

Poverty – Conflict Nexus: The Nigerian Experience.

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Abstract: *This paper examined poverty-conflict nexus within the Nigerian setting. The phenomenon of poverty has become so endemic in Nigeria to the extent that all recent statistics point in the direction that a greater proportion of the Nigerian population lives in poverty. High poverty rate in Nigeria has been attributed to a number of factors including inept leadership that breeds monumental corruption in all facets of life. Corruption ensures that the wealth of the nation is not equitably distributed among its citizens leading to very high level of inequality. Few people have appropriated far more than their fair of the commonwealth thereby pushing the majority of the people to the margin of society. Poverty in Nigeria has been exacerbated by the fact that the poor do not have any voice in the political process. This situation generates massive frustration within the population that also leads to varying degrees of conflict. The paper therefore contends that the numerous conflict situations and violent criminal activities witnessed frequently in Nigeria are directly linked to poverty.*

Key Words: *Poverty, Conflict, Corruption, Inequality, Marginalization.*

Introduction:

The poverty level in Nigeria is assuming a very worrisome dimension as more and more Nigerians drift towards the margin of society. This situation was aptly captured by the World Bank President Jim Yong Kim at the IMF/World Bank spring meeting held in April, 2014 where he restated that Nigeria is one of the five countries that have the highest number of poor people. Nigeria according to him ranks third in the world behind India and China. The Director-General of the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) stated in his written press conference address in 2011 that about 112 million Nigerians were living in poverty (Punch Editorial, 2014). Five years down the line, the situation instead of improving is even getting worse. The current Vice President of Nigeria Mr Yemi Osinbajo in August, 2015 stated that over 100 million Nigerians were still living below poverty line despite the policies of past governments to improve their welfare. He further stated that the policies were wrongly formulated and as a result did not have direct impact on the people.

The high level of poverty in Nigeria has been attributed to a number of factors including poor leadership that breeds corruption which has become institutionalized. Corruption ensures that the wealth of the nation is not evenly distributed among its teeming population generating very high level of inequality to extent that the gap between individuals in terms of material wealth is one of the widest in the world. The people that have appropriated the wealth of the nation are in the minority while the poor are in the majority. The poverty situation in Nigeria has been made worse by the fact that the poor are completely excluded from the political process ensuring that they do not make any input in decisions that pertain to their lives.

Nigeria is also currently plagued by a number of security challenges, posing a variety of threats to Africa's most populous nation. These security issues are fall-outs of the activities of the Boko Haram Islamic Sect, militancy in the Niger Delta region of the country, armed robbery, cult activities, kidnapping, herdsmen/farmers clashes,

communal clashes, activities of ethnic militia groups among others (Mac-Leva, 2016). Even domestic conflicts have also heightened as a result of the biting economic situation in the country presently. In Nigeria, conflict is very often the result of political, economic and social instability frequently stemming from bad governance, failed economic policies and inappropriate development programmes (Epkonyong, 2011).

The failure of governance is core to the socio-economic and political development challenges confronting Nigeria and the spate of violence that threatens national security (Omodia, 2012). Given that democratic governance reinforces the social bond that exists between the government and the governed, the expectation is that public policies and programmes should reflect majorly appropriate citizens' demands and aspirations made upon the political system. In Nigeria, the extent to which government policies have their origin in the people is minimal (Omodia & Aliu, 2013). According to Jega (2007), the political leadership is characterized by blatant personalization of power, predatory, parochial, prebendal and patrimonial tendencies. These ills no doubt undermine popular participation and the critical role of the masses in setting the agenda of governance (Olaniyi, 2001). The fact that in most cases the outcome of the elitist imposed policies consists of widespread unemployment, corruption and poverty tend to worsen the peoples sense of alienation and frustration in the political system which often translate into disobedience of the state and the resort to violence as a means to challenge the legitimacy of the state. This explains in part the Niger Delta militancy and the Boko Haram insurgency in the North (Omodia, 2012). In the light of the foregoing, this study sets out to examine the relationship between massive poverty in Nigeria and the numerous conflict situations that often generate security challenges in the country.

Clarification of Concepts

Poverty: Poverty is at once a universal phenomenon and a culture-bound concept. Based on the extent and nature of poverty Bjorn Hettne (2002) has developed five classifications of poverty. First, absolute poverty which occurs when human beings live in a state of deprivation as a result of meager income or lack of access to basic human needs which include food, safe water, sanitation, health, shelter, education, and information. Second is relative poverty which defines poverty from a comparative point of view. Here poverty is not absolute but relative. Relative poverty is defined in terms of judgments by members of a particular society of what is considered as reasonable and acceptable standard of living and styles of life according to the conventions of the day. Just as conventions change from time to time, and place to place, so will definitions of poverty (Shankar Roa, 2013). Townsend, (1979) also suggests that any definition of poverty must be related to the needs and demands of a changing society. The third is administrative poverty which includes all those who are eligible for state welfare because they are either temporarily unemployed and/or unable to earn an income. The fourth is consensual poverty which depends on the perceptions of what the public deems to be below basic sustenance. Finally, contextual poverty which is based on a comparison of poverty to the socio-cultural and economic levels of a particular society. This definition is helpful in contrasting the poor and non-poor in a particular society.

According to Draman (2003), a common thread runs through all these distinctions of poverty. They highlight the fact that poverty is a general condition of deprivation and want that consigns its victims to the periphery of their societies. Quite apart from defining poverty from a demographic point of view, poverty can also be defined as a static or dynamic concept. The definition of poverty as a cycle projects its dynamic nature and its linkage to marginalization and social exclusion. The implications of the various meanings attached

to poverty entail different approaches to social mobilization and protest. By using our local approaches to the study of poverty, we can portray this element of social mobilization, protest and conflict. These include the livelihoods, exclusion and rights, human security, and risk and vulnerability approaches. The livelihoods approaches classifies household assets into forms of human, social, natural, financial, and physical capital and determines which of these a particular individual is deprived of. This is helpful because it is broader, inclusive and context specific (Draman, 2013).

The World Bank provides a simple definition of poverty which views the phenomenon as multidimensional and a situation in which people are unable to fulfill their basic needs as well as lack of control over resources, lack of education and skills, poor health, malnutrition, lack of shelter, poor access to water and sanitation, vulnerability to shocks, violence and crime and the lack of political freedom and voice.

According to Adejumbi (2006), there are three things to be noted about poverty. First, it is a structural phenomenon that has multidimensional perspective. It manifests in economic, social and political arenas. The second is the process nature of poverty. Poverty is not a natural state of affairs nor is it a specific event. It is usually the result of a constellation of forces that undermines the capacity and living conditions of a people. Third, is the relative nature of poverty; poverty has cultural relativism. Apart from the general standards, there are socio-cultural variations to the issue of poverty. What a society considers to be a feature of poverty may not be so for some other societies. This is why caution is necessary in understanding the issue of poverty on a global scale (Adejumbi, 2006).

Conflict: Conflict is generally defined as an interaction between interdependent people who perceive incompatible goals and who expect interference from the other party if they attempt to achieve their goals (Draman, 2003). According to

Galtung (1996), conflict could be viewed as a triangle with structure, attitudes, and behavior as its vertices. By structure, he means the conflict situation, the parties, and the conflict of interest among them. Conflict arises where the parties come to have incompatible interests, values or goals. He uses the term attitudes to refer to the tendency for the parties to see conflict from their own point of view, to identify with own side, and to diminish the concerns of others. Behaviour includes gestures and communications, which can convey either a hostile or a conciliatory intent.

Conflict, by definition is an intrinsic and inevitable part of human existence. However, violent conflict is not inevitable and as such is an anomaly. Conflict is defined as the pursuit of incompatible interests and goals by different groups (Francis, 2011). According to Himes (1980), conflict is conceived as a purposeful struggle between collective actors who use social power to defeat or remove opponents in order to gain status, resources and push their values over other social groupings. The potential for conflict exists whenever and wherever people have contact. As people are organized into groups to seek a common goal, the probability of conflict greatly increases. Only the most serious conflicts make headlines, therefore conflict in general has a negative connotation in society at large. All conflicts are not the same and we often face conflicts on all levels.

When a conflict turns into open combat with a least 25 battle related deaths per year, then it is described as armed conflict. Armed conflict exists between governments (inter-state) or between governments and armed groups within states or between opposing armed groups (intra-state). However, intra-state conflict is the dominant form of conflict in the world in general and Africa in particular (Draman, 2003).

The Poverty – Conflict Nexus in the Nigerian Setting: A Theoretical Review.

Although poverty and conflict are different phenomena that plague different societies, the effect of one on the other has been the subject of much research. There is therefore a lot of disagreement about the specific relationship between poverty and conflict (Draman, 2003). While one school of thought thinks that poverty causes conflict, the other school of thought argues that only the reverse is true. Admittedly, the relationship between poverty and conflict is blurred. Poverty is both a cause and a consequence of conflict. The relationship is two-way: poverty leads to conflict and vice versa (Draman, 2003). Those who dismiss the link between poverty and conflict generally argue that poverty may lead to conflict when other factors are present, meaning that it is not a sufficient condition for conflict to occur. Nelson (1998) for instance, argues that the precise links between economic grievances and ethnic conflict are elusive, variable, and strongly conditioned by a wide range of non-economic factors.

However, according to Draman (2003), there are a number of theoretical and empirical studies that have established the link between poverty and conflict. These studies show that poverty, inequality, scarcity of resources and external economic forces all combine to have a destabilizing impact on political stability. These studies can be classified into psychological and economic arguments. The frustration-aggression theory and relative deprivation theory suggest that individuals become aggressive when there are obstacles (perceived and real) to their success in life. The frustration-aggression hypothesis argues that the occurrence of aggressive behavior always presupposes the existence of frustration and that the existence of frustration always leads to some form of aggression. Frustration is understood to mean preventing the fulfillment of a goal. The frustration-aggression hypothesis otherwise known as frustration-aggression displacement theory is a theory of aggression proposed by Dollar, Doob, Miller, Mowrer, and Sears (1939).

The theory says that aggression is the result of blocking, or frustrating a person's effort to attain a goal. Frustration causes aggression, but when the source of the frustration cannot be challenged, the aggression gets displaced onto an innocent target. This theory can also be used to explain riots and revolutions which are both caused by poorer and more deprived sections of society who may express their bottled up frustration and anger through violence.

Closely associated with the frustration-aggression theory is the relative deprivation theory first proposed by Ted Robert Gurr (1970). The theory stresses that sometimes people perceive themselves to be deprived relative to others. It is the perception that creates the inter-group hostility, rather than the actual relative status of the two groups. This often happens when conditions improve more slowly for one group than for another. The theory argues that collective actions have their foundations among people who feel deprived of some goods and services. According to this approach, individuals and groups who lack some goods, services and comfort are more likely to organize collectively to improve or defend their conditions. Gurr's hypothesis is that the potential for collective violence varies strongly with the intensity and scope of relative deprivation among members of a collectivity. Just as frustration produces aggressive behavior on the part of an individual, so does relative deprivation predict collective violence by social groups (Gurr, 1970).

Social psychologists break the relative deprivation theory into fraternal and egoistic deprivation. Fraternal deprivation is the feeling that one's group is deprived relative to another while egoistic deprivation is the feeling that one individual is deprived relative to another. In other words, fraternal deprivation is group – related while egoistic deprivation is related to the individuals. Fraternal deprivation is most closely linked with prejudice, social protest, and nationalism (Draman, 2003).

These theories are relevant in discussing the relationship between poverty and conflict in Africa. With poor governance structures and unequal access and distribution of economic resources, some segments of the population tend to have better opportunities than others. This inevitably alters power relations and in turn leads to the persistence of poverty amongst certain groups with very serious consequences for social stability. When people perceive poverty as being inflicted on them, then the frustration-aggression thesis becomes relevant in understanding why men rebel (Draman, 2003).

These two theories help to provide deeper insights in the relationship between poverty and conflict within the Nigerian context. Most of the violent conflicts that have rocked Nigeria over the years are part of the consequences of failed development process. It is an undisputable fact that the failure of governance to improve the wellbeing of most Nigerians is a major contributory factor to the emergence of numerous threats to national security (Omodia and Aliu, 2013). Successive governments in Nigeria have been colossal failures in terms of improving the material conditions of the Nigerian people leading to high levels of poverty in land. The political elite have taken advantage of their sojourn in the corridors of power to corner the resources that is suppose to go round to everybody leaving the greater proportion of the Nigerian population in poverty. This explains why there are cries of marginalization coming from different groups across the country. Some of these groups have also tried to ventilate their anger and frustration by embarking on acts that are capable of compromising national security. The activities of the of the Boko Haram in the North Eastern part of Nigeria, the renewed militancy in the Niger Delta region of the country, and the frequent protests organized by the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) now known as Indigenous People of Biafra (IPB) are cases in point.

According to the National Bureau of Statistics (2012), the high poverty rates are recorded in the North-West and North-East geopolitical zones of the country with poverty rate of 77.7% and 76.6% respectively. The reason is not far-fetched considering that these zones are riddled with conflict. Absence of social services, mass unemployment, bad governance and corruption provide avenue for peoples in these regions to become radicalized (Ajodo-Adebanjoko & Ugwuoke, 2014).

In the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, the poor and hungry people in the communities contend that the multinational oil companies in collaboration with the Nigeria government have been exploiting their oil without giving much of it back to the communities. Violence in the Niger Delta has been spearheaded mainly by restive, and often unemployed and poor youths who blow up oil pipelines, kidnap expatriate workers of oil companies, assassinate law enforcement officers guarding oil facilities, as well as community members that collaborate with oil companies and the Federal Government. The most recent development in the Niger Delta with respect to militancy is the emergence of a new group known as the 'Avengers'. This group has continued to blow up oil pipelines and other oil installations as a way of expressing discontent.

MASSOB/IPB has continued to protest what it terms gross marginalization of the South-East within the Nigeria state. As a result it has been working tirelessly for the emergence of the republic of Biafra. The leader of the movement Mr Nnamdi Kanu is currently facing treason charge preferred against him by the Federal Government. He is also charged for allegedly maintaining an unlawful organization and for illegal possession of fire arms (Mac-leva, 2016).

In the Middle Belt region, insecurity is also rife. In places like Plateau state conflict between Hausa-Fulani and the Berom people has left many dead while in Benue state the frequent conflict

between the Fulani herdsmen and the local people has continued to claim more lives and villages being sacked. The menace of the herdsmen is spreading like wild fire across the country. Nasarawa state is another conflict-ridden state in the zone. Communal conflicts have become pervasive to the extent that virtually every local government has an unresolved conflict at various stages of escalation or de-escalation (Ajodo-Adebanjoko & Ugwuoke, 2014).

Kidnapping with the intent to collect ransom that has its roots in the Niger Delta had long become a thriving trade across the country. This is perpetrated by young people who are mostly unemployed graduates. Initially, it was the kidnapping of expatriates that was predominant, but today it has gotten so bad that nobody is safe. Incidences of armed robbery have also become daily routine in many parts of the country. Apart from institutions such as banks that are the main targets, major highways across the country are also targeted as commuters are routinely attacked and dispossessed of their valuables. Although the police make daily arrests of suspects who are paraded before journalists in different parts of the country, the trend appears to be getting worse by the day (Mac-Leva, 2016). All these are the various means through which people express their anger and frustration against a system that has not been fair to them.

Conclusion

Poverty as a social phenomenon is the outcome of an inter play between socio-economic, political, and even religious forces. No useful definition of poverty can be formulated without considering the interplay of these social forces. Poverty is a policy issue that exists in the political domain. Poverty, inequality and governance are now seen to be inseparably related, because without good governance, bad policy choices will be made, the people would have neither voice nor power, and the economy may likely deteriorate. Similarly, when poverty and inequality persists in a society it

weakens the political process and promotes deficient governance. Good governance ensures the participation of the poor in decisions that affect them and empowers them to get their views on the policy agenda.

The ruling elite and political leadership in Nigeria as a critical vanguard of democratic governance will have to imbibe and practice the core values of democracy in government. Exemplary leadership from the political leadership has the capacity to inspire confidence and popular participation in governance. This is very important in improving the loyalty and obedience of Nigerians to the government, with great impact on the legitimacy and capacity of the state to alleviate poverty, guarantee security, stability and peace.

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