies which will emphasis the fear of God, moderation, the sanctity of life, the ultimate end of man in heaven (or paradise) or in hell and that each of them is by a deliberate choice based on what we do here on earth.
5. Social Studies that will expose to him political arrangements in the country, his rights as a citizen, the states of the federation and their economic and cultural potentials, the country's relationships with other nations of the world, his expected contributions to his community and nation.
6. Entrepreneurial studies which will equip him to translate the technical skills, knowledge, values

and attitudes he has acquired into a money-making system sustainable through reinforcements of these factors.

7. French language and one other Nigerian language other than the one of this locality.

Recommendations

In view of the critical issues highlighted in this discussion the following recommendations are hereby made:

1. The content of education for those receiving poverty alleviation whether in a project form or programme form must be expanded to include the subject as outlined above.
2. There must be a consistent monitoring and evaluation of the interventions of international donor agencies to ensure that corporate objectives and programme implementation of poverty alleviation remain consistent with the needs and priorities of the recipient individuals and communities.
3. Education programme implementers must be teachers or individuals who are specialists in the various disciplines because these people need the special touch which can only be offered by those who have experience and in-depth knowledge.
4. Both government and non-governmental agencies must harmonize their investments in these programmes and present a common front to avoid unnecessary duplication and competition resulting in not having much to show for all the efforts already expended on the matter after several decades. All the money being recovered from thieving public officers can be put into the procurement of both materials and personnel for poverty alleviation programmes.
5. Entrepreneurship must be taken very seriously because that is the missing link between the arena of knowledge acquisition and that of money-making which will ultimately deal with those factors that place the individual in the enclave of the poor.

Conclusion

There is definitely no end to learning but knowledge and skills already acquired should enable one access, appropriate and even contribute to new knowledge. The quality and level of knowledge offered to the people under poverty alleviation programmes seem not to have empowered them much to come out of poverty and at the same time others are sliding into poverty. The poverty alleviation education programme as advocated in this paper, (not just handing out motorcycles or other machines), should equip recipients to operate on their own when new knowledge appears, apply it to their enterprises and be properly located in the mainstream of their specific areas. Knowledge and skill acquisition must expand to include (the ones that will really translate knowledge, skills, values and attitudes into money).

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