

AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT AND THE WAR AGAINST POVERTY: THE AFRICAN EXPERIENCE

POROMA, CELESTINE LEKIA (Ph.D)

Department of Sociology,
Faculty of Social Sciences,
Ignatius Ajuru University of Education,
Port Harcourt, Nigeria.
E-mail: porocele@gmail.com

NNA, NEKABARI JOHNSON (Ph.D)

Professor of Political Economy,
Department of Political & Administrative Studies,
University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria.

AKEODI ALLWELL ALI

Department of Political & Administrative Studies,
Faculty of Social Sciences,
University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria.

Abstract

This article explores the burning issue of poverty in Africa. The article neither adopts the media method of painting gloom and hopelessness nor the political denial and image laundry method of some African governments; rather it uses a more holistic approach. It presents the problem of extreme poverty in Africa in an objective manner and shows that though a rural based agricultural approach presents a viable escape route out of African's prolonged and embarrassing status as the world's poorest continent, the exogenous nature of the post colonial African state prevents it from achieving the minimal sustained success in the global fight against poverty. The contemporary African state is inherently autocratic weak and unable to lead autonomous self sustained development. The paper argues that for the African state to succeed in the fight against poverty a re-conceptualization and restructuring aimed at positioning the African state in the direction of putting the needs of its people on its front burner through home grown and locally applicable ideas is imperative.

KEYWORDS: Agricultural development, Poverty, Rural Agriculture, Poverty Alleviation

INTRODUCTION

Issues bordering on the poverty trap which has entangled Africa has become a recurrent decimal in the sphere of social and economic discourse. From the avalanche of writings that has resulted from these intellectual exercise only few, if any have been able to use scientific methodology to produce any home grown viable solution.

Africa is the world's second largest continent after Asia. It has a total surface area of 30.3km², including several islands and an estimated population of 888 million (UN 2005). The vast Sahara Desert, covering an area greater than that of continental United States, divides North Africa from Sub-Saharan Africa.

Poverty in Africa is predominantly in the rural areas where more than 70% of the population live and depend on agriculture for food and livelihood yet agriculture remains highly underdeveloped, with farming still principally subsistent, based on crude traditional implements. In sub Saharan Africa more than 218 million people live in extreme poverty. Among them are rural poor in eastern and southern Africa, an area that has one of the world's highest concentrations of poor people. The incidence of poverty in Sub-Saharan Africa is increasing faster than the population. Overall, the pace of poverty reduction in Africa has slowed since the 1970s.

Rural poverty in many parts of Africa has its roots in the colonial system and the policy and institutional restrains that it imposed on poor people. In recent decades, economic policies and institutional structures have been modified to close the income gap, structural adjustments has dismantled existing rural adjustments but have not always built new ones.

In many transitional economies, the rural situation is marked by continuing stagnation, poor production, low incomes and the rising vulnerability of poor people. Lack of access to markets is a problem for many small sale enterprises in Africa especially the agro-business. The rural population is poorly organized and often isolated, the reach of society safety nets and poverty programs. Increasingly, government policies and investments in poverty reduction tend to favour the urban over the rural areas.

With the appalling commitment of many African governments to this sector, the 6% growth in agriculture projected by NEPAD as a sine qua non for attaining the MDG goal of halving poverty by 2015 would continue to remain a pipedream until the governments of the various African countries realize that an agriculture led growth offers most African countries their best chance at rapid economic growth and poverty alleviation.

To understand why the post colonial African state has failed in this urgent task of leading their increasingly hungry populations out of the poverty trap, it is important that we try to x-ray the structure of the African state with a view to unveiling the root cause of this burgeoning embarrassment.

African is being confronted by a myriad of challenges, namely:

1. Inadequate and inefficient distribution and high cost of farm inputs that have rendered investment in agriculture relatively risky.
2. The problem of land tenure that has made farmers reluctant to improve their land holdings due to lack of ownership and control over land. In some places women despite constituting a large chunk of the farm workforce are denied access to land.
3. The scattered nature of the rural settlement, which is made worse by poor roads and inadequate access to information technology, makes it difficult for government to organize and involve them in the process of policy formulation.
4. Inadequate infrastructural facilities such as electricity, roads, portable water, health centres, schools etc.
5. Inadequate marketing infrastructures such as storage, preservation and processing facilities that have increase post harvest losses.
6. Inefficient supply and distribution of fertilizers, improved disease and climate resistant seeds and livestock. Inaccessibility of low interest credit facilities.
7. The weak research-extension and farmer linkage as well as the inappropriateness of some agricultural technologies to the rural farming system.
8. Bias against women in the provision of farm capital and logistic support. Inconsistent government agricultural policies and the unfavorable terms of trade against agriculture.
9. African agriculture suffers from erratic rainfall, is vulnerable to high seasonal and inter-annual fluctuations and is subject to high rates of evapotranspiration due to high temperatures. Also there has been a secular decline in rainfall across Africa during the past 30 years, perhaps linked to long term climatic change and to rising sea to surface temperatures in the Indian Ocean.

This study becomes imperative not just because the World Bank statistics show that Africa remains the poorest continent on the planet with the vast majority of her people living below the poverty line of one dollar a day but because of the gory images that continue to emerge from Africa's unending famines like the current one in the horn of Africa.

AFRICA: A METAPHOR OF GLOBAL POVERTY?

Alapiki, (2005:115) has rightly captured the kind of emotions which the debate on Africa's economic quagmire naturally stirs as been "emotionally charged". This causal polemics which swings between the historical approach and the cultural approach (O' Brien and Williams 2007) has resulted in the fabrication of huge intellectual materials. However, while this debate rages on, local and international media continues to be inundated with gory images and stories of women and children suffering chronic starvation and malnourishment resulting from recurrent wars, droughts and famines or of sub human living conditions in the

rural areas and the increasingly sprawling urban slums. While other regions within the developing nation's belt have recorded appreciable increase in their economic wellbeing, most of Africa continues to depend on world aid to feed their hungry and treat their sick. The table below shows sub-Africa at the nadir of global development indicators.

Region	Life expectancy at birth	Adult literacy rate (% age 15 and above)	Combined primary, secondary and gross enrollment	US\$ GDP per capita (PPP US\$)
Arab states	66.4	61.3	63	4,550
East Asia and the Pacific	69.2	85.3	71	3,950
Latin America and the Caribbean	69.6	87.8	74	6,880
South Asia	62.5	55.1	53	2,280
Sub-Saharan Africa	48.8	59.6	42	1,640
Eastern Europe and CIS	68.5	98.6	77	6,290
OECD	76.6	97.5	87	22,020

Source: UNDP Human Development Index 2001

The reality of poverty on the continent can be seen in the grim summary below:

- 315 million people i.e. one in two people in sub Saharan Africa survive on less than one dollar a day.
- 184 million people or 33% of the African population suffer from malnutrition.
- During the 1990s the average income per capita decreased in 20 African countries.
- Less than 50% of Africans have access to hospitals and doctors.
- In 2000, 300 million Africans did not have access to safe drinking water.
- The average life expectancy in Africa is 41 years.
- Only 57% of Africans are enrolled in primary education and only one of three children complete school.]
- One in six children dies before the age of five. This number is 25 times higher in sub Saharan African than in the OECD countries.
- The African continent lost 5.3 million hectares of land during the decades of the 1990s.
- Less than one person out of five has electricity. Out of 1000 inhabitants 15 have a telephone line and 7 or 8 out 1000 surf the net.

Though countries like South Africa and Egypt may not be as poor as countries like Angola, Ethiopia and South Sudan yet on the overall Africa is home to the world's poorest countries. Recent events continue to point to the depressing reality that poor Africa is getting poorer on the average and 2011 sees drought in North East Africa bringing again the horrendous ordeals

of starvation to millions in the region affecting Somali, Ethiopia and Kenya- with the war in Somalia making things worse.

THE NATURE OF THE AFRICAN STATE AND THE POVERTY TRAP

The UN document entitled “Africa’s Special Needs” describes the lack of inertia to move out of the poverty situation entangling the African countries as poverty traps. The persistence of this trap can be linked to the nature of the African state.

Much has been said to the fact that the nature of the African state, its elite and relations with the western countries are the root causes of Africa’s predicament. This predicament puts Africa at the lowest level of economic, political and social development in the world.

One striking feature of the African situation is that the ruling elite which constitute 10% of the population enjoys full citizenship rights such as freedom from hunger, diseases, fear and conflict and are basically concentrated in the cities. The rest of the populations live in rural settings. To understand this predicament one must analyze the African pre-colonial, colonial and neo colonial states.

Successive historical processes such as slavery, colonialism and neo colonialism contributed in creating the African state which reflects neither the western state nor African values. The deformity of the African state which manifests itself in the extreme poverty of the populace reveals its vulnerability to global dependency and makes it herculean for the African state to attain autonomous development. The persistence of the poverty trap can be linked to the exogenous structure of the African state and the uncut umbilical cord to the west which makes it inept in the handling of the poverty crises.

Walter Rodney (1972) had earlier brought to the fore the intriguing questions of why Africa has realized too little of its natural potential and also why so much of its present wealth goes to non Africans who for the most part reside outside the continent. Another question which follows naturally is why the continent continues in its inglorious position as the world’s poorest despite its huge mineral and natural resources? Again, why is it that contrary to what pertains to most part of the world, Africans are still grappling with the very basics of human needs?

In a bid to respond to the above questions, we argues that the nature and structure of the indigenous African state have been determine by various exogenous processes namely the cross Atlantic slave trade, mercantilism, imperialism, colonialism and neocolonialism. These exogenous processes have cumulatively led to the creation of an African leviathan, a dysfunctional monster without any historical, ethnic and cultural substance and in reality whose main function is to exact political control, domination and maintain economic exploitation over the African people. As a result, the African state is autocratic and unable to lead to autonomous, self centered and self sustainable development. Africa was created essentially as states and not nations and the neo political elite inherited African states as the central agencies defining the parameters of economy, cultures, and the people or citizen

(Lumumba-Kasango 2002). The contemporary African state is thus inherently autocratic, and unable to lead autonomous self centered and self sustained development.

Over the years, western interests have been consistent as far as Africa is concerned. They came down to access markets, cheap labor and raw materials. These interests are the priority of western countries, which *ab initio* and African state has been shaped to meet these goals. As a result, African needs such as self reliance sufficiency in basic things as food cannot be met.

The post colonial African state is in many ways an extension of the colonial state. It has been made clear that the intention of the colonialists in Africa was clearly that of exploitation. Despite the huge agricultural resources appropriated from Africa nothing was done in the direction of developing the forces of production. Rather the burden of production was dropped on the peasants whose production had been forcefully inverted from meeting local food needs to producing Europe bound cash crops. The surplus agricultural products of the peasant were however appropriated by the colonialist through the Commodity Marketing Boards in this way the needs of the colony were subjected to the needs of the metropole (Ekekwe, 1986:39). In the same vein, the post colonial African State with strings attached to the foreign bourgeois shows interest not in the development of the productive forces but in the exploitation of the peasants (Ake, 1981). It is this deformed nature of the African capitalist State which has made it lean towards non productive rent collecting economy. As a result, most national development plans have either died on inception or have just existed as national monuments. Ake, (1996:64) argues that the failure of the African State to develop agriculture is due to the fact that agricultural policies are in the real sense not geared towards developing agriculture but are self serving strategies for survival, power or accumulation.

Other models which seek to explain the paralysis of the African state also exist. For instance, William Zartman (2002) and others use the political interaction frame work to posit that the state-society relationship is central to understanding the dynamics of Africa today and perceives politics “as a set of transactions, the manifestation of the exercise of choice by multiple actors within parameters. This approach which places premium on power, competition and authority as key to understanding the situation in Africa argue that African politics and political interaction are constrained by the environment (geographical, climatic and ecological), they are also constrained by population the historical inheritance (artificial political boundaries external dependence and institutional dualism) this multi disciplinary perspectives explains the diversity of contemporary Africa in terms of constrains possibilities and alternatives.

From the foregoing, a reconceptualization of the African state becomes imperative as result of a number of reasons. First, about four decades of preoccupation with development have yielded only very meager results. It has proven a mistake to try to analyze something that has not yet been seriously on the agenda, dealing mainly with symptoms related to the behavior of the state instead of its substance. Secondly, all the available evidence points to the inescapable conclusion that political conditions in Africa are the greater impediment to

development. Thirdly, despite the explosion of a number of factors in the global system and the deliberate effort of some multinational and multilateral institutions to African states, and also despite the fact that the African system of service delivery or performance at the national level are highly problematic, the African state still remains the most visible actor in the economy of most African countries. Finally, neocolonial influence which manifest in unequal and dependency relations make the African state susceptible to accepting alien policies that are not favorable to its own people. For instance while many states in the Global North spend colossal amount of money on agricultural subsidy, the Bretton Wood Institutions compel African countries to remove the comparatively meager amounts spent on the already underdeveloped agricultural sector. The answer therefore lies in creating a state that is both autonomous and democratic.

FIGHTING POVERTY: THE RURAL AGRICULTURE STRATEGY

It is disheartening to observe that in the 21st century, the major problem threatening the life and people of Africa despite the abundance of natural resources is the problem of how to eat, have clothes to put on and to live in a befitting shelter. While western countries are almost transcending the stage of high mass consumption, Africa is overwhelmed with miserable living conditions (Agbor, 2006).

Across Africa, several “poverty eradication” programs have been implemented by national governments and by international agencies without any substantial result (Idiong C. Idiong, 2004). This failure of the successive agricultural production to contribute significantly to the war against poverty through increased food supplies and job creation may not be unconnected with the design of the structure of these programs. In the first place these programs were not in the real sense designed to eradicate poverty but to alleviate poverty.

All over Nigeria and other parts of Africa, relics of the failure of these programmes show a large amounts of facilities and machinery which worth hundreds of millions of dollars lying waste. Like the Ujaama program in Tanzania, most of these programs have failed because the governments concentrated on excessive mechanization (Ake 1981:118) without considering other intervening factors.

In Nigeria for instance, it is the failure of the large scale farms that necessitated the “U turn” towards rural agricultural program through the expansion of the agricultural Development Program (ADP) in 1986 to engender the productivity of the small scale farmers and the socio-economic wellbeing of rural dwellers. The achievement of this approach has remained a pointer to the fact that given the right incentives, rural agricultural production is capable of driving out extreme poverty from our midst. Amalu (1993) has demonstrated how the ADP program contributed to the national food basket in the region of about 60%. The small scale farmer has contributed immensely to increase livestock and fisher production, producing over 97% of the total fish production.

From the foregoing, one could see that rural agricultural strategy is indispensable in the goal of fighting poverty and extreme hunger in Africa more especially since the rural dwellers

make up the highest percentage of those living below the poverty line. Therefore policies aimed at improving their productivity will not only enhance their income but increase access to food. Increase in the productivity of the rural farmer will increase domestic production and reduce food imports, thereby improving the balance of payment situation in the continent (Onyeweaku 2000, quoted in Idiong 2004).

Capitalizing upon agricultures potential to drive development in Africa is both critically important and urgent for enhancing the aggregate economic growth and improving the welfare of hundreds of millions of extremely poor people. Agriculture employs above 70% of the population of Africa (excluding South Africa) and generates 27% of GDP of these countries, with the majority of the poor living in rural areas (Saatz and Dembele, 2008). More than 215 million people, about a third of the population are malnourished and almost half live on less than a dollar a day. Africa is the only region of the world where poverty is still a rural phenomenon and malnourishment have been increasing over the past 20 years and where those living on less than a dollar a day are getting poorer (World Bank). This weak economic performance is closely linked to slow productivity growth in the agricultural sector. Yet Africa is incredibly diverse, continent widows averages about agricultural performance are often misleading, obscuring localized successes and potentials.

The argument in favor of an agriculture led strategy for economic growth and poverty alleviation in low income countries in the early stages of structural transformation are well known. Agricultural growth contributes to broader economic growth and poverty alleviation through:

- The direct effects of the growth on those who participate in farming either as farmers or as farm laborers.
- Increased upstream demand for inputs and downstream demand for marketing and processing that accompany expanded agricultural production.
- Flows of capital and labor from agriculture to other sectors, as profits generated by agriculture are invested by communities and individuals in other sectors and infrastructure to generate real incomes and employment.
- The impact that expanded agriculture has on lowering food prices and hence wages rates, which in turn encourages expansion of output and the creation of employment in other sectors.
- The increases in incomes and employment in other sectors resulting from increased demand emanating from farmers whose incomes are rising due to improved agricultural production.
- Potentially increased productivity resulting from improved worker nutrition and increased efficiency of investment resulting from greater macro economic and political stability that accompanies a more reliable food system.

Saatz and Dembele (2008) argue that the strength of these direct participation, wage goods, and linkage effects determine the broader economic growth and poverty alleviation effects of a given increase in agricultural production. They depend on the relative size of the agricultural and non agricultural sectors, the current concentration of poverty in the various sectors, the type of agricultural growth that takes place, the consumption habits of the farmers experiencing that growth, the structure and openness of markets they face and functioning of local institutions. Many of these factors can be influenced by policy and the challenge facing Africa and its partners is to structure agricultural growth within a policy environment that maximizes both broader growths throughout the economy and poverty alleviation.

In Africa, the arguments in favor of an agriculture led approach to economic development and poverty alleviation are based on the large absolute numbers of the poor in the rural areas, the strong dependence on farm activities in most parts of Africa emanating from the agricultural sectors, and consequently the evidence that income and poverty multipliers are greater in the agricultural sectors than in the non agricultural sectors. Records show that over the periods 2000-4, the agricultural sector accounted for 24% of total economic growth in sub Saharan Africa excluding South Africa.

CONCLUSION

The potential for agriculture to grow faster and contribute more effectively to the fight against poverty and extreme hunger through the creation of employment opportunities and the improved food production can be actualized through the reconstruction of socio-economic structures and political contexts both within and outside Africa.

Though agriculture is growing in Africa, the growth is precarious. In most countries it is yet to reach the sustained 6% annual rate estimated by NEPAD as necessary to meet the MDG goals of cutting poverty in half by 2015. Growth needs to be accelerated, secured and used more effectively to promote sustained poverty alleviation. This involves two elements. First, is a reversal of the massive underinvestment and disinvestments that has characterized agriculture in Africa in the past which has led to a huge cost in foregone development for Africans.

The viability of the rural agricultural option is without doubt. The African state can meet the basic needs of its people if it can reinvent itself to serve this purpose. Instead of being subservient to international capital it can cooperate with relevant donor agencies to produce rather than perpetually begging for hand outs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Despite these daunting challenges, if the African state is reoriented towards meeting the needs of its people through commitment, strategy and focus, a comprehensive rural agricultural scheme still remains the practicable way out of the present quagmire. Without attempting a one side -fits all solution, we present the following recommendations:

Land law reform: The issue of land tenure is sacrosanct to improved agricultural production. The World Bank concludes that increasing land rights is the key to reducing poverty, citing that land rights greatly increase poor people's wealth in some case doubling it. It is estimated that state recognition of the property of the poor would give them assets worth 40 times all the foreign aids since 1945.

Gender equality: Women constitute a huge chunk of the rural poor; hence any anti poverty program in the rural areas must ensure gender equality both as a goal itself and as a crucial input in achieving other goals. This should include property rights (in this case farm land) and equal access to credit and agricultural extension facilities.

Improving infrastructure: To ensure that improved yield transforms to wealth creation, facilities such as roads, electricity, transport and communication, storage and marketing facilities must be provided.

Effective agricultural subsidy and incentives: Owing to the abysmal failure of the small government policy in agriculture that was forced down on African governments by the World Bank, subsidy must be provided for rural farmers in fertilizers, improved seedlings and livestock, farm tools and credit facilities. Governments should also put in place mechanisms that would ensure that resource meant for rural farmers reach their destination.

Effective research and extension services: Since most of these rural farmers are illiterate, research — extension farmer linkage must be strengthened and made effective to ease the transfer of developed agricultural technologies to the farmers who are the end users.

Increased government and donor investments: Over the years billions of dollars have been spent by many African countries in importation of food to cover deficit. In the same vein, the international community in a bid to assist Africa meet food and poverty challenge has been throwing in huge sums of money in food aid. However, this can be changed if permanent solution is adopted through direct investment in agriculture and agricultural infrastructure like irrigation. Finally, the problem of markets can be solved through encouragement of light manufacturing and effective economic integration of African countries. The debilitating hunger and starvation that is persistent in the horn of Africa region can be improved through political stability and the development of drought resistant crops and livestock.

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