

THE PLACE OF POLITICAL WILL IN THE FIGHT AGAINST POVERTY IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the scourge of poverty in Nigeria and how it has affected the country's development efforts. It argues that while poverty is a global phenomenon, the Nigerian case is quite alarming given the country's rich resource base. Statistics from the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) indicate that about 71.5% of Nigerians are relatively poor. Poverty is deep, widespread and multifaceted and all Nigerians are affected by poverty in one way or the other. The paper examines the various strategies that were put in place by successive governments to tackle the menace of poverty and the factors responsible for the failure of these strategies and policies. The paper makes the point that poverty is pervasive in the country and that this has been a major impediment to the quest for development in the country. It argues that the lack of political will has been the problem with the various poverty alleviation policies in the country. It therefore advocates the use of political will in the fight against poverty and specifies practical measures through which this can be done. The paper contends that it is by bringing the necessary political will to bear on the fight against poverty that development may be achieved and sustained in Nigeria.

Keywords: Poverty, Political will, Alleviation, Strategies, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

With a population estimated to be about 170 million, Nigeria is the most populated country on the African continent. In addition to this human population, the country is also blessed with an abundance of natural resources chief among which is crude oil. With a rebased GDP of \$510 billion as at 2013, Nigeria has become Africa's largest economy (see *Forward Special Publication on the 2015 Elections*: 28). Nigeria is the 6th largest exporter of crude oil in the world. Other mineral resources that are found in Nigeria which have commercial value include, coal, tin, columbite, iron-ore, limestone, gold, salt, marble and bitumen (Ikporukpo, 2002). In fact almost all resources are found in Nigeria in varying quantities (Ikporukpo, 2002). This makes Nigeria rank high in the comity of highly endowed countries of the world.

Paradoxically and in spite of this rich resource endowment Nigeria is one of the poorest countries on earth (*The Nation*, January 23, 2012:19). This is not only intriguing. It is indeed very disturbing. It is disturbing because over the years, successive governments in the country have put in place measures to curb the menace of poverty. These measures do not seem to have meaningfully stemmed the tide of poverty. And so the challenge of poverty along with a myriad of other challenges continues to ravage many Nigerians robbing them of their dignity, self esteem and even their humanity.

It is needless to add that apart from poverty, Nigeria is confronted with other challenges. These challenges include corruption, ethno-regional and religious tensions, lack of patriotism on the part of leaders and followers and terrorism and insurgency in recent times. All these challenges singly and taken together have continued to frustrate efforts at national development in the country.

Be that as it may, the focus of this paper is an exploration of the meaning of poverty and an attempt to situate it in a Nigerian setting and to examine the particularly Nigerian issues that have shaped the manifestations of the menace in the country.

The incidence of poverty is a global phenomenon. As it has been argued elsewhere, poverty is one social problem that does not seem to discriminate on the basis of climate and/or global divisions (Egwemi and Yunusa, 2011). Poverty affects all nations of the world. Be that as it may the reality is that poverty is more pervasive in the less developed countries of the world than it is in the advanced countries. For the avoidance of doubt the scale of poverty is usually higher in these advanced countries than it is in the less developed countries. This of course is as it should be because the socio-economic distance between the rich and poor in advanced countries is wider than in the less developed countries (Egwemi and Yunusa, 2011).

Nigeria is a less developed country and the impact of poverty given its pervasiveness has been very telling on the country's socio-economic and political well-being. Studies have shown that about seventy five million Nigerians live below the poverty line (Abubakar, 2009, Agodom, 2011). This indicates that about half of Nigerians are poor. Recent data from the Nation Bureau & Statistics indicates that 71.5% of the Nigerian population was relatively poor as at the end of 2011 (Akinmutimi, 2012, Subair, 2012, Ibrahim 2012).

According to Kayode Fayemi, "poverty in Nigeria is deep, widespread and multifaceted, and Nigerians are all victims of this condition in one way or the other - the rich elite and the poverty stricken masses alike - although not to the same degree" (Fayemi, 2005:11). Therein is the crisis of poverty in Nigeria. Given the pervasive nature of poverty in the country, the prospects of development in the country are very dismal. A country traumatized by a plague like poverty can hardly have a motivated citizenry that can drive the process of development. This means that until the scourge of poverty is dealt with

decisively the developmental efforts of the country will continue to be frustrated. The consequences of such a situation are very dire.

It is against the background of the foregoing that this paper examines the incidence of poverty in Nigeria. It argues that the challenge of poverty seems to have defied solutions in spite of the many programmes put in place to alleviate or eradicate it. In the opinion of the paper the measures in some cases have led to a worsening of the conditions of the poor. As a corollary the point is made that the corrupt practices and tendencies of those charged with poverty alleviation and eradication were responsible for this condition.

The paper is divided into six parts. After the introduction section two deals with conceptual clarifications. Section three examines the poverty situation in Nigeria. Section four examines the causes of poverty while section five examines poverty alleviation programmes in the country over the years. The last section is the conclusion which expatiates on the place of political will in the fight against corruption.



Map of Nigeria showing the thirty six states and the Federal Capital Territory.

CONCEPTUALIZING POVERTY

Poverty like most concepts does not have a single or universally accepted definition. However, as M.O. Odey argues, poverty “can be easily recognized”(Odey, 2007:186). The following response from a “poor man” in Kenya, who was requested to define poverty, bears out the easily recognizable quality of poverty. According to him:

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 (in Jimada, 2008:160).

Poverty can be defined from different perspectives. Indeed, scholars are agreed that poverty is multi- dimensional in nature (Odey, 2007, Jimada, 2008, Mambe, 2009, UNDP, HDR Nigeria, 2008-2009). The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) defines poverty as “a state of long-term deprivation of those essential and non-material attributes which are considered necessary for decent living” (UNDP, 2008-2009:63). Ajakaiye and Olomola define poverty as;

...living condition in which an individual is faced with economic, social, mental, political, cultural and environmental deprivation and exclusion. It is a state of voluntary or circumstantial deprivation to which persons, households, communities or nations can be subjected to (in Mambe, 2009:101).

Poverty may be classified in terms of absolute poverty, relative poverty and subjective poverty (Odey, 2007, Mambe, 2009, Alubo, 2005).

Absolute poverty refers to a situation where there is lack of resources to obtain and consume a certain bundle of goods and services. This bundle of good and service, is made up of an objective minimum of the basic necessities of life such as food, shelter, and clothing. This categorization has two main problems. One, what to include in this objective minimum and two how to set minimum standards for basic needs like clothing and housing which often vary according to individual taste, cultural norms and the prevailing socio-economic conditions in society at a given period (Odusola, 1997).

Absolute poverty involves a judgment of basic human needs and is measured in terms of the resources required to survive and maintain health and physical efficiency. Most measures of absolute poverty are concerned with establishing the quality and amount of food, clothing and shelter deemed necessary for a healthy life. Absolute poverty is also known as subsistence poverty since it is based on gauging minimum subsistence requirements (Mambe, 2009; Bello, 2002).

Relative poverty- this is an attempt to conceptualize poverty with respect to the living standards that prevail in a particular society. The key merit in measuring poverty in this manner is that it reflects changing perceptions of acceptable minimum living standard. For example electricity, indoor plumbing and pipe-born water considered essentials in the developed countries may be luxuries in developing countries (Odusola, 1997).

Relative poverty refers to a person or household whose provision with goods is lower than that of other persons or households. In this sense, relative poverty does not mean that the persons affected cannot lead a life that is worthy of human

dignity. It only means that because of the distribution structures in a society, certain economic subjects are disadvantaged to an unacceptable extent. Relative poverty exists when the subjects concerned are poor in relation to others (Anyanwu, 1997).

THE POVERTY SITUATION IN NIGERIA

While indeed poverty is a global phenomenon and is all pervading, the situation in Nigeria is quite alarming because “in spite of the rich resource base of Nigeria, most Nigerians live below the poverty line, making them susceptible to hunger and disease (Adewumi, 2005:11). According to Farunkanmi, poverty;

...is visible on the faces of Nigerians, in the nature of our living conditions, in the decaying morphology of our towns which are over-congested and ragged, on the roads which are prone to erosion, untarred (with) imported junks referred to as motor vehicles, dearth of drugs in our clinics, ... collapse of tertiary education, dearth of employment opportunities for able-bodied and educated youths most of whom are, for want of gainful employment involved in armed robbery and in other unwholesome activities (in Idada, 2003:207).

The long and short of the story is that poverty is a major challenge in Nigeria. The phenomenon manifests in both absolute and relative terms. Studies have shown that “the incidence of poverty in terms of those who live below one dollar per day is put at between 54% and 70%” (Adewumi, 2005:11). Indeed, the incidence of poverty has continued to elicit reactions. For example between September, 2008 and December 2009 five Nigerian newspapers dedicated their editorials to the issue of poverty. (*Nigerian Tribune* 25 January 2008, *National Life*, September 13, 2008, *Nigerian Tribune* 17, October 2008, *Nigerian Tribune* 24 October, 2008, *Punch* March 11, 2009, *Nigerian Compass* March 23, 2009, *The Nation* December 11, 2009.)

In the same vein scholars and opinionists have variously discussed the issue of poverty (Amaechi 2008, Gulloma, 2008, Onyechere, 2008, Sobowale, 200C), Ekpu, 2009 Omoniyi, 2011; Yerima, 2011, Agodon, 2011, Osuji, 2011)).

All these show that the issue of poverty poses a dilemma to many. In fact as the World Bank, report on Nigerian poignantly reports, the Nigerian situation is a case of “Poverty in the Midst of Plenty” (Egwu, 2007). This has had a telling effect on development efforts in the country.

The following graphic statistics indicate the prevalence of poverty in Nigeria;

Table 1: Dimension of Poverty Incidence in Nigeria, 1998 – 2004.

Dimensions of Poverty Incidence: Education

	1980	1985	1992	1996	2004	Contribution to Poverty in 2004*
No schooling	30.2	51.3	46.4	72.6	58.7	47.6
Primary	21.3	40.6	43.3	54.4	48.7	4.9
Secondary	7.6	27.2	30.3	52.0	44.3	30.1
Post secondary	24.3	24.2	25.8	49.2	26.3	4.3
All Nigeria	27.2	46.3	42.7	65.6	54.4	100*

Dimensions of Poverty Incidence: Occupation of Household Heads

Poverty Head Count						
Professional & technical	17.3	35.6	35.7	51.8	34.2	
Administration	45.0	25.3	22.3	33.5	45.3	
Clerical & Related Jobs	10.0	29.1	34.4	60.1	39.2	
Sales Workers	15.0	36.6	33.5	56.7	44.2	
Service industry	21.3	38.0	38.2	71.4	43.0	
Agricultural & Forestry	31.5	53.5	47.9	71.0	57.0	
Production & Transport	23.2	46.6	40.8	65.8	42.5	
Manufacturing & Processing	12.4	31.7	33.2	49.4	44.2	
Others	1.5	36.8	42.8	61.2	49.1	
Students & Apprentices	15.6	40.5	41.8	52.4	41.6	
Total	27.2	46.3	42.7	65.6	54.4	

Dimensions of Poverty Incidence: Household Size

No. of Persons	Poverty Head Count					
	1980	1985	1992	1996	2004	Contribution to poverty in 2004
1	0.2	9.7	2.9	13.1	12.6	0.6
2-4	8.8	19.3	19.5	51.5	39.3	19.4
5-9	30.0	50.5	45.4	74.8	57.9	58.9
10-20	51.0	71.3	66.1	88.5	73.3	20.5
20+	80.9	74.9	93.3	93.6	90.7	0.6
All Nigeria	27.2	46.3	42.7	65.6	54.4	100.0

Source: UNDP Human Development Report, Nigeria 2008-2009

Figure 1: Nigeria's Poverty Profile

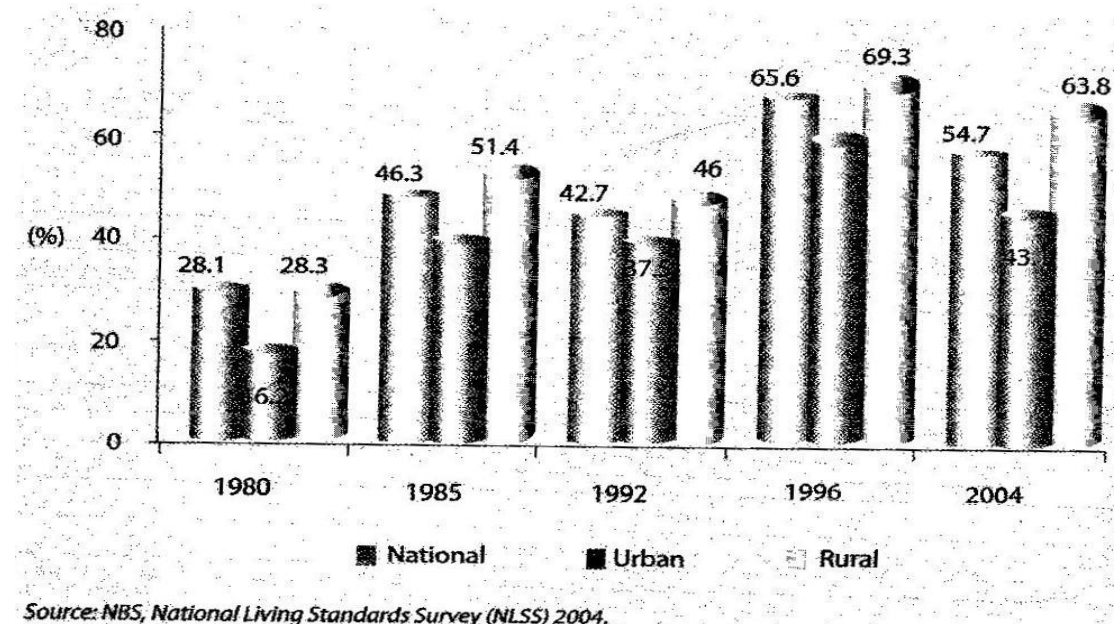


Table 2: Incidence of Poverty by Sector and Zones, 2004

		1980	1985	1992	1996	2004
National	Total poor	28.1	46.3	42.7	65.6	54.4
	Core poor	6.2	12.1	13.9	29.3	22.0
Urban	Total poor	17.2	37.8	37.5	58.2	43.2
	Core poor	3.0	7.5	10.7	25.2	15.7
Rural	Total poor	28.3	51.4	66.0	69.3	63.3
	Core poor	6.5	14.8	15.8	31.6	27.1
South South	Total poor	13.2	45.7	40.8	58.2	35.1
	Core poor	3.3	9.3	13.0	23.4	17.0
South East	Total poor	12.9	30.4	41.0	53.5	26.7
	Core poor	2.4	9.0	15.7	18.2	7.8
South West	Total poor	13.4	38.6	43.1	60.9	43.0
	Core poor	2.1	9.0	15.7	27.5	18.9
North Central	Total poor	32.2	50.8	46.0	64.7	67.0
	Core poor	5.7	16.4	14.8	28.0	29.8
North East	Total poor	35.6	54.9	54.0	70.1	71.2
	Core poor	11.8	16.4	18.5	34.4	27.9
North West	Total poor	37.7	52.1	36.5	77.2	71.2
	Core poor	8.3	14.2	9.0	37.3	26.8
Population in Poverty (million)		17.7	34.7	39.2	67.1	68.7

Source: UNDP Human Development Report, Nigeria 2008-2009

CAUSES OF POVERTY

A scourge such as poverty is usually not an isolated phenomenon. Rather it is engendered by other factors. In this wise the World Bank Poverty Task Force has identified the following as the main causes of poverty:

- Inadequate access to employment opportunities
- Inadequate physical assets, such as land and capital, and minimal access by the poor to credit even on a small scale.
- Inadequate access to the means of supporting rural development in poor regions
- Inadequate access to markets where the poor can sell goods and services
- Low endowment of human capital
- Destruction of natural resources, leading to environmental degradation and reduced productivity
- Inadequate access to assistance for those living at the margin and those victimized by transitory poverty.
- Lack of inclusive participation; which is the failure to include the poor in the process of designing development programs (Tsuwa and Jeiyol, 2009:186).

Other causes of poverty are highlighted and discussed by Tsuwa and Jeiyol as follows:

- 1) **Lack of Access to Quality Education and Training:** Education provides opportunity for improved skills that enhance productivity and resource mobilization and management. Education also creates enlightenment and mobilizes people to participate in income generating activities. It is therefore obvious that, when a person or group of people lack education and proper training, poverty is likely to set in. The absence of qualitative education in most parts of Nigeria is one reason why majority of Nigerians especially rural dwellers are poor.
- 2) **Lack of Good Governance:** Bad governance here entails corruption, unfocused leadership, inappropriate policy formulation and execution. In a situation where the leadership is selfish, autocratic, corrupt and irresponsible, it creates a fertile ground for poverty to germinate. Closely related to bad governance is the existence of fragile states that are incapable of meeting the desires of the people which subsequently lead to conflicts that lead to the destruction of lives and properties. This situation creates refugee crisis, medical crisis and other humanitarian problems that exacerbate poverty.
- 3) **Lack of Critical Infrastructure:** The bedrock to industrial development, which translates to job creation and raising income, is critical infrastructure like functional electricity, quality water and good roads. In the absence of these, the cost of production becomes high thereby leading to another causal factor of poverty, which is low production capacity. This situation not only makes it difficult for many people to be employed but also reduces the amount of goods and services in the society and increase cost of goods and sometimes increases inflation.
- 4) **Natural Disaster and increased Population:** Natural disaster and environmental changes create conditions that generate poverty. A situation were erosion, flood and drought causes famine and harsh environmental conditions makes it difficult for farming and damages crops and other environmental potentials leads to poverty. Rapid population explosion also exerts too much pressure on the limited resources thereby leading to poverty.

- 5) **Globalization and Debt Overhang of developing nations:** For many developing nations, the unequal terms of trade liberalization and economic deregulation has resulted to their exploitation by the stronger partners in the globalization process. This exploitation entails the siphoning of resources from the vulnerable partner to the stronger one hence causing poverty in the economies of the less powerful. Closely related to this is the incidence of debt overhang of developing nations. The consequence of this is that, the poor nations keep servicing their debts hence the difficulty to invest and eradicate poverty (Tsuwa and Jeiyol, 2009:186-187).

THE NIGERIAN GOVERNMENT AND THE FIGHT AGAINST POVERTY

The *raison d'être* for government is the security and welfare of its people. This reason for the existence of government is given practical expression in the constitutions of most countries of the world. For example in the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria in section 14 subsection 2(b) it is clearly stated “the security and welfare of the people shall be the primary purpose of government” (1999 Constitution). Against the backdrop of this constitutional imperative and in the face of damaging effects of poverty on Nigerians, governments in the country over the years have put in place various strategies to stem the tide of poverty. However, it would seem that most of these strategies have not succeeded. In this regard, scholars have begun to theorize about the aggravation of poverty through poverty alleviation programmes (Tsuwa and Jeiyol, 2009).

Many studies have examined the various poverty alleviation programmes put in place over the years in Nigeria (Tsuwa and Jeiyol, 2009, Abdullahi and Gbegi 2006, Mambe 2009, Fayemi and Igbuzor 2005, Jimada 2008, Odey 2007). These programmes include Universal Primary Education (UPE), Operation Feed the Nation (OFN), Green Revolution (GR), National Agency for Mass Literacy (NAML), National Agricultural Land Development Authority (NALDA), Directorate of Food, Roads and Rural Infrastructure (DFRRI), National Directorate of Employment (NDE), Peoples Bank, Better Life for Rural Women, Family Economic Advancement Programme (FEAP), Nation Economic Reconstruction Fund (NERFUND), Poverty Alleviation Programme and National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP).

The thing to note about these programmes is that they were well intended and well thought out. The crisis they all faced was lack of proper and/or insincere implementation. Suffice it to say that there is unanimity in the opinion of scholars that these programmes have not achieved much! This is to the extent that these programmes have not alleviated poverty not to talk about eliminating it. In fact these programmes seem to have made Nigerians poorer (Oyewale, 2005).

And this is worrying! It means that there is a need to interrogate the reasons for such failures. In this direction, scholars have identified some of the factors responsible for the failure of poverty eradication programmes. These include but are not necessarily limited to:

- Policy inconsistency and poor governance;
- Ineffective targeting of the poor (leading to leakage of benefits to unintended beneficiaries);
- Unwieldy scope of the programmes resulting in resources being thinly spread among projects;
- Overlapping of functions which ultimately leads to institutional rivalry and conflicts;
- Lack of mechanism in the various programmes and projects to ensure sustainability;

- Lack of complementarities from beneficiaries;
- Uncoordinated sectoral policy initiatives;
- Lack of involvement of social partners and other stakeholders in planning, implementation and evaluation; and
- Poor human capital development and inadequate funding. (Mambe, 2009).

These constraints in the fight against poverty need to be effectively tackled if the war on poverty has to be won. We shall return to this in the concluding part of the paper.

THE EFFECTS OF POVERTY

The failure of government's fight against poverty has meant that poverty has continued to ravage and wreak havoc on the lives of many Nigerians. This will *ipso facto* mean that it has had very telling effects on the lives of these people. **This has been more so in terms of the impact of poverty in frustrating development efforts. These effects of poverty may be summarized basically as manifestations of underdevelopment.** Dagaci Mambe has summarized the views of some scholars on the effects of poverty as follows:

- Less money is spent per pupil on schools attended by poor children who spend few years in school, do less while there and do not obtain a degree and diploma essential for later job success.
- Poor people have less-nourishing diets and more birth defects, accidents, disease and reported mental illness than others. They are also more likely to be alcoholic and narcotic addicts. As a result, they have higher absenteeism at work and school, lower energy levels, lower productivity and shorter lives. There is high rate of mortality in the society of the poor especially women and children.
- Violent crimes such as assault, rape, homicide, "thuggery" and armed robbery, are committed by and against the poor people and they are more likely to be arrested (falsely or rightfully), less likely to be released pending trial, and more likely to receive stiffer sentences than the non-poor. Due to poverty crisis in the Nigerian system, the socio-political space of the nation is riddled with the collapse of social values, "kleptocracy", political corruption, transition crises, manipulation of electoral process unstable, weak and vulnerable structures, as well as brigandage.
- Another effect of poverty in Nigeria is that poor people vote in much smaller numbers than the rest of society and they are poorly organized to influence any government policies and agencies. Poverty breeds inferiority complex in people and makes them aliens and slaves in societies in which they are ordinarily major stakeholders.
- The poor people pay higher prices and interest rates and are more frequently victimized in their purchase.
- Poverty is dehumanizing and destabilizes the society and degrades the economy. It breeds other vices, because out of poverty, grows the greed and desperation to get rich at all cost through dubious exploitation and all sorts of illegalities, such as bribery, circulation of fake and adulterated products, prostitution, ethno-religious crises, ethnocentrism, vandalization of government properties, oil, telecommunication and electricity equipment. (Mambe, 2009:106- 107).

Other effects of poverty may be enumerated as follows:

- Malnutrition, hunger and starvation
- Infectious disease and exposure to the elements
- Mental illness and drug dependence and increased suicide
- Crime and violence
- Depression
- Homelessness
- Lack of opportunities for employment
- Low literacy
- Social isolation
- Increased discrimination
- Lower life expectancy (Wikipedia and Microsoft Encarta).

Having examined all the above, this paper is of the view as argued elsewhere that the most serious effect of poverty is its dehumanizing component. When a man cannot as a consequence of poverty meet his basic needs such a man loses his dignity and we argue, with that, almost every other thing (Egwemi and Yunusa, 2011). **All these effects of poverty directly and indirectly affect the development efforts of Nigeria. This is why the need for political will is advocated in this paper. It is the reasoned opinion of this paper that dealing with the scourge of poverty is a major step towards tackling the challenge of development in Nigeria.**

CONCLUSION: THE PLACE OF POLITICAL WILL IN THE FIGHT AGAINST CORRUPTION.

Poverty has earned recognition in the extent of its ravaging society and the affairs of humanity at the international, national and local levels... The need exists now for urgent action towards its eradication and control... Indeed poverty is a snare. It is dehumanizing. It must be eradicated (in Mohammed, 2009: 28).

Poverty is pain: it feels like disease. It attacks a person not only materially but also morally. It eats away ones dignity and drives one into total despair (in Keshku, 2007:216).

How does a country overcome a scenario like the one painted above? In other words how can a country like Nigeria overcome the scourge of poverty given its prevalence in the country? This concluding section is to answer the question just

posed. To be sure there are various ways and measures for tackling poverty. Also Nigeria has over the years adopted various strategies aimed at tackling the menace. The point then is to go beyond providing answers to the question posed to examine the problem with the solutions adopted over the years in Nigeria. In other words why have the measures and strategies adopted over the years not eradicated or at least reduced poverty in Nigeria? This concluding part of the paper will interrogate these issues and provide answers to them.

The need to decisively tackle the menace of poverty in Nigeria cannot be overemphasized. Recent data on the rate of poverty in Nigeria has indeed been very frightening. The figures released by the National Bureau of Statistics indicate that 71.5% of the Nigerian population (about 115 million out of 161 million) was relatively poor as at the end of 2011 (Akinmutimi, 2012; Subair 2012; Ibrahim, 2012). These figures leave a lot to be desired. As a corollary the need to tackle the menace of poverty is urgent.

The obstacles to the fight against poverty have been dissected by many scholars (Mohammed, 2009; Mambe, 2009; Fayemi and Igbuzor 2005; Odey, 2007a, 2007b, Onoja, 2007, Bello, 2006, Onwe 1997). These obstacles which have been highlighted earlier include among others; corruption, lack of sincerity among executors of poverty alleviation programmes and the top-bottom approach to the issue of planning of programmes.

WHY POLITICAL WILL?

Throughout sub-Saharan Africa there is clear absence of political commitment. Therefore poverty will continue unabated. This lack of political commitment makes politics the bane of the eradication of sub-Saharan African poverty (Ogbogbodo, 1992:38).

This paper is of the opinion that all the obstacles to effective poverty alleviation can be taken care of once and for all if the necessary political will is brought to bear on poverty alleviation programmes in the country. The argument is that the problem with all the failed solutions to poverty in Nigeria is the lack of the necessary political will to solve the problem.

This writer has elsewhere advocated the need to muster the necessary political will to achieve reliable census figures (Egwemi, 2011) to curb the menace of corruption (Egwemi, 2012) and to tackle the menace of poverty (Egwemi and Yunusa, 2011; Egwemi, 2013). In these disquisitions the lack of political will was identified as a major obstacle to development. For instance if monies meant for development is corruptly appropriated this will affect overall development goals. Furthermore if census results are dubious then proper planning for development is made difficult if not impossible.

In this paper, political will is also advocated in the quest by Nigeria to surmount the challenge of poverty. It is contended that the lack of political will has been the problem with the solutions adopted to tackle poverty over the years in the country. As a corollary the paper makes the point that the scourge of poverty has been a major impediment to the development efforts of Nigeria. An elaboration of this contention is in order at this point.

The advocacy for political will has been an on-going one among scholars and activists interested in poverty alleviation (Obe, 2012, Egwemi & Yunusa, 2011, Egwemi, 2013 Egwu, 2007). Ayo Obe has argued in this direction that “political will is all about making those positive interventions... and breaking the chains of poverty”. (Obe, 2012:51). In the same vein and while still emphasizing the need for political will and the role of the leadership, Grey Mills in his book *Why Africa is poor and*

What Africans can do about it has argued that Africans (and in our specific case, Nigerians) “remain poor because (their) leaders have made that choice” (in Obe, 2012:51).

Some scholars have in the past advocated for the government to intervene to break the circle of poverty (Olowononi, 1997) and the need for policy makers to show more discipline in the execution of poverty alleviation programmes (Egware, 1997). These two scholars to my mind had political will in mind when they reached these conclusions but stopped short at calling it that. For example G.D Olowononi has put forward the following strategies for poverty alleviation.

- i. Fiscal operations of government should be decentralized further, particularly for the provision of infrastructures with more resources being given to state and local government for maintaining and improving social services.
- ii. A reduction should be made in the cost of peace-keeping operations and the security votes. This would release resources for the provision of social and economic infrastructures for the state and local governments.
- iii. Since it was the government that started hyperinflation in the economy through naira devaluation and unjustified increases in the prices of public sector services, measures should be taken to review them in order to alleviate poverty. In this direction subsidies on farm inputs and petroleum products should also be restored.
- iv. The business climate should be made more conducive to local and foreign investments. This will include free entry and exit of capital and labor, interest and dividends. Furthermore, incentives should be based on production rather than on exports.
- v. There is evidence that growth performance is better under import substitution of capital goods than export promotion. Without it, the current export promotion strategy will continue to fail. The increased dependence on imported inputs has hindered export promotion and foreign exchange earnings.
- vi. Poverty will be reduced drastically by ensuring access of the poor to free or subsidized health care services, good drinking water, free education at primary and secondary school levels and making loans available for tertiary education or making it tuition free. The poor must be identified for these programmes to be well executed.
- vii. The problem of inter-state disparities in fiscal capacities must be addressed. There is not a single federation; past or present, old or new without this problem. Government must evolve a special grant system to assist states which cannot provide basic social services for its people without imposing heavy tax burden on them.
- viii. Preservation and conservation of the country’s natural resources will go a long way to alleviate poverty.
- ix. The inclusion of poverty alleviation in the objectives of the Federal and State budgets must be made compulsory.
- x. Efficient management of resources and reduction in the degree of corruption are other ways of poverty alleviation.
- xi. Government should introduce an unemployment insurance scheme which is related to previous wages or salaries and index to inflation.
- xii. For every child of the poor, less than 16 years the mother should receive a tax free cash allowance of N500 per month which could be raised periodically in accordance with inflation rate. All these will raise productivity in various ways, raise the living standards of the poor, bring about a more equitable income distribution and create effective demand.
- xiii. The National Directorate of Employment (NDE) must expand its operations, absorb more school graduates and foreign investors must be attracted to create more jobs for Nigerians. The type of welfare programme advocated here is certainly very costly to maintain. *Nigeria has enough resources to implement it given the political will.* There is

no doubt that the after-tax, earners income of the rich, will be reduced drastically as a result of heavy taxation. Revenue must be generated to support the national welfare programme which should constitute about a third of total public expenditure. (Emphasis mine).

- xiv. While government should increase tariffs on non-essential commodities such as alcoholic drinks, telephone, jewellery and tobacco products, tariffs on essential consumer commodities like gasoline and electricity should be reduced. The anti-poverty programmes recommended fall into two categories, namely those aimed at removing the fuelling factors. The increased public expenditure in the face of declining oil revenue means that government must be strict in its spending. The Petroleum Trust Fund should be made to handle the welfare aspect of these programmes. These programmes, if implemented carefully, will provide for the poor. They will reduce both absolute and relative poverty. (Olowononi, 1997:483-485).

There is no gain saying the fact that without political will none of these strategies will come to reality as well thought as they are. Only by the government mustering the necessary political will, will all these proposals see the light of day.

As we argued earlier in this paper, the lack of political will has been the problem with the solutions put forward for poverty alleviation over the years in Nigeria. As some scholars highlighted earlier have argued there are many factors responsible for the failure of poverty eradication programmes in the country (Mambe, 2009). The argument of this paper is that with the necessary political will, it is possible to take care of these inhibiting factors.

Political will as used in this paper simply means that the people in positions of authority at all levels in Nigeria do the correct thing, that they make the right decisions. In doing so the general well being of the people in the country should be the overriding consideration. Mustering, the political will to tackle poverty will involve the following practical measures;

- Adopting good governance principle as article of faith
- Punishing public officials, who mismanage, divert or embezzle poverty alleviation funds.
- Involving the poor in poverty alleviation programmes.
- The willingness to learn from countries with successful poverty eradication programmes.

An expatiation of these points is in order at this point. The good governance deficit in Nigeria has attracted a lot of scholarly attention. Nigeria has suffered a leadership deficit because the country's leadership over the years has failed (Achebe, 1983, Egwemi 2008, Meir, 2000). The failure of governance has been the reason for the high prevalence of poverty in the North (Onyema, 2012). The 2011 statistics given by the National Bureau of Statistics indicates that the Northern States of Sokoto, Zamfara, Kebbi, Kastina, Bauchi, and Adamawa have poverty rates of between 80% - 89%. These are followed by other northern states which have rates of 70% - 79% (Ibrahim 2012). In relation to this scenario Allen Onyema is of the opinion that;

Every part of this country is marginalized, but one thing we have to say about the North is that their leaders have not been fair to them. The Northerners ruled this country for 35years of our 50years. They had all

the opportunity to provide qualitative education for their people. They did not (Onyema, 2012:71).

There is the need for the government of the day to be decisive in meting out punishment to those involved in diverting or outright stealing of poverty alleviation funds. The need to prosecute such persons cannot be over emphasized. Over the years, governments have put millions of naira into poverty alleviation programmes. If the huge amount of money has not been translated into poverty reduction, then the people charged with these duties may have questions to answer.

This is where political will comes in. The editorial of the *Nigerian Tribune* of 22 June, 2010 titled “Poverty inflicted by profligacy” is of the opinion that part of the explanation for poverty in Nigeria is the profligacy of government officials and comes to the conclusion that;

The government should check the ugly trend in which poverty is getting more pervasive because resources are being deliberately channeled into unproductive ends. Nigeria has had enough of poverty inflicted by profligacy (17).

Until and unless the government does something about corruption in the administration of poverty alleviation funds, the programmes may only continue to aggravate the poverty of Nigerians (Tsuwa and Jeiyol, 2009).

The need for a participatory and pro-poor approach to the war on poverty in Nigeria has been advocated by many scholars (Fayemi and Igbuzor, 2005; Egwu, 2007). It is the case that poverty alleviation programmes in Nigeria have not succeeded because the *real* poor are not involved in the planning and execution of the programmes. Government needs to de-emphasize the top-bottom approach and focus on the bottom-top approach. It is only in this way that the poor can actually benefit from these programmes.

S.G Egwu has summed up the argument for a pro-poor approach to poverty alleviation programmes as follows:

The first proposal for anti-poverty policy measures in Nigeria is to look up to the poor themselves as the major actors in the fight against poverty. This can be achieved through a participatory process in which they set the agenda, define their priorities on the basis of lived experience, and play a leading role, in monitoring and evaluating the policies and programmes of government. This requires building a critical mass from the rank of the poor and their organizations... It requires a movement of the poor, for the poor and by the poor (Egwu, 2007:10-11).

The advocacy for a pro-poor approach to poverty alleviation has been on for a long time but seems to have continually fallen on deaf eyes. It would seem that many people benefit from the existing but unsuccessful system. This is where political will comes. The government needs to determine to do the correct thing-adopt a pro-poor, bottom-top approach even if this would mean rocking the boat and *interfering* with an established pro-elite system. Only political will can bring about a system from which the poor truly benefit.

While it is the case that poverty alleviation programmes have not quite succeeded in Nigeria, it is also the case that some countries have had very successful programmes. The advocacy here is that the Nigerian government should be willing to learn from the experiences of these countries. There are indications that the Nigerian government is not averse to such a proposal. There are reports that Nigeria is considering adopting the Brazilian model of poverty reduction (Abdulhamid, 2012). This is quite encouraging considering that Brazil is one country that has made giant developmental strides in contemporary times. The government should also go beyond Brazil and reach out to other countries with successful poverty reduction programmes.

There are two levels at which such learning can take place. The first is adopting these programmes in terms of their content and the second and more important level is adopting the attitude of the operators of these programmes. If it is established that the problem has been the type of programmes adopted, then there would be a need to change gear. However, if the problem has not been with the programmes, then the attitude towards implementing the programmes needs to change fundamentally. A good programme is likely to be bad if implementation is poor. Therefore the proper attitude needs to be brought to bear on poverty alleviation programmes. Since countries like Brazil have succeeded, adopting their kind of attitude to the issue will be a good start.

S.G Egwu has made the following rather convincing argument on the place of political will in the fight against poverty and why it is imperative to eradicate poverty in order to enhance the prospects of development in Nigeria. According to him;

The Nigerian state must take the primary responsibility for development. This role cannot be abdicated to the private sector, civil society and multilateral finance agencies because it is at the core of the function of the state. The Nigerian state here does not refer to the federal government alone. It refers to all the institutional manifestations of the Nigerian state that relate directly to the management of resources including federal, state and local governments as well as corporate bodies that have been set up to promote development. All these other institutions and organizations can at best compliment the efforts of government. Poverty is driven primarily by political forces. It is to be explained by the very logic of the reproduction of the Nigerian state. And It persists because of the lack of political will by successive regimes to deal frontally with the problem (Egwu, 2007:12-13) (Emphasis mine).

This paper has advocated and expatiated on the need to bring the necessary political will to bear on the fight against poverty in Nigeria. **The advocacy for political will is underscored by the fact that when poverty is curbed the chances for achieving and sustaining development in Nigeria will be greatly enhanced.**

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