

Poverty and the Sustainability of Democracy in Nigeria

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Abstract: *On 29th May, 1999, Abdulsalam Abubakar, the then military Head of State handed over power to a democratically elected government headed by Chief Olusegun Obasanjo. Many Nigerians believed this was the dawn of a new era and another attempt at democratising the country which will usher in a better society- one that truly brings the genuine dividends of democracy to the people. Unfortunately, democracy has not have significant and direct benefit to the people, particularly those at the lower strata of the society because of the rising incidence of poverty in the country. Poverty is made manifest in unemployment, hunger, poor health, poor standard of education, low self-esteem, low economic status, lack of security and exclusion from civic and political life which negate the essentials of democracy. This paper chiefly examines the threats of poverty to the sustainability of democracy in Nigeria and make suggestions on how the country can come out of the mire of poverty so that democracy can be sustained and thereby have the expectant effects on Nigerians.*

Keywords: *Poverty, Democracy, Electoral process.*

I. Introduction

The fact is that 2/3 of the world's extreme poor are concentrated in just five countries- India, China, Nigeria, Bangladesh and the Democratic Republic of Congo (Yong ,2014). It is disheartening that despite the natural and human resources that Nigeria is blessed it, she is one of these countries..Poverty is a major problem of our time, which along with environmental threats, weighs heavily on our planet and the future of humanity. It has assumed unprecedented and unacceptable proportion in Nigeria, manifesting not only in abysmal decline in economic indicators and trends, but more glaringly and tragically in the suffering, hardship and general impoverishment of the vast majority of the people. The average Nigerian is far worse off than he was 54 years ago when the country achieved political independence.

The prevalence of poverty and misery in Nigeria is however, a paradox. Nigeria should, by no means be a poor nation. Apart from being an oil-producing nation, Nigeria is endowed with other natural and human resources which are enough to put her on a solid path to economic development and greatness. But Nigeria still wallows in abject poverty despite her stupendous wealth. Deep concerns have been expressed about the sustainability of the democratic process in Nigeria, as poverty-induced agitation and violent conflicts spread across the country. Stakeholders in the Nigerian democratic enterprise appear to be at crossroads on what to do to alleviate poverty, which is generally regarded as the greatest threat to the nascent democratic process in the country. Large segments of the population are demanding the dividends of democracy as the incidence of poverty continually grows throughout the nation. Geo- political zones are crying out against impoverishment, deprivation and marginalization. Countless ethno-cultural associations and pressure groups are being formed to articulate interests for a better share of the national cake, even when such interests threaten the very basis of democracy in the country.

It is a fact that the rising incidence of poverty in Nigeria poses a serious threat to the democratization process. The concern of this paper therefore is to highlight the challenges posed by poverty to democracy in Nigeria. Conceptual definitions of poverty and democracy are presented, the causes of poverty and the implication of poverty for democracy is also examined, while suggestions for reducing the incidence of poverty across the country are also put forward.

II. Poverty And Democracy: A Conceptual Clarification

Poverty

Poverty is a global phenomenon which affects continents, nations and peoples differently. It affects people in various degrees. There is no nation that is absolutely free from poverty. The intensity and prevalence make the difference. Poverty can be conceptualized as an extreme state of social and economic deprivation. It is a situation where an individual or household fails to attain and maintain a specific level of wellbeing which is considered as the acceptable minimum standard of living in a given society. In a similar vein, Olamejeye (1994) defined poverty as a high degree of difficulty encountered in making ends meet.

The consequences of poverty, according to Nemedi (2001:72), include: ***severe material deprivation, absence of recreational opportunities, lack of access to economic as well as political power, inferiority complex, isolation and social degradation. Poverty also breeds hunger, malnutrition, low-life expectancy, human and political rights abuse, diseases, illiteracy, ignorance, hopelessness, uncertainty and all those feelings that negate the resilience of the human spirit and blithe expectation of a better tomorrow.***

More so, poverty also creates frustration, loss of hope/prospects and value for life, loss of meaning for life and purpose of living. It also creates disillusionment about morality. Poverty makes people compromise on moral values or abandon moral values completely.

Democracy

Democracy is essentially a contested concept, which does not lend itself to any universally accepted definition owing to the ideological, cultural and historical contextualization that underpins it. This accounts for why adherents of a diversity of political philosophies and ideologies all insist on being labeled “democratic” because democracy is associated with goodness. Democracy is a form of government that has its historical roots in the Ancient Greek -city states where all adult males were accorded equal opportunity of directly participating in the decisions affecting the governance of their society. The ‘direct’ democracy obtainable in the Greek city-states was possible because of their small size both in terms of population and geographical territory (Tamande;2003:306). However, the emergence of the modern nation state with extensive population and expansive geographical territories has necessitated the institutionalization of ‘indirect’ democracy and representative government. Democracy has thus become a form of representative government in which a few are elected to stand on behalf of the majority of the people based on so – called equal and universal franchise. Abubakar, (2003: 315) defined democracy as ‘the principles, ideas, political practices and responsibilities that guarantee civic pride and participation in public and private affairs’. In a similar vein, Tamande (opcit) also conceived of democracy “as the political and economic empowerment of the majority of the ordinary people for effective participation in the decisions that affect their lives, their individual and collective rights and the way in which their society is governed”. Thus, democracy can only be effective and meaningful if the people are fully involved in making decisions about the way they are governed. The present situation in the country whereby the ordinary people are recognized only during the formalistic democratic rituals characterized as elections is unacceptable and cannot be meaningfully called democracy.

It is imperative in a democracy that the generality of the people participate fully in the decision-making process and the people must be provided with available and reliable information. According to Iyayi (2002), democracy exists:

When grassroots members participate fully in decision –making, the leadership does not arrogate to itself all wisdom in decision –making; members of the leadership do not manipulate or hoard information but rather share information so that it becomes a source of group power, a lot debate and discussion take place before decisions are made, criticism is not only welcome but also encouraged.

Some features of democracy include: good governance, the independence of the judiciary, existence of such institutions as political parties, the rule of law, freedom of expression and association and a vibrant civil society. Moreover, in a true democracy there must be an acceptable level of economic and social development so that people can develop their basic physical and intellectual potentials and have the means to participate in the civic and political life of their society.

III. Causes Of Poverty

Some of the causes of poverty include the changing trends in a country’s economy, high level of illiteracy, high rate of divorce, which causes feminization of poverty, having a culture of poverty (primitive cultures that will not enhance poverty alleviation), bad governance, mis-management of public funds, unemployment, over population, epidemic diseases such as Ebola Virus, HIV/AIDS, malaria and environmental problems such as flood and erosion.

Some studies have also focused on the causes of poverty. According to these studies, the causes are many and varied. Olowu & Akinola (1992) pointed out that urbanization resulting from migration of unskilled, uneducated or not well educated migrants from the rural areas hoping to secure employment in the urban center is also one of the causes of poverty. By the time these migrants get to the city they are confronted by the reality of life, unemployment, retrenchment and low income for those employed, high cost of living etc. These often

prompt them to resort to squatting in squalor areas of the towns. A large family size without the necessary financial backing in most cases also results in poverty. Onibokun & Kumuyi (1996) also argued that poor parental status at birth is a very important cause of poverty. That is, if the parents are poor, invariably, their children would suffer social deprivation of all sorts at least within the first few years of their lives. Actually, such children might not be able to liberate themselves until they start working. In other words, some people are poor because they were born to poor parents.

According to Fanimo (2010), governance in Nigeria has been so characterized by incompetence, official corruption, and poor prioritization of policies, which often resulted into misappropriation of scarce resources leading to non provision of essential social and economic infrastructures. Men and women and their families are caught in the grip of poverty wishing and striving to rise above it. Added to the list are income inequality, ethnic conflict and political instability. However, it is hard to separate the causes of poverty from its effects; there is no doubt that poverty is associated with various economic and social ills.

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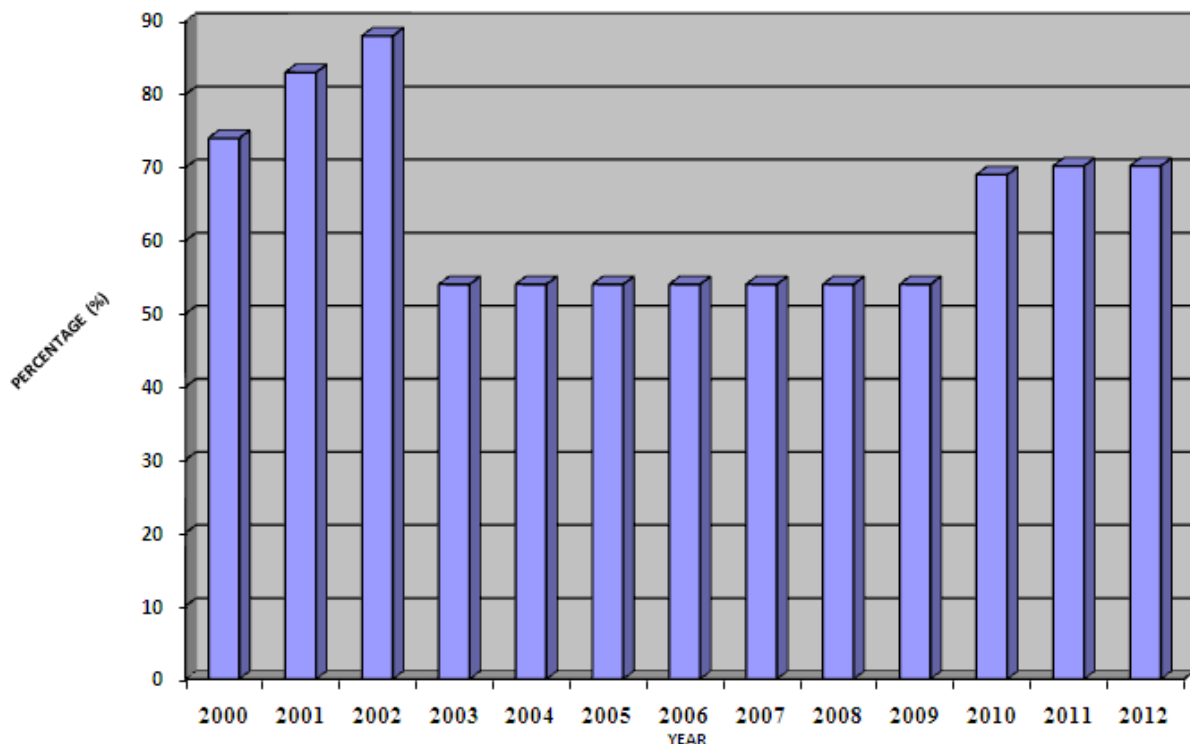
IV. Poverty And Democracy In Nigeria

The poverty index of the country (2000-2012) which is provided by the National Bureau of Statistics is presented below.

Table 1. Poverty Index (Year 2000 -2012)

Year	Percentage
2000	74%
2001	83%
2002	88%
2003	54%
2004	54%
2005	54%
2006	54%
2007	54%
2008	54%
2009	54%
2010	69%
2011	70.2%
2012	70.2%

POVERTY INDEX FROM YEAR 2000 TO YEAR 2012



Graph 5:1

The data presented in the chart above shows the rate of poverty from year 2000-2012 in Nigeria. In 2000, the poverty rate was 74%, it increased to 83.1% in 2001 while it increased to 88% in 2002. From 2003-2009, it maintained a constant percentage of 54% while it increased to 69% in 2010 and increased to 70.2% in 2011-2012 respectively. This however, shows that from 2000-2001, the poverty rate increased with a percentage difference of 9% and between 2001-2002 was 5%. There was economy degradation until 2003-2009, where it maintained a constant percentage of 54% for 7 years. This implies there is a slight incline in the economy stability until 2010 when it moved up by 15%. Again, in 2010-2012, the rate increased by 1.2% with a slight change in the economy compared to the previous year. The poverty range between 2000 and 2012 is 3.8%. This shows that the economy is not fast growing and it has negative effect on per capital income per head.

From the above, poverty in Nigeria used to be significant despite high economic growth. Nigeria has one of the world's highest economic growth rates but she ranks 153rd position out of 186 countries (2013 UN Human Development Index). There have been attempts at poverty alleviation by the government in order to make life comfortable for the citizenry and thereby reduce the incidence of poverty, all to no avail. Most notably are the following programmes:

- 2001: National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP): to replace the previously failed Poverty Alleviation Programme.
- 2007: 7-point Agenda
- 2010: Transformation Agenda.
- 2011: YouWIN- Youth Enterprise with Innovation in Nigeria to support enterprising youth (between ages 18 and 40) to establish their own businesses that will enable them employ others.

The problem of poverty has become an epidemic in Nigeria and the citizens do not seem to understand what it is in their culture that prevents them from achieving a just, prosperous, dignified life and true democracy. The CIA World Factbook painted a grim picture of poverty in Nigeria- life expectancy was 52 years in 2011-2012 and 52.62 years in 2014, infant mortality stood at 100 out of 1,000; 24.4% of children under five years of age were stunted because of malnutrition. In 2013 over 70% still live on \$1.25 per day and 35% live in abject poverty, despite its abundant resources and oil wealth (Litwack, 2014). The success/failure of any government is measured by the degree of attainment of human development or the level of poverty among the people. On this note, Nigerian government cannot be said to be successful with so many people wallowing in poverty.

Continued poverty, aggravated by mass unemployment, is a barrier to Nigeria's quest for true democracy. Unemployment rate in Nigeria increased from 21.1% in 2010 to 23.9% in 2011 (Awe, 2013).

Unemployment affects economically active people especially the youth and women disproportionately. The deeper the unemployment, the higher the inequality and poverty. Any individual deprived of the basic wherewithal cannot participate effectively in a democratic political process. Therefore, a poor person is not a full-fledged social individual, as he/she lacks the basic freedom to fulfill his/her aspirations. One can then safely argue that poverty constitutes a hindrance to true democracy since socio-economic insecurity which is one of the resultant effects of poverty can destroy democratic institutions. Also, discrimination, ethnicity, tribalism and poverty are closely related, as they affect the people's ability to secure employment and earn a living. Consequently, many people are concerned more about their daily struggle for economic survival than the abstract term 'democracy', which they feel cannot feed them.

Mis-management of public funds by our leaders also made the average worker poor. Workers work for months, without getting their salaries and the retirees are not paid their retirement benefits as and when due, thereby largely incapacitating large segments of civil society. Eking out a living becomes an uphill task, causing disillusionment and apathy among the citizenry. This is made manifest in the low turn-out of people in collecting their permanent voter's card (PVC) which will enable them to participate in the forthcoming general elections in February, 2015. This is so because people have lost faith in the democratic process as a means of enhancing their economic and social development in order to develop their potentials that will galvanize their good living. Moreover a situation whereby workers go without wages and are hungry cannot help the cause of democratization in Nigeria. As the saying goes- 'An hungry man is an angry man'; thus the average Nigerian citizen is angry with the political system that puts him/her in such a situation and is not committed to preserving the system. This is why they are readily available as armed robbers, kidnappers, political thugs, e.t.c. and this is impacting negatively on our democracy.

This vicious and self-perpetuating cycle of poverty is passed from one generation to another. Thus, illiteracy and the attendant ignorance greatly hinder effective participation of poor Nigerians in the political process. There is no way the poor illiterates of society can contribute meaningfully to the decision making process, which largely affects their lives through the policies that are the outputs of the political process; because of limited access to the means of getting information about the political process. Thus, the denial of effective decision making power to the people is the bane of democracy in the country. Liberal democracy in Nigeria has become the business of the state and not the people. It is the ruling elites that dictate the pace of things in society and even the individuals who participate in the processes of government, do because they have access to economic power, which the poor Nigerians lack.

Lack of access to economic power also breeds inferiority complex which leads to loss of one's self esteem as earlier pointed out. The resultant effect of this is for one to perceive oneself as having nothing good to contribute to the good of society. This implies that if such an individual has brilliant ideas to contribute, the confidence to come out and participate in the electoral process/decision making process in order to be heard will not be there because of his/her self-perception of worthlessness caused by poverty. This explains why it is easy for the unemployed youths to participate in the electoral process as thugs and political militias during electioneering campaigns and election to serve the interest of the rich for just small amounts of money and this trend is a threat to our democracy. And once they get elected into positions of power, the rich completely neglect or forget the poor youths and only remember them in the next round of elections.

Moreover, the monetization of politics in Nigeria has reduced the level of political participation of the mass of the people in the political process. The poor who do not have the huge capital required dare not step out as candidates for elective posts. This situation has perpetually subjected the poor to the class of electorate and the rich to the class of electoral candidates. More so, the negative impact of poverty is seen on the electoral process which is supposed to produce credible candidates for elective offices. Politicians are using the incident of poverty to get support for their candidates in order to be elected into offices. The poor masses are no more considering the integrity, credibility and intelligence of candidates but are after getting material inducements during the electioneering campaigns and Election Day. This can be seen in the 2014 governorship elections of Ekiti and Osun States respectively; where material inducements (cooked rice, raw rice, money, and kerosene) were used by politicians to get votes from the poor electorate (Akinbade,2014). A situation where it is only during political campaigns that the people will be empowered cannot sustain democracy in Nigeria.

Also, when a politician buys his way into political office, he becomes arrogant and insensitive to the plight of the electorate because he does not see himself as being accountable to the people; and to make the situation worse, the poor does not bother to hold them accountable because they feel that will not fetch them their daily needs. Thus, the politicians are using this to play on the intelligence of the poor and continue in their maladministration.

It is a known fact that the rule of law and the fundamental human rights of the citizens are essentials of democracy but these are violated with capricious recklessness. Because of poverty and the attendant illiteracy and ignorance, such violations go unchallenged and unaddressed. Many are ignorant of their rights and even those that know cannot fight for their rights when they are infringed upon because they cannot part away with

the little money they have to seek redress in the law court. According to Ake (1996:23), “it is patently absurd for a starving peasant to be chasing after these abstract rights instead of attending to the stomach”.

Moreover, corruption has contributed much to the impoverishment of the people. Nigeria is a place where political leaders with access to the national treasury convert public funds to private use, a place where the parliament works to undermine anti-corruption campaign. Political corruption is pandemic in Nigeria, manifesting as bureaucratic and electoral malpractices, bribery, fraud, embezzlement, extortion, favoritism and nepotism in the political scene. Public officials have thrown away selfless service. This is the more reason why the various poverty alleviation schemes which were highly politicized and used to dish out money to party faithful, failed woefully, further making the ordinary Nigerians to distrust the democratic process.

V. Recommendations

However, the situation can be changed and the following recommendations are made in order to reduce the level of poverty in the country. First, there is the need to review all economic policies that are causing high rates of inflation, unemployment, food insecurity and poverty in the country. To do this, the government must dialogue with the citizenry so that the policies will be people oriented because democracy is about the people. These policies must also go beyond capacity building for the people by matching capabilities with opportunities. In this connection, the government should create employment in the rural economy through agrarian reforms, improved technologies and processing facilities which will add value to raw agricultural produce. It should also foster linkages between agricultural and non- agricultural activities by increasing effective demand in agriculture for the products of non- agricultural enterprises, especially those located in the rural areas.

Furthermore, primary and secondary health-care services, rural roads and infrastructures, water and sanitation and community services should be enhanced to bring about a good environment for sustainable democracy. For instance, elections and electioneering activities would not be marred by violence, thuggery as well as rigging because the people are enlightened and will value lives and property which are always their target at violent eruptions. Institutional coordination among the three tiers of government should be strengthened to reduce waste, particularly in the local government. Also, there should be an increase in public spending on essential social services to increase productivity and enrich people’s lives. And government should provide vocational training centres to improve and equip youths in particular for self employment. Good governance is also a critical requirement for sustainable democracy. The level of corruption in Nigeria does not allow such ingredients of good governance as probity, transparency, accountability and equal opportunities to thrive. Our political leaders should be more committed to bringing about the above ingredients to facilitate effectiveness of their poverty reduction programmes.

Also, there is need for an overhauling of our educational programmes in order to include skill contents because modern economies require specific technical skills and this will widen the employment opportunities of our graduates. There is a need to change the structure of the economy in such a way that the economy is not dependent on only one product but diversified economy and expand the industrial sector. For the industrial sector to enhance job creation, government should put in more efforts to provide uninterrupted power supply as this will invariably encourage self-reliance among the citizenry.

Furthermore, another way to throwing off the yoke of poverty in democracy is by electing credible and honest people into the position of power. A government should be put in place on the basis of integrity and service to humanity rather than wealth acquisition. Hard work and merit should be the watchword of every Nigerian in order to eradicate or alleviate poverty in our society.

VI. Conclusion

There is no gainsaying the fact that poverty and democracy have a high degree of correlation and they affect each other in very profound ways. Indeed, the high rate of poverty has created public apathy in the democratic process, as democracy which is expected to enhance the quality of life for the citizenry through its dividends has turned out be an abysmal failure in the country. Poverty has greatly hindered the mass of the people from effective participation in the political process which is one of the basic features of democracy. This is because poverty has placed them in a disadvantaged position that makes it difficult for them to develop their basic physical and intellectual potentials which can enhance their political participation in the democratic process.

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