

THE NEXUS BETWEEN SOCIAL INEQUALITY AND PREVALENCE OF INSECURITY IN NIGERIA

By

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Abstract

Social inequality is a phenomenon that cuts across all societies and all social spheres of life; however, it is so endemic in Nigeria. It is opined in this paper that the dismal state of social inequality in the country to a very large extent, has led the country into unbearable state of insecurity. Although, many underlying factors have been suggested to have contributed to the magnitude of insecurity in the country, the prevalence of socioeconomic inequalities with its attendant results in abject poverty, high rate of unemployment among others, is the major precursor of chronic insecurity in Nigeria. The paper observed that social inequality is becoming more pronounced by the widening gap between the rich and poor and specifically the Upper class and Lower class categories in the Nigerian society. This stratification is clearly manifested and obvious in almost all the social relationships between the haves and the have-nots, among the society. This paper based its assumption on Becker's ecological economic theory of insecurity which seeks to explain variations in insecurity rates through the differing incentives, pressures, and deterrents that individuals face in different environments. The paper examines the major forms of social inequalities experienced in the country: socio-economic inequality, political inequality, socio-cultural inequality among others and how they have direct impact on the current challenges of insecurity in the country. It revealed that with the growing inequalities among the populace, unsuccessful individuals feel frustrated and do easily take to crime to have their ends met, hence, the unbearable state of insecurity in the land. The paper concluded with practical solutions towards achieving relative peace and tranquility within the country.

Key words: Social inequality, insecurity, poverty, social stratification

Introduction

It is quite disheartening that Nigeria, a country blessed with abundant natural and human resources, is today bewildered with myriads of woes. It is paradoxically surprising that the country, being the sixth largest exporter of oil in the world, is unfortunately still lamenting in terms of its appalling state of social amenities; the almost total collapse of the economy which has pauperized the people beyond imagination; institutionalized corruption characterized by embezzlement of public funds by public officials; the inability of government to pay workers' salaries and emoluments, let alone to cater for pensioners, high rate of abject poverty, the

skyrocketing prices of goods and services with the attendant hardship and agony upon the populace. It is no gainsaying the fact that currently, almost everything is in shambles, and that majority of the citizenry are groaning under heavy and unbearable economic hardship.

Consequent upon this is the fact that Nigerians live in fear of insecurity. The country in recent times has witnessed unprecedented level of insecurity. As a matter of fact, the issue of insecurity has become persistently worrisome to all and sundry. In the Nigeria of today, there seems no place that is apparently secured any longer. This obnoxious situation has grown to the extent that many, especially the government, are befuddled and at a loss for insight as to what meaningfully could be done to avert the menace. Every day, people wake up to the news of one crime or the other: armed robberies, kidnappings, ethnic/religious killings, armed insurgency, herdsmen onslaught, banditry, terrorism, ethnic and regional agitations and many others. There is almost a total breakdown of law and order in the land.

Plutarch, the famous Greek biographer and essayist, once noted, “An imbalance between the rich and the poor is the oldest and most fatal ailment of all republics”¹. Unfortunately, this imbalance between the rich and the poor continues in every society, in every time and clime, and in every political system, from the ultra-socialist to the ultra-capitalist, and the ones in between till today. That is why the major cause of the grave insecurity in the country today, which has become seemingly intractable, is largely attributable to the endemic nature of social inequality and the perversion of common good among the citizenry. Many innocent lives have been lost to incessant insurgency, regional agitations for resource control which was fueled by the feelings of grave injustice and uneven distribution of the nation’s common wealth by different groups and federating units. It is obvious that the brainchild of most of our predicaments in terms of the rampaging insecurity, which has become worrisome and seems uncontrollable by the current government, is the perceived injustices and inequality in the distribution of the common wealth of the nation among the regions and peoples within the federating units.

It is therefore the concern of this paper to examine the various forms of inequalities being experienced by the people within the country which invariably have directly or indirectly led to the current gloomy state of insecurity. The paper focuses on the prevalence of social inequality in the nation, looking for the way and manner in which they have directly led to unbearable insecurity in the country and the solutions to this situation.

Conceptual Analysis

Social Inequality

Social Inequality is a global issue, and that is why it has been of concern to scholars, particularly philosophers, sociologists, political analysts and the like. The United Nations has set a benchmark for social equality the world over, the absence of which amounts to palpable inequality. The benchmark was contained in a UN Declaration that:

Everyone has the right to a standard of living, adequate for the health and wellbeing of himself and his family, including food, clothing, housing, medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age, other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control².

In essence, the issue of social inequality refers to the existence of variations in terms of valued attributes which some members of a society possess more than others. The attributes can include income, wealth, status, knowledge and power. The possession of these attributes can vary among individuals, families, social groups, communities, and nations. Preston defines social inequality as “the expression of lack of access to housing, health care, education, employment opportunities, politics, and status. It is the exclusion of people from full and equal participation in what we, the members of society, perceive as being valuable, important, personally worthwhile and socially desirable³.” Social inequality has equally been defined as “differences in income, resources, power and status within and between societies. Such inequalities are maintained by those in powerful positions via institutions and social processes⁴.”

This shows that social inequality is multidimensional, rightly as Grusky⁵ notes, it is different from economic inequality which refers to unequal distribution of wealth. Invariably, it means that social inequality can be measured through a number of ways, such as through differences in social class or role, for example: social divisions related to inequalities which include gender, age, ethnicity and ability⁶. Moreover, Ortiz and Cummins suggested an examination of social divisions in order to view income distribution in terms of their effect on groups such as women, children and the poor. The scholars stated that:

The human development index is another way in which inequality can be measured. The index measures the three dimensions of health, education and living standards to assess how countries are progressing in development terms and to offer international comparisons. This measure is broader than simply examining income⁷.

However, the submission of Ortiz and Cummins as highlighted above has been criticized on the ground that human development does not end with just education, health and income. It actually extends to other conditions that people face, in terms of distribution of advantages in the society they live in, and also the possibilities of participating in decision- making and how it affects the wellbeing of future generations. Scholars such as Sen, also, suggest a wider view of measuring and examining inequality. According to Sen, the standard of living of a people is quite very important. Furthermore, his approach, which was termed as the “capability approach”, is also concerned with poverty, justice, and quality of life and freedom within context. The empirical works carried out by the scholar in 1985 and 1998 analyzed many inequalities such as sex bias, race, colour, gender and class biases forms of inequalities. It was also discovered by the studies that wellbeing is another useful measure of development, as it provides an alternative picture. This is because, according to him, “countries that have the highest income do not necessarily have the highest levels of wellbeing⁸”.

It is noteworthy, that the work of Sen has led to the development of the Multidimensional Poverty Index, which is characterized thus:

The index highlights deprivations at the household level across the same three dimensions used within the human development index: education, standards of living and health, the index looks at specific

indicators within each dimension to report on deprivations. For example, in the living standards dimension, the index looks at the access that households have to a toilet, cooking fuel, water and electricity as well as assets⁹.

The above index was accepted as having provided a more comprehensive determinant of deprivation. This leads to the reasoning that just as social inequality leads to deprivation; deprivation also leads to social exclusion.

There are four key domains that constitute much of the ecology of inequality: (i) socioeconomic, (ii) health, (iii) political, and (iv) cultural. Before delving into each domain, however, we note that our terminology describing each domain is necessarily broad. By “socioeconomic,” we mean wealth, income, and work in addition to schooling and education. The “political” domain encompasses not only participation, power, legal and civil rights, but also resources, in addition to social and public policy. The “health” domain incorporates both physical and mental well-being. Finally, “socio-cultural” includes power, the structure of stereotypes, media control and representation, and access to cultural tools.

Socioeconomic Inequality

Many scholars argue that socioeconomic disparities are the primary domain of inequality—the one that drives or reinforces inequality in other domains. Socioeconomic inequality refers to the unequal distribution of economic resources (e.g., money, usually measured by income or wealth, and access to credit), opportunities to build human capital (e.g., from schooling, technology, and job training), and social resources (e.g., access to social capital and information)¹⁰.

There are substantial racial/ethnic, gender, and national origin disparities in material resources¹¹, labour market opportunities¹²; and educational outcomes. Likewise, the socioeconomic status of one’s parents is strongly predictive of one’s own material well-being, earnings, educational achievement, and health¹³. Because of high levels of racial and socioeconomic segregation, most black, Latino, and poor children grow up in low-income neighborhoods¹⁴. Moreover, socioeconomic inequality also plays out by gender. In other words, the way and manner at which social economic variables are distributed and controlled will probably control all the other domains of inequality. It is indeed the mother of all other inequalities!

Socio-cultural Inequality

Conventionally, as we think of inequality, generally we think of financial or material access, power and resources. In addition, there exists another level of inequality, one that is, perhaps, more intangible. A number of scholars have considered how social identities and group cultures are impacted by other forms of inequality¹⁵. Despite the debates about the meaning of “culture,” we can safely assume that there is some consensus that different social groups share languages, tastes, interactions, physical presentations, and comportment. Further, social scientists have documented how these “cultural repertoires” or “toolkits” have been ascribed different values, such as “highbrow,” “lowbrow,” “mainstream,” “deviant,” or “sub-cultural”. With power and resources has come the ability of some social groups to shape the orientation of just about any social institution and organization with their cultural preferences. Contemporary debates about multiculturalism in a pluralistic society cut at the core of this issue. Many who lack this power and access, consequently, have been segregated against in the distribution of access to quality schools, employment opportunities, political power, and economic attainment among others.

Cultural inequality intersects with material inequality, too. Unquestionably, recent technological advances (including the Internet, smart-phones, and tablets) either have led or will lead to large macro-cultural changes in communication in the twenty-first century around the globe. These innovations have increased our capacity to search the archive for information. Through the proliferation of massive open, online courses (MOOCs), they have broadened educational access. The Internet and the various cultural tools have likely expanded access not only to education but also to good jobs, better healthcare, and political discussions and campaigns.

Political Inequality

Political inequality is evident in the substantial between-group differences in civic engagement and access to political power and rights. Particularly salient here is the substantial evidence that the views of lower- and middle-income citizens are not as well represented in policy decisions as the views of the rich¹⁶. It is true that the Constitution provides that all citizens above the age of 18 has the right to vote and run for public office, provided that they meet certain requirements, but in practice, it is obvious that some class of people are directly or indirectly discriminated against. For instance, some people from a particular culture, women, youths, and individuals from low-income backgrounds are substantially underrepresented in political positions at the local, state, and national levels.

Moreover, political participation is strongly determined by socioeconomic status (as measured by education and income). In fact, political campaigns have come to rely more heavily on monetary contributions than service and time—the latter, perhaps, being a resource more evenly distributed among residents and citizens¹⁷.

Health Inequality

There are, of course, considerable variations in health among individuals. Some of these variations are due to socio-economic power, age, biological factors, personal choices, and the vagaries of luck. Of concern to us, however is the extent to which health disparities - in both access to healthcare and health outcomes - are unequally patterned among groups. In general, low-income and less educated individuals are at substantially higher risk for most diseases. Many studies confirm that a concave relationship exists between personal income and health outcomes, meaning that each additional dollar of income leads to better health outcomes, but by smaller amounts as the income reaches a certain threshold¹⁸.

Despite the correlational and cross-national evidence suggesting a relationship between income and health inequalities, it is not entirely clear if the poor health of low-income individuals is primarily due to their relative poverty (the fact that their incomes are low relative to others in society) or their absolute poverty (the fact that their incomes are low, regardless of the incomes of others). To the extent that the latter is the cause, reducing poverty would reduce health inequalities, even if income inequality remained the same. If relative poverty is the culprit, however, a reduction in income inequality may be necessary to decrease the income-health gradient. As with most factors associated with income, the evidence is suggestive but not conclusive on the comparative importance of absolute and relative income in shaping health inequalities.

The Prevalence of Social Inequality in Nigeria

It is a well-known fact that inequality is a universal phenomenon in all human societies. However, the case of Nigeria seems to be pervasive, as the country is suffering from what can be referred to as aggravated inequality. The country is suffering from inequality that is based upon economic, cultural, ethnicity, gender, land ownership, linguistic ability, political and religious affiliation and class stratification. This class stratification enters into all interpersonal relations, economic arrangements and political leadership. The other types of social inequality can, in fact, be seen either as extensions of the class system to particular settings (e.g., the church or the classroom) or as the class system in which one dimension (e.g., land ownership or ethnic identity) is emphasized.

As a matter of fact, the Oxfam report¹⁹ on inequality in Nigeria clearly stated that the scale of inequality in Nigeria is extreme. The report indicates that poverty situation in Nigeria is very high and that the country is among the 30 most unequal countries in the world. As at 2010, more than 112 million people were living in poverty. This precarious situation finds expression in the daily struggles of the majority of the population in the face of accumulation of obscene amounts of wealth by a small number of individuals²⁰. The obvious situation in the country is the fact that the poor are becoming poorer while the rich are becoming richer. The consequential result of the endemic economic inequality in the country is the fact that a larger percentage of the people are living in abject poverty. Poverty in Nigeria is particularly outrageous because it has been growing in the context of an expanding economy where the benefits have been reaped by a minority of people, and have bypassed the majority of the populace. Hence, majority of the people, most especially the young ones are impoverished by mass unemployment, and class stratification. Many are thereby segregated against due to ethnic and political differentials, making them useless even to themselves and prone to all forms of vices. Since an idle hand is a willing tool for the devil, these set of people are easily provoked to take to crime and unleash mayhem on the society.

Poverty and inequality in Nigeria are not due to lack of resources, but to the ill-use, misallocation and misappropriation of such resources. At the root of it all is a culture of corruption and rent-seeking combined with the political elite who are out of touch with the daily struggles of the average Nigerians. Moreover, the public resources that the government manages to collect are often spent in an unfair and inefficient way. This translates into lack of access to basic services for the majority of the population and poor outcomes in human development. It is quite disheartening that the elite in one way or the other have captured the public sector policies and resources to their own selfish interest which invariably undermines the productivity of the most important sectors of the economy and prevents a fair distribution of the benefits of growth.

In Nigeria and indeed all over world, economic inequality is a catalyst for social tensions within communities, with citizen's frustrations manifesting in increased crime rates and violence in various forms, including communal, domestic, electoral, religious and inter-tribal violence. Inequality also perpetuates corruption because politics is perceived as the only route to earning opportunities. There is no doubt that the rising level of inequality in Nigeria poses a growing threat to Nigeria's unity and stability and to its ability to eradicate poverty.

The *nexus* between inequality and insecurity in Nigeria

To adequately drive home our point in this paper that there exist a *nexus* between social inequality and insecurity, we rely on Becker's²¹ ecological economic theory of insecurity. It suggests that there is a direct link between social inequality and insecurity. To compute this supply. Becker assumes that a person commits an offense if the expected utility to him exceeds the utility he could get by using his time and other resources in other activities. According to this theory, insecurity rates depend on the potential gains from criminal acts and the associated opportunity cost. The net gains, in turn, depend on wealth differences between the rich and poor. Chiu and Madden opine that: "Thus, if income inequality increases so that low incomes become lower and higher incomes become higher, then the level of insecurity is driven up from two sources: the alternative to insecurity is less attractive for perpetrators and the potential proceeds from such act are greater²²". In other words, whenever there is a wide gap in the society, classification of the resultant effect is discrimination, inequality, poverty and high rate of crime.

In Nigeria as we have earlier observed, there is an almost total collapse of most basic infrastructures like accessible roads, pipe borne water, functional educational system, cottage industries, functional healthcare delivery services, poor communication, absence of transportation, electricity, decent and affordable homes, etc. To a large extent, there is uneven distribution of the country's wealth, while the rich continues to be richer, the poor also continues to be poorer. There is almost a total annihilation of some classes of the society in the appropriation and enjoyment of meaningful life within the society. This social isolation leads to economic isolation and impoverishment which invariably breeds high level of insecurity.

According to Marks²³, the persistence of poverty in Nigeria is due to income inequality, long term ethno-religious conflicts, civil unrest, and political instability. This is correlated with differential access to infrastructure and amenities. The apparent incongruence is further compounded by seeming concentration of the country's revenue in the hand of few aristocratic elements to the detriment of others. Consequently, the high rate of unemployment weakens personal incomes and aggravates social vices in the society. The lopsided pattern of distributing societal benefits thereby placing certain ethnic tribe and/or geo-political region in perpetual disadvantage is a major source of violent conflicts.

In addition, insecurity of lives and property in Nigeria is being championed with ethnic bias by unemployed youths. Abundant supplies of valuable natural resources give increased incentives to powerful elements of the society to seize areas or the entire state to control access to valuable resources. Of course such development invariably generates civil strife. The disadvantaged segments of the society are invariably encouraged to form rebel groups and fight over abundant supplies of valuable natural resources. Thus, resource related conflict is driven by super abundance and greed rather than scarcity and grievance. Unequal distributions of natural resources and unequal ability to purchase these resources, contribute to the scarcity experienced by disadvantaged segments of the population²⁴. Extreme poverty raises the likelihood of violent conflict and the collapse of a civil state into lawlessness²⁵. Over the past three decades, civil and ethnic conflicts have undermined prospects for economic and political development, destabilized the entire nation and left millions of defenseless civilians dead. There is no doubt that the seeming neglect of the provision of basic social amenities such as access to good and quality education, provision of employment opportunities, even distribution of wealth, by successive

government has a direct link and actually snowballed into banditry, kidnapping, herdsmen onslaught, and terrorism with grave security consequence. One may want to reason that if the individuals that are perpetrating crimes all over the country had been gainfully engaged, there is the likelihood that they will not take to banditry and other vices.

Relative economic deprivation is a potential cause of social movements and defiance, leading to extreme situations of political violence, such as rioting, terrorism and civil war or social deviance like crimes. In other words, social movements arise when people feel deprived of what they perceive as their fair share. Alienation, feelings of powerlessness, hopelessness and estrangement from society may predispose an individual or group of people to participate in the struggle against the state government. The groups or individuals who see themselves as permanently excluded from real power, despite apparent electoral resources, may become desperate, especially if the powers of government are used to disadvantage the aggrieved²⁶.

Poverty is a product of unemployment, inequality, economic marginalization, lack of education, etc. The jobless youths are frustrated due to inequality and economic deprivation that have rendered them unemployed. The consequential result is the birth of regional and sectional movements that can champion the cause of these helpless, desperate, disadvantaged youths who form or join socio-political movements such as: The Movement for Actualization of Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), the Oduduwa People's Congress (OPC), and the recent insurgence of the Boko Haram and the likes. The incidence of suicide bombings, terrorists' attacks, kidnapping, destruction of lives and properties, armed robbery, vandalization of corporate facilities, (such as the power holding installations and oil pipelines), car-snatching, drug abuse, and other criminal acts are unlawful activities associated with some of these groups. Therefore, there is a direct relationship between inequality, unemployment, poverty and high rate of insecurity of lives and properties in Nigeria.

Conclusion

The rising level of insecurity within the country poses a growing threat that has led to unbearable and intractable security challenges. However, deliberate policy interventions and political commitment, backed by an active, vibrant civil society and enlightened, proactive citizens can break the cycle. For the country to overcome her current security challenges, it is therefore imperative for the government to take deliberate measures at dealing with endemic corruption in the land. It is equally expedient that massive job opportunities are created for the teaming unemployed youths, and then create an enabling environment in the country where all the federating units within the country will not be seen as inferior to the others.

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