

Leveraging Social Protection Programmes for Poverty Reduction in Nigeria

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Abstract

Social protection programme is conceived in Africa to be a magic wand that mitigates all socio-economic maladies countries face. It is this understanding that led to United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and subsequently Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) launched especially to reduce poverty in the global south and the world at large. Poverty is singled out as one of the major drawbacks of development in the global south in general and Nigeria in particular. It is as a result of this that the developed north earmarked 0.7% of their revenue as aids and grants to be sent to the countries of the global south, including Nigeria, for the alleviation of their poverty. However, in spite of such packages, global south countries especially Nigeria, have remained impoverished. Several factors are responsible for the ineffective outcomes of the social protection programmes (SPP); such factors include inept leadership, illiteracy, overpopulation, corruption, social seclusion and environmental scarcity. The latter results from air, land and water pollution, desertification and deforestation; all of these distort food production chain and heighten food insecurity and conflict. There are interconnections between inept leadership, food insecurity, conflict and poverty in Nigeria. This paper concludes that the legions of social protection programmes aimed at reducing poverty in Nigeria would continued to be a mirage until there is a total overhaul of Nigeria's leadership selection process and the enthronement of genuine people-driven democracy as well as accountability, transparency, and probity in all levels of governance in the country.

Keywords: social protection programme, SDGs, poverty, food insecurity, leadership, environmental scarcity

Introduction

One of the socio-economic maladies threatening countries of the world, especially the global south and Nigeria in particular, is poverty (Barrientos & Lloyd-Sherlock, 2002; Onyeonoru, 2018) and to address the scourge the

UN has designated poverty reduction as one of its critical Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Nigeria has domesticated the poverty reduction goal, as enshrined in section (6) c of the 1999 constitution as amended which emphasized political, economic, social, cultural and developmental rights of citizens through several social protection programmes (Onyeonoru, 2018). Even so, there have been several laudable initiatives to stem poverty in the global south and in Nigeria in particular; nonetheless, poverty has remained one of the facilitators of hunger, crime and violent conflict in Nigeria. Poor people globally do not have regular access to good quality food and, as a result of that, often face health related challenges that cut across adults and children (Dutta, Anaele & Jones, 2013). Lack of access to sufficient quality food most times weakens the immune system and makes the poor susceptible to debilitating and life-shortening sicknesses. Hence, poverty, hunger and health related issues are interrelated; they interconnect and predispose the poor to crime and conflict.

It should be noted that poverty is not the only cause of crime and deadly conflicts in Nigeria, and this is not the position of this paper, for there are other causes, such as ethnic rivalry, religious chauvinism, environmental scarcity, terrorism and insurgency (e.g., Boko Haram in Northern Nigeria), militancy (in Nigeria's South South and South East), and injustice, especially that resulting from inequitable distribution of the national wealth and opportunities. Nigeria's ruling class, through inept leadership, systemic corruption and sectionalism, is guilty of the latter.

Since independence in 1960, different social protection programmes aimed at reducing or eradicating poverty have been introduced in Nigeria. They include National Accelerated Food Produce Programme (NAFPP) of 1972, Operation Feed the Nation (OFN) of 1979, Better Life Programme (BFP) of 1987, Family Support Programme (FSP) of 1994, and Community Action Programme for Poverty Alleviation (CAPPA) of 1997. Others are Poverty Alleviation Programme (PAP) of 2000, National Poverty Eradication Programme of 2001, Anchor Borrowers Programme (ABP) of 2015, Social Investment Network Programme (SINP) of 2015, Home Grown School Feeding Programme (HGSFP) of 2016 and COVID-19 pandemic relief mechanisms by federal and state governments. All these social protection mechanisms were aimed at lifting the Nigerian populace from abject poverty in tandem with the United Nations SDGs' Goal number 1.

The UN Sustainable Development Goal pertaining to poverty reduction has gradually assumed universal relevance as every nation in the world is faced with one form of poverty indicator or the other. However, the prevalence of poverty is severe mostly in the global south despite the fact that many countries in this region are endowed in rich natural and human resources.

One may be attempted to ask; why has the global south, particularly Nigeria, remained poor and always in need of assistance from the countries of the north, some of which are less endowed than countries of the south in terms of natural resources? Whatever reasons may be advanced, the fact remains that most countries of the south are poor not because they lack natural resources but principally because they mismanage human and natural resources. Hence, they need managerial guidance from external bodies, particularly the United Nations who has intervened through its SDGs programme aimed at reducing poverty globally before the year 2030.

As the year 2030 draws nearer and all the indices still indicate that many impoverished countries of the south are yet to significantly reduce poverty in their domains, one fears that even by the year 2060 poverty may still remain endemic in the south unless drastic measures are taken to rescue these countries from inept leadership and systemic corruption. According to an MPI 2023 report, 1.1 billion out of 6.1 billion people (just over 18%) live in acute multidimensional poverty across 110 countries. Sub-Saharan Africa (534 million) and South Asia (389 million) are home to approximately five out of every six poor people in the world. The report, however, hoped that poverty reduction is achievable; with the global south's poor living mostly in the rural areas, where there is virtually no basic infrastructure, one wonders how this would be achieved in 2030.

Relevance of the Study

Scholarly literature on social protection programmes and poverty reduction in Nigeria and elsewhere exists; they include *The Role of Social Protection Programmes in Affected Situation* (Holmes, 2011); *Issues in Social Protection: Non-contributory Pension and Social Protection* (Barrientos, A & Lloyd-Sherlock, P, 2002); and *Social Protection in Nigeria* (Onyeonuru, I. P, 2018). However, a gap exists as these studies are not focused on the aspect of leadership system, a critical engine that drives or mars development initiatives, including such social protection programmes and poverty reduction programmes in Nigeria. Hence, this study seeks to address the effect of leadership defects on the implementation of social protection programmes; it argues that successful implementation of social protection programmes in Nigeria may remain elusive as long as they are managed by corrupt and insensitive leaders.

Conceptual clarification

Social protection

This concept has assumed omnibus connotation as it generally means steps or procedures implemented to provide largess to the most vulnerable ones in

the society. This becomes necessary since resources are not evenly distributed, leaving a large number of people extremely poor while a few are extremely rich; hence, the need for policy makers and nations to devise measures to alleviate or reduce the plight of the vulnerable.

Nations and governments all over world have identified the need to address poverty and socio-economic disequilibrium in order to create a just and egalitarian society where the disadvantaged individuals/or states are empowered.

Derveureux and Sabates-Wheeler (2004), cited in Onyeonoru (2018), define social protection as “all public and private initiatives that provide income and consumption transfers to the poor, protect the vulnerable against destitution, and enhance the social status and rights of the marginalized: with the overall objective of reducing the economic and social vulnerability of the poor”. In Nigeria, governments at all levels occasionally give handouts in form of relief packages to its vulnerable population. These ad-hoc measures in the long-run do not eradicate conditions of the vulnerable poor but only cushion the effect of poverty, which later resurfaces. What may alleviate or reduce poverty is a well concerted programme that empowers the vulnerable population through job creation, giving of short-long and medium term loans with low interest rate, subsidized agricultural implements, products and other goods and services, and accountable, prudent and people-driven leadership.

Poverty Reduction

In looking at how to solve the problem of poverty, the words “reduction” and “alleviation” have been used interchangeably. Generally, they refer to efforts being made to arrest or abate the growing trend or effect of poverty in a given period or region in order to improve the living condition of the people affected by poverty. Semantically, the two words stand apart. Reduction according oxford dictionary is an action or fact of making something smaller or less in amount, degree or size while alleviation is a process of making a deficient state or problem less severe or the process of providing a relief. However poverty alleviation is the process or strategy aimed at reducing or mitigating poverty by improving economic and social well being of the people overtime.

Development

Some people have said that Europe is the cause of Africa’s under-development. Okowa (1996) has countered the argument, asserting that the underdevelopment of Africa is not Eurocentric; rather, according to him, Africa is underdeveloped by its environment. This leads us to the question,

“What is development?” Development has been looked at in terms of natural resources increase and also in terms of increase in human capacity and efficiency.

Anao (2015:8) sees development as enhancing people’s capacities so as to enable them achieve higher levels of well-being. Anao further postulates that development is “about effective utilization of the resources available to a people such as land, capital, knowledge and innovation to make the people more productive and more effective so that they can apply themselves more effectively to enhance their standards of living”. This definition, for this paper, encapsulates the essence and values of development that may best address and reduce the prevalence of poverty in Nigeria and elsewhere in the global south.

Nigeria’s Slide from Prosperity to Poverty

In the 1970s the Nigerian economy was strong and competed favourably with other economies in the world due to its petrol dollar inflows (Nwaughu, 2023). It was the period when Nigeria’s naira was equal to the US dollar and the standard of living of Nigerians was relatively high. Things degenerate around early 1980 as corruption and embezzlement of public funds became the order of the day and gradually Nigeria became one of the most indebted Nations (MINs) by 1985, and by 1986 with the introduction of structural adjustment program (SAP) Nigerians began to feed on the dustbin and poverty escalated even till date.

The number of poverty related deaths globally outweighs the number of people that die in wars and diseases globally. Sadly, poverty has different degrees of manifestations, from structural to systemic. It is structural when it is caused by individual inability to access the basic needs, such as food, shelter and clothing resulting from health conditions or indolence while systemic poverty occurs as a result different government policies that impoverish the people through misappropriation of public funds, looting, embezzlement and all forms of corrupt practices. Systemic poverty also emanates from violent conflicts and wars caused by divisive and oppressive government policies.

There is this persistent call to reduce poverty at national, regional and international levels. This clarion call is a realization that one of the major drawbacks to development globally is poverty. This understanding is based on the fact that the major crux of development anywhere is to pilot an improved condition of living where people would live in a less cumbersome environment, where food, health facilities and security are provided (Runesewe, 2014). This vision of a prosperous world, according to Mimiko

(2010) is threatened by globally induced poverty emanating from global economic meltdown and pandemics that lead to job loss and plunge millions of people globally into extreme poverty (Strauss-Kahn, 2009).

The stark reality is that in spite of the dogged and strenuous efforts by policy makers to eradicate poverty, poverty has remained an existential malady that manifests in different forms, including intellectual poverty and physical poverty. Poverty is caused by so many factors that it would be impossible to eradicate it; however, it certainly can be reduced if governmental and other relevant agencies design and implement adequate policies, such as the global SDG strategies, transparent and accountable governance, and equitable distribution of resources. Only then would social protection programs empower the populace. This was showcased during the COVID-19 pandemic when the global North provided for the social, economic and emotional needs of its people while the reverse was the case in Nigeria where some state governments hoarded the relief materials meant to alleviate the plight of its citizens. It was even reported that COVID-19 funds were looted by government officials; according to reports, it was hoarded relief materials that the youth looted in various state capitals during the EndSARS protest saga of 2020.

Poverty and food insecurity are major drivers of violent conflict in Nigeria and elsewhere in Sub-Saharan Africa (Nwaugh, 2023). Food insecurity is opposite of food security. Food security, according to WHO in Runsewe (2014), occurs “when all the people at all times have access to sufficient, safe, nutritious food to maintain a healthy and active life” while food insecurity occurs when there is insufficient food. According to global hunger index (GHI) 2023, Nigeria placed 109th out of 125 countries on the global ranking. Nigeria’s poverty index (NPI) reached 38.8% in the second quarter of 2024; it was precipitated by the effect of fuel subsidy removal which has continued to adversely affect the purchasing power of Nigerians.

According to Runsewe (2014) over 30 million children in Sub-Saharan Africa are underweight and suffer from different kinds of diseases such as Beriberi and Kwashiorkor. Factors responsible for this pitiable state of Africa and Nigeria in particular include overpopulation, drought, desertification, air, land and water pollutants, effects of global warming and environmental scarcity (Nwaugh, Ireunmi & Kolawole-olu, 2024). This may be why some scholars maintain that global south poverty is environment-driven; others trace the genesis of global south poverty to colonialism and neo-colonialism. This was the position of Walter Rodney (1972), Oritsejafor, Emmanuel, Cooper & Allen (2021), Amartya (1999), Apata (2022), Kohli (2020), and Gulger (1982) all of whom assert that the underdevelopment of Africa is the development of global North. The fact,

however, remains that independent African countries, including highly-endowed Nigeria, with accountable and visionary leadership in place, can steer themselves away from poverty, much of which is internally induced.

Nigeria's Global Poverty Record

In 2018, when the Extreme Poverty Index (EPI) metric indicated that 87 million of her citizens live within the bracket of extreme poverty, Nigeria snatched from India the unenviable record of being the world's poverty capital (Brookings, 2018). Extreme poverty, according to the World Bank, is measured as the number of people living on less than \$1.90 per day. According to Brookings (2018), extreme poverty today is mainly about Africa:

According to our projections, Nigeria has already overtaken India as the country with the largest number of extreme poor in early 2018... At the end of May 2018, our trajectories suggest that Nigeria had about 87 million people in extreme poverty, compared with India's 73 million. What is more, extreme poverty in Nigeria is growing by six people every minute, while poverty in India continues to fall. In fact, by the end of 2018 in Africa as a whole, there will probably be about 3.2 million *more* people living in extreme poverty than there are today.

Already, Africans account for about two-thirds of the world's extreme poor. If current trends persist, they will account for nine-tenths by 2030. Fourteen out of 18 countries in the world—where the number of extreme poor is rising—are in Africa.

Apparently, with every New Year the number of Nigerians living in extreme poverty increases; since 2022/2023 even more people have become extremely poor as a result of the removal of fuel subsidy and the devaluation of the naira due to the floating of NGN-USD exchange rate (Nwaughu & Ihezue, 2024; Nwaughu & Umoru, 2023). The skyrocketing of prices of commodities in the market makes it very difficult for poor people to afford a meal per day, making the overall picture of poverty in Nigeria very gloomy (Umoru, 2022). As Naira further depreciates, poverty within the rural population aggravates.

Leadership and Implementation of Social Protection Programmes in Nigeria

Social protection mechanisms have not been able to address poverty in Nigeria because of policy summersaults and corruption. The leadership style in Nigeria is a confiscatory system where state officials engage in what Dokubo (2001) described as lootocracy. There is no way development can

be possible when the political and economic elites are concerned about what they can grab from state resources. As Nwoke (2005) puts it, “there is ample fact that poor leadership in Africa is one of the main reasons for the failure of the development projects in the continent”; he cautioned that political leadership and far-sighted statesmanship are crucial for Africa’s development

Conclusion

Having examined the need for social protection programmes to cater for the vulnerable population, the paper concluded that for social protection programmes to make an impact towards the alleviation of poverty in Nigeria a well concerted programme should be in place to empower the vulnerable population through job creation, giving of short-, long- and medium-term loans with low interest rate. Also, agricultural implements and essential products and services should be subsidized for the poor. There should be frequent and improved metrological survey predictions to forewarn the populace about imminent natural disasters. Basic infrastructure should be put in place, and people-people and people-government communication and relations should be improved. Above all, accountable, prudent and people-driven leadership should be enthroned to replace the current system of “lootocracy” that makes the implementation of poverty-reduction programmes across the country inefficient and ineffective.

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