
Juvenilization of Poverty in Nigeria: Implication for Childhood Development and Education

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Abstract: Poverty is a global challenge. Several economies have taken steps to ensure that there is total eradication of poverty. Poverty is erroneously associated only with adults but from day to day experience, we gradually introduce this variable to our children. This paper examines ways which poverty has been introduced and perpetuated among the minors of the Nigerian society, its effects on child development and education. Remedies have been suggested after examining the effects of this phenomenon on the development of the Nigerian society.

Introduction

Poverty and its associated variables have taken the central stage of global deliberations since the dying end of the 20th century. It has not still quit the scene even with the on set of the 21st century. Several conferences have been convened to address the devastating effects of poverty and ways of combating them. Some of these conferences include the National Conference of Nigerian Economic Society (1975 and 1997) and the National Conference on Research and Policy Directions. These conferences among others had poverty as their central theme. Poverty has been the concern of all, such that United Nations have taken interest in assessing the percentage of citizens living either above or below a particular poverty line for each

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country (UNICEF, 2004). For Nigeria, more than 70% of the population are said to be living below a dollar a day (IMF, 2004:78; UNICEF, 2004). This is an indication of the level of poverty in the country. However, before we undertake this discussion, it would make for clarity if we define what we mean by the term “poverty”.

What is Poverty?

To different people, poverty means different things. Anyanwu (1997) defines poverty as insufficient income for securing basic goals and services. In the country, the lay man would describe a man as poor if he does not have enough with which to respond to his daily exigencies of life such as feeding, school fees, clothing and essential medications. Elaborating further, poor people are those whose nutrition, housing and clothing, though adequate to preserve life do not measure up to those of the population of the particular society.

Poverty is a relative term. Kuper and Kuper (1996) sub-divide poverty into absolute poverty, poverty as arising from basic needs and relative deprivation. Each subdivision is a school of thought which seeks to define poverty. Relative deprivation describes poverty as a thing of the mind because if one is contented with what he has, makes his plans within his resources, he would be moderately satisfied with life. This satisfaction does not make the individual feel he is poor.

Whatever the definition of poverty, it suggests acquisition of the enablement to provide for one’s basic needs. Doyal and Gough (1991) have identified eleven secondary needs which are the same for all cultures as contributing also to physical health and autonomy thereby posing as basic needs. These include nutritional food, clean water, adequate housing, a non- hazardous work environment, appropriate health care, security in childhood significant primary relationships, physical security, economic security, appropriate education, safe birth-control and safe child bearing. In considering this view

point, one realizes that to be able to proffer an acceptable definition, one must first agree on what constitutes basic needs.

In another consideration, the provision of basic needs is an adult responsibility. Poverty in this wise used to be attributed only to adults and in fact adult males because women and children were viewed to be catered for by some men within the family circles. Even widows in the Nigerian culture were not seen as poor because they were inherited by some male member of the husband's family (Obinaju, 2003). By this tradition, she and her children were catered for. Recently, poverty has been so wide spread in concept, population and context that it does not only get attributed to women but also to children. Before considering what makes poverty a childhood phenomenon in Nigeria, it should pay to consider what makes one poor in the Nigerian context.

Indices of Poverty

Nigeria practises a capitalist economy where what one has determines the person's social class. People, therefore, guard their possessions jealously and go to despicable lengths to acquire material wealth. A man who cannot acquire enough to provide for his basic needs is, therefore, termed poor. He may be employed but as far as his income cannot satisfactorily cater for his food, housing, clothing and health needs, he is seen as poor.

Secondly, inheritance runs on patriarchal basis. A man hands over to his sons whatever landed property he has. He also has the right to sell these assets should he be threatened by extermination during his life time. By this process, several poor families sell out the little of whatever assets they had with no ability to acquire any substantial one or even replace the ones sold. They, thus, have next to nothing left to hand down to their children.

High prevalence of disease within the family is yet another factor which renders one poor. Nigerians out of their upbringing cannot feel comfortable to watch a member of the family die without seeking all avenues to rescue

the sick individual. By this process, family income and asset are depleted and the family sinks deeper into poverty.

Laziness and sometimes a tendency referred to as unwillingness to work is another phenomenon which further renders one poor in the Nigerian society. The desire to have a white collar job instead of the menial and “degrading” job available for people of a particular status makes for reasons why this type of attitude persist in the society. For as long as the attitude lingers, poverty deepens.

Poverty as a phenomenon and a state is caused by factors such as the ones described above. It is also associated with such variables as poor health, low level of education, lack of entrepreneurial skill, disruptive behaviour and underdevelopment (Anyanwu, 1997; Bello, 1999). While some among these are causative factors as well as resultant effects of poverty, some others like disruptive behaviour arise out of the frustration of poverty.

The discussion so far taken still postulates poverty as an adult syndrome. The question which arises now is ‘can poverty be a childhood/ juvenile phenomenon?’

Poverty as a Juvenile Phenomenon

A juvenile, a young person who is not yet an adult (Hornby, 2000), is supposed to be a dependant in the Nigerian context. As a child, he is expected to be the responsibility of his parents and/or guardians. As orphans, he is expected to be the direct responsibility of the extended family member assigned the responsibility at the death of his parents. Today, owing to societal change and increasing urbanization, the extended family system has completely broken down (Obinaju, 2000). Even relationship within the nuclear family is threatened. Each individual learns how to fend for himself as soon as he is able to go out unaccompanied. This singular development has brought juveniles into the picture of being termed poor and their realizing

that they are poor. Below are a few high lights as to how poverty becomes and gets institutionalized as a juvenile variable.

- **Inheritance**

A juvenile who is born into a family faced with food insufficiency, lacking land on which to cultivate and lacking parents with steady income cannot but have the feeling of poverty. Food insufficiency is enough drive for him to fend for himself early in life. He is, hence, driven into child labour to provide food and other basic needs for the family in the first instance and later on for himself.

- **No free and compulsory education**

A country which does not have free and compulsory education cannot but divert the attention of her youth to ventures other than education. Nigeria has launched the universal basic education with the intent that education becomes free and compulsory. This exists only as far as the policy is concerned. The actual practice is every other thing except free and compulsory. Children are seen hawking wares, working at building sites, trading and engaging in other such pre-occupations. Even those who go to school, only attend school as a part-time business. The underlying reason is purported to poverty of their family of origin. This practice lays foundation for mediocrity in general education and skill acquisition in particular. These in themselves are the foundation of massive poverty.

- **Unemployment**

In the past and as far back as the 1960s and 1970s, the motivation for going to school was for one to get employed by the government, companies or big firms at qualification. One then, sacrificed everything, got serious and acquired the needed education. Education and the subsequent employment became a means of social mobility among members of the lower social class. Today, unemployment which became critical in the 1990s in Nigeria has reduced in Nigerian youths the desire to acquire formal education. Those who have the zeal to acquire education at all, only do so because it is fashionable so to do and because they can afford it. The idea and the

assurance of getting employed at graduation are surely out of the question. With this situation, marginal families do not see the need to educate their youngsters. Young people begin very early to cater for themselves. Those who can break even escape the poverty line and those who cannot, accept themselves as poor quite early in life. Resignation to this status is obvious when it comes early in life.

- **Overindulgence in Child Labour**

Education as we all know does not bring in immediate visible material reward. Instead, at the initial stage, fees have to be paid, lockers made, uniforms sewn, books bought and several other areas of expenditure. When this is compared to child labour which yields daily income as in the case of children working on construction sites and monthly income as in the house maid cases, the preference of child labour to education can be understood. The end result of this preference is low level education for the populace and poor skill acquisition. Low literacy, poor education and lack of skill have been found to be the bedrock of poverty (Townsend, 1993).

- **Lack of Birth Control**

Remedies to poverty as suggested by Sill (1968) include expansion of gross/national product through improved agriculture and population limitation. In Nigeria, expansion of agriculture is imbibed by the general population. To this end, the man believes in marrying many wives and having many children. The intent is so that there maybe many hands to work on the farm. This in itself is detrimental to education.

Population limitation cannot really work in Nigeria because it is against the traditional belief of the people. An attempt made in the 1990s to limit each woman to a maximum of 4 children was ridiculed. This did not work out and was not also pursued by subsequent governments. This being the case, poverty cannot improve instead it deteriorates.

Between 1970 and 2000, the country's poverty rate—measured by the population subsisting on less than \$1 a day— increased from close to 36 to just under 70%. This translates into a staggering increase in the number of poor from 19million in 1970 to 90million in 2000. (IMF, 2004:78).

Conclusion

This paper has been able to define poverty and examine what makes a man seen as poor in the Nigerian society. Poverty which used to be an adult phenomenon has been seen as descending to be attributed to juveniles. This new tendency has been seen to have very devastating physical and psychological consequences especially to child development and childhood education. To this end, there is need for all hands to be on deck to fight poverty by pursuing the tenets of Universal Basic Education policy in Nigeria. There is need for more commitment towards free and compulsory education, birth control and governance. Finally, it has been recommended that the curriculum needs to be responsive to the needs of the society.

Implication of Juvenile Poverty on Child Development and Education

The effect of parental poverty on child development and education cannot be far fetched. These would manifest in poor nutrition, poor education and poor health of the child. Juvenile poverty is a variable which manifests physically and psychologically. It is capable of producing the above stated effects as well as more devastating psychological consequences.

The feeling of poverty tends to lower the child's self esteem. He, therefore, feels inferior to his mates and would rather not present himself to face any challenging situation. Targets he sets for himself are generally low and easily achievable such that his real potentials do not come to the fore. This arises from low aspiration and low motivation with a corresponding result of low productivity and low achievement. Not being able to make a mark in productive ventures, the tendency usually is for the child to resort to truancy

and sometimes crime. Having lost faith in himself, he no longer minds what he does. If he does not engage in full blown crime, he is timid, aggressive at the slightest provocation and resigns to fate in the face of challenges

These indices are not productive to child development and childhood education. A child needs to be bold, explorative and resilient in dealing with challenging circumstances if he must grow up to be self reliant as recommended by the National Policy on Education (FRN,2004). Since poverty is at the base of determinants to un-productive developmental variables, there is need to forge a way to prevent poverty from ravaging the juveniles so that the much needed new vibrant generation can be achieved.

The Way Forward

Whatever the definition given to poverty and no matter the association attributed to it, authorities and lay persons alike commonly agree that the effect of poverty are harmful to both individuals and the society. To this end, there must be a way to bring to an end actual poverty and the feeling of poverty.

In the first place, education which is expected to 'foster the worth and development of the individual, for each individual's sake and for the general development of the society' should be pursued more vigorously. In Nigeria, free and compulsory education has been launched. There is need to make it truly 'free and compulsory' such that books are not bought by students, desks are provided in schools and no form of fees is paid. Compulsion in the right sense of it would make it an offense for any child below a stipulated age to be out of school. With the conditions in place and the forceful remain in school state; it would be assured that every Nigerian child would acquire at least the required basic education and its attendant benefits.

In another consideration, the curriculum should be more responsive to the practical needs of the people. Theoretical education is no longer very beneficial to the life of Nigerians. Practical skills seem to be more

appreciated and readily useable yet schools continue to lay more emphasis on theories. This disparity between what schools offer and the needs of the society cannot but increase non-desirability to attend school by youths.

To reduce poverty in general and indeed juvenile poverty, there needs to be a more meaningful means of birth control. This will bring population control. In Nigeria today, the population is estimated at 129million people (Encarta Encyclopedia, 2006) with an annual growth rate of 2.5%; a statistic which does not match the agricultural input of the country. With reduced infant mortality, wider immunization coverage and improved sanitation, the population is said to grow faster than the economy. The dilemma of poverty is already here with us and the need to control the population cannot but be pursued vigorously so as to limit it to the economic exigencies of Nigeria.

Lastly, the political scenario in Nigeria is not helping matters. Monies and budgets made for provision of basic needs of the masses are often either diverted or mismanaged. There is need for sincere governance if poverty in the present and future generation is to be eradicated.

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