COGNITIVE RESTRUCTURING AND POVERTY ALLEVIATION IN NIGERIA: LESSONS OF A ROAD NOT TAKEN.

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, there has been a renewal of interest in academic and policy circles on poverty reduction in Nigeria. Despite the implementation of a combination of market and empowerment approaches to combat poverty, this multi-dimensional problem has continued to defy solution. This paper provides a simple, coherent and practical approach to alleviating poverty. It reviews the diverse strands of theoretical and empirical literature concerned with the definition and measurement of poverty and reviews the trend in poverty alleviation in Nigeria since the 1970s. The paper argues that human cognition and affect, more than anything else, are critical to the success of any poverty reduction programme. It further asserts that until the irrational thoughts and beliefs of Nigerians are replaced with rational philosophies and positive self-statements, efforts aimed at poverty alleviation will continue to bear no good returns. Finally, the essential elements of the re-educative process are presented in a lucid and simple step-by-step manner.

INTRODUCTION

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In recent years, there has been a renewal of interest in academic and policy circles on programmes, policies, problems and approaches connected with poverty reduction among the generality of Nigerians and more so among specific target groups such as rural inhabitants, the urban poor, youths and rural women since these groups are disproportionately affected by poverty. A number of new theoretical and empirical contributions have prescribed strategies based upon the direct transfer of wealth or income from the more affluent to poor groups (the first losing what the second gains) full employment policies and special employment programmes, food subsidies, raising minimum wages and pensions, land reforms and investment on human capacities. In spite of the implementation of these programmes and polices at all levels of government in Nigeria, poverty has continued to strive and appears to defy solution. In recent years, it has threatened the corporate existence of the Nigeria nation state as evidenced in secessionist propaganda, increased wave of violent crimes and high degree of social unrest. Some economists have advocated rapid industrialisation and development as a panacea for poverty. But experiences in Nigeria have shown that rapid growth and development can take place concomitantly with by a worsening of the poverty situation while the state of Kerala in India and to some extent, Cuba have exemplified experiences where lower growth rates are accompanied by impressive poverty performance.

This paper attempts to contribute to the literature on poverty alleviation by providing a simple, coherent and practical approach to alleviating the complex, multi-dimensional problem of poverty. It reviews diverse strands of theoretical and empirical literature concerned with the definition and measurement of poverty and highlights the several programmes and policies that have been implemented over the years to combat poverty in Nigeria. The

paper asserts that experiences with poverty reduction in Nigeria have a common denominator - the thinking of Nigerians, which is responsible for their abysmal failure. It is further argued that a first step in poverty reduction in Nigeria is a re-educative process to change the irrational thoughts or beliefs of Nigerians and to replace these with rational, growth inducing thoughts about poverty and wealth. Finally, the basic elements of this re-educative process are explored.

Definition and Measurement of Poverty

A major problem with poverty is the lack of a common definition and methodology for measuring it as evidenced in the works of various developmental experts and official poverty data of various countries. It has been defined in several different ways and Reading (1977:158) explored some of these definitions.

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Defined in material terms, it refers to individual or family insufficiency of assets, income and public utilities, a condition of having an income in the lowest one-fifth of the income distribution or a condition of having an income incompatible with a society's national objectives. In the words of Ghai (1997:27) Poverty may refer to material deprivation, social exclusion, certain psychological attributes or power relations and is typically measured in the development literature by the number of people or households falling below some level of nutrition, consumption or income (defined, in turn, in terms of meeting some core basic needs. Some writers use the term absolute poverty which is defined in terms of a minimum income for meeting food and other essential material needs which do not necessarily include education and health but is a function of per capita income and patterns of income and consumption distribution. Others have used the term relative poverty which is conceived as possession of an income falling below a certain partile of an income distribution.

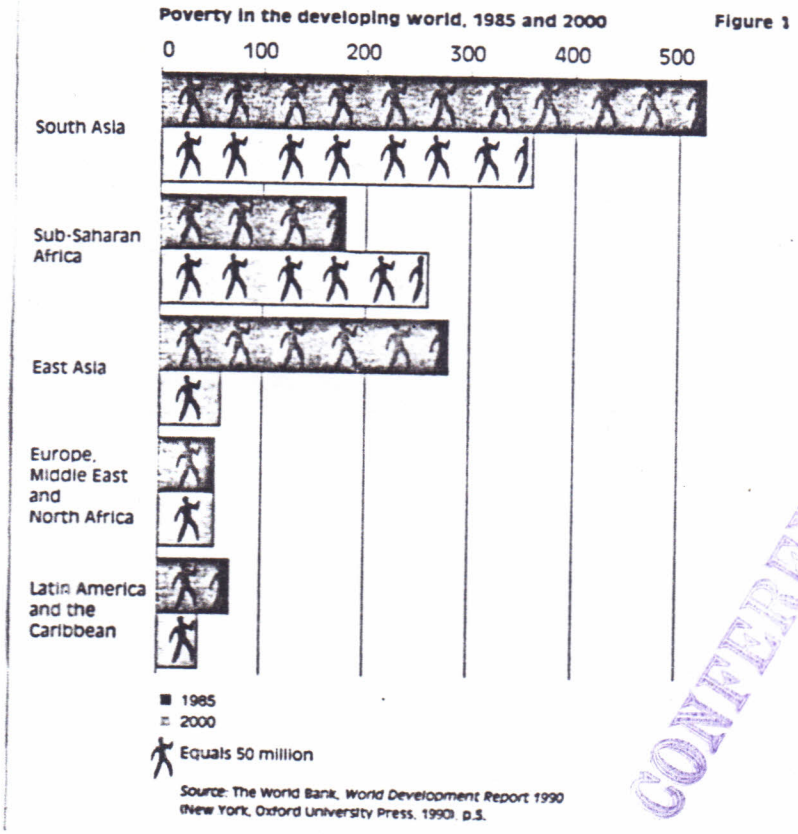
Recently, the UNDP (1997) developed the human poverty index (HPI) as a new measure of poverty, integrating social service provisioning with consumption of basic goods. As Ghai (1997) noted, this index incorporates indicators of deprivation concerning longevity, knowledge and living standards. These are given by the percentage of people expected to die before age 40, the percentage of illiterate adults, the proportion of malnourished children under the age of 5 and of the people without access to health services and safe water.

Several theoretical explanations have been given concerning the origin of poverty, the most dominant of which is the notion that it was laziness that led to poverty and any direct attempt to alleviate poverty would encourage idleness and discourage thrift, and that a cure of this kind would be worse than the disease. Akin to this, is the explanation that it is the lack of thrift - inability to postpone present consumption that led to poverty Other explanations include the notion that wealth - and by extension, poverty are given - each individual according to God's riches in glory. According to this

Whether poverty is defined in absolute or relative terms, in terms of human development induces, income measures or social services provisioning and whether it is caused by laziness, lack of thrift or an invisible hand, all are important to us, because people, and a multitude at that, are involved.

Why the Concern With Poverty?

According to the United Nations Fund for Population Activities (1997) more than one billion people, or about one fifth of the world's population, live under conditions of extreme poverty and although the eradication of poverty has long been on the international agenda the task is not made easier by the fact that population growth is fastest among the poorest and in the poorest countries as illustrated in Figure I.



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Unfortunately, Nigeria ranks amongst the ten poorest countries in the world. The concern for poverty in recent years stems from the realisation that poverty is among the most significant contributing factors to environmental degradation (UNFPA). There also seems to be a nexus of interrelationships between poverty, education, health and other social and economic indicators (Cassen, Wignaraja & Kingdom, 1997). It has therefore been recognised that the elimination or rapid reduction of poverty is an important aspect of the success in social and economic development (Ghai, 1997) and unless this goal is attained, there will continue to be social and political upheavals.

Experiences with Poverty reduction in Nigeria

The trend, specifically the strategies and programmes for poverty reduction in Nigeria has been a mixed grid - combining both the market approach and the empowerment approach (Mayoux, 1995) and has for the most part been inconsistent,

unoutstanding and uncreditable. Some of the market approach strategies which aim at the stimulation of entrepreneurship among the poor and the removal of legal and institutional barriers to entrepreneurship include: Land reforms which ceded the ownership of land to Government, increasing access to financial services through decentralised network of banks in rural areas and the establishment of community banks and other specialised financial institutions to grant credit and provide insurance cover to farmers. The empowerment approach lays emphasis on grassroots community and solidarity with the aim of encouraging group formation of the poor as a means of empowering them such as the better life programme for rural women, the family economic advancement programme and the family support programme. Despite the implementation of these programmes since the 1970s, poverty has continued to rise significantly. Apart from official corruption and reckless planlessness that run through these programmes, a common denominator responsible for their dismal failure is the irrational belief system and attitudes of those who are suppose to benefit from the programme and those involved with implementation. It is therefore our thesis statement that to alleviate poverty among Nigerians, we must first assist them to change their irrational thoughts and beliefs and replace these with rational philosophies. The remaining section explores the essential elements of this re-educative process.

The Role of Cognitive Restructuring In Poverty Alleviation

The specific therapeutic procedures outlined below to alter participants behavioural patterns are derived from Rational Emotive Therapy (RET) (Ellis, 1973) and the procedures outlined by Brammer (1973).

This treatment is recommended for individuals and groups targeted to benefit from poverty alleviation programmes of the family Economic Advancement Programme (FEAP), the National Directorate of Employment (NDE) and other family empowerment programmes designed for the poor. The essential elements of the treatment are elaborated below.

Formation of Group. A group should be homogeneous in goals and may be heterogeneous in all other demographic variables such as age, sex, marital status and educational status. Previous relationships - friends, spouses and relatives need not be an important consideration in forming a group. Group membership should be closed (that is, fixed). If any member withdraws during the course of treatment, his or her place should remain vacant for the rest of the sessions.

Group Size. Each group should range between ten and thirty.

Number Frequency and Duration of Sessions. There should be six sessions in all, spanning six consecutive weeks. This means one session should be held weekly. This is considered most productive because group members will have a chance to meditate and think over experiences of previous week(s) session. Each session should last approximately two hours preferably in the evenings. However, the fifth session should last for four hours divided into two periods of two hours each with a break of one hour between periods.

Setting. The training venue should preferably be a classroom or public hall of reasonable size - neither giving a feeling of emptiness nor of overcrowding. It should be quiet, moderately furnished, well illuminated and ventilated, without offensive odours and with no outside distractions.
Attendance. Although membership should be voluntary, regular attendance should be encouraged as irregular attendance may have adverse effects on others' sense of purpose.

SESSION ONE: RELATIONSHIP ESTABLISHMENT: The facilitator should take the initiative to establish a climate conducive to mutual respect, trust, free and open communication and understanding through attentive listening, positive regard, accurate empathy and genuineness and an ability to understand and feel with the client. An exploration of the following variables as they relate to the participants as suggested by Brammer should carried out:

(i) Self perceptions
(ii) Needs
(iii) Values
(iv) Feelings
(v) Experiences
(vi) Expectations and
(vii) Problems

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A thorough understanding of group structure and dynamics should also be undertaken. Key activities should include the following:
(a) Identification of group goals and objectives of the therapy
(b) Group norms
(c) Responsibilities of group members

SESSION TWO: PROBLEM IDENTIFICATION AND EXPLORATION. An examination of the participants' "self defeating and catastrophic logic" with a view to helping each participant eliminate entrenched beliefs in the magical hypothesis about himself and the world by being made to see that nothing is awful, sacred or all-important.

Key techniques to be employed in this session would include the exhibition of attending behaviour, placing particular emphasis on such communication skills as paraphrasing, clarification, perception checking or feedback. Questioning at this stage should be facilitative to the participants' continued exploration of not only their experience and behaviours but also the relationship of their concerns to the ways they are living generally. Questions that would embarrass, challenge or threaten the participants should be avoided.

In carrying out the above activities in the first two sessions, the target objectives should be to:

1. stimulate open, honest and free communication about poverty and the factors and background related to it.
2. work towards progressively deeper levels of understanding, respect and trust between the facilitator and the participants on the one hand and between and among the participants themselves on the other.
3. provide the participants with the view that something useful can be gained from the sessions.

SESSION THREE: CONTINUED PROBLEM EXPLORATION AND PARTICIPANTS' SELF ANALYSIS: The major activities here should include:

1. Intensive participants' self analysis
2. Assisting each group member to develop a self understanding that recognises the need for dealing with poverty-the need for change and action.
3. Show the participant that he is illogical in his reasoning.
4. Assist him to understand how and why.
5. Demonstrate the relationship of his irrational self talk to his unhappiness, inaction and subsequent poverty.

SESSION FOUR: PLANNING FOR PROBLEM SOLVING. The major activities in this session should be centred on the following:

1. Demonstrate to the participants how they are maintaining their poverty by continuing to think illogically.
2. Show them how their present illogical (irrational) self-verbalisation are responsible for their condition and not the continuing influence of early events.
3. Recognise and deal effectively with:
   (i) transference
   (ii) counter-transference and
   (iii) resistance
4. Challenge and actively dispute their self defeating indulgence and hostility
5. Develop a plan to alleviate poverty. Goal setting at this stage is important and central.

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SESSION FIVE: SATURDAY OF RATIONAL ENCOUNTER. The central purpose of the Saturday of rational encounter is to help the participants get free of illogical ideas and to substitute logical ideas in their place. This is to get the participants internalise a rational philosophy of life. Major activities should include:

1. Getting the participants to change their thinking, to abandon and replace their irrational ideas with more rational ones that are empirically grounded.
2. Teach the clients how to apply the scientific approach to thinking and problem solving.

3. Teach participants how to re-think, challenge, contradict and reverbalise their internalized illogical sentences and how to engage in Counter-propaganda.

Some irrational beliefs about wealth and poverty and example of rational philosophies are contained in Appendices A and B.

SESSION SIX: SOLUTION APPLICATION AND TERMINATION. The major activity here is for the facilitator to go beyond dealing with specific illogical ideas of the participants and to consider the main general irrational ones as posited by Ellis (1967) so that the participants can avoid falling victim to them.

To carry out the above activities, the facilitator should employ various techniques such as:

(i) Tutoring and Teaching
(ii) Empirical Disconfirmation
(iii) Home work
(iv) Rational Emotive Imagery

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These activities should enable the participants to acquire emotional insight into the sources of their problems and working, in a determined and energetic manner, to apply this knowledge to the resolution of this problem. The participants should at all times be encouraged to arrive at basic insights, implications and probabilities through technique of repetition, mild confrontation, interpretation and information. The outcome of this is to identify many solutions, projecting the consequences of each solution and the final setting of priorities of these by the individual participant.

The training encounter should be terminated at the end of the sixth session.

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APPENDIX A

SOME BELIEFS AND DOCTRINES ABOUT POVERTY AND /OR WEALTH.
A rapid assessment survey was carried out on a group of 52 adults who were members of one of six co-operatives in a satellite town in Lagos on the origin of poverty and/or wealth.

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The following explanations were common to all the Christians among them:

1) Disobedience of God's commands - cited the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden (Gen 3 [22-24])
2) If you spend your time sleeping you will be poor (Proverbs 20:13), for while you sleep poverty will attack you like an armed robber (Proverbs 6:11, 24:34).
3) Drunkards and Gluttons will be reduced to poverty. If all you do is eat and sleep you will soon be wearing rags (Proverbs 23 [21])
4) Temptation to determine your faithfulness (Job 1:6).
   The Moslems among them gave the following explanations

1) Allah has raised men in ranks, some above others, that he may try you in the gift he has given you (Sura 6:165).
2) People are still poor because we have neglected the Zakat (mandatory alms giving once a year), Sadaqah (voluntary almsgiving) and Waqf (endowment) (Sura 2:3)
3) God has provided the resources for wealth.

The following responses were common to both Moslems and Christians in the study.

1) God gives riches - Oluwanisola
2) God makes people to be rich - Olubukun
3) God provides - Olupese
4) If you put a poor man in a house full of money, he will still be poor - Ti aba gbe olosi sile owo, iyo tosi kehin
5) To be rich you must cut corners.

APPENDIX B

EXAMPLES OF RATIONAL PHILOSOPHIES AND POSITIVE SELF STATEMENTS

1. Man you are free, define yourself.
2. Cultivate your own individuality.
3. Live in dialogue with your fellow man.
4. Your own experiencing is the highest authority.
5. Be fully present in the immediacy of the moment.
6. There is not truth except in action.
7. You can transcend yourself, in spurts.
8. Live your potentialities creatively.
9. In choosing yourself, you choose man.
10. You must learn to accept certain limits in life.
11. I can make it.
12. Although the past is important, the present could be changed.
13. Risks, while possibly resulting in failures are worth taking, failing is not catastrophic.
14. I am the architect of my fortunes.