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Politics of Predation: Food Distribution and Women

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Abstract

Emergent on the African conception of food as a significant human physiological need which in most cases defines poverty; this paper discussed the possibility of unique political participation based on the effectiveness of Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Within the context of these conceptual issues, women in traditional and contemporary Africa, having their core social roles as home-makers and food providers are likely major targets of food distribution. Food distribution in this context emphasizes aid programmes and vote buying (money for vote and food for votes). The paper examined the outcome of the need for and supply of food, by engaging the dualism that characterizes food distribution which has capacity to inhibit sustainable development and to perpetuate poverty. The perpetuation of poverty is conceptualized as a tool of; and for the political class in third world countries where, poverty is higher among women compared to other parts of the world. Poverty provides the fertile ground for making political gains out of the people, especially women who are largely politically marginalized and economically dependent.

Key Words: food programmes, household, needs, political participation, voting patterns

Introduction

In the context of African societies, the life time of a woman as a matter of social expectation, oscillates around babysitting, food preparation for the family, nursing the sick, growing and processing food crops for the family and for market purposes (Olurode, 2013). Thus, women's active participation in politics in this part of the world may not materialize until the needs and expectations of family life have been met and that stage passed. Significantly, the cultural dictates of patriarchy in African society are at cross purpose with the idea of women's participation in politics. These culture codes query the humility, morality, sense of duty and character of women who participate in politics.

Political and social thoughts have significantly discussed the participation of women in terms of contesting elections, but not many have identified the role of women play in shaping political decisions. In a majority of third world countries, that men dominate the family and political arena, the discreet role of women is crucial and critical to shaping election outcomes and political decisions have remained evasive. In Olurode, 2013 and NDI, 2012, the political relevance of women in the 2007 and 2011 general elections in Nigeria presents the overview of the struggles for increasing women's vying for political offices and the outcomes. Women's participation has been discussed in most studies in terms of contesting political offices, but a fundamental understanding which has not been discussed, is the extent of women's voting in elections.

According to Blaydes and Tarouty (2009), women's voting power is high, irrespective of the repressive political, social and economic environment. This is significant because women constitute a force for organizing and mobilizing other female voters. In fact, Madhi (2011) reiterates, that in Nigeria, politicians are wary of the numerical strength of women at the polls because they constitute a larger percentage of the voting population. About 48% of registered voters during the 2011 general elections were women (NDI, 2012). This is not far-fetched from the fact that women constitute 49.1% (NPC, 2010) of the Nigerian population, and 51% (of the world population. This signifies that the political decisions that women make have indeterminable impacts on election results. This notwithstanding, significant proportions of women are highly impoverished and lack access to basic life chances. In Blaydes and Tarouty (2009), to most women in the lower class, the meaning of voting transcends political activity. Voting among low income women is regarded as an *informal economic activity*.

Thus, because of the preponderance of extreme poverty among women, *vote buying* is a bottom-up path rather than a top-bottom approach. Women's votes are perceivably easy to negotiate, they are easier to convince – to sell or to willingly give

their votes (Blaydes and Tarouty, 2009). According to INEC and FEC (2011), women constitute the significant population of the unemployed and over half of the population of registered voters are willing to vote in elections. As British Council Nigeria (2012) notes, 60% of women do not participate in the labour force. Therefore, they are more prone to *vote buying* and vulnerable targets of food programmes. This is because unemployed citizens are more likely to vote than citizens with some form of employment. Consequently, unemployed persons are more likely to trade their votes for personal or economic gains than others will. Therefore, because these women have need of the social, economic and political benefits that electioneering can bring, they are poised to cash in on the available opportunities.

Food Distribution as *Ideas* Preemptive of Power Change

This preemptive influence which food distribution holds on political office holders in Nigeria is enormous. Food insecurity is one of many challenges in the polity. In this case, we refer to food distribution within the framework of food aid [which is inclusive of food interventions, and other alternatives to food aid (direct – cash distribution; indirect – food stamps/vouchers)] (ACFIN, 2006). Therefore, members of the political class this instrument either as programs (programs/policy) and/or antics. Taking cue from the debates as to the basis of electorate turn out and voting patterns in the elections in Ekiti State, Nigeria, political commentators and analysts have come up with various theses as regards the role of food distribution. Significantly, food distribution was done by the feuding parties, but there were allusions to quality and quantity of food distribution.

For a theoretical turn, focus on food distribution/aid in the measurement of governance quality, the altruistic perspective and the end point which is the vote garnering intention of such practices are discussed. In Beath, Christia and Enikolopov (2013), food distribution is one of the many measures of governance quality, which are relative public service standards. These standards have economic and social consequences for the beneficiaries. This quality becomes more visible when the context of inclusiveness touches more on the neediest households. There is more political participation when food distribution is made available, especially among groups in which food insecurity is emphatic. In extending the discussion into the political agency models, Besley and Burgess (2002) explained that when an incumbent is in government at a given point A, there exist two categories of citizens – vulnerable (needy and un-needy) and non-vulnerable. The activities of the government, as altruistic (always put in maximal effort for service), or selfish (never puts in efforts for service) or opportunistic (puts in efforts if it will increase his chance for re-election) will determine re-election at point B. This is subject to the extent of media activity. Therefore, the opportunistic and selfish government may fail at their re-election due to high media

activity and low turnout of voters. Through the channels of information based on greater media activity, the effort of the altruistic incumbent is learned by the un-needy, coupled with the observed positive efforts of the needy. Thus, the vulnerable citizens will vote for the incumbent. While on the other hand, the non-vulnerable will align with the ideology of the incumbent. Notably, where the poverty level of a country is high, the electorate is bound or more likely to vote for altruistic tendencies (Leigh, 2005), because of the perception that such candidates will do well to alleviate the situation. In terms of women participation, because the level of poverty among women is disproportionately high; there is a tendency for higher participation among women, in terms of voting than in contesting elective offices. Although, within the realm of the turnover of the electorate and evolving politics on other issues, the challenger at the point is most likely to get random votes. Thus when there is a larger electorate turn out and the opportunistic government had put in some effort, he also may be victorious over the challenger.

This explanation extends into many other factors which include the level of struggle/competition for political power; party ideology; and the overarching prevalence of food insecurity which makes incumbents more insecure and challengers for power more proactive. Although food distributions remain temporary palliatives to the increasing food insecurity in sub-Saharan Africa, it subsists as one political tool for taking and giving state control. In Malawi, Cammack (2006) noted that food policy became an impeachment threat to Dr. Binguwa Mutharika who came to power in 2004 after Bakili Muluzi reluctantly stepped down. This reflects the extent to which ameliorating the food insecurity among other responsibilities of government can be an effective tool. This assertion emphasizes the role of food distribution – although antithetical to the electoral law in Nigeria can be a way of getting political support during elections. The dual role of food distribution at these points reflects the pre-election food distribution which has negative legal implications and post-election food distribution, having support rousing effect in the polity. As Beath et. al (2013) noted, food distribution as forms of intervention encourage more turn out and participation in political/decision-making process. In Martinez-Bravo, Qian and Yao (2012), the effect of election is driven by re-election incentives rather than by changes in the quality of the leader.

Why Food? – Why Women?

The baseline of food insecurity is high in Nigeria. But it does not constitute the only problem in the polity, as governance and infrastructure are also grey areas. While it is agreeable that *vote buying* is not affirmative of election conduct and election participation, this issue is germane to majority of countries in the third world and the discourse on governance and political participation. Preceding sections have identified

the central role that women play in political participation and the influence that women wield in terms of voting and involvement in the political process. Also, the significance of food to political decisions has been engaged in view of leadership. Therefore, the question of *why food* as a social infrastructure – of all other infrastructure, is a key point of discussion. Thus, moving from simplistic and general idea of food as a key need of man, we seek viable socio-psychological engagements of *why food?*

Predator Effect

Food is a survival prerogative of society and tracing through the emergence of man, food related activities defined the economics of human society. In fact, food consumption marked the evolution of other dimensions of society. The struggle for survival was the hallmark of the hunting and gathering epoch. Human beings subsisted on the use/exploitation of non-domesticated, otherwise wild food resources. It marks about 99% of humankind's history (Scott and Marshall, Eds., 2009). In Clevenger (1975), the description of the 'politics of hunger' in the Biafran enclave during the Nigerian Civil War, discusses the values, beliefs, policies and actions which prolonged the nutritional emergency in Eastern Nigeria. The Biafra power block refused the *imperatives of humanitarianism*. They acted in accordance with the ideological gap that formed the basis of the war (secession) which made other interests (the people) secondary. The Government of Nigeria and Biafra's had highly political standpoints which compromised humanitarian considerations.

At this point we discuss the predator effect that underlies food distribution/programmes. Taking insight from the *politics of hunger*, the divided interests around the distribution of food and other relief items was for one of either side to **win the war.** For Biafra, it was a way to bring in more weapons and win the war. Also, for the Federal Government, it was the way to prevent Biafra from winning, because 'hardliners' in the government felt feeding the enemy was not an ideology of warfare. Therefore, Nigerian government's insistence on monitoring and supervising humanitarian activities was intended to prevent more arms from coming into the hands of the belligerents. Thus, Biafra was to make a choice between receiving food without a supply of weapons or not to receive food at all and get the supply of weapons through illegal routes. This was tantamount to fighting the war without food for the people and for the army.

Hence, when this scenario is transferred to the democratic process of power change, the *predative* tendencies which underlie food distribution makes people to surrender their political power (votes). Whether through altruistic, opportunistic and selfish types of leaders, a convergence point is that food aids/distribution to the poor remains a temporary solution to hunger arising from food insecurity. This means that food programmes (pre or post-election), without any affirmative action to stop the

cause of food insecurity, is an effort to perpetually impoverish the people and create a culture of dependency (Cammack, 2006). Thus, food supply becomes the political bait to get the elective mandate. In the era of the Civil war, the Federal government was notably stealth about the approach to winning the war, therefore, a *façade of predation* was in place to shield the real intention of the government. The real intention at this time was to win the war and not to find a truce or middle ground for resolving the conflict. The government knew that cutting of weapon supply was key to having Biafra's back against the wall. This concept is also applicable in modern democracies. As a matter of fact, because blatant predation in political arenas in modern times is greeted with sanctions (in the case of Russia and Ukraine), governments and challengers for political power use more subtle means.

In clearer terms, the predatory tendency of government is reflected either through the incumbent or the challenger. Thus, when the government expropriates the wealth of the citizens, and feeds them with crumbs, subtle layers of clientelism are installed. The situation remains the same until the people through a political will understand and are able to overthrow the government and install a new government. In Azam, Bates and Biais (2009), the channel of strong institutions enable civil society to better resist predation. Also, the existence of formal and informal checks and balances, a free and powerful press, a democratic culture and independent courts enhance the ability of the people to fight predatory governments.

In Nigeria, like most of other African countries that have been perpetually predated and impoverished, political decisions among the poor (constituting more women) lies first in the concept of *breadwinnerism.* Thus, because the physiological need of food is critical, this forms the basis for which their political power (vote) is exchanged for economic gains. The political decisions are tied to the interests of the individual in the family who brings in the food. Significantly, women are the targets for most of these programmes. Politicians understand the role of the mother and wife in the home and in the community. The influence that women wield in elections remains powerful (Markham, 2013). Therefore, supply of food to the most 'subtly' influential is a key variable. Hence, the concept of *breadwinnerism* is very important as to the extent of indirect influence that women have in carving political decisions and affiliations within the home. This is done without necessarily usurping the role of the man as dictated by the patriarchal nature of the society. Thus, by reason of the nature of women's predominant occupational engagements, they are at the forefront of food based strategies.

In National Population Commission (NPC) [Nigeria] and ICF International (2014), a majority (58%) of women are in sales and services which ensure daily income, with 75% of women being self-employed. Therefore, because daily income

ensures the smooth running of the home, among 82% of male headed households, significant population of women are living in such homes. This is because they are largely self-employed and without restrictions in the work environment. With or without telling their husbands and children about the source of the food items, some sort of control is wielded when political decisions are to be made. In altruistic, selfish or opportunistic leadership, the *façade of predation* in modern societies is likely to be reflected in women's account of the impact of government. Having a means of consistently delivering the *daily bread* is a significant consideration. Thus, according to Ofong (2002) in Ogbogu (2012), women (4%) constitute the population of voters, is a unique sphere of influence for election decisions and shaping the interest of others in the community.

Imperatives for Food Distribution

For food distribution within the context of governance to be beneficial, it must surmount the challenge of ensuring sustainable development in societies. Significantly, there are conflicting environmental, social and economic dimensions to food distribution. This is because food distribution practices globally are unsustainable and ethically unacceptable. According to Food Ethics Council (2008), there are debates over these issues within policy, business and society. If food distribution will be enacted in the polity, core values are important.

As Cammack (2006) noted, food distribution/aid is a palliative which is only temporary. Thus, making food distribution effective requires certain standards which are valuable and important. When food distribution is setup as a political tool rather than an affirmative action to protect the citizens from harm, it achieves very narrow goals and puts a burden of effectiveness on the process. Therefore, when altruistic intentions form the basis for food distribution, there is likely to be higher objectivity as to the needs of the people and a commitment to effectiveness and quality. This notwithstanding, altruism will be complete when the political will to improve and increase local production is in place. The logic of food distribution in most socio-politically advanced societies is intended to supplement and cushion the weight of poverty on the poorest in society. Although an attempt to compare poverty levels between developed and developing societies may not be relevant in this paper, poverty level reflects the proportion of people that rely on food aid for survival. While food distribution exists in developed societies as amenities, it exists in most developing societies as privileges. These contexts are useful in defining the intent of food distribution.

Food programmes must conform to ethical standards. A principled approach is important; such that fundamental principles are infused for proper delivery of services to the citizens. The nutritional/food needs of the people must be assessed with the ideals

of *humanity*, *neutrality* and *impartiality* in hand. By *humanity*, we refer to the guiding principle of ensuring that the programme meets the basis for alleviating and minimizing human suffering, improves human living, ensures protection from food insecurity and guarantee for health and dignity of individuals. Although *neutrality* must be ensured at all times, Joseph and Nestle (2012) noted that it is unusual to think about food as being political, and yet is just as rare for a modern food system not to have its origins in national and/or international politics. This notwithstanding, neutrality of the programme must not be compromised. As much as possible neutrality must be maintained in terms of distribution and processes of apportioning rations. This also applies to the idea of *impartiality,* which emphasizes the fact that it is unjustifiable to become partisan. There should not be any form of discrimination based on ethnicity, origin, gender, political opinion and/or religion.

To make the system bereft of politically exploitative tendencies, food programmes should target and reach the most needy and vulnerable in the society. Also, as people get this support, self-reliance should be promoted, because it should be a drive towards reducing the vulnerability of families to hunger. Hence, recipients of food support should not undermine the local agricultural production marketing and or coping mechanisms inherent in society. Importantly, food programme should guide against the erosion of culture and environmental degradation. Furthermore, the health of populations should be given attention, as well as ensuring that the local economy does not fail. When the process is without bias, it will not develop new migratory patterns (WFP, 2002, Jaspers, 2000).

Community participation is very important. When beneficiaries of the programmes are adequately involved in the programme, the design and implementation in various communities will follow unique patterns that are suited to such environments. The involvement of women is a critical point of emphasis in establishing food programmes. Women are necessary because they essentially form the bedrock of *community*. Women understand the nutritional needs of the community and they have clear knowledge of what needs exist and how such needs can be met, even when resources are limited. Women understand the society and are able to effectively manage and plan the food distribution process (WFP, 2002). Significantly, the viable role of women in shaping social processes at the home front, translates also to the political process. Therefore, they should be made direct beneficiaries of the rations in the communities. Also, traditional rulers should also be key players in the programmes (Jaspers, 2000; ACFIN, 2006).

Conclusion

While this paper asserted that food programmes are important reducing the extent of poverty in Nigeria, the electoral process is not the platform to attempt to

garner support through food distribution. As the paper agrees that *vote buying* is inimical to democracy and the electoral process, using food as bait is a *predator* effect. Significantly, women constitute a large population of the poor in third world countries, they are unemployed and have propensity to monetize their votes. Thus, they form a large population that vote in elections and are conceivably preys in the hands of politicians. The condition of women is perceived as a function of deliberate social and cultural impoverishment. Hence, in advanced democracies, where votes are not garnered by satisfying physiological needs alone, people tend to make political decisions based on their evaluation of core issues. Significantly, food insecurity is a problem in Nigeria. Hence, food programmes as temporary palliative and agricultural programmes as permanent solutions should be set up to give women a leverage against poverty and hunger in the home. With these imperatives met, political decisions will take a different turn and sustainable development will be ensured in our society.

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