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RURAL POVERTY IN NIGERIA AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT: REMEDIAL PERSPECTIVES.

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In this paper the causes of rural poverty in Nigeria are given as colonial and political factors, economic factors, natural disasters, government's insensitivity or bad policy and inadequate nutrition among others. The implications of rural poverty on the rural people and on national development are discussed.

Remedies against rural poverty include provision of functional education programme, employment generation opportunities, harnessing of local initiatives and promotion of viable cooperatives in the rural areas. The paper concludes by saying that the transformation of the rural areas into productive, liveable and efficient settings would ensure solid foundation for genuine national development and it suggests that multi-dimensional efforts and interdisciplinary approaches are needed to tackle rural poverty in Nigeria for national development.

Introduction

What Is A Rural Area?

Literatures available reveal that population is the main characteristic that differentiates rural from the urban areas, especially in the developed countries of the world. Nigeria classifies any area with a population of 70,000 people and below as a rural area. About 80% of the populations of Nigeria are in the rural area. Other determining features are depression, degradation and deprivation and immersed in poverty. Basic infrastructures are absent and where they exist are most inadequate for any meaningful development. Also it could as well be seen and defined as having both spatial and occupational connotation. A rural area is more closely related to nature than the urban area.

Rural poverty is one of the most intractable social problems confronting any society. In rural communities in Nigeria, it is a widespread feature. This fact serves as the rationale for an examination of rural poverty and national development in Nigeria.

Rural Poverty And National Development.

It will be difficult to appreciate the stark realities of rural poverty and national development without understanding poverty per se. Poverty is a social problem which defies precise and universally applicable definition. This is so because according to Mere (1987) poverty is a relative concept whose meaning depends on the prevailing socio-economic organization of the society. It is also a multi-dimensional concept involving not only economic and quantifiable aspects but also social-psychological and not easily quantifiable features. Poverty has to do with employment and income, level of living, social and infrastructural facilities of health, education and housing. According to United Nations definition (1968), "the poor are those who do not enjoy the minimum standard of living consistent with human dignity, those families whose total earnings are insufficient to obtain minimum necessities for the maintenance of mere physical efficiency". This would imply that the persons affected would be in condition in which basic needs of food, shelter and health can hardly be satisfied even at a minimum level required for survival. Waxman (1970) sees poverty as, "a condition of want, need or deprivation".

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In an economic sense, poverty is regarded as a state of chronic insufficiency, economic inequality, a condition of want inadequacy, scarcity, a dependence on others for every necessity of life. However, poverty as it exists in the Nigeria society today and other developing countries is not just a matter of low income alone. It essentially means more than that. Ume (1987) emphasized that, "people may be perceived as being poor even if they are assured the minimum required for physical survival. Consequently, poverty line is now viewed not as a minimum required for subsistence, but as a minimum level of adequacy or of wealth and deprivation grossly low income and inadequacy. Poverty here also connotes generally very poor level of living, inaccessibility of social, infrastructural and educational facilities from which people can benefit for their individual and for collective development.

Olayide and Essang (1975) in their study of aspects of Rural poverty in Nigeria gave a definition of rural poverty that is similar to the United Nation definition above. According to them, "rural poverty refers to a situation in which rural individuals, groups, communities and societies at a given point in time experience a level of income below that which is needed to provide a desirable minimum living level". Poverty like an elephant is more easily recognized than defined.

In Nigeria therefore the rural poor is that segment of the country's population who find themselves in the rural areas and are under the above condition. The rural poor are highly impoverished and so many of them suffer from absolute poverty, a condition in which according to the Clausen (1985) "people are too poor to obtain calorie-adequate diet which yields sufficient energy with which to work for national development".

In spite of the rural poverty, according to Ogbu (1985), "it is estimated that greater than 80 percent of our population still live in the rural areas upon the large migration into the cities". Unfortunately, our governments, both civilian and military have pursued national development and its policies, which have strong bias in favour of urban centres. Most disciplines viewed national development from different perspective. Economics may view it from economic point of view where by national development is measured in terms of growth rate like gross national products. Political scientist might tend to view national development on the basis of political power (mobilization), while sociologist may view it from sociological point of view on the basis of all interaction, relationship, growth and development of a given society. Although National development should ensure that human potentials are developed in such a way as to make room for meaningful growth of the nation in all its sphere of development, development to most Nigeria is the construction of urban centers with neglect of rural areas. According to Nnoli (1981), "artifacts are not development".

Authentic development means much than establishment of infrastructures in cities. It is not determined by the amount of development spending annually. Similarly, imported artifacts, goods and services are by no means true indicators of development. For Olatunde (1985), "Authentic national development should be seen in terms of the increasing ability of any country to effectively utilize or mobilize all available resources both material and human in transforming the socio-physical environment in order to satisfy the social and/or material needs of the citizens. It is indicated by collective increase among the member of a society in their capacity to deal with their environment in their interest". Fortunately, our rural population constitutes an enormous man power reservoir which should be mobilized to increase productivity and contribute to national development. In addition to abundant manpower, the rural communities

also offer very stable socio-political framework for effective mobilization of the masses of our people. The long duration of Biafra resistance during the civil war was mainly due to the resilience of its rural population, which buttressed the embattled regime long after most of the urban centers were sacked by the federal troops. In effect, the rural dwellers should be involved in contributing to national development. Most rural communities will willingly accept the challenge of contributing their quota to national development.

The Causes Of Poverty In Nigeria

The factors responsible for rural poverty are many and sometime interact in a complex way to perpetuate poverty among the rural poor these include colonial and political factors, Neo-colonialism/social stratification, Economic Factors, Natural disasters, government's insensitive/bad policy and poor policy implementation, and illiteracy/lack of education.

Colonial And Political Factors

It is necessary to begin by saying that the sharp distinctions between the urban and rural areas are traceable to the British colonialists who influenced the political and economic structure of Nigeria. Although the living condition in the pre-colonial traditional society is not comparable to the standards of present-day society, people lived well in their traditional communities in the past and contributed to national development. They did not experience the helplessness in national development which rural poverty has brought upon the contemporary rural poor because at that time, they lived communally.

On arrival, the colonialists settled down in what was regarded as European quarters. They pursued from there, their trade and commercial objective which was the extraction and transfer of agricultural and mineral products from the rural areas to overseas to serve as industrial raw materials infrastructures such as food, pipe-borne water, good residential buildings, electricity; hospitals, and means of transportation. The areas where they settled acquired the status of urban area. As a matter of deliberate policy rural areas were neglected. According to Anyanwu (1987), "for most of the years between 1900 and 1960, community development was both in theory and practice not a priority of the colonial authorities. Their role in the development of education was very marginal as it was also in other aspects of social and economic development such as roads, agriculture, health facilities, and market".

The exploitation of the rural poor and indeed the aggravation of rural poverty therefore, date back to the advent of the colonialists. The extension of basic infrastructural facilities to the rural areas (if any) was undertaken only when it served the exploitative interests and long term goals of the colonial power. This laid the foundation for what has today become the gap between the urban rural area, and rural poverty.

Neo-Colonialism/Social Stratification

It was expected that after independence, the urban-rural dichotomy would be broken by the Nigerian politicians, who took over the mantle of leadership from the colonialists. Unfortunately, they preferred the sustenance of the status-quo and the enhancement of the dichotomy and social inequalities to the disadvantage of the rural poor.

The emergent Nigeria elite saw themselves as constituting a class. They also saw their position as that of strength from which to ensure the continuity of the master-servant or rich-poor

relationship within the Nigeria society. They failed to immediately embark on even and progressive development of both the urban and rural areas and did not give them equal opportunity to contribute to the national development. The planners and policy makers concentrate attention on the urban sector. This urban bias results in development policy that favors a relatively small urban industrial sector over a considerably larger rural sector. According to mere (1987:50) between 70% and 80% of the nation's population live in the rural area and 64% of these rural dwellers are engaged in agriculture.

Thus, agriculture is the primary source of employment. In spite of this, the 1970-1974 Second National Development plan devoted only 13% of the total investment to agriculture. In the 1975 to 1980 plan period, only 6.6% was allocated to agriculture. In the 1981 to 1985 plan 21% went to agriculture. Inadequate investment in agriculture and imbalance in the development of urban and rural sectors of Nigeria mean that there are pockets of plentitude coexisting dangerously with areas of misery. The exploitation of rural resources by middlemen and primarily for urban development to the neglect of the rural areas is an essential cause of rural poverty in Nigeria.

The conservative posture of the neo-colonialists has therefore ensured sustained social stratification base on social economic status which reflects a continuum from the extremes of wealth to the extremes of poverty- a development which continues to put the poor to a lot disadvantage. As summarized by Okoye (1985), "the fundamental source of inequality is the nature of the overall political and economic organization of the society."

Economic factor

The economic factor is easily the strongest factor responsible for rural poverty. In view of its power of exchange, money can purchase a person's need or services. With money one can build a house, eat good food, obtain good medical attention, get food education, and provide pipe-borne water. Rural dwellers who are predominantly farmers and fishermen depend on their agricultural activities as their source of generating income. Unfortunately, most of these people are uneducated and unexposed and ill-equipped to launch their agricultural activities into viable commercial ventures and contribute to national development. They toil all day and yet end up with such little farm outputs that are barely enough for subsistence.

Furthermore, not much economic activities take place in the rural areas. The rural markets normally hold every fourth or eight day and the rural dwellers depend on the city dwellers who rush in from the townships to buy off the agricultural products. Many rural dwellers therefore are unable to rise above poverty line. They easily mortgage and sell their few lands and give away their daughters for marriage at a very tender age in exchange for some money.

Unfortunately, heavy domestic commitments such as taxies, church contributions, school fees etc very quickly liquidate the funds and return the affected rural dwellers to their former conditions of object poverty and without involvement in national development.

Natural Disasters

Since rural dwellers thrive mostly on subsistence farming, natural disasters such as drought, extremely heavy rainfall, bush fire, landslides erosion, pest invasion, etc adversely affect the agricultural efforts of the rural dwellers. During the rainy season, flood washes away property including crops worth huge sum of money. Several states in the Northern parts of Nigeria have for some years been combating the invasion of farmlands by pests, locusts and quilabirds.

These are known to swarm around in very large numbers and could eat off every green leaf and

fruit of plants within several acres of land, in a matter of minutes.

In the southern parts of Nigeria, farm lands have been swept off or displaced by erosion and landslides. The case of Nanka communities in Aguata Local Government Area of Anambra State is well known. These losses usually suffered are sometimes inestimable and hard to recover from. So are the effects of drought during which farm plants and crops are burnt up leaving the rural poor much poorer than before in the light of emphasis on national development.

Government's Insensitivity/Bad Policy and Poor

Government's insensitivity to the needs of the rural poor, bad policy implementation, and inability to evenly involve both the urban and rural areas in national development contribute to the poor condition of living in the rural areas and impoverishment of the rural poor. Rural development is not adequately taken seriously by the Nigerian Government. Rural areas are probably and are not fully involved in national development.

Government officials and policy makers had exhibited lack of perception and appreciation of the nature and extent of rural poverty. Visits to the rural areas, are normally publicized for cheap political gains. During such visits they are welcome by school children with flags lining up the roads. At every stop, local chieftains surround them and after being entertained to traditional dances and *gala-nights*, they rush off without getting a good idea of the true condition of the rural dwellers.

The obvious consequences are that policies that are unfavorable to aid the rural dwellers in contributing adequately to national development and improvement of life in the rural area are formulated. Even when favorable policies are formulated, government for smooth and effective implementation of such policies does not release funds. When funds are released excessive bureaucracy kills implementation.

The land policy whose credibility is still being questioned by the peasants is an example. Being now in a position where it holds all the lands in trust for the people, the government has simply dispossessed the poor farmers of their only source of contribution to national development and means of livelihood. New conditions for getting land are unfavorable to the poor. Although Government claims to be giving loan through bank; the conditions tied to it make it impossible for poor rural dwellers to obtain.

The educational system has in fact come to occupy a strategic position as the central determinant of the economic, political, social and cultural character of society and thus part of national development. The importance of education in human development and the process of modernization and national development is unquestionable. Education here means both general education, and specialized education and training for a specific purpose in the process of socio-economic development.

Production increases and national development requires new techniques and increase investment. According to Ukeje (1985). "Techniques are comprehended through learning process and education while increased investment means the creation of new power supplies that work, building of more factories plants and industries, more efficient telecommunications, development of natural resources and most importantly, the training of personnel who will in turn be able to produce more".

Just like general education, and specialized education and training, literacy establishes the conditions for growth and development by helping one understand and apply new techniques as well as appreciate modernization and national development process.

On the other hand, illiteracy is one of the greatest handicaps of the rural dwellers. Unfortunately, Nigeria has a problem of both low level of education and literacy rate among the rural poor. Literacy militates against efforts to eradicate ignorance and promote the uptake of innovation and contribution to national development. The illiterates are unable to appreciate and apply new production techniques, to obtain and use bank loans as one of the option open to him for raising capital for development ventures. They do not understand and use advice from experts regarding the improvement of agricultural activities. Illiteracy and lack of education coupled with ignorance contribute to rural poverty.

Poor Condition of Health:

Due to inadequate and under nourishing food, there is hardly resistance to epidemics while the use of intoxicating drugs make the states of health even worse for the rural dwellers. Poor condition of health reduces the efforts of rural dwellers in national development.

Implications of Rural Poverty On Rural Dwellers And National Development

The implications of rural poverty on rural dwellers are of economic, social, educational and medical nature while its implications on the national development are generally little or no contribution to development.

The Implications on the Rural Dwellers: Economic Effects On Rural Dweller

The nature of rural poverty itself- a condition in which one lacks good food, shelter, water, assets, cash, education and medical attention and other infrastructural facilities and is not involved in national development begets and perpetuates rural poverty. The fact is that since the rural poor live at a subsistence level, they do not have enough, let alone the extra funds to cope with heavy domestic and social responsibilities which should enhance their general well being and those of their children.

They can not improve on their system of farming. They can not buy mechanized tools, or hire bulldozers, mowers and harvesters for increased output and national development. They cannot employ and pay for labour to increase output. The fishermen among them cannot buy even cheap canoes and nets.

The farmers are unable to raise loans and in fact may be unable to pay back even if they receive any since they are likely to use it to settle accumulated debts and needs. In the final analysis they continue to toil all day without anything to show for it. Rural poverty leads to further impoverishment and perpetuation of the poverty and hinders national development. A family or individual has a high probability of staying poor. According to Fajana (1975), "poor parents have a greater likelihood of not giving their children the opportunity (in a capitalist society) for better health and education needed to improve their lot. The cruel legacy of poverty is thus passed from parents to children".

Medical Effects:

These include deteriorating physical and health condition, high mortality rate, malnutrition, kwashiorkor, and poor medication. A good medication costs money, which the poor rural dwellers do not have. They are unable therefore to give themselves good medication and prefer traditional doctors. The rural poor feed very poorly, eating mostly carbohydrate and little protein. They do not eat balanced diets and therefore suffer malnutrition. Under such a condition, children are more vulnerable to disease; they are more likely to die in the first year of life, or if they live, to be stunted physically and mentally.

The rural poor are often victims of water borne disease such as diarrhea, guinea worm, cholera and air born disease such as cerebra-spinal meningitis. Rural communities in Abakiliki and Oha Ozara are well known examples of areas where water born diseases have been a menace. Cerebra-spinal meningitis is rampant in rural communities in the Northern states of Nigeria. According to Clausen (1985), "lack of good and urgent medical attention also lead to death and may be responsible for frequent early deaths and low life expectancy, a position that is consistent with the view that in sub Sahara Africa as a whole (including Nigeria), life expectancy at birth is 49 years, compared to years in the world's industrial countries".

Social/Educational Effects:

The social and educational effects are many. They include lack of formal education, very low level of education and literacy for those who manage to get some education. Other consequences are unemployment, population explosion, crime and corruption, juvenile delinquency etc.

Being uneducated and illiterate themselves, and constrained by lack of funds, the older generation rural dwellers are unable to perceive and appreciate the need to give their children formal education and raise their level of literacy for national development

Lack of education and illiteracy limit the extent to which the rural poor can cope with innovations and new technology, which can lead to national development and improvement in rural life and business. Although the formation of farmer' cooperatives in the rural areas is now getting boost, their effectiveness may depend on the level of education/literacy, since the older ones among them will tend to adhere strictly to traditional farming methods. Ignorance of new approaches and techniques and refusal to apply new inputs make it impossible to improve beyond subsistence.

Unemployment is another bad consequence and leads to the mass exodus of the unemployed from the rural to the urban centres, draining away qualified persons whose ideas could have been useful for development in the rural areas.

Juvenile delinquency, armed robbery and other criminal activities are also dangerous consequences. This is more so in this period of general financial squeeze, lack of job openings, and high inflation to the extent that some people do not eat a good meal. Several children have dropped out of school because their parents can no longer pay school fees and buy books. These children join bad companies and grow delinquent. In fact, there has been a drastic fall in school enrolment in the rural areas.

The Implications And Effects On National Development

Current efforts towards self-reliance and national development require that all Nigerians should be effectively mobilized and utilized for socio economic development. However, the depressed, alienated, malnourished, weak and ailing rural dwellers are no longer in a position to contribute meaningfully towards the development of their communities. Even those of them who are healthy and able to contribute, had over the years been cut off by the government the way it deliberately neglected the rural areas and concentrated development efforts on the urban areas.

Having been marginalized, the rural poor remain largely outside development efforts, able neither to contribute to the national development nor to benefit fairly from it. This condition is very serious problem. Also, since the rural areas do not have the necessary infrastructures and market prospects, investors do not find such areas attractive and viable enough for investment. A few rural communities especially in Igboland like Amokwe in Udi local government area and Ihe/Owerre in Nsukka, have built things like town halls, short distance roads, health centers, churches etc through communal efforts and payment of levies. A few philanthropists have done one or two things for their respective communities, but all these do not screech the surface of expected national development. The fact remains that owing to their unenviable position, the rural poor are neither collectively nor individually making optimal contribution to the development of their respective rural areas, and by extension not contributing to national development.

Viewed strictly form the above point of view, and considering the population explosion, the rural poor tend to become more of a liability than the asset they should be, thereby reducing the general pace of national development in Nigeria.

Realistic Remedies Against Rural Poverty In Nigeria

According to Mere (1987) there are three great giants against man: (a) ignorance (b) poverty and (c) illness. Poverty and illness are said to be offspring of ignorance. Thus, to tackle poverty, it is a key concern that major emphasis be given to the eradication of ignorance. To prevent poverty, the government should combat illiteracy and poor and inappropriate education in Nigeria. Primary and secondary education as we as other types and all levels of education should be given top priority. A successful and adequate educational programmes could raise people above poverty line. Unfortunately there are more stories of token success in qualitative education and adult education. A mass educational programme through the mass media, newspapers, personal contacts and other possible means of disseminating information should be used. Not until the education of the entire population is placed over and pursued above the needs of a few elite in Nigeria we cannot hope to eradicate poverty and there will be no proper national development.

At an expert's workshop on "Effective Anti-Poverty Strategies" held in Bangkok in 1975, various antipoverty measures were proposed for developing nations like Nigeria and these include:

- (a) Rural Development Programme
- (b) Employment promotion, cooperative and labour union.
- (c) A more equitable income distribution
- (d) Educational improvements and
- (e) Slum improvements (International Association of Schools of Social Work: 1976:60).

It is pertinent to emphasize that currently, the Nigeria government is embarking on some of these anti-poverty strategies. However more still need to be done. Poverty should be attacked through the provision of fuller employment opportunities. This is possible through a labour intensive mode of production, which will enable the Nigeria citizenry use all its productive forces. Also assistance should be given to rural farmers by helping them find additional or ancillary source of income.

Government technical institutions and the universities should gear their training programmes to produce more job creators than job seekers. Government should help the graduates of the institutions to establish on their own and provide job for fuller employment of others. There should be a judicious distribution of industries in both urban and rural areas. This will help to reduce rural urban migration and rural poverty in Nigeria. Citizen participation should be employed in rural areas. The participation of the citizens in the development process is a significant factor in rural development particularly of developing countries like Nigeria. Citizen's participation means the participation of indigenous and naturalized citizens in national development. Citizen's participation is *sine qua non* for accelerating social change in the rural areas.

Furthermore, voluntary community organizations should be encouraged in the rural areas. Voluntary community organizations are important in the harnessing of local initiative for national development. The efforts should include training of officers of this association on programme and project planning. This, it is hoped will enable them expand range of projects to include those that touch directly on the felt needs of the people.

Similarly, there is need to promote viable cooperatives in the rural areas. A successful cooperative offers each member and the general public an opportunity to maximize their economic welfare.

Effective community bank is necessary in the rural areas in Nigeria. The community bank should be established in all the states and should have suitable branch network operation in rural areas in Nigeria. The staff of the bank should be exposed to specialist training in rural development. This will enable them assess effectively the viability of development projects by recognizing factors not traditionally considered by commercial banks.

Community organization, self help groups and other social clubs and cooperative should be directed to open and operate account with the Banks to enable them obtain loans for development projects in the rural areas.

Encouraging and sponsoring research work in the rural areas in Nigeria is necessary in order to solve the problem of rural poverty. Nigeria and her institutions of higher learning have not been encouraging researchers in the field of rural development. Research findings if considered by the government should give a face-lift to rural areas in Nigeria. Rural development remains virgin fields of study which, Nigeria should be encouraged to research into. The government, especially in the rural areas should adequately subsidize research programmes in Nigeria's institutions of higher learning. This it is hoped will spur interest of scholars in the study of the principles, mode, fancying, administration and mobilizing of the rural folks toward national development.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, rural poverty cannot favour national development. Poverty involves not only economic and measurable variables, but also non-quantifiable socio psychological considerations. Rural poverty is not always associated factor endowment. In some cases, it is in part the consequence resources as in Nigeria.

In Nigeria, the rural poor have been marginalized and kept out of development efforts, neither contributing to national development nor benefiting from it on the other hand. Although it is a very serious problem, rural poverty does not seem to have received appropriate attention from the government for practical solution and onwards involvement of the rural dwellers in national development. The transformation of the rural areas into productive, liveable and efficient settings would ensure solid foundation for genuine national development. The dominant western styled approach to national development has strong economic interests in our urban centers and its powerful protagonists may not readily endorse a shift of emphasis to the rural areas for their maximum contribution to national development. Equity will be restored to our national development scheme when rural communities in Nigeria are used as the basis for future development of our nation. Multi dimensional efforts and interdisciplinary approaches are needed to tackle rural poverty in Nigeria for national development.

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