

## **The Scourge of Poverty: A Major Contending Socio-Economic Problem in the Nigerian Society**

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**Abstract:** *This paper reveal that poverty is a major socio-economic challenge in Nigeria despite the abundant natural and human resources. The poverty situation prompted many researches which were cited in this work; and some researchers are of the view that more than two-thirds of the poor in Nigeria are at the risk of spending their life-times below the poverty line. The objective of this paper was clearly stated, poverty defined and various types of poverty were outlined. Also, the socio-economic effects of poverty in Nigeria were examined and possible solutions were recommended.*

**Key Words:** *Poverty, Socio-economic, Poverty line, Nigerian society.*

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### **I. Introduction**

Poverty condition is not in any way a pleasant one be it for individuals or a particular section of society. In a layman's understanding, poverty is an economic bankruptcy characterized by inability to meet basic needs of life such as nutritious food, medical care, clothing, shelter, basic hygiene, etc. Many research results reveal that a greater percentage of Nigerians live in abject poverty despite the rich potentials of the country in human and natural resources which could be harnessed in order to gain freedom from the clutches of poverty. In fact some research findings made it clear that most poor Nigerians may start and end their life-time in poverty. This was clearly stated by Zuhuman Dapel (2018) in a paper titled "Will the poor in Nigeria escape Poverty in their life-time? He said "Thus I found growing evidences suggesting a rising deep level of deprivation in Nigeria, rendering more than two-thirds of the poor at the risk of spending their life-times below the poverty line".

The situation of poverty in Nigeria is pathetic. However, when concerted efforts are put in place to really trace its causes and proffer practical solutions, which, if embraced and applied by all stakeholders – the government, non-governmental organizations, organized private sectors and the poor inclusive, then there will be a way forward. This paper, therefore, is aimed at revealing the poverty situation in Nigeria, its causes, effects and suggested ways through which it could be surmounted.

### **II. Objectives**

The general objective of this paper is to show that poverty is dominant in Nigeria and has become a major socio-economic issue to contend with. Other objectives are to:

- Understand poverty at the Nigerian and global contexts
- examine its causes
- reveal its socio-economic effects
- make practical suggestions on how to alleviate or eradicate it.

### **III. Definition Of Poverty**

Although the World Bank has a definition of poverty, it does not negate the views and ideas of scholars on the issue bearing in mind the different criteria used, the difference in economies and the level of development across the globe. For example, Blackwood and Lynch (1994), identify the poor, using the criteria of the levels of consumption and expenditure. Meanwhile, Sen (1983), relates poverty to entitlements which are taken to be the various bundles of goods and services over which one has command, taking into cognizance the means by which such goods are acquired (for example, Money and Coupons, etc) and the availability of the needed goods. Yet, other experts see poverty in very broad terms, such as being unable to meet "basic needs" – (physical; (food, health care, education, shelter etc. and non – physical; participation, identity, etc) requirements for a meaningful life (World Bank, 1996), (cited in O. W. Olowa, 2012). Bhalla and Lapeyre (2016) relate it to the concept of social exclusion as an emerging phenomenon in both developed and developing contexts. Bradshaw

and Main (2016) discuss child poverty, addressing how the well-being of children is affected by indices of poverty. Room (2016) analyses the new poverty in the European community, indicating the existence of poverty in even the most advanced societies, even though most of the poor live in the less developed regions of the world – Africa, Asia and Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa is evidently worst hit by the menace of poverty (World Bank, 2001, 2006 and 2007).

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) 2002 describes the poor as those who live on less than \$1 per day. The issues of income inequalities, gender imbalance and rural-urban divide where those who produce wealth are deprived from reaping its benefits have attracted the attention of the international community. Women, rural dwellers and other vulnerable groups who produce the bulk of the world's food get incommensurable rewards for their labour (Abimuku, 2006). The United Nations Organization (UN) says "Fundamentally, poverty is a denial of choices and opportunities, a violation of human dignity. It means lack of basic capacity to participate effectively in society. It means not having enough to feed and clothe a family, not having a school or clinic to go to, not having the land on which to grow one's food or a job to earn one's living, not having access to credit. It means insecurity, powerlessness and exclusion of individuals, households and communities. It means susceptibility to violence, and it often implies living on marginal or fragile environments, without access to clean water or sanitation" (UN Statement, June 1998 – signed by the heads of all UN agencies). From the above, it is clear that poverty is multidimensional and multifaceted.

Another interesting phase to definition of poverty is how the poor themselves explain poverty. Some poor people have this to say... "Don't ask me what poverty is because you have met it outside my house. Look at the house and count the number of holes. Look at my utensils and the clothes that I am wearing. Look at everything and write what you see. What you see is poverty". —A poor man, Kenya 1997.

"Poverty is humiliation, the sense of being dependent on them, and of being forced to accept rudeness, insults, and indifference when we seek help". —Latvia 1998.

From the above definitions and insights on poverty, the common denominator is economic, social, physical deprivations and acute income.

#### **IV. Types Of Poverty**

It is really a difficult task for any scholar, researcher, policy maker, etc. to find an easy or definite yardstick for classifying poverty. Literatures in this area reveal that poverty can be broadly grouped into three namely, absolute, relative and subjective poverty.

Absolute poverty connotes a yardstick or standard applicable to all societies which is referred to as poverty line below which poverty subsists and above which poverty ends. This measure of poverty is concerned with basic necessities of life such as the quantity and quality of food, clothing and shelter which are very essential for living. This reflects the words of Pope John Paul II as cited in Ezeanyejí and Ozughalu (2014) where he said "Absolute poverty is a condition in which life is so limited by lack of food, malnutrition, illiteracy, high infant mortality and low life expectancy as to be beneath any rational definition of human decency". This kind of poverty is compacted with many kinds of depravity.

Absolute poverty has widely been criticized and the criticism stem from the fact that there are minimum basic needs in all societies. Therefore it is difficult to set a minimum standard for basic needs such as food, clothing and shelter- which largely has to do with the socio-economic conditions of a particular society. Despite the criticism, absolute poverty gives a clear cut delineation which make it easier to identify who is poor and who is not; and that necessary measure can be taken to salvage the poor.

In view of the problems associated with absolute poverty, scholars have identified another way of measuring poverty in relative standards as against absolute terms. Relative poverty has to do with the perception or judgment of people in a particular society as to what is accepted standard of living based on the prevailing conditions of the day. Thus, Peter Townsend (1974) argues that "individuals, families and groups in the population can be said to be in poverty when they lack the resources to obtain the types of diets, participate in activities and have the living conditions and amenities which a customary, or at least widely encouraged and approved, in the societies to which they belong. Their resources are so seriously below those commanded by the average individual or family that they are, in effect, excluded from ordinary living patterns, customs and activities".

Relative poverty also connotes the inability of certain regions of a society to earn adequate income to satisfy their basic needs according to what obtains in the better-offs regions (UNDP, 1997). Odusola (1997) opines that conceptualizing poverty in relative terms has the advantage of reflecting changing perceptions of acceptable minimum standard of living. Thus in this our rapidly changing world, poverty in relative terms will be constantly changing as summarized by I. M. Rubinow where he said things considered as "luxuries become comforts, comforts become necessities". The major challenge of this type of poverty is that it is constantly on the move; before you take time to understand it properly for policies or programmes it has changed.

Ezeanyejì and Ozughalu, 2014 said the relative type of poverty has been severely criticized for being too much of a moving target. "It is very difficult to reduce relative poverty and also virtually impossible to access the effectiveness of transfer programmes when it is conceptualized in relative terms". Besides, the setting of relative poverty line is highly arbitrary (Afonja and Ogwumike, 2003).

The third type of poverty is the subjective poverty. This has to do with the individual or group feeling about whether they are poor or not. This is closely related to the relative poverty since it is the prevailing standard of a particular time that is used in measuring poverty. Therefore, people will assess themselves based on the prevailing standards and give themselves a verdict as being poor or not. However, exceptions may arise, for example, where a person was formerly wealthy but based on some circumstances, he lost his wealth. No matter his feeling about his new status as a poor person may not be acceptable by those who knew him to be wealthy before. Also, the concept of subjective poverty is difficult to apply because of differences in individual utility functions and circumstances (Afonja and Ogwumike, 2003).

Ezeanyejì and Ozughalu, 2014 further classified poverty as chronic or transient. Chronic poverty is characterized by permanent socio-economic deprivations and is linked to various factors such as limited productive resources, lack of education or skills for gainful employment and endemic socio-political and cultural factors. While transient poverty is temporary; it is linked to natural and man-made disasters such as wars, loss of jobs, conflagration and flood (Ajakaiye and Adeyeye, 2001; Job, 1998).

## **V. Theories Of Poverty**

The world has never been richer (World Bank, 2008). At the same time, the number of people living in poverty has increased by almost 100 million in the period 1992 – 2002 alone (J. Stiglitz, 2003). Why has poverty refused to be eradicated, or at best, be alleviated to the barest minimum? There are numerous theories that explain the prevalence and persistence of poverty in human societies. However, from the literatures on theories of poverty, the work of Aseel Sabah Abdullatif et al, (2017) summarizes the various theories into four.

### **I. THE VICIOUS CYCLE OF POVERTY THEORY**

According to this theory, the basis of poverty is the per capita income level. It is known that in developing countries the vicious cycle of poverty begins and ends with poverty. This vicious cycle starts from the low level of nutrition which leads to low level of health resulting in low productivity levels and ends with lower income levels (poverty) again. This theory is premised on the idea that individuals with high income can save and invest and can retain the same status, while individuals from the low-income group cannot afford to do so and is therefore unable to break the vicious cycle of poverty (Rohima, S., Suman, A., Manzilati, A., & Ashar, 2013, P. 35). However, the economic and social realities of developing countries suggest that there are multiple cycles. There is a vicious cycle for low level of education. It begins with a low level of education that leads to a low level of technical skills which results in a low level of income and thus ending with a low level of education. There is a vicious cycle on the lower level of real income and nutrition that results in a lower level of health and poverty vis-a-vis the level of investment and this is demonstrated in the results of the basic features of this theory. In addition, Nurkse believes that the under-developed States cannot break out of the cycle of poverty, unless the state implements huge investment programs directed to break the "vicious cycle of poverty".

### **II. PROGRESSIVE SOCIAL THEORY**

According to T.K. Bradshaw (2007) this theory focuses on several factors, and they are the political system, economic policy adopted in the country that do not support the principle of transparency in dealings between citizens, as well as the social structure. The social structure has an impact in the reality of poverty where income is reduced and there are no savings and the society is denied access to their well-being, by the reduction of opportunities to gain access to resources, for example, access to education, employment or support for small enterprises. In the communities that suffer from the political, economic and social imbalances, there is a wide category of society that is living close to the poverty line and the reason for this is racial, sexual, and sectarian or there is a social stigma where tribal traditions prevail. All this leads to their chances becoming limited regardless of their competence and their personal capabilities.

### **III. BIG PUSH THEORY**

The postulation of the Big Push theory is that there is an urgent need in poor communities for a strong push or an intensive program with a specific minimum level of investment in order to overcome the obstacles of development and put the economy on track for growth. Rodin opined that large investments in the manufacturing sector will lead to a rapid increase in the accumulation of capital. Rodin considered that his theory (Big Push) is more feasible than the classic theories because this theory is more realistic (Jmona, 2010, P. 10; Sumaya, 2014, p. 8). In fact, when this theory was applied in poor countries, it was proven that this theory cannot be applied successfully there because the Big Push theory requires a huge capital for the establishment of

industrial projects, but poor countries do not have the money and also do not have a large enough market. In addition to that, this theory only focuses on the industrial sector and neglects all the other sectors.

#### IV. BASIC NEEDS THEORY

The theory of basic needs aims to increase the incomes of the poor by raising the level of development, which in turn will lead to an increase in national income. Several thinkers and economists are seeking, through this theory, to achieve the basic objectives for the citizens such as increasing the income of the poor, the elimination of unemployment, the provision of services, improvement in health care and education level as well as providing appropriate housing. This theory is ideologically and politically supported because it aims to achieve social equity through the provision of services to the poor, such as education and health care, and providing job opportunities that leads to an increase in the gross domestic product (GDP) and also to achieve prosperity (Bukhari, n.d, P. 48).

#### V. INTEGRATIVE THEORY

The author of the integrative theory Ken Wilber describes his theory as an attempt to place a wide diversity of theories and thinkers into one single framework. It is portrayed as a "theory of everything" trying "to draw together an already existing number of separate paradigms into an interrelated network of approaches that are mutually enriching." it is arguably the first truly comprehensive or integrative philosophy. Wilber explains the need for an Integral Approach in the following Way: In our current postmodern world, we possess an abundance of methodologies and practices belonging to a multitude of fields and knowledge traditions. What is utterly lacking, however, is a coherent organization, and coordination, of all these various practices, as well as their respective datasets. Through the Integral approach, we reveal the previously unseen possibilities for a better, more compassionate, and more sustainable future for all of us. In short, the integrative theoretical approach is coherent in organization, and is suitable for all studies and methodologies. Wilber says it's the best way to make the world the right way ((Wilber, 2001, P. 55). Al-Alami (2002, P. 65) in his book titled "The Poverty" points out that poverty is a complex phenomenon that arises due to multiple social, cultural, political and economic factors. So, researchers dealt with the issue of tackling poverty according to their own specialization. We find that the studies on poverty have identified different causes. The mismatch of results is due to the individuals themselves because the interpretation of the causes of poverty is according to the individual's perspective. Some of them look at it from the social perspective so they interpreted that poverty is a result of the lack of social justice. There are also researchers who look at it from the integrative perspective that combines multiple reasons. In the same context, Al-Shamsi (2004, P. 7) in his article titled "Population policies and demographic transformation in the Arab world: the Gulf Cooperation Council" confirms that these factors collectively contribute to the spread of poverty. Therefore, development and poverty reduction concepts shift from the concept of economic growth based on manufacturing and fixed capital formation to the process of human development, political development, social development, and sustainable development.

#### VI. Poverty In The Nigerian Society

The prevalence of poverty in the Nigerian society is glaring even without making reference to any official or scholarly documents and data. Majority of the streets in cities and towns in the northern part of the country are full of beggars, children hawkers who have become a source of livelihood to their families as a result of poverty instead of being in their classrooms. Many are dying as a result of malnutrition and inability to afford medical care. So also in most cities and towns in the south, it is common to see people living in slums and under the bridges being so vulnerable to diseases and epidemics all because of their poverty condition. Meanwhile, the majority of rural dwellers are peasants who live from hand to mouth and are generally excluded from the good things of life because of poverty.

Ironically, Nigeria is richly blessed with abundant natural and human resources. Ewubare et al (2017) captures it well when they reported that Nigeria is endowed with abundant mineral and natural resources which amounts to over 34 occurrences ranging from industrial materials, iron ore, tin-ore, limestone, coal, lead, zinc, columbines, marbles, bitumen and tar sand. Statistically, the exploration of these minerals is very minimal in relation to the level of deposits found in the country. Nigeria was among the largest producers of columbines, 6th largest producer of Tin, 8th largest producer of crude oil and gas. Their study further revealed that about 31.3 percent of the total land area in the country is arable, of this, 3.0 percent of the total land is for permanent crop cultivation, and 23.0 percent for meadows and pastures, 15.0 percent is the forest woodland region while 28.0 percent is for other uses with negligible percent for irrigation. Nigeria is also blessed with abundant maritime resources, water constitutes about 1.4 percent of the country's total area which provides an abundance of fish of large variety capable of producing about 600,000 metric tons of fish annually and producing less than 12 percent of their estimated fishery potential. Despite all these rich potentials, Nigeria is still bedeviled by poverty.

Nigeria's poverty condition is arguably traced to the oil discovery and the consequent over reliance of the economy on oil at the expense of other sectors which hitherto sustained the nation's economy. According to Olatomide (2012), the first oil shock in 1973 brought a dramatic positive impact on most economic indicators such as real per capita income, private consumption and real wages rose sharply. At the same time, Anusionwu and Diejomoah (1981) observed that income inequalities increased sharply particularly between urban and rural areas, and primarily as a result of oil booms and their spin-offs. Severity of poverty as well as the incidence of extreme poverty increased between 1985 and 1992.

In one of my papers in May, 2018, titled "Human Security: A Crucial and Desirable Component of Security in the Contemporary Nigerian Society", I captured the Nigeria Poverty Profile (2010) as published by the National Bureau of Statistics NBS, which gave a number of ways of measuring poverty which is referred to as "Poverty Line". They include the following:

- i) Food Poverty line is N39, 759.49. This Food Poverty is an aspect of Absolute Poverty Measure which considers only food expenditure for the affected Households.
- ii) Absolute Poverty line is N54, 401.16. This is the second step in Absolute (Objective) Poverty measure. Here, this method considers both food expenditure and non- food expenditure using the per capita expenditure approach
- iii) The Relative Poverty line is N66, 802.20. This line separates the poor from the non-poor. All persons whose per capita expenditure is less than the above are considered to be poor while those above the stated amount are considered to be non-poor.
- iv) The Dollar Per day Poverty line is N54, 750. This measures, consider all individuals whose expenditure per day is less than a dollar per day using the exchange rate of Naira to Dollar in 2009/2010.
- v) The Subjective Poverty Measure is the perception of the citizenry. It is neither related to Per Capita Expenditure of household nor the Country adult – equivalent scale. From the survey result, the core poor is 46.7 percent, Moderate poor is 47.2 percent while the non-poor is 6.1 percent
- vi) Another critical measure of poverty is the Gini Coefficient (Inequality Measurement). This measure can explain the spread of Income or expenditure yet cannot explain increase or decrease of individuals or persons in poverty. In 2004, the Gini Coefficient was 0.4296 whereas in 2010 it was 0.4470 indicating that inequality increased by 4.1 percent nationally.

Through the above measurements, the NBS was able to show the prevalence and increase in poverty in Nigeria from 1980 to 2010. The table below shows that poverty is on a persistent increase with no sign of decrease whatsoever.

Table 1: Relative Poverty Headcount from 1980 - 2010

Year	Poverty incidence (%)	Estimated Population (million)	Population in poverty (million)
1980	27.2	65	17.1
1985	46.3	75	34.7
1992	42.7	91.5	39.2
1996	65.5	102.3	67.1
2004	54.4	126.3	68.7
2010	69.0	163	112.47

Source: National Bureau of Statistics HNLSS 2010.

IMF data reveal that poverty rates have declined more slowly in Nigeria than in other sub-Saharan African countries with similar GDP. The data available shows that the poverty headcount is high, with 62.6 percent of the population living below the poverty line (HNLSS 2010). More shockingly, Yomi Kazeem (2018) reported that according to the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) to end extreme poverty by 2030, most parts of Nigeria will remain in abject poverty as it overtook India to become the country with the most extreme poor. The extremely poor in Nigeria is up to 86.9 million representing nearly 50% of the estimated 180 million population which according to CNN reporter (Lagos, Nigeria) are living on less than \$1.90 a day (updated 0807 GMT, 1607HKT, June 26, 2018) and that the number of people falling into extreme poverty grows by roughly six people every minute.

## **VII. Socio-Economic Effects Of Poverty**

The socio-economic effects of poverty cannot be over emphasized. Poverty as seen earlier is lack of economic resources which leaves a person less empowered to access the basic needs of life. Consequently, diseases, hunger and poor sanitation overwhelms the poor.

The Borgen Project (2016) noted that the effects of poverty are often interrelated so that one problem rarely occurs alone. Bad sanitation makes one susceptible to diseases, and hunger and lack of clean water makes one even more vulnerable to diseases.

Poverty in Nigeria means outright denial of some basic necessities of life – nutritious food, medical facilities, sound education, etc. Many infants born into poverty have low birth weight, which is associated with many preventable mental and physical disabilities. Children raised in poverty tend to miss school more often because of illness.

Gwendolyn C. Warren (2012) noted that Poverty affects the economic prosperity of a community. Costs associated with individuals living in poverty are elevated due to an increased risk of adverse outcomes such as health, low productivity, and increased crime in unsafe neighborhoods – which leads to lower graduation rates and a reduced participation in the workforce. Poverty works against human capital development by limiting an individual's ability to remain healthy and contribute talents and labor to the economy. While a decrease in human capital puts a strain on government resources and causes decreased economic output.

## **VIII. Recommendations**

The first major step in tackling the problem of poverty in Nigeria is to diversify the economy instead of depending on the oil sector alone. When government give attention to other sectors such as agriculture, mining, tourism, etc., it will boost the economy and increase the general standard of living. New jobs will be created thereby reducing the number of the unemployed poor.

Another decisive step to take is to sincerely fight corruption not just a selective fight. When corruption is dealt with it will lead to the revamping of the power sector which hitherto engulfed huge resources without any sign of improvement. However, when there is sufficient power supply, cottage industries and other petti businesses will thrive. Fight against corruption will lead to the success of several poverty alleviation programmes as the money committed to these programmes will not be mismanaged.

More so, there should be deliberate support for small scale businesses. The government of Nigeria should be deliberate in policies that will ensure creation, survival and expansion of small scale businesses. Loan facilities with more realistic collaterals should be made available. The government should also ensure enabling environment for these small scale businesses to thrive such as steady power supply, a secure society free from kidnapping, armed robbery, cybercrimes and many other criminal activities inimical to business and social life. There should also be improvement in social orientation. The government should devise a means of social orientation that transcend the urban centers. This is because not all mass media programme broadcasts, schools, and government programmes are accessible to rural dwellers. The government should make concerted efforts through designated agencies to reach out to the remote areas and enlighten the dwellers on the need for education, basic hygiene, starting up small businesses and not just to rely on subsistent farming, etc. This will remarkably transform their standard of living.

Above all, people's attitude should change. Some accept poverty as destined by God due to their religious or cultural beliefs. Simple attitude of saving, prudence, investments and hard work can go a long way in salvaging many from this circle of poverty.

## **IX. CONCLUSION**

It is clear that Nigeria is a country that is highly endowed with natural and human resources. Ironically, large number of the population is languishing in abject poverty mainly due to corruption and insensitivity of the government. It is hoped that the recommendations in this paper will serve as a road map for lifting the poor to a better standard of living.

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