

# A Socio-Christian Study of Leadership and Poverty in Nigeria

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**ABSTRACT----** *It is arguable that whilst poverty is one of the realities of life, some leaders of nations have managed it so well by reducing its incidence to the barest minimum through quality leadership. This onerous task of driving avoidable poverty away, struggling with it or allowing it to overwhelm the nation is a choice any leader must make. Good and effective leaders usually grow the economy to the point of keeping poverty at bay. In Nigeria's own case, it seems that leadership is seriously struggling with poverty to the level of breaking point. A nation is adjudged poor when it is characterized by high rate of unemployment, low purchasing power of the currency, lack of good health facilities, low economic growth, and imbalance of macroeconomics. It seems to us that the problem of poverty in Nigeria is not as a result of policy formulations because a lot have been done in this respect. Some of such interventions included the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) in 1986, Directorate of Food, Roads and Rural Infrastructure (DFRRI), the Better Life/Family Support Program, and the Family Economic Advancement Program. In this paper, we reviewed the poverty trend in Nigeria (pre- and post SAP), the possible influence of leadership on the poverty of the nation, and the causes of ineffectiveness of National Poverty Eradication Program (NAPEP) in Nigeria. Considering all of these, this paper tried to assess and interrogate the nation's leadership concerning poverty in Nigeria. It also invoked and analyzed the structure and impact of selected biblical leadership models for comparison. Generally, we argued that leaders are the ones who will drive growth and development of a nation by not just making policies but by monitoring, assessing and evaluating such policies and projects.*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The issue of poverty continues to intrigue some people and evoke discussions in our world today. Individuals, communities, religious organizations and different world bodies continue to engage it with little or no result. Somehow, poverty does not really have a definite definition because it tends to mean different things to different people and it comes in different dimensions. However, it can mean to be poor and the absence of the basic needs of life. It can be described as a situation whereby the basic necessities are conceived as luxuries and fundamental human rights seen as opportunities. Existing statistics shows that 112.519 million of Nigerians are living in relative poverty with the entire population of Nigeria at 163 million. This represents 69% of the total population (FOS, 2012).

The National Bureau of Statistics informs us that 54.7% of Nigerians in 2004 were living in absolute/object poverty which is measured by the number of people who can afford only the basic necessities like shelter, food and clothing. This figure had risen to 60.9% in 2010 and has increased to 69% in 2012. The Statistician General predicted that this rising trend was likely to continue if economic policies to arrest the situation are not put in place (FOS, 2012). Nigeria, daubed the giant of Africa as well as the biggest oil producer in the continent, has been accused of corruption severally.

Agba (2011: 48) observed that Nigerians, including young and old, are suffering from energy poverty which he described as lack of or limited access to energy resources like electricity, gas, fuel, kerosene and diesel. The exact situation of things in Nigeria is really deplorable in some quarters. Students have resorted to the use of candle at night to get assignments done; generators are used to do little household chores which otherwise would have been done with electricity; car batteries are used in some places to charge cell phones for lack of electricity; and some households have resorted to the use of charcoal to cook given the lack of electricity and gas. In fact, the poverty level in Nigeria tends to dictate the kind of telephone that is used by many- the type with torch light.

Kpakol (2008) as cited in Asikhia (2010: 65) sees poverty as the inability of a person to acquire the empowerment needed to substantively control the environmental challenges. He asserts further that people are poor when they lack empowerment in (a) tools and new techniques, (b) innovations, (c) management skills and ideas and (d) economic participation.

Fagbadebo (2007:36) posits that a failed, corrupt and inept leadership coupled with inclement domestic socio-political environment have plunged development performance in Nigeria into the abyss.

## 2. CAUSES OF POVERTY

Poverty is caused by a number of factors such as overpopulation, unequal or poor distribution of income or resources, lack of education, natural disaster, corruption, etc (Agba, Agba, Ushie & Akwara, 2009:2). A nation is said to be poor if it is characterized by high rate of unemployment, low purchasing power of the currency, low exchange rate, lack of good health facilities, low economic growth, and imbalance of macroeconomics.

According to National Bureau of statistics (NBS), relative poverty is the comparison of the living standard of people living in a given society within a specified period of time.

To Adejo (2006) as cited in Barnes (2010: 139), poverty can be manifested in poverty of history, poverty of intellect and poverty of ideology. The bottom line is that these people are poor and lack some basic needs.

## 3. LEADERSHIP

Leadership is concerned with the execution of those policies and decisions which help to direct the activities of a nation towards its specific goals. Leadership is a status of dominance and prestige acquired by ability to control, initiate or set the pattern of behavior for others (Ojo & Olaniyan, 2008: 175). Harold and Heinz (2009: 365) opined that leadership is the art or process of influencing people so that they will strive with enthusiasm to achieve the goals of the group. The leader serves as the primary agent for the determination of group activities and leadership entails social influence and interaction between leaders and subordinates or followers (Adepoju, 2006: 324). In the context of this paper, the leadership of a country is the process of influencing all the arms of government towards achieving the goal of eradicating poverty.

More harm has been done to the Nigerian economy in the hands of managers who are inexperienced and poorly initiated. Nwachukwu (2006: 24) said that the method of recruitment and promotion has caused a lot of havoc in the economy which is evidenced in the questionable leadership of many bank managers and led to their dismissals. He said further that this has led to the impeachment of senate presidents, governors, Federal and state speakers, dismissal of directors and permanent secretaries.

Leadership seems to be at the center of poverty problems of Nigeria. Nigeria enjoyed good governance since 1940 up to early 1980s. Nigeria has been plagued with leaders who are selfish, lack integrity and dishonest. Stories of corruption among our leaders pervade both local and international news; the process of electing leaders in Nigeria is often challenged with god- fatherism, rigging, bribery and corruption. These are the reasons why our leaders are not in the office to serve but to be served and after words are charged to court for bribery, corruption, money laundering, embezzlement and so on. Our leaders are amassing wealth for themselves neglecting the welfare of the citizens. They have allowed poverty of their minds to affect the whole nation. There can be poverty of the mind which cannot be measured. Poverty of the mind is responsible for irresponsible leadership, primitive accumulation of capital, greed and the pervasive corruption that drags Nigeria through the throes of disintegration. Statistics cannot detail the impact of the effects of poor leadership on Nigerians

## 4. POVERTY SITUATION IN NIGERIA

NBS further states that relative poverty was most apparent in the north of the country, with Sokoto state's poverty rate ranking the highest at 86.4%. In the north-west and north-east of the country, poverty rates were recorded at 77.7% and 76.3% respectively, compared to the south-west at 59.1%. This poverty situation may provide an explanation for the activities of the Boko Haram insurgency in the northern parts of the country where poverty and underdevelopment are at the peak. The report of federal office of Statistics revealed that Nigerians consider themselves to be getting poorer.

According to *Vanguard Newspaper* (Feb. 13, 2012) David defines absolute poverty as the absence of any two of the following eight basic needs -

**Food:** Body Mass Index must be above 16.

**Safe drinking water:** Water must not come from solely rivers and ponds, and must be available (less than 15 minutes' walk away).

**Sanitation facilities:** Toilets or latrines must be accessible in or near the home.

**Health:** Treatment must be received for serious illnesses and pregnancy.

**Shelter:** Homes must have fewer than four people living in each room. Floors must not be made of dirt, mud, or clay.

**Education:** Everyone must attend school or otherwise learn to read.

**Information:** Everyone must have access to newspapers, radios, televisions, computers, or telephones at home.

**Access to services:** This item is undefined by David, but normally is used to indicate the complete panoply of education, health, legal, social, and financial services.

By his measures, a person who lives in a home with a mud floor is severely deprived of shelter and a person who never attended school and cannot read is also deprived of education. In the same token, a person who has no newspaper, radio, television, or telephone is perceived to be deprived of information. Further, a person who has no access to good health, legal, and financial services is extremely poor. People who meet any two of these conditions — for example, they live in homes with mud floors *and* cannot read — are considered to be living in absolute (abject) poverty.

It seems that many Nigerians will fit into the scenarios painted above. The stark reality is that many Nigerians are poor and poor leadership is a major cause of poverty. Asikhia (2010: 66) observed that if the various poverty alleviation programs were all working together to achieve the goal, then small and medium scale enterprises would have experienced a continuous growth as opposed to what obtains now.

## 5. INDICES OF POVERTY IN NIGERIA

As 2015 draws near, indications are emerging that Nigeria is most likely not to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in respect of Eradication of extreme poverty and hunger just as the country is still not listed close to the 10 countries that have made rapid progress to meet the MDGs. The statistics below speak loudly about the issue of poverty in Nigeria.

### Nigeria's Poverty Population

Year	Population	Remarks
1980	17.1 million	Early years of oil boom
1985	34.7 million	The increase is steady
1992	39.2 million	„
1996	67.1 million	„
2004	68.7 million	„
2010	112.47 million	„

Source: Nigeria's National Bureau of Statistics

A number of measures and policies have been put in place to reduce poverty in Nigeria, parts of which are:

#### 1. Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)

The aim of the MDGs, which came into existence in September 2000 at the United Nations and comprised 189 countries, is to reduce the number of people who lived on less than a dollar in year 2015 by pursuing the following major eight objectives and goals: eradicating of poverty and hunger, achieving universal primary education, promote equality and empower women, reduce child mortality, improve maternal health, combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases, ensure environmental sustainability and developing a global partnership for development.

In order to achieve the MDGs, Nigeria produced a policy document that is called the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS).

The specific objectives of NEEDS are as follows:

- (a) Poverty reduction
- (b) Value re-orientation
- (c) Wealth creation
- (d) Employment generation

Barnes (2010: 148) observed, without any fear of contradictions, that MDGs and NEEDS have not been able to achieve its major goal which is poverty reduction. In that respect, the problem of poverty in Nigeria is not a matter of deficient policy but deficient monitoring by the leaders and policy makers. The unemployment rate keeps increasing in Nigeria with the falling standard of education. Indeed, in support of Barnes, it can be said that we still have a long way

to go in bringing about development in view of the aforementioned objectives. Even the current re-basing of Nigeria's GDP does not solve the problem when the money does not trickle down to the masses.

Some of the problems encountered by these programs according to Ntunde and Chukwuemeka (2011: 98) include: the inability to ensure effective implementation of these programs on the part of the government, political instability, lack of commitment on the part of both the providers and the beneficiaries and shoddy execution of projects. Further, posit that inadequate funding crippled the activities of most of these agencies providing services to reduce poverty. Non supply of power made it impossible for the rural people to embark on any project utilizing electricity and thereby entrenching poverty.

## 6. LEADERSHIP CHALLENGES

The challenges below tend to hamper any positive and meaningful impact from the various leaders of government in Nigeria.

- a. Non continuity of programs: This is one of the major ordeals of Nigerian leaders. Programs that are started by a leader would not be followed up by the new leader. There seems to be disjointed ideas and the new leader does not see any need to continue the projects that were started by the predecessor. This will only leave the nation where it has been or even worse because some of the resources would have gone to the unfinished projects.
- b. Distractions from militant groups: Resources that are meant to be channeled to poverty reduction/alleviation are spent on curbing the menace of militant groups like Boko-Haram. According to Emmanuel Ujah, the Federal Government has set aside N968 billion naira to fight the insurgency in the country (*Vanguard Newspaper*, May 24, 2014, p. 5). The height of this distraction, which has jolted the entire world, was the recent abduction of the Chibok girls in Borno State by the Boko Haram insurgency. Current efforts at repelling them, with all the international assistance, have resulted in a huge financial drain on the economy of the nation. Money that could have gone into developmental projects.
- c. Corruption: This is a major problem in Nigeria and it has taken a deep root in our society according to Egbuji (2007: 449). No solution has been proffered even with the government institutions established to fight it.
- d. Lack of effective monitoring of projects: Most of the structures established to fight poverty are not properly monitored and evaluated so as to know their performance with the goal of eradicating poverty.

## 7. BIBLICAL PARADIGMS

Although some unserious or non-Christians usually tend to denigrate and ridicule Christian principles and values, a closer evaluation reveals that many of these principles hold the key to our breakthrough in the current economic and leadership gridlock and confusion in Nigeria. It is true that poor people will always be poor (Matt. 26:11; Mark 14:7), not only in Nigeria but around the world, but the percentage is what matters and thus worrisome in our own situation. The Bible gives examples of leaders who reduced the incidence of poverty and articulated some ways of reducing poverty to the barest minimum. We shall examine three of such people, namely, Joseph, Jesus and Paul.

Leaders need to plan and translate such plans into reality by meticulously following their blueprints. In the case of Joseph, following Pharaoh's vexatious dream about imminent famine (Gen. 41:1-8), he gave a detailed, step by step advice to Pharaoh on how it can be averted. Joseph's economic blueprint was measurable, achievable and sensible and Pharaoh simply mandated him to oversee its implementation. From this story, we can deduce that leaders need to consult at least when the summit of their knowledge has been reached and nothing new is obtainable. More so, they should endeavor to put the right kind of advisers by their sides. This seems to be one of the sore points in our own context. Ministerial appointees and other advisers often emerge based on 'connections' but not inner convictions. In this entire episode, notice that Joseph did not try to enrich himself but worked hard together with the people to make sure that the average Egyptian survived those seven years of famine.

In spite of his leadership ingenuity, Alfred Adask, amongst others, suggests that that Joseph was despotic, displayed high-handedness and shrewdness in his economic programs especially by creating artificial scarcity, taking and buying over the people's livestock and lands in order to provide them with food because he had a national storage facility. In his words, "Joseph, my Bible school's purported hero, manipulated the Egyptian economy so as to cause a whole nation to *consent* to become slaves."<sup>1</sup> Another scholar posits, "not only did he accumulate all the money in the land, but he also gathered up all the cattle and the land, and even the people were enslaved. How could a man who, to this

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<sup>1</sup> Alfred Adask at <http://adask.wordpress.com/2010/11/20/the-story-of-joseph-the-worlds-first-economist%E2%80%94or-%E2%80%9Cthose-who-wont-learn-from-history-%E2%80%9D/> Accessed October 4, 2012.

point, has a flawless record suddenly be so greedy and insensitive?”<sup>2</sup> However, it must be noted that there was an economic crisis in the land, a looming danger, and Joseph utilized some radical methods to save the economy and citizens from utter collapse and extinction. It may not fully be proper to insinuate that Joseph was greedy and insensitive because, in the first instance, he did not confront the famine situation in that way because of his personal gains but for the corporate good of the land. In fact, this same author also remarked, “in this sense [of taking the cattle over] Joseph did the Egyptians a favor to take the cattle off their hands by exchanging them for grain which they must have to survive.” The people would not have had the capacity to keep the cattle alive and that would have meant double tragedy for the nation.

In Luke 9:10-17 and John 6:3-13, Jesus the master leader shows care and compassion to His poor and hungry followers. The story above suggests that Jesus did not ask the multitude if they were hungry. He observed, perceived and confirmed that they were hungry. Leaders who are sensitive to the plight of their followers are sought after by their subjects. Following His confirmation, He sought for a solution by interfacing with His disciples. It was after this interaction that Andrews, Peter’s brother, informed Jesus of that lad’s lunch of five loaves and two fishes. Based on this information, Jesus requested the disciples to sit the multitudes down in groups of fifties (orderliness) and subsequently took the five loaves and two fishes in His hands, prayed and starting serving (servant leadership). For us to reduce poverty, Nigerians should endeavor to accept God and believe in Him. These multitudes followed Jesus till late in the evening (perseverance) and were provided with food. Perhaps, David’s observation that once he was young and now old but he never seen the righteous forsaken nor his seed begging bread (Ps. 37:25) is very true. It can then be assumed that no one who is faithfully following God will lack the basic needs of life. Nigerians should begin to trust God in spite of the many places of worship that dot many parts of the country.

Another aspect of Christ’s teaching in the gospels is on the need to block wastages. After feeding the five thousand people with five loaves and two fishes, He requested His disciples to faithfully gather all the leftovers. Interestingly and obediently, they gathered twelve more baskets of bread and fish. In the Nigerian context, we can all imagine the resources we lose in the many arable lands across the nation. One colleague of ours, who loves farming used to joke when he sees thick forests in some states, that since the Deluge of Noah’s day, such forests have not been entered into. What about the quantity of crude oil that is squandered every day by oil thieves and robbers. The amount of money lost to gas flaring for over fifty years now. What of the untapped minerals in the various states of the federation? It seems that any leadership that is determined to reduce poverty must display the will power to reduce wastages in bloated contracts and poorly executed projects and thus block all leakages which obviously have concomitant effects on poverty reduction.

Further, the life Paul, which arguably depicts responsible leadership, is our next consideration. It has been suggested that when considering leadership, especially biblical leadership, Paul cannot be easily bypassed. Gangel (1994: 153) considers “his constant activity of modeling and mentoring, encouraging and exhorting, teaching and training”<sup>3</sup> as the apogee of New Testament leadership situation and expectation. Paul’s life showcases good leadership qualities worth considering. From some of his writings, he is a firm advocate of leadership by example. His exemplary style is pronounced in his calls to his followers to be industrious and hardworking (2Thess. 3:9, 10). If every Nigerian cultivates the habit of working with his or her hands, poverty will be highly reduced. It seems that there is so much indolence and idleness among some in this country which leads such people to enroll into the school of robbery. In fact Paul enjoins those who were stealing before to steal no more “but rather labour, working with his hands the thing which is good, that he may have to give to him who needs” (Eph. 4:28). Being a tentmaker and an itinerant preacher himself, he becomes vehement when he posits, “if anyone will not work, let him not eat” (2 Thess. 3:10).

## **8. SUGGESTED SOLUTIONS**

It has been observed that our government has failed with 69% of its citizens being in poverty. Hence, the following are suggested solutions to this precarious problem in Nigeria. First, our leaders are to ensure effective appraisal of the on-going projects and regular evaluation must be done. In a situation where teachers in primary and secondary schools as well as lecturers in tertiary institutions are being paid regardless of whether they teach or not, the leaders are contributing to the poverty which is pervading the country through lack of education. The educational system is so bad that secondary school students of public schools can barely spell their names correctly. This is precisely the

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<sup>2</sup> Bob Deffinbaugh, “A Proper Perspective of Poverty and Prosperity (Genesis 47:13-31)” at

<http://bible.org/seriespage/proper-perspective-poverty-and-prosperity-genesis-4713-31> Accessed October 4, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Kenneth O. Gangel, “The Meaning of Leadership” in James D. Berkley, editor, *Leadership Handbook of Management and Administration*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: baker Books, 1994), p.153.

opposite of what was intended. We also see similar government failures in health care, water supply, sanitation, electricity, transportation, labor markets and trade policy.

Besides, an acceptable work ethic should be intentionally inculcated into the students at the various levels of our educational enterprise. It should be stated clearly to all that there is no free food anywhere. People should learn how to work with their hands instead of waiting for free or cheap income. Not everyone may be privileged to be employed by the government or other private sectors. Through sheer hard work and creativity, the incidence of poverty can be drastically reduced.

## 9. CONCLUSION

This study suggested the causes of poverty to include overpopulation, unequal distribution of resources, natural disasters, corruption, indolence and especially the dearth of responsible and responsive leadership. The problem of what to eat, what to wear and where to stay still remains unsolved in our society and this can only be solved or ameliorated with good leadership. We believe that while the leaders in Nigeria do not lack ideas, they are seriously challenged by the will power to implement those ideas. In light of that challenge, we suggested that Nigeria as a nation needs men and women of integrity who cannot be bought or sold, who will call the sin of corruption its rightful name and who will stand for the right though the heavens fall (White, 57).

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