

# Tackling Poverty for Achieving Sustainable National Development in Nigeria

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## Abstract

Decades after Nigeria attained statehood, poverty still stares many Nigerians menacingly in the face. It has assumed unprecedented and unacceptable proportions. Manifesting not only in abysmal declines in economic indicators but more glaringly and tragically in the suffering and general impoverishment of the vast majority of the people; hunger, diseases and other social quagmire have now become a life style of many Nigerians. Efforts by successive governments to tackle the scourge & poverty appeared to stress the pursuit of high growth rate in statistical terms and failed to reduce to social and economic deprivation of substantial number of people. Sustainable development implies equitable and balance development that take into cognizance the interest of different groups within and among generations in four major areas: social, economic, political and environmental. The paper discusses the tackling of poverty as *sin qua non* for attaining sustainable national development. It concludes that government needs to implement policies and strategies that promote adequate levels of funding and focus on integrated human development policies.

## Introduction

Fighting poverty has been the hallmark of the international development agenda. It is the top most priority of governments across the globe especially those who are signatories to the Millennium Development Goals, yet poverty remains an intractable foe. Over the years, policy makers have failed to take into cognizance key institutional, environmental, policy and political dimensions that may be causes of poverty and obstacles to both its reduction and sustainable development. Where these causes are recognized as in the cases of National poverty eradication programme (NAPEP) and National Directorate of Employment (NDE) among others, the programmes are either not vigorously pursued or wrongly implemented. Moreover, when a substantial proportion of a country's population is poor, it makes little sense to detach poverty from the dynamics of development. For countries that have been successful in increasing the well-being of the majority of their populations over relatively short periods of time, research has shown that progress has occurred principally through state directed strategies that combine economic development objectives with active social policies and forms of politics that elevate the interests of the poor in public policy. This paper discusses tackling of poverty in Nigeria from these three key areas as *sin qua non* for attaining sustainable national development.

## Conceptual Clarifications

### Poverty

Defining poverty has always been a very difficult thing to do because of its intricate nature. It is also very pertinent to note that any attempt at defining poverty must take into cognizance that poverty is a relative concept and it varies in different contexts. To some people poverty can be seen as the inability of individuals or households in a particular society to purchase a specified basket of basic goods and services such as nutrition, shelter, and housing, (safe and clean) water and health care; etc. Poverty can also be as a result of lack of impaired access to productive resources including education, working skills and tools and political as well as civil rights to participate in decision making concerning socio-economic conditions.

Poverty can be conceptualized as an extreme state of social and economic deprivation. It is a situation where an individual or house hold fails to obtain and maintain a specific level of well-being which is considered as the acceptable minimum standard of living in a given society (Tanande, 2003).

### Sustainable Development

Development within the context of this paper means all round improvement of people's lives including the totality of their well-being while sustainable is the capacity to endure through renewal, maintenance, and sustenance, or nourishment in contrast to durability, the capacity to endure through unchanging resistance to change.

The concept of sustainable development was defined by the Brundtland Commission (formally the World Commission on Environment and Development) as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (Brundtland, 1987). The concept

emerged as a response to a growing concern about human society's impact on the natural environment. This definition acknowledges that while development may be necessary to meet human needs and improve the quality of life, it must happen without depleting the capacity of the natural environment to meet present and future needs. The sustainable development movement has grown and campaigned on the basis that sustainability protects both the interests of future generations and the earth's capacity to regenerate. At first, it emphasized the environment in development policies but since 2002, has evolved to encompass social justice and the fight against poverty as key principles of sustainable development. Thus, it can be said within the context of this paper that sustainable development drive should take into cognizance variables like; poverty alleviation, citizenship, peace, ethics, responsibility in local and global contexts, democracy and governance, justice, human rights, gender equality, corporate responsibility, natural resource management and biological diversity etc.

According to Hasna (2007), sustainable development is a process which tells of a development of all aspects of human life affecting sustenance. It means resolving the conflict between the various competing goals, and involves the simultaneous pursuit of economic prosperity, environmental quality and social equity famously known as three dimensions with the resultant vector being technology; hence it is a continually evolving process.

### **Manifestation of Poverty in Nigeria**

Poverty in Nigeria has many manifestations and dimensions, including joblessness, over-indebtedness, economic dependence at adult age, lack of freedom, and inability to provide the basic needs of life for self and family, lack of access to land and credit and inability to save or own assets, (Ajakaiye & Adeyeye, 2001),

The scourge of poverty goes beyond mere measurement of a household's expenditure or welfare. Poverty has many dimensions and may include inadequate access to government utilities and services, environmental issues, poor infrastructure, illiteracy and ignorance, poor health, insecurity, social and political exclusion. In urban areas, the burden of demand of services has effects on school enrolment, access to primary health care, growth of unsanitary urban slums. Also in rural areas, poverty manifests itself more in the agricultural sector and food security. For any meaningful economic growth and poverty reduction, there is the need to enhance and improve access to social services, including health and education, (NBS, 2012).

Consequently, the deepening incidence and dynamics of poverty has stratified and polarized the Nigerian society between the haves and the have nots, between the north and the south, between the educated and the uneducated, between the land lords and the tenants, poor parents gives birth to poor children (offspring) creating a dynasty of the poor, (Debate to Action, 2007: pp.11). The social scourge of poverty have ravaged and bastardized the Nigerian society with unimaginable negative implications. Late Chief Obafemi Awolowo was right when he asserted that:

It is pertinent to remind ourselves that a situation such as we now have under which the good things of life are assured to a small minority of Nigerians, and almost totally denied to the vast majority of our country men is pregnant with unpredictable dangers for all of us.....', ( cited in Ufford, 2003).

The social conditions in Nigeria present a startling paradox. Because the rate of poverty among Nigerians stands in sharp contrast to the country's vast and robust endowment in human and material resources. Nigeria has one of the world's highest economic growth rates averaging 7.4% over the last decade (World Bank, 2012), an endowed economy plenty of natural resources such as oil and other solid minerals. However, 'it retains a high level of poverty, with 63% living on below \$1 daily implying a decline in equity (DFID, 2012).

Indeed, enormous human and material resources have been expended and used by the various administrations to address the challenges posed by poverty. These programmes and policies came under different names but were all designed and aimed at reducing the scourge of poverty among Nigerians. A careful survey of such policies and interventions chronicled about 28 (twenty eight or so) projects and programmes with poverty reduction thrust, spanning virtually all the sectors of, national economy (Debate to Action: PP.15) These among others include; Directorate of Food, Roads and Rural Infrastructure (DFRRI), Community Banks, River Basin Development Authority (RBDA), Agricultural Development programme (ADP), Operation Feed the Nation (OFN) Better Life Programme (BLP), National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP) etc. They were all established by different administrations to curb the various manifestations of poverty such as unemployment lack of access to credit, rural and gender dimensions of poverty. But most, if not all the programmes appear to have been uncoordinated, ad-hoc and more or less a fire brigade approach. While none of them was completely without merit, they did not seem to have a significant, lasting and sustainable positive impact on Nigerians. Thus many continue descending into the abyss of poverty.

But there has been a missing link in Nigeria's quest for development, this is captured by (the Former Nigerian president Olusegun Obasanjo in a speech in September 2003. Too often, we attempt to measure progress by statistical and technical prowess, we tend to overlook. that the main goal of life is to ensure survival and to enable every one realize his full potential for well being.. we must not continue to stress -the pursuit of high growth rate in statistical terms and fail to reduce the social and economic deprivation of substantial number and group of our people, We must not absolutely pursue wealth and growth at the expense of inner well-being,

joy, satisfaction, fulfillment and contentment of human being.... Our reforms policies must impact on the urban: population as well and as much on the rural population-progress in provision of electricity, water, roads, health and sanitation in urban and rural areas must continue to be pursued, (Cited in NEEDS, Document,2004).

To pursue this, the Obasanjo administration design a blue print for development which focused on wealth creation, employment generation, poverty reduction, elimination of corruption and value reorientation. Unfortunately, the downsizing and rightsizing policy left many Nigeria stranded thus increasing the number of unemployed. The National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS) was not implemented to the latter and Its life span ended with the administration. A nation that desire development must tackle the menace of poverty through an all round strategy spanned across four major domains of economic, social, political and environmental concerns because of the complexity of contemporary society.

### **Political/Social Development**

Sustainable political and social development broadens the usual definition beyond state and governance. The basic issues of social power as they pertain to the organization, authorization, legitimating and regulation of a social life "held in common. It connotes equity, justice, participation of the people in governance (policy formulation and implementation), respect and preservation of rights and cultures, formulation of people oriented policies that will creates the enabling condition for broad-based growth and break the circle of poverty. This calls for human right approach to development planning, which places human beings at the center of development efforts etc.

### **Economic Development**

This is typified in the adage that *'you teach people how to catch fish and not giving them fish to eat'*. Sustained economic development is that development effort that seeks to empower and elevate the people from the vicious circle of poverty and other economic malaise. Economic development generally refers to the sustained, concerted actions of policymakers and communities that promote the standard of living and economic health of a specific area, Economic development can also be referred to as the quantitative and qualitative changes in the economy. Such actions can involve multiple areas including development of human capital, critical infrastructure, regional competitiveness, environmental sustainability, social inclusion, health, safety, literacy, and other initiatives, Economic development differs from economic growth. Whereas economic development is a policy intervention endeavor with aims of economic and social well-being of people, economic growth is a phenomenon of market productivity and rise in GDP. Consequently, as economist Sen (1983) points out economic growth is one aspect of the process of economic development.

### **Environmental Sustainability**

Environmental sustainability involves making decisions and taking action that are in the interests of protecting the natural world, with particular emphasis on preserving the capability of the environment to support human life stressing that the environment should be kept as pristine as naturally possible. It demands that society designs activities to meet human needs while indefinitely preserving the life support systems of the planet, (Wikipedia, 2012). It is a topical issue because people are realizing the full impact that human activities can have on the environment. Thus while tackling poverty; it is the responsibility of government to formulate policies that are design to guard against activities that are:

- Damaging rainforests and woodlands through logging and agricultural clearing;
- Polluting and over-fishing of oceans, rivers and lakes;
- Polluting the atmosphere through the burning of fossil fuels;
- Damaging prime agricultural and cultivated land through the use of unsustainable farming practices. (Wikipedia, 2012)

It means therefore that we need to consider not only the immediate impact our actions have on the environment, but the long term implications as well. For example, exploration and other related activities by oil firms and other extractive industries have rendered must parts of the land unsuitable for farming stripping the environment of it natural resources, oil spillage have also affected fishing activities in the coastal areas. But access to land and the attendant opportunities to generate an income from the land will greatly reduce extreme poverty. These and many other issues have contributed to disempowering the people of the area engendering poverty.

### **Tackling Poverty: A Precursor To Sustainable National Development.**

From the foregoing discussions it can be seen that it will be very difficult for a nation to attain sustainable development without tackling the menace of poverty. Because poverty can be an obstacle to sustainable development as captured by Mr. Ban Ki Mon; "When there is absolute despair due to abject poverty ..... they would provide the breeding ground of mistrust and develop into conflicts. And these conflicts will develop into

regional and global wars... undermining development" (New Straits Times, 2012)

There will be no development in the midst of chaos, and poverty occasions fertile ground for social vices and other forms of conflicts which stands in the way of development. A nation which desires development will not handle poverty with kid's gloves. Thus sustainable development goes beyond statistical growth, measurement of gross domestic product (GDP) or gross national product (GNP), it is that development drive that recognizes that government must work not only to improve incomes but tackle the many other social and political factors that contribute to poverty and social exclusion. Because poverty can pull people into downward spiral thus undermining development. Tackling one aspect of it may not lift a family out of poverty; an effective poverty reduction requires a multi-faceted approach that attacks poverty on all fronts at the same time.

### Conclusion and Recommendation

While managing resources sustainably, an environmental policy that focuses mainly on the conservation and protection of resources must take due account of those who depend on the resources for their livelihoods. Otherwise it could also contribute poverty and on chances for long-term success in resource and environmental conservation. Equally, a development policy that focuses mainly on increasing the production of goods without addressing the sustainability of the resources on which production is based will sooner or later run into declining productivity, which could also have an adverse impact on poverty. A specific anti-poverty strategy is therefore one of the basic conditions for ensuring sustainable development. An effective strategy for tackling the problems of poverty, development and environment simultaneously should begin by focusing on resources, production and people and should cover demographic issues, enhanced health care and education, the rights of women, the role of youth and of indigenous people and local communities and a democratic participation process in association with improved governance.

In the light of the above, the government needs to implement policies and strategies that promote adequate levels of funding and focus on integrated human development policies, including income generation, increased local control of resources, local institution-strengthening, capacity-building and greater involvement of non-governmental organizations and local levels of government as delivery mechanisms; -develop for all poverty-stricken areas integrated strategies and programmes of sound and sustainable management of the environment, resource mobilization, poverty eradication and alleviation, employment and income generation; To create a focus in national development plans and budgets on investment in human capital, with special policies and programmes directed at rural areas, the urban poor, women and children.

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