

Dynamisms in the Understanding and Conceptualisation of Poverty in Nigeria

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Abstract. The issue of poverty has become a focus of researchers in poverty, especially in developing economies. One of the major issues of concern is the dynamism that characterizes its understanding and conception. This article explores various factors which explain the meanings of poverty in various ways in accordance with the views of community individual and anti-poverty organizational respondents across Nigeria. The essence is to establish how the understanding and conceptualization of poverty could help in the formulation of strategies towards poverty reduction. The findings show that changes characterize the understanding and conceptualization of poverty as justified by factors such as ownership of farmland, structure of abode, geographical location, possession of livestock, activities and appearances, inheritance and gender discrimination, and education and empowerment. The findings also indicate that these changes are anchored on certain economic, social, cultural, and political factors operating in different periods.

Keywords: Poverty, Dynamism, Poor, Poverty Conceptualization, Nigeria

1. Introduction

The way poverty is understood and conceptualized has become significant in contributing to the design of strategies to reduce the scourge, especially in developing countries. Specifically, Nigeria is one of the third world countries where the issues of poverty have become a serious concern and a deep relative understanding of the concept has become imperative. The National Bureau of Statistics (2020) recorded 40.1 percent of total population of Nigeria as being classified as poor. Accordingly, average 4out of 10 individuals in the country have very low real per capita expenditures, which indicate that over 82.9

million Nigerians are considered as poor based on national standards. There have been seemingly variations in the experience of people regarding different levels of poverty in Nigeria due to different factors, all of which explain chronic poverty in the country. It is, therefore, important to understand such variations and their underlying dynamics, which would also be significant in working effectively towards poverty reduction.

It can be argued that the concept of poverty is not new as it has evolved more than half a century. But there is no definite agreement amongst researchers in this area of study on the general understanding, definition, and conception of poverty. For instance, since poverty has been recognized in the development studies, it has elicited different conceptual definitions and descriptions and challenging tasks from different scholars, international organizations, and researchers (Townsend, 1979; Pillari & Newsome, 1998; Sen, 2000; Vollmer, 2010). The real meaning of poverty which revolves around income and human development has not enjoyed a universally agreed conception and this has continued to generate a seemingly confusion among stakeholders in this area of study. The protracted disagreement could be explained on the basis of interpretative difference and a failure to understand the true nature of poverty as a human problem. From the foregoing, this paper reviews the dynamism that characterizes the understanding and conceptions of poverty, which would help in appreciating its multidimensional features in relation to the condition in the developing countries such as Nigeria.

2. Statement of Research Problem

Poverty, in terms of understanding and conceptualization, is dynamic thereby posing

problem to its solution. Historically, poverty is viewed as characterized with a rich vocabulary in relation to cultures and regions and on the basis of available food, clothes and shelter, especially in the 19th century (Simon, 1999; Cobbinah, Black & Thwaites, 2013). The problem of how best an approach to the conceptualization of poverty could be developed has not gained adequate attention in the literature. In the consideration of how best to tackle the problem of poverty conceptualization, there is need to understand it in its usage as everyday language. The problems associated with poverty understanding and conceptualization has led to various interpretations, all of which are concerned with human welfare and explained within the broader concept of development in relation to equitable distribution of national wealth. The central problem that this article attempts to address has to do with how best poverty can be understood and conceptualized in the face of these dynamisms. This is for the purpose of identifying the real poor people and their extent of poverty level in developing economies, with a view to also making its corresponding solutions simpler. The foregoing issues, therefore, raise the vital question as to whether existing understandings and conceptualizations of poverty are adequate and whether they identify the dynamisms of poverty in the developing world, especially in relation to Nigerian poverty condition.

3. Method

This article explores old and recent literature by examining poverty evolution, evolvement and interpretations as well as reviewing divergent views on the concept of poverty in order to understand the differences and similarities in its descriptions and interpretations in relation to developing countries like Nigeria. It, therefore, employs an approach of reviewing peer-reviewed literature from books and journal articles. It also relies on the primary data collected from the real poor and anti-poverty organizations domiciled in Nigeria, all of which provide relevant evidence to the subject matter of this study. The study explores the views of respondents on the issues and questions relating to the dynamics of poverty conceptualization and its underlying drivers.

4. Conceptual Discourse and Empirical Review

The understanding and conceptualization of poverty really matter in development and human welfare. One of the leading scholars on poverty and

development, Chambers (2006), conceives poverty by clustering it into four groups, which are income poverty or consumption poverty; material lack or want including lack of shelter, furniture, clothing, access to services, among others; capability deprivation including human capabilities like skills, physical abilities and societal self-respect; and multidimensional deprivation. It is also important to understand and conceptualize poverty because of its relevance in influencing the shaping of poverty interventions and policies. Nevertheless, it has been argued that understanding of poverty is characterized by ambiguity in various forms as determined by different ideologies, world views and disciplinary approaches (Handley et al., 2009). But its definitions cannot deviate from the complementary economic definitions and approaches in recent decades as depicted by factors such as basic needs, capabilities, human development and multidimensional poverty (Handley et al., 2009). In the opinion of Ravallion (2010), poverty is historically understood in terms of money, based on the measurements of income or consumption levels, by classifying those that live below a specific level of income or the poverty line as poor.

Poverty has also been conceptualized in one of the three basic different ways by Engberg-Pedersen and Ravnborg (2010), in that poverty is a material condition explaining the poor condition of people based on limited income or consumption level; poverty is a multi-dimensional condition explaining the context specificity, dynamism and socio-political of people; and poverty is a relationally shaped condition explaining the poor condition of people on the basis of social relations like gender, land and labour, all of which have the likelihood of preventing them from improving their condition. In recent years, there have been salient points in the discussions of poverty. For instance, issues of well-being and inequality which indicate different levels of conditions of living across societies in a relative manner. There has also been a relative focus on local and national phenomena of poverty with an increasing global attention and intervention.

Olowa (2012) has argued on the reason for the elusiveness of a concise and universally accepted definition of poverty in that it affects a variety of areas of the human conditions, such as psychological, moral and physical conditions. Accordingly, poverty can be broadly conceptualized in different ways, which include lack of access to basic needs and lack of access to productive resources. In overall, poverty is mostly understood and conceived on the basis of income or consumption in comparison to a specific

living standard. The issue of poverty has become a protracted issue of concern in developing countries with various measures being designed by the United Nations and the World Bank to mitigate the scourge of poverty. For instance, the United Nations (2015) measures poverty as living on less than US\$1.25 a day and aims at extreme poverty eradication by 2030 for all people.

Engberg-Pedersen and Ravnborg (2010) opine that poverty is always concrete and can be understood, experienced and conceived in relation to the local context. The authors, therefore, provide a brief overview of related works on poverty conceptualizations. Olowa (2012) discusses the concept of poverty in terms of its evaluation using various methods of measurement in relation to Nigeria in order to arrive at the main cause of poverty in the country. Baulch (2013) examines poverty dynamics in terms of the conceptualization and measurement by referring to it as changes in welfare annually and a condition whereby individuals or households cross a fixed poverty line, usually from one period of time to the next. Cobbinah, Black and Thwaites (2013) emphasize that the term poverty has been explained and understood in different ways globally due to its multidimensional nature. Accordingly, while some geographical regions and countries view poverty as a condition of deprivation, others view it from the perspectives of social exclusion and inequality in resource distribution.

5. Summary of Findings and Discussion

These dynamisms that characterize the understanding and conceptualization of poverty, according to participants' opinions, include various factors such as ownership of farmland, structure of abode/geographical location and possession of livestock, activities and appearances, inheritance/gender discrimination, and education/empowerment. The changes are also influenced by factors such as economic, social, cultural, and political factors, all of which are operating in different periods. The argument is that the changes in the understanding and conception of poverty in Nigerian society, historically and hitherto, can be understood within the context and understanding of people in relation to the country's economy. For instance, due to the agrarian nature of most traditional olden day societies in Nigeria, the quantity of farmland owned determined the worth of the owner. This is understandable in the sense that some people might own small pieces of land but lacked the capacity to farm on it while others might own hectares of land and use them for oil-palm and

cocoa plantation among other high-yielding cash crops. In the same circumstance, there were others who did not have access to land let alone of making use of it. Accordingly, the possession of the foregoing made farmers to control a larger part of the economy, while those who lacked the possession of land with which to farm were only employed as wage workers by those who possess land. According to Narayan et al (2000), the ownership of land has become a factor which explains the view of an individual as rich. The foregoing findings, as emanated from participants, show that ownership of farmland could be a distinguishing factor between the rich and the poor in the traditional Nigerian society, and therefore, contributes to the dynamism in the understanding and conceptualization of poverty within the Nigerian context.

The findings also show that the type of house in which people live can be used to classify the rich and the poor. This might not be the case in the traditional Nigerian society, but it has become one of the yardsticks in defining poverty today. For instance, people who live in mud houses are regarded as poor while those who live in well-furnished houses are viewed as rich. Besides, the possession of a large number of livestock is seen as a distinguishing condition by which a person can be regarded rich. The attendant argument, however, is that it is most likely people live in poorly constructed houses and still be seen as rich, especially if such people have large quantity of farm land as indicated above along with many wives and possession of livestock. Nevertheless, today's reality shows that there are different types of houses, all of which may indicate the socio-economic status of the inhabitants. In modern-day Nigerian society, the understanding and conception of poverty has also been associated with geographical location and habitation. There are some areas that are either occupied by the rich, or the poor, or by a mixture of 'not too poor' and 'not too rich'. For instance, it has been argued that social differentiations on the basis of socio-cultural, religious, economic, political, occupational, class, prestige and status are employed for the division of persons or society into groups and classes (Stanek & Veira, 2012; Moreh, 2014), all of which are evident in Nigeria.

The activities and appearances of individuals are revealed as part of the dynamism in the understanding and conceptualization of poverty in Nigeria. The type of physical activities that individuals carry out regularly may be used to adjudge them as either poor or rich. For instance, even though it was a normal thing in traditional

Nigerian village society when economic transactions were executed by people who commuted on bare feet, commuting on barefoot these days rather than using a car or other means of transportation is seen as poverty. But this has been contested in the sense that if people are categorized as poor based on commuting style, it may be biased. In their arguments, Jeon et al. (2007) and Lusk et al. (2010) state that people may decide to adopt walking habits based on health grounds to reduce bad cholesterol levels in their body systems. Also, just as it was in the olden days, the types of clothes worn in modern Nigerian society are used to delineate the social class of an individual as to whether the individual is rich or the poor. Expensive clothing is used to determine the appearances of individuals as being rich and this has formed part of the dynamic conceptualization of poverty.

The study further reveals the issue of inheritance as part of the changes observed in the conceptualization of poverty. It was noted that women were being denied the right of inheritance in many societies in Nigeria. For instance, based on the existing culture in some communities, a female does not have the right to inherit the property of the father simply because she is a woman. This condition is justified on the argument that women are given away in marriage, and as a result, should not be entitled to any inheritance from their fathers. The right to inheritance is most likely to contribute towards lifting one out of poverty as a woman. The implication of this is that women that are left without the right to inheritance in Nigeria are most likely to end up in poverty. By this is meant that the denial of women of the right to inherit the property of their fathers or husbands in some cases affects and shapes the changes in the understanding and conception of poverty. Equally, Oke (2001) and Allanana (2013) note that the death of a man without having a son means all his belongings would be taken by the brother or uncle according to tradition, and this further explains the much value placed on a son than a daughter in some parts of the country. Gender discrimination is among the noticeable changes that have occurred in the understanding and conceptualization of poverty within the Nigerian context.

The dynamism of poverty understanding and conceptualization is also noted in the area of education/empowerment in Nigeria, especially in agrarian village lives. In the past, some parents in different communities were not favourably disposed towards providing quality education for their children, thinking that going to school was a taboo and would be a waste of time and available little

resources. The reason for this could be traced to lack of information and awareness on the part of the people that education could be much more productive, even to the improvement of farming systems. In view of this, there is now a struggle among parents to educate their children because of the consciousness that education can make individuals successful and eventually assume the responsibility of caring for their parents or families financially in the future. The reasons behind the interest in education is justified on the importance of education and the rate at which most Nigerians equate education with investment in human capital development, long term productivity, monetary possession and successfulness in the future (Boserup, 2007; Orji & Job, 2013). The changes in the understanding and conceptualization of poverty are also revealed in the movement from lack of empowerment to empowerment. This is because poverty has been viewed as deprivation, which has motivated anti-poverty organizations, especially non-state ones to start embarking on empowerment awareness and raising the need to address such identified deprivations through some positive interventions. As noted by Narayan (2005) and the World Bank (2011), empowerment is simply about building up the capacities of individuals or groups with a view to enabling them make appropriate choices capable of being transformed into positive outcomes, thereby bringing about stability in their lives.

6. Conclusion

The point to note is that as Nigeria's economic standards change, so does the understanding and conception of poverty. It is believed that there are changes in the conceptions of poverty in the past and in the modern period. Poverty is understood and conceived from different perspectives, some of which are revealed above as engendering poverty. What is important is the dynamism that characterizes such conceptions and understanding across the people and various organizations in Nigeria. A lot of socio-economic realities have continued to change the understanding and conceptualizations of poverty in the modern times. The issues responsible for these changes in the understanding and conceptualization of poverty are situated around economic, social, cultural and political factors operating in different periods. This study has presented reviews on the dynamism in the understanding and conceptualization of poverty, which portend vital implications for efforts at the reduction of poverty in Nigeria. The article explores different ways in which people describe poverty, especially in relation to Nigeria,

and it serves as a contribution to the broader literature on the understanding of poverty.

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