

ELITE PERCEPTIONS OF POVERTY AND NIGERIA'S POVERTY REDUCTION RESEARCH: A THEORETICAL ORIENTATION

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Abstract

The way the elite perceive poverty and the poor in any society constitutes a very important dimension of poverty research. This is because normally there are several areas of interrelationship and interdependence between the poor and the elite, and these form part of the basis for social life in all societies. Perceptions of the elite about such situations would therefore largely inform their behaviour in relation to poverty and the poor. In reality while the poor depend on the elite for improvements in their status, the elite are also affected (sometimes negatively) by the poor in several ways. Individual members of the elite do not usually ward off threats to their security, or realize the opportunities presented by poverty situations on their own; as such situations often require collective action on their part. Adequate information about the level of awareness among the elite about these interdependencies, together with the extent of the sense of responsibility among them, is therefore deemed to constitute a missing but necessary input into Nigerian poverty research aimed at bringing about substantial change in the current poverty scenario. This paper is therefore aimed at theoretically contributing to the creation of adequate focus on the importance of this aspect of poverty research. Such an insight is particularly crucial in a developing country like Nigeria, where poverty afflicts a large section of the population, and where poverty reduction and eradication programmes usually championed by the elite, have usually not witnessed the measure of success set out in the goals and objectives of these intervention measures.

Keywords: Poverty, Consciousness, Elite, Alleviation, Research.

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Introduction

Poverty constitutes a major global problem that has for very long, eluded efforts directed at its meaningful reduction. Even highly developed countries such as the United States of America and Britain have not been spared. Miller (2007: xi) quotes McClatchy Newspapers' findings that "the number of 'severely poor' rose by 26% from 2000 to 2005 ... that social programmes aren't as effective as they once were in catching those who fall into economic despair" in the United States. In Africa, poverty constitutes a huge problem. Kankwenda et al (2000) estimated that around 250 million people, that is about 45% of Sub-

Saharan African population are poor, and that poverty in this region continues to grow at an alarming rate. Large scale poverty tends to increase inequality. In Miller's view, the trend is for the gap between the rich and the poor to keep widening, ultimately leading to destruction of democracy. He also observes that poverty exacerbates so many social problems that ideally its eradication, not reduction, should be seen as a moral, economic and social imperative. Poverty impacts negatively on both the poor and other sectors of society, and as such its drastic reduction is vital to overall sustainable development. Its far reaching negative ramifications throughout the world have placed it on the topmost list of United Nations interventions over the past few decades culminating in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) within which poverty eradication occupies a pivotal focus.

The problem here is therefore in several dimensions. In the Nigerian context, large scale poverty has far-reaching negative consequences on the lives of people as shown by Ali-Akpajiak and Pyke (2003). Furthermore, the elite, as cultural, economic and political leaders, are mostly responsible for instituting and effecting measures for dealing with poverty and its associated problems. Consequently, how elite perceive and therefore define poverty is crucial to the type and quality of impact they are likely to make on the strategies geared at distribution of opportunities, wealth creation, and other measures that should enhance social equality. It is remarkable that over the years, poverty has vastly increased in spite of Nigeria's massive oil wealth (Osinubi, 2003; Thomas and Canagarajah, 2002; Onyige, 1985). Available evidence indicates that it still continues to increase. Anambra State statistics indicate a rise from 42.7% of the population in 1992 to 65.5% in 1996, and 70% in 2004, noting that in spite of such high incidence, the situation of poverty was "better in the south east than elsewhere in the country" (Anambra State of Nigeria, 2006: 13-14). Earlier in 2004, the report of the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS) (Nigeria, 2004: 6) had acknowledged that generally in Nigeria "poverty incidence could be as high as 70%".

Additionally, poverty has resulted in the escalation of many social problems, such as crime, slums and pollution, poor health conditions and many forms of insecurity of lives and property in the nation. Since the 1970s, poverty alleviation programmes have featured prominently as components of strategies and programmes geared at achieving sustainable socio-economic development in Nigeria. There were a total of twenty-eight such programmes between 1975 and 2001, at the federal government level. Since then there have been several more. State governments also institute their own anti-poverty schemes, while international voluntary agencies contribute initiatives, expert advice, funds, manpower training and other essential resources to some of these programmes. Many reasons are given for the high rate of failures of these programmes. Some of them are closely related to certain aspects of the behaviour of the elite such as lack of adequate implementation measures, corruption and so on. For instance the 2004 NEEDS report states that among other reasons for persistence of poverty in Nigeria is "inconsistent and unstable policy environment facing actual or potential participants in economic activity in the country, thereby hindering sustained pursuit of personal and corporate economic improvement plans" (2004: 99-100). Another reason given was unhealthy economic governance; including corruption. The same reasons had previously been given in the Federal Government Interim Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (2001). It is necessary to note that elite, as policy makers and initiators of policy implementations, are the same people who spearhead poverty reduction measures at all levels of government and even at the international level. An example of the latter situation is that for Nigeria, international elites at World Bank and IMF levels play vital roles in packaging and even forcing down

crucial economic measures such as Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) that at least in the short-run enormously increased hardship for the common man. The situation is further compounded by the fact that poverty alleviation measures in Nigeria have generally not led to reduction of poverty. Failure of such programmes over the years represents massive waste of financial resources as well as clear demonstration of inadequacies in programme planning and implementation.

In the light of these situations the elite clearly have much responsibility for persistence and increase of poverty in Nigeria. While one also acknowledges economic and other structural factors such as scarcity of financial resources and necessary physical infrastructure, which cause poverty and constrain meaningful intervention, as observed by Ali-Akpajiak and Pyke (2003) even these still largely depend on the interest, drive and commitment of the elite to effect necessary social change.

This paper's significance is informed by two major factors. The first is that there is very little existing research and knowledge about elite perception of poverty globally and especially in developing countries and Africa in particular, in spite of the fact that poverty afflicts inordinately large sectors in this part of the world. In Africa presently, such research exist only in respect of South Africa (Reis: 2005). There is therefore a need to draw academic focus to this gap. The second is that elite perception of poverty and therefore their definition of the phenomenon can have very powerful effect on social policy and thus on the quality of life of vast numbers of citizens who are poor. In the Nigeria context the elite, as those who occupy leadership positions in important sectors of socio-cultural, economic and political life, make important contributions to economic policies and programmes, often without commensurate input by the poor themselves and other levels of the non-poor (Maduagwu: 2000).

In view of all the above, and because of the central position occupied by poverty and poverty related matters in Nigeria's development, every aspect of elite behaviour that have the potential to affect the poverty situation should be considered, identified and explored. From this perspective, focus on the perceptions of the elite about poverty and poor people, would help to provide a substantially clearer insight into poverty eradication endeavours in Nigeria.

Conceptual Clarifications

Four terms: elite, poverty, the poor and the non-poor are extensively utilized here. All of them are flexible and thus adaptable to various approaches for analysis in relation to 'class' relations and inequality. It is therefore deemed necessary to examine the ways that these terms are given focus in this paper.

The Elite

The concept of elitism is explored here from a socio-political perspective. The term, elite refers to a minority group which has and wields power and/or influence over the rest of the people in any society, and is recognized as being somehow 'superior'. Sociology has traditionally focused on the elite in terms of their rulership position within society; as in the works of Pareto and Mosca. The assumptions that are inherent on the sociology of elites is that there will always be a divide between the ruler and the ruled, or between those who possess power and those who are without it, even in so-called democratic societies and institutions.

Modern sociological views on rulership, involving the nature and limits of democracy was set out by Weber (1979) and later modified by the economist Schumpeter (1983). Weber's thesis began from the assumption that direct democracy involving the direct input of everyone in governance was impossible in large scale societies, first, because of obvious logistic reasons and secondly because running complex societies and organizations require expertise. In support of Weber, Schumpeter viewed democracy as the rule of the politician not the people.

Another major contribution to sociological discuss on elites is made by Mills. The traditional sociological model of elites in the United States was one in which a plurality of elites operating in different and nonintegrated spheres, acted as checks and balances on each other. In contrast, Mills (1963) as shown in Giddens et al (2005) claimed to have found a well integrated and partly self perpetuating power elite, made up of top groups in political, economic and military organizations. In his view, these groups are linked by ties of family and friendship and share common social backgrounds.

Elite groups make vital contributions to leadership in most societies. In the Nigerian situation, ethnicity, together with variations in the power wielded by religious and traditional leaders, emerging power of trade unions, growing number of leaders in the industrial sectors, and the domination of the political scene by the military for decades, have given a unique flavour to elitism. Operationally the elite in Nigeria are identified in institutional terms as those who occupy leadership positions within the set of institutions that are most salient to national political influence and policy making within the country. Elite in this context are also quite fluid, not having had the long tradition of well consolidated leadership positions as is the case with western countries. They are however clearly recognizable in the Nigerian socio-economic and political scenario (Fadal, 2004) and are acknowledged to be well placed to serve as creators and innovators of change (Ajaegbu, 1976).

It is however important to note that the Nigerian elite do not always operate as a homogenous unit. In the Nigerian context, although elites may have some things in common, they have differing basis for their power and different sets of interests. Their economic base, their control of land, industry, financial institutions and so forth vary. So do the political resources that they command as leaders of parties, movements, bureaucratic agencies, armies, unions and so on. So do their symbolic resources as traditional leaders, religious leaders, intellectuals or controllers of media. So does their influence over the means of violence and coercion. For instance, the latter resources are more likely to be available to politicians, the police and the armed forces, militia and "vigilante", than to other elite groups. The nature and potential impact of the networks of connections which different elite groups maintain also vary in their character and importance.

On the one hand, elites share certain common interests and habits. They interact, they have certain common norms, they consume along the same patterns, they claim attention and respect because they belong to higher social classes, and they behave in certain ways because they are in positions of power. On the other hand, they also oversee and possess divergent interests, and in certain areas they are also competitors.

Poverty

Poverty essentially denotes a lack, shortage or neediness in a particular area. Thus, there may be poverty of ideas, of intellect, of vision and so on. The term however, usually refers to economic conditions which may give rise to insufficiency or deficiency in other

areas of life. In line with this view, Encarta Encyclopedia defines poverty as an economic condition in which people lack sufficient income to obtain minimal levels of health services, food, housing, clothing and education that are generally recognized necessary to ensure adequate standard of living.

There is no agreed universal definition of poverty (Jennings, 1994). This is largely due to the fact that it is complex and multidimensional and is therefore subject to various perceptions. However, sociologists generally look at poverty from two approaches; namely as absolute poverty or relative poverty. Absolute poverty is conceptualized on the basis of subsistence; that is involving prerequisites for physically healthy existence, such as food, water, shelter and clothing and is deemed to be universally applicable. Some scholars however doubt the possibility of effectively utilizing such a universal standard for all societies and varieties of categories in populations, and prefer the use of the concept of relative poverty. This latter concept relates poverty to the overall standard of living that prevails in a particular society. Arguments for and against these views of poverty are not part of this work. It is however notable that many measurements of poverty incorporate both ideals.

In simple terms, poverty can be described as a way of life characterized by certain negative conditions, namely: low calorie intake, inaccessibility to adequate health facilities, low quality education system, low life expectancy, high infant mortality, low income, unemployment, underemployment and inaccessibility to various housing and societal facilities. The latter conditions denote some aspects of social exclusion, which represents another dimension from which sociologists view poverty. This term is related to the tendency for the poor to become cut off from full involvement in the wider society due to lack of opportunities resulting from their poor status. In real terms, poverty denies its victims the most basic needs for survival, which in itself constitutes a denial of their fundamental human rights.

Onibokum and Kumuyi (1996) argue, with regard to urban poverty in Nigeria, that poverty is linked to a shortage of vital resources and the endurance of harsh and inhospitable environments, that include the breakdown of economic, demographic, ecological, cultural, and social systems, and bad governance, which they claim sustains systemic poverty in developing countries. In practice, however, the most common and preferred definition in determining a country's level of poverty is derived from the economists' concept of 'income poverty', which assesses the poor as people living in 'absolute' or 'relative' poverty. A person is in a state of 'absolute' poverty when his or her level of income is insufficient to provide the basic necessities for life, while 'relative' poverty denotes a situation where someone is better off than those who are in absolute poverty, yet has less than others have in terms of income, property, and other resources. For statistical analysis and formulation of policy, the most common and universal measurement defines a person as poor if he or she is living below the 'poverty line', which is universally set at US \$1 a day; although each country is urged to set its own particular level. In global terms there are an estimated 1.3 billion people living below the poverty line, of which nearly half are living in sub-Saharan Africa (UNDP: 1998).

The Poor

The 'poor', are those who possess very few material, political or symbolic resources; and they rank at the bottom of the status or authority hierarchy. Their material deprivation is reinforced by their low standing in terms of status, skills, capital and connections; all of which the elite possess in relative abundance. If they resort to the limited means for violent coercion

at their disposal, they are denied social legitimation by the mainstream society and denounced as criminals and rebels. On the other hand, violence against them is often justified as legitimate self-defense and the restoration of “law and order” (Giddens, 2006: 807).

The Non-poor

The concept of ‘non-poor’ is applied here to all groups other than the poor, including elites. In most societies however, the vast majority of the ‘non-poor’ belong outside the elites. They possess some of the resources, status and authority which elites enjoy; but in most cases only limited amounts of these.

Elite’s Perceptions and Impact on Poverty

The term perception generally means view or insight. It has to do with awareness or an assessment that an individual or a group have about a given situation. The concept of perception as it relates to poverty has very broad connotations that enable it to be adapted to the varied circumstances in diverse societies. De Swaan (1988) as observed in De Swaan et al (2000) views the term “social consciousness” as possessing more analytic coherence for relating perception to poverty, and uses this term specifically to refer to a set of perceptions that he found to be relevant for analyzing the ways poverty affects the elite and to explain their attempts to control it. He therefore observed that members of the elite can be deemed to possess ‘social consciousness’ towards poverty to the extent that they have awareness of the interdependence of groups within society, especially as regards the external effects of poverty upon themselves. Their social consciousness may also be measured by the extent to which they realize that as members of the elite they bear some responsibility for the condition of the poor; and thirdly to the extent that they believe that feasible and efficacious means of improving the lot of the poor exist or might be created.

For example, the elite often may see poor people as posing threats to them by way of epidemics, crime, possible insurrection and so forth. Such perception has the potentials to foster a realization that all social groups are interlinked, and the conviction that it is in the interests of elites to alleviate at least the extremes of poverty. Also within such a background, in countries that are experiencing economic growth, the availability of surpluses and the rising morale that attends growth may inspire the beginnings of a belief that both the resources and the instruments (governmental or non-governmental) to tackle poverty exist or may be created.

Above three elements of a ‘social consciousness’ refer to three different types of thinking by elites. The first entails a factual assessment of the condition of the society in which they live. It calls for a typical-sociological insight on the part of elite members. The second entails both factual assessments (the identification of a causal chain linking their action or inaction to the living conditions of the poor) and moral evaluations, the details of which researchers need to sort out. The third requires the elite to accept the power of collective or public agency; whether governmental or non-governmental to change the prevailing situation.

It should be noted that class relations do not have the same level of coherence and salience in all societies. In Nigeria, the power resources, the material wealth and cultural capital of the elite stand in stark contrast to that of the poor due to inequality. General awareness of the functional interdependencies between elites and the poor strata is low. In

general, real perceptions of inequality and of the necessity to alleviate poverty clearly have less import in the popular awareness and the public discourse of African countries than in more developed countries, as observed by Kankwenda et al (2000). Øyen et al (1996) showed that in industrialized countries, much research have been conducted on the poor in their various categories, groupings and situations. Nonetheless, even in these societies elite perceptions of poverty and poor people have received grossly inadequate attention.

This paper sets out from the premise that poverty is a phenomenon that is intimately bound up with the elite who tend to dominate the wider society. The elite occupy the small upper stratum within the category of the non-poor, and their functions in the emergence and reproduction of poverty constitutes an interesting and important subject for poverty research. The elite have images of the poor and of poverty, and these would likely shape their decisions and actions. So far, little is known about those images, with the exception of those that are portrayed in popular stereotypes. Examples of these statements and assumptions are that 'poor people are lazy' or 'the poor are rough and dirty'. For decades such stereotypes have constituted the background for debates in western societies about the "deserving" and the "undeserving" poor (Katz: 1996). It is of course possible that the elites may well ignore or deny the external effects of their own actions (and omissions) upon the living conditions of the poor. It is also interesting to observe that with the emergence of poverty in history and its reproduction over the years, legal frameworks were created to contain the problems caused by it, without due regard to the consequences of these legal creations for the poor. Furthermore in general, political, educational and social institutions tend to ignore or even damage the interests of the poor. For instance in constructing physical infrastructure for the needs of transportation, industry, trade and tourism, the settlements of the poor are often the first to be destroyed, or in the event of their survival, to be left exposed to pollution, noise and crowding. These situations may be related to the way policy makers and implementers perceive the poor, or bring their perception into their consciousness.

Another point is that although elite, together with most of the other non-poor, may perceive the poor as a burden on society, such an image represents only one side of the total picture. Piven and Cloward (1972) have pointed out that a certain degree of poverty helps to promote labour relations, by securing a labour reserve, keeping down wages and maintaining discipline among those who have the good fortune to be employed. Gans (1995) has also demonstrated that negative identification of the poor is sometimes functional for the wider society, as in the case of the economic functions of poverty. For lack of other options the poor may be forced to perform economic activities considered degrading or unclean, and thus allowing the non-poor to further shun them. They are more likely for instance, to purchase low grade goods and foodstuff thereby prolonging the economic utility of these items. They are prone to use the services of low quality personnel in such professions as medical doctors, nurses, pharmacists; whom the non-poor would normally shun as quacks; thereby enhancing the professional opportunities of such persons. Poverty and the poor also serve an important symbolic function, in reminding people of what could be the fate of those who do not heed the values of thrift, diligence and cleanliness, and of the constant threat that the rough, the immoral and the violent represent for the rest of society.

De Swaan (2000) noted that available literature on elite views on many subjects in industrialized society clearly indicate that there is a recognition that elites in some western countries have contributed substantially to the development of institutions that alleviate poverty. He also observed that Reis (1998) and Reis and Cheibub (1995) have shown that

above situation differs from what is found in many contemporary industrializing countries. This difference may be crucial to the determination of the direction of social policy making in the latter countries. In Nigeria, literature is totally lacking with regard to elite perceptions of poverty. This is a matter of serious concern, since Nigerian elites tend to dominate (with no substantial positive results) the institutions that undertake to tackle poverty. There is also an urgent need for literature that deal with the detailed composition of the elites, the conditions in which they live, especially with regards to their contacts and relationships with the poor.

Dimensions of Elite's Roles in Poverty Intervention

Elites' Relations to Poverty

There are many ways by which elites already contribute to creating, sustaining or attempting to alleviate poverty; either as individuals or in a planned and coordinated manner within groups. It is therefore important to examine their perception of poverty and the poor, as an important background to such processes, and as powerful catalyst conditions that sustain or debilitate poverty, for the benefit of poverty research.

For adequate implementation, poverty reduction measures need to be based on a given level of legitimacy. It is therefore important to also examine the role of elites in setting standards, providing ideological arguments and proposing solutions. Adequate assessment is also important in order to determine the extent of contact that the elite have with the world of the poor. Various elites will differ in their familiarity with the everyday existence of poor people. For instance, military and religious leaders may be better acquainted with the poor than bankers. These different elite positions may affect their ways of perceiving the poor, and would therefore shape their ideas about which kinds of action are desirable in controlling the external effects of poverty. It would also be important to give focus to the degree or intensity of contact which elites have or do not have with poor people and poverty.

Furthermore, there are some social divisions that separate elites and the poor and may therefore, influence their perception. In Nigeria, various ethnic, linguistic, religious, cultural or regional differences may be relevant at any given point in time; and some of them are partly the result of elite manipulation. The rural-urban divide is another variable to be taken into consideration. Town and rural dwellers often constitute two distinct units, living in virtually two distinct worlds, different and sometimes even hostile to each other. Furthermore, there are regional and local community divides. These divides form part of the daily life of both the elite and the poor and may distract elites from focus on the rich/poor divide. It is also important to understand that certain factors sometimes separate the poor from the non-poor in general, in most societies. For instance, physically, the poor and the non-poor may be kept apart, through differential land use and ghettoization processes. Socially, they may be separated through differential participation in the labour market, the consumption economy, and in political, social and cultural institutions. Conceptually, they could be divided through stereotyping and media depictions. This separation is even more pronounced between the elite and the poor.

Patterns of Elite Action against Poverty

Reasons for poverty reduction efforts by the elite may vary over time or among sections. It may be driven by the desire to benefit themselves; by improving the quality of the labour force, improving the morale of the soldiers who fight for the country or so as to obtain

the loyalty of the masses of voters, or to increase the potential of consumers of produced goods, or as in the case of many developing countries, to benefit corruptly or otherwise from the large funds injected into poverty alleviation programmes. On the other hand, elite efforts at poverty alleviation could be based on more altruistic reasons.

Nonetheless there is usually a need for collective action. Consequently, efforts to tackle poverty by some members of elite may benefit those among them who do not share their perceptions and who thus do not cooperate. Such division among them may result in dampening enthusiasm of some members. On the other hand, collective action may be triggered off by outside initiative, or through illusions and false expectations. Once collective action gets under way, a sense of collectivity may arise in the very course of collective action, as participants begin to assess the contributions of each other, apply shared norms to one another, apply informal social sanctions to laggards and defectors, and equally praise and reward the most dedicated.

Historically, western nations' anti-poverty policies had their origins at the beginning of modernity, in local level charitable relief efforts; as observed by Katz (1996), and witnessed increase in scope over time. This model of elite action may however not be replicable in countries which are yet to develop industrially, or which are still undergoing the process of developing complex industrial economies in the face of intense competition from advanced Western and Asian economies (Reis, 2005). Nonetheless, elites must find ways to control the unwelcome effects of poverty which damage their interests. The relative weakening of the nation-state through the actions of transnational corporations and international financial agencies, or as a result of internally generated inadequacies in the governance machinery, may further hamper attempts to mobilize the state apparatus for the purposes of poverty alleviation. In Nigeria, the imposition of foreign agency driven Structural Adjustment Programme and the continued domination of economic policy by international agencies such as the IMF and the World Banks as well as political corruption (Ogwumike, 2002) have been subjects of much debate. Civil society has potentially powerful role to play in this situation. Unfortunately, civil society in Nigeria has generally lacked the level of cohesion, drive and commitment necessary to instill accountability and transparency into the governance machinery. Furthermore, their personnel are often bogged down in their operations by some of the ills they themselves seek to remedy. Additionally, they are sometimes constrained by the control of western oriented international organizations, who are both funders and trainers for civil society activism.

Basic Assumptions for Assessment of Elite Perceptions

In carrying out an assessment of elite perception of the poor, an underlying assumption would be that the perceptions which people have about others tend to affect their behaviour towards them. This is irrespective of whether such perceptions appear morally inadequate, logically inconsistent or factually unrealistic to the outside observer and particularly to specialists in poverty research. Consequent upon such perceptions, image of the poor are often stereotyped or even ritualized (as in religions where poverty represents punishment or a path to a better life after death). Such perceptions are amenable to scientific analysis and could serve to explain the behaviour of the people who hold and act upon them, and according to De Swaan et al (2000) may be subject to certain conditions.

One is that it is feasible to assume that elite perceptions of the poor may not necessarily form a consistent whole. Rather, internal contradictions may be possible; and this

in turn may point to particularly contested areas in the perceived relations between the elites and the poor. For instance the views that poor people are especially incompetent and that the poor bear the moral responsibility for their own condition are clearly contradictory.

Another relevant area has to do with the emotional side of elite reaction when faced with the often appalling conditions that are endured by the poor. In this regard questions arise about how elite rationalize the terrible deprivations of the poor with which they are faced, with their own lives of luxury and with their religious beliefs. Furthermore what is the nature of possible defense mechanisms that the elite employ in order to maintain cognitive, emotional and moral distance between them and the realities of poverty?

It is also important to assess the degree to which elite perceptions of the poor constitute some form of 'social consciousness'. As already discussed, factual assessments, moral evaluations and considerations of individual and group interests are inseparably blended in this concept. While the above represents reality, at the same time these different aspects need to be analyzed separately, as well as in the way they tend to reinforce or contradict one another. Finally, the willingness or otherwise of members of the elite to engage in action, and what options they see as available or creatable for possible actions, is also important. Of course, their action or otherwise would considerably determine or be determined by their level of awareness of poverty and the poor.

Elite Perceptions and Poverty Situation in Nigeria

Governance in all its ramifications, involving personnel, institutions and the machineries necessary for its operations, is central to the formulation and implementation of poverty reduction measures (Ogwumike and Medupin, 2003). This situation brings the elite to the very core of the poverty question. However, Nigeria continually witnesses several and sometimes conflicting governance related pressures that require urgent attention. For instance, there is still a long way to go before achieving genuine democracy and sound management of public affairs (Talbot, 2007). In the past few decades military style governance structures have eventually given way to governments elected in multiparty elections. However the policies and practices of political election still require vital adjustments and refinements as evidenced by the large numbers of election petitions. The processes of achieving a balance of powers between the main organs of state, that is the executive, legislative and the judiciary, are still underway. Furthermore, there remains a clear need for strengthening of accountability and transparency, the implementation of human rights provisions and the establishment of the primacy of the Nigerian constitution. These particular inadequacies and attendant conflicts have led to huge wastage of public and private funds to the tune of trillions of naira, as well as endangerment and loss of lives and property. In addition, arrangements are still being put in place to streamline the devolution of certain decision-making powers and responsibilities to local, state and federal government levels. Above processes have not usually been smooth and have sometimes witnessed social tensions and conflicts within and between communities, ethnic, religious and political party boundaries. Such instabilities often have serious negative consequences on the situation of poverty due to population displacements, disruptions in socio-economic life, and destructions of physical structures that ordinarily promote socio-economic growth.

These situations have also substantially contributed to diverting attention from a holistic approach to poverty and its related inequalities. In laying emphasis on how national

elites perceive poverty, the intention is not to devalue the contribution of other sectors of the population, and in particular the perceptions and the experiences of the poor, or their potential role in helping to reduce poverty and its attendant inequalities. There is also an underlying realization that in many ways the elite constitute a major part of the problem of poverty, and that as a group they have not lent sufficient impetus to providing solutions. In Nigeria, past programmes of poverty alleviation have mostly been bedeviled by corruption and ineptitude on the part of elite officials and their associates. Furthermore, as Maduagwu (2000) observed what he termed “master and servant” relations; that is top-bottom approach in programme planning and implementation; associated with Nigerian poverty alleviation programmes, started right from 1972 National Accelerated Food Production Programme and has characterized most subsequent ones; thus fostering a background of low appreciation of the real needs of poor people and their own perceptions of the most appropriate routes to alleviating poverty. Consequent upon these constraints, these programmes turned out to be huge drains on public funds, without commensurate achievements of objectives.

Adequate focus on elite perception of poverty would therefore combine with other necessary focus areas and with other available information on poverty, in order to fill obvious gaps in this area of knowledge. For instance, data obtained from Bangladesh (Hossain, 2005) indicate that the elites there did not consider poverty a priority, or a threat to the elite, and had little or no confidence in the efficacies of state anti-poverty programmes. Armed with similar data with regard to Nigerian local situation, effort could be directed to awareness creation in necessary areas where public knowledge is lacking or considered inadequate. Another instance is that evidence in Nigeria indicates that some growth in the economy in the past was not accompanied by reduction in poverty (Ali-Akpajak and Pyke, 2003). Therefore, a view that poverty is only a consequence of national underdevelopment, as expressed by the Bangladeshi elite, would not be tenable in the Nigerian context.

Conclusion

In conclusion, studies of elite perceptions of poverty and the poor have the potential to generally enrich existing understanding of the social construction and reproduction of poverty, and to shed more light on the background of elite action and/or inaction with regard to Nigeria's massive poverty situation. Such studies could be carried out by individual academics, or as joint efforts, or be commissioned at local, state or federal governmental levels with the active assistance of international agencies. Such studies have so far been carried out in developing countries like Bangladesh, Brazil, Haiti, the Philippines, South Africa and India, and have the potential to generate and facilitate more scientifically informed perspectives on poverty reduction strategies, thereby making these interventions more effective for tackling the serious problem of poverty and social inequality in Nigeria.

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