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SOCIAL INVESTMENT PROGRAMME AND SUSTAINABLE POVERTY REDUCTION IN NIGERIA: AN EVALUATION OF N-POWER PROGRAMME IN AKWA IBOM STATE

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Abstract
The concept of poverty alleviation is one of the recurring concepts in the study of the political economy of developed and developing economies. This is why modern reform initiatives embarked upon by various countries are characterized by approaches aimed at tackling the menace of poverty. In cognizance of the debilitating effects of poverty, the government of Muhammadu Buhari in 2016 launched the National Social Investment Programme (NSIP) with n-power as a component to provide safety nets for the poor. This paper examined social investment programmes and the possibility of achieving sustainable poverty reduction in Nigeria through the N-power scheme. The elite theory was adopted as a theoretical underpinning to provide an empirical guide in the study. Using historical and descriptive analysis of documentary data, the paper contended that the n-power programme which was adopted to cushion the impacts of poverty has failed to meet such noble objective due to some glaring factors such as; poorly articulated policies, corruption, and lack of accountability, policy inconsistency and incessant conflicts. The paper recommended among others that Government should ensure that its social investment programmes, particularly the n-power is not politicized. This will guarantee and ensure the sustainability of the programmes. Also, poverty alleviation programmes should be given their pride of place through adequate budgeting and prompt release of funds by the government and its supervising agencies to ensure adequate implementation.

Keywords: N-power, Social Investment, Sustainability, Poverty, Poverty Reduction & Elites.

Introduction
Poverty has emerged as one of the challenges of the 21st century (Gweshengwe and Hassan, 2020). About 1.3 billion people (22%) across 107 developing countries live in poverty with children under age 18 constituting half of the poor. Out of this, about 84.3% of the poor

people live in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia with the majority left behind in terms of access to basic needs such as nutrition, standard housing, and quality education (UNDP & OPHDI, 2020). Widespread poverty in Africa can be attributed to population explosion, climate shocks, ill health, conflict, and displacement of people (Watkins & Quattri, 2019). The World Economic Forum recently reported that Nigeria has overtaken India as the country with the highest number of extremely poor people in the world (Schwab, 2019). Regarding unemployment, the International, according to Labour Organisation (ILO, 2019), an estimated 172 million people - or 5.0 per cent of the global workforce - were unemployed in 2018. Youth unemployment was placed at 13 per cent in 2017, representing nearly 67 million young people aged 15 to 24 actively seeking but unable to secure work (ILO, 2019). Youth unemployment appears to be strongly associated with the inability of governments to establish coordinated policy efforts and active labour-market programmes that ease access to employment. More recent estimates suggest that global unemployment is projected to stand at 4.9 per cent in 2024, representing about 183 million persons (ILO, 2024). Despite this improvement, youth unemployment remains considerably higher: in 2023, approximately 64.9 million young people (13 per cent) were unemployed - the lowest level recorded in the 21st century - and this rate is expected to fall slightly to 12.8 per cent in 2024 (ILO, 2024; Donor Platform, 2024). While the global averages have stabilised, significant regional variations persist, reflecting disparities in economic growth, demographic trends and labour-market structures.

Poverty and unemployment are Siamese evils bedeviling Nigeria's path to growth and development. The National Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2004) earlier reported that the population of Nigerians in poverty rose steadily from 17.7 million in 1988 to 66.7 million in 2004. In 2010, the NBS (2010) recorded that 60.9% of Nigerians were living in poverty (Obadan, 2017). Similarly, the World Poverty Clock (2018) stated that Nigeria had assumed the ignoble position of being the poverty capital of the world, after overtaking India, with about 86.9 million of its population in extreme poverty (Odey and Sambe, 2019). More recently, the World Bank (2024) estimated that about 30.9% of Nigerians were living below the international extreme poverty line of US$2.15 per day, while broader national projections suggest that over half of the population, approximately 54%—could be living in poverty in 2024. As a developing country, the incidence of poverty in Nigeria is real with devastating effects on the citizens. Though the concept of poverty is difficult to define, it is evident in the lack of job, food insecurity, vulnerability, insecurity, usage of inefficient forms of energy, poor access to health care, lack of quality education, and shortage of other basic infrastructures for an acceptable standard of living. The absence of basic infrastructure like health care system, water, education, electricity, financial security, and so on has worsened the poor state of Nigerians. More so, most Nigerians are engaged in subsistence farming, petty trading, and other self-employed activities. This is due largely to a lack of access to financial capital required to engage in economic activities of profitable proportion. This stems from the inability to access financial capital or credit because of bottlenecks by the traditional financial institutions which make it very difficult for low-income earners to access funds (Abur and Torruam, 2012).

To corroborate this assertion, the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) in the 2012 National Baseline Survey, documented that more than half of the Nigerian youth population in the country are unemployed (Obadan, 2017). Poverty and unemployment rate continue to climb vertically, translating into social problems of more monumental and complicated proportions, attempting to defy successive government intervention programmes geared towards ameliorating them.

Statement of the Problem

Despite Nigeria's wealth in natural and human resources, poverty remains one of the most pressing socio-economic challenges facing the country. In response to persistent poverty and youth unemployment, the Federal Government introduced the Social Investment Programme (SIP), which includes various interventions aimed at improving the living conditions of vulnerable populations. One of the flagship components of the SIP is the N-Power Programme, launched to address the issues of unemployment and skills deficiency among Nigerian youth by providing temporary employment, training, and a pathway to self-reliance. However, despite years of implementation and significant budgetary allocations, the impact of the N-Power Programme on sustainable poverty reduction remains uncertain and widely debated. Reports of irregular payments, lack of exit strategies, limited monitoring and evaluation, and the temporary nature of the benefits raise concerns about the programme's long-term effectiveness. Furthermore, the sustainability of the livelihoods of beneficiaries after exiting the programme remains questionable, casting doubt on the overall contribution of N-Power to enduring poverty alleviation in Nigeria. This study, therefore, seeks to critically evaluate the effectiveness of the N-Power Programme in achieving sustainable poverty reduction in Nigeria. It aims to examine whether the programme's design, implementation, and outcomes align with the goal of long-term poverty alleviation or whether it merely offers short-term relief without addressing the structural drivers of poverty. Addressing this research problem is essential to inform future policy decisions and improve the efficacy of social investment interventions in Nigeria.

National Social Investment Programme

President Muhammad Buhari launched the NSIP as a platform for the empowerment of unemployed Nigerian youths in three categories: either young graduates, semi-skilled or semi-literates, and unskilled labour with little or no level of education. For the actualization of this NSIP, the programme content was compartmentalized into three dimensions; and in each of the dimensions, some sub-dimensions were enlisted. N-Power Teachers' Corps was one of the dimensional components of NSIP with subsidiaries on N-Power Agro, N-Power Health, N-Power Teach, and N-Power Community Health. Another notable dimensional component of NSIP is the pack of N-Power Knowledge which is designed not necessarily for graduates from tertiary institutions but for individual youths with a requisite level of education in at least secondary school. Its subsidiaries include N-Power Creative, N-Power Tech Hardware, and N-Power Tech Software. Also, the third component of the NSIP is N-Power Build with civil divisions in the area of building services, construction, environment services, utilities, automotive, as well as aluminum and gas.

The N-Power Programme

The N-Power Programme was designed "to assist young Nigerians between the ages of 18 to 35 to acquire and develop life-long skills for becoming change-makers in their communities and players in the domestic and global markets" (FGN, 2020). It was targeted at graduates from the university, polytechnics, and colleges of education; the skilled, unskilled, and out-of-school youths. A monthly stipend of N30, 000.00 was paid to each beneficiary (FGN, 2017). The N-Power is grouped into two categories – N-Power graduate and N-Power non-graduate. The N-Power graduate also known as N-Power volunteers, was expected to provide teaching, instructional and advisory solutions in four key areas: (1) N-power Agro meant to provide advisory services to farmers across the country by assisting the Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development to disseminate knowledge in the area of extension services, (ii) N-Power Health was targeted at pregnant women and children obviously to reduce maternal and child mortality as well as other vulnerable members of society. Volunteers were to help promote preventive healthcare among these target groups in their communities; (iii) N-Power Teach deploys teachers to assist in primary schools in Nigeria. This was aimed at improving basic education delivery in the country; (iv) N-Tax volunteers were to work as community tax liaison officers in their states of residence with the state's tax authorities. They were to assist in creating awareness on tax compliance, answering online enquires, etc. On the other hand, the N-Power Non-Graduate programme provided training and certifications in two key areas, namely:

i. N-Power Knowledge which provided incubation and acceleration of the technology and creative industries. It was primarily aimed at ensuring that participants get engaged in the market place in an outsourcing capacity, as freelancers and as entrepreneurs.
ii. N-Power Build engaged and trained young unemployed Nigerians to build a new crop of skilled and highly competent workforce of technicians, artisans and service professionals (Onah and Olise, 2019).

Skills and knowledge are the driving forces of economic growth and social development. Despite the current high level of unemployment, harnessing Nigeria's young demography through appropriate skill development efforts provides an opportunity to achieve inclusion and productivity within the country. Large-scale skill development is the main policy thrust of the N-Power Programme. N-Power is also linked to the Federal Government's policies in the economic, empowerment, and social development arenas. N-Power addresses the challenge of youth unemployment by providing a structure for large scale and relevant work skills acquisition and development while linking its core and outcomes to fixing inadequate public services and stimulating the larger economy. The modular programmes under N-Power will ensure that each participant will learn and practice most of what is necessary to find or create work. The N-Power Volunteer Corp involves a massive deployment of 500,000 trained graduates who will assist to improve the inadequacies in our public services in education, health and civic education. Some of these graduates will also help in actualising Nigeria's economic and strategic aspirations of achieving food security and self-sufficiency (Federal Ministry of Youth Development, 2009). The introduction N-Power Programme under the umbrella of social empowerment safety net represents a strategy of alleviating poverty amongst youth through training in vocational jobs and the provision of micro-credit in a sustainable manner as a tool for self-actualization and empowerment (Enyioko, 2006). Specifically, the study examines the socioeconomic characteristics of the schemes' beneficiaries, examines the effectiveness of the scheme and highlights the problems militating against the scheme in the study area. The study also postulates a hypothesis for testing which states that there is no significant relationship between the socio-economic characteristics (age and educational level) of the respondents and their involvement in the empowerment scheme.

Challenges to Sustainable Poverty Reduction in Nigeria Vis a Vis N-POWER Scheme

Lack of Proper Infrastructure

Kanayo (2014) stated that the state of infrastructural facilities in the country is embarrassing. Infrastructures, which are known to enhance industrialization, provide employment especially in the small and medium scale enterprises (SMEs) sector and eradicate poverty, are grossly inadequate in the country. This stands as one of the prominent challenges to the achievement of the alleviation of poverty and hunger. Inadequate infrastructure such as lack of good roads also hinders stakeholders‟ from getting to the grassroots where poverty is at the extreme.

Poorly Articulated Policies

A problem that impedes the actualization of poverty-related programs in Nigeria is the inability of Nigerian policy-makers to bring forth properly articulated policies. The policymakers in Nigeria always want to formulate policies and programs with some inbuilt flexibilities to allow them loopholes to make personal gains. This is the reason why most poverty alleviation programmes do not get to the people at the grassroots who experience poverty first hand (Chukwuemeka, 2008).

Corruption

Corruption is a major challenge frustrating the efforts towards poverty alleviation. Although Nigeria has the largest economy in Africa and has enjoyed oil wealth as well as experienced economic growth in years past, the period of economic growth due to oil exports has not sufficiently trickled down to the poor (Freedom House, 2012). It is widely accepted that the misappropriation of public funds and assets by corrupt elites have been the major cause of Nigeria's poverty (Global Witness, 2012). The struggle to lift more Nigerians out of extreme poverty is an indictment on successive Nigerian governments which have mismanaged the country's vast oil riches through corruption. Poverty and inequality in Nigeria are not due to lack of resources but due to ill-use, misallocation and misappropriation of such resources. At the root, there is a culture of corruption and rent-seeking combined with political elite out of touch with the daily struggles of average Nigerians (Mayah *et al*, 2017). Funds meant for development have at many times been embezzled by corrupt officials without qualm.

Policy Instability and Increasing Conflict

Frequent policy changes have interrupted the progress of initiated programmes (Taiwo and Agwu, 2016). Change in government often leads to halting of already existing programmes by the new government. Every government wants to impose its own programmes rather than working on existing programmes. Moreover, the personal interests of the leaders often result in bringing new policies that will benefit the leadership too. New policies mean the appointment of new officials that would work according to the dictates of the leader. Also, the country has been bedeviled with conflicts such as militancy in Niger Delta, Boko Haram insurgency and farmer-herder conflict in the last two decades, thereby creating more internally displaced persons and communities that have lost their means of livelihood.

Empirical Literature

The issue of poverty reduction strategies and its implementation in Nigeria has occupied the studies of well-meaning researchers in recent times. Some of these studies are reviewed thus: Enyioko (2020) conducted a study on 'The impact of N-Power programmes on poverty alleviation in Rivers State, Nigeria'. The study found that N-Power programmes generate empowerment for the youths in Rivers State. It also noted that the beneficiaries of N-Power programmes were mainly university and polytechnic graduates. The study found that major factors affecting implementation of N-Power programmes towards alleviating poverty in Rivers State include: insufficient information, non-payment of stipend to participants as at when due, bribery and corruption, wrong bank verification number, overbearing hands of politicians in the programme, high transportation fare paid by participants to work, website and internet hiccups, poor funding of the programme.

Furthermore, Ogunmodede *et al* (2020) carried out research on 'Unlocking the potential of Agribusinesses in Africa through Youth Participation: An Impact Evaluation of N-Power Agro Empowerment Programme in Nigeria'. The researchers revealed that the impact of N-Power Agro programme for Nigeria's young men and women on employment and income generation for participants was shown to be effective and positive, hence an increase in the beneficiaries' income was recorded. Again, Isa and Auwal (2019) carried out research on 'Public Policy and Empowerment programmes in Nigeria: Assessment of N-Power in Taraba State'. The paper found that N-Power programme is a temporary Social Investment Programme, which faced some major challenges among which were the concentration of the programme on the educated youths instead of all citizens. Similarly, Amah (2019) and Clarida (2019) in their studies observed that the policy succeeded in keeping yields at low level.

Theoretical Framework

To give the work an empirical paradigm, Elite Theory was adopted. Elite theory was developed by Vilfredo Pareto, Gaetano Mosca, Robert Mitchel and Wright Mill (1939) to explain the position of elites in policy formulation and implementation as well as elite structure and interest in the society. The theory maintained that public policy is nothing, but the preference and values of the elite class in the society. This explains why government policies are always elite's interest, whose objectives are to project and serve the interest of a few as against the masses which N-Power is not an exception. In a bid to tackle poverty and address the menace of unemployment in Nigeria, several administrations have initiated with several intervention schemes aimed at solving the problem of in the country. One of such policies is the N-Power adopted in 2016. However, despite the programme goals and objectives, the programme has not been a total success due to implementation process and bureaucracy. The programme instead of improving the standard of living of the citizens as intended, the programme ended up adding more hardship to the citizenry as the policy implementation strategies was faulty. Relating the above to the poverty situation in Nigeria, one would discover that poverty in Nigeria results from the intentional disproportionate distribution of income, opportunities and national wealth by the ruling few (governing elites). The Nigerian elites have often seen the position of political leadership as a means to get rich quick. They have often seen most policies and programmes which they come up with as a means of enriching themselves through awarding over bloated contracts to their firms and those of their firms and those of cronies, while they also compensate family members, political associates and supporters who in one way or the other helped them to ascend the throne. Their penchant for primitive accumulation of wealth has no doubt plunged the country into untold hardship and the level of poverty which the people find themselves.

The scheme implementation has suffered monumental setback owing to policy politicization. The focus of the programme failed to target the poor and the unemployed segment of the populace. This has resulted in months of indebtedness. Funds meant for efficient execution of the N-POWER programme were cornered into private pockets by few individuals in the government. A number of Nigerian leaders have become 'accidental billionaires' through illicit funds drawn from the programme, thus leaving the scheme in a pathetic and perplexing state. This adversely impacted on the goals of the programme in Nigeria. It is the opinion of the authors of this work that N-Power programme is not merely a consequence of an implementation deficiency. It is rather traceable to the nature of Nigerian state whereby the ruling elite use their power to control, manage and manipulate government polices to their selfish interest. N-Power Programme had some inherent dysfunctional structures that did not allow the implementation to function properly. Government was aware, but was not being realistic thereby implementing the programmes.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative case study design to examine the effectiveness of the N-Power Programme in achieving sustainable poverty reduction in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. The study used purposive sampling to select respondents who have direct involvement with or knowledge of the N-Power Programme in Akwa Ibom. Participants included: 15 N-Power beneficiaries across three categories: N-Teach, N-Health, and N-Agro, 3 local government N-Power coordinators, 2 officials from the Ministry of Economic Development and Labour, and 1 community leader for local insights. Participants were selected from three local government areas: Uyo (urban), Ikot Ekpene (semi-urban), and Oron (rural) to provide a balanced geographical representation. Data were collected through: Semi-Structured Interviews, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), and Document Review. Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the qualitative data.

Findings

The findings from the case study were organized into four major themes that emerged from the interviews, focus group discussions, and document reviews. These themes reflect participants' perceptions and experiences with the N-Power Programme and its contributions to poverty reduction.

i. **Economic Empowerment and Income Support:** Most beneficiaries reported that the N-Power Programme provided a significant source of income that helped them meet basic needs, support dependents, and reduce financial hardship. *"Before N-Power, I stayed at home doing nothing. With the monthly stipend, I can take care of myself and even assist my younger siblings."* N-Teach Beneficiary, Uyo LGA. The ₦30,000 monthly stipend was especially important for young people who had previously been unemployed. Several participants described the programme as a temporary financial lifeline that brought relief and stability during the duration of their participation. However, concerns were raised about irregular payments and delays in stipend disbursement, which occasionally disrupted their budgeting and planning.
ii. **Skill Acquisition and Capacity Building:** Beneficiaries in N-Teach and N-Agro components acknowledged gaining practical experience and job-related skills that increased their confidence and employability. *"Even though I studied biology, I never taught before. But now, I have experience in lesson planning, classroom control, and interacting with students."* N-Teach Beneficiary, Ikot Ekpene LGA. Some N-Agro participants reported learning agricultural extension techniques, basic record-keeping, and community engagement skills. However, many expressed that training was too brief or lacked depth, especially in rural areas. There were also concerns about the lack of certification or formal job placement after the programme ended.
iii. **Implementation Challenges and Operational Gaps:** The study found administrative and structural challenges such as lack of monitoring and supervision of beneficiaries by local officials, poor communication between federal authorities and state coordinators, limited access to training materials, especially in N-Agro and N-Health components, no clear exit strategy for beneficiaries after the 2-year engagement period, etc affected the effective delivery of the programme in Akwa Ibom State: *"Some beneficiaries are serious*

and committed, but many just come and go because no one checks on them regularly." N-Power Coordinator, Oron LGA.

iv. **Perceived Impact on Poverty Reduction and Sustainability:** While the N-Power Programme was seen as a positive short-term poverty alleviation strategy, most participants agreed that its long-term impact was limited unless beneficiaries were absorbed into permanent jobs or provided startup grants. *"The programme gave us hope, but after the 24 months, most of us are back to square one."* Former N-Power Beneficiary, Uyo LGA

Conclusion

Poverty has been an issue of global concern. Despite the various programmes and government initiatives such as the National Social Investment Programme and the establishment of many offices and committees saddled with the responsibility of poverty eradication in the country, poverty has remained a hydra- headed monster. It is apparent that although the objectives of NSIP were well-intended as they were concerned with poverty reduction, employment generation, and general inclusiveness of the disadvantaged members of society, poverty index in the country has remained gloomy with no sign of improvement. Undoubtedly, every Nigerian government has introduced and left behind a poverty eradication scheme, aimed at reducing poverty and promoting wealth creation. Unfortunately, the N-Power programme, despite its initial promise, has failed to yield the envisaged results. Its implementation has been largely remedial, short-lived, and riddled with loopholes. As the study reveals, the programme suffers from poorly articulated policies, corruption, lack of accountability, policy inconsistency, and frequent administrative conflicts. In addition, there has been a noticeable lack of commitment from both operators and beneficiaries, further undermining its intended impact.

Recommendations

i. Government should ensure that its social investment programmes, particularly the N-Power is not politicized. This will guarantee and ensure the sustainability of the programmes.

ii. Poverty alleviation programmes should be given its pride of place through adequate budgeting and prompt release of funds by the government and its supervising agencies to ensure adequate implementation

iii. There should be proper coordination among supervisors to ensure successful implementation of poverty alleviation programmes in Nigeria. Conflicts among agents as to who should implement the programmes should be avoided as such will lead to successful execution of future poverty alleviation programmes.

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