

GENDER AND POVERTY ALLEVIATION IN NIGERIA

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Introduction

Poverty level in Nigeria has been extremely high, with about two thirds of the population below the poverty line in 1996 (FOS, 1999). The situation would have been worse but for the damping effect the period 1985 to 1992 had on poverty, when the rising trend of the earlier period was reversed, before the upward movement resumed again. Specifically, poverty level went up 50% between 1980 and 1985, going from 28.1% to 46.3%. Between 1985 and 1992, there was a drop of about 4 percentage points to 42.7%. However, by 1996, the level jumped to 65.6%, an increase of more than 50% of the 1992 figures.

Over the 16-year period 1980 to 1996, female-headed households were slightly better off poverty wise than their male counterparts. In 1980 the poverty levels were 26.9% and 29.2% respectively, a gap of 2% . In 1985, the gap had increased to 9% but came down slightly to 5% in 1992. However, the gap widened again to 8% in 1996. According to the Federal Office of Statistics (1999), the analysis showed that the major factor leading to this result is the fact that the average size of female headed households is generally smaller than that of their male counterparts. Consequently, the per capita consumption (pcc) (which is the basis of poverty computation) in female-headed households is higher than of male-headed households. However, the comparison here is in respect of the gender of heads of household and not the gender of all persons in general.

It is a known fact that the relationship between gender and poverty is a complex and controversial topic. This relationship exists even though there is extensive literature on gender and poverty but how best to deal with the two concepts remains controversial. Although much policy making has been informed by the idea of feminization of poverty, the precise nature of the nexus between gender and poverty needs to be better understood and operationalized in policy making (Beneria and Bisnath, 1997). The difficulty originates from the different shades and forms gender inequalities and poverty take depending on the economic, social and ideological content. Yet another difficulty involves the scarcity of gender disaggregated data for a number of countries. As planners, our concerns also will be how to relate the two concepts to physical planning to achieve a sustainable environment. We shall examine in the following sections the two concepts, poverty and gender, as they affect planning.

The Concept Poverty

Since the mid 1980s, reducing poverty has become a major concern for an increasing number of governments and donor agencies. This concern emerged from observed undesirable effects of certain economic reform programmes (Aigbokhan, 1999). However, while recognizing the renewed interest in the subject, it must be appreciated that concern about poverty and the need to reduce it has existed throughout history.

A glance at the relevant literature rapidly shows that there is no general consensus on any meaningful definition of poverty (Schubert, 1994). In fact, there are perhaps as many definitions as there are researchers. A generally worded, and therefore interpretable, definition is relatively quickly found. The "Ninth Report on the Development Policy of the Federal German Government, for instance, states that people affected by poverty are unable "to lead a decent life" (BMZ 1992, 13). In this report, the following aspects are listed: "poverty means not having enough to eat, a high rate of infant mortality, a low life expectancy, low educational opportunities, poor drinking water, inadequate health care, unfit housing and a lack of active participation in decision-making processes". Virtually everybody who writes on the topic of poverty can surely agree with this formulation.

However, the way in which a "decent life" is to be translated into reality is a matter on which opinions will diverge, depending on culture, religion and social value systems.

According to United Nations Development Programme (1990), an analysis of poverty typically differentiates between absolute and relative poverty. Relative poverty exists when the subjects under consideration are "poor" in relation to "others" – who remain, of course, to be more closely specified. Absolute poverty, on the other hand, refers exclusively to the situation of particular individuals without any comparison being made between them and others. Absolute poverty is considered to exist when the lives of those concerned are impaired by physical or socio-cultural deficiencies (Hemmer and Kotter, 1990, 29). If physical human subsistence (expressed in terms of nutrition, clothing and housing) is not guaranteed, this is termed primary (absolute) poverty. "Exclusion from participation in normal social life" (Schauble, 1984) or, in other terms, the non-attainment of a minimum level of conventional social and cultural existence is, by contrast, described as secondary (absolute) poverty. Obviously, this way of classifying poverty is linked to the concept of "basic needs". People whose minimum or basic material or immaterial needs are not satisfied are regarded as "poor".

In Nigeria context, at the Nigeria Economic Society conference on "Poverty in Nigeria" in 1975, many of the papers conceived of poverty as existing when incomes or disposable resources are inadequate to support a minimum standard of decent living (Edozien, 1975; Olajide and Essang, 1975). Some elements of this minimum standard approach are contained in Mabogunje (1975) and Onimode (1975) papers. In the same vein, Ogwumike (1991) defines poverty as a household's inability to provide sufficient income to satisfy its need for food, shelter, education, clothing and transportation. He noted that minimum standards for food are based on nutritional requirements in terms of calories and proteins, consumption habits and customs. As for non-food items such as shelter and education, standards such as number of persons per room and number of children receiving education / level of education attained respectively are frequently used. His line of argument is based on the adoption of absolute or relative standards in the determination of minimum incomes or disposable resources.

According to Aigbokhan (1999), poverty is defined today as a state of long-term deprivation of well being, a situation considered inadequate for a decent life. Poverty is thus synonymous with lack. Poverty is also a long-term phenomenon; it does not generally describe individuals in temporary difficulty. Beyond this broad definition, which there is broad consensus, there are many debates on how well-being should be measured and what indicators should be used. What has emerged from the debate is that there are two broad approaches to defining and measuring poverty. The various definitions adopted in the literature are variants of either of these two broad approaches. These are the 'welfarist' approach and the 'non-welfarist approach'. The welfarist approach defines well-being in terms of the level of utility attained by an individual. The approach attaches great importance to the individual's perception of what is useful to him or her. This approach therefore favours 'neutral' indicators, that is, those, which do not favour one good over another, in which the individual decides.

The non-welfarist approach defines well-being independently of individual's perceptions of it. The approach relies on what planners consider desirable from a social point of view. For measurement of well-being, the approach uses selective indicators to distinguish certain goods considered to be socially useful. Examples, are adequate food, access to education, health care and housing. Since the 1980s this has been expanded to include capabilities and other indicators of human development.

The Gender Dimension

Gender inequalities in economic life has become a causal factor in the chronic poverty of all household members, not just of women in poor households and the intergenerational reproduction of poverty. Norms about child marriage of girls, gender biases against girls' education, women's limited mobility, women's lack of control over fertility decisions, gender gaps in wages – all contribute to difficulties of escaping poverty intergenerationally through vicious cycles between poverty and gender inequalities.

The 1997 Human Development Report argued that across countries there are systematic relationships between gender inequality, as measured by the Gender Development Index (GDI), and the general level of human poverty, as measured by the HPI.

“Gender inequality is strongly associated with human poverty. The four countries ranking lowest in the GDI – Sierra Leone, Niger, Burkina Faso and Mali – also rank lowest in the Human Poverty Index (HPI). Similarly, of the four developing countries ranking highest in the HPI, three – Costa Rica, Singapore and Trinidad and Tobago – also rank among the highest in GDI” (UNDP 1997, p. 39).

The report also suggested that HPI and the Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM), an index that measures the extent of gender inequality in political and economic participation and decision-making are correlated.

The relationship between gender disadvantage and poverty appears to be quite straightforward. Women or female-headed households, it is very often argued, suffer more from poverty than men or male-headed households in numbers and/or in intensity. This particular approach has been prominent in aid agency writing on “gender and poverty”, which have used social and/or economic indicators to capture poverty outcomes. Such a perception underpins development agency arguments about the “feminization of poverty”, and the frequent references to women as “the poverty of the poor”.

In these policy discourses three strands of thinking stand out: first, the equation of female headship with poverty (Jazairy *et. al.*, 1992); second, assumptions about anti-female discrimination within the household and consequent female disadvantage in well being (UNDP, 1995); and third, synergistic arguments positing a positive relationship between “investing in women” and meeting developmental objectives such as poverty reduction or fertility decline (World Bank, 1994). But at a deeper level, the gender analysis of poverty is not so much about whether women suffer more from poverty than men in numbers and/or in intensity, but rather about how gender differentiates the social processes leading to poverty.

On the issue of poverty and gender in Nigeria, Table 1 presents poverty indicators by gender of households' head in four survey years. In 1996, poverty incidence in male-headed households was 66.5%. The corresponding figures for 1992, 1985 and 1980 were 43.1%, 47.3% and 29.2% respectively. Thus, there was a 23-percentage increase in the four years between 1992 and 1996. Similarly, there was a 20-percentage increase between 1980 and 1985, whereas over the seven-year period 1985 to 1992, the earlier upward trend was reversed and a 4-percentage decrease was recorded.

In the female-headed households, the incidence of poverty was 58.5% in 1996, double the 27% in 1980. The figure for 1992 was 39.9%, while that for 1985 was 38.6%. Unlike the

male-headed households, the upward trend in poverty was not fully arrested in the second period; rather a marginal increase of 1-percentage was recorded in the period. Thus, for this group, poverty was on a continuous increase over the sixteen year period.

Table 1: Poverty Headcount (in %) by Gender Household Heads

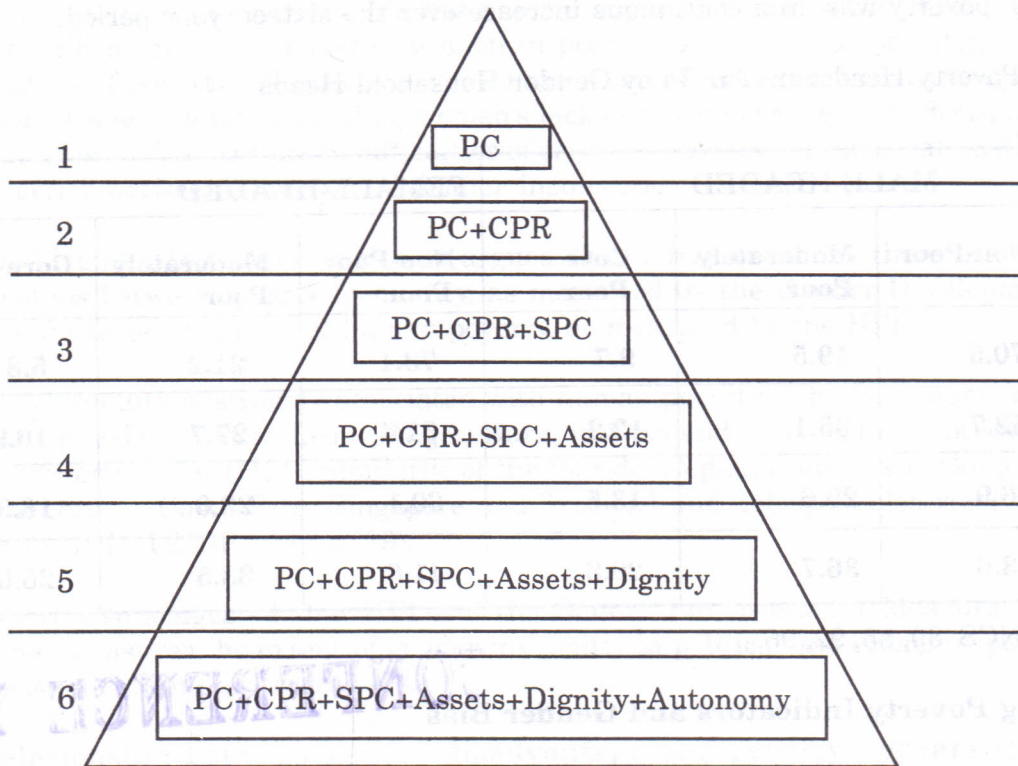
| YEAR | MALE-HEADED | | | FEMALE-HEADED | | |
|------|-------------|-----------------|-----------|---------------|-----------------|-----------|
| | Non-Poor | Moderately Poor | Core Poor | Non-Poor | Moderately Poor | Core Poor |
| 1980 | 70.5 | 19.5 | 9.7 | 73.1 | 21.2 | 5.8 |
| 1985 | 52.7 | 35.1 | 12.2 | 61.4 | 27.7 | 10.9 |
| 1992 | 56.9 | 29.6 | 13.5 | 60.1 | 23.0 | 16.9 |
| 1996 | 33.6 | 36.7 | 29.8 | 41.5 | 33.5 | 25.0 |

Source: NCS 80, 85, 92, 96.

Measuring Poverty Indicators and Gender Bias

According to Sen (1981), there are two essential questions regarding poverty: Who are the poor? And at what level is poverty defined? Conventional definitions of poverty refer to a notional poverty line (Greenley, 1994). This is measured either as a minimum flow of real income per capital, or as a bundle of 'basic needs', which may be quantified. Often this approach is also related to an indicator of 'quality of life'.

Income has been the most consistent factor to be included in measurements of poverty, yet approaches to this are consistently under review. One key question is the assessment of income in terms of flows (such as sales from agricultural crops) or stocks (such as agricultural land that may be rented to others or used as collateral on loans) (Lipton, 1977, 1991; Dasgupta, 1998; Baulch 1996 a and b; Ravallion, 1992; Reardon and Voisti, 1995). Income-based definitions of poverty has been widely criticized as being too narrow, especially in the developing country content. The Human Development Index (HDI) is an important attempt to broaden the range of indicators while retaining the advantages of quantification and international comparability; it draws on a bundle of indicators referring to general standards of health, education, and wealth which may be used to indicate general levels of development (Ravallion, 1992; Reardon and Vosti, 1995). Figure 1 indicates the so-called 'pyramid' of poverty concepts which may be adopted to indicate deprivation. The simplest, and crudest definition is private consumption (PC) at the top of the pyramid. Below this comes concepts of common property resources (CPR) and state provided commodities (SPC), and then afterwards personal assets and the subjective assessments of 'dignity' and 'autonomy' (Baulch, 1996a).

Figure 1: A Pyramid of Poverty Concept. (Baulch, 1996)

However, recent research has pointed to weaknesses in approaches based on aggregate indices. Aggregating may therefore not provide policy makers with sufficient guidance for specific local problems. A related argument concerns the need to disaggregate definitions and indices of poverty in order to reveal ways in which it may be socially or geographically concentrated. As the environmental entitlement approach emphasizes, poverty is experienced differently according to social, gender, age and occupational groups. Processes of impoverishment need to be disaggregated to show such differences (World Bank, 1995a), as well as those linked to particular ecological conditions or diminished to key environmental goods or services. Also, discussions have emphasized that poverty as so defined is just one aspect of deprivation. Other factors include vulnerability, physical weakness and powerlessness, which may be interlinked and mutually enforcing.

Poverty Alleviation Options

In the recent past and, even currently, the governments in many poor countries have heavily interfered in the market in the name of helping the poor. They have used high tariffs, quantitative trade restrictions and overvalued exchange rates, subsidized credit and underpriced energy, water, and other publicly provided inputs to help domestic producers. They have used price control and trade restrictions on agricultural commodities to keep food prices low for the urban poor. They have used industrial and investment licenses to keep larger producers at bay and help small-scale, sometimes inefficient, producers. They have imposed high marginal tax rates and public sector dominance in production with the objective of reducing concentration of income and wealth. The experience of the last four decades has shown that many of these policies have been counter productive from the point of view of both efficiency and equity. Economic growth has often been stunted, while the conditions of inequality have not significantly improved, and in some cases even worsened (Bardhan, 1996).

In general, the most important way for economic growth to help the poor is by expanding their opportunities for productive and remunerative employment (that is including self-employment on farms and in artisan shops).

Also, gender differences in the experience and incidence of poverty must be addressed in a contextualized way. If it is found that Female Headed Households or women as individuals are poorer in income terms and how and why they are poorer, such information should be used for designing policy. Gender-aware benchmarks and gender –aware monitoring must accompany gendered analyses of poverty. This requires gender-disaggregated statistics and capacity building in gender analysis.

Poverty must be understood in a multidimensional sense. That is, it must be conceptualised not only through the lens of consumption/income poverty, but also that of human poverty, which implies deprivation in basic capabilities. Eradicating illiteracy, closing gender gaps in education, public provision of health services, water, etc. all contribute to overall poverty eradication, but they are particularly critical for eradicating women's poverty by enhancing women's capabilities. They also help alleviate women's time poverty since the absence of health services, clean water and energy sources usually translate into added burdens for women.

Eliminating women's drudgery must require other interventions such as increasing the productivity of their labour in both paid and unpaid activities through access to better technologies and knowledge. Efforts towards redistributing the burden of reproductive labour toward men within households or socializing the cost of child care or other types of caring labour are necessary for both reducing women's time poverty and helping them participate in labour markets more fully.

Gender discrimination in labour and a variety of other markets are a cross-cultural phenomenon. Women's empowerment as labourers can be realized through collective action. New and innovative approaches to women's organizing such as Self-Employed Women's Association and other professionals should be emulated. Governments must create an enabling environment for such organizations and for trade unions in general.

Asset distribution strategies, such as land reform, or privatization policies – that redistribute assets – must be made gender aware and gender fair. Similarly, strategies that increase poor people's access to productive resources such as credit as well as employment schemes must be made gender aware.

Anti-poverty strategies must also include the goal of democratic governance as a poverty issue. If poverty is to be eradicated, it cannot be done without the empowerment of the poor. This is particularly important for women because of the worldwide gender inequalities in political and economic empowerment.

All policies, including macroeconomic policies must be examined from a gender and poverty perspective. Public awareness of the predicament of poor women must be enhanced. National machineries must be set up to further the cause of gender equality in general and the cause of poor women in particular.

In the long run, elimination of poverty, as opposed to alleviation of poverty, requires transformatory approaches that go beyond coping with poverty. Similarly, eliminating gender inequalities require transformatory approaches, which are about addressing the strategic needs of the poor or women, while coping approaches are about addressing their

practical needs. The latter is necessary for alleviating poverty and gender inequality while the former is necessary for the eradication of poverty and gender inequalities. Finally, it must be recognized that all this depends on political will, patience and an understanding that mental landscapes change slowly and need to be challenged constantly by the production of new and better knowledge for the empowerment of the disadvantaged.

In summary, eradicating gender inequalities help to reduce poverty. The policy conclusions of the 1997 Human Development Report as partly explained above incorporated gender equality and particularly women's empowerment in its six priority areas of action for poverty elimination:

1. Empowerment of (poor) women and men by assuring their access to productive assets and their participation in political decision-making.
2. Gender equality.
3. "Pro-poor" growth in all countries, with full employment as a policy priority.
4. Management of globalization with greater concern for global equity.
5. Creation of an enabling environment by the state.
6. Special international support for some countries in the form of debt reduction, increase in aid and opening up of agricultural markets.

Conclusion

This paper has tried to review the poverty level in Nigeria by examining the issues of gender and poverty. It discussed extensively on the measurement of poverty indicators and gender bias. It also examined the poverty alleviation options.

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