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Nigeria Democracy: A Panacea to Poverty Alleviation?

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Abstract

The fight against poverty has been a continuous efforts since the advent of military regimes in Nigeria. However, Nigerians expect more intensive efforts from a democratic government to eradicate their poverty. The return of democracy in Nigeria in 1999 therefore beams the hopes of many Nigerians. This is based on the conception that democracy serve as the governed making a great contribution to the governing process of their lives, where decisions are made to represent their interests. This implies that under a democratic system, the interest of the masses rule. If this applies, poverty which is ravaging Nigeria would have been reduced to a manageable level. With poverty on the increase in Nigeria, one begins to question the efficiency of our democracy. Is Nigeria truly democratic?

Introduction

A decade ago, democracy appeared to be the most desired system of government which all Nigerians craved for (except the Military Lords). Many movement were constituted to fight this course. The crave for democracy therefore was due to its perceived "dividends" such as: social welfare, justice, equity, equal access to resources and power.

What appeared to be a dream finally emerged in 1998. Nigerians were greeted with the unexpected exit of the military tyrant Gen. Abacha, which paved way for democracy in 1999. This seemed a dream come true, hopes were raised, and all Nigerians looked forward to a better life under a democratic setting-the

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fight against poverty came to fore again. Poor Nigerians looked forward to a new era, a supposed era that will alleviate their suffering.

Nigeria democracy has now survive for a decade, but the question is; has it changed the poverty status of the Nigerian citizenry? This paper therefore, seeks to assess the expected dividends of democracy on poverty alleviation and to ascertain if this has been achieved.

Conceptual Clarifications

Democracy: Democracy involves the ability of the electorates to freely decide how and who governs them. Democracy therefore constinute accountability, universal adult franchise, transparency, respect for human rights and independent and impartial judiciary (Dahl,1989). This implies that the electorates are conferred with the right to demand accountability from their elected leaders and also posses the powers of choice through their performance, especially where the interest of the people is not represented (Yakubu and Aderonmu, 2010).

Poverty: The Roles of Culture, Power, Social Structure and other factors largely out of control of the individual are the main forces which sociologists use to explain poverty. The basic assumption is that individuals are strongly influenced by the physical and cultural context on which they live.

Poverty means different things to different scholars. Its conceptualization varies based on the fact that it is relative. Its measurement is determined by different indicators. Some scholars view poverty in terms of inefficient income for securing basic goods and services, which others see it as a function of education, health, life expectancy and mortality rate (Smeeding, 2002). Similarly, the British Department for International Development (DFID) and United Nations use Human Development Index (HDI) as a criteria for defining poverty.

Based on the above criterion, Ajaiya and Mobolaji (2004) regard Poverty as lack of insufficient income for securing basic goods and services. This conception of poverty focuses on the ability of an individual to subsist and reproduce himself as well as the individual's ability to command resources to achieved subsistence.

Other scholars like Boltvinik (2000), and Okoh (1998) posit that Poverty is a living condition which an entity or individual is faced with some economic, social, political, cultural and environment deprivations such as: lack of good food, poor drinking water, low life expectancy, poor health services, general lack of economic infrastructure and lack of active participation in the decision making process either as it affects the individual or a nation.

Inferences drawn from various postulations made above implies that Poverty being a general lack of basic amenities of subsistence is directly or indirectly linked to deprivation of the citizenry by those responsible for the distribution of resource.

Efforts to Alleviate Poverty since the Inception of Democracy in Nigeria

Over the years, the quality of life of the average Nigerian citizen has progressively nose-dived. Numerous researches have exposed the dimensions and extent of Poverty in Nigeria. Available statistics therefore, indicate glaringly how precarious life has become for the average Nigerian citizen in the face of a suffocating level of Poverty. It is on this note that Poverty Alleviation Programmes have been bandied around by Nigerian leaders in the return of democracy in 1999.

The democratic era under Obasanjo's government introduced the Poverty Alleviation Programme (PAP), which was designed to provide employment to about 200,000 unemployed Nigerian Youths. By 2001 PAP was transformed into National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP) (Yakubu and Aderonmu, 2010).

This new programme therefore was designed to identify areas of failure and short comings of previous Poverty Alleviation Programmes and rectify those lapses by the year 2010. To this effect, the formulators of the programme identified three stages for the attainment of this ambitious target. The first stage was the restoration of hope in the poor masses. This involved providing necessities to hitherto neglected people, particularly in the rural areas. The second stage was the restoration of economic independence and confidence while the final stage was Wealth Creation (Aderonmu, 2007).

In order to attain efficiency, NAPEP was designed to achieve result through the following Schemes;

- i. Youth Empowerment Scheme (YES)
- ii. Rural Infrastructural Development Scheme (RIPS)
- iii. Special Welfare Service Scheme (SOWESS)
- iv. Natural Resources Development and Conservation Scheme (NIRDACS).

The time frame which NAPEP was expected to reduce the menace of poverty in Nigeria elapsed in 2010, however the rate of poverty still remains high. This therefore raise questions on the rationale behind establishing the poverty eradication programme since poverty rate remains on the increase despite its existence.

How Far Has Nigeria Gone in Poverty Eradication?

Eradicating extreme Poverty and hunger is a Goal no. 1 of the development strategy produced under the umbrella of the United Nations to enable member countries, especially the developing countries to reduce Poverty rate by at least 5% in 2015.

Sadly enough, current indices show that Nigeria and most countries in Africa are not even moving towards the direction of achieving the MDGs by the set date.

With the enormous resources and potentials, which democracy is expected to explore and give its dividends to the citizenry, Nigeria is still sitting 20th among the World poorest countries. This is so disgusting. Nigeria moved from a per capita GDP of US \$1,200 in 1981 to about US \$300 in 2000 with about 70% of its populace falling below poverty line; 71% survive on one dollar per day; and Nigeria numbers 157 in Human Development Index (HDI) (WorldBank, 2010).

Despite regular reports of economic progress, transformation and improved quality of life and livelihood in the polity and political circles in Nigeria, the country has continued to post derogatory outlook in the global development ranking.

The most recent Human Development Report launched by the UNDP in November, 2011 placed Nigeria in the 142nd position out of 169 least prosperous countries in the world. In addition, the country was listed 15 among 42 countries considered to belong in the least human development' category. The report categorized countries into groups of Very High Human Development, High Human Development, Medium -Human Development, and Low Human Development with Nigeria falling into the last. Unlike previous years, the 2010 report entitled "The Real Wealth of Nations: Pathways to Human

Development?, applied more robust indicators of quality of life and human development. It considered state of education, wealth, and life expectancy, all of which are further determined by level of poverty, inequality, and social exclusion, including gender. The report examined progress in health, education and income across countries in the last 40 years. Nigeria lagged behind in all (UNDP, 2011).

It is painful that the so-called Giant of Africa is no longer sleeping, the giant is dying. The fact is that Nigeria has slipped perpetually on the Legatum Prosperity Index over the last five years. Nigeria, the second largest economy in Africa has a per capita income of a mere US\$1,224 compared to the largest economy, South Africa, with national income per head of about US\$9,812. Nigeria equally placed shamefully behind Kenya and Cameroon in terms of income per head. It is also behind Ghana, Benin Republic, Cameroon and Uganda on life expectancy. Yet, Nigeria is supposed to be a great nation with vast natural and human resources. It is even more painful to note that despite her massive oil wealth, poverty is increasing due to significant inequality of access to the national wealth. According to the CIA World Fact Book, poverty rate in Nigeria is about 70 per cent.

Although the so-called technocrats in government are painting pictures of economic growth, improving fortune among other achievements, the real picture is the opposite. The major sectors of the economy which employ a majority of Nigerians drifted in terms of contribution to domestic economic activities, measured by the GDP in the last three years. Manufacturing slid dramatically from 7.14 per cent in 2009 to 4.16 in 2010; agriculture fell marginally from 41.2 per cent to about 40.8 per cent during the same period. Nigeria has been running a significant budget deficit, while tax and non-tax revenue dropped in the face of climbing national expenditure in the last few years. The recent noise about inflation dropping to single digit is a mere deception, inflation remains much above 11 per cent. The country's external reserves which could comfortably cover 17.24 months of imports in 2008 can merely cover only seven months of imports today (UNDP, 2011).

Nigeria is a nation endowed with a variety of resources ranging from natural to human and capital resources which, if well harnessed, have the potential to elevate Nigeria from a struggling economy to one of the "so-called" Tigers, such as Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand. For instance, Nigeria has received and somewhat squandered over US\$300 billion from oil since the early 1970s. At present, it can still boast of proven oil reserves estimated at about 36 billion barrels, while natural gas reserves are somewhat larger, estimated at over 100 trillion cubic feet. However, Nigeria has neither redeemed its enormous promises nor fulfilled its great potential suggested by her large deposit of minerals, petroleum and agricultural resources. When will this cycle end? Nigeria is no doubt a great nation but with bad leaders. Despite an abundance of resources, all indicators suggest that Nigeria is fast drifting towards failure. Since 2004, Nigeria has carried the nomenclature of a "fragile state" alongside 46 other countries in the world, though it does not have any reason to be in that category (UNDP, 2011).

Poverty is more visible in the midst of plenty than ever before. Every sector of the economy has seemingly failed. Public schools that used to be the pride of the older generation of the elite are shadows of what they used to be. Public hospitals are potential abattoirs when compared with general hospitals even in less prosperous countries. Basic livelihood is continually threatened and youth unemployment is on the increase. Nigerians deserve commendation for being patient and very resilient. The realities that caused the ongoing rage in the Middle East and North Africa is in no way dissimilar to the situation in Nigeria. The government should know that no human can be resilient forever.

Considering that nothing much has changed development-wise since 1999, the latest report on Poverty in Nigeria would not have come as a surprise to many, except government officials, who dissipate more energy denying the obvious fact than they expend on addressing the frightening problem of Poverty. As the generality of Nigerians continue to wallow in abject Poverty, a privileged few live in opulence.

Although Poverty seems more acute in rural areas where people hardly have access to any basic infrastructure, those living in sub-urban areas and slums still grapple with this unfortunate situation. The situation is so bleak that an average salary earner cannot earn enough to support a family because of rising cost of food items, transportation, healthcare, among numerous other challenges. This is the so called "dividends" of democracy Nigerians are "enjoying." Instead of our democracy to bring us joy, it is rather adding more pains to our sorrows. The supposed representatives of the people have become lords to be worshipped before one get employed or even benefit from any welfare package from the government. This brings to play "son of the soil" syndrome where dividends of democracy are distributed on the basis of "who-knows-who".

Conclusion

While government officials may continue to kick against these statistics by international organizations, the basic fact still remains that the quality of life of most Nigerians have been on the downward trend. The rising Poverty level is the consequence of mass unemployment and corrupt leaderships, which denies the people access to basic infrastructures such as roads, potable water, electricity, healthcare among others (Yakubu and Aderonmu, 2010).

Perhaps, the result of these incidences of Poverty may "justify" the alarming level of insecurity and crime in the country, leading to high incidences of kidnapping, political violence, sectarian violence as well as prostitution and child trafficking.

The questions now is, are Nigerians still zealous of this democracy as it were in 1999? Are there regrets the citizenry has incurred in the course of our democracy? Some would say yes or no to these posers. But the truth is, there are so many regrets, even though, many Nigerians would prefer the worst form of democracy to the best form of military rule.

Recommendations

For Nigerian democracy to become a pride to the citizenry, poverty level must be reduced to a barest minimum. In order to achieve this the Nigerian government must as a matter of urgency diversify the country's economy, to reduce overdependence on oil revenue, especially in the face of the current global financial crisis.

The government needs a more pragmatic approach to governance. A paradigm shift is the key. The Sovereign Wealth Fund should be well applied to revive public education, public health, and create a strong public works department similar to what operated in the past. The Federal Government should be proactive towards reversing the derogatory picture Nigeria is posting in the global development space by coming up with a new approach to reducing inequality, poverty and improving access to quality education, health and income earning opportunities in Nigeria.

The starting point is for those running Nigeria democracy to implement socially just welfare policies that would help alleviate Poverty or at least give the poor masses a sense of belonging. Otherwise that sense of exclusion and marginalization would persist and may inform an unexpected reaction from Nigerians,

may be a revolution. This country and its rich resources belongs to everyone. There is no point where only a few benefit while a large majority suffer. Otherwise, no matter how the police are equipped they may not efficiently fight crime. Beside, how do you solve a problem without tackling its root cause? Except the rotten tooth is removed, the mouth must chew with caution.

There is every need for more investment in mechanized agriculture as well as developing small scale and medium scale enterprises, which are important for the growth of the economy.

A true democracy must give the people the chance to chose their leaders, therefore, efforts should be intensified in conducting credible election so that the people can vote in or out a leader whenever he does not represent their interest.

Considering the fact that corruption has marred the efficiency of poverty Alleviation Programmes, efforts should be intensified to fetch out the "bad eggs" so that war against Poverty can be won. Those to benefit from Poverty Alleviation Programmes should truly reflect the poor masses and not the affiliates of the programme managers.

If the above recommendations are fully implemented, Nigerians will once again be proud of their democracy and leaders. There will be more patriotic effort to preserve the system than when only a few are benefiting and the masses are suffering.

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