

## POVERTY REDUCTION AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN NIGER DELTA REGION OF NIGERIA: STRATEGIES FOR COUNSELLING

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### ABSTRACT

*The Niger Delta region of Nigeria is richly endowed with huge resources of petroleum oil which is a major source of National income, yet the region is characterized by poverty. It is against this background that the present paper attempts to examine how poverty can be reduced particularly in respect to the people through skills acquisition in the region. Despite all the measures adopted by government at all levels to reduce poverty, a high percentage of Nigerians are still poor. The scourge seems unbolting as a result of the negative role of globalization in the economy of Nigeria, disparities in peoples income, gender imbalance as far as access to economic resources is concerned, disparities in access to health and education, corruption, neglect of agriculture among others. Be that as it may, the paper highlights some of the causes and effects of poverty in Niger delta region, discusses some approaches to poverty reduction, mentions some reduction strategies, looks at some of the problems that militated against previous National Poverty eradication programmes and finally the author proffers some recommendations that will help to reduce poverty in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria.*

**Key Words:** *Poverty, Reduction, Sustainable Development, Niger-Delta and Counselling*

### Introduction

The Niger – Delta is Africa’s largest mangrove forest area in the world. It covers an area of about 70,000 sq.kms and has a population of about 31,217,889 million (Vanguard, 2007, Wednesday, January, 10). The Niger-Delta region consist of nine (9) states: Abia,

Akwa-Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross-River, Delta, Edo, Imo, Ondo and Rivers; and adjoining shallow and deep off shore produce over 2 million barrels per day of crude oil which accounts for about 95% of Nigeria's earning and about 85% of the revenue of the federation. The major economic activities in the area include agriculture, trading and oil related industries. Unemployment and poverty are serious problems especially amongst the youths and mid adults in this region (Ojameruaye, 1996; Oghiagbephan, Ikekhua and Oyearone, 2009; and Oghiagbephan, 2014:11). There is a widespread feeling of marginalization, neglect, oppression and deprivation amongst the people of the area.

A look at the Niger Delta region from afar shows a picture of a rich region characterized by low poverty level. This is due to the presence of large quantity of oil which is a major source of National income of the Nigerian State. However, a closer look at the region in particular gives a clear picture of and the presence of poverty. Poverty which has become a global issue has always formed a major concern in the agenda of the United Nations, the challenges of its eradication have occupied top priority both in international and national agenda. Through the assistance of global United Nations Conference, Seminars, Workshops and summits, a set of interrelated and mutually reinforcing goals and targets have been canvassed by governments at different levels in order to combat poverty (Okumagba, 2010:119).

Poverty, a global phenomenon that is complex and multi-dimensional is not easy to define. Each region of the world has different yardsticks for measuring the level of poverty based on people's ability to have access to basic things of life namely: food, clothing and shelter. However, it is instructive to note that despite different parameters and indices of measuring poverty from region to region all over the world, the fact still remains that the meaning of poverty still tends towards lack and below average and poor standard of living (Ogunleye, 2010).

Poverty reduction is one of the most difficult challenges facing any country in the developing world where, on the average, majority of the population is considered poor.

Evidences in Nigeria shows that the number of those in poverty has continued to increase. For example the number of those in poverty increased from 27% in 1980 to 46% in 1985 and to 67% in 1996, by 1999 it increased to more than 70% (Ogwumike, 2001). Poverty reduction programmes in Nigeria are means through which the government aims to revamp and reconstruct the economy. The high incidence of poverty in the country has made poverty reduction strategies important policy options over the years with different results or outcomes. Poverty reduction strategies ranging from Operation Feed the Nation of 1978, the Green Revolution of 1982, the Directorate of Foods Roads and Rural Infrastructures (DFRFRI), the National Directorate for Employment (NDE), Poverty Alleviation Programme (PAP) up to the National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP) were all attempts made by various governments in the country to curb the menace.

### **Concepts of Poverty**

There is no standard definition of poverty because of its multi-dimensional or hydra-headed nature. Poverty is commonly defined as a situation of low income or low consumption. It can also be viewed as a situation in which individuals are unable to meet the basic necessities of life such as food, clothing, shelter, education, security and health. Ajakaiye and Adeyeye (2000) opined poverty as a function of education, health, child mortality and other demographic variables. Poverty to them is the availability or otherwise of the above yardsticks.

Narsir (2002) defined poverty as a concept that entails socio-economic and political deprivation which may affect individuals' households, or communities and which may result in lack of access to the basic necessities of life.

The World Bank Report (1990) sees poverty as hunger, lack of shelter, being sick and not being able to go to school, not knowing how to read, not being able to speak properly, not having a job, having fear for the future, losing a child to illness brought

about by unclean water, powerlessness, lack of representation and freedom. According to World Bank (1990) and United Nations (1995) the various manifestations of poverty include: lack of income and productive resources sufficient to ensure sustainable livelihood; hunger and malnutrition and other basic services, homelessness and unsafe degraded environment among others. Going by the foregoing definitions and facts about poverty, Ogunleye (2006) concludes that indicators of poverty include: literacy, health status, nutrition status, access to housing, water satisfaction and a host of others. Poverty therefore is the ability to attend to or meet up with the basic necessities of life as a result of lack of where withal to do so.

However, in a nut shell, poverty can be regarded as a situation in which an individual is unable because of economic, social, political and psychological incapacitated, to provide himself and his family, the barest basic necessities of life.

### **Concept of Sustainable Development**

Sustainable Development could be regarded as a process of change in which the exploitation of resources, the direction of investments, the orientation of technological development and institutional change are all in harmony and enhance both current and future potential to meet human needs and aspirations. Consequently, satisfying human aspirations and needs is the major objective of development while sustainable development is the development which meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

Sustainable human development stresses the importance of participation as a means to sustain the development process and to ensure a more equitable distribution of beneficiaries created by development initiative. Its main focus is the utilization of national resources (physical and human) to:

- a) meet the Niger-Delta needs,
- b) achieve sustainable livelihood systems in a given community,

- c) eliminate poverty,
- d) maintain the physical and human environment for the present as well as succeeding generations of members of the community and above all, and
- e) achieve global inclusion by ensuring the mobilization of the participation of all members of the community in the development process as well as equitable distribution of benefits produced.

The shift is however emphasizing the programme approach which encourage a national participatory process in development involving all major stakeholders/beneficiaries including development partners and donors (UNDP, 1996:50-51, Oghiagbephan, 2014; 12 – 13).

### **Objectives of Sustainable Development**

The objectives of sustainable development are numerous amongst these include:

1. To ensure that the natural or environmental resources base is not allowed to deteriorate,
2. To educate people and nations on the need for Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) before carryout a development project.
3. To create a sustainable improvement in the quality of life for all people as a principal goal of development,
4. To identify the cause of environment degradation, biodiversity loss and other environmental problems and to combat them.
5. To meet the basic needs of people of the present generation in order to sustain the needs for future generations.
6. To increase economic growth.
7. To ensure clean environment for all
8. To give everyone the chance to participate in public life.
9. To uplift the living standards of people by meeting their basic needs.

10.To better people health and enhance their educational opportunities (Jhingan and Sharma, 2009 in Oghiagbephan, 2014:13).

### **Classification or Forms of Poverty**

Poverty can be classified, based on different criteria, as absolute poverty, relative poverty, rural poverty and urban poverty. Absolute poverty refer to lack of minimum physical requirements for existence; relative poverty on the other hand refers to a situation in which persons or households' provision of goods is lower than that of others. Rural poverty is characterized by poor material condition, low level of education, lack of infrastructures, poor health condition, underemployment, low investment and high out-migration. Urban poverty on the other hand is characterized by environmental degradation, overcrowded accommodation, low per capital income, and other problems associated with urban areas such as slums, ghettos and shanties.

There are also the biological, psychological and sociological dimensions to poverty. The biological theorists see poverty in terms of over population and contend that any society that is over populated is prone to a high rate of poverty.

The psychologists see poverty in terms of behaviour and poor initiative. to them, poverty results from apathy, laziness, lack of industry and the capacity of the person to exploit opportunities available to him.

The sociologists see poverty in terms of unfavourable conditions evidenced in the society. It is their believe that the society creates its poor people, for it is the functions of the society to provide the masses with adequate opportunities to better their lot.

### **Causes of Poverty in the Niger-Delta**

A number of factors are responsible for the existence of poverty in the society. These factors may be economic, socio-cultural, political, physical, natural or man induced



disasters. Obadan (1997 and 2001) identified some factors as the causes of poverty among which are:

- i. inadequate access to employment opportunities,
- ii. inadequate physical assets,
- iii. inadequate access to markets,
- iv. destruction of natural resources,
- v. lack of power to participate in design of development programmes,
- vi. inadequate access to assistance for those living at the margin,
- vii. inadequate provision of social infrastructures such as motorable roads to the rural communities makes it difficult for the rural dwellers to carry their farm products to the urban market for sale.
- viii. Other factors that cause poverty include protracted ill health, accident that incapacitates persons or diseases.

### **Effects/Consequences of Poverty in Niger Delta**

Aku and Oladeji (1997) opined that there is general loss of confidence in the society stricken by poverty and this renders government policies ineffective. Poverty also results in increasing the fragility and vulnerability of members of Niger Delta to external influences. Furthermore, poverty makes production remain largely subsistence due to lack of capital needed for expansion. Labour becomes intensive and marginal productivity remains low.

### **Others include:**

- a) malnutrition of children,
- b) increase in adolescent or teenage pregnancies,
- c) increase in juvenile delinquency and child abuse,
- d) increase in prostitution and high rate of moral decadence in high and low places in the society,

- e) increase in educational drop-outs from primary and secondary schools among adolescents,
- f) increase in the incident of drug abuse and alcoholism,
- g) increase in armed robbery and “Biro/Pen robbery”, fraud, bribery and corruption, injustice, indolence, and so forth.

## **Approaches to Poverty Reduction**

There are many approaches to poverty reduction, some of which include;

**Economic Growth Approach:** Broad based economic growth should be encouraged. This should focus on capital formation as it relates to capital stock, and human capital. Human capital formation has to do with education, health, nutrition and housing needs of labour. This is obvious from the fact that investment in these facets of human capital improves the quality of labour and thus its productivity.

**Basic Needs Approach:** This calls for the provision of basic needs such as food, shelter, water, sanitation, health care, basic education, transportation etc. Unless there is proper targeting, this approach may not directly impact on the poor because of their inherent disadvantages in terms of political power and the ability to influence the choice and location of government programmes and projects.

**Rural Development Approach:** This approach sees the rural sector as a unique sector in terms of poverty reduction. This is because majority of the poor in Nigeria in general live in this sector. In addition, the level of paid employment in this sector is very low and this means that, traditional measures of reducing poverty and may not easily work in the rural sector without radical changes in the assets ownership structure, credit structure, etc. One basic problem with this approach to poverty reduction is that it is difficult to focus attention on the real poor given that poverty in the rural area is



pervasive. In others words it makes targeting of poverty reduction programmes very difficult.

**Target Approach:** This approach favours directing poverty reduction programmes at specific groups within the Niger Delta in particular and Nigeria in general. It includes such programmes as social safety Nets, Micro Credits, and school meal programme.

### **Poverty Reduction Strategies in Niger Delta**

In Nigeria, especially Niger Delta, the poverty alleviation measures implemented so far have focused more on growth, basic needs and rural development approaches. They can be looked at from two perspectives: that is those in the pre Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) era and those in the SAP era.

During the Pre-SAP era, poverty reduction was never the direct focus of development planning and management. Government only showed concerned for poverty reduction indirectly. Many of the programmes which were put in place by the government (either wholly or in association with international agencies) had positive effects on poverty reduction although the target populations for some of the programmes were not specified explicitly as poor people or communities. Some of such programmes include: the River Basin Development Authorities (RBDA) the Agricultural Development Programmes (ADP), the Agricultural Credit Guarantee Scheme (ACGS), The Rural Electrification Scheme (RES), and the Rural Banking Programme (RBP). Most of these programmes were designed to take care of such objectives as employment generation, enhancing agricultural output and income, and stemming the tide of rural-urban migration, which no doubt affected poverty reduction. Despite some significant degree of success made by some of these programmes, most of them could not be sustained due to lack of political will and commitment, policy instability and insufficient involvement of the beneficiaries in these programmes.

The SAP Era was a conscious policy effort made by the federal government towards poverty alleviation in Nigeria. The severe economic crisis in Nigeria especially Niger Delta in the early 1980s worsened the quality of life of most Nigerians. The government made a determined effort to check the crisis through the adoption of Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP). However, the implementation of SAP further worsened the living conditions of many Nigerians especially the poor who were the most vulnerable group. This made the government to design and implement many poverty alleviation programmes between 1986 and 1993. Also, under the guided deregulation that spanned the period 1993 to 1998, more poverty reduction programmes were put in place by government. Oladeji and Abiola (1998) identified them as: The Directorate for Foods Roads and Rural Infrastructures (DFFR), the National Directorate for Employment (NDE), Better Life Programme (BLP), People's Bank of Nigeria (PBN), Community Banks (CB), Family Support Programme (FSP) and the Family Economic Advancement Programme (FEAP)

### **Problems Militating Against Previous National Poverty Eradication Programmes and National Directorate of Employment (NAPEP and NDE)**

From the preceding discussions, we have seen that despite the effort of the government to reduce poverty, it have remained high in Nigeria especially Niger Delta Region. There are so many problems that are responsible for the less than impressive performance of the past and present poverty alleviation programme viz: National poverty Eradication Programmes (NAPEP) and National Directorate of Employment (NDE). These problems can be analyzed as follows:

1. Bad leadership, exemplified by galloping corruption, sit tight policy, monopolization of power, nepotism and cronyism. Complete lack of accountability transparency and consistency in governance has constituted serious obstacle to prevent poverty alleviation programmes in Nigeria.

2. Monopolistic politics as against pluralistic or multi-party politics. Under this type of monopolistic politics, there is little or no time for the governed.
3. Increase dependence on oil and neglect of Agriculture constitutes another problem for the past and present poverty alleviation programme.
4. Lack of consistency and non implementation of government poverty alleviation economic programme.
5. All the previous poverty alleviation programmes in Nigeria have not improved the poverty profile because they were not religiously implemented
6. Inadequate funding by the three (3) tiers of government.
7. Inadequate inflow of foreign investment in Nigeria is politically and economically unstable.
8. Social amenities problems like electricity, pipe borne water and health facilities are non-existence in the rural area where the majority of the people live even in some of the cities, these facilities are lacking. Presence of these will help to reduce drudgery of rural life, increased productivity of labour force and open up the rural areas to rapid and industrial development (Abubaka, 2008:63 – 64).

### **Sustainable Poverty Alleviation Strategies in Niger Delta Region**

The following are some of the sustainable strategies at alleviating poverty in Niger Delta Region of Nigeria:

1. Investment in infrastructure that directly enhances productive capacities can have a high economic return through increased agricultural output. Roads and other infrastructures should be extended to geographically remote areas.
2. Economic policies of government be geared towards creation of jobs
3. Special attention should be given to the needs of the marginalized especially the Niger Delta people.
4. The community must be the center piece of all poverty eradication efforts with the grassroots being involved in the design, implementation, monitoring and elevation of those efforts.
5. There is the need to end the folly of privatizing state functions on a large scale and to rebuild the public institutions and services that were dismantled in recent years.

6. National tax systems should be made moderately progressive so that the rich pay more, thus, generating additional funds for poverty reduction and basic social services.
7. Enhanced probity and accountability at all levels of governance.
8. Political reforms that can make government accountable to the people and also pave way for confidence in the polity so as to attract investment from abroad (Ogunleye, 2010:300-301).

## Conclusion

Poverty is a very serious problem in Niger Delta especially and Nigeria in general as more than 70% of the entire population are still poor. Considering the current poverty in the Niger Delta, One can conclude that the past poverty alleviation programmes have not achieved much. This is perhaps due to the problems identified as hindering the effective implementation of the programmes. There is no doubt in the fact that successive government in Nigeria have attempted to alleviate poverty at one time or the other through their poverty alleviation related programmes, the conclusion is that as laudable as some of these programmes, they have not been able to lift the life of majority of Nigerians especially the Niger Delta people above the poverty line.

However, this paper has dealt extensively with the concept of poverty and sustainable development, classification or forms of poverty, objectives of sustainable development, causes and effects of poverty, Approaches to poverty reduction, poverty reduction strategies, problems militating against previous National Poverty Eradication programme (NAPEP), sustainable poverty alleviation strategies and finally proffered some recommendations on poverty reduction and sustainable development in Niger Delta region.

It is therefore important to give expression to poverty alleviation objectives within National Development Plans with Strategies well integrated into the National

Development plans. It is my fervent belief that the level of poverty in the Niger Delta can only be reduced not eradicated through good governance in all the three tiers of governance.

### **Recommendations**

Sequel to the above, the following recommendations will help in reducing poverty to a large extent in the Niger Delta and the Nigerian state generally.

1. The need for skill acquisition centres in the Niger Delta. This entails not just setting them up, but proper funding and monitoring to achieve the desired goals of helping to alleviate poverty in the region.
2. The establishment of cottage industries. This will help to create employment for more who cannot get employed in oil companies, civil service and private companies. This can be achieved through collaborative efforts with Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) and Multi National Co-operations.
3. Setting up of Micro Credit Scheme. There is the need for the establishment of Micro Credit schemes in the form of co-operative societies which must assist particularly the rural dwellers.
4. The governments at various levels should be seen to be creating enabling environment for, and providing the means of empowering the Niger Delta people towards alleviating poverty in the region.
5. Government should device a blueprint to poverty eradication in Nigeria by monitoring their citizens for higher productivity by paying the workers living wages and pension as at when due.
6. It is believed that sustainable poverty alleviation or reduction is achievable in Nigeria if investment in physical infrastructure is improved upon. And government should be made to be more accountable to all the people.
7. Poverty is a multi-dimensional issue and needs a multi-dimensional approach towards solving it.

8. Nigerian leaders should develop a vision that would create a sense of purpose in the citizenry, teach our children the values of hard work, instilling sense of pride for their country by encouraging rewards for honesty.
9. Government should avoid poor conception and implementation of economic reforms on poverty alleviation in Nigeria.
10. Finally, our leaders should avoid ethnic nationalism, create oriented and pro-poor social politics through investment and rural infrastructures like electricity and good roads which will assist in production and distribution of goods and services

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