

POVERTY ALLEVIATION AND DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE IN AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

There is little or no dispute about the existence, extent and the negative consequences of poverty, especially in the continent of Africa. What perhaps may be in dispute are the sources of poverty and means or ways of alleviating it. Poverty is simply a situation of lack concerning basic necessities of life. And where such deprivations exist, human beings cannot be expected to live fully, develop, and have a manageable social order. In such a situation, it would also be difficult or almost impossible for individuals to worship God and remain committed to Him.

In this paper, we examine the interface between poverty and democracy in Africa, putting our searchlight mainly on ways poverty can be alleviated through and by governance, especially governments with democratic coating or appellation. We argue that there is symmetry between poverty alleviation and democratic governance, such that one necessarily affects the other. We propose that African governments must be responsive and responsible to the people to alleviate poverty. And this involves having a conducive atmosphere and freedom to choose leaders in elections in Africa which has not been the case. Furthermore, we opine that poverty has also been a bane of democratic governance in Africa because it has led to kleptomaniac tendencies in government. We then conclude that the institutionalization of truly democratic governments in Africa

is a major step towards poverty alleviation and further that proper education, especially moral education such as championed by religious bodies is a necessary step towards curtailing unbridled materialism in contemporary Africa.

However, it is also the case that religious bodies have to “speak truth to power” to make this possible. But this task has also been abdicated. There is, therefore, a need for the reevaluation of our value system in Africa if Democracy is to play the role of ensuring that the people take decision collectively in ensuring social order and development and curtaining such vices that limit human progress, such as poverty.

Key Words: Poverty, Democracy, Africa, Governance, Religion

INTRODUCTION

The central object of our discourse is *poverty alleviation and democratic governance*. Let us note that this issue is as old as mankind and it is not in any way restricted to Africa, since we hear about it in all the continents of the world but with variations and more predominance in Asia, South America and Africa. The problem of poverty and democratic governance is however a recurring decimal in Africa due to several factors, some of which this discourse attempts to address.

Several academic papers, articles, and books have been written separately and collectively on poverty and democracy in Africa and causes.¹ In spite of all these attempts at the theoretical level, poverty and bad governance are still the major trademarks of most African countries. But whether as academics, religious men, business men and women, we are all familiar with *governance* and *democracy*, more especially since we have been used to bad types of governance in Africa, especially in Nigeria and her chequered history. We are familiar with both democratic and undemocratic nations. Of recent we can compare the United States' election that ushered in Barack Obama with those of sit-tight Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe, and Kenya and Nigeria. Hence, we can do some arithmetic to arrive at the true meaning of the phrase 'democratic governance'.

The second aspect of our discourse has to do with poverty alleviation. We can only alleviate poverty but we cannot eradicate it due mainly to unequal acquisition and inheritance of natural and human resources. However, alleviating poverty will, at least, ensure the enjoyment of certain human necessities which promote development and social order in the normative perspective.

The title of our discourse may, therefore, suggest two issues; namely, how has democratic governance led to the alleviation of poverty or contributed to the entrenchment and institutionalization of poverty in Africa, particularly Nigeria? The second issue is how poverty has been a bane of democratic governance in most part of Africa. We shall pursue the discussion from the two perspectives. We shall attempt to proffer some solutions, which are not novel anyway, but which need more than passive conformity to the existence order for their realization, especially given the roles of religious bodies and their ability to 'speak truth to power'. Nevertheless, our conclusion will be that democratic governance has a major role to play in the alleviation of poverty. This conclusion is aptly expressed by Nzungola-Ntalaja thus, 'Democracy as a social project means social progress in terms of better standard of living and full participation in the process of governance by the people'.²

THE PHENOMENON OF POVERTY IN AFRICA

Whether as adults or children, when we experience lack of basic necessities of life viz food, good health, clothing, conducive atmosphere for human habitation, and inability to access those fundamental instruments, such as education, that will give us easy access to the basic necessities of life, then we are experiencing poverty. Akinyele provides a good working definition of poverty; thus, 'poverty has many dimensions but has been defined in terms of an individual falling behind in some standard of minimum requirement for his or her wellbeing'.³ He cites 1995 world summit for social development in Copenhagen and Millennium Development Goals 2000, which assumed that poverty is multidimensional. Furthermore, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is said to have introduced, in 1997, two intertwined concepts; namely, human development and human poverty and consequently arrived at the definition of poverty as having to do with 'deprivation in the most essential capabilities of life including participating fully in the life of the community'⁴.

In similar vein, R.A. Akanmidu suggests that poverty is related to starvation, destitution, hunger and sufferings of different forms'. It is in this sense that poverty itself can rightly be described as 'a form of human suffering'⁵ which can appropriately be seen as 'the state of lacking the means to exist adequately'.⁶

According to Akanmidu⁷, poverty constitutes a major form of crisis that is habitual as it conveys a message of hardship which cannot be denied as there is visible misery, persistent destitution, endemic hunger or starvation, and visible malnutrition. He stresses further that the International labour office estimated the number of destitute at 700 million to be domiciled in third world countries in the early seventies. The World Bank gave the figure of 800 million as destitute in third world countries, of which Africa is a part.⁸

Although poverty is multi-dimensional, one can talk about two major forms of poverty in Africa, namely absolute poverty and relative poverty⁹. Absolute poverty is seen as a condition of life punctuated by the inability to meet or access basic needs of life, such as food, clothing, shelter, and health. It is a condition of extreme lack. People in this category are hungry but have no food to eat; sick but lack resources for medical treatment; and so forth. Relative poverty concerns the inability to meet the demands of basic needs of life adequately.

The causes of poverty range from natural factors, such as climate, geography, and history, to man-made factors, such as bad or deficient governance. Deficient governance, according to Akinyele, may exhibit the following features: entrenched corruption, lack of respect for human rights, weak

institutions and inefficient bureaucracies, lack of social cohesion, and political will to undertake reforms.¹⁰

The table below produced by Nigerian Human Development Report, UNDP 2002 culled from Akinyele book¹¹ shows Nigeria Poverty Indicators.

1. Life expectancy at birth.....(Women 52 years; Men 48 years)	
2. Adult literacy rate	63.9%
3. Per Capital Income.....	260 per annum (dollars)
4. Population using adequate sanitation facilities.....	63%
5. Population using improved water sources.....	57%
6. Physicians (per 100,000 people).....	19
7. Births attended by skilled health staff.....	42%
8. Undernourished people (as % of total population).....	7%
9. People living with HIV/AIDS, adults (% age 15-49).....	5.8% (5.2%)
10. Gender-related development Index (GDI) rank	124
11. Female adult literacy rate.....	55.7%
12. Female economic activity rate (age 15 and above).....	47.6%

Our concern in this section has been to have a panoramic expose of the phenomenon and causes of poverty. But the major preoccupation in this work is on the interface between poverty alleviation and democratic governance in Africa. This shall be our pre-occupation in the next section. The interface, which could be constituted as problematic, is best captured by Confucius, who is quoted as saying that, ‘In a country well governed, poverty is something to be ashamed of’.¹² If this statement is true or enjoys any patronage, it means that in situations where there is overt poverty, especially in Africa, there is leadership deficit or democratic ineptitude.

INTERFACE BETWEEN POVERTY AND DEMOCRACY

Let us start by making a disclaimer here. It is to the effect that the embrace of Democracy by advance nations of the world does not mean that it translates in good governance wherein the poverty alleviation is a given. Rather, democracy has to do with abiding by the principles and features that govern any set of people, which we lack in most part of Africa. The second disclaimer is that the popular embrace of democracy does not mean that other systems of governance, such as monarchy and socialism, are not functional, practical, and people oriented as they also exhibit features of democracy.

Given the foregoing, it is, therefore, important to stress that the beauty and functionality of democracy lies with its features and principles, such as rule following, accountability, popular participation, protection of human right, equitable resource distribution, and freedom to determine who exercises sovereignty on one's behalf. After all, many of us know that God does not embrace democracy in the popular sense, but we believe that he exhibits democratic principles, such as justice, and that is why we remain glued to Him as the source of our hope.

The discourse on poverty alleviation and democratic governance must be handled in such a way that it will not over-dovetail into other causes of poverty given the sensitive nature of the issues. Although, towards the end of the paper we shall cite other factors in addition to proper democratic governance that can help mitigate the effect of poverty on Africans.

Furthermore, one is tempted to go into the conceptual analysis of democracy. This shall be avoided not to make the discussion superfluous, since it is assumed rightly too that we are familiar with the concept of democracy.

What perhaps we may start with are the features of democracy or democratic government. The first is the sovereignty of the people. These factors show that the government derives its legitimacy or sovereignty from the people and is, therefore, responsible to them. This is the basis of all social contract theories, such as Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan*, John Locke's *Treatises of Government*, and Jean Jacques Rousseau's *General Will*. Even J.S. Mill's *On Liberty* 1859, is predicated on the willingness of the individual to transfer his right of self governance to others. The sovereignty of the people also presupposes their freedom. This is because it is only free individuals that can voluntarily transfer their rights to others. And if rights are transferred to others, those who hold it in trust must be accountable to the person(s) who relinquish such power.

Furthermore, being accountable presupposes that those who hold the sovereignty in trust must be reliable, trustworthy, and pursue the goals of justice, equality, welfare for and on behalf of their subjects. Being accountable also means managing the resources of their representatives in just manner devoid of avarice, greed, and self-centredness. If the foregoing is the case, those in government, who are presumed to be holding the people's sovereignty on trust must present themselves regularly to their subjects for renewal of mandate through periodic elections that conform to the laid-down canons of free and fair election. All the factors identified above form the basis and

hallmark of truly democratic governments all over the world. It is, therefore, not the tag-democracy that makes a government democratic but the conformity and adherence to democratic principles.¹³

It is the failure to adhere to democratic principles in African countries that has constituted the bane of African development and has led to social disequilibrium, resulting into negative traits, such as corruption, war, violence, nepotism, tribalism, and these in turn have led to material and mental poverty among Africans. It is the failure of African governments to take pro-active attitude towards the development of their people that has made poverty a permanent feature of the African countries. The basic question that should agitate our minds is: What is the purpose of government? The primary answer is that government has the primary purpose of promoting the good of the people. Although, this good can be subjected to vagaries of interpretations, the success of government in promoting the good of the people through whichever means is to ensure that they have access to the basic necessities of life and subsequently live a fulfilled and happy life.

And whatever pretence any democratic government may make about development, development is primarily about people. It is human development in all ramifications. It is a government that is pro-active towards this that can be called a democratic government and it is such government that will take poverty alleviation seriously. This has not been the lot of most African countries. Concerning the interconnectedness of development and people, Ade Ajayi opines thus:

Development is growth plus change. Change, in turn, is social and cultural as well as economic. The key concept must be improved quality of people's life¹⁴

Therefore, in self evaluating a government that claims to be democratic, the extent to which people's life have been improved and poverty reduced to its barest minimum should be the standard test.

The emphasis so far has been that in most African countries, such as Nigeria, the failure to adhere to democratic principles as manifested in corruption, non-accountability, rigging of election, lack of respect for human and people's rights; emasculation of people's freedom have all led to hyper-poverty among citizens.

As a consequence of unbridled poverty, resulting from lack of respect for democratic principles, many individuals now go into politics or governance to *amass* wealth at all cost. This scenario has led to what is popularly tagged 'do or die' syndrome in Nigerian politics. From this perspective, one

can also argue that poverty understood as an unending crass materialism has made the attainment of truly democratic governments almost impossible in Africa. This form of poverty also has the mental dimension, such that governance is now construed as a quick means to material prosperity. It is no wonder then that many leaders in Africa, who are no more than hoodlums and hooligans, have converted public property to individual asset, with little or no consideration for public good. In this guise, therefore, democracy cannot serve as a social project for alleviating the poverty of the people and ensuring better standard of living for the people.

DEMOCRACY AND POVERTY ALLEVIATION

At this juncture, we emphasise the roles of democratic governance in poverty alleviation. It is in this positive direction that the ideal of democracy has its root. We can pose the question: Can democracy or its institutionalization contribute towards poverty alleviation in Africa? The answer is yes. This is only possible and feasible if those saddled with governance pre-occupy themselves with the pursuit of common good or public good. This is not new as it dates back to ancient times to philosophers like Plato in *The Republic*, the social contract theories, and even to such organic theories as that of Hegel.

In pursuing public good, the interest of all, especially the weak, are taken into adequate cognizance. Features of truly democratic governance are what make the promotion of public good possible. For instance, there is recourse to people's mandate, accountability, transparency, zero tolerance for corruption so that primary goods are not unjustly appropriated, and protection and defence of human right of citizens such that in any case of violation of right, the rule of law is appealed to by all.

The pursuit of public good, especially in the interest of all by government points up the bareness of sophisticated economic policies of government in Nigeria, such as deregulation, liberalization, privatization, and free-market economy that do not take into cognizance the susceptibility of the weak and which promote the philosophy of "the winner takes it all" in the economic sphere. It is the duty of the government as the greatest helper of the citizens to provide not only the atmosphere for alleviating the poverty of its citizens but also to provide the means of enabling the people to be self-sufficient. In political philosophy, this is described as the merger of negative and positive freedom.

In a similar vein, government economic policies should allow the unfettered development of the weakest individual in society. This seems to be the major pre-occupation of John Rawls in his *A Theory of Justice*¹⁵, where he argued that the state has the obligation to protect the interest and welfare of the less well-off in society. The import of the recourse to Rawls is that since we cannot

reverse the movement of capitalism in most African states, with some of its perceived threats to economically dependent ones, government can continue to foster such measures that will make it possible for the ordinary citizens to enjoy the good conditions of life. Government should also ensure that multinational corporations that are seen as the agents of development in this epoch of globalization and privatization do more in their host communities to alleviate poverty.

Furthermore, the need for adequate infrastructures, such as electricity, drinkable water, good roads, affordable health service, and qualitative education cannot be over-emphasized in the alleviation of poverty and they should be given adequate attention by the government. Individuals and groups should complement government efforts by adopting pro-active attitude towards the eradication of poverty, such as the readiness to work and be educated. They should adopt consumption habit that is inward looking and development oriented. Underscoring the importance of self-reliance which is part of the African cultural values, Bolarinwa states, thus:

To lay claim to any dignity, a human being must be self-supporting, must be able to generate minimally whatever is consumed¹⁶.

Ali A. Mazrui corroborates the above concerning self-sufficiency when he asserts that:

Self-development includes defining goals in relation to available means, and cultivating the will to pursue those goals with as much reliance as possible. Excessive dependence on outsiders is part of the imperial malaise and Africa should seek ways to transcend it¹⁷

We can, therefore, see that development and poverty alleviation are not the exclusive tasks of democratic government. The people who are themselves economic dependent need to play vital roles beginning from the fact that they have to get their priority right, especially in their consumption attitude.

CONCLUSION

Our preoccupation in this work has been to examine the nexus between poverty alleviation and democracy in Africa. The main thrust of our argument so far is that a democratic government can only alleviate poverty by adhering strictly to democratic principles.

The basis of this is that any government must see itself as holding power on behalf of the people to ensure the acquisition and distribution of basic goods. It is only through this method that reasonable attempts can be made to alleviate poverty in Africa.

Let us note at this juncture that religious bodies also have vital roles to play in ensuring that government plays its role. First, religious bodies must be able to praise and condemn governments when necessary. However, what we find in Nigeria these days is praise-singing of government leaders to the detriment of the citizens. Religious bodies should wake up to its responsibility and ‘speak truth to power’ as there are several examples in the holy books.

Furthermore, religious bodies should not only collect offerings, tithes, and donations from members no matter their economic status, they should also help those in need in a *significant* manner. In other words, they should live up to their task as defenders of the poor, of moral uprightness, and justice. Religious bodies too should encourage family planning because unplanned families have been a major cause of poverty in Africa. Although, some religious injunctions encourage persons to go into the world and multiply, these injunctions must be carried out with wisdom. A planned family is more manageable than an unplanned family, no matter the level of wealth available to the latter.

Education is also a major avenue at combating poverty. Individuals should be encouraged at all levels to acquire functional education that will alleviate material and mental poverty. It also helps individual to have self confidence and be able to weather the storm of life in all its ramifications.

We want to end this short discourse by stressing that in today’s world, joint survival is the most plausible option and so we should all be concerned with the plight of the poverty-stricken in our society.

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