

**THE CAUSES AND IMPACT OF POVERTY ON
SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA**

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INTRODUCTION

Poverty is the oldest and the most resistant virus that brings about a devastating disease in the third world called under development. It's rate of killing cannot be compared to any disease from the genesis of mankind. It is worse than malaria and HIV/AIDS which are claimed to be the highest killer diseases.

HIV/AIDS attacks only a few number of people in a society which is a negligible portion of the world's population. As of poverty, it is a pandemic that affects a greater number of people in the society and the whole society at large "out of the worlds population of more than 6 billion people, nearly 1.3 billion people live on less than a dollar a day, and close to 1 billion cannot meet their basic consumption requirement", Human Development Report (1999). While only about 33.4 million are affected by HIV/AIDS as reported by UNAIDS (1998). Those that are affected by the HIV/AIDS virus may be as a result of the poverty virus. All the diseases are rampant in Africa and Asia. This has seriously affected sustainable development in Africa today. Consequently, while other societies are struggling to get to the moon, Africa is struggling to get back to the village.

Mankind has failed to give poverty the attention it deserves. That is why a problem from time immemorial is plaguing the world today. Many have seen it as a problem of the third world. Little or no findings have been made about the origin of poverty though Encyclopaedia Encarta says that the reasons of poverty are not clear. Yet there are attempts to eradicate it today.

Therefore, in a society plagued by poverty, little can be said about sustainable development if the problem of poverty cannot be redressed. Poverty remains the only social problem that man attempts to solve it, has met with many other challenges and societal ills. For example attempts to find solutions to the problem of poverty using microfinance has met with the

question of how can these institutions attain financial sustainability Gibbons (2000).

The terms poverty and sustainable development are not new in our daily parlance but when seen from the practical point of view, they call for the attention of man, especially those who are humane with the abuse of human rights.

POVERTY

There are many definitions of poverty, according to how it is viewed. Encyclopaedia Encarta, defines poverty as the condition of having insufficient resources or income. In its most extreme form, poverty is a lack of basic human needs to sustain as useful and working efficiency such as adequate and nutritious food, clothing, housing, clean water and health services.

According to the United Nations Human Development Report, (1998), poverty is defined as a complex phenomenon that generally refers to inadequacy of resources and deprivation of choices that would enable people to enjoy decent living conditions. While Professor Muhammad Yunus (1994) defines it as the denial of human rights relating to the fulfilment of basic human needs.

From my own perspective, poverty can be viewed as the absence of peace in an individual. This could be as a result of hunger, lack of medical care, marginalisation, denial of human rights relating to the fulfilment of basic human needs, freedom, etc. It is generally known that poverty can be “absolute” or “relative”. In this regards, the definition of poverty needs a case study to have a clear picture. In Cameroon, according to the Cameroon Human Development Report (1998), the poorest household lives on 148000frs CFA (€73.84 or about \$68.57) per year in order to have the minimum food intake of 2400 calories a day per adult.

Poverty is one of the most retarding and devastating factors in human life. It is the root of underdevelopment and insecurity in Africa. The root cause of poverty is not by a person’s unwillingness to work, his inability to work, lack of resources to put together or lack of skills. As a matter of fact, a poor person

works very hard – harder than others and he or she has more skills and time he/she can use. He/she shoulders the yoke of poverty because he/she does not receive the full worth of his work and his rights in the society.

Under the existing societal and economic man-made conditions, man has become very egoistic thus taking away a significant part of income that is due to the poor man. The existing social and economic man-made conditions are selfishly designed in such a way that, it allows this process of grabbing from the poor to continue unperturbed. It gathers strength everyday consequently making the rich richer and the poor poorer. A poor person cannot arrange a large share of returns of his work because his economic base is too thin. If he cannot gradually build up an asset base, he cannot command a better share of his work because his economic base is too small. Ensuring equality for all the members of a given human society is the fundamental dream of mankind. This dream remains unattainable if the society cannot overcome the general conditions of poverty among its members. If this is not met, there can never be peace in an individual, in a family, in the society in which we live, in the nation and Africa at large for it is said a hungry man is an angry man – peace goes with sustainable development.

THE POVERTY SITUATION IN AFRICA

While remarkable progress has been made in some developing countries in reducing chronic hunger and abject poverty, especially in East and South Asia, the situation has deteriorated in Africa. In sharp contrast with Africa, the incidence of abject poverty is likely to have been substantially reduced in East and South Asia. The achievements of China and, to some extent, India are very impressive and are a glaring example.

Towards the end of the 1980s, 40 out of 64 low-income, food deficit countries failed to provide enough food to meet average nutritional requirements. Twenty-nine of them were in Africa, their people were perennially condemned to hunger by inadequate incomes. The plight of starving people in the Horn of Africa and Southern Africa is all too familiar,

especially in Ethiopia, Somalia, the Sudan, Angola, Mozambique and Liberia. In as much as food security is not just a supply issue, but also a function of income and purchasing power, the results of an assessment of the changes in per capital income during the same period were equally disquieting. According to the United Nations estimates, between 1981 and 1990, real GDP per person in Africa recorded a negative average annual growth of 1.3 percent.

It is difficult to know exactly how many people are poor and food insecure in Africa due to the dearth of information on poverty, food consumption and variation in the definitions and assumptions used. This causes the estimate of the world poor and insecure people to vary from about 300 million to one billion in 1986 FAO (1988). According to World Bank (1986), 340 million people in developing countries in 1980 did not have enough income for a minimum calorie diet that would prevent serious health risk and 730 million did not have enough income for a diet that is required for an active life. The African continent alone accounted for half of the population of those people.

Due to this fact, many developing nations have experienced declining economic conditions while at the same time, accumulating to multilateral public lending agencies, such as the World Bank and the IMF, and to foreign governments. Out of the 41 heavily indebted countries around by the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative, 33 of them are found in Africa with a debt of \$156 billion. You would imagine many African countries are happy to find themselves ranked in this file.

The poor country debt saga has been allowed to drift on for too long. It has been allowed to deprive some of the World's poorest citizens of the basic rights to health, education and livelihoods. It has contributed to sickness, premature death and to shocking levels of poverty. Studies carried out in Cameroon in 1990 reveals that death often stem from malnutrition in pregnant women and babies infections. As a result out of every 100,000 births 430 women lose their lives, MINASCOF (1990). This is a situation of people living in poverty in Cameroon which is not different from other parts of Africa. What

makes this waste so tragic is the simple fact that the human costs of debt have been so high, while the financial costs of resolving the debt crisis are so small. If African countries fall squarely into the frame of this situation, how do we expect them to develop sustainably?

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Generally, when we talk of development, we often associate it with its sustainability. Sustainable here will be any development that can stand the test of time. For example donors or funding agencies would often want to know how and for how long a project can resist its viability? It is important to know that projects are all forms of development. In the words of Forzi (2000) a project that can be sustainable needs no investment. In a similar case a country that cannot work towards sustainable development cannot attract investment.

Development could be defined as a positive change in the economic status of the bottom 50% of the population of a given society. If an effort fails to improve the economic condition of the bottom 50% of the population, it cannot qualify to be categorised as development effort. This is in contrast of the view of many development planners looking at development in terms of per-capita income of nations. In other words, if one is looking for the per capita real income of the bottom half of the population, not the national per capita real income.

To better understand the term sustainability, one needs to look at it from a feasible and impact point of view. A developmental project that requires physical structures could be accepted sustainable from the structures in place but may not be impact wise sustainable. It is from this point that the sustainability is tied to development.

Consequently sustainable development could be regarded as a long lasting quantitative and qualitative expansion of all aspects in a society. Be it social, cultural, economic, political, scientific or technological.

THE CAUSES OF POVERTY IN AFRICA

The absence of all developmental factors in human life has been the cause of sustainable underdevelopment or “dark ages” in our societies. We must now look behind, sit up and move out of these doldrums.

Poverty in African society can be attributed to many factors which I will just mention but few in this paper today. These factors are interwoven and so complex in such a way that, if they are not carefully separated and treated, our dreams for sustainable development in Africa will remain like a faint moon at the horizon.

One of these factors is illiteracy. It has remained a terrible ulcer on the leg of development in Africa. It is one of the impediments that have not pushed Africa forward to achieve sustainable development. It is one of the forces turning the wheel of sustainable development in Africa anticlockwise. From the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPCS) 1997 selected human development indicators, we will notice that some African countries still fall below 40% of adult literacy. These are Niger 14%, Somalia 24%, Mali 31% Sierra Leone 31%, Senegal 33%, Guinea 36%, Ethiopia 36%, Benin 37%, Liberia 38%. From this statistics, you will now evaluate its impact in Africa.

Think of an illiterate who will want to keep basic records of his daily commercial activities, think of an illiterate who would want to be trained to develop his skills in any business venture. Think of an illiterate who will want to use a computer, think of an illiterate in our so-called global village who is faced with the latter’s challenges, etc. This issue is not a voluntary act or wish of the people to remain illiterates. It is due to their inability to afford for even basic education. It is just that education has never reached their threshold. This has been as a result of poverty and or negligence by those who can afford to provide these basic needs of life. If a panacea is not sought for, Africa will remain vulnerable to underdevelopment, ignorance and insecurity.

The accusing fingers of the poor in Africa have always remained pointing at the rich for the later being what they are today. To be crystal clear, Africa has always held the western world responsible for their plight today.

They believe that they have remained poor and underdeveloped thanks to the exploitative expertise of the latter. The economic potentials in Africa (from food crop to human labour) have only one sense of direction – towards Europe and America. These potentials have only one hymn to sing: “Africa is not our home, we are just passing through...” The western world is like a bird that robs and dismantles the other’s nest to build its own. If these egoistic and exploitative tendencies are nursed in our minds, how do we hope for development and worse of all sustainable development in Africa? This tendency is just like killing the goose that lays golden eggs.

On the other hand, we hold some of the avaricious, dishonest and heartless African leaders are responsible for auctioning and or mortgaging the economic base of their countries for their personal gains. Some of these leaders divert money borrowed from International Financial Institutions and developed countries for developmental projects into their private pockets. The best economic constructions that these dictators have ever done for Africa is to dismantle their economic treasures and build them at the backyard of Europe and the U.S.A. If these practices (embezzlement, foreign investment, capital flight) are halted, sustainable development in Africa will not be advocated for, but would be copied as a model.

One of the main things that could be done to help alleviate poverty and strive for sustainable development in Africa is to build their capacity. That is to intensively and extensively train development experts for Africa. They could be trained towards the new socio-economic landscape. Most educated people in our society do not have the skills to marshal the economy of their countries forward. It is not because they do not want it but because they cannot afford for this training. That is knowing what to do and not knowing how to do it has been the main shackles holding the development of Africa backward.

We will take the example of this presenter who has never had any formal education in either economics and or development studies (social studies). He is only a holder of a Bachelor of Arts degree in Languages but seeing the plight of his people (which he has grown up with), has all along

been fighting as a volunteer to ameliorate it. He has tried to develop his skills towards this direction but has failed due to abject poverty in his family circle and also lack of external support.

If stakeholders could invest more in building the capacity of the poor in the 3rd world towards sustainable development, they will help wake the economy of their societies from economic hibernation. This gesture will go to confirm a Chinese proverb which says “teach a man how to fish and not to give him fish.” But if you teach a person how to fish and you do not give him a fishing tackle, it will be a waste of time and resources. Consequently, stakeholders should make provision for seed capital to the poor to lay the economic foundation of their communities. If these people are trained and given seed capital to start off their businesses, Forzi (1999) sustainable development will come spontaneously to the society.

Many stakeholders, who have tried to salvage the poor from their plight through financial assistance, have often missed the target. That is they direct the assistance into wrong hands – the rich. Consequently, this assistance does not reach the real targeted people – the poor. They are diverted by some government administrators and so called contractors into their private use at the expense of those dying in abject poverty. What I mean is that, most of this assistance given to most African governments never reach the grassroots. The assistance disappears from the hands of those who sign for it and never reach the grassroots. The poor remain at the bottom gaping like hungry chicks of a bird waiting to be fed. One should not be deceived that sustainable development in Africa can ever begin from “the top”. The idea of putting financial resources on top to trickle down to the bottom (grassroots) has failed in Africa. These resources do not trickle down 2 cm deep and gets dry. If stakeholders and donors could reverse this method and try the trickle up method, that is giving assistance and resources to local governments and organisations at the grassroots level; assistance to Africa for sustainable development will be a farce.

THE IMPACT OF POVERTY ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

The impact of poverty on sustainable development in Africa is devastating. Due to the inability of the people to harness the resources that will improve their living conditions, it has helped to dismantle their hopes of life. Therefore the economic activities of these people continuously face diminishing returns.

This impact is seriously felt in the agricultural sector as well as other sectors of the economy. Since farmers lack the appropriate technology, updated skills, modern technology, capacity building, innovative techniques, tools, lack capital to invest in this sector (to improve the soils and multiply the yields), because of this poor state, the sector has seriously been affected.

Considering the indiscriminate population explosion in Africa in relation to the shrinking food production and the economy, there is a serious threat to food production and food security. The policies to guarantee food security and eliminate hunger in Africa have remained all theories on the lips of those who preach it to make political gains. Except these theories are transformed into concrete action and realities, one will wonder how this issue of food security that has remained a sing-song for the past decades will be guaranteed and hunger that takes away souls every hour in Africa will be eradicated.

Because of the poverty situation in Africa, the continent has been plunged into a feat of successive political problems that has resulted to wars, coup d'états, dictatorship, military rule and many leaders clinging so long on to power. This is because they believe that nectar is found only on the crown or around the crown". The glaring examples have been experienced in Liberia, Angola, Sierra Leone, Democratic Republic of Congo, The Republic of Congo, Burundi, Rwanda, Nigeria, Chad, etc. Most of the manpower is trained to use arms, the little finances used to purchase arms and most of the time spent in fighting. Consequently leaving the feeble economy in the hands of the women and the old. If the continent remains in perpetual political upheavals, little or nothing can be expected of development and most of all sustainable development.

It is because of this reason today that we find a lot of massive emigration of Africans to Europe, America and other parts of the world to seek for greener pastures. They use all unorthodox means to make sure that they leave their homeland for good to a land where they are subjected to all forms of slavery. Yet the exodus continues despite all attempts to curb it. This only helps to reduce the economic manpower of the continent, which ought to be nurtured.

Due to this fact, poverty-related problems like malnutrition, diseases, HIV/AIDS, juvenile delinquency, disillusionment, unemployment, social insecurity, fraud, acute corruption, embezzlement, trauma have been the order of the day.

It has resulted to the availability of very few and poor medical facilities, personnel and infrastructure. Many African countries especially South of the Sahara have very poor communication and transportation network such as telephone, internet, fax, radio signals, television images etc. There are very few accessible road network. Acute poverty in Africa has resulted in high rate of illiteracy. This is because, there are no educational infrastructure, few and in experienced personnel. This has affected mostly the elementary and post secondary levels.

CONCLUSION

Sustainable development in Africa can be given a succinct treatment if and only if poverty is eradicated first. This is because we cannot leave the substance and chase the shadow. If we leave poverty to prevail in African societies, then the dream of sustainable development will still be far fetched. This is because if a free society cannot help the many who are poor, it cannot save the few who are rich.

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