

PERCEPTION OF POVERTY AND THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANISATIONS IN POVERTY ALLEVIATION

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Abstract

This paper examines the perception of poverty in two semi-urban communities, the relative success of their community-based organisations in alleviating perceived community poverty and the reasons for this relative success/failure. The paper argues that government's strategy of development impacts strongly on rural poverty. It then suggests some measures for rural poverty alleviation. These include capacity building for community organisations, a renewed commitment to rural development by the Federal Government and the establishment of a rural development bank.

Introduction

The subject of poverty alleviation and sustainable development has for sometime now increasingly engaged the attention of people and organisations concerned with national development in particular and the human condition in general. So great has the attention been that scholars, governmental agencies (e.g. National Planning Commission) international organisations (e.g. I.L.O., SIDA, UNDP) and professional associations (e.g. Nigerian Economic Society, Nigerian Environmental Study/Action Team, and Social Science Council of Nigeria) have conducted surveys and/or organised seminars on one or the other aspect of poverty alleviation and sustainable development. The increasing attention paid to the subject has emanated from three related reasons, viz:

- (i) the failure of past development programmes with their emphasis on industrialisation and economic growth;
- (ii) the consequent increase in the incidence and severity of poverty in many nations, particularly of the third world; and
- (iii) the recognition that sustainable development requires the mobilization, incorporation and participation of the poor in the development process.

Thus, scholarly attention has now come to focus on designing development programmes which place people at the centre of development so that long-

term equitable development can be achieved. In essence, sustainable development has come to mean the eradication of poverty, improvement in people's standard of living through an increase in the basic level of material welfare, and, people's participation in taking decisions on matters that affect their lives and livelihood. Thus, some of the areas the subject covers have come to include the identification of the poor, the determination of the severity and magnitude of poverty, the appropriate institutional framework and mechanisms for poverty alleviation, among others. This paper looks at the perception of poverty in two semi-urban communities and the role of their organisations in poverty alleviation.

The paper is structured as follows: after this introductory section, the paper goes on to look at the nature and origin of rural poverty in some historical depth. It then appraises government efforts to develop the rural areas. The next section outlines the research conducted in the two communities and its findings. The final section considers the implication of the findings for poverty alleviation and makes some recommendations.

The Nature and Origin of Rural Poverty

The rural areas of Nigeria are areas of poverty and insecurity. Generally, they are characterised by low level of socio-economic activities, low purchasing power, lack of infrastructure and lack of such social amenities as clean water, electricity, medical care facilities, education, etc.

These rural areas account for over 70% of the population, provide employment in agriculture and related activities for a large majority of the population and also serve as the source of food and raw materials for the urban areas and many industries. Yet they have continued to witness increasing poverty, immiseration and marginalisation vis-a-vis the urban areas. For example, the urban areas of Nigeria accounted in 1990 for over 60% of the socio-economic infrastructures available in the country, 80% of industrial establishments, 70% of trade and commerce, 90% of banking facilities, etc. (Fabayo, 1990).

The history of this disadvantaged position of the rural vis-a-vis the urban areas dates back to the colonial period. The colonial authorities were not particularly enthusiastic about the overall development of their colonies in general and in the rural areas in particular. The primary concern of colonialism was the economic exploitation of the colonies. For a long time there were no development plans for the colonies and when the first set of plans was devised after the Second World War, the plans were meant to respond to the balance-of-payments problems which Britain faced (Morgan, 1980) as well as the loss of Asian colonies and, therefore, the necessity by the African colonies to produce certain crops both for consumption and as sources of revenue.

Development was thus defined mainly in terms of the expansion of primary products and mineral exports. Government attention focussed on the provisions of infrastructure such as roads and railways for the evacuation of primary products and the investment of public and private capital in areas that were considered acceptable and profitable by the government and private investors, respectively. These areas excluded issues of social and material welfare and distributional inequality between classes, groups and rural versus urban areas.

Indeed, because of the colonial governments lack of enthusiasm for the development of social services (e.g. education, sanitation, water, medical care), the little development that took place was due largely to the efforts of the missionaries and the development of trade and commerce which increased the demand for more western type of education particularly in the southern part of the country (Crowther, 1968). And when finally attention was paid to these services on a wider scale their provision was based on the principle that each colony and each area should obtain only those services it could pay for.

The effect of the operation of this principle and the relative advantageous position of the urban areas that served as seats of administration was the

development of structural inequalities between the urban and the rural areas on the one hand, and on the other hand, the inequalities between different rural areas due to the selection and geographical advantage of some rural areas as centres for the production of valued cash crops. Also discriminatory colonial policies as regards education, medical care provision, employment and wages not only led to interpersonal inequalities between the educated and the uneducated and between the workers and the peasants, but also reinforced the structural inequalities between geographical areas. As regards water, sanitation and health services, not only were these generally inadequate but they were also urban-biased and were rarely available to the large majority of the populations of the colonies, particularly in the rural areas.

In sum, the experience of colonial domination and control resulted in fostering gross developmental inadequacies as well as extreme inequalities within the nation - state. The significance of these inequalities lies in the fact that they are inextricably linked to the economic and social mobility chances of individual and groups and determine the extent and effectiveness of their participation in the social, economic and political life of the country. Indeed, much of the country's social-political history and development efforts have revolved around the attempt to deal with these colonially inherited developmental inadequacies and inequalities.

Rural Development Programmes in Nigeria

Nigeria's rural development policies and programmes became more systematic after 1975. These systematic policies and programmes have ranged between such single sectoral programmes as the Agricultural Development Programmes (ADPs) to multisectoral, integrated or comprehensive development programmes such as Integrated Rural Development Projects (IRDP). They have included such strategies as currency devaluation, tax incentives, subsidies for agricultural inputs, direct government intervention in education, health, agricultural research and extension services, land reform and even family planning.

In more concrete terms, attempts to transform the rural areas of Nigeria since 1976 have included the establishment of the Agricultural Development Programmes (ADPs) in Funtua, Gusau, Gombe, Ayangba and Lafia in 1975/76; the Operation Feed the Nation in 1977; the Land Use Decree of 1978; the establishment of thirteen irrigation projects or River Basin Development Authorities in 1976,

River Basin and Rural Development Authorities (1979); the Universal Primary Education Scheme of 1976; the five year tax holiday granted those willing to invest in agricultural production and processing of 1977; the Green Revolution in 1980; the establishment of the Directorate of Food, Roads and Rural Infrastructures (DFRRI), "Mass Mobilization for Social and Economic Recovery (MAMSER)," Primary Health Care Scheme, National Directorate of Employment (NDE), Better Life Programme (BLP) and the Peoples and Community Banks during the Babangida period; and lately, the Family Support and Family Economic Advancement Programmes and the increase in the Local Governments share of value added tax from 25 percent in 1997 to 30 percent in 1998.

In spite of the numerous policies and programmes, not much has been achieved in terms of rural development. Observationally, the rural areas remain poor both in absolute terms and relative to the urban areas. The differentials in employment, income, power, education, health and general material well-being that existed at the time of independence between the rich and the poor, and between the urban and the rural areas, have assumed more visible and more invidious proportions as shown by several studies by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) (1981), World Health Organisation (WHO) (1992) the World Bank (1996) and the UNDP (1997). According to the WHO for instance, in 1980 the numbers of doctors and nurses per 10,000 of the population working in urban areas were 17 and 13 times the numbers in the rural areas (I.L.O., 1981:103). Between 1983 and 1984, eight percent of the rural population had access to electricity compared with 69% of the urban population. According to the WHO 1992 report, 30 percent of the urban population had access to sanitation services between 1983 and 1985 while the figure for the rural areas was five percent. Also, whereas 60 percentage of the urban population had access to safe drinking water in 1983/85 the figure rose to 100 percent in 1986/87. The figure for the rural areas remained at 20 percent for both periods (WHO, 1992:55).

A recent study of the period 1985 - 92 by the Federal Office of Statistics in collaboration with the World Bank summed up the situation as follows:

The number of rural poor is roughly twice that of the urban poor. The depth of poverty... was more than double in the rural area... of the extremely poor, 85

percent lived in rural areas and more than two-thirds lived on farms. Income inequality is also worse in rural areas, with a Gini coefficient of 45.6 compared with 39.9 for urban Lagos (Poverty and Welfare in Nigeria, 1997:8).

Reasons for Failure

Several reasons have been adduced for the failure of government's rural development efforts. While some of these include the lack of technical and financial capacities at the local level, the influence of powerful urban-based professionals, inefficient fiscal structure, lack of accountability and transparency in government at all levels, etc, the most critical has been the strategy of development pursued by government. Successive regimes, since formal political independence in 1960 have conceived of the essence of development as achieving maximum rates of economic growth in the belief that growth will not only bring about development but will also reduce if not eliminate poverty and inequality through its trickle down effect. The second, third and fourth development plans put the desired growth rate at between six and seven percent per annum up to the end of 1980. Currently, the 1997-99 and 1998-2000 Rolling Plans envisage a 5.5 and a 6-10 percent annual growth rates up to the end of the year 2000, respectively.

This narrow economic conception of development has resulted in greater emphasis on growth objectives than on the structural inequalities between individuals and groups and between the rural and the urban areas. It has also resulted in an outright neglect of social services in spite of the substantial demand for such services in the rural areas and the consequence of their absence on the health, well-being and economic activities of the rural people.

Unfortunately, government policy pronouncements, programmes and strategies in the last four years reveal an essential continuity with this flawed strategy of development as can be seen in the summary of government objectives and programmes presented below.

Summary of Government Objectives and Programmes, 1995-2000

1997 - 1999 Rolling Plan

1. Ensuring Macro-Economic Stability.
2. Achieving an average of 5.5 percent economic growth rate per annum.

3. Reduction in the level of unemployment.
- (New Nigerian, January 22, 1997).

1998 - 2000 Rolling Plan

1. Sustained annual growth of 6-10 percent GDP
2. Accelerated agricultural production to ensure food sufficiency and provision of raw materials.
3. Full fledged industrialisation... for the enhancement of the exportation of manufactured goods.
- (The Punch, January 8, 1998).

Major Budget Thrusts

1995 Budget

1. Intensive revenue collection drive,
2. Reduction in fiscal deficit, inflation, extra budgetary spending, etc.
3. Expansion of the economy's productive base and improvement in the level of capacity utilisation.
4. Funding of non-oil prime movers and encouragement of agricultural production so as to eventually replace oil as the nation's foreign exchange earner.
- (The Daily Times, Jan. 18, 1995).

1996 Budget

1. Enhancement of increased production and productive capacity;
2. Encouragement of export promotion and growth;
3. Promotion of non-oil prime movers, including agriculture and solid minerals, as the nation's major foreign exchange earner.
- (The Guardian, Feb. 16, 1996).

1997 Budget

1. Encouragement of private foreign investments for growth and development;
2. Agricultural and food production;
3. Family economic development.
- (New Nigerian, Jan. 22, 1997).

1998 Budget

1. Establishment of poverty alleviation programme;
2. Agricultural development programme including sustenance of ADPs, FADAMA and NALDA programmes;
3. Completion of ongoing Irrigation projects of

4. River Basin Authorities;
Establishment of agricultural programme for youth employment to complement FEAP, NDE and NALDA programmes.
- (The Punch, Jan. 8, 1998).

In addition to the emphasis on growth objectives, there is the issue of corruption and lack of transparency. A huge percentage of funds allocated for rural development goes into private accounts or pockets, through the inflation of contract rates and administrative overheads. Above all, the planning and implementation of projects are usually over centralised. Rarely, if ever, are the views, perception and knowledge of the intended beneficiaries sought let alone incorporated into the planning and implementation process. It is against this background of government's continuing lack of responsiveness to the yearnings and aspirations of the majority rural people that an examination of communal efforts to alleviate poverty becomes very pertinent. In the absence of a strong state presence, most people and communities have taken their destinies into their own hands. What then have been the results and what lessons can be learned from these efforts? The next section examines these issues based on the result of a research conducted in two communities.

The Research

Between March and June 1995, a nationwide survey of the potential beneficiaries of a proposed poverty alleviation programme was conducted by the National Planning Commission in collaboration with the UNDP and the World Bank. The country was divided into six zones. Three local government areas (LGAs) and two communities were selected from each zone and each LGA, respectively. The criteria for the selection of communities included size, rural/urban status, the degree of accessibility, the presence of poverty and evidence of strong community efforts to address poverty. Among the communities selected in Oyun LGA of Kwara state were Ipee and Ira.

Generally, a qualitative participatory appraisal research technique was used to collect data. The dimensions of the technique included detailed observational tours of the communities, extensive consultation with carefully selected informants, and, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with the informants and members of the public. Data were collected on community history, socio-economic differentiation, the perception of poverty, the

characteristics and performance of existing organisations and the development priorities of each community and groups within it.

The Communities

Ipee is a small town situated in the eastern part of Oyun LGA. The people claim descent from Oyo - Ile from which their ancestors were said to have migrated. The population at the time of research was estimated to be about 25,000 by a well-informed informant. Although there are a few migrants, including the Fulani who have settled in some of the villages in the Onipee's domain, the area is ethnically and culturally homogeneous.

The economy is mainly agricultural. Most of the people, including salaried employees, are farmers. Occupational and socio-economic differentiations are not noticeable. Most of the houses are small, old fashioned and contain little or no furnishing. Even the present palace of the Onipee does not stand out conspicuously from the other houses.

Like Ipee, Ira is also a small town situated in the south western part of Oyun LGA. It is smaller in size and has a population of about 15,000 people. The people claim descent from Oyo from where their founder - Laage - was said to have migrated. Ira is made up of the same ethnic group as Ipee and is also culturally homogeneous.

The economy is based on subsistence agriculture but there is also some trading and stone crushing done manually by women. However, most of the farmers are the old and the adolescents schooling at home because many of the middle-aged and able-bodied indigenes live away from home, particularly in far away Kaduna. Thus, there is very little, if any, vertical and horizontal occupational and socio-economic differentiation.

Perception of Poverty

The people of both Ipee and Ira perceive themselves as poor both absolutely and relative to other communities. Except for a handful of high level professionals in Ipee, most of the people in the two communities are income poor. Farming, the major occupation in the two communities, is considered a poor man's occupation because it does not lead to the accumulation of wealth and material goods. In the words of the Onipee, "we are all poor people here". Poverty is seen to manifest at two levels. There is a community level poverty. This refers to lack of infrastructural and other facilities especially industries, electricity, water and roads which other communities are seen to possess in varying degrees. The other type

is individual level poverty. This refers to an individual's inability to provide the basic necessities of food, clothing and shelter for himself and/or family. Individual poverty is attributed solely to lack of personal efforts and/or personal misfortune. Every individual is expected to fend for him/herself and his/her dependents, if any. According to one informant, "any one who is not sick is expected to take care of himself. Sick people receive help from members of their families".

Community level poverty is seen to derive from the inability and/or unwillingness of governments to develop the communities and raise their level of material welfare. The Federal Government is seen to be too remote and indifferent while the state and the local governments are seen as inefficient, corrupt and lacking the resources for development projects. Cases of abandoned uncompleted projects, of completed but non-functioning ones, and lack of response to requests and unfulfilled promises were cited as evidence for the negative evaluation of all levels of government.

Because of the failure of governments and the prevailing conception of poverty, there are no specific programmes targeted at the poor. The communities rely on the efforts of their organisations to mobilise human and material resources for the execution of projects that would alleviate perceived community level deprivation and poverty.

Community Organizations

Ipee is a highly democratically organised community. It is served by three major organisations which work together to identify community needs and mobilise resources for their provision. The three organisations are the Traditional Council, the Ipee Progressive Union (IPU) and the Egbe Atunluse.

The traditional council consists of the Onipee, six high chiefs who also constitute the king-makers and six lower chiefs who are equal in rank and authority. The council meets every market day but extraordinary meetings are summoned when necessary. Matters for discussion may originate from the Onipee, the council members or may be brought to the council by the IPU or the Atunluse. Although the Onipee takes decisions on activities involving expenditure, generally decisions are arrived at on the basis of consensus no matter how long it takes to reach consensus.

The I.P.U. was founded in 1956 and is open to all indigenes regardless of age, sex and socio-economic status. It meets twice a year (Easter and Christmas) and has branches all over the country with a President resident in Ipee. The national executive council is elected for a two-year term renewable for a

second term and election is always by open ballot. Although the posts are open to all indigenes, only highly educated ones get elected. The executive council meets monthly and approves all expenditure. Every indigene contributes five naira monthly, excluding levies which are charged according to socio-economic status. Levies are imposed and collected through the Egbe Atunluse and the IPU's accounts are audited every year. The IPU serves as an umbrella organisation for all the clubs and societies and as an organ for the identification of projects and the mobilization of resources.

The Egbe Atunluse was created by the IPU. It consists of two representatives from each of the nineteen compounds in Ipee. Thus, each compound is treated equally in terms of participating in taking decisions on matters of interest to the community. Only the compound representatives attend its bi-monthly meetings. The Chairman of the Atunluse is a member of the executive council of the IPU. In addition to the collection of levies, the Atunluse serves as a channel for passing information to the compounds, mobilising people for communal activities and for enforcing community sanctions.

In addition to these three, there are thirty-three clubs and societies. While some of them are purely social, others are special interest organisations like the women's clubs, farmers clubs and cooperative societies. All clubs and societies register with the IPU as a rule. Some common characteristics of the clubs and societies are the small membership of about 15 to 25 people who tend to be friends and/or age mates who grew up together; short span of existence (all except the Ipee Social Club, are between 5 and 15 years old); small monthly contributions; long stay in office by officials; focus on activities that directly benefit their members; and, lack of relationships with other organisations.

The organisations in Ira include the traditional council, the Ira Descendants Union (IDU) and about twelve clubs, societies and traders associations such as club 20, Araromi Club for Women only, kolanuts sellers association, etc. None of the clubs or societies is expected to register with the IDU. All of them are small in size, have loose structures, collect small contributions and, most importantly, have absentee leaders/members. Most indigenes live outside Ira, particularly in Kaduna. Their clubs/societies, therefore, lack effective presence at home. Although there are eighteen compounds in Ira, there is no organ under which they are brought together as in the Atunluse in Ipee. Thus, the two relatively effective organisations are the traditional council and the IDU.

The traditional council consists of the Onira and four high chiefs - Esa, Jagun, Elemosho and Balogun and a few honorific title holders. Although the council is supposed to meet on market days (every five days) its meetings were reported to be infrequent, perhaps because of the advanced age of the Onira at the time of the research. Issues which originate from within the council or are brought before it are discussed in reverse order of seniority. Final decisions are taken by the Onira after members have expressed their views. All projects or programmes must be approved by the Onira-in-Council.

The IDU was founded in 1964 as Ira Progressive Union but changed its name in 1993. It is open to all indigenes without restriction. Every employed indigene pays an annual contribution of N50.00 (men) and N20.00 (women) regardless of occupation. The money is paid directly to the IDU. The Union meets once a year but its executive council (exco) meets every three months. None of the executive members could be reached at the time of the research but it was learnt that its decisions are usually taken by majority vote. The IDU has been the most, if not the only, effective organisation in Ira.

Performance Evaluation

Given the observed differences in the structures of the communities, the dynamism of their organisations and effective leadership and membership presence, Ipee has been more successful in alleviating perceived community level poverty than Ira and many other communities of its size. Available infrastructural facilities include two primary schools, three secondary schools two of which were built by the community, a post office and telephone services (both from the community's efforts), a basic health centre, a veterinary clinic and an uncompleted general hospital begun by the state government in 1980 but abandoned. Other ongoing projects include a town hall begun by the community in 1979 but set aside when the community decided to build a new palace; a community bank and a modern market, and the improving/upgrading of a network of roads linking Ipee with surrounding communities.

Ira has two primary schools which were established in 1942 and 1948 but taken over by the state government in 1967 and 1968, respectively. A secondary school was established by the state government in 1979 but is now supported by the IDU annually. The facilities for which the community has been responsible include: payment for the hand pump, installation and maintenance of a well sunk by the Kwara ADP in 1994; supply of poles for electricity

transmission by N.E.P.A.; a town hall built in 1984; a community bank began in 1994; a postal agency; and, a ring road and four feeder roads begun in 1995.

In sum, although both communities are culturally homogenous, identify a common goal and use similar institutional mechanisms, Ipee has been evidently more successful than Ira. The reasons for this success include greater effective leadership and membership presence and commitment; a democratic structuring of the community, including the creation of the Egbe Atunluse which demonstrates the equality and ensures the commitment of all compounds, the frequency of conventions which helps to maintain the support of old members and to attract new ones, effective control of the clubs by the IPU and the presence of the threat or actual use of sanctions by the Atunluse.

Implications and Recommendations

Given the absence of a strong state presence, people and communities have for long been making efforts to ameliorate their living conditions. Naturally, each community defines for itself a desirable mode of existence and the institutional mechanism for attaining it. Because of the differences in the circumstances of each community, not all the communities are successful in achieving their objectives. These observations have implications for poverty alleviation and sustainable development.

Firstly, effective community organisations are necessary for poverty alleviation and sustained development efforts. The effectiveness of these organisations requires the commitment and innovativeness of community leaders and their followers, including the educated and enlightened members of the community. Communities that lack committed leaders and/or whose educated sons and daughters tend not to identify with them, suffer from their poverty and the inability to tackle it. Hence, community leaders need to attract and involve all their subjects, wherever they may live, in community development and poverty alleviation programmes.

Secondly, community-based organisations need to be strengthened in their operational capacity and democratic practices through technical assistance, management training and human resources development. Such capacity building will enhance greater participation by individuals and groups, better identification of community needs and appropriate mechanisms for meeting them, and the sustainability of poverty alleviation projects.

Thirdly, communities vary in their

perceptions of poverty. While the two communities in this study perceive poverty only in terms of community deprivation, others see poverty in individual or group terms. For a national poverty alleviation programme to be generally successful it must accommodate the different perceptions of poverty and, in particular, the cultures in which they are rooted. Where communities emphasize community deprivation and focus on alleviating community poverty, ways need to be found to address the specific needs of poor individuals and groups as well as to give them greater access to community services based on need.

In this regard, the introduction of the Family Support and the Family Economic Advancement Programme (FEAP) by the Abacha administration is appreciated. However, the institutional mechanism chosen by FEAP to alleviate poverty is not likely to give the desired result. According to the programme, people are to be mobilised and encouraged to form cooperatives which will then use loans obtainable from commercial and Peoples Banks to go into productive ventures. While cooperatives will foster entrepreneurship, bring together people with common goals and are efficient in the use of resources, they tend to further the interests of their members rather than the collective good, often widen the gap between the rich and the poor in the rural areas, and are often captured by the already rich and powerful to the detriment of even their members.

Fourthly, government needs to reconsider its apparent indifference to rural development and see the alleviation of rural poverty as a precondition for, and a measure of, overall national development. Most of the people in the country live in rural areas and the absence of social welfare services in these areas not only impacts negatively on the health, well-being and economic activities of the rural people but also induces rural-urban migration and exacerbates political tension.

Instead of indifference, the government should renew its commitment to rural poverty alleviation and development and should establish a National Rural Development Bank with a high social responsibility content. The Bank which will focus solely on the provision of rural social welfare services will not compete with the Petroleum Special Trust Fund whose responsibility will be restricted to infrastructural development or with FEAP whose activities will tend to favour personal/family development. Rather, the NRDB will fund welfare projects to be determined by the poor communities themselves and to which most people will have access. Its funds will be channeled through the peoples

grassroots organisations which together with the bank will serve as a catalyst to mobilise the people to participate in and enjoy the fruits of their own development.

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