

Rural Poverty Reduction and Sustainable Development Strategies in Nigeria

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Abstract

Rural poverty in Nigeria exists in multi-dimensions and proportions. It is an experience commonly associated with persistent communal conflicts, poor health conditions, lack of portable water supply, lack of basic education, gender inequality, lack of good shelter, superstition, diseases, poor sanitation, hunger and high rate of fertility. Rural poverty is seen as a “paradox” in a country blessed with abundant natural resources for which it is considered as one of the wealthiest in Sub Saharan Africa. This poverty phenomenon has recently attracted the concern of international bodies because of its attendant rate of affliction, suffering and pains. This study therefore examines rural poverty development strategies as a means to improve the livelihood of the poor. The study adopts a historical descriptive analytical research method which helps to highlight the focus of the study. The study utilized secondary sources of data collection such as journals, textbooks, internet services, and newspapers. The study identified some challenges (problems of identification of the target group, corruption, lack of accountability and transparency and lack of participation of the beneficiaries in poverty programme formulation and implementation) that make rural poverty reduction difficult. The study concludes that poverty reduction can be made possible through a strategic frame work of sustainable development as a means to improve the living conditions of the poor.

Keywords:

Rural, Poverty reduction, Sustainable development strategies.

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Background to the Study

Nigeria is in the Sub Saharan Africa. The country is richly endowed with abundant natural resources like petroleum, gas, rubber, cocoa, limestone and other gifts of nature. At present, it is experiencing one of the world's highest economy growth rates averaging 7.4 percent (World Bank, 2014). Paradoxically, despite these natural resources, the country is facing the menace of poverty at alarming high rate especially in the rural areas which has been difficult to eradicate (Eteng, 2016).

Rural dwellers in Nigeria are daily confronted with the hurdle of poverty that has made development to be elusive. However, the government development goals have been directed towards solving these problems. As part of the millennium goals, various strategies were put in place to guide and assist the people to meet their needs and aspirations. Some of these development strategies which are embedded in the policy framework of the government include: Better life for rural women, capacity enhancement programme, skill acquisition etc. These important measures show the seriousness and the willingness of the government to reduce poverty at all cost. Generally, an assessment of these programmes will be predicated upon improvement in the living conditions of the rural poor. Imoke (2008) opined that “where for instance, the people are economically and socially bankrupt, the attendant risk is that policies and programmes of government may be mis-targeted, poorly implemented or abandoned which may adversely affect social welfare and hinder the possibility of replication anywhere else” (cited in Ndiyo, 2008). However, the yardstick for evaluating improvement in the living conditions of the poor rural dwellers is based on the ability to reduce poverty.

Rural poverty is a disease that seriously affects the rural people in many areas of life. This includes health, finance, housing, transportation and economic growth. Therefore, given the poor socioeconomic conditions of the rural areas, one cannot overlook the dangers of poverty. It is therefore necessary to reduce poverty which as a “monster” is affecting several millions of rural dwellers resulting in inequality, worsening economic conditions, lack of basic needs like education, electricity, and mass transit that are seen as luxury in the rural areas.

In the light of the level of poverty in the rural areas of Nigeria, this study is intended to suggest remedies to this problem by looking at sustainable development strategies that can reduce the effect of poverty and enhance improvement in the living conditions of the rural people.

Conceptual Clarification

In order to achieve a clear understanding of the study, it is necessary to conceptualize some of the terms used in this study. This will enhance process and clarity. Therefore, the terms that needs to be clarified are; rural, poverty reduction and sustainable development strategies.

Rural: This is similar to the countryside which lacks basic needs and amenities like portable water, electricity, health centres, mass transit and other paraphernalia commonly associated with the city or urban areas in Nigeria. These facilities are luxury which causes rural-urban drift. Rural areas have common economy, culture and lifestyle. They are organically related with scanty population.

Poverty Reduction: This is a coherent plan which is aimed at transferring resources towards a targeted population with the intention to improve their socioeconomic “well-fare profile”. The strategy involves skill acquisition, job creation, rural development schemes and providing basic needs to the people.

Sustainable Development Strategies: This is a multifaceted plan of government which as “support activities” is intended to deal with the poverty problem while positively impacting on the live of the people in order to improve their conditions of living. These are economic, social, institutional and environmental in nature.

Economically, the strategy involve maintaining a “baseline level of economic welfare” (Ndiyo, 2008) continually and in line with the international bench-mark of “dollar-a-day”. Socially, this requires the ability to eradicate social segregation and inequality with the aim to promote equity, participation and fair play. Institutional sustainability involves a framework which can impact positively on the poor masses through “well defined laws, participation policy making processes and effective public and private sector organizations” (Ndiyo, 2008). Environmental sustainability involves conserving a country's motivational resources so that it will be beneficial to the future generation.

Rural Poverty Reduction: Why?

Poverty results in insults and abuses especially when seeking for assistance or help from close friends or siblings (Eteng and Anam, 2016). Rural poverty is connected to mental poverty, lack of basic education, inability to satisfy basic needs, inability to pay children school fees, and communal or family disputes over limited resources or access to land use. This condition gives rise to afflictions, pain and frustration at the village level with high fertility rate. People hardly feed or have the capacity to better their living social conditions of poverty. There is general deprivations which often make rural people to be aggressive and be warlike. These conditions of suffering among rural dwellers are vividly summarized by Odumoso (1999) in the following manner:

Starvation and death stare at his face as in medieval times. Indeed time have not changed since the Dark Ages. And as though these afflictions were not enough, it is he – and this is the greatest agony of all – who gives birth to the largest number of children thus spreading and multiplying misery to a dark universe of destitution. When death comes to him finally, he seems to be happier than those he has left behind him. (Cited in Eteng, 2015)

Poverty is an agonizing condition which results in inability to control self, particularly when one is hungry or relatively deprived. It causes people to be engaged in armed robbery, prostitution, house breaking, stealing and high rate of crime especially among miscreants who under these conditions threaten the peace of the area, while family heads resort to drunkenness as a way to escape from the heavily hearted depressive conditions of life. Rural poverty can be seen than imagined in the conditions of the rural houses, environmental hazards, cooking utensils, clothes, food and hygienic conditions with several health challenges. No one can dare seek for an explanation for rural poverty because one can meet it in and outside their houses with leaking roofs. Ukertor and Ezekiel (2006) described this miserable condition as follows:

Don't ask me what poverty is because you have met it outside my house. Look at the house and count the number of holes. Look at my utensils and the clothes that I am wearing. Look at everything and write what you see. What you see is poverty (cited in Eteng 2015).

However, although at different periods the government and donor agencies have made several efforts to tackle this problem, yet the situation seems to defile any solution which made rural livelihood very miserable. Based on this, poverty reduction in the rural areas in Nigeria becomes imperative and need urgent attention.

This study will examine rural poverty highlighting the challenges of poverty reduction and suggests strategies needed for sustainable development as a way to cushion the impact of poverty and improve the socioeconomic conditions of the rural people.

Literature Review

This is an integral part of this study which tends to highlight earlier works on the subject matter of inquiry. It is meant to show what particular research efforts have been made on the concept of poverty and what value can be added to the already existing knowledge.

In line with this ideological perspective, Obikeze and Anthony (2004) defined poverty as “the absence of the capacity to acquire the means to sustain a standard of living”. This will involve capacity to participate with dignity in society. In Nigeria, about 80 percent of the population is rural dwellers with little or no capacity to maintain a minimum standard of living.

The concept of poverty has given rise to series of academic interest. Harry (1989) defined poverty as “a situation when the resources of individuals or families are inadequate to provide a socially acceptable standard of living i.e. the individuals live below the conventional poverty line distinguishing the poor from the non-poor”. This agrees with the position of the German Government in 1992, that poor people are “those who are unable to lead a decent life.” Kankwenda (2000) added that, “Poverty means that opportunities and choices most basic to human development are denied.”

Poverty is further defined as “not having enough to eat, a high rate of infant mortality, a low life expectancy, low educational opportunities, poor water, inadequate health care, unfit housing and a lack of active participation in the decision making processes” (Federal Ministry of Co-operation and Development, 1992). According to World Bank Development Report (1990), poverty is defined as “inability of certain persons to attain a minimum standard of living.” Anam (2013) maintained that poverty is “lack of basic necessities of life.”

There are two levels of poverty; relative poverty and absolute poverty. Both are linked to the shortage of vital resources and the endurance of harsh and inhospitable environment including the final breakdown of economic, demographic, ecological, socio-cultural system, and bad governance (Central Bank of Nigeria, 1999). Anyanwu (1997) categorized the following as poor, especially within the Nigerian rural context:

- I. Households or individuals below the poverty line and whose income are insufficient to provide for their basic needs,

- ii. Households or individuals lacking access to basic service, political contracts and other forms of support:
- iii. People in isolated rural areas who lack essential infrastructures;
- iv. Female-headed households whose nutritional needs are not being met adequately;
- v. Persons who have lost their jobs and those who are unable to find employment as a result of economic reforms under the Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAP) and those who are in danger of becoming 'new poor' and
- vi. Ethnic minorities, who are marginalized, deprived and persecuted economically, socially, culturally and politically (Anyanwu, 1997).

The prevalence of these poverty indicators calls for the need to assess the perspectives of rural poverty in Nigeria. The World Bank (2013) maintained that “the quantity of poor people in rural and urban areas is also different”. The number of poor people in the rural areas is twice higher than that of the urban ones. The Nigerian government have made considerable efforts through policies and programmes to address poverty. Onah (2006: 86-96) itemizes these as follows:

- i. Gowon's National Accelerated Food Production Programme (NAFPP) and the Nigerian Agricultural and Co-operative Bank, NACB (1972);
- ii. Obasanjo's Operation Feed the Nation, OFN (1976);
- iii. Shagari's Green Revolution Programme, GRP (1980);
- iv. Babangida's National Directorate of Employment (NDE); the Directorate for Foods, Roads and Rural Infrastructure (DFRRI); Better Life Programme (BLP), Peoples Bank (PB), Community Bank (CB); and the National Economic Reconstruction Fund (NERFUND) (1986-1992);
- v. Obasanjo's third Republic National Poverty Eradication Programme, NAPEP, (1999-date).
- vi. Yar'Adua's 7-Point Agenda was pivotal in addressing infrastructural development and poverty reduction in Nigeria (2007 – 2010);
- vii. Jonathan's administration and the Transformation agenda; Physical Infrastructure (Power, Transport, Aviation, Roads), Social Infrastructure (Health, Education and ICT, Housing, Water), and the Real sector (Agriculture, Manufacturing, Trade, and Industry). Also, was the Nigeria Incentive-Based Risk Sharing Systems for Agricultural Lending (NIRSAL) (2010-2014); and
- viii. Buhari's Green Alternative: Agriculture Promotion Policy, 2016-2020 (2011 to date).

To achieve the above policies, Eneh (2009) maintained that “the Federal Government sought to ensure that all the activities of the line ministries and agencies are effectively co-ordinated”. However, the government need to ensure policy continuity, and the existence of appropriate institutional framework and sustainability of all programmes. Therefore, eight internationally recognized cluster areas of intervention were identified and earmarked for exploitation. These are agriculture, employment, micro/small/ medium enterprises (MSMEs), health, population and gender, public infrastructure and utilities, etc.

The core policy of the Federal Government to eradicate poverty in Nigeria under the main sectors listed above has been integrated and harmonized into four multi-sectoral schemes,

namely Youth Empowerment Scheme, Rural Infrastructural Development Scheme, Social Welfare Services Scheme, and the Natural Resources Development and Conservation Scheme (Eneh, 2009). The poverty eradication initiative of the Federal Government was centered on empowering Nigerians, particularly the unemployed, women and youth through training/retraining and MSMEs; developing infrastructure, particularly in the rural areas; providing adequate social and welfare services, and a sustainable development of mineral and other resources (Ebigbo, 2008).

Ebigbo (2008) recalled that in 2004, “the Federal Government introduced the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategies (NEEDS), the State Economic Empowerment and Development Strategies (SEEDS and the Local Economic Empowerment and Development Strategies (LEEDS)”. Eneh (2009) added that “NEEDS is a comprehensive medium-term growth and development programme based on some core principles and designed to serve as Nigeria's home-grown version of the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP), which has taken into consideration not only the fiscal operations of government, but also some political, socio-cultural and other country-specific considerations towards evolving an effective and enduring poverty alleviation initiative”. The NEEDS framework was anchored on the belief that people constituted the beginning and the end of any credible and legitimate public policy or process.

Thus, given that overall economic growth by itself may not necessarily ensure poverty reduction at the desired pace, NEEDS would direct specific steps to facilitate individual economic empowerment, particularly among the poor and other vulnerable groups. Hence, NEEDS identifies five priority action areas: wealth creation, employment generation, poverty alleviation, corruption elimination, and general value re-origination. “NEEDS targeted at least 2% annual growth of per capital consumption, the creation of about 7 million jobs from 2004 to 2007, access to safe drinking water to at least 70% of the population (urban and rural), and at least 65% adult literacy rate by 2007” (Ebigbo, 2008). He added that, “The three pillars of NEEDS are reforming government institutions, growing the private sector, and social charter (or human empowerment)” (Ebigbo, 2008). The prevalence of poverty in Nigeria leaves much to be desired and therefore, the need for a strategic framework for sustainable development.

Causes of Poverty in Nigeria

There are so many reasons for poverty in Nigeria. In case of rural poverty, the causes may depend on the era in which people lived and the environment which determines the possibilities of escape from poverty. In the ancient time for instance, physical strength is a measure of wealth or poverty. Today, poverty is basically caused by many socioeconomic conditions. Among these are access to loan, malnutrition and poor rural health, lack of functional education, lack of rural infrastructures, inadequate resources, lack of skill acquisition or capacity enhancement, environment, large family size, culture and religious practices and poor living condition

- I. Lack of access to loan: due to lack of loan, most poor farmers are not capable of farming on a scale that matches their labour resources. There is a dire shortage of working capital. Rural banking is a recent phenomenon with few community banks.

The loan system is so difficult because most rural people don't have what the banks need. Besides, the procedure is also difficult and bank managers only use prebendalism as a means to grant access to loan. This shortage limits the productiveness of farming in general. High-interest rate and lack of collateral required by financial institutions are some of the factors responsible for lack of access to loan by rural dwellers and it affects their possibility of growing out of the poverty cycle.

- ii. Malnutrition and poor rural health: poor people in Nigeria lack access to nutritious foods or lack the ability to afford them. They are faced with several health issues as they lack basic health amenities and competent medical practitioners. This has led to high level of infant mortality and low level of life expectancy in rural areas. Poor nutrition causes deaths among children under five. Most deaths are as a result of vulnerability to diseases such as kwashiorkor, marasmus, etc. This deepens the scourge of poverty among the already vulnerable population.
- iii. Lack of functional education: education is necessary for poverty alleviation. Basic education creates awareness that is necessary to eradicate poverty by engaging in useful or productive ventures of life. Many of the poor are uneducated. The few educated ones do not have functional education or access to other forms of informal training that should enhance their skills for self employment and reliance. Uneducated rural dwellers find it difficult to apply modern farming tools and plan effectively. The lack of productive and functional education with useful skills is indicative of the endless trap of poverty in rural areas.
- iv. Lack of rural infrastructures: Rural infrastructures support the productive capacity of rural areas and lack of it pose a challenge to production activities in rural areas. Infrastructures such as access roads, health, electricity, housing, potable water, among others are unevenly distributed in most rural areas in Nigeria.
- v. Inadequate resources: land in the rural areas is communally owned and is limited in supply because of pressure on resources. As already indicated, securing loan is difficult, and large family and extended family system tend to have influence in the planning and expenditure of limited resources. In most cases, most rural people spend their resources on marriages or dead ceremonies with little or nothing left for purposes of business investment.
- vi. Lack of skill acquisition or capacity enhancement: in many rural areas labour is unskilled or semi skilful. This causes unemployment. Where the people are trained to acquire skill, they may lack the necessary enhancement or empowerment to be functionally engaged. For instance, they may be trained as local drivers with driving licenses but no vehicles. It is therefore essential to empower these people with motor cycles or tricycles (KekeNAPEP) vehicles for wealth creation.
- vii. Environment: This includes terrain, season, nature of the soil etc., which usually determine the possibilities to be utilized. Where these possibilities fail to exist, poverty becomes prevalent in such environment.

- viii. Large family size: large family size is common among rural areas in Nigeria. The extended family system is predominant. Although large family size is high in rural Nigeria, agricultural productivity is low, and this affects income and saving capacity for investment. Nearly all the food produced by the household is consumed because productivity is low and family size is large. Consequently, there is low household income, little savings, and increased poverty.
- ix. Culture and religious practices: in most part of the country, the role of women and their access to land and other productive resources are limited. These unfavourable cultural and religious practices contribute to poverty by keeping agricultural production low.
- x. Poor living condition: Most rural households are unable to satisfy their basic social needs. The inadequacy of income to support a minimum standard of living results to poor living condition among the poor. Lack of access to regular means of livelihood exacerbates the conditions of the poor people in the rural areas.

Strategic Framework for Sustainable Development

In view of the magnitude and dimensions of poverty in the rural areas, it is necessary to establish a framework that will serve as a plan of action needed to achieve the purpose of improving the livelihood of the poor rural dwellers. This proposed strategic framework as a driving factor will include: job creation, integrated rural development, provision of basic needs, and targeting.

Job Creation: The aim of this strategy is to provide jobs to the poor households and give opportunity to those who are not gainfully employed to augment their income so as to meet their basic needs. The process involves skill acquisition, capacity enhancement schemes through micro-credit programmes and establishment of adequate vocational training centres. This will empower the people and prepare them for self-employment. This means that budgetary allocation must also be adequate to cater for these needs. Where budgetary allocations are not adequate, there will be risk of dumping the rural people who in the face of frustration may resort to farming without assets.

Integrated Rural Development Programme: This strategy must view the rural areas as domains for poverty reduction. A large part of the population lives in the rural areas where basic needs and amenities are lacking. Since poverty is pervasive in the rural areas, this strategy laid emphasis on the provision of basic needs to the poor. These include health care, housing, portable water supply, education, food and employment. It recognizes “community based initiatives such as community-based organizations and community development associations” (Ndiyo, 2008). The strategy addresses spatial growth as a single entity in which case neglecting one aspect causes harm to other aspects. Therefore, land use and socioeconomic planning must be given the attention it deserves (Mudenda, 2006). However, there is need to create awareness through workshops, seminars, village announcer, and other local media so that effective participation in poverty reduction programmes can be achieved.

Basic Needs Strategy: The rural people are poor and can hardly afford good shelter, health care, education and adequate environmental sanitation. In most cases movement from one village to the other is by foot or by the use of bicycle for the traditionally “rich people”. This strategy therefore calls for the provision of essential needs like rural mass transit, food, housing, health care, sanitation,, education, portable water and environmental protection.

In order that the poor rural dwellers can achieve these basic needs, there should be proper targeting of the poor as a target group. This is because in most cases the provision of these basic needs are done on the basis of prebendal politics which only favor those in power to the neglect of communities that lack people in government. Also in order that the poor rural dwellers can sustain these projects, they should be fully integrated in the planning and management of the programmes. This will create hospitality and ensure the protection of the projects without being vandalized. This strategy requires a bottom up approach which gives households or unsatisfied communities opportunity to air their views in the choice of project site.

Targeting: Essentially, to eradicate leakages which may occur due to improper identification of the target group, targeting as a sustainable development strategy calls for proper identification of those who are actually affected by the scourge of poverty. This will help in transferring goods and services to them to cushion the plague of poverty. This strategy is important because most often than not, people in high positions of government hijack the poverty reduction programme and use prebendalism in the distribution of resources which mostly favor their families, tribal kinsmen, closed relatives or party supporters. Targeting may also require public expenditure or sectorial spending on health and educationally related matters.

The principal objective of targeting is to identify those households, families or groups that need help and transfer money or resources to them for their livelihood improvement. Useful targeting indicators include age, sickness, disability, household size and occupation.

Challenges of Rural Poverty Reduction

Rural poverty reduction in Nigeria suffers some set back which makes anti-poverty strategies difficult to achieve. There are as follows;

- i. Lack of uniform poverty reduction agenda among stakeholders (federal, state and local governments, non-governmental organizations (NGO) and international donors). Thus, among the federal and state ministries, agencies or parastatals that are established to be of service in poverty reduction, there is the problem of coordination, collaboration and improper target setting.
- ii. Beneficiaries are most often sidelined and don't participate in the poverty reduction programme formulation and implementation exercise. This attitude creates lukewarmness among the beneficiaries who may develop lethargic feelings in identifying with the projects.

- iii. Absence of proper identification of the target group. This creates leakages which gives the field officers opportunity to divert resources to those who are not directly affected by poverty. In some cases, support for electoral campaign or number of votes cast for a politician is used as yardstick for determining the choice of beneficiaries. This activity is antithetic to poverty reduction in rural areas.
- iv. Overlapping functions of some of the ministries, agencies or parastatals that are involved in rural poverty reduction result in the duplication of resources and effort.
- v. Corruption, problem of accountability and transparency among programme managers constitute a serious challenge. In most cases, beneficiaries are short-changed. Thus, because of the need for social structure which “guarantees” social security, the programme managers in the choice of beneficiaries usually prefer their family members, tribal affiliation or close friends on the grounds that “if you do not help your family, they are actually going to curse you”. (Anna Persson, et al, 2012 cited in Eteng and Omenka, 2016).

Precepts for Poverty Reduction

There are certain principles for poverty reduction in rural Nigeria. These include:

- i. Bottom-up approach: This involves grassroots participation in the policy implementation and programme evaluation, monitoring and control. It requires strengthening the linkages between rural communities and the owners of the poverty programme (federal, state, local government and donor agencies) in agriculture, industry and the development of appropriate technology in the rural areas.
- ii. Capacity acquisition: This may be in the form of skill acquisition, vocational programmes or training, job creation, financial empowerment through rural banking where the people can easily access credit facilities
- iii. Provision of infrastructure: These involve the provision of amenities like portable water supply, roads, housing, electricity, basic education, health centres and rural mass transit to ease the stress of life. Social welfare schemes like child right protection, gender equality and the protection of women rights and access to Land Use should be guaranteed by law. This is because in some communities women have no right in the property of their deceased husbands and are treated as “second class citizens”.
- iv. Inter-agency cooperation: At present, what we experience as agencies involved in poverty reduction are over-lapping in functions. This gives room for leakages and duplication of resources. It is necessary to have all agencies properly coordinated and controlled through a legal or institutional framework that can clearly separate their roles and ease conflict.
- v. Targeting: Targeting should be properly done without the value or preference of the programme managers which usually influence the choice of beneficiaries. Targeting should be directed towards the disabled, poor families, unemployed youths, children, sick people and the aged.

Conclusion

Rural poverty in Nigeria is a serious challenge that attracts the attention of the international communities because of its attendant conditions of deprivation and agony in a country often regarded as the wealthiest in the Sub Saharan Africa. The scourge of poverty led to the government to introduce several poverty reduction programmes that have failed to meet the expectations of the people.

The poor in the rural areas are humiliated, depressed and become inferior with little or no solution to their problem, hence, poverty still persist with afflictions and pains. Therefore, to cushion this poverty condition, a number of sustainable development strategies were listed by this study. Although there are challenges in reducing poverty in the rural areas, yet a bottom-up approach which gives opportunity for the participation of the rural communities in the location of projects, programme implementation and monitoring is imperative as a precept for rural poverty reduction. This approach gives hope to the rural communities and confirms the statement attributed to Ndiyo (2008) as follows:

The paradox of synergy is that the more we put our resources into action for the service of others, and the less we think about how we will be rewarded in return, the greater the benefits that we have and share with others.

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