

**DEMOCRACY AND POVERTY REDUCTION IN NIGERIA: A CASE STUDY OF
RIVERS STATE: 1999 – 2007**

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to examine the extent to which Nigeria's democratic experience (1999-2007) has elevated the living standards of the majority of the people. It specifically aimed at search lighting the impact of the regime's key poverty reduction strategies vis-à-vis the overall poverty situation in the country in general and Rivers State in particular. The study focused on two poverty reduction strategies: National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP) and the Rivers State Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (RIVSEEDS). The study utilized the primary and secondary sources of data in realizing its central objective. The Participatory Poverty Assessment (PPA) method was also adopted in the course of this research work. The sample population was drawn from ten Local Government Areas (LGAs) of Rivers State; Port Harcourt, Obio/Akpor, Ikwerre, Emohua, Etche, Omuma, Ahoada East, Ahoada West, Abua/Odual and Ogba-Egbema-Ndoni LGAs. The research work employed the Political Economy (P.E.) method of analysis. The PE approach elucidates in very clear terms how the policies and reforms of successive governments in Nigeria have debilitated the productive forces of a great number of her population. The findings of this study showed that the democratic experience has impacted little to the poverty situation of the people of Rivers State. It also revealed that the present government's poverty reduction programme is yet to be complemented by other macroeconomic policies to yield the desired results of poverty reduction, wealth creation and capacity building.

KEY WORDS: DEMOCRACY, POVERTY REDUCTION; PARTICIPATORY POVERTY ASSESSMENT METHOD; POLITICAL ECONOMY APPROACH; NATIONAL POVERTY ERADICATION PROGRAMME (NAPEP) AND THE RIVERS STATE ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT AND DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY (RIVSEEDS)

INTRODUCTION

Poverty is a serious problem in Nigeria. The country produces between 1.8-2.0 million barrels of oil per day and has huge potential for development, and has, on a per capita basis, the fourth largest income per capita after South Africa, Angola and Zambia. While Oil accounts for 90 per cent of its export income, it also exports Cocoa, Rubber and other non-oil products. In 1995 alone, it earned more than 10 billion US Dollars from oil.

In spite of the enormous human and material resources and its potential for development, Nigeria remains one of the poorest countries not only in the world but also in sub Saharan Africa with increasingly sharp decline in investment, in education, health, infrastructure, and thus decline in social services. This has had a negative consequence for human development and welfare. The government's own National Planning office admits that the number of people living in poverty increased from 39.07million in 1992 to 70million in 2004. (National Bureau of Statistics, 2007, p.38). In 1978, the World Bank ranked Nigeria as a middle-income country with a per capita income of about 1,000 US Dollars per annum, and an exchange rate of 2 US Dollars to the Naira. However, by 1990, the World Bank revealed that the per capita income had declined from 1,000 US Dollars to 290 US Dollars and the country slipped from a middle-income country to the 17th poorest country in the world in terms of per capita income. Oladapo, (1998:49). The United Nations Human Development Report (2003) ranked Nigeria "low" in terms of human development index which captures such indicators as life expectancy, education etc and placed Nigeria 152 out of 175 countries. The Punch Newspaper of 15 September 2006 thus laments that Nigeria which was about the sixth largest exporter of crude oil and one of the 50th richest countries in the world had become one of the 20 poorest countries in the world.

In the same vein, Thomas and Canagarajah, (2002:4) reveal that between 1970 and 1990 Nigeria earned about 200 billion US Dollars primarily through exports some of which was invested locally but these investments had very little impact on the welfare of the

people. Today, about 83.9 per cent of Nigerians live below two US Dollars a day. (UNDP, 2009:178) This has raised a lot of concern not only in government circles but also among scholars.

It was a common assumption that the deepening level of poverty resulted from the long years of military dictatorship which the country had experienced (about 35 years of the nearly 50 were spent under military rule). As Harbour (2001) notes authoritarian governments thrive on and deliberately create an atmosphere of censorship, intimidation and intolerance. In this situation, the needs of the poor can too easily be ignored by unelected and unresponsive elites more concerned with self enrichment.

Expectations were therefore raised when the country transited from a military dictatorship to a constitutional democracy in 1999. The new democratic regime therefore made poverty alleviation its major policy thrust, manifesting in its National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS) and the Seven Point Agenda of the current democratic dispensation. As Macpherson (1972) contends, 'the goal of all democracies is the provision of the condition for the full and free development of the essential human capacities of all members of the society'. Is democracy therefore a necessary and sufficient condition for the reduction or alleviation of poverty? Can this also be true of Nigeria?

The major objective of this paper is to examine the extent to which Nigeria's democracy between 1999 and 2007 elevated the living conditions of the majority of the people. Specifically, it seeks to searchlight the impact of the democratic administration's key poverty reduction strategies vis-à-vis; the overall poverty situation in the country in general and Rivers State in particular. More specifically, it attempts to:

- 1) Evaluate the approaches to poverty reduction with particular focus on who the target groups were and the nature of intervention.

- 2) Assess the administration's poverty reduction strategies within the context of Performance Evaluation and Review Technique (PERT).
- 3) Proffer recommendations based on the findings.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A valid and concrete analysis of the extent to which Nigeria's nascent democracy has improved the lot of the majority of Nigerians in the past seven years must as a necessity be predicated on a sound theoretical base.

Poverty goes beyond income and other economic variables, it is also political because it includes rights, power relations and access to and distribution of resources, it also cuts across the social sphere as it involves the question of human dignity, social relationships and opportunities. A broad based approach is therefore imperative. It is for this reason that we adopted the Political Economy Approach.

The subject matter of political economy is the system of relations of production in its connection with the productive forces, or the laws of production, exchange, distribution and consumption of material goods at different stages in the development of human society. Nikitin, (1983:24) corroborates the above strand when he posited that political economy studies the basis of the development of society which is the production of material wealth, the mode of production. More than that, he adds that, it is not with 'production' that political economy deals with, but with the social relations of men in production, with the social system of production.

Political economy thus, considers the relations of production and economic laws of all the socio economic formations that have ever existed in history, from the primitive – communal mode of production to the communist.

The method of political economy is that of dialectical materialism which presupposes, first, investigation of the production relations in the process of their emergence and

development i.e. historically, second consideration of this process as an objective reality i.e. materialistically, third revelation of the internal contradictions of development inherent in social production i.e. dialectically.

On the whole, this “method of study is a historical and holistic orientation for the analysis of social formation and their contradictory relationship.” Nna, (2000:169)

The political economy approach illuminates how the majority of Nigerians that bear the brunt of generating the nation’s wealth live in misery, squalor and degradation that threaten their continued existence.

The employment of the P.E. method of study therefore elucidates in very clear terms how the policies and reforms of successive governments in Nigeria have debilitated the productive forces of a great number of the population. It basically deals with class relations in the society, in terms of what laws or policies are made, what particular economic, social or political interests these laws or policies are designed to serve and how these laws or policies impact on the economic survival of the mass of the society.

Commenting on the productive forces (a combination of labour, means of labour and objects of labour, considered fundamental to the development of any society by Marxian Political Economy) Ake, (1981) maintains that;

“The state of the development of productive forces decisively influence social organisation, culture, the level of welfare and even consciousness... Africa’s economic backwardness and abject dependence today reflects the state of the development of her productive forces.”

What is deducible from the above is that the level of development of the productive forces determines the level of development of any society. Consequently, the stagnation or destruction of the productive forces would mean a halt and perhaps a reversal of the development process.

The significance of the P.E. Approach is that it recognises the importance of non economic factors: history, politics and law in the study of any ‘economic’ problem. As Okowa showed, “the political economy theories build around the interplay of economic, sociological, political, psychological and geographical elements within the context of historical change.” Okowa, (1996:203)

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The data for this study is derived from both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include observations, interviews and questionnaires. This research work adopts the Participatory Poverty Assessment (PPA) method in its field work. The PPA is an iterative, participatory research process that seeks to understand poverty from the perspective of a range of stakeholders, and to involve them directly in planning follow-up action. PPA seeks to understand poverty in its local, social, institutional and political context. A key element of the PPA is that of focused group discussion, (Narayam et al. 2000:15)

To this end, personal observations and unstructured interviews were used in discussions. The questionnaires were personally administered on subject samples in a bid to highlight salient variables- living standards from holistic and participatory perspectives.

The sample population constitutes residents and inhabitants of ten (10) Local Government Areas (LGAs) of Rivers State (out of 23 local governments)- Port Harcourt; Obio/Akpor; Ikwerre; Emohua; Etche; Omuma; Ahoada East; Ahoada West; Abua/Odual and Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni LGAs. A total of 200 questionnaires were administered as follows: twenty (20) per local government randomly distributed to each of the ten LGA selected for the study. Simple percentages were used for analysis. The secondary sources include publications of the Central Bank of Nigeria, Federal Office of Statistics (FOS) in Nigeria, The World Bank, UNDP Reports, the FOS/UNICEF Multiple Cluster Survey, Newspapers, Magazines, Journals, articles and world wide websites that are of relevance to this research work.

The FOS national account data are both by sector of origin and by expenditure method at current as well as constant prices. In many sectors, gross output is converted to net output by applying fixed coefficients observed from the past (base) years. The FOS also estimate price deflators for each sector of activity that are used to arrive at the sectoral value added at constant prices. In many cases, sectoral price deflators are not based on producer prices, but on consumer price sub-indices for a particular activity. The deflator for consumption is proxied by the Consumer Price Index (CPI). The National Consumer Surveys implemented by the FOS are based on a nationwide household survey on various dimensions of household's living standards. Data is collected at three level; household; community and individual. The sample frame is based on population census. The UN Human Development Index (HDI) measures human development by combining three dimensions of development-longevity (life expectancy at birth), knowledge (adult literacy and mean years of schooling), and income.

The facts collated from both primary and secondary sources were empirically analysed to realise research objectives using the 'descriptive method'. The suitability of this method is appreciated when one highlights the fact that the descriptive approach is most concerned with "conditions that exist, practices that prevail; beliefs, point of view or traditions that are developing". Ofo, (1994:8)

DEMOCRACY AND POVERTY REDUCTION

Sorensen, (1991) examined the relationship between Democracy, Dictatorship and Development using four case studies, India, China, Taiwan and Costa Rica; using two hypotheses;

- 1) Democratic regimes may not perform well for economic development since they are less able to withstand popular pressures for increases in consumption and welfare, more so, because policy pressures are sometimes seen as vulnerable to influence the powerful interest groups.
- 2) Autocratic regimes committed to growth may achieve economic development, but are likely to deprive citizens of welfare, focusing instead, mainly on acquiring capital for investment.

He concludes that democratic regimes may be more susceptible to elite interests and have slower reforms while autocratic rule in small, open countries can generate higher savings as a basis for higher levels of growth (Bryant, 1992)

In the same vein, Varshney, (1999) contends that democracies are not capable of eliminating poverty. He argues that democracies by themselves do not eliminate poverty, but economic strategies do, pointing out that in one practical respect, policies towards the poor can emerge from the same source in democratic and authoritarian politics, both of which can align themselves with the poor if the political elites have a consistent commitment to them and they force the state structure, particularly its bureaucratic institutions to translate that commitment into an equally consistent policy implementation. He makes a distinction between direct and indirect methods of poverty alleviation and their corresponding political and economic significance. To him, the direct method of poverty alleviation covers such issues as public provision of income and assets to the poor while the indirect methods of poverty alleviation is growth mediated, including not just any kind of growth but the kind of growth that aims at creating more opportunities for increase in incomes of the poor.

Varshney therefore concludes that no democracy in the developing world is capable of successfully eliminating poverty. This conclusion is predicated on his assumption that direct methods of poverty alleviation have greater political salience in democracies and that the poor are typically not from the same ethnic group and as such, direct, market based methods of

poverty alleviation are both more sustainable and more effective and a split between ethnicity and class militates against the mobilization (and voting) of the poor as a class and thus, dilutes the exertion of pro-poor political pressures on governments.

The United Nations Development Programme (2003:134) focuses attention on the relationship between poverty and the political empowerment of the poor. It therefore specifically argues that;

people must organise for collective action to influence the circumstances and decisions affecting their lives. To advance their interests, their voices must be heard in the corridors of power... Ending human poverty requires a democratic space in which people can articulate demands, act collectively and fight for a more equitable distribution of power... Government that acts in the interest of poor people is easier to achieve in democratic political systems where the poor represent a significant electoral bloc

The Human Freedom Index adopted by the UNDP iterates poverty is not just about loss of income and lower expenditure levels but also freedom. Poverty is a denial of human rights. Human rights here refer to rights that are inherent to the person and belong equally to all human beings. Their realization has to be carried out as a participatory, accountable and transparent process, implying equality in decision-making.

Human rights instruments-such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights-provide a coherent framework for the practical action- at the international, national and sub national levels to reduce poverty.

The notion of poverty is at the centre of human rights-based approach to poverty reduction. The poor must be considered as the principal actors of development and not as passive recipients; they are strategic partners rather than target groups.

NATIONAL POVERTY ERADICATION PROGRAMME (NAPEP)

The National Poverty Eradication Programme serves as the Secretariat for the National Poverty Eradication Council, the apex body for the formulation of policies on poverty in the country.

Specifically NAPEP acts as the primary government agency to coordinate and monitor all poverty eradication efforts at federal, state and local government levels. It also assists NAPEC (National Poverty Eradication Council) at the federal level and SPEC (State Poverty Eradication Council) at the state level to formulate poverty reduction policies nationwide and intervenes in specific poverty reduction areas to provide social protection through economic empowerment as may be needed.

The National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP) was established by the present administration in 2001 to help eradicate extreme poverty in the country by the year 2010. NAPEP, (April, 2001:20)

The move is also generally in line with the United Nations Millennium Developments Goals (MDG) of halving the proportion of people living in poverty by the year 2015. UN-HDR, (2003)

NAPEP is the major Federal Government Programme implementing the goals of NEEDS (National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy) at the grassroots, supporting the National Planning Commission and other institutions and agencies that play a role in promoting employment generation, wealth creation, value re-orientation. NAPEP thus, aims at helping the government in

creating mass participation in the development process in the communities principally for the objective of eradicating poverty.

Owing to the Federal nature of Nigeria, the structures of the poverty alleviation programme are replicated at the state and local government levels to support any program initiated at these levels. Thus, the programme has offices and coordinators in all 36 states, the federal capital territory and all 774 local government areas of the federation.

Structurally, NAPEC is chaired by the President, with the Vice President and Secretary to the federation as vice chairman and secretary respectively. At the Federal level, the programme has National Coordinating Committees with the National Coordinator of Programme (NCP) appointed by the President as the Head with representatives of other core poverty eradication ministries. At the State level, the State Coordinating Committees (SCC) is headed by the State Coordinator alongside other relevant ministries and likewise the local government monitoring committees.

Internally, NAPEP maintains four (4) departments as follows; Administration and Supplies; Monitoring and Evaluation; Research and programme; Finance and Accounts.

The administrative framework and operations of NAPEP in Rivers State are in accordance with the above Federal Government's modus operandi.

It is worth remarking that NAPEP is not a specific sector implementation office, its main mandate as approved by the federal executive council is:

*To multi-sectorally coordinate and monitor all poverty eradication efforts in Nigeria with a view to harmonizing these efforts and bringing about the focus, collaboration, partnership and complementation required at levels to ensure better delivery, maximum impact, effective utilization of resources and easy review.
(NAPEP, 2002:5)*

The Secondary mandate of NAPEP is:

To extend specific but scaled intervention programmes and projects on stressed, critical and sensitive sectors of the economy periodically to supplement and provide relief in the sector with a view to enhancing the impact of the effort of the statutory implementing ministries, agencies and parastatals. (ibid)

Accordingly, NAPEP activities in Rivers State have been condensed into four multi-sectoral schemes with programmes as follows: The Youth Empowerment Scheme (YES); The Rural Infrastructure Development Scheme (RIDS); The Social Welfare Resources Development and Consideration Scheme (SOWESS); and the Natural Resources Development and Conservation Scheme (NRDCS). These Schemes cover all the institutional landscape of poverty, consisting of economic empowerment, provision of economic infrastructures and provision of social welfare services. It is based on these multi-sectoral schemes and programmes that all efforts relevant to poverty eradication in the state are classified, coded, monitored and their impacts assessed.

It is worthy of illumination that the poverty eradication targets are set in three stages. The first and most important is targeting to restore hope in most of the affected people. Here all the efforts are geared to lower poverty line or push the affected people above the line on the pyramid of poverty. The second stage is aimed at restoring economic independence and confidence, while the third stage

is the final stage of wealth creation. This is ought to be the ultimate positions where all Nigerians shall be free of the reigns of absolute poverty.

They would have been empowered to afford all basic necessities of life, participate in National Development and effectively take the abundantly available opportunities to create wealth and additional comfort for themselves.

The overall target of NAPEP is to eradicate absolute poverty in Rivers State and Nigeria in general by the year 2010.

In the ultimate, the target is to ensure that all the indigenes of Rivers State are provided with;

- ❖ Steady source of real income
- ❖ Food
- ❖ Education
- ❖ Water
- ❖ Housing
- ❖ Power Supply
- ❖ Roads
- ❖ Health Care Facilities
- ❖ Good Governance
- ❖ Security and
- ❖ A Conducive environment for productive activities. (op. cit)

It is against the above targets that this study appraised the extent to which NAPEP goals have been attained in Rivers State in the period under review. The focus on Rivers State is appreciated when we bring to limelight the fact that Rivers State is one of the states in the Niger Delta region, the treasure base of the nation where about 90 per cent of the country's export earnings is harnessed. (RIVSEEDS, 2004:14); (Derefaka and Okorobia (ed), 2008:194).

Rivers State accounts for over 48 per cent of onshore petroleum oil, the single biggest source and 100 per cent of natural gas in the country. (RIVSEEDS, 2004:32)

In pursuant to the above poverty eradication targets in Rivers State, the estimated vacancy allocations for Capacity Acquisition Programme (CAP) and Mandatory Attachment Programme (MAP) in 2001 were as follows: Cap -3,143 persons; MAP -1,572 persons, for a projected population of 4.1m persons in 2001 according to NPC (National Population Commission) Figures.

In the same vein, the 2001 fund allocation for Cap and MAP respectively were N94.3m and N94m (\$628,667 and \$626,667 respectively at the exchange rate of N150 to US\$1). Furthermore, the MAP 2002 industrial attachment programme for graduates of tertiary institutions in Rivers State stood at N107.4m, while the CAP financial assistance to unemployed youths and women in Rivers State in the form of soft loans stood at N19.015m in 2004.

In 2005, 60 youths were trained in capacity building, and 30,000 life-line given to about 250 Gokana widows early July 2005 with a zero interest, Tide Online, (Sept. 2005:5) while a total of about 68 "KEKE-NAPEP" were distributed between 2002-2006. NAPEP-Rivers State, (2006:10)

RIVERS STATE ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT AND DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY (RIVSEEDS)

The National Economic Empowerment and Development strategy (NEEDS) in close collaboration with the state government aimed to build a solid foundation

for the attainment of Nigeria's long term development goals over the medium term (2003-2007).

This policy in collaboration with the state equivalent (SEEDS: State Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy) was designed to promote macroeconomic stability, improve the performance of the agricultural, manufacturing, solid minerals and oil and gas sectors, improve delivery of basic services, create an enabling environment for the private sector and invest in human capital towards reducing the poverty of the people.

The Policy thrust of NEEDS amidst others included the sustenance of high broad based non-oil GDP growth rate consistent with poverty reduction and employment generation; diversification of the production structure away from oil/mineral resources, ensuring international competitiveness.

Another major thrust of this policy which was launched in March 2004 was the systematic reduction of the role of government in direct production of goods and strengthening its facilitation and regulatory roles, pursuit of private/export led growth, empowering the people through gainful employment and creating safety nets for vulnerable groups.

As a corollary, the Rivers State Government developed in August 2004 its own State Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (RIVSEEDS).

Its strategy was to synergize with the Federal Government and achieve complete restoration of the cherished values of civilized life, long lost to bad governance and value bastardization.

SEEDS IN Rivers State sought to achieve;

Capacity building, wealth creation, empowerment and utilization of the critical reserve of manpower resources abundant in the State and create economic prosperity. (RIVSEEDS, Aug., 2004)

In accordance with the above mission the state launched some cardinal programmes which included the state Independent Power Project, Mass Production in Agriculture for domestic and industrial uses, Skills Acquisition in partnership with the private initiative of The Adolescent Project (TAP); job creation and income generation. In particular, the Presidential Initiative on cassava production for domestic and external use which the state adopted and is being intensively implemented are all geared towards job creation, capacity building and industrialization.

In the same vein, the Rivers State Government also initiated the Technology and industrial parks programme to encourage technology incubation and promote information and communication Technology acquisition.

The economic development objectives of the State are private sector driven. This is in tandem with the federal government's goal of promoting private initiatives in the drive to achieve human capacity utilization and socio economic growth and development.

Furthermore, the State government also created the Agency for Re-Orientation, Integrity, Services and Ethics (ARISE). It also set up its own Due Process organ

known as the Cost Control Unit to vet all public expenditures and to ensure maximum value for every public fund spent. This curbed a lot of budget indiscipline, financial indiscretion, and encouraged transparency in the management of public finances, contract administration and ensured best practices in business and public affairs.

PERFORMANCE EVALUATION AND REVIEW

| | | |
|-------------------------|---|--------|
| Number of LGA | - | 10 |
| Number of Questionnaire | - | 20/LGA |
| Number of Respondents | - | 200 |

Communities were randomly selected in each LGA

**ASSESSMENT OF GOVERNMENT'S POVERTY PROGRAMME IN
RIVERS STATE**

| S/N | Variables | Strongly Agree/Agree | | Strongly Disagree/Disagree | |
|-----|--|----------------------|-------|----------------------------|-------|
| | | No. | % | No. | % |
| 1 | My Community is fully aware of the National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP) established in 2001 | 116.12 | 58.06 | 83.88 | 41.94 |
| 2 | My Community is fully aware of the Rivers State Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (RIVSEEDS) established in 2004 | 96.76 | 48.38 | 103.24 | 51.62 |
| 3 | Representatives of My community participated in the conception of these government's poverty reduction programmes | 70.96 | 35.48 | 129.04 | 64.52 |
| 4 | Representatives of my community are involved in the implementation and management of these government's poverty reduction programmes | 69.56 | 34.78 | 130.44 | 65.22 |
| 5 | The present government's poverty reduction programme has significantly improved the socio economic profile of our LGA in terms of employment | 69.56 | 34.78 | 130.44 | 65.22 |
| 6 | The present government's poverty reduction program has further enhanced our access to Micro-Credit facilities | 72.72 | 36.36 | 127.28 | 63.64 |
| 7 | The RIVSEEDS and NAPEP have contributed immensely to the acquisition of various skills in our LGA | 90.32 | 45.16 | 109.68 | 54.84 |
| 8 | Agricultural growth and development has | 109.66 | 54.83 | 90.34 | 45.17 |

| | | | | | |
|----|---|-------|-------|--------|-------|
| | been promoted by the present government's poverty reduction programme | | | | |
| 9 | The present government poverty reduction programme has enhanced the overall standard of living of our LGA in terms of Housing | 38.70 | 19.35 | 161.30 | 80.65 |
| 10 | Access to portable water has greatly improved by the present government's poverty reduction programme | 45.16 | 22.58 | 154.84 | 77.42 |
| 11 | The LGA's transportation has been improved by the present government's poverty reduction programme | 58.06 | 29.03 | 141.94 | 70.97 |
| 12 | The Cost of Food Items has been reduced and is now more affordable as a result of the present poverty reduction programme | 6.44 | 3.22 | 193.56 | 96.78 |
| 13 | The community's Health Care Delivery System is now more accessible and affordable by the present government's poverty reduction programme | 64.50 | 32.25 | 135.50 | 67.75 |
| 14 | The Electricity situation in the LGA has been greatly improved by the current government's poverty reduction programme | 6.44 | 3.22 | 193.56 | 96.78 |
| 15 | Safety and security of lives and property in the Local Government has improved as a result of the present Government's programme | 32.24 | 16.12 | 167.76 | 83.88 |
| 16 | Our Community is wholly represented in decision making process | 38.70 | 19.35 | 161.30 | 80.65 |

Source: Authors' Field Survey, 2007

A review of the responses reveals that only about half of the people in the areas under study are fully aware of the poverty reduction strategies of the government. In fact, while about 58% have full knowledge of NAPEP, less than half of the people (48.38) have knowledge of RIVSEEDS.

In terms of participation in conception, implementation and management of the poverty reduction programmes a greater majority of the people are not involved in this process. The field survey carried out in this regard shows that only 35% of the people are involved in the implementation and management process. Above all, the study further reveals that while about 19.35% are involved in the decision making process, 80.65% are not represented in this process.

On the socio economic profile of the communities as it relates to employment and access to micro-credit facilities the field survey shows that about 65% strongly disagree that the present poverty reduction programmes have had significant improvement in employment opportunities and access to micro-credit facilities. This thus implies that there is still low per capital income and capacity underutilization.

Nevertheless, the study highlights that Agricultural growth and development has been promoted by the present government's poverty reduction programme in the areas under study. This is represented by 54.83% of the respondents, while only 45.17 held a contrary opinion.

Furthermore, on the overall standard of living of the people, a large number of the people (80.65%) vehemently held that the present poverty reduction

programme have not impacted positively on their living standards. This thus, shows that there is a looming gap between policy goals and results obtained.

The study further reveals that basic amenities as access to portable water, transportation, health care delivery systems and electricity are still beyond reach of the masses.

More still, the cost of food items, safety and security of lives and property of the people have not witnessed any significant improvement by the present poverty reduction strategies of the government.

The field study reveals that 84% of the people held that the poverty reduction programme have not ameliorated their security status, more than that 96.78% approximately 100% maintained that the cost of food items has neither reduced nor is more affordable as a result of the government's poverty reduction strategies in their communities.

What the above shows is that the present government's poverty reduction programmes are yet to be complemented by other macroeconomic policies to yield the desired results of poverty alleviation, wealth creation and capacity building.

For instance, while so much effort is put on alleviating the poverty of the people through NAPEP and RIVSEEDS, the government was at the same time, 'wholly' implementing the policies of privatization of public corporation, downsizing of the ministries as well as increasing the pump price of petroleum products.

This study notes that, the policy conception and implementation were incongruent, inconsistent, and contradictory with the goals of poverty reduction. Aside from the anti-people stance of the government, a major flaw is the inherent contradiction of “downsizing” the public service. This defeats the expressed intention of NEEDS as adopted by RIVSEEDS to create 7 million jobs by 2007. In the areas under study 65.22% of the people contend that the poverty reduction programmes have not impacted positively on the employment opportunities in their areas. The overall effect being that at the end of 2007, the unemployment level in the area in particular, and the country, in general, deteriorated.

Electricity, which is crucial and central to empowerment and capacity building, is grossly inadequate. The field study shows that 97% of the people strongly disagree that the electricity situation in their areas has been greatly improved by the current government’s poverty reduction programme. The implication of the above being that while so much has being “aired” on the investment and expenditure of government on electricity, there is little on ground to justify this. The current spate of indictment by the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) nationwide, especially with reference to the Independent Power Project (IPP) embarked upon by most state governments lends credence to the fact that embezzlement, corruption and financial indiscipline and misappropriation is still very rife in the government. In March, 2010, the Acting President of the federation inaugurated a 19-man Presidential Projects Assessment Committee (PPAC) to look into projects embarked upon by the government. The above is against the background of several allegations of financial mismanagement such as the \$16 billion expenditure on power generation by the former Olusegun Obasanjo administration; misappropriation of N300 billion meant for road construction across the

country by the ministry of works and housing and several others. (This Day, March 24, 2010, p. 25)

The level of corruption and electoral malpractices debilitates the capacity of government to truly mobilize the people to a true economic development strategy resulting in the long run to anti-people stance, repression and alienation. Good governance and sound home grown national ideology cannot be held in isolation, they have to be attained.

The summary of findings with respect to the research questions shows and justifies our hypothesis that,

1. Nigeria's democracy (1999-2007) has impacted little on the poverty situation of the people of Rivers State.
2. The poverty reduction strategies adopted by the present regime are inconsistent, inadequate and inherently self-contradictory.

As Nna and Igwe, (2009:261) remarked; the policies of privatization, deregulation and the downsizing of the public service adopted by the government contradicted the ideals of the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy and exacerbated the unemployment situation in the country.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study specifically aimed at search lighting the impact of Nigeria's democratic experience (1999-2007) on the poverty situation of the people of Rivers State. To this end, the study focused on; the National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP) and the Rivers State Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (RIVSEEDS). The study thus, aimed to illuminate the extent to which these strategies have proved to be theoretically adequate, empirically valid and policy-wise, efficacious.

The Employment of the political economy method of study in this paper elucidates in very clear terms how the policies and reforms of successive governments in Nigeria have debilitated the productive forces of a great number of her population. The study notes that in spite of the massive inflows of revenue of about 200 billion US Dollars between 1990 and 1999 for instance, very little impact was felt on the level of poverty reduction and over 70 per cent of Nigerians remained poor.

The major subject variables chosen in this study were; awareness, participation and representation in decision making process of the government's poverty reduction programme (NAPEP and RIVSEEDS), socio-economic profile with reference to employment, access to micro-credit facilities, skill acquisition, agric development, access to portable water, transportation, housing, health care delivery system, electricity, cost of food items safety and security of lives and property.

The above variables were intended to inculcate the multidimensional and multi-faceted nature of poverty. This study notes that poverty in its most general sense is the lack of necessities, basic food, shelter, medical care and safety are generally thought necessary based on shared value of human dignity.

Beyond the lack of basic physiological needs is also “powerlessness and voicelessness”. Thus, while the poor has been generally identified as those whose inability to contribute to the productive process is insufficient, that is those who are unable to contribute adequately to the productive process to warrant an income that would raise them above poverty line, there is an inherent socio-economic and socio-political inequality orchestrated by social norms and institutions which serve as key obstacles faced by poor men and women as they attempt to eke a living against odds.

Narayam, D. et al (op cit p.15) captured this scenario when he reports that;

poor people's experiences demonstrate again and again that informal rules in use invariably override formal rules.... Precisely because social norms are deeply embedded that change in one part of a social system cannot bring about systemic changes.... Poor people's experiences reflect fundamental inequities in power among different social groups, and the lack of bridges or horizontal linkages between those more powerful and those less powerful... experiences of the poor are characterized by the lack of power and voicelessness.

What is deducible from the foregoing is that those who live in conditions of poverty lack a wide range of socio economic, socio-political and other resources and may thus, be described as “poor” or “impoverished”.

The participatory Poverty Assessment Method (PPA) adopted in this study further reveals that favouritism and prebendalism have inundated the system, such that only the privileged few have access to the provisions and facilities of the programme.

Furthermore, this study reveals that access to basic amenities such as, electricity; health care, good roads which are crucial and central to empowerment and capacity building are grossly inadequate. This thus implies low per capita income and high capacity underutilization, therefore, justifying our hypothesis that the democratic experience of the government in the period under review has not ameliorated the poverty situation of the people of Rivers State in particular. The reports of the NBS (2005, p.69) and NBS (2007, p.222) corroborates this finding when it noted that the poverty incidence of Rivers State rose from 29.09 in 2004 to 46.4 in 2007.

The persistence of corruption by government officials has further deprived the people the benefits of the poverty reduction programmes. This study notes that the Independent Power Project (IPP) embarked upon by the State and indeed most other States of the country which is supposed to be a catalyst to economic regeneration and human capital development were avenues employed to corner resources for personal aggrandizement.

The illegitimacy of the government characterized by massive electoral malpractices has further debilitated the capacity of government to effectively pursue and implement the cherished goals of poverty reduction.

The fact remains that the government and its paraphernalia lack both the moral right and will power to execute programmes and stand accountable to the people as they all grossly lack the mandate of the people. Probity, transparency and accountability are thus lost and this is reflected in the level of arbitrariness and indecorum witnessed in the administration of the State.

The level of corruption and electoral malpractices debilitates the capacity of government to truly mobilize the people to a true economic development and poverty reduction strategy resulting in the long run to anti-people stance, repressiveness and alienation. Good governance is a sine qua non. The high incidence of poverty in Rivers State and Nigeria in general appears to indict its democracy. The transition from the protracted military rule to a democratic regime in 1999 ushered hopes that were dashed by the end of the second democratic regime in 2007. As Macperson (op cit, p.37) remarked, the essence of a democracy is that it provides the condition for the full and free development of the essential human capacities of all members of the society. Where essential human capacities of a majority of the people are not developed, then democracy loses its essence. We concur with Varshney's (1999, p.4) remark that democracies by themselves do not eliminate poverty, but economic strategies do. If reforms that are geared towards enhancing mass welfare must be pursued in a democratic framework, an imaginative integration of the political and the economic remains quite necessary.

Democracy is not necessarily a sufficient condition for poverty reduction. A democracy that does not pursue sound economic policies will be unable to raise the welfare of its people. Democracy must not only be participatory in outlook, its policies must be truly people-centred and its leaders transparent and accountable. It is against this background that Ake (1994) advocates for the democracy of empowerment as distinct from electoral democracy. He notes specifically that;

Africa is democratizing but the democratization occurring in Africa does not appear to be in the least emancipating. On the contrary, it is legitimizing the disempowerment of ordinary people who seem to be worse off than they used to be because their political oppression is no longer perceived as a problem inviting solution, but a solution endowed with moral and political legitimacy. (Ake, 1994:p.1)

He recommends that what is required is,

A social democracy which goes beyond abstract political rights and takes economic and social rights seriously... a democracy of empowerment which invests heavily in the upliftment of ordinary people so that they can participate effectively in governance and be more competitive in promoting their material interests. (Ake, 1994:p.3)

There is need therefore, to greatly improve governance and to strengthen institutional capacity and social programmes. To achieve this, there has to be a zero-tolerance to corruption, indiscipline, mediocrity and nepotism.

Poverty reduction will have to adopt a holistic approach involving both the government (all tiers) and the civil society for it to achieve a sustainable reduction in poverty incidence (Ogwumike, 2002, p.13). There has to be a multi-sectoral

framework and unity of purpose at all levels of government. There has to be harmonization, periodisation and rationalization of government programmes and projects with sectoral linkages.

Furthermore, there is need for a more equitable redistribution of a society's wealth. Economic growth without even distribution is inimical to man-centred development. There has to be emphasis on employment generation through industrialization.

As Ogwumike (ibid, p. 15) aptly noted, there is need for the Federal Government to relinquish most of its responsibility in the social sector to the state and local governments. This will give the state and local councils more autonomy to evolve and execute poverty alleviation programmes/projects that will take their peculiar circumstances into consideration.

The essence of the foregoing is to empower the people. Empowering the people is the anti-dote to poverty. Poverty is always and everywhere as a result of the inability of man to overcome the elements of nature on one hand and the inequitable distribution of resources including political power on the other. To defeat poverty, Rivers State and Nigeria at large must empower its people in tools and techniques, innovation and new ideas, a voice and increased participation. To defeat poverty we must evolve a process which enables the people to realize their potential, build self-confidence and lead lives of dignity and fulfillment.

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