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NIGERIAN EDUCATION SYSTEM:

- **POVERTY ALLEVIATION PROGRAMMES OF OTHER COUNTRIES: LESSONS FOR NIGERIA**
- **POVERTY ALLEVIATION PROGRAMMES IN AGRICULTURAL OCCUPATIONS AND BUSINESS FIELDS**
- **THE STATUS OF POVERTY ALLEVIATION INITIATIVES IN NIGERIA**
- **PHILOSOPHICAL REFLECTION ON POVERTY ALLEVIATION PROGRAMMES IN NIGERIA**
- **COMMUNICATION GAP IN THE POVERTY ALLEVIATION PROGRAMME IN NIGERIA.**

Other Articles Inside

Nigerian Educational Research Association

Grassroots Mobilization as Strategy for Poverty Alleviation and Sustainable Livelihoods Among Peasant Farmers in Nigeria

By

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Abstract

Poverty is prevalent among all segments of the Nigerian population. The nature of poverty among mankind makes it important that it deserves alleviation to improve livelihoods among all so that improved living will be constantly sustained.

Sustainable livelihoods approaches are being used as an 'optimal' through which poverty can be better understood, and development options prioritised. This paper takes a cursory look at the concept of poverty, its alleviation, sustainable livelihoods among peasant farmers and strategies for improving their efficiency through grassroots mobilisation and group movement in the realisation of these goals for the survival of man

Introduction

In most rural communities of Nigeria and other developing Nations of the world, the poor often referred to their new income earning role in terms of it having been thrust upon them by worsening economic circumstances and situations. The rural poor all over the world are far from a homogenous group and so from this reason exploit a variety of economic circumstances and situation to alleviate their sufferings from poverty.

The rural poor according to Ramprakash (1991) are of two broad categories:

- Potential viable rural poor, comprising small and marginal farmers and rural artisans who possess some kind of asset such as land or skill.
- Asset less rural poor, comprising landless agricultural labourers who depend mainly on wage employment.

The rural poor otherwise called the peasants suffer from extreme deprivations, which worsen their socio-economic status in spite of natural resources and assets they possess. They are vulnerable to a range of changes and reducing vulnerability may be a higher priority than say, increasing production, or the quantity of their assets. This neglect over the years put the rural poor perpetually in the poverty rung.

There has been the concern for some time now among governmental organisations, non-governmental organisations, international bodies etc to extricate the rural poor from the poverty line. A large number of international organisations have recently adopted "livelihoods" approaches to development of the poor and by centring on the rural poor, these allow development initiatives to identify and support people's livelihood strategies. These strategies, in turn, are conditioned by the vulnerability of the contexts in which they live, and by the opportunities and constraints they face in economic, social and institutional conditions. These poor people can be described as being in an "energy trap" that is having to maintain subsistence through high levels of energy expenditure leaving little residual time and energy for other activities (Longhurst, 1997).

Furthermore, the rural poor are usually trapped in productivity occupations. Although they diversify, they rarely have assets (skills, knowledge, information, command over labour and technology, or credit) to allow them to switch into occupations offering higher returns to effort (Jafry, 2000). However, the view expressed above negates the Earth summit Declaration in Rio De Janeiro, which stated that, human beings are the centre for sustainable development. They are entitled to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature'. One implication of this is that people ought to be able to live and work environment and use equipment and production process that will not cause danger to human health.

In line with the above, the Civilian Administration of president Olusegun Obasanjo launched the National poverty Alleviation programme in February 2000. It was expected to be used for or to lead to job

creation of about 200,000 distributed all over the 36 states of the federation and the Federal Capital Territory in areas of:

- Patching of potholes on highways
- Environmental sanitation
- Afforestation.
- Control of vegetation along the highway.
- Cleaning of hospitals and cutting of grasses therein.
- Renovation of schools and public places, which would include the removal of posters displayed indiscriminately on public buildings.
- Rehabilitation of public utilities and facilities for communities.
- Construction of low-cost building and assistance in food production.

The programme as expected is not meeting up with the expectations of the poor in the society for which the programme is targeted at. The programme as expected by the wide publicity and enlightenment on the government's side in addition to the above, is also expected to:

- Provide jobs for a sizeable number of youths in each state and in each local government area based on the level of their education and skill acquisition.
- Pay the youths for working.
- Retrain the youths with inadequate skills for work.
- Place youths on community jobs as a stop gap measure in their endeavour for further education and in training for high-technical jobs.
- Focus the attention of the youths on what they can do to develop their communities rather than waiting on what their communities can do for them.
- To reduce rural - urban migration in search of pseudo-jobs.

Though the poverty alleviation initiatives are focused on the above, it is expected that it should be able to perform numerous other functions that are targeted at the poor and are also community based. These should be an additional diversification option for the poor, not a substitute for their core activities, as it will only last for a year.

Poverty according to Maxwell (1998) is blessed with a rich vocabulary, in all cultures and throughout history. It could be traced back at least to the codification of poor laws in medieval England, through the work of classical economists such as Ricardo, Smith and Malthus, to the pioneering empirical studies at the turn of the century by Booth in London and Rowntree in York. Rowntree's study, published in 1901, was the first to develop a poverty standard for individual families, based on estimates of nutritional and other requirements.

The concept of poverty did not receive much attention until the 1970s specifically in 1973 as a result of the celebrated speech of the World Bank president Robert MacNamara to the World Bank Board of Governors in Nairobi.

According to the United Nations development programme (UNDP, 1997), "poverty can mean more than a lack of what is necessary for material well-being. It can also mean the denial of opportunities and choices most basic to human development to lead a long, healthy, creative life and to enjoy a decent standard of living, freedom, dignity, self-esteem and the respect of others."

In a much more practical sense, 'poverty is a man-made phenomenon that manifests in all the facets of life of the poor due to deprivations and vulnerability of the basic needs such as good food, affordable and good shelter, accessible and good health, good governance, sound education, better paid employment, manageable household population etc, thereby putting the poor at the perpetual mercy of others.

Poverty is much more predominant in the rural settings of Nigeria than in urban households and it is synonymous with backwardness and underdevelopment, and has been viewed as irrelevant in the quest for progress and development. In general perceptions, the supposed rural -urban dichotomy is similar to that of backwardness - modernity, agricultural - industrial and poor - prosperous. "Poverty" according to a saying from Rev. Sydney Smith "is no disgrace to a man, but it is confoundedly inconvenient".

To extricate the poor from these suffering demands that the poverty level be reduced or alleviated through some outside intervention strategies by individuals, groups, governments and non-governmental agencies etc. Poverty alleviation simply refers to the reduction and cushioning effect on the level of poverty prevalent in the daily lives of the rural poor thereby making their livelihoods to be alright and better defined. A livelihood is defined as the capabilities, assets (including both material and social resources) and activities required for a means of living. A livelihood is sustainable when it can cope with and recover from stresses and shocks and maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets both now and in the future, while not undermining the natural resource base (Carney (ed.) 1998:4). From the foregoing therefore, poverty of the rural poor requires alleviation and it is after this that the emanating livelihoods can be sustained for the good of all and sundry so that it becomes part of them.

In making the livelihoods of the rural poor sustainable, it is important that government or programmes do not impose outcomes, but negotiate with communities to find out what their aspirations are, and what may be achievable outcomes, combining people's assets and access to resources with the external resources that government and other agencies may be able to provide. (Goldman et al. 2000). Development initiatives of governments and non-government organisations (NGOs) worldwide provide services and supports to alleviate the sufferings of the rural people. These organisations operate within a set of laws, politics and procedures and define the options that are available in making the livelihoods of rural poor sustainable and also to empower them by broadening the range of strategy options available to the rural poor.

Governmental and non-governmental organisations need to meet in the capacity building for the rural poor should include aggressive grassroots mobilisation and also;

- Commitment to poor people and potential for creativity in service delivery - e.g. use of available local resources and material for their own good and to earn a living which the organisations can later improve upon. e.g. weaving of baskets, cane chairs, foot mats, carvings, hunting etc.
- Ability to promote a momentum of change for development through outside intervention strategies - as could be seen during the periods of DFRRRI, BLP, FSP and through international aids and assistance.
- Putting a holistic understanding of poor people at the centre and recognise that policies and institutions condition the environment within which people operate. This gives a clear understanding of the clients and their needs.
- Provision of enough resources both human and materials including cash for services to repackage and focus the policies more on the people to ensure their empowerment.
- Commitment to the poor people in terms of fostering good relation ship and efficient formation and management of group dynamics. Group and approach to issues is collective and have the tendency to reach large people within a relatively short time.

Natures and Causes of Poverty in Nigeria

Many attempts have been put in place by successive government since independence, to address the menace of poverty in the Nigerian households. Such include those specifically targeted at increased and sustained food production because of the agrarian nature of most rural households - National accelerated Food production programme, Farm settlement schemes, Agricultural Credits Guarantee scheme, operation Feed the Nation, Green Revolution, Agricultural Development project (ADP), and then lately in the last two decades -Directorate of Foods Roads and Rural Infrastructures (DFRRRI), National Directorate of Employment (NDE), the peoples Bank, the Community banks, the Better Life Programme (BLP), Family Support programme, (FSP), Family Economic advancement programme (FEAP), The National Agricultural Land Development Agency (NALDA) etc.

They have by and large been improperly operated and executed with reckless abandon and have at various times become avenues for government officials to siphon tax payers money. This renders them ineffective with no positive impact on the poor. Difficulties and uncertainties mount on regular basis on the effectiveness of poverty alleviation policies and programmes as a result of the following:

- neglect of agriculture by the rural poor;
- neglect of superstructures and infrastructures transport, rural development road construction, feeder roads development, diminishing health centres, poor water development etc.
- population pressure (in homes of the poor);
- adverse international resource flows, trade protectionism, subordination of poverty alleviation objectives to foreign policy and commercialisation of interests in bilateral aids.
- Local power structure and vested interest (political differences, power struggle, ethnicity, quota system etc).
- Lack of co-ordination among co-ordinating agencies as was the case with NDE, MANR, DFERRI, BLP, NALDA, ETC.
- Ineffective interim measures (SAP, peoples Bank, community Bank, FEAP etc).
- Poor project design and implementation at ministerial and non-ministerial levels, states, local governments and community/village levels.
- Limited resources (insufficient resources devoted to poverty alleviation or targeting what is not entirely on the poor. This is very evident in the present PAP as politicians use the programme to solve the domestic problems in their household).
- Limited local participation.
- Lack of commitment on part of government to the needs of the poor

(An adaptation from Ramprakash (1991)).

These difficulties and uncertainties towards the effectiveness of various Poverty Alleviation Programmes since independence have not helped our developmental initiatives and capacity building at the grassroots.

According to Sokenu (2000), the rate of poverty increased from 22 percent in 1960, to 50 percent in 1996 and to an alarming 80 percent in 1998. GDP per capita dropped from N1069 in 1993 by 73 percent in 1996, while the rate of inflation rose from 45 percent in 1992 to 73 percent in 1996. Infact, Nigeria ranks below Ghana, Kenya, Zambia and Cote d'Ivoire in areas like literacy, access to safe water and number of people living below the poverty line. In 1985, 45 percent of the population, or some 36 million people, lived below the poverty line, 21 out of the 36 states had poverty indices below the national average, with Borno State posting the highest with 79.2 percent. Today more than 70 percent of the populations live below the poverty line. Infact there had been an alarming rate of the rise in poverty in Nigeria within 5 years from a figure of 34.7 million to a record high rate of 55.8 million. If nothing concrete is done to arrest the situation, Nigeria will be having 91.5 million poor people by the year 2002.

Strategies for improving the efficiency of peasants through Mobilization movements for Poverty Alleviation

The peasants otherwise called the rural poor constitute the large percentage of the rural poor. The poor is not a homogenous group. It is essential to analyse the specific deprivations of the poor, to differentiate between categories of poor and to recognise variation in their spatial incidence so that pinpointed targeting of poverty alleviation programmes can be developed.

Peasants according to Byceson (2000) constitute a distinct type of agrarian producers having four main characteristics namely:

- (i) *Farm* - the pursuit of an agricultural livelihood combining subsistence and commodity production.
- (ii) *Family* - internal social organization based on family as the primary unit of production, consumption, reproduction, socialization, welfare and risk spreading.
- (iii) *Class* - external subordination to state authorities and regional or international markets which involve surplus extraction and class differentiation.
- (iv) *Community* - village settlements and traditional conformist attitudinal outlooks.

The Sri Lanka's poverty alleviation study cited in Ramprakash (1991), distinguished between:

- (a) Terminally poor; i.e. those who are poor at the beginning and at the end of the life-cycle
- (b) Chronically poor; i.e. those who are poor all through their lives because of, for example, a physical disability.
- (c) Acutely poor e.g. beggars, who would keep returning to the state of poverty even if market conditions radically improve.

Also, a study in Bangladesh also classified the rural poor as:

- (i) Landless males
- (ii) Destitute women
- (iii) Marginal farmers
- (iv) Small farmers
- (v) Elderly male and female in the preceding categories.

The peasants constitute the large percentage of workforce in agriculture, which is still the overwhelming employer in rural areas in all the countries of the sub-Saharan Africa. In Nigeria, a large percentage of these peasant farmers are into subsistence agriculture, which has not extricated them from the poverty line. In spite of the blessings in the country in terms of natural resources, abundant mineral water including huge oil and gas reserves, solid mineral, and expansive population, educated but relatively cheap labour, fertile agricultural lands, large domestic market etc, yet economically the status is quite disappointing. Every passing day, the nature of poverty associated with the rural poor is on the increase and this has not really helped in the improvement of their social status and livelihood strategies. These inadequacies lead to food insecurity, poor diets, and massive emigration from the rural areas, inadequate employment opportunities, population pressure in households etc.

To be free from these shackles of underdevelopment, some strategies are hereby espoused for efficient grassroots mobilization of these peasant farmers to sustain their livelihoods viz:

- Establishment of group dynamics as the basic foundation of grassroots mobilization in the adoption of new ideas and technologies on production activities. Group approach to

issues help to solve problems by bringing more people into contact with an idea or innovation at a time.

- Mobilization must start with the poor people as the focus, and so should put clients at the centre of discussion. This should further give way for the recognition of the differences within rural communities and implies the need for a range of responses.
- There must be clear understanding of the clients and their needs in terms of training on farming related areas, and retraining of those who entered the profession with obsolete skills in large numbers.
- There is the need to understand the external environment - identify organizations, agro-processing industries, individuals or institutions that are willing and are able to participate effectively in activities relating to sustainable livelihoods.
- A clear policy direction coupled with clear and effective implementation strategy to determine the rate or otherwise of the contribution of peasant farmers to the nation's economy.
- A change agent to facilitate the change process through identification of other initiatives that are tangential to poverty alleviation and sustainable livelihoods in agriculture as agriculture itself should not be in isolation of other professions.
- A strong and sustained political will and ability to use hard and soft authority effectively to enforce change through efficient and dynamic communication process to the masses. Previous programmes (poverty alleviation) like WAI, MAMER, NOA, BLP, FSP, FEAP etc have all failed in this respect of grassroots mobilization.

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