

**RURAL POVERTY AMELIORATION – A KEY  
TO SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN  
NIGERIA.**

**BY**

*Fatai Adesina* **BADRU (M.N.I.M)**

Lecturer

Department of Sociology

Faculty of Social Sciences

University of Lagos, Akoka, Yaba.

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## **Abstract**

*Poverty is a plague and hydra-headed virus that affects both urban and rural areas. It is a social problem as it has social root. Poverty emasculates and dehumanizes. Paradoxically, it is human-engendered. A number of efforts have been made by government and non-governmental organizations to de-emascuate urban poverty with some percolations to the 'ruralites'. However, the contention of scholars is that poverty is a grass-root problem but successive governments in Nigeria have addressed this in 'top-bottom' manner. The programs have not only neglected the rural areas inhabited by more people (63% of Nigerian population live in rural settings) but suffer from proper co-ordination and focus. This made the impact of hitherto strategies to be unsustainable and undesirable by people. It is not people-centered but 'graft-anchored'. The paper argues that it is only when urban bias disappears for even development and instituting co-ordinated, flexible, focused, genuine, politically-immuned rural ameliorating measures before Nigeria can be sustainably developed. The kernel of this paper is that rural poverty amelioration is a challenge of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and a key to sustainable development in Nigeria.*

## 1. *Introduction*

Poverty can be described as a plague and virus that can affect any Homo-sapien in every continent of the world. It is a social problem as it has social root. Poverty is a complex phenomenon. It is both rural and urban, and respects no country or region. In some areas, poverty seems to be endemic (Badru, 2000). However, most people live in rural areas and most rural dwellers are poor (Oyekanmi, 2001; Olurode 2001; Soyombo, 2000). Poverty emasculates individuals and groups from realizing their potentials. It has manifest and latent consequences for people especially rural dwellers. It is dehumanizing and paradoxically human engendered.

The concept of poverty is not only multi-dimensional but also multi disciplinary. This brings into fore conceptual, theoretical and methodological snares to scholarship. Terms such as *absolute*, *relative* and *subjective* poverty have been used in the literature. Conceptually, poverty can be seen as *absolute* (situation whereby a section of the population cannot meet their minimum standard of living in terms of basic needs like food, clothing and shelter) or *relative* (situation whereby households, over time, fall short of the resources to meet their socio-economic needs). The notion of *Subjective* poverty implies a situation or a condition when individuals or groups within a society feel they are poor when this is anchored on the subjective experience and/or definition of others (Badru, 2000). The author had also pointed out the limitations of these conceptualizations.

*Theoretically*, the shift in Nigeria's revenue base from peasant agriculture to petroleum oil rent has been argued to be contributory in unfolding rural poverty. There is no agrarian capitalism in Nigeria's agriculture (Olurode, 2001: 359).

*Methodologically*, the rich experience of the rural people themselves must constitute an integral part of knowing rural poverty.

According to Olurode (2000), *the Human Development Report, 1997* developed the concept of *Human Development Index (HDI)* and *Human Poverty Index (HPI)* as tools of measuring the level of development and poverty in a country.

Poverty in Nigeria is widespread, varies from region to another and deep-seated, earning the country a placement among the 25 poorest countries of the world. Paradoxically, it is sixth leading oil exporting country in the world. 48.5 per cent of Nigerians live below the poverty line of one US dollar a day (Olurode, 2000:1). Life expectancy at birth is 50.1 and life expectancy index is 0.42 for Nigeria (UNDP 2000). Classification of countries by the Human Development Aggregates reveals that we have High Human Development (HDI 0.800 and above), Medium Human Development (HDI 0.500 – 0.799) and Low Human Development (HDI below 0.500). Nigeria is classified in Low Human Development and Low Income with GNP per Capita of \$760 or less in 1998 (UNDP, 2000: 283).

Apart from the introduction there are five other sections: the second clarifies some salient concepts, the third illuminates distribution of poverty in Nigeria, the fourth examines some poverty alleviation measures and their limitations, the fifth gives some ameliorating strategies for rural poverty, while the sixth is the concluding remark.

The paper departs from the premise that due to lack of resources, poor policy articulation, and the pervasive social strife in the community, the various policies aimed at reducing poverty have failed to bring about a marked improvement. It concludes that to make in-roads, poverty amelioration strategies must not only overcome the above impediments but should also be part and parcel of mainstream socio-economic policy.

## 2. *Clarification of Some Concepts*

**Poverty** – is a condition of life so limited by malnutrition, illiteracy, disease, squalid surroundings, high infant mortality, and low life expectancy as to be beneath any reasonable definition of human decency (McNamara 1984 cited in Oyekanmi, 2001: 272).

**Poverty Depth** – The average gap or distance between the income of the average poor and the poverty line.

**Poverty Incidence** – It is otherwise called the *headcount ratio*. It is the fraction of the population below the poverty line. An instance is the proportion of people in the total population who fall below certain amount in a year.

*Poverty Line* – The value of income (expenditure) per person that is needed to consume food and other items for a healthy living.

*Rural Poverty* – This is a type of deprivations of socio-economic access to goods and services unique to rural dwellers.

*Sustainable development (SD)* – This is a socio-economic concept whose content varies according to the culture and time.

According to Okoye (1999) SD is a conglomerate of *four sectors*: Ecological, Political, Social and Economic. Social development is only sustainable if no deterioration occurs in medium and long term in the different sectors.

Oganwu, (2000:4) quoting Foy & Dally (1989) asserts that SD meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the needs of the future generation.

### ***3. Distribution of Poverty in Nigeria***

Rural dwellers are marginalized. Poverty is skewed negatively to the ruralites.

Distribution of poverty in Nigeria revealed that poverty is highest in rural areas. The number of rural poor is, roughly twice that of the urban poor (FOS/World Bank, 1999: 8-9). The depth of poverty (that is, the average shortfall from the poverty line) was more than double in rural areas. The average per capita expenditure of a poor rural household was one-fifth of the non-poor in 1992. Of the extremely poor, 85 percent lived in rural areas and more than two-thirds lived on farms. Income inequality is also worse in rural areas, with a Gini co-efficient of 45.6 compared with 39.9 for urban Lagos. Compared with Ghana and Uganda, Nigerian income inequality is worse (World Bank, 1999: 8-9). The implication here is that more efforts should be geared towards de-emasculating the rural dwellers of the burden of poverty.

Poverty also varies with geographical areas. The northern states, which are substantially rural and have had less exposure to education, express more poverty than other parts of the country. A third of Nigeria's poor are concentrated in three northern states: Sokoto, Kaduna and Kano. Sokoto, Kano and Bauchi had a poverty rate of more than 50 percent (World Bank, 1999:9).

CONFERENCE PAPER

The poor are often concentrated in communities without basic services. Poor communities are usually cut off from the benefits of development – roads, portable water supply and safe sanitation. Most of the poor live in rural areas (World Bank 1999:10) and most people live in rural areas. 68 % of the extreme poor are dependent on agriculture for their livelihoods.

The incidence of wasted, stunted and underweight children is higher in rural areas.

#### *4. Some Previous Poverty Alleviation Measures.*

Some of the previous strategies of poverty reduction include Operation Feed the Nations (OFN) introduced by Obasanjo's regime, Green Revolution by Shagari's regime, Directorate of Foods, Roads and Rural Infrastructure (DFRRI) during Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida's era, Better Life Programme (BLP), National Directorate of Employment (NDE), Family Economic and Empowerment Programme (FEEP) and Child Care Trust at the Federal Level, among others. Like Olurode (2000) argued, these programmes failed to produce the desired results because they are devoid of participation of people right from the conception and beset with bureaucratic red tape, corruption and lack of political will. Moreover, the programmes were used to fester the pockets of party loyalists, placate political enemies, enrich political sycophants, and buy political supports.

#### *5. Ameliorating Strategies for Rural Poverty.*

'Three pronged consensus strategy' to reduce rural poverty involves three subsidiary goals: labour – intensive growth (alleged policy instruments: deregulation), infrastructure building; (right prices), human capital formation (alleged policy instruments: mass (primary) education, nomadic education where necessary, social safety nets (alleged policy instruments: health, employment guarantees) e.t.c.

Government represent and embody power; market forces do not automatically improve the relative power of the poor. Developing countries and peripheral nations like Nigeria, including market based ones, differ in the access by poor people to power, and to human and physical capital that improves such access.

Land Reform: People's lands need to be returned. Government is vesting power of occupancy to the state governor. This has not been seen to be favourable to the masses. It has, on the other hand, turned the rural poor into near-landless labourers rather than small farmers.

Land reform is a critical instrument, neglected by consensus strategy but needed as part of attack (ameliorative) on absolute poverty visible and palpable on the rural people. Redistribution into small family-sized farms may be handy. Those whose lands have been taken should be compensated. We should have pro-poor reforms, as rural poverty reduction requires reversal of the alarming erosion of agricultural research funds.

Long-sighted policy on primary education (quality as well as universality) is needed. Credit-linked policy for the rural non-farm sectors can do much to reallocate capital to many of the poor.

Three-linked problems are the increasing concentration of poor people in remote and badly watered places, international transmission of inappropriate technology and lack of access by poor people to power. The standard view is that the poor should be helped to resettle away from unpromising areas, but relocation induced during the past has worked badly, and voluntary relocation is slow, especially for the poorest. Some rural areas are unlikely ever to make inhabitants comfortable, but many are poor areas because they have been neglected by research. They are environmentally threatened less by development at the margins, than by absence of appropriate technologies there. Because, rural non-farm growth is seldom fast in agricultural stagnant areas, and because accelerating urbanization has costs, developed countries could help with agricultural irrigation/hydrology research required to develop semi-arid, ill-drained, and humid-tropical zones through pro-poor experiment/research into environmentally appropriate technology.

*Depauperization of the ruralities in 7 steps:*

- Attacking rural poverty through: Structural readjustment.
- Invest in people's productive capacity through education and health care.

- Create jobs for the long-term unemployed and other valuable groups (the unskilled at the lower end of the labour market).
- Strengthen the social security system by adapting it further to serve a dual purpose: to guarantee a minimum income on the one hand and to strengthen the economic base on the other.
- Rural – urban drift must be halted by systematically developing the rural areas taking cognizance of their felt needs. This will engender participation of the people; create sense of belonging and sustained beyond the present policy makers. It may be an intellectual exercise, but it is also organizational, a challenge politically and poser to development efforts in Nigeria.
- Direct provision by the government of e.g. food, clothing, health care and education.
- Widening the opportunities for earning a living for poor households through land redistribution investments in infrastructure and grants or loans for agricultural development.

## 6. *Concluding Remarks*

For any strategy of rural development to be meaningful, it must make it possible for rural dwellers to work, live and have their life experiences in the rural areas.

Cottage industries like Cassava and yam processing, weaving, house construction – bricks rather than blocks, should process products within the technical competence of the rural poor.

Profile of production processes should be established and indicate whether the production process is family business or joint ventures.

Opportunities should be created to dispose the local goods without compromising the values, norms and price of the rural products.

The rural credit scheme like “Esusu” should be further developed. Many rural dwellers keep their money with “Esusu” Operators or under their sleeping mats. These informal rural financial system should be encouraged. The esusu system is based on trust and not on the requirement of collaterals. It is flexible and accommodating. It is also devoid of red-tapism associated with modern banking system. It responds to emergency needs of



the rural dwellers (Olurode, 2001: 386). Besides, rural dwellers must be encouraged to initiate, sustain and manage their industries.

Development when imposed from above may be counter productive. We should change from top-bottom approach to bottom-top approach in project designs, implementation and evaluation.

Any of these strategies must stop the rural-urban migration, reduce rural poverty and transfer resources to the rural areas. It must in addition empower the ruralites. It must take care of different social groups, the vulnerable e.g. the aged and be gender sensitive.

The knowledge of rural dwellers must be harnessed in the strategies of rural transformation. Their social values and norms should be appropriately recognized.

Policy instruments against poverty, however, ingenious, will be effectively operated (and targeted on the poor) only if the poor can exercise politically effective demand in civil society. Dissemination of regular and reliable information such as farm output, or input data should be a regular phenomenon.

Broad community based efforts of the NGO's ranging from feeding schemes in drought stricken areas should be encouraged. It should be participatory in its implementation, involve shared vision of the people in its conception, desirable and beneficial to the ruralities and at the same time sustainable.

The knowledge of rural sociology and anthropology, to say the least, are important ingredients in the equation to transform rural communities and ameliorating rural poverty.

Other factors essential to rural poverty amelioration include improved access to credit, technology, materials and markets as well as ancillary services such as research and extension.

There is also a need to develop, increase and make full use of human capital of the rural poor.

Increasing the supply of potable water is important. Spending inordinate amounts of time looking for good water is a problem.

Provision and maintenance of rural roads, affordable and timely appropriate transportation in rural areas provide access to employment and market. There should be increased community participation in the development and maintenance of infrastructure and the provision of services. The government should build on existing community based organizations and activities to ensure effectiveness and sustainability.

The local initiatives should be strengthened through design as well as careful coordination and collaboration with private sector non-governmental and community based organizations.

Programs to reduce or ameliorate rural poverty should be well-targeted, demand-driven projects that can be implemented and evaluated by the communities. Efforts should be made to avoid the previous pit falls in poverty reduction strategies. Some of the errors in the past are encapsulated in what Olurode (2000:1) calls Social Exclusion (lack of participation in the conception by the beneficiaries), bureaucratic difficulties, corruption and lack of political will.

Those would indubitably engender participatory and sustainable development. These are the keys to rural poverty amelioration in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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