

ERADICATING POVERTY IN NIGERIA: THE ROLES OF RELIGION

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Abstract

Poverty has wide-ranging and often devastating effects. Many of its effects, such as poor nutrition and physical health problems, result directly from having too little income or too few resources. As a result of poor nutrition and health problems, infant mortality rates among the poor are higher than average, and life expectancies are lower than average. Other effects of poverty may include infectious disease, mental illness, and drug dependence. Some effects of poverty are not as easily understood. Religion on the other hand enables people of equal faith and beliefs to assemble and practice the tenets of such religion. The central theme of most religion lies in their generosity towards members and the likes. It was on this basis that the study presumed that if such religious beliefs and tenacity is well enshrined in the community it would go a long ways in solving such economic problem like poverty

Keywords: Religion, Christianity, Islam, Poverty, Development

Introduction

Poverty has wide-ranging and often devastating effects. Many of its effects, such as poor nutrition and physical health problems, result directly from having too little income or too few resources (Badru & Ogundipe (2017). Poverty is defined as a condition of having insufficient resources or income. In its most extreme form, poverty is a lack of basic human needs, such as adequate and nutritious food, clothing, housing, clean water, and health services. Extreme poverty can cause terrible suffering and death, and even modest levels of poverty can prevent people from realizing many of their desires. In African context, poverty is seen as a 'curse' or 'destitution' that threatens people's health or lives, which can be transmitted from one generation to another generation if not carefully and strategically weed out from its host (family or community).

Extreme poverty as defined by international organizations, means having a household income of less than U.S. \$1 per day. The Encarta Dictionary defines poverty as a state of being poor. That is, a state of not having enough money to take care of basic needs such as food, clothing, and housing and also deficiency or lack of something. Besides privations of this kind, the Encyclopedia of Theology, added a situation of helplessness when faced with the demands of life: ignorance, weakness, bondage, isolation, defenselessness against injustice".

Badru & Ogundipe (2017) observed that governments of most developing countries provide limited assistance to prevent some poverty. Most have at least minimal social security programs, which provide benefits during periods of unemployment, illness, or disability; at retirement; and to the families of deceased workers. These programs usually provide support only for people

who are employed full-time—a very small percentage of the population in most developing countries. Some countries, such as Bangladesh and Nepal, provide mandatory full support only to government employees. A variety of organizations support antipoverty programs in developing countries. They include

1. International government organizations, such as the UN
2. Aid agencies run by developed countries
3. Non-governmental (mostly nonprofit) organizations
4. Private development banks.

The reasons for poverty with respect to Nigeria is unclear; Nigeria is among the most endowed country in human, material and mineral resources in the world but yet was rated the one of the poorest countries world-wide. Nigeria is still surviving as a nation but it is yet to flourish. Paradoxically a country so blessed with rich human and natural resources and yet her people are very poor. This prompted Oladipo (1999) to posit that “Nigeria today is a country in which poverty, human degradation and despondency reign supreme.

However, both military and civilian governments who have ruled this country have desired to provide a panacea to the problems of poverty since after independence in 1960, without success. Little wonder that Imaekhai (2000) observes that “the fact that poverty is still very much a problem in Nigeria even on a higher magnitude points to the failure of previous attempts made by both civilian and military government to tackle the problem”.

Therefore, this article endeavours to identify possible areas where religion can ameliorate or possibly eradicate poverty. The way in which this is carried out, is by identifying basic principles as expressed in different religions on how poverty can be viewed and treated. This is not a theological exercise to judge the correctness or validity of any religious position, but rather a neutral empirical study where religion is viewed as a human phenomenon. This approach can be deemed by some to be a phenomenological study. There are however enough critical remarks on the different religious positions to disqualify this as a mere phenomenological descriptive study. The perspective provided by sociology furthermore plays an important role in this study.

What is poverty?

There are many expressions of poverty but a conscious decision for a selected few definitions/perceptions are made here. Geremek provides a substantive definition: from a social perspective Geremek (1994) defines poverty as ‘the point at which the survival of the individual and of the family became threatened’. According to Obayelu and Uffort (2007) poverty is perceived as not just lack of money, food and assets but also as lack of access to education and health care and lack of security, dignity and independence. However, a person’s perception of poverty is a function of his present experience, condition of his environment, the aim of such definition, his vocation and his definition of the good life (Fasoranti, 2010). Du Toit (1996) in an attempt to define poverty, states that poverty operates on a scale ranging from ‘absolute poverty’ to ‘relative poverty’.

Causes of Poverty

There are two broad schools of thought to causes of poverty - Low economic growth performance and Market imperfections. A viable economy is essential for the provision of employment thereby reducing poverty levels. The low economic growth is associated with increased unemployment and underemployment when the income of those affected may generally not be sufficient for them to maintain adequate standard of living. Market imperfection on the other hand has to do with institutional distortions which would not make for equal opportunity to productive assets. They include ignorance, culture and inequitable income distribution.

The following have been identified as causes of poverty - Inadequate access to employment opportunities; Inadequate physical assets; Inadequate access to the means of supporting rural development in poor region; Inadequate access to markets for goods and services that the poor can sell; Low endowment of human capital; Destruction of natural resources endowment; Inadequate access to assistance for those living at the margin and those victimized by transitory poverty because of drought, floods, pests and war; Inadequate participation of the poor in the design of development programmes; Poor maintenance culture or failure to retain and maintain existing structures, leading to deterioration in rural, urban, and high way roads and township slums and drainages. They can be summarized as follows:

1. The Stage of Economic and Social Development: A situation of economic underdevelopment can be a hindrance to the capacity of a nation to formulate and implement programmes and projects that would enhance real economic growth. In a situation like this, poverty will tend to persist, because economic growth is the first necessary step to poverty alleviation.
2. Low Productivity: Low productivity may be due to obsolescence of human skill or low acquired skill resulting from low education, poor health and physical incapacity. It could also be as a result of inadequate access to productive assets and consequently unemployment or underemployment. This causes poverty since the consuming unit is unable to earn enough income to maintain adequate/decent living standard. Nigeria's human and physical skills have tended to deteriorate with the passage of time as a result of a combination of brain-drain and falling educational facilities and funding.
3. Market Imperfections: Distortions in the employment market which introduce all forms of discrimination and rigidities, and prevent the advancement of people along the social and economic ladder of progress, in the form of sex, age, colour, race and tribe

Effects of Poverty

Poverty has wide-ranging and often devastating effects. Many of its effects, such as poor nutrition and physical health problems, result directly from having too little income or too few resources. As a result of poor nutrition and health problems, infant mortality rates among the poor are higher than average, and life expectancies are lower than average. Other effects of poverty may include infectious disease, mental illness, and drug dependence. Some effects of poverty are not as easily understood. For example, studies link poverty to crime, but by no means are all poor people also criminals. In many cases, the primary effects of poverty lead to other problems. Extended hunger and lack of employment, for instance, may lead to depression, which may sometimes contribute to criminal behavior.

The relationship between poverty and personal or social problems is very complex. For example, studies of mothers on welfare reveal that those with multiple problems—such as depression, substance abuse, and being a victim of domestic violence—are much less likely to find work and escape poverty. What is less clear, however, is whether these problems result from the disadvantages of poverty.

Fighting Poverty in Nigeria

Anyanwu (2012) examined measures taken by successive governments in Nigeria aimed at fighting poverty since 1980 to include: the Green Revolution (1980); programs to alleviate the pains of Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) through the Directorate of Food, Road and Rural Infrastructure (DFRRI) and the National Directorate of Employment (NDE) (1986); the People's Bank of Nigeria (1990); community banks; the Better Life Program (BLP); Family Support Program (FSP) and Family Economic Advancement Program (FEAP); establishment of National Agricultural Land Development Authority (NALDA) (1993) as well as the Agricultural Development Programs (ADP) and the Strategic Gains Reserves Programs (SGRP). Another key measure was the establishment of the Poverty Alleviation Program (PAP) (2000) which later metamorphosed into the Poverty Eradication Program (PEP) and culminated in the National Poverty Eradication Program (NAPEP) (2001). NAPEP has been organized around four schemes, namely, the Youth Empowerment Scheme (YES), Rural Infrastructure Development (RIDS), Social Welfare Schemes (SOWESS) and the National Resource Development and Conservation Scheme (NRDCS). Also periodic reviews of salaries/wages and tax rates and allowances as well as pensions aimed at increasing the purchasing power of civil and public servants.

In addition, there is the Interim Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (IPRSP) with the aim of building on the gains of PAP and PEP. One of the recent measures that attracted a lot of attention was the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS), which was built on the interim PRSP. This medium term strategy (2003-2007) derived from the long-term goals of poverty reduction, wealth creation, employment generation and value re-orientation, being a national coordinated framework of action in close collaboration with the state and local governments and other stakeholders. The main strategies were anchored on: empowering people (Social Charter or Human Development Agenda); promoting private enterprise, and changing the way the government does its work (Reform Government and Institutions). The equivalent of NEEDS at State and Local Government levels were the State Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (SEEDS) and Local Government Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (LEEDS). Though some of measures and reforms made some positive impacts, they proved unsustainable while at the same time failed to result in sustainable poverty reduction. Indeed, these earlier efforts to address poverty failed largely because they were badly implemented and had no particular focus on the poor in terms of design and implementation, poor targeting mechanisms, lack of focus on the poor, program inconsistency, apparent disconnect between the government and the poor, poor implementation, and corruption (Imaekhai, F. J. 2009). Thus, an understanding of the various dimensions and determinants of poverty in Nigeria is a precondition for effective pro-poor development strategies in the country.

Why Government Strategies Failed

A number of factors have contributed to the failure of past poverty alleviation programmes and efforts. Some of them are:

1. Lack of targeting mechanisms for the poor: most of the programmes do not focus directly on the poor.
2. Political and policy instability: this has resulted in frequent policy changes and inconsistent implementation, which in turn have prevented the continuous progress of the programmes.
3. Severe budgetary, management and governance problems: these have afflicted most of the programmes, resulting in either uncompleted, broken down and abandoned facilities, which are most times unstaffed and unequipped.
4. Overextended scope of activities of most institutions resulting in resources being spread too thinly on too many activities. DFRRRI and BLP, for example, covered almost every sector and overlapped with many other existing programmes.
5. Lack of accountability and transparency: these made the programmes to serve as conduit pipes for draining national resources.
6. Inadequate coordination of the various programmes: this resulted in each institution carrying out its own activities with resultant duplication of effort and inefficient use of limited resources.
7. Most of the programmes lacked vision for their sustainability.
8. Absence of agreed poverty reduction agenda that can be used by all concerned Federal Government, State Governments, NGO's and the International Donor Community.
9. Lack of cooperation among the three tiers of government.
10. Inappropriate programme design reflecting lack of involvement of beneficiaries in the formulation and implementation of programmes. Most beneficiaries were not motivated to identify themselves sufficiently with the successful implementation of the programmes.

Religious Organizations in Nigeria

Solving the problem of poverty has become not only that of the government but by extension religious groups concern. Many religious groups have established Faith Based Organisation (FBOs) in tackling and eradicating the vicious circle which consternate members. Among these groups are Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), Christian Health Association of Nigeria (CHAN), Church of Christ in Nigeria (COCIN), Christian Rural and Urban Development Association of Nigeria (CRUDAN), Evangelical Church of West Africa (ECWA) Federation of Muslim Women Association of Nigeria (FOMWAN), Justice, Development and Peace (JDPC) Jama'atu Nasril Islam (JNI) Nasrul-Lahil-Il-Fathi Society of Nigeria (NASFAT) Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN), Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs, Jama'tu Nasril Islam, Christian Council of Nigeria, Nigerian Catholic Bishops' Conference Christian Rural and Urban Development Association of Nigeria, Ansarudeen Society of Nigeria, Islamic Foundation of Nigeria, Council of Ulama, Muslim Students Society of Nigeria, Muslim Sisters' Organization, Anwar-Islam Movement, BEGE Ministries Int, Serving in Mission Young Men's Christian Association, Al-Hayat Relief Foundation, etc.

The Way Forward

Since the causes of poverty are multidimensional, in the same way the strategies for poverty reduction must also be multidimensional. The following suggestions are made: According to Aliyu (1999), as cited in Aluko (2003), a very strong and solid foundation is essential for the successful implementation of poverty reduction programmes in Nigeria. The solid base should be in the areas of:

- a) National Security and Political stability
- b) Discipline
- c) Infrastructural Development
- d) Economic stability and provision of adequate welfare services.

Though these functions lie solely with the government, but religious organizations can complement these efforts through the formation of religious security outfit similar to what we have at the national level. For example, the Sherriff guards, which often times provide security during the Muslim programmes such as NASFAT, and other. In addition preaching and sermon should be centered on the fear of God and the consequences of evil becomes, discipline, and others. Infrastructural development is not new to religious organization, over times, they have been involved in the development of the education such as the creation of schools (Primary, Secondary and Tertiary) e.g. Redeemer's University, Mountain Top University, Bowen University, Babcock University, Covenant University, all by the Christians while Al-Qalam University, Al Hikma University, Crescent University to mention but few are by the Muslims. In terms of economic stability, the religious organization equally have roles to play, recent studies by Barro and McCleary (2003), Eelke de Jong (2008), Badru and Ogundipe (2017) revealed that attendance at places of worship tend to decline with economic development, i.e. increases in attendance at places of worship tend to reduce economic growth while religiosity has also been found not to be a function of attendance at places of worship. The implication of this is that programmes at churches and mosques should be reduced at best confined to their stipulated periods (Fridays to the Muslims and Sundays to the Christians)

Conclusion

As discussed in the body of this paper, the incidence of poverty is prevalent worldwide but mostly common in the developing countries of the world, such as Sub-Saharan Africa, Asia and South America. The causes of poverty have also been extensively discussed in the paper. However, there is no end to seeking ways to end the ugly phenomenon. Among other things therefore the following are positive steps to take to further combat poverty:

- Re-direction of sermons toward the benefits of good and consequences of evil and away from PROSPERITY which has become a major scam and source of corruption among some religious organization and the nation at large
- Complimentary roles of religious organization through the formation of security organizations for members
- Reductions in the number of attendance at their places of worship
- Institute policies which directly focus on the emancipation of the poor e.g. agricultural sector
- Strengthen the existing poverty alleviation strategies e.g. establishment of micro finance and credit institutions (e.g Al- Hayat Microfinance Bank, etc.) for effective performance

- Emphasis on basic socio-economic infrastructure (education, health services, roads etc)

All these and many more would go a long way in assisting the efforts of the government

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