

Interface Between Public Policy and Rural Poverty in Benue State

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Abstract: Benue state which carries the sobriquet of *The Food Basket of the Nation* because of her strategic role as the producer of food that feeds Nigerian people, and located in the North Central Senatorial Zone, is one of the federating units that make up Nigeria. With a population of over four million people, the state is hugely endowed with vast arable land and vibrant youths that are potentials for jumpstarting the economic development of the state. Interestingly, agriculture is the mainstay of the economy of the state. Benue agriculture yields fibres for human consumption as well as raw materials for feeding industries. It is in the hands of resource poor farmers who rely mainly on traditional technology and practices for cultivation, processing and storage. The low level of agricultural mechanization, poor land management, high cost of agricultural input, inadequate access to credit facilities, research products and farm implements by farmers, constitute a serious strain on agriculture. Over 90% of the Benue population are farmers who produce food to feed the rural and urban populace while the surplus is sold to earn income for the state (CRRBAP, 2003; Our Benue, Our Future, 2007).

Keywords: Public Policy, Rural Poverty, Agriculture.

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Introduction

The practice of agriculture in Benue state, prior to and since her creation in 1976, has remained predominantly at the subsistence level. Though the land is arable, the population pressure and the reliance of the subsistence farmers on traditional methods of farming, has led to low annual harvests which leaves the economy of the average farmer, unattractive. Of the Benue land area of 34,059 square kilometers, 31,811 square kilometers is arable and worked by rural based small-holders who rely on human labour for production, planting old saved seeds and with little or no access to farm machines and implements, research products and credit facilities to boost their productivity. Animal rearing in the state is undeveloped in spite of the climate and geo-strategic location that is conducive for massive animal production. Interestingly, the cultivation of citrus plantations has gained prominence in recent times. Apart from checking erosion, the tree crops generate all-year-round income for the farmers. For a state where squabbles over land and abound in quantum, the planting of economic crops that are tendered and harvested regularly, consolidate the hold of an owner

on land (Ega, 1987; Gbehe, 2007). However, agriculture in Benue state is hampered by the inability of the farmers to harness the state's resources for effective production because majority of the farmers rely mainly on natural rainfall, traditional hoes and cutlasses for farming which greatly undermines their productivity. This situation has paradoxically led to food insufficiency and poverty of the rural dwellers in spite of the availability of enormous resources. Although past and present political leaders in Benue State since her creation in 1976 have keyed into, and introduced diverse policies and programmes in tandem with the Federal directives, rural poverty remains despicably and unacceptably high (Omachi, 2015; Aliegba, 2017).

The disturbing situation suggests that rural poverty has become an intractable malady in Benue state despite the policy efforts of governments and individuals. This reality has given rise to certain pertinent questions. First, is rural poverty caused by the limited access of rural farmers to sources of agricultural inputs? Second, is it due to decreasing soil fertility as a result of population swells, perennial flooding and herdsmen activities that put pressure on land? Third, is the exacerbating rural poverty due to the neglect of agriculture by the nation's political leaders? Fourth, is rural poverty caused by the biased and urban-oriented disposition of Nigeria's political leaders? These questions and other related issues provide the compelling need for investigation and will provide a focus for our discussion in this work. We hope to situate our discussion in this paper within the ambience of the power theory.

The Power theory of poverty

Although the social sciences is replete with diverse theories such as blaming the victim, lack of access to basic needs and poverty culture theories of poverty among others; to analyze the concept and dynamics of poverty, we hope to adopt the power theory of poverty for our discussion in this work to elucidate the origins, impacts and dynamics of poverty in Benue state. This theory also variously known as structural theory or occupational structure theory has a central thesis which argues that it is political power in the state that determines the distribution of poverty among the people. The proponents contend that poverty in the society can best be understood by looking at the occupational structure to identify an individual's position on the economic ladder and by extension, his economic status. The arrowheads of this theory, notably Marx (1960), Machiavelli (1940), etc. further explain that those who own the means of production as well as those with the requisite managerial skills, rank higher on the occupational structure and are rich, while people without skills and do not own the productive means are at the bottom of the ladder and are poor.

The proponents of this school are in agreement that poverty is typical of a situation where those who possess political power organize the system to suit themselves at the expense of the poor especially in societies where the majorities are politically unsocialized. Dudley (1965, p.21)) aptly captured this view in his seminal work on party politics in Northern Nigeria in the following words: 'the shortest cut to affluence and influence is through politics. Politics means money and money means politics. To get politics, there is always a price...to be a member of government party means Open Avenue to government patronage, contract deals and the like'. Instructively, modern theorists of power theory stress that poverty would be eradicated when the poor rise up in protest and successfully alter the political structure, viz-a-viz, the state's economic structure (Kurien, 1978; Uniamikhogbo, 1997). Although this theory has been criticized for being heuristic and appearing gloomy because of the envisaged difficulty in altering the power structure, its beneficial values to this study are enormous. The theory recognizes the widespread illiteracy and low level of political consciousness in Benue state.

This fact has made the citizenry vulnerable, gullible, docile and apathetic, all of which combine to ease their oppression and exploitation by the ruling class. Also, the theory clearly explains the dynamics surrounding the persistence of poverty in Benue state like elsewhere, where the possession of political power translates to holding the magic key to state coffers for primitive accumulation rather than development (Dudley, 1965; Nnoli, 1993; Asobie, 2001; Olatunbosun, 1975; 2009; Mabogunje, 2009). Thus, this strand of the theory of poverty possesses alluring and enormous beneficial values for our discussion of the deteriorating living conditions of the Benue rural poor in spite of the flurry of public policies implemented by successive administrations at both federal and state levels, ostensibly to unleash prosperity on the people.

Clarification of Concepts

Rural Poverty

As we noted in the sequel, the phenomenon of rural poverty is widespread and endemic in Benue hinterlands due to myriads of reasons. First, many people do not have enough land to grow crops to feed their families and to generate income to meet their numerous obligations. Second, the poverty situation is further worsened by uncontrolled population which puts undue pressure on land, thereby reducing farmers's productivity. More disturbing is the inadequate access of the farmers to complementary in-puts such as fertilizers, credit facilities, machines, improved seeds, pesticides, research findings and new methods of farming (Our Benue, Our Future, 2007; Omachi, 2015; Aliegba, 2017). Third and equally disturbing is that Benue rural dwellers who hold the acquisition of large-sized families in esteem, continue to procreate intermittently without regard for the resources needed for upkeep. Consequently, they are trapped in a vicious cycle with no hope of escape.

Against the foregoing premise, we examine the definitions of rural poverty as opined by scholars. First, is that provided by Ekpo and Olaniyi (1995), who conceive of rural poverty as a condition of life in the rural areas that is characterized by misery, morbidity and underdevelopment. For Ayichi (1995) who conceives of poverty as a rural phenomenon, it is a condition of life in which the ruralites are trapped; have low income from investment; under-utilize or are unable to utilize their resources; enjoy rapid population growth; are under-employed or enjoy disguised unemployment; witness low productivity and rely on low and traditional technology. Further, Ayichi highlights limited entrepreneurship, high level of illiteracy, ignorance, diseases, malnutrition, near absence of social services and infrastructure as characterizing and perpetuating rural poverty (Ayichi, 1995). Ayichi's descriptive definition which is comprehensive and clearly captures the salient features of rural poverty situation however has a fundamental flaw. Describing poverty as a rural phenomenon is misleading and fallacious as poverty equally exists in the urban with similar excruciating effects.

Deriving from the above submissions, rural poverty is conceptualized in this work as a ravaging social and economic phenomenon that manifests in the inability of the rural dwellers to acquire the basic necessities of life. It equally connotes a state of deprivation which dehumanizes the rural poor, thereby making them gullible, vulnerable, morbid and helpless. It is also a vicious trap, created largely by the ruling elite, who consciously manipulate state policies for personal benefits at the expense of the neglected rural populace. We justify this definition against the backdrop that power plays a central role in the governance of all societies. Those who control power, invariably use it to promote their interests, while distributing poverty to the less privileged groups. The implication is that Benue state's political leaders have in the spirit of the peripheral capitalist ideology, continually initiate

policies for self-aggrandizement at the expense of the rural poor (Achebe, 1985; Gbehe, 2007; Omachi 2015; Aliegba, 2017).

Public policy

McLean and McMillan (2003) conceive of a public policy as the blueprint showing what the state intends to do to enhance the progress and well-being of the citizenry. In their view, a development plan and public policy are synonymous. However, they are quick to point out that a thin line of demarcation between them is that, a plan carries an operational time frame while a policy does not. Similarly, Nwankwo (1987) who largely agrees with McLean and McMillan (2003) define a public policy as a blueprint that highlights the key sectors of the state as well as how their activities may be harnessed for optimal benefits of the citizenry. Relatedly, Anyanwu, Oaikhenam, Oyefusi and Dimowo (1997) conceive of a public policy as a document that reviews past policies, prevailing national and global economic conditions as well as proposes expenditures in the light of the resources available to operate the plan in a given period. Deriving from the foregoing therefore, we conceive of a public policy as a blueprint, outlining what the government intends to do to improve the living conditions of the citizenry in the light of the available resources over a given period. However, given the Nigerian status of a peripheral capitalist society, a public policy is an instrument in the hands of the ruling class, used for capital accumulation at the expense of the people.

The justification of the above definition lies in the experience that successive Nigeria's political leaders have initiated public policies meant to be in the interest of the citizenry; yet, their underlying motive have been to consolidate their personal economy, while distributing poverty among the populace (Uniamikogbo, 1997, p.23; 1993; Nnoli, 1993; Ake, 2001; Mabogunje 2017).

Poverty Trends in Benue state, 1976 to Date

Despite the flurry of public policies and the humongous sums committed to their implementation by successive federal and state administrations since Benue state was created in 1976, the state continues to be mired in widespread poverty especially in the rural areas and mostly among the majority without access to political power. Currently, a visitor to the rural areas in Benue State would easily notice a number of glaring abnormalities that point to the accentuating character of rural poverty. First is the alarming high number of school age children clad in rags and looking ill-fed that continually roam the streets due to lack of funds to sponsor their school education (Field Survey, 2019).

Second, most families are malnourished with fragile adults and abused children, roaming the vicinity in rags and cheap clothing in their daily struggle for survival. Third and closely related is the astronomical rise in the phenomenon of begging for survival as exacerbating poverty has removed all inhibitions that hitherto discouraged such a demeaning practice Benue society. Fourth, most crops—cassava, yams, banana, plantain, oranges and okra among others; as well as domestic animals like goats and chickens, are harvested prematurely for consumption and sale due largely to lack of alternative means of survival. Fifth and importantly too, is the reliance on herbs by most families for medication because they cannot afford orthodox therapy (Field Survey 2019).

Sixth, most families eat only a meal a day, made up mostly of carbohydrates which leaves them with cracked skins, haggard and unkempt bodies; as well as vulnerable to ailments. Seventh is that most people live in unsafe houses with cracked walls, leaking roof and make-shift doors that make rural life harrowing.

Eighth, there is an explosion of new generation churches where foods, clothing, drinks and other gifts are shared to woo the poverty-stricken ruralites. Ninth, there is an increase in rural – urban drift by youths to escape from the entrenched rural poverty. Tenth, there is an increase in anti-social behaviors such as prostitution, indulgence in hard drugs pilfering of crops and other materials, child labor, ritual practices and thuggery among others ills adopted by the youths as survival strategies (Field Survey 2019).

Eleventh, there is an increased degradation of the environment through the plundering of woods for commercial purposes and the pollution of rivers to harvest fish with debilitating consequences for the unsuspecting consumers. This disturbing scenario has led to widespread political violence and ethnic militancy that combine to undermine the development of the state. Interestingly, pundits of the political economy of Benue state are of the view that poverty in the state is alarming and continues to rise because of reasons that include, first, most public policies evolved and implemented in the state have concentrated more projects in the urban than rural areas due to the unwholesome orientation of the political elites who are urban-biased. This has led to the neglect of rural areas in the provisioning of infrastructure and functional social services in the rural areas. Second is that more funds are allocated in annual budgets to the urban sector than rural, leading to the backwardness of the latter, in comparison with the former. Third is in the evolution and implementation of public policies in Benue state, without the involvement of the rural dwellers in order to appreciate their challenges (Gbehe 2007; Omachi 2015).

The consequence is that when programmes meant for their upliftment are haphazardly implemented, manipulated or abandoned, they are voiceless. Also, when the benefits of the development programmes, designed for the ruralites are captured by the self-serving elites, they are encumbered by poverty and illiteracy to confront them. Thus, they are adamant about the performance of their political leaders. Furthermore and quite importantly too is the adoption of anti-people policies such as the 1999 Land Use Act by the ruling elite as an instrument to disinherit the helpless rural dwellers who cannot insist on justice, when their rights are infringed upon. Dispossessing rural dwellers of their lands, tantamount further impoverishing them as land is their most critical factor of production. Also related is open grazing activities of herdsmen that have pitched them against farmers in the state leading to widespread violent conflicts with fatalities and a huge loss of valuable homes and property. Until date, hundreds of thousands of Benue citizens sacked from their natal homes (prior to and since the introduction of the Open Grazing Prohibition Law), live as refugees in camps set up for them by government, depending on hand-outs for survival (Ortom, 2016).

Conclusion

Against the backdrop of the foregoing, this chapter has attempted to demonstrate the proposition that, to the extent that public policies in Benue state have been elite-biased and urban- oriented; bequeathing more benefits to the urban sector at the expense of the rural, they had been self-serving, exploitative and are therefore the genesis of the persistence and exacerbating rural poverty. In fact, it has been rightly stated that: ‘the state plays a major role in deciding the path which development will take’ (Okali, 1990,p.10).

It therefore becomes pertinent to assert that when the state becomes an instrument of exploitation and wealth accumulation in the hands of a self-serving ruling elite, widespread poverty and its accompanying iniquities are bound to bedevil the society as the Benue situation clearly demonstrates. As Aristotle, the Prima Ballerina of social science rightly noted, ‘poverty is the parent of crime and revolution’ (Omachi, 2015. P.14).

In sum therefore, we conclude that although rural poverty may be attributed to several causative factors, the Benue case shows that it is a function of elite-biased and urban-oriented public policies that have been used over the years by the ruling elite for the accumulation of capital at the expense of the masses, majority of who live in the rural areas. This conclusion demonstrates that there is a correlation between the persistent and increasing rural poverty in Benue state like the rest of Nigeria and the chronically flawed public policies that are elite-inspired and urban-oriented, meant to consolidate the economy of the elite at the expense of the rural dwellers.

Recommendations

In the light of the foregoing exploration, it becomes pertinent to make the following recommendations with a view to repositioning the Benue state economy to enable her unleash prosperity on the citizenry, especially, the rural dwellers. Rural dwellers should no longer be ignored but be involved in the formulation of public policies meant for their well-being. A conscious needs to be made to link the rural economy with the main stream state and national economies to ensure that the people in the hinterlands are not left to continue to wallow in penury as a matter of social justice. In the light of the devastating nature of rural poverty in Benue State and the larger Nigeria today, we recommend that there is an urgent need for the political leaders to demonstrate more commitment in the implementation of development policies.

There is also the need to repeal the injurious sections of the 1999 Land Use Act to make more lands available to farmers as a booster to their agricultural activities since it constitutes the mainstay of the rural economy. Government should as a matter of priority, provide farmers with agricultural inputs such as fertilizers, herbicides, farm machines, infrastructures, etc, to jumpstart rural economy given their vital role as the producers of the food that feeds the nation. This will go a long way to making agriculture more attractive and thus mop up the unemployed labour army of youths that are fast degenerating into drug addicts, ethnic militants, kidnappers, prostitutes and robbers. We also advocate that government increases her investment in education that is tailored towards skills acquisition as this will enable graduates to be self-employed at graduation rather than searching for non-existent white collar jobs.

The rural dwellers need to on their own part, shed off some of their injurious cultural practices like acquisition of numerous wives and children beyond their capacity for adequate training and upkeep, use of violence in settling disputes, conduct of elaborate funeral ceremonies among others; that guzzle their resources and thus aggravate their plight. This indeed suggests that policy makers should make efforts towards strengthening the indigenous institutions and cultural rejuvenation for promoting peace through dialogue; transparency in governance; communalism; dignity in labour and honesty through workshops, conferences and the mass media. This would lead to the integration of the rural populace into the national economic and political mainstream to bring about balanced development in Nigeria as a panacea to the current situation where urban affluence thrives alongside rural squalor.

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