

Poverty and Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria: Issues, Challenges and the Way Forward

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Abstract

It is fundamental to note that high level of poverty in any democratic society affects the consolidation of the system. This is because democracy cannot be sustained or consolidated in a society where there is extreme poverty, hunger and starvation. This study is an examination of the potential challenges of poverty to the consolidation of Democracy in Nigeria. The paper adopts a historical/descriptive method of enquiry and generates data largely from books, journal articles, magazines/newspapers and the Internet. It argues that in Nigeria, the inability of successive governments to make frantic efforts towards harnessing the enormous human and material potentials of the country to improve the standard of living of the citizens is the actual cause of poverty. The paper concludes that the phenomenon of poverty in Nigeria is not new and its history is as old as the history of the people believing that its modern manifestations are linked directly to the history of western imperialism. It concludes further that democracy cannot be consolidated in an impoverished society where people live below the poverty line and where diseases and famine are prominent. The study suggests the way forward to include among others that for Nigerian democracy to be consolidated, the political elite must ensure good governance via judicious use of available resources, provision of social amenities and critical infrastructures, ensure periodic free, fair and credible elections, promote transparency and accountability so as to reduce poverty.

Keywords: Poverty, Democracy, Democratic Consolidation, Challenges, Way forward

Introduction

Nigeria is endowed with both human and material resources, but in the midst of these resources lie the issue of endemic poverty, which has remained a recurring phenomenon. Apart from being endowed with tremendous agricultural and mineral resources, Nigeria is the sixth largest producer of crude oil in the world and is potentially viable for natural gas and varieties of solid minerals including tin, columbite, kaolin, coal, gold iron ore and limestone. Poverty is a situation whereby an individual or country is bedeviled with cultural, social, political, economic and environmental deprivations and finding it difficult to find its way out of it. Recent studies have proved that there are reinforcing vicious circles that keep families, regions and countries poor and unable to contribute to national growth (Perry *et al.*, 2006; Okoye and Onyukwu, 2007 as cited in Samuel, Ugoh, & Wilfred, 2009). In the Third World Countries, the level of poverty has been on the increase and would continue to be if adequate measures are not taken to improve the living standard of the people. In Nigeria for instance, the situation has deteriorated since the late 1990s which without doubt can be best described as inflammable. According to (Nnamani 2003:60), poverty in Nigeria has reached an alarming level and has been rising steadily not exponentially. Knowing the implication of poverty, various attempts have been made by successive governments to eradicate extreme and endemic poverty in Nigeria, the scourge has persisted due to poor implementation and mostly lack of political will on the side of the political elites to eliminate the menace.

For democracy to become stable, the political class must do everything humanly possible to eradicate or alleviate poverty as the case may be. This is because democracy cannot be sustained or consolidated in an environment where the inhabitants live below poverty line or living below USD1 per day, and where stresses of diseases, famine and climatic shock are pervasive (Sachs cited in Yakubu & Aderonmu, 2010). It is against the foregoing that this paper examines poverty and democratic consolidation in Nigeria with the aim to ascertaining the level of issues and challenges it poses to the system and to come out workable recommendations or way forward.

Conceptual Clarification

Poverty: this is complex and multi-dimensional. Therefore, it is a dynamic process of socio economic, political or other deprivations which affect individual households or communities and usually results in lack of access to basic necessities of life. It affects many aspects of the human conditions, including physical, moral and the psychological. The concept of poverty has been defined by different scholars from different perspectives. For instance, Maiangwa (2009) conceptualized poverty as a condition where an individual finds it extremely difficult to meet the basic and essential needs of life that differentiate him from animal. In the recent past, poverty was seen as exclusive feature of rural dwellers where the bulk of the population earns its livelihood from agriculture and where poverty has reached alarming proportions.

Poverty has been classified into five types which are: first, absolute poverty that occurs when human beings live in a state of deprivation due to meager income or lack of access to basic human needs which include food, safe water, sanitation, health, shelter, education and information. Second, relative poverty which views poverty from a comparative point of view, that is, poverty is not absolute but relative. Relative refers to the position of household or individual compared. It is measured in three ways: through the low income family statistics; through income and through disposable income. Third, chronic/structural- this means that poverty is persistent or long term. Its causes are more permanent and depend on a host of factors such as limited productive resources, lack of skill for gainful employment, vocational disadvantage or endemic socio-political and cultural factors. Fourth, conjectural transitory which means poverty is temporary or short-term and cause mainly by factors such as natural or man-made disasters—wars and environmental degradation or structural changes induced by policy reforms which result in loss of employment, loss in value of real income assets, etc. Fifth, spatial/location means depending on geographical or regional spread and incidence. It involves urban squalor/poverty typified by the existence of ghettos, slums and shanties in metropolitan cities and characterized by environmental degradation, inadequate welfare services and social deprivations, low per-capita income, over-crowded accommodation, engagement in informal business, rural poverty characterized by poor conditions of living. Interestingly, the common feature of these varieties of poverty is that they all viewed poverty as a general condition of deprivation and that consigns its victims to the level of their societies (Hettne 2002:2, cited in Samuel, Ugoh & Wilfred, 2009).

Democracy: There is no universally accepted definition of the term democracy. That is to say, the term has been defined by different scholars from different perspectives and each of these definitions in one way or the other reflects the experiences, cultures and values of the authors. For the purpose of this study however, democracy is seen as “a political arrangement in which political power is vested in the majority of the citizens” (Asamoah 2004:23); popular power (Adejumobi, 2004:12) among others. It is also seen as an on-going process influenced by past politico-institutional history of the democratizing society and whose survival depends on its consequence for the people, on how much it is able to better their material conditions in terms of literacy, security of life and property, better health, employment, food security, portable water and rural development, as well as ensure political stability (Olarinmoye, 2010:84)

Democratic Consolidation: the term democratic consolidation has to do with the challenge of securing new democracies to extend their life expectancy beyond the short term; and making them immune against the threat of authoritarian regression and of building dams against eventual reverse waves (Azeez 2006:112). Meanwhile, for democracy to be consolidated certain terms and conditions must be met. These conditions as highlighted by Omotola are as follows: popular legitimization, diffusion of democratic values, neutralization of anti-system actors, civilian supremacy over the military, elimination of authoritarian enclaves, party building, organization of functional interest, stabilization of electoral rules, routinization of politics, decentralization of state power, introduction of mechanisms of direct democracy, judicial reform, alleviation of poverty and economic stabilization (cited in Nwanegbo and Alumona, 2011:127).

It is noteworthy that democratic consolidation in this study is viewed as a deliberate and meticulous efforts by the political elites and the citizens of a given country to develop and nurture a civil

rule to a point that such regime meets the yearnings and aspirations of the subjects such as the socio-economic, political, psychological and cultural needs which can lead to greatest happiness for greatest number.

Theoretical Framework:

To critically examine poverty and democratic consolidation in Nigeria's fourth republic, it will be a worthwhile exercise to analyze the scenario through the application of a framework of certain theoretical postulations. Interestingly, Marxist theoretical explanation of capitalism which is regarded as the key source of poverty and its effects on the political system will be relevant in this study. To (Marx cited in Ngara, Esebonu, Ogoh, & Orokpo, 2014), Capitalism has two dimensions viz: the use of wage labour which arises only when the owners of the means of production and subsistence meet in the market with the free labour selling his labour and the second which has to do with private ownership of means of production, which is different from personal property. In the opinion of Marx, individual ownership of means of production and distribution is the important feature of capitalism which is restricted to the few, adding that majority of the people who do not own means of production are forced to sell their labour and thus, become wage earners. Marx believed that the man who possess no other property than his labour power must in all conditions of society and culture, be slave of other men who have made themselves the owners of the material conditions of labour. He can work only with their permission hence, live only with their permission (Mukherjee and Ramaswamy, 2007:360).

What becomes the end result of such relation of production is the reproduction of poverty and even when the means of production is owned by the state, wage labour will still subsist. What is fundamental about Marx's argument that is relevant to this study is the fact that capitalism whether local or international inherently breeds poverty: "the existence even in prosperous time of chronic technological unemployment, the destruction of the skilled crafts by new machines, the displacing of skilled by unskilled labour, the sweating of non-industrialized trade, the growth of an unemployable slum-proletariat" (Sabine and Thorson, 1973:713) and the assembling in cities where they had become dependent on starvation wages (Mukherjee and Ramaswamy, 2007:362) are all building blocks of poverty.

Suffice it to say that poverty and inequality have created immense social tension not only at the horizontal level of 'rich' versus 'poor' but also at the vertical level (between and among the poor themselves) culminating in mostly of armed conflicts and political instability in Nigeria.

Trends of Poverty in Nigeria

Nigeria is a country with enormous wealth owing to the fact that the country is blessed with both human and material resources but in the midst of this huge wealth lie the issue of poverty which has remained a recurring decimal. The irony of the whole thing is that the citizens are very hungry, poor and as such, cannot meet up with the acceptable standard of living in spite of the abundant resources. The UNDP has classified 141 countries as poorest nations on Human Development Index and in its report Nigeria is ranked the 20th poorest country in the world with 70% of the population classified as poor and 54.4% living in absolute poverty (UNDP-HDI, 2006; Ekugo, 2006:12). It is evident that the dangerous nightmare confronting Nigeria right from the time of independence has been poverty.

Regrettably, instead of Nigeria to progress the country has lately retrogressed to become one of the poorest countries in the world. This is evident in the fact that more people are becoming poorer day by day. In 1960s, the poverty level in the country was about 15% and by 1980 it reached to 28.1%. In 1985, the poverty level was 46.3 but dropped to 42.7% in 1992. May be, the drop could be as a result of the then upcoming elections slated to hold in 1993. Meanwhile, with the termination of the civil rule by the military government, the poverty level in Nigeria rose to 43.6% in 1995. A year after, about 65% of the population was living below poverty line which accounts for about 67.1 million Nigerians. In the 1999 and 2000 UN Development Reports, Nigeria had degenerated further as 87% of the population was living below poverty line and rated 154 on the world's marginal poverty index out of 172 countries (Ekpu, 2004).

According to Samuel, Ugoh & Wilfred (2009), poverty in Nigeria has geographical perspective. While the Nigeria's Draft Report on Millennium Development Goals, the Northern part of the country

accounted for the higher incidence of poverty which largely predominated in the rural areas. Specifically, the report showed that the rate of poverty was as high as 84% in states like Zamfara, Sokoto, Gombe and Bauchi during the period 1980 - 2004. In the Southern part, poverty had increased between 1980 and 1996 but dropped in 2004, apart from the South-South zone that dropped in 1992. In fact, all states except Bayelsa had more than half of their population in poverty circle (Akintunde and Amaefule, 2005:5). Comparatively, while poverty showed as high as 72.2% in the North-East, it has the lowest in the South-East with 26.7%. This confirmed the findings by the World Bank study in Nigeria which showed that there were differences between the North and South with more concentration of the poor in the Northern zone (cited in National Bureau of statistics, 2005).

During the period between 1980 and 2004, the incidence of urban poverty also has been on the increase, an indication that poverty is not only seen in the rural areas but also co-existed in urban cities of the country. In 1980, poverty rose from 28.3 to 51.4% in 1985 but declined to 46.0% before it rose again to 69.3% in 1996 and fell to 63.3% in 2004 (Tomori et al., 2006). Thus, the inflation rate which stood at 15% in 1960 had risen to 28% in 1980. In 1985, the figure was put at 46%. Seven years later, it came down to 43% only to shoot up to 66.4% in 1996. The federal government claimed to hack down the fleeting inflation rate from its awesome 54.4% in 2004 to 50%. It attributed the reduction in the trend to the institution of democracy and touted benefits of the economic reforms of the time (Duru, 2008:3). As Soludo pointed out, the Nigeria's per capita income had always been in the deficit since independence. However, between 1999 and 2005, it has risen to over 3 percent.

He further stated that the Gross Domestic Product had grown at 10.2% in 2003 as against an average of 2.9% in the immediate past decade while the nation's external reserves stock had risen from US\$ 7.68 billion to over \$ 20 billion as at January 2005 (Punch, 2005:9). Comparatively, there is improvement, yet Nigeria has failed to live up to nationhood aspirations at independence. A few African countries like Botswana and Mauritius have achieved a high growth. These countries belonged to those that were poorer than Nigeria at independence. With the much vaunted status parity in 2004, Nigeria's GDP per capita stood at paltry \$1000 as against South Africa's \$11,000, Kenya's \$1,100, Angola's \$2,100 and Cuba's \$3000 (Idowu, 2005:15). Presently, Nigeria is a shadow of its promise, in 1960 when it ranked higher than a number of today's leading nations in all major development indices. A situation attributed to the social, political and economic environment in the country, cited in (Samuel, Ugoh, & Wilfred, 2009).

Poverty and Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria: Issues and Challenges

In Nigeria, poverty has impeded the development and consolidation of democracy in many ways since the birth of the current republic. To support the above assertion, Ake (1996) opines that "A society of beggars, parasites and bandits cannot develop, it cannot know peace or stability and it cannot become democratic.

The challenges facing democratic consolidation in Nigeria's Fourth Republic appear to be more complex, devastating, unfortunate and disastrous. After the long occupation of political arena by the military, Nigeria is now on the path of transforming to civil rule in order to fully democratize. Though, the problem of democratic transition, nurturing and consolidation are daunting and the challenges must be faced. For democracy is an avenue through which members of the society possesses the right of choosing their leadership through election (Ojo cited in Odeh, 2007). The collapse of the past Nigerian republics came as a result of weak foundations of democracy paving the ways for military incursion into politics and governance. The demise of the First Republic in 1966 marked the beginning of 'soldier go, soldier come' syndrome which was detrimental to the process of democracy in Nigeria.

Expectations that greeted Nigeria's return to civil rule in 1999 was very high but was short-lived as the expectations placed on the new polyarchy regime to alleviate or eradicate the increasing level of poverty in the country was dashed with the continuous inability of successive governments to deliver dividends of democracy to the people. Interesting to note is that the first noticeable sign of challenge that poverty posed to the new democracy was the rise in crisis of legitimacy on the new government. Consequently, this created the room for the citizens not only to openly challenge the authority of the ruling elite and the viability of the Nigerian state, but also opened up the space for expression of suppressed ethnic demands bottled up by years of repressive military rule (Metumara, 2010:92).

The process of transition creates threatening uncertainties for some groups and opens up a range of transitory political opportunities for ethnic entrepreneurs (Omotola, 2008:55). The intensity of these challenges in Nigeria has been manifested by the upsurge of “ethnic nationalism” which has continued to threaten the very survival of the nation as a corporate entity. The growing menace of the Oduduwa Peoples’ Congress (OPC), in the West, the militant boys in the Niger-Delta, the renewed demand for Biafra spearheaded by the Movement for the Actualization of Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) in the South East, the incessant ethnic crises in the middle belt region and the Sharia debate that has led to tension and unease in the country, and the deepening ethnic polarism of the country into Afenifere (West), Ohaneze Ndigbo (East), and Arewa Consultative Forum (North), does not only breed hatred but also serve as a threat to the consolidation of Nigerian democracy.

In the opinion of (Metumara, 2010:92-3), the recurring violent attacks by Boko Haran (fundamentalist Islamic militant) in the north has resulted in widespread violence across the country. Ginifer and Ismail (2005:5) puts the number of armed violence outbreaks recorded between 1999 and 2003 at over 50, with Lagos accounting for at least 15 cases of armed violence. Similarly, it has been estimated that between 14,000 and 15,000 Nigerians have died from localized clashes since 1999 (Ploch 2013; U.S. CIRF, 2012). It is on record that the activities of these new ethnic militia organizations challenge the legitimacy of the state (Metumara, 2010:96). All these malaise and quagmires have emerged as response to politico-economy decline and the emergence of Nigeria as a quasi state in the committee of nations.

Studies carried out by (Mattes et al, 2003:6) reveals that the rising profile of militias and ethnic chauvinism and their agitations in Nigeria seems to be given credence to the postulation that “the prospects for sustaining democratic government in a poor society are far lower than in a relatively wealthy one. This is to say that democracy cannot be consolidated in a country where people live below the acceptable living standard. Such society is characterized by stresses of diseases, famine and climatic shock are pervasive, (Yakubu and Aderonmu, 2010:191).

It is worthy of note that when poverty is severe, it creates unwarranted socio-economic and political competition and the negative impact of this competition is insecurity associated with limited job opportunities and social services” (Metumara, 2010:96). It is on record that since Nigeria got her political independence in 1960, its economy has remained largely dualistic and monolithic, depending on one primary product for export (Ogunlela, and Ogunbile, 2006:2). This situation has in no small way halted the development of productive forces occasioned by economic wastage, mismanagement and lack of judicious use of available resources by the political elite. Due to the country’s mono-culturalism and the predominant role of the state in development, the competitive advantage has reduced minimally when compared to other countries of the Western nations. It is imperative to stress here that in the presence of all the identified issues and challenges artificially created by poverty, the consolidation of Nigerian democracy may continue to be an illusion.

It is not an exaggeration to conclude that the current spate of poverty in Nigeria has given prominence to inequality, social injustice and consequently resulted to political apathy. The rising profile of poverty in Nigeria as observed by the National Bureau of Statistics (2007:38) states that the number of people living in poverty increased from 39.07million in 1992 to 70million in 2004. Similarly, the UNDP states that about 83.9 per cent of Nigerians live below two US Dollars a day (Nna & Igwe, 2010: 133). This poverty profile is further complicated by staggering and alarming levels of inequality as highlighted by (Oshewolo 2010:267) that 70.2 percent of the Nigerian population lives on less than \$1 a day, while 90.8 percent lives on less than \$2 a day. The total income earned by the richest 20 percent of the population is 55.7 percent, while the total income earned by the poorest 20 percent is 4.4 percent.

Another worrisome dimension of poverty situation in Nigeria in this republic is that of powerlessness which is characterized by dependence on others thereby having no voice and choice. In line with the above, (Mattes, et al, 2003:35) asserts that the poor “are regularly victimized by public officials and encounter higher levels of crime. As a consequence, they are forced to rely on informal networks and associations” for survival. Meanwhile, as the state constantly violates the right of the citizens and deprive them social justice and economic opportunity, the people have come to perceive the state as predatory and evil that should be avoided and feared and consequently, they (citizens) are not concerned about working in any way towards the consolidation of democracy.

The consequence for people not participating in democracy is that it ridicules the system from the realm of genuine democracy and it has all the potentials to hinder it from embarking on policies and programmes that can better the lives of the people. In a situation where there exists such democratic regime it should be regarded as a quintessential non-polyarchy.

From the above, it can be argued that in the face of extreme poverty, no country can afford to maintain state's institutions such as quality electoral machinery, a well-resourced legislature and unbiased judicial system and societal institutions such as political parties, the mass media and vibrant civil society organizations which are central estates in the democratic consolidation project. Since Nigeria returned to civil rule in 1999, the country's democratic institutions such as the civil society organizations, the judiciary, political parties, and the Independent National Electoral Commission have continued to remain weak in terms of discharging their duties and obligations as enshrined in the constitution so as to respond to the yearnings and aspirations of the citizens. The above assertion is evident in the opinion of (Ojakorotu, 2009:162), who revealed that the electoral institutions created to manage elections have been unable to permit substantial involvement of citizens in the electoral process as underscored by the massive electoral fraud that characterized the 2003/2004, and the 2007 general elections variously described by both local and international observers as inadequate and below accepted democratic standard.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, it can be argued that the current spate of poverty in Nigeria has given prominence to inequality, social injustice and consequently resulted to political apathy. Furthermore, the major identified factor responsible for continuous poverty, hunger and starvation in Nigeria can be traced to uneven ownership and distribution of property, corruption, lack of technological advancement and accumulation of capital. In this study, it has been revealed that in Nigeria, the phenomenon of poverty and inequality is not of recent origin and its history is as old as the history of the people believing that its modern manifestations are linked directly to the history of western imperialism. It is on this premise that the study concludes that democracy cannot be consolidated in an impoverished society where people live below the poverty line and where diseases and famine are prominent features of the society. This is to say that democracy cannot be sustained or consolidated in a country where there is high density of poverty and Nigeria is not an exception to this fact. There is the fear of the possibility of military to scuttle the democratic journey in Nigeria if adequate steps are not taken to ameliorate the sufferings of the people through sustainable poverty alleviation programmes.

The Way Forward

Based on the issues and challenges identified in the course of carrying out this research, the following recommendations are hereby made so as to correct the abnormalities and dangers posed by poverty in the consolidation of Nigerian democracy. The poor should be involved in the design and implementation of policies and programmes that concern them because they know better the challenges facing them in their various communities. This should be seen as a task because as poverty increases in level so it increases the chances of posing direct challenge to the nation's economic stability and the consolidation of democracy will remain a mirage.

It is however, important to ensure institutional strategy for checking the excesses of political class and bureaucratic agents in the area of implementation of lofty policies and programmes on poverty eradication because in the past, those charged with the responsibility of implementing such programmes have succeeded in diverting the funds into personal use.

Finally, for democracy in Nigeria to be consolidated, the political elites in particular and bureaucratic agents in general must ensure good governance through the judicious use of societal resources thereby providing social amenities and develop the critical infrastructures, ensure periodic free, fair and credible elections, promote transparency and accountability and above all, the rule of law must be maintained by all and sundry.

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