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Changing Paradigm in Poverty Conceptualization and Alleviation Strategy for the Niger Delta, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT: This paper interrogated the validity and contextual applicability of the classical concepts of poverty and also proposed new framework for poverty alleviation in the Niger Delta. Based on a rigorous theoretical review and empirical investigation in some parts of the Niger Delta; the paper argued that conceptualization of poverty and poverty alleviation strategies by the locals differed significantly from extant classical definitions of poverty. Specifically, the notions of poverty as constructed by the poor revealed a multi-dimensional attributes of poverty. These findings represent a paradigm shift that stakeholders cannot ignore. Furthermore, these findings provide the needed conceptual framework for evolving effective poverty alleviation strategies for the Niger Delta in particular and other poverty endemic region of the world in general.

KEY WORDS: Poverty, Poverty Concept, Changing Paradigm, Poverty Alleviation Strategy, Niger Delta

I. INTRODUCTION

The conceptualization of poverty is critical to the strategies adopted to tackle and alleviate poverty in any given society. Over time, the definition of poverty and the poor had relied on the “World Bank Monetary bench mark” where the poor were designated based on daily income/consumption less than US \$3.20. This bench mark became known as “the Poverty line.” This concept of poverty later known as the “Poverty head count index” became the basis for targeting the poor for intervention, palliatives and other social security programmes of government in developing nations including Nigeria [7]. With the failure of various interventionist schemes aimed at alleviating poverty in the third world countries came the realization that poverty is something more than not just having money in the pocket [6]. Some authors such as Ogunleye [11]; Omoniyi [12]; Effiong [4] argued that poverty has multi-dimensional properties which development experts have overlooked. Essentially therefore, a “multi-dimensional poverty index” was brought to light. This index defines the poor as those lacking access to basic livelihood, nutrition, housing, safe water, adequate sanitation, educational opportunities, healthcare, electricity and other basic human needs [10]. A twin to the multi-dimensional concept of poverty is the “Happy Planet Index” and the “Misery Index.” The Happy Planet Index measures poverty in terms of the average subjective life satisfaction, life expectancy at birth and ecological footprint, while the Misery Index shows how economically well off the citizen of a country are.

Poverty in Nigeria is multi-dimensional rather than an issue of “head count” [3]. In fact, the recent poverty report issue by the National Bureau of Statistics [10] has affirmed to this fact. The report indicated that 133 million Nigerians (about 63%) live in multi-dimensional poverty – having limited access to healthcare, education, water, sanitation, clean cooking fuel and other necessities. The report further indicates that 4 out of 10 Nigerians experience monetary deprivation, but 6 out of 10 are multi-dimensionally poor. This report confirms Nigeria as the Poverty Capital of the World [15].

The regional or sub-national analysis of the Multi-dimensional poverty Index (MPI) and the Misery Index (MI) revealed that some States in the Niger –Delta particularly Akwa Ibom State and Bayelsa were among the poverty stricken. The high rates of MPI and MI in the Niger-Delta States is rather paradoxical. This is so considering the wealth of natural resources endowment of the region and the huge amount of accruable revenue from derivative fund. However, the region continues to remain deeply in the grips of poverty, squalor and environmental decay. It is believed that corruption, environmental insensitivity, marginalization of women and youths remain the main trigger of poverty and youth restiveness in the region [5]. Essentially therefore, the adoption of the MPI and MI as effective conceptual framework



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for analyzing poverty in Nigeria and the Niger Delta needs further verification and validation empirically. This paper seeks to contribute theoretically and empirically to the debate on Poverty Conceptualization with a view to unfolding the ramifications of the changing paradigm as it affects poverty alleviation strategy in the Niger Delta.

II. THEORETICAL CONCEPT OF POVERTY

The explanation on the nature and causative agents of poverty are tripartite. One school of thought led by Oscar Lewis examined the cultural attributions of poverty. Lewis construed poverty as a pattern of life, which people adopt as a community and is passed from one generation to the next. According to Daenaan [2], people and communities trapped in the culture of poverty ignore opportunities for self-actualization and property. They are rather yoked by the limitations posed by religion, superstition and primordial cultural belief. This theory vividly explains why the objective definition of “Poverty” and “the Poor” (in terms of monetary value) is limited. Viewed in this light, different culture holds diverse concept of poverty as dictated by that culture. And consequently, effective strategy for alleviating poverty in such culture needs to recognize and leverage on the subjective meaning of poverty as construed by the people. According to Effiong [4], effective poverty alleviation programme should address what the people need and not what the interventionist agencies want. The underlying factor here is for development experts to invoke the spirit and tenets of the “culture of poverty concept” in managing poverty.

The second school of thought examines the individual deficiency theory of poverty. This theory was propagated by the Neo-Classical Economists who viewed poverty as an individualistic phenomenon rather than communal as held by Lewis. The proponents of this theory defined poverty as personal inadequacies, economic incapacitation and social exclusion created by individual choices and Psychology. Viewed in this light, the failures of individuals to acquire adequate skills, training, education, and knowledge for personal development are the ramifications of poverty. Essentially therefore, this theory captures the nuance of poverty and youths’ restiveness in the Niger Delta. Rather than grabbing available opportunities for personal development, most youths in the Niger Delta subscribe to crime – pipe line vandalization, bunkering, oil theft which offers temporary respite rather than liberating wholesale from the yoke of poverty [8]. The understanding and appreciation of this school of thought is critical to addressing poverty in the Niger –Delta. It will afford the elites, politicians, Development Commissions and External Donor agencies the framework to anchor on youth development, human capital and skills.

The third School of thought refers to the “Progressive Social Theorists.” The 19th century socialist theorists argued that rather than blame poverty on individual choices, poverty should be examined in terms of the distorted economic, social and political systems posed by capitalists. They analyzed how the lopsided economic system of capitalism can create wealth for a few opportunists at the expense of the marginalized majority. According to Bradshaw [1] the deliberate system of racial, gender and religious discrimination promoted by the capitalists aids the perpetuation of poverty in many climes. Viewed in this light therefore, the policies and actions of government can either aid or abate poverty to a large extent. According to Omoyibo [12], there is a strong correlation between the character of governance and the level of poverty especially in Nigeria and the Niger-Delta. In the Niger Delta for instance, it has been reported that the region’s wealth only revolves around a few politicians and their cronies leaving behind an army of impoverished youths and women. Poverty of this nature can only be reversed by overhauling the structures of government to enhance inclusiveness and egalitarianism [3].

III. POVERTY CONSTRUCTION IN THE NIGER-DELTA: EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

This section of the paper presents empirical evidence to support the re-conceptualization of poverty and poverty alleviation strategy for the Niger-Delta region. The evidence provided here were generated from a Focused Group Discussion (FGD) conducted by the author in two locations – one in Akwa Ibom State and the other in Rivers State in 2019. The purpose of the FGD was to investigate, probe and explore the peoples’ notion, thinking and conceptualization of poverty as well as the strategies for alleviating poverty in the region. Specifically, 10 people were drawn from the men, women and youth groups as well as representatives of the elders’ forum/chiefs to form members of the FGD. Two meetings were held in each locations for a duration of one hour.

The views and opinion of the people were captured, summarized and presented (as shown) in Table I.

Table I: Dimension of Poverty in the Niger-Delta

Dimension of poverty	Specific attributes/Indicators	Remarks
Physical Dimension	• Begs to feed once a day	Five main attributes clothing, water supply, feeding nutrition, environmental quality and healthcare, are in line with most conventional measures of poverty.
	• Can't afford a good meal	
	• Manage to feed twice a day	
	• Uses old clothes from donor	
	• Lives in a mud/thatch house	
	• Lives in unfinished zinc/bricks building	
	• Uses open defecation	
	• Uses shared pit toilet	
	• Depend on herbs/Native Doctor for healthcare	
	• Water supply form streams/river/rain	
	• No communication device	
	• No generating set or power supply	
Social Dimension of Poverty	• Have no friend at all or just a few friends	Some of these attributes are not considered in conventional poverty measures and assessment.
	• Not liked in the community, rejected and isolated	
	• Not involved in decision making/discriminated upon	
	• Well addicted to alcohol	
	• Have no wife/husband/children	
	• Have no helpers/relatives/just a few relatives	
	• Is a widow/widower/suffers operation	
• Possesses little or no education		
Economic Dimension of Poverty	• No steady source of income	Some of the attributes highlighted here are often overlooked by poverty alleviation Agencies and Stakeholders
	• Depends on daily paid jobs	
	• Have no skill/training	
	• Owns no bicycle/motorcycle	
	• Owns no farm land	
	• Owns no live stock or just a few live stock	
	• Have no access to fertilizer	
	• Have poor harvest	
	• Excluded from government loan/ Agric Credit Facilities	
	• Have just a sizeable shop	
	• Have no fishing tool	
• Have access to market		

Source: Author's finding

The results from the Focused Group Discussion conducted to explore how the Niger Delta people perceive poverty has been summarized and displayed in Table I. The data in Table I contains three columns. The first column shows the dimensions or groupings of poverty attributes/indicators. Three dimensions of poverty are displayed the physical, social and economic dimensions. Each poverty dimension has specific attributes/indicators that define it. These indicators are



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displayed in column two; while the third column shows the remarks indicating how three indicators agree or deviates from conventional indicators of poverty.

As data in Table I indicates, the people hold three notions of poverty. The physical notion or dimension defines poverty in terms of the physical wellbeing and environmental standards of the people. The social notion or dimension of poverty relates to the social factors/networking that contributes to the emotional well-being of the people. According to the people, the lack of relationship/emotional stability connotes poverty in as much as it affects the physical and economic wellbeing of an individual. The economic dimension of poverty as shown in Table 3 has to do with individual's possessions, assets, access, skills and financial resources. It is important to note that while the physical and economic dimensions of poverty as opined by rural people converge somewhat with the conventional indicators of poverty, the social dimensions are rarely contemplated by known conventional standards.

This insight calls to questioning the acceptability and applicability of the World Bank measures including other quantitative standards in a local setting where the people have their own notions of poverty. It is clear that the minimum income benchmarks often adopted in poverty analysis falls short of capturing the deeper meanings of poverty as well as the sentiments of rural people regarding poverty. Poverty has some social dimensions that the objective - quantitative school may not adequately measure and analyzed. The issue of social exclusion, intimidation, marginalization, deprivation and victimization as captured in Table I are core components/indicators of poverty according to peoples' notions and conceptions. However, there are intangible poverty attributes that require far more than World Bank poverty intervention project to address in the Niger Delta. With a preponderance of poverty alleviation programmes, the people still retain the sense of poverty if the social dimensions are not addressed. This perhaps is the reason Danaan [2] argues that poverty is a complex, multi-faceted phenomenon that requires a far more diverse and composite approach to resolve. The physical attributes of poverty as captured in Table I coincides with some conventional measures. This shows that elements such as feeding/nutrition, housing, clothing, water supply, health care and environmental quality are universal components poverty. However, the economic dimension of poverty as opined by the rural people reveal a strong ties local people have with land tenure, livestock, mobility, skill acquisition and credit as the lack of these things define the poverty status of the people. These insights further confirm the importance of context and culture in analyzing and addressing poverty. Local people are tied to their land and extractive industries, therefore, anti-poverty engagements that fail to address these issues end up leaving a yawning gap in poverty alleviation [14].

IV. MULTI-DIMENSIONAL POVERTY ALLEVIATION STRATEGY FOR THE NIGER-DELTA

From the findings of this empirical work reported in this paper, it is obvious that multiple approaches are required to address the Niger Delta poverty. Two-level strategy has been presented here. There are:

- i. The social re-orientation strategy (SRS) (Soft measures)
- ii. The Physical development strategy (PDS) (Hard measures)

The Social Re-orientation Strategy (SRS) are those specific efforts targeted at alleviating the social dimension of poverty. The social issues identified in this paper require more of policy legislation rather than physical projects to address them. Essentially, therefore, the term 'soft measures' is conceptualized based on the intangibility of the approaches involved in solving the social dimension of poverty. The term is akin to the 'software' components of a computer system which are largely intellectual than physical components of the hard wares. For instance, issues like oppression, exclusion of individuals/communities, segregation/victimization, inequality, nepotism, illiteracy and weak relationship are among the societal vices that precede and underpin the physical and economics dimensions of poverty. Though these issues are often overlooked by most poverty studies, it is now becoming a major research component in poverty analysis.

Evidently therefore, local people believe that efforts such as promoting education, good governance, restoration of values, proper orientation of rural people, strengthening wholesome customs/traditions, establishing a robust conflict resolution mechanism and social campaigns alongside the enthronement of political inclusion and egalitarianism can help to weaken the grips of these social vices that define and underpin poverty. Education for instance has been identified as being a catalyst for social engineering and poverty alleviation. It is a powerful driver of development and one of the strongest instruments for reducing poverty and improving health, gender equality, peace and stability.



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Political inclusion and the enthronement of an egalitarian society are antidotes to nepotism, exclusion and segregation. The establishment of a robust conflict resolution mechanism would improve and strengthen weak relationship among rural people/communities and also pave way for meaningful development in the Niger Delta social orientation, social campaigns and restoration of values can help improve the bonds of unity, love and family among the people and also re-engage the spirit of co-operation and community among them.

The 'Hard Strategies' are bifurcated into two: the remedial and transformational measures. Based on the findings, the remedial strategy are short term efforts that can cushion the effect of economic dimension of poverty while the transformational are long term strategies for addressing the physical dimension of poverty. It is necessary to highlight the importance of the 'hard strategies' in alleviating poverty in the Niger Delta.

Micro-loans and skill acquisition are identified as remedial 'hard strategies' for alleviating economic dimensions of poverty. Specifically, micro-loan offers the people access to soft loan necessary for running small businesses, build assets, secure smooth consumption and invest further in agriculture. Micro-loans if managed properly can help households generate further income, feed better and acquire durable clothing. Micro-loans can also help lift people out of poverty. Policy-makers believe that access to micro-finance in developing countries empowers the poor (especially women) while supporting income-generating activities, encouraging the entrepreneurial spirit, and reducing vulnerability.

Skill acquisition equips local people and creates the mindset to undertake the risk of venturing into applying the knowledge and skills gotten in the school or vocational training centers. It also enhances local capacity by providing individuals with enough training to enable creativity and innovation for self-employment and self-reliant. Skill acquisition provides people with adequate training that will enable them to be creative and innovative in identifying great business opportunities. It serves as a catalyst for economic growth and development, creates jobs employment opportunities for the people, reduces rural-urban migration, provides people with enough training skills and support that will enable them to establish a career in small and medium scale business, it incubates the spirit of perseverance which will enable them to persist in any business venture they embarked on and it creates a smooth transition from tradition to modern industrial economy.

SMEs are critical for alleviating poverty in the Niger Delta. SMEs however, have been acknowledged by economic development experts to be a robust tool for steering growth and alleviating poverty. SMEs require small capital to produce small scale products enough to serve rural communities and beyond. The small scale industries are well known for their immense contribution to poverty reduction, developing process and as engines of economic growth, critical segment of the manufacturing sub-sector, effective strategy for tackling unemployment, diversifying output. SMEs play a role in improving the socio-economic condition of the poor, create employment opportunity, job creates greater utilization of local raw materials and improve the economic growth of the rural areas, which indicates growth/development and reduction of poverty.

Mobile clinics are innovations in health care delivery for rural and remote communities where access to health center and hospitals are impeded. It involves taking health care services to the door post of the people. It offers flexible and viable options for treating isolated and vulnerable group. Healthcare has been identified as part of the physical dimension of poverty. Mobile health clinics can drive better healthcare outcomes, promote value-based care, and improve patient access to care. There are a range of primary health care services mobile clinics can provide for rural people. These include; regular checkups; treatment for minor ailments; lab services; health education/campaigns; immunization; managing chronic disease or condition; prescription renewal and referrals. Mobile clinics improve access to local, on the spot primary health care services for rural people. The issue of ensuring that the poor have access to safe drinking water and improved sanitation has rightly been prominent in international discussions and specific targets has been included in the internationally agreed SDGs. The use of 'Water Catchment' can help alleviate the poverty associated with lack of water and sanitation. A catchment is an area where water is collected by the natural landscape. In a catchment, all rain and run-off water eventually flows to a creek, river, lake or ocean, or into the groundwater system. The Niger Delta can be grouped based on Catchment either natural or artificial for the provision of clean drinking water.

Water is essential for improving health and livelihoods of the poor, ensure wider environmental sustainability, reducing squalor and eradicating hunger. It is also critical in addressing gender inequalities and improving access to education for the poor. Water availability in rural areas will help women to function effectively in economic activities such as home gardens, livestock, tree crops planting, home based manufacturing such as pottery and brick making and services such as laundries and hair salons.



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Farm estates and markets are critical economic structure for the people. The development of farm estates can increase agricultural productivity and raise farm incomes for rural people. There is a lot of evidence that agriculture can contribute to poverty reduction having a direct effect on farmer's income. Agricultural development can stimulate economic development outside of the agricultural sector and lead to higher job and growth creation. Increased productivity of agriculture raises farm incomes, increases food supply, reduces food prices, and provides greater employment opportunities in both rural and urban areas. Higher incomes can increase the consumer demand for goods and services produced by sectors other than agriculture.

The Niger Delta is largely rural. To this end, rural industrialization can be of considerable importance for economic development, employment creation and the reduction of poverty. Industries do not only reduce poverty and income inequality but they also raise standard of living of poor people. Furthermore, they enable people to make a living with dignity. The rapid development of capital goods industries promotes the growth of agriculture, transport and communication. It also enables the rural people to produce a variety of consumer goods in large quantities and at low cost. Rural industrialization can provide the rural people with increased employment opportunities in small and large scale industries. In an industrial economy, industry absorbs unemployed and underemployed people from the agricultural sector thereby increasing the income of the community.

Roads provide opportunities for the transport sector to develop which in turn benefits both users and operators of transport services and the entire transport service supply industry. Road access is importance for connecting rural production to urban markets to ensure income generating to help improve living standards and reduce poverty. Provision of roads will provide easy access to markets, farms thereby boosting commercial activities in the region. Roads are the primary means of transportation. They provide human access to different place. Roads are the conduit of life's activities. Roads make a crucial contribution to economic development and growth and bring important social benefits.

V. CONCLUDING REMARKS

This paper has succeeded to provide both theoretical and empirical underpinnings for a paradigm shift in poverty conceptualization and alleviation strategy. Poverty is by far a multi- dimensional issue especially for the Niger- Delta where oil exploration has degraded the people and their land. Local development agencies and their foreign partners must come to terms with the "new thinking" on what constitute poverty. The fact remains that the images of poverty as mentally constructed by the poor themselves represents the "real: concept of poverty. These images should form the building blocks of an effective poverty alleviation scheme. The Niger Delta would continue to remain in the grips of poverty if the development stakeholders continue to dish out "hand out" to the poor rather than taking a multi- dimensional approach to alleviating poverty. This paper presents the framework and road map to achieve this end.

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