

## **Absolute Poverty Deterioration in Benue State: Rural People Oriented Coping Strategy**

### **DÉTÉRIORATION DE LA PAUVRETÉ ABSOLUE DANS L'ETAT DE BENUE:**

#### **LA POPULATION RURALE S'EST ORIENTÉE SUR LA STRATÉGIE D'ADAPTATION**

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**Abstract:** Absolute poverty has been a social problem in rural Nigeria with its rate ever on the increase. All the previous government efforts in terms of poverty reduction projects and programmes failed to improve on the situation. In order to survive, the rural poor decided device survival strategies to cope with poverty. One of such strategies is the formulation of community based organizations (CBOs). The paper examines the nature, activities and impact of the CBOs on the rural poor. The CBOs were able to minimally mobilize both human and material resources, established both primary and secondary schools, built cottage industries, constructed culverts and bridges, established community health clinics, local financial institutions, donation of relief materials contributed food and cloths to less-privileged, widows and orphans. The CBOS are handicapped due to certain problems such as lack of adequate funds, corruption, accountability, credibility among their leaders, illiteracy, and lack of commitment among some members and limited sustainability of projects. The paper advocates for government to intervene in form of finding lasting solutions to these problems.

**Key words:** Absolute rural poverty; Coping strategy; Benue State Nigeria

**Resumé:** La pauvreté absolue a été un problème social dans le Nigeria rural avec un taux qui augmentent de façon constante. Tous les efforts gouvernementaux précédents en termes de projets de réduction de la pauvreté et des programmes ont échoué, la situation ne s'améliore guère. Afin de survivre les pauvres ruraux ont décidé une stratégie de survivance d'artifice pour régler le problème de la pauvreté. Une de telles stratégies est la formulation d'organisations basées de communauté (CBOs). Le papier examine la nature, les activités et l'impact du CBOs sur les pauvres ruraux. Les CBOs étaient capables mobiliser très peu de ressources sur le plan humain et matériel, les

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écoles primaires et secondaires ont été établies, les travaux artisanaux à domicile ont été construits, les caniveaux et les ponts ont été construit, des cliniques de santé de communauté ont été établies, ainsi que des institutions financiers locales, la donation de matériel pour soulager la situation comme les aliments et les vêtements aux peuple qui sont des moins favorises, les veuves et des orphelins. la donation de matériels(matières) de soulagement la nourriture contribuée et des tissus à moins - privilégié, des veuves et des orphelins. On handicape le CBOS en raison de certains problèmes comme le manque de fonds adéquats, la corruption, la responsabilité, la crédibilité parmi leurs leaders, l'analphabétisme et le manque d'engagement parmi certains membres ont limite ce projet. Le papier recommande pour le gouvernement d'intervenir dans la forme de trouver des solutions durables a ces problèmes.

**Mots-clés:** Pauvreté rurale absolue; Stratégie d'adaptation; L'Etat Benue Nigeria

## INTRODUCTION

Poverty is a detestable condition that has no racial, geographical, religious, political, ethnic and any other barrier poverty affects every aspect of human existence. It affects its victims socially, physically, mentally and psychologically. For instance, it limits the possibility of the poor from realizing their mental and physical potentials. It destroys aspirations, hope, happiness, self esteem, personal competence, tolerance of others, self-satisfaction, oneness to others and one's disposition to participate in community affairs (Dike, 2002).

There are traces of poverty in every nation but the situation is more pronounced in developing countries especially Sub-Saharan African countries. Those countries remain the poorest in the world. The World Bank in its 2005 report pointed out that poverty in Sub-Saharan African is typically higher than elsewhere in the world. They are noted for prevalence of absolute poverty in all its characteristic features. Poverty here is absolute, pervasive and chronic.

Just like any other Sub-Saharan African country, Nigerian poverty situation is a long-standing issue. The poverty situation is a paradox one as Nigeria is rich in both human and material resources but yet inhabited by many poor people. The World Bank and UNDP (2001) ranked Nigeria as the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> in petroleum export and crude oil production. Despite this, Nigeria poverty situation ranked her as the 20<sup>th</sup> poorest country in the world. That is poverty in the midst of plenty. The poverty situation has worsened over the years and human condition has deteriorated. An analysis of the series of national consumer surveys over sixteen year period put together by Oluniewaju and Abiodun in 2005 shows that the incidence of poverty rose drastically between 1980 and 1985 and between 1992 and 1996. The current poverty situation has obviously grown worse with 70% of the Nigerian population living in poverty and seven (7) out of every ten Nigerians living below the poverty line of less than one U.S. dollar a day (NEEDs, 2004).

Poverty in Nigeria is more severe in the rural areas where social services and infrastructures are limited or non-existent. The great majority of those who live in the rural areas are poor and depend on agriculture which is the most neglected sector of the Nigerian economy. The current rural poverty rate in Nigeria is 75% (NEEDs, 2004).

Benue State is one of the thirty-six states of the Nigerian federation. It is also the eight (8) poorest state of the federation. Poverty in Benue State is absolute, severe, widespread, multi-dimensional and has increased in the last decades. Poverty here is also predominantly rural. Poverty characteristics of the state shows that 79% of the working population are engaged in agriculture which is not rewarding. Only about one third of the population have access to health facilities with a quarter of this population in the rural areas. Only 5% of patients from rural areas use community health centers. High level stunted and under weight children are found in the rural area. Major environmental problems in the state whose costs fall predominantly upon the rural poor are declining soil fertility, soil erosion, bush burning, flood, deforestation, pollution and waste management, neglect of agricultural sector and lack of infrastructure (BENSEEDs, 2005).

The poverty issue in Nigeria in general and Benue State in particular has not been totally ignored or abandoned by government. Several poverty reduction programmes have been embarked upon but contrary to expectation in reduction, the situation has rather deteriorated. As a strategy for survival, the rural poor have devised measures for themselves. One of such measures is the formation and establishment of community – based associations. This paper takes a look at the activities of these associations and emerging challenges that have hindered the actualization of their aims.

## **CAUSES OF HEIGHTENED POVERTY IN NIGERIA**

Although, historical analysts tend to blame the major cause of Nigerian poverty situation on her colonial experience, but it is expected that all the errors or damages of colonialism should have been corrected within her forty (40) years of independence. The causes of absolute poverty in Nigeria can be totally blamed on Nigeria herself. Several factors within Nigeria have been advanced by analysts to be responsible for rural poverty. This multiple causation are rooted at leadership level. The major causes of poverty in Nigeria since 1984 are visionlessness on the part of the leaders and their high level of greed for wealth accumulation which have affected the implementation of poverty alleviation programmes also.

The above have manifested in struggle for power, election rigging, corruption, exploitation, artificial scarcity of resources, devaluation of naira, mismanagement of resources and lack of investment. These attitudes have resulted in high rate illiteracy, armed robbery, indiscipline unemployment, HIV/AIDS, high population rate, child abuse and labour, maternal and infant mortality. Other consequences are neglect of agricultural sector (Major sector of the economy), inadequate supply and high cost of agricultural inputs, high cost of education and lack of social amenities (Njoku, 2004, Dike, 2002 & Maduagwu, 2007).

## **REVIEW OF GOVERNMENT EFFORTS TO ALLEVIATE POVERTY IN NIGERIA**

Efforts at alleviating poverty in Nigeria started early in the 1970s shortly after independence. The earliest programmes were the General Yakubu Gowon's National Accelerated Food Production Programme (NAFPP) and the Nigerian Agricultural and Cooperative Bank in 1972. These programmes were devoted entirely to fund agriculture. Unfortunately, the NAFPP turned out to be a colossal waste and nothing was achieved (Olisa and Obibuaku, 1992).

This was followed by operation Feed the Nation (OFN) established in 1976 by the then military Head of State, General Olusegun Obasanjo who was motivated by wide spread hunger that plagued the nation. He realized that for OFN to positively impact on agricultural development and productivity, it was essential that adequate supplies of inputs such as fertilizers, improved seeds, pesticides, credit etc were made available to farmers. The programme focused attention on ways of boosting the supply of inputs to farmers. The programme was accompanied by three institutions or project designed to make it operational. These were Nigerian Agricultural Cooperation Bank (NACB), Agricultural Development Project (ADP) in each state of the federation and River Basin Development Authority (RBDA). This programme failed woefully because it was controlled or directed by the bureaucratic bourgeoisie for their own interest /benefit. The scheme only succeeded in creating awareness of food shortage.

The successor of the then Head of State Alhaji Shehu Shagari decided to replace OFN with the Green Revolution (GR) in 1980 the aim of the programme was to curtail food importation and boost agricultural production as well as ensuring rural development. The overall agricultural aim of the programme was to boost export of agricultural products or big farming and to increase food production. The institutional structures set up by the earlier administration were being utilized to achieve the aims of the programme. This programme failed because when government decided to import fertilizer massively, many senior civil servants, military officers and businessmen used their access to the state to the advantage of the wide range of facilities committed to the programme. They turned big time absentee farmers, distributors of inputs and

acquired large tracks of land that were used for speculative purpose. This programme like the rest before it ended in 1983 without any positive impact on the rural poor.

In 1984, the regime of Buhari introduced the go back to land programme. It quickly fizzled out and died. The military regime of President Ibrahim Babangida (1985-1993) created the National Directorate of foods, Roads and rural Infrastructure (DFRRI) for rural development, DIFRRI was a multi-sectoral programme with emphasis on alleviation of rural poverty and enhancement of the quality of rural life. Government emphasis was on rural roads, rural water supply and agriculture. Even though the programme was well designed. It could not achieve the desired objectives because it was highly politicized and bedeviled with corruption which manifested in embezzlement non-accountability and poor project conceptualizations . (Olisa & Obibuaku, 1992).

Under the same regime, the then first lady Mrs Maryam Babangida established the Better Life Programme for rural women which targeted at caring for the rural poor Nigerians, unfortunately, the programme became a business ventures for the ruling class. It ended up making millionaires of the programme officers and their friends. General Abacha who succeeded Babangida with his wife found a gold mine in the business of pretending to be caring for the poor again through establishment of Family Support Programme and the Family Advancement Programme (FEAP). FEAP adopted the same objectives of the Better Life Programme. The programme ended up by taking Nigerian poor for a ride (Maduagwu, 2007).

The last poverty reduction programme was the establishment of National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP) in 2001 by the civilian regime of president Obasanjo. The programme adopted a four scheme strategy for implementing the programme. These were Youth Empowerment Scheme (YES), Rural Infrastructural development Scheme, Social Welfare Service Scheme (this was for provision of social services to alleviate both rural and urban poverty) and National Resources Development Scheme (NRDS).

Even though this programme was comprehensive in nature and was clearly spelt out, it was not efficient in its adopted approach and like the rest has not been able to make a dent on poverty since 2001. Along with this programme, the federal government along with other 188 countries signed the millennium declaration which gave birth to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Six out of the eight goals of this declaration targeted at attacking poverty from various angles. Related to this are the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDs), which is a Nigeria home-grown poverty alleviation medium term (2003-2007) strategy. As a version of NEEDs, the Benue State Economic and Development Strategy (BENSEEDs) was established targeted at poverty reduction.

None of the above efforts and programmes has impacted positively on the poor. Rather, the poverty situation of Nigeria has deteriorated to a crises level where majority of the rural poor can not find food to eat. Seven out of every ten Nigerians today are absolutely poor (NEEDs, 2004). This situation is worse in the rural areas where more than 75% are very poor. A close observation of all the programmes indicated that they were all initiated by government and taken down to the poor. A top-bottom approach was adopted without due consultation, participation or involvement by the poor over programme initiative, execution, coordination and implementation.

Since the poverty situation gets worse by the day, the poor have decided to adopt certain measures to survive. One of such measures is the formation of cooperative societies or Community Based Organizations which this paper has tried to analyse the impact of their activities on the target group.

## **COPING STRATEGY**

One major strategy in Benue State to contend with poverty is the establishment of Community Based Organizations (CBOs) by the poor themselves. These organizations are known by other names such community Development Associations, Community Development Council, Self-help organization and local organizations. CBOs are seen as locally established, non-governmental institutions that are non-profit, non-governmental founded and people oriented, directly engaged in activities that are aimed at alleviating abject poverty especially of the rural population, and the advancement of services, considered to be beneficial to the generality of the people (Wilson et al, 1990). From this perspective, CBO is more or less a

private non-profit organization which is representative of a community and which provides relative services to individuals in the community.

CBOs in a similar manner are seen as non-governmental voluntary and membership –based civil organizations, which are located and actively engaged in communities whose concerns are essentially with grassroots issues pertaining to social welfare services, development project execution and so on. (Arrossi, 1994) CBOs by this definition are conceptualized as grassroots organizations that are people oriented which have mass appeal and engage in self-help and community development projects. They are known widely for the selfless services they offer either for the benefit of their members or general community development.

Although the existence or emergence of CBOs is not new in Benue State but there has been a tremendous increase in their number as the poverty situation of the state deteriorates by the day. CBOs in Benue state are categorized based on the type of services offered and areas of focus. This is summarized in table 1 below.

**Table 1: Distribution of CBOs in Benue State by Service Category**

Category of service provided	No of CBOs	Percentage (%)
Community Development	434	16.76
Charity	414	15.98
Self-help	244	9.42
Service Provision	142	5.48
Producer organization	208	8.04
Market/Enterprise	175	6.76
Micro-credit	258	9.96
Youth development	211	8.15
Capacity building/training	221	8.53
Multi-sector functional	103	3.97
	180	6.95
Total	2590	100

Source: Filed Survey, 2010

These CBOs address poverty issues from different angles of human life which is seen below.

**Community development organizations:** This category of CBO is concerned with the mobilization and utilization of community-based resources (both human and material) for the sustainable development of rural communities within which they operate. These include family development associations, district development associations progress associations, unity associations, social clubs and community development associations. This category forms the bulk of all CBOs and has the highest number of registered operations 16.765. This is due to the high poverty rate in the state which exposes the rural people to hardships and development challenges. It is hoped by these CBOs that the poverty situation might improve if communities could mobilize their resources at all levels. Some of these CBOs have formal legal status with formally stated rights and responsibilities.

**Charity Organizations:** This category of CBOs are formed for humanitarian purposes. They are made up of faith-based organizations and other voluntary organizations targeted at meeting the needs of their members and other less privileged population in the communities where they operate with items such as food, clothes, health care services, provision of welfare services like housing, transport, scholarships. Environmental sanitation, burial aids etc. They also undertake relief activities during natural or man-made disasters. This category established rapport with people at community level and render micro-assistance to very poor people. This category constitute 15.98% of the total CBOs in the state.

**Self –Help Organizations:** This category of CBOs is concerned with self-help projects, where local people are particularly involved in the implementation of projects through contribution of cash, tools, land, materials and labour for the general well-being and development of their communities. Their overall aim is to liberate communities from squalid life conditions and empower them to become active participants in

programme(s) formulation, execution, coordination and monitoring using available community resources. These CBOs provide basic services such as portable water, access roads, bridges, health care, information services and sanitary services.

**Service Provision Organizations:** These are formed to offer essential development services that could be difficult if left for government or individuals alone. These include activities such as provision of health care services, family planning, educational services and other basic amenities. They are designed in a manner that local people are expected to participate in their implementations. Only 5.48% of these CBOs, are established in Benue State.

**Women Organizations:** are formed by women determined to render services that can improve their socio-economic status in particular and the communities within which they operate in general. Organizations of this kind include women family associations, community women associations, market women associations, women farmers group and hawkers' association. 208 (8.04%) of such associations exist in Benue State. These associations play political, social, self help and development roles. They organize capacity building, home management training. Small and medium scale business enterprises for their members.

**Producers Organizations:** This category of associations engage in a wide range of agricultural activities such as crop and livestock production, management and use of range land, forest and forest products, fishing and fish production, post-harvest and processing activities. They are meant to boost production and increase the bargaining power of members thereby better their living conditions. This type of associations include young farmers clubs, poultry farmers associations, yam farmers association, soya-beans farmers association, forest workers associations and fish farmers association. These associations 6.76% of all the association that are poverty coping oriented.

Market/Enterprise organizations. This type of associations carry out various commercial activities ranging from buying, processing, distribution to selling of goods and services. Such associations include Baranda union, millers associations, porters associations and vehicle chatters associations. Statistics indicate 9.96% of this category of associations.

Micro-Credit Organizations: These associations that constitute 8.15% encourages community savings and small-scale loaning schemes. They include local Bam, thrift and loan associations, savings and investment associations. These associations assist members to meet their financial challenges or needs. They constitute 9.96%.

**Youth Development Organizations:** This category of associations aim at mobilizing and encouraging youth participation in community development. They constitute 8.53% and include youth clubs, youth movement, Youth organizations and associations. The existence of these associations indicate the willingness and readiness of the youths not to leave the task of coping with poverty in the hands of adults alone.

**Capacity Building/Training Organizations:** This category of associations in Benue State is small (3.97%) but their aim is to help poor people develop a clearer understanding of the social, political and economic factors that affect their lives. This type include Teacher's unions, Parents – Teachers Association (PTA), Women Movement, Human Rights protection initiatives, Youth Empowerment Movements among others.

**Multi-Purpose organizations:** These ones have multiple purposes and functions. They constitute 6.95% of all the associations in the state. They are known as multi-purpose associations, cooperative societies and Empowerment Foundations in form of non-Government Organizations (NGOs). They play numerous development roles such as financing of community development projects, consultation services, giving loans, training of members in technical skills and rendering advocacy services to their communities. This category of associations are not totally exclusive in terms of their services and areas of focus. There exist a considerable level of mutual inclusiveness or overlapping ties in the activities of organizations in local communities of the state. These associations in the rural communities usually develop their services focus spontaneously around a particular problem or an issue that seems to threaten or challenge the well-being of the local people in question and change over to other areas when the problem or the issue is over.

## **ACTIVITIES OF THE CBOS**

Findings from a study conducted by Akpehe (2006) on the activities of CBOs in Benue State revealed the following. CBOs have mobilized both human and material resources in communities where they operate to embark on so many development projects such as construction of feeder roads, culverts and bridges, establishment of primary, secondary and tertiary schools, public water wells, sanitary facilities and cottage industries, provision of transport facilities especially in the riverine communities, milling /food processing and security services, establishment of community health clinics, and local financial institutions, sports clubs, donation of relief materials such as food and clothes items to the very poor people, widows, orphans, disabled and children, relief materials to refugees contribution of money for burial of members and support to people living with HIV/AIDS and disadvantage groups, award of scholarships to disadvantaged children and rendering of legal services to vulnerable groups.

The economic activities of the CBOs include operating small-scale loaning/micro-credit schemes for members, forming common market fronts for strong bargaining powers and improving the production capacity of farmers and other groups. This enabled people to obtain needed capital to establish small-scale business and rural farmers get soft loans from local financial institutions to improve on their agricultural activities.

Furthermore, the CBOs account for over 40% of health care delivery services offered in the state which has contributed tremendously to the improvement of the health status of community dwellers within the localities where these services are established.

Through the above mentioned activities, these organizations have helped to impact on the poor in several ways. As summarized by Akpehe (2006) they have helped the poor to:

- promote local participation in designing, implementing and monitoring development programme by building self-confidence and strengthening organizational capacity among low income people.
- Provide more accurate and representative information about the needs, priorities and capabilities of public services by government agencies.
- Adapt programmes to meet local development needs which significantly serve priority needs more appropriately
- Effectively mobilize community resources through which local technical knowledge could be tapped and utilized to produce desired services operate as intermediaries between communities in question and other NGOs and international donor agencies for effective service provision and
- Create relative peace, unity and security which has minimized incessant land disputes and communal clashes that hitherto ravaged many communities.

## **CONSTRAINTS**

Despite the large number, efforts and broad-based nature of these CBOs, certain factors have restrained them from achieving their overall objective of poverty reduction and peoples' ability to cope well. Rather, the poor are only able to cope minimally while the vicious cycle of poverty remains with the rate permanently at a deteriorating level. One of the major inhibiting factors is poor funding and relatively small resources base. Majority of the CBOs if not all suffer from inadequate funds and resource base to execute their planned development programmes and projects. Their major sources of funds include donations, membership registration fees, gifts, loans, levies and sometimes grants from donor agencies. Finances realized from these means are however insufficient to finance major capital projects, such as building health clinics, schools and other infrastructures amenable to bringing development in the rural communities.

Another problem that hinders the CBOs from actualizing their dream is corruption, low degree of legitimacy, accountability and credibility. Just as corruption has been the major problem in Nigeria, so also it has been with the CBOs. Many leaders and members tend to embezzle organizations' funds, divert

organizations' resources to personal property and local programmes and projects areas with high prejudices, there are evident cases of default in the local finance institutions organized by some CBOs where many leaders and members who benefited from the organizations' small-scale loan schemes refused to pay it back to enable other members benefit too. Also, financial accounts are rudimentarily kept without or with little transparency and credibility thereby betraying people's confidence in their operations. This problem has been reported to be the major factor that many CBOs have found difficult to overcome. Some donor agencies including the state government have withdrawn their grants from CBOs due to this problem.

Again, limited sustainability of projects has been an intractable problem. Many development projects like schools, health care centres, water supply system and cottage industries among others collapsed immediately after launching them due to inadequate arrangements on how they could be sustained.

Poor participation and commitment among members is a problem to many CBOs. Since the CBOs are non-profit oriented, many young people who aid them in projects execution often move on to other mainstream jobs with more clearly defined career paths. As a result, this sector always find itself in need to constantly train new staff members with high commitment to carry out development activities. This problem has left many development projects initiated by CBOs uncompleted.

The CBOs also suffer from constant struggles over leadership and resources among members which adversely affect their operations. This struggle over power and resources of organizations brought about disintegration among members and negatively affected their efficiency and development.

There has also been a problem of strained relationship between CBOs and the state government. The present democratic dispensation in the state is characterized by partnership relationship between the state and civil society organizations with an aim of promoting and sustaining democracy, facilitating the empowerment of the rural communities to help alleviate abject poverty and promoting their involvement in formulation, planning and execution of development programmes and projects. The state in this bit tries to maintain patriarchal position hence undermining the prime visions and strategies of the CBOs. This in some cases generates misunderstanding between the state and local organizations, especially when they want to maintain their stands with out deviation. The state more often employs her statutory powers to suppress the operations of CBOs in order to command their allegiance. Also. Some CBOs consider others a rival group than partners in development, therefore operate in competition with one another. This strained relationship hinders CBOs from attaining their development goals and objectives adequately.

Lastly, limited managerial and Technical Capacity is a constraining factor in CBOs actualizing the set objective. Many of the CBOs are managed by incompetent leaders and members who in some cases have no formal or low educational status. Sometimes, academic attribute of members is held in high esteem and considered . this problem killed high enthusiasm of most CBOs.

Though some level of achievements have been recorded by the CBOs in Benue State, their vulnerability to the above mentioned problems have limited their ability in alleviating absolute poverty and to competently aid the poor to cope adequately. This has partly accounted for the present heightened poverty situation of the state.

## **THE WAY FORWARD**

The formation of CBOs as strategies for coping with poverty is a welcome development because the Nigerian government over 50 years (since 1960) ago has failed to improve on the poverty situation of the people. The CBOs are people oriented, used bottom-up approach, involve the poor in formulation, implementation, coordination and monitoring of the programmes. This strategy takes care of the felt needs of the people as against the situation where government adopt top-bottom approach and will always assume what the poor need and how to meet the needs.

The government therefore needs to acknowledge this fact. The government needs to maintain cordial relationship with them, organize for the training of their leaders and members in areas of leadership, resource management and accountability, improve their resource based and enhance their managerial and technical capabilities and sustainability.

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