

ASSESSING THE EFFECTS OF RURAL POVERTY ON ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This paper argues that poverty is more than a lack of income and a decent standard of living as its ramifications also border on other aspects of deprivation, including lack of access to services" essential for health care delivery, literacy, political voice and legal protection. The deepening poverty experienced by rural dwellers in Nigeria leaves them with no alternative than to degrade the environment on which their livelihoods depend and development programmes designed to alleviate that poverty have not yielded the desired results. Government interventions to boost agricultural production in order to enhance rural incomes has equally been largely unsuccessful. Population growth has not helped matters either. Since poverty is the driving force of environmental degradation, the relationship between the two phenomena is such that when one is solved, the other is simultaneously resolved. Tin's implies that a friendly attitude towards the environment in rural Nigeria is possible on condition that rural poverty is alleviated. More importantly, the integration of rural development into poverty alleviation programmes would make the peasants more responsive to strategies for their development, which in turn would help to reduce environmental degradation.

Introduction

Poverty as a social and economic problem has for long attracted the attention of mankind (Baldwin and Ross-Larson, 1993). The dimensions of this problem have expanded to include not only lack of access to material wealth, but also the denial of opportunities and choices to those that are burdened by it to lead a long, prosperous and creative life, to enjoy dignity, self-esteem, the respect of others and the things that people value (UNDP, 1998). In short, poverty is more than a lack of income and a decent standard of living as its ramifications also border on other aspects of deprivation such as lack of access to education, political voice, services essential for health care delivery and legal protection (Satterthwaite, 2002).

Fundamentally, however, poverty denotes the absence of wealth although its perception varies tremendously from one society to another. This is because the criteria for distinguishing the poor from the non-poor tend to reflect specific national priorities and normative concepts of welfare and human rights. As countries develop, their perception of who is poor and not poor changes with the variation in their levels of consumption. Therefore, to understand the implications of poverty on development in and welfare of Nigerians, we have decided to limit this paper to rural poverty and environmental degradation in the country.

The deepening poverty experienced by rural dwellers in Nigeria leaves them with no alternative than to degrade the environment on which their livelihoods depend. This human assault on the environment leads to depletion of natural resources and has enormous consequences for sustainable development. Despite the concerted efforts of successive Nigerian governments at rural development, rural poverty has worsened, thus calling into question the appropriateness and adequacy of the instituted rural development programmes. The alarming environmental assault in rural Nigeria and the deprivation that brings it about serve as the motivation for this paper. Accordingly, the issue: discussed are separated into four sections. Section 1 deals with the introduction. In section II, poverty and associated environmental concerns are discussed while section III assesses the effects of rural poverty on the environment in Nigeria. The conclusions are contained in section IV.

Poverty and Environmental Concerns

In the past few decades, radical changes have taken place in the conceptualization of growth poverty and environmental concerns. Whatever the meanings attached to these economic phenomena growth is necessary for poverty alleviation since there can be no sustained increase in consumption and hence welfare without it (Obadan and Odusola, 2001). In the same vein, increased consumption promotes higher living standards, enhances prosperity and so helps in the eradication of poverty -However, increased consumption entails expansion and intensification of economic activities, which are directly related to extensive use of environmental resources.

The key problem facing mankind, 'therefore, centres on how to reconcile increase' consumption with the sustainability of the environment. This task is oriented towards achieving development patterns capable of meeting the needs of the present generation without jeopardizing the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). Hence, the challenge of contemporary growth and poverty reduction efforts is the ecological integrity of development programmes.

Poverty, as a phenomenon that encompasses insufficient income to meet subsistence needs, inequalities in the distribution of resources and inaccessibility to economic power and 'political freedoms, has been adequately discussed in the literature (see, for example, World Bank, 1990; Ravallion and Bidani, 1994; World Bank, 1996a; Bigman and Fofack, 2000) that we do not need to duplicate those efforts. The literature on the environmental problems of development is also large (see World Bank, 1992; World Bank 1995; United Nations, 1997a; Lopez, 1998). The main thrust of this body of research is that the environment embraces the totality of the planet earth and that its- external conditions, which a society acts upon in order to influence its development is being degraded as people struggle for survival. Consequently, the onslaught on the environment makes the growth prospects unsustainable.

The interaction between poverty and the environment is complex and multidimensional and the two phenomena constantly influence each other. The pertinent question, therefore, is: how does that happen? The answer is that the poor, unable to generate enough income tend to be highly resource dependent. As such, poverty causes those burdened by it to incessantly assault the environment. Put differently, excessive use of environmental resources leads to poverty and the poorer the environment, the more intense is the process. In fact, the relationship between poverty and environmental problems is interwoven to the extent that when one is solved, the other is simultaneously resolved. This implies that the trade-off between the two is positive. That is why a compromise between poverty alleviation and environmentally friendly attitude is necessary for development to be ecologically sustainable.

Moreover, the rapid population growth is a demographic imperative that adversely affects development. More people would make the labour market to be saturated and means of livelihood per person would also become less. In addition, more people produce more wastes, which threaten environmental conditions and causes stress on the earth's assimilative capacity. The heavier onslaught on natural resources this entails is not difficult to comprehend. When viewed from this perspective, the campaign against poverty must take cognisance of population explosion particularly in developing countries and its effects on environmental sustainability.

This point has been variously stressed by the World Commission on Environment and Development (1987), UNEP (1988), the South Commission (1990) and the FAO (1991) when they assert in their Reports that under conditions of rapid population growth and widespread poverty, environmental abuse is usually severe. It manifests, for example, in the conversion of forests into agricultural land and overexploitation of rivers and streams, which disturb the surrounding ecology. The United Nations (1997b) equally notes that large populations account for increased pressure on natural resources with devastating consequences on ecological balance. Thus, population growth, poverty and environmental problems influence each other in that the action of one leads to the exacerbation of the other. Therefore, the need to pursue public policies directed at slowing population growth is desirable for poverty reduction and environmental sanity. Otherwise, as Dasgupta and Maler (1990) suggest, some form of Malthusian check could intervene to bring about the desired balance.

Environmental problems are both local and global in their outlook although local trends can have global effects and vice-versa. For example, poor natural resource management in some countries, which as it were is a local event could threaten the physical basis and vulnerable ecosystem of the earth. And the effects of desertification, destruction of the ozone layer and ocean pollution that take place globally are felt at local

levels (for details, see Nijkamp and Soeteman, 1990). This presupposes that solutions to environmental problems should have a global character since the natural environment is all encompassing. No effort should, therefore, be too much in making the exploitation of the environment a friendly affair.

Rural Poverty and Environmental Damage in Nigeria

Poverty is pervasive and severe in rural Nigeria in the sense that the majority of the poor live there. This is corroborated by the fact that whereas 40 per cent of Nigerians reside in the cities, the corresponding figure for the rural areas is 60 per cent and rural households are poorer than their urban counterparts (Magbagbeola, 1999). What is more, the rural households are the more marginalized in terms of access to educational facilities, health care delivery systems and employment opportunities. Inequities in the distribution of economic resources, including income also weigh heavily against the rural dwellers (Central Bank of Nigeria, 1999; National Population Commission, 2000; and Iwuagwu, 2001).

The rural poor are classified into small-holders, landless rural residents, nomadic pastoralists and artisanal fishermen while the rural sector is made up of small-scale farmers, food processors, informal traders and other rural micro-entrepreneurs (World Bank, 1996). However, the dominant occupation of rural dwellers in Nigeria is subsistence agriculture because about three-quarters of them engage in that occupation. Therefore, their poverty is caused not by lack of employment, but due to predominance of small farms, low adoption of modern farm practices and consequent low income. This view is supported by Todaro (1998) who stresses that in most developing countries about two-thirds of the rural poor scratch out their living from subsistence agriculture either as small-scale farmers or low paid farm workers, while the remaining one-third are located on the fringes of urban centres where they engage themselves in various forms of self-employment such as street hawking, petty trading and seasonal commerce.

With rural poverty on the increase in Nigeria, the level of environmental degradation is equally high in the rural areas. Since the rural poor have no access to regular income, they have no choice than to overexploit the natural resources of the environment in order to survive. Such practices pose even greater threat to their ability to fend for themselves because overexploitation of natural resources leads to their depletion with grave consequences for sustainable development. Moreover, most of the rural poor live on land resources, but with limited access to parcels of land. This leads to repeated tillage of available acreages for agricultural production, which exposes the soil to water and wind erosion and weakens its structure. Incessant crop production also removes soil nutrients, leading to its degradation. And as soil is degraded, crop yields decline and the levels of inputs (and hence costs) needed to restore its productivity rise (Lutz, Pagiola and Reiche, 1994; and Lopez, 1998). For the Nigerian rural poor, this amounts to a tragedy because instead of reducing, their poverty deepens.

To compound the problem, the majority of the rural dwellers rely on firewood and the use of crop residues, coconut husks, and rice hull or elephant grass for cooking. As such, trees and grasses are not allowed to perform their roles as soil fertilizers, but rather they constitute air pollution when they are used as fuel in cooking. The polluted air damages the health of the rural dwellers and makes them sick, which often jeopardizes their chances of working harder, earning more, saving more, investing more and breaking out of their vicious circle of poverty.

Since most rural dwellers are farmers, their poverty can be alleviated through programmes that boost agricultural productivity. This in turn will enhance their income and increase their capacity to look after themselves. In the same vein, if rural poverty is alleviated, the recourse of rural populace to environmental degradation will lessen and with a healthier environment, more resources will become available to them for their self-actualization.

This explains why successive Nigerian governments have over the years instituted various programmes aimed at enhancing agricultural productivity and boosting rural income and development in order to alleviate rural poverty. The rural anti-poverty strategies already packaged and implemented include the Directorate of Food, Roads and Rural Infrastructure (DFRRI) of 1986, National Directorate of Employment of 1986, Better Life Programme of 1987, the People's and Community Banks of 1989 and 1990 respectively, the Family Support Programme of 1994 and the Family' Economic Advancement Programme of 1997.

These were laudable programmes that targeted the rural dwellers and whose objectives were to provide them with feeder roads, water supply, electricity and credit facilities for their businesses. The

programmes were also meant to encourage them to acquire skills necessary for the establishment of cottage industries and participate in self-help projects (Oladeji and Abiola, 1998). Although these programmes helped to boost agricultural productivity, employment and socio-infrastructure development in the rural areas (Ogwumike, 1995 and Okojie, 2001), their overall performance leaves much to be desired.

For example, DFRRI's mandate spanned provision of economic and socio- infrastructure, rural housing, sourcing and dissemination of improved seedlings to enhance agricultural production and mobilisation for mass participation in rural development. By 1992, the sum of £42.4 billion had been allocated to the initiative, but an evaluation report reveals that about 16 per cent of the health care outlets under the scheme were without drugs and equipment. In the case of water supply, only 61 per cent of the designated areas were provided with borehole services, leaving the rest to continue sourcing for their water supply under unhygienic conditions (Omorogbe, Asemota and Ogieriakhi, 2002).

Another aspect of government intervention to alleviate rural poverty concerns the Agricultural Development Programmes (ADPs) and the River Basin and Rural Development Authorities (RBRDAs). The ADPs are World Bank assisted programmes established in 1974, first in pilot states and later in all the states of the federation. They are expected to provide infrastructure, farm service centres, farm inputs such as fertilizers and agro-chemicals, and training and extension services. Thus, the ADPs' primary objective is to boost agricultural production, enhance farmers' incomes and by extension the welfare of rural dwellers. However, this objective is not being met because of under-funding. Records, for example, show that ADPs finances rose from N1,217.5 million in 1992 to £42,119.7 million in 1994, but fell to £41,111.3 million in 1998 (Federal Office of Statistics, 2002). As funding dwindles, the level of operation of ADPs suffers and the farmers' productivity and welfare correspondingly decline.

The RBRDAs came on board in 1973 with the establishment of Lake Chad Basin Development Authority. The Authorities are to cater for land and water resources of the country for agricultural and rural development purposes. However, these capital-intensive irrigation projects are based on false development premises and so have been producing a parody of themselves, which proved disastrous to peasants (Adelakun, 1999). For example., the Bako Lori dam project of the Sokoto-Rima RBRDA, which displaced some 15,000 peasants, many of whom eventually became either tenants or landless was certainly a defeat to peasant agriculture and rural development efforts (Okolocha, 1999).

As we reasoned elsewhere (Onwuka, 2002), involving the peasants in large-scale mechanised agriculture, that is meaningless to them is not rural development. Certainly, people are the agents and beneficiaries of development. But since the RBRDAs projects rely on high technology and sophisticated management, Unit alienate the peasants, rural development certainly cannot occur because the peasants are not psychologically, mentally and even physically involved. The projects are also wasteful because the capacities and agricultural experiences of the peasants would remain underutilized in plantations applying heavy mechanization. Because the RBRDAs are inimical to peasant agriculture, they cannot champion the cause of rural development and as such are not in a position to contribute much in enhancing the living standards of rural dwellers.

The poverty alleviation programme (PAP) of the Obasanjo administration has been mired with corruption to the extent that the rural dwellers have not really benefited from the scheme. After 4 years of doling out money under PAP, rural poverty has -persisted and in fact has intensified. In consequence, environmental degradation has also become more pronounced and widespread in the rural areas as marginal and sensitive lands are being encroached upon for cultivation purposes and attack on fisheries population continues unabated among other abuses. Unless solutions are found to the rural poverty-environmental degradation nexus through appropriate poverty reduction strategies, unsustainable utilisation of environmental resources in rural Nigeria would remain a part of the country's economic problems.

Conclusions

Given the enormity of poverty and environmental problems in the contemporary world, sustainable development has become a key phrase in economic and resource management parlance. Because of the excruciating poverty of the Nigerian rural populace, environmental abuse is severe in the rural areas. Population growth has not helped matters either. Nevertheless, poverty can be alleviated in the rural areas through widely shared growth and sustainable exploitation of natural resources.

Understanding the links between poverty and environmental degradation is pertinent for us to appreciate the forces responsible for the alarming environmental assault in rural Nigeria. The poverty of the rural populace

is the driving force of this degradation. Therefore, environmental degradation in the rural areas can be reduced when rural poverty is alleviated. This has become imperative so that the rural people would not be worse off due to environmental abuse, that results from economic decisions they make.

Since the rural poor are mainly farmers, their poverty would worsen and environmental degradation made more severe if policies and strategies for accelerated rural development are not put in place and implemented. Such a framework would enhance the efficiency of government's anti-poverty programmes and strengthen the capacity for environmental management in the rural areas. More importantly, the integration of rural development into poverty alleviation programmes would make the peasants more responsive to strategies for their development aspirations. In the final analysis, the alleviation of rural poverty would help in the campaign for a friendly environment in rural Nigeria,

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