

A Reflection on UN's Agenda 21 and Poverty Alleviation in Nigeria, 2001-2015

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Abstract

Humanity, in the 21st century, is confronted with worsening cases of poverty, hunger, ill-health, illiteracy, and the continued deterioration of its ecosystems. However, integration of the environment and development concerns and greater attention to them is capable of leading to the fulfillment of basic needs, improved living standards, better protected and managed ecosystem, and a safer and more prosperous future. No state in the international system can achieve this on its own but together they can in a global partnership for sustainable development. The global partnership on war against poverty was captured in Agenda 21 based on the United Nation's General Assembly Resolution 44/228 of December 1982. Poverty is a complex multi-dimensional problem with origins in the national and international domain; a problem that has defied a uniform solution capable of global application. Against this background, state's programmes to address poverty and international efforts and processes of creating a supportive international environment are necessary for a solution to this problem facing humanity. This paper focuses on one of the efforts of the international community under the aegis of the UN to wage a war against poverty. The paper argues that the eradication of poverty and hunger remains a major challenge to mankind and the war against it remains a shared responsibility of all states in the extant international system. The paper concludes that since poverty is a problem that concerns and affects all, all hands must be on deck to wage a successful war against it.

Keywords: Agenda 21, Alleviation, Poverty, Reflection, Resolution

Introduction

Since independence, various administrations and regimes have made frantic attempts to address the question of poverty in Nigeria. For this discourse, the area of focus is the measure taken by President Obasanjo's administration immediately after the UN Millennium Declaration in 2001, a document which was in line with the letter and spirit of Agenda 21. In taking the necessary measures to pull millions of Nigerians out of poverty, the Obasanjo's government established an agency called NAPEP in 2001. The body was established with the mandate to coordinate and monitor all poverty eradication programmes in Nigeria and to intervene in critical areas for empowerment and improvements of conditions of living of the poor in the country. The agency symbolized the federal government commitment to the fight against poverty. With offices in the 36 states, including the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), NAPEP partnered with states and local governments councils, including the private sector in articulating practicable poverty eradication strategies and policies. The strategy of NAPEP was to develop partnership with relevant bodies with philosophical principles that poverty must be adequately addressed through investment in the people; the fight against poverty must be

sustained and approached creatively overtime; the causes of poverty are multi-dimensional, therefore the fight against it must cut across institutions and demands collaborations with all levels of government; and the fight against poverty therefore must be all-inclusive.¹

This paper examines the philosophy of Agenda 21 on poverty alleviation with a special interest on the measures taken by the President Obasanjo's administration on war against poverty. In this wise, the paper is situated in four parts. The first part focuses on the basis for action and the objectives of the Agenda 21 on poverty alleviation and the means of implementation. Part two examines the measures taken by Obasanjo's administration in addressing poverty, especially, the NAPEP, while part three accesses the achievements and failures of the programme, with part four being the conclusion.

Agenda 21 and the Poverty Challenge in Nigeria

Agenda 21 addresses the pressing problems facing humanity, one of which is poverty. Its major concern is to prepare mankind for present and future problems of poverty. Under the aegis of the United Nations System, Agenda 21 reflects a global consensus and political commitment at the highest level on development and environmental cooperation. The successes and failures of this concerted effort depend on national strategies, plans, and policies which are crucial in winning the war against poverty.²

As argued earlier, poverty is a multi-dimensional and complex problem, therefore, addressing the problem adequately requires the effort of both the international and national actors, and even non-governmental organizations are encouraged to play a vital role. The developmental objectives of Agenda 21 calls for enormous flow of financial resources to states in the global South in order to take care of the cost of action in dealing with environmental problems and ensure sustainable development. Financial resources are also needed to strengthen the capacity of international institutions for the implementation of Agenda 21.³

Chapter 3 of Agenda 21 deals extensively on combating poverty and sets out long term objectives in dealing with poverty. The document sets out the basis for action and the objectives for combating poverty and provide that poverty is a complex and multi-dimensional problem. This is so because no general solution can be applied for its global application, but specific programmes of action to address poverty at the national level. For Agenda 21, the eradication of poverty and hunger, greater equity in income distribution and human resource development remain the major challenges globally making the war against poverty a shared responsibility of all states in the global system.⁴ In its provisions, Agenda 21 provides the following as long term objectives in enabling all people to achieve sustainable livelihood in order to provide an integrating factor that allows policies to address issues of development, sustainable resources management and poverty eradication simultaneously.

¹Abram Sen, "Issues in the Measurement of Poverty", *Scandinavian Journal of Economics*, 2003, p. 285.

²Agenda 21, *United Nations Conference on Environment and Development*, Rio-de-Janeiro, Brazil, 3-14, June, 1992, p.14.

³Agenda 21 Official Document, p. 16.

⁴Agenda 21 Official Document, p.20.

These objectives are to: implement various measures of combating poverty and provide means of realizing the set goals. These include financing, cost evaluation, and capacity building. In financing and providing cost evaluation of these projects, the Secretariat of Agenda 21 Conference estimated that the total annual cost of implementing activities for combating poverty between 1993 and 2000 will amount to about thirty billion US dollars⁵. This projection of the estimated cost will depend upon the strategies and programmes governments in the respective countries may decide upon for implementations⁶

In the area of capacity building for combating poverty, there was a consideration to place high premium on capacity building at the local community level to engender a community driven approach to sustainable and also strengthen mechanism for cross-fertilization of ideas and experience between local groups. Requirement for these activities are considered and related to the various provisions of Agenda 21 calling for financial and technological support from relevant international agencies. The above analysis provided the framework for combating poverty as articulated by Agenda 21. The next section of the paper will assess how the Nigerian government has keyed into the vision of Agenda 21 to combat poverty in Nigeria.⁷

Implementing Agenda 21 in Nigeria through the NAPEP Programme

In the implementation of Agenda 21, emphasis was placed on circumstances facing economies in transition. As a dynamic programme, all relevant actors were involved, considering their peculiar situations, capacities with thirty two areas of action and seven measures and means of implementation. In line with this philosophy, the Obasanjo administration keyed into the programme and established National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP) in 2001 with the mandate to coordinate and monitor all poverty eradication programmes. The Agency was also mandated to intervene in critical areas for empowerment of the poorest of the poor and the improvement of conditions of living of the poor in the country.⁸

NAPEP as a poverty alleviation strategy was to spur participation of all Nigerians who can contribute to poverty eradication considering the limited resources of NAPEP to fight poverty. Therefore, the programme was to be creative by making good use of resources in ways to engender partnership and mobilize the needed resources. To achieve this objectives, every state in the country had a poverty eradication agency with the mandate of sensitizing government and people of the urgent need to eradicate poverty in Nigeria; promote and encourage the use of microcredit as an effective tools to fight poverty; cause state government to provide counterpart fund for on-lending to the poor initiative; and mobilize commercial banks to support the course of poverty alleviation.

⁵Duraiappah Kumar A., *Sustainable Development and Poverty Alleviation: Exploring the Links*. International Institute for Sustainable Development, 2002.

⁶Agenda 21 Official Document, p. 21.

⁷Femi Ogwumike, "A Basic Need Oriented Approach to the Measurement of Poverty in Nigeria", *Nigerian Journal of Economic and Social Studies*, vol. 33, No. 2, 2007, p. 105.

⁸Agenda 21 Official Document, p. 18

In addressing poverty in Nigeria, NAPEP came up with six plans of actions to be based at community levels. These included: Meso-credit, village economic development solution (village solution), village trust fund, In-Care of the People (COPE), Community Economic Sensitization (COMESS) and Multi-partnership Matching Fund (MPMF). For the purpose of clarification, there is need to explain these plans of actions.

Meso-Credit: Meso Credit was introduced by NAPEP as an instrument to drive economic development of rural communities through the establishment of local agricultural and agro-allied processing industries. The credit was meant to spur economic development in rural areas with the resultant effect of creating jobs and raising income levels through employment generations. The initiative was based on the realization that micro-credit alone cannot promote economic transformation for the rural communities. This reality calls for the establishment of commercial ventures that will promote job creation and raise income levels of people in the rural areas. Meso credit represented financial services offered a little higher than the micro credit through which the financial needs of small and medium scale entrepreneurs can be met. It provided financial starter pack between five hundred thousand naira (#500,000) and fifty million naira (#50,000,000) to help in the establishment of small and medium scale industries especially agro-allied industries that can create jobs and raise the level of income of local dwellers.⁹

Village Solution: The village solution policy was a rural area-based poverty eradication programme aimed at empowering the poorest of the poor. In this programme, the establishment of ‘anchor project’ on village basis was considered as engines of economic growth in the villages. The area of focus was the agro-allied industries, and the projects were linked to micro-business which will sustain the ‘anchor projects’ and create mass participation in economic activities by the poor. The anchor project served as ready markets for the produce, goods and services and helped to build capacity and increase in productivity.

All said, the programmes implemented in the villages were determined by the peculiarities of the local setting and the principle of comparative advantage. This programme led to the setting up of rice mills, cassava processing plants, oil mills, fishing ponds, among others. Also, computer centres, printing press and call centres sprang up in the rural areas.¹⁰

COPE: COPE which means “In Care of the People” was a conditional cash transfer scheme designed for the poorest of the poor. COPE was geared towards breaking inter-generational transfer of poverty and reduce the vulnerability of the poorest of the poor against the harsh economic weather in Nigeria. The programme was implemented through fund from the Millennium Development Goals and Debt Relief gained in collaboration with Small and

⁹Femi Ogwumike, “Poverty Alleviation Strategies in Nigeria in Measuring and Monitoring Poverty in Nigeria,” Proceedings of the 7th Annual Conference of Zonal Research Units of CBN, 2004, p.161.

¹⁰Oye Ibidapo and Olusegun Akinkugbe (Eds.) *Olusegun Obasanjo: The Presidential Legacy, 1999-2007*, vol. 1, Lagos: Bookcraft, 2013, p. 189.

Medium Enterprise Development Agency (SMEDAN) and the National Directorate of Employment (NDE).

COPE provided grants to poor households on the condition that they engage in investments in human capital development of their children especially in government basic education and health care programmes. The first phase of the programme started in twelve states, two per geopolitical zone- Nassarawa and Niger (North Central), Bornu and Yobe (North East), Jigawa and Kebbi (North West), Ebonyi and Enugu (South East), Bayelsa and Cross River (South-South), and Ogun and Oyo (South West). These states were selected based on Human Capacity Development Index (HCDI) criteria. This criterion was largely from indicators using the girl-child school enrollment ratio and adult literacy in English and measured the potential capacity for human contribution to economic development in Nigeria. Based on experience from the first phase of the project, the programme was extended to all the states of the federation.¹¹ Most of the poverty eradication policies focused on supply sole projects in education, health, infrastructure and micro-credit for empowerment. Some of these programmes contributed their quota to poverty eradication, as COPE was an additional measure in the fight against poverty.¹²

COMESS: COMESS which means “the Community Economic Sensitization Scheme” was introduced in 2004. It was a collection of programmes that employs various media to take the message of pushed support for self-help and active participation in poverty alleviation and wealth creation activities to local communities. The essence of the programmes was to inform and mobilize the people at the rural level to be actively involved in the activities of government directed at poverty alleviation. The programme carried the message of hope to the people about government policies aimed at eradication of poverty and involving the people in the processes of economic development.

The target of the programme was the urban and rural poor as well as other persons in the local communities. All the levels of government were involved in the implementation of the programme. Also, the organized private sector was expected to contribute to the successful implementation of the programme. In the implementation of COMESS, community based workshops, mobile audio and video vehicles, town hall meetings, and publications served as means of sensitization of the people.¹³

Multi-Partner Matching Fund: One of the tools of implementing poverty eradication under NAPEP was the Multi-Partnership Matching Fund. The NAPEP partnership philosophy was based on the understanding that NAPEP and government cannot eradicate poverty alone, making the building up of a coalition and network of stakeholders necessary. These partners

¹¹Femi Ogwumike, “A Basic Need Oriented Approach to the Measurement of Poverty in Nigeria”, *Nigerian Journal of Economic and Social Studies*...p. 110.

¹²Oye Ibidapo and Olusegun Akinkugbe (Eds.) *Olusegun Obasanjo: The Presidential Legacy, 1999-2007*...p.193.

¹³Femi Ogwumike, “A Basic Need Oriented Approach to the Measurement of Poverty in Nigeria”, *Nigerian Journal of Economic and Social Studies*...p. 116.

were to contribute what was known as multi-partnership micro finance. The state and local government, commercial banks, micro-finance institutions, non-governmental organizations, were to partner with the federal government to make available a large pool of funds for on-lending to the poorest of the poor.

Through this strategy, resources were mobilized to stimulate economic and mass participation in the economic process. Through this process, saving culture was promoted, giving the poor easy access to finance needed to promote sustainable entrepreneurial activities and develop and maintain good relationship with financial institutions.¹⁴

The major objectives of the Micro Partner Matching Fund include the following: coordinate and facilitate access to credit for the poor; enlarge the pool of micro-credit facilities for the poor through partnership with key stakeholders; encourage savings among the poor; provide affordable interest rate for the poor; stimulate increased economic activity in local government areas; generate commitment to NEEDS among local government and state's officials for poverty eradication, employment generation, wealth creation, value reorientation and create a stronger tie between the poor Nigerians with commercial banks and financial intermediaries.¹⁵ The sustainability of NAPEP's programme derives from the mandate which was to spur mass participation in economic development. NAPEP has gone through changes over the years as an organization that was meant to intervene in certain areas of needs and has remained one of the measures taken by the Nigerian government towards poverty alleviation.

Concluding

The successes and failures of the programme were determined by various factors, as a critical assessment of the programme revealed that much attention was not given to the programme because the agency was set up to coordinate the activities of ministries, departments and agencies whose activities did not impact on poverty reduction. However, the agency, apart from the first two years of operations, did very little to improve the lives of Nigerian. It largely proved to be ineffective except in some of its own programmes such as KEKE-NAPEP. The employment generation and job creation activities suffered from a number of problems such as inability to directly engage the supply side of the economy and lack of adequate funding. Employment generation was not an explicit objective in the design and implementation of projects as government was expected to play the role of facilitator, while the private sector generates employment. NAPEP as an agency through which government made effort at poverty alleviation had very poor outcome. The programme can be re-organized and re-oriented in order to positively reduce poverty. Its relationship with the MDAs needs to be re-focused so as to directly influence job creation and employment generation through the supply side.

In conclusion, the existence of poverty in the midst of abundant resources indicates that human resources are not only under-utilized but that the economic and political system in

¹⁴Abram Sen, "Issues in the Measurement of Poverty", *Scandinavian Journal of Economics*, 2003, p. 285.

¹⁵Femi Ogwumike, "A Basic Need Oriented Approach to the Measurement of Poverty in Nigeria", *Nigerian Journal of Economic and Social Studies*...p. 118

Nigeria has also failed to use its resources prudently and efficiently. Government should optimally tackle the problem of poverty by mobilizing the needed resources towards adequately addressing the problems that had defied many solutions in the past decades.

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