

INFRASTRUCTURE PROVISION: A PANACEA TO RURAL EMPOWERMENT AND POVERTY REDUCTION IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Empowerment and poverty reduction strategies in Nigeria over the years have been least successful due to poor attention to basic infrastructure provision. This paper examined the efficacy and potency of basic infrastructure to rural empowerment and poverty reduction. The paper theoretically articulated historical data from literatures on empowerment and poverty alleviation. It anchored its analysis on the Basic Needs Theory which emphasizes the creation of a strong infrastructural base as a stimulant to the delivery of productive activities. On the strength of this, the paper gathered secondary data which enabled it to highlight the impact of infrastructure on poverty alleviation, pinpointing improvement in agriculture, entrepreneurship development, enhancement of living standards, and general socio-economic well-being as some of the goodies. It concluded that basic infrastructure like rural roads, electricity, potable water and the like are critical and sine-qua-non if the quest for rural poverty alleviation is to be meaningful.

Keywords: Infrastructure, empowerment, poverty reduction, rural areas.

INTRODUCTION

It is generally agreed that empowerment is the most illustrious approach towards development. Several strategies have therefore been evolved by public, private and voluntary organisations to empower the citizenry especially the rural dwellers and reduce the incidence of poverty among them. In Nigeria, for example, poverty reduction programmes such as Better Life, Family Support Programme (FSP), Family Economic Advancement Programme (FEAP), National Directorate of Employment (NDE), the Agricultural Development Programmes (ADPs) and many more have been implemented to empower the rural people.

A critical examination of the rural empowerment strategies reveals that, apart from their top-bottom orientation which has prevented them from making the desired impact on the lives of the rural people, one other major reason for their failure is the dearth of basic infrastructure in the rural areas. Basic infrastructure is a sine-qua-non for poverty reduction, but is grossly inadequate in the rural areas. Asiodu (2000) laments that the poor state of infrastructure in Nigeria particularly the inadequate and epileptic supply of electric power, the high cost and inadequacy of transport and telecommunications have been the greatest impediments of the expansion and diversification of the productive sector. The Efficiency-Services Theory of local government avers that some services such as local roads, distribution of water supply, houses for low income groups, health services, agriculture, rural electricity in the right quantity and quality, time and speed are desperately needed in the rural areas (Eminue, 2005). The basic needs theory further buttresses this perception pointing out that rural development is anchored on the availability of basic needs such as food, shelter, clothing, water supply, healthcare services and similar other facilities to the rural dwellers (Okonkwo, 2008). In the same vein, Adamolekun (1983) outlined the three main objectives of local government as including ‘‘the need to ensure the provision of basic needs to the people speedily and efficiently’’ (as cited in Ijir, 2003p.99).

This perception implies that infrastructure is crucial and at the root of rural empowerment, poverty reduction and the whole gamut of development yet emphases of almost all the approaches implemented by successive governments in the country were least on infrastructure and more on financial support, economic empowerment or agricultural modernization. It is against this backdrop that Asiodu (2000) stressed that the poverty reduction programme of the Obasanjo administration will involve the immediate improvement of infrastructure in the urban and rural areas with government leading the mobilization of resources.

This paper, therefore, examines infrastructure and projects it as a panacea to rural empowerment and poverty reduction in Nigeria. The paper is theoretically historical in approach and culls data from empowerment, poverty alleviation, and development literatures to support its analysis.

Conceptual Clarification

Infrastructure: According to the Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary (New Eight Edition), infrastructure is ‘‘the basic systems and services that are necessary for a country or

an organization to run smoothly; for example, buildings, transport and water and power supplies.” They are public goods and services needed by the citizenry to effectively carry out domestic and economic activities that would improve their income, exit their poverty and enhance their standard of living. Access to basic infrastructural facilities strengthens the capacity of both the rural and urban population to perform their productive roles more effectively.

Infrastructure has been identified in two broad clusters - economic and social infrastructure otherwise referred to as core and social infrastructure. Economic or core infrastructure are those critical services such as power, transport, roads, telecommunication, water and so forth that support economic growth. Their availability engenders the production process and accelerates economic growth and development. Social infrastructures, on the other hand, are those services that ensure sustainable human growth and settlement, among which are healthcare, education, housing, sanitation, parks (www.lagosstateppp.gov.ng, 2011). They are essential for the physical and mental well-being of the individual.

Poverty: Poverty is a multi-dimensional concept definable in terms of insufficiency of resources to satisfy the basic needs of life. It is both an expression of life situation as well as a state of the mind. Hence, there is material poverty and psychological poverty. People who cannot afford the basic necessities of life are said to be poor. Psychologically, a person is poor if he thinks he is poor regardless of his income level (Hembe, 2001). Lipton and Ravallion (1995, as cited in Denga, 2003) define poverty as “a state of living in which people are faced with economic, social, political, cultural and environmental deprivations laced with vulnerability to high risks, powerlessness and very low capacity to cope.” Obadan (1997) has similarly defined poverty as referring to lack of physical necessities, assets and income – a condition which results in “deprivation, social inferiority, isolation, physical wideness (disillusionment), vulnerability, seasonality, powerlessness and humiliation.” (as cited in Eminue, 2005). Such people live below subsistence level and have limited access to social and economic infrastructure like education, sanitation, credit facilities and recreational opportunities (Ijir, 2003).

The causal factors of poverty have been grouped into three categories: social/structural factors, natural/circumstantial factors and individual/attitudinal factors. Social/circumstantial factors include unemployment, level of technology, class stratification; natural/circumstantial

factors are illness, natural disaster, death of breadwinner; while attitudinal factors include financial mismanagement, low ambition, loose morals et cetera.

Hembe (2001) identifies two types of poverty: primary poverty which arises from insufficient family or individual income to satisfy the basic needs of life. Secondary poverty is precipitated by mismanagement of economic resources by an individual or a family.

Poverty is massive in the rural areas and is perpetuated partly by inaccessibility to basic infrastructure, what Asiodu (2000) and Eminue (2005) refer to as non-income or infrastructure poverty. Poverty infrastructure includes rural water supply, rural electrification, rural feeder roads, rural transportation, hospitals, schools and so on.

Rural Area: According to Olatunbosun (1985, as cited in Omenka, 2003), the term 'rural' is conceptualized in both 'spatial' and 'occupational' connotations. The spatial index defines a rural settlement by the number of people living in an area, usually less than 5,000 inhabitants while the occupational index indicates the human activity engaged in by a group of people, which is mainly agriculture.

A critical consideration of 'ruralness' along the spatial and occupational lines is by all means misleading and ambiguous, hence, some scholars argue that a rural area should be determined on comparison with an urban settlement on the basis of three indicators: per capita income, availability of basic infrastructure and level of literacy.

Ipsa facto, a rural area presupposes an area located in the countryside. It is remote, agrarian in nature and lack basic infrastructure or amenities such as good road network, electricity, pipe-borne water, communication facilities, to mention a few. The rural society is said to belong to the primitive communalistic mode of production (Chukwuezi, 2001). The bulk of the labour force is engaged in subsistence agriculture which makes the inhabitants earn less income compared to their urban counterparts.

Theoretical framework

This paper is anchored on the framework of the Basic Needs Theory propounded since the 1920s. The theory is founded on the belief that rural development is predicated on the provision of the basic needs of life, most of which are the physiological needs-food, shelter, clothing- for the rural dwellers. These needs are essential for the well-being of man and must be available in the right and satisfactory quantity before the individual thinks of any other

need. It is in recognition of this that governments in developing nations are striving to improve healthcare services, housing facilities, water supply, good roads et cetera in the rural areas (Okonkwo, 2008).

For the numerous natural resources in the rural areas to be mobilized and properly harnessed, basic infrastructure must first be developed since a strong infrastructural base creates the enabling environment for private sector participation in and smooth delivery of productive activities which improve the living conditions of the people. Age'nor (2013) submits that the accumulation of public capital goods (infrastructure) contributes to long-run per-capita income growth. Frischmann (2010) similarly states that there are functional relationships between infrastructure and infrastructure-dependent systems; that society benefits so much from infrastructure resources, hence, decisions on their provision and management affects a wide variety of public and private interests.

Government spending on infrastructure assets stimulates production, which leads to economic growth. It also improves human capital development and technology. Age'nor (2013), for instance, is of the opinion that a better transportation system and an easier access to water and sanitation in schools can be important prerequisites to raising school attendance in even the developing nations. Similarly, access to electricity can help students to spend more time studying. This underscores the indispensability of infrastructure in the rural economy. The availability of an adequate stock of public infrastructure is a sure bet to economic growth and sustained long-run development. In a vast country like Nigeria with pervasive poverty, the provision of basic facilities in the rural areas will pave the way for a conducive environment for people to significantly earn a living capable of sustaining a reasonable standard of living.

Rural Infrastructure Provision Strategies in Nigeria: An Abridged Historical Review.

Rural infrastructure provision strategies have been evolved by successive governments in Nigeria over the years, most of which were agencies under the aegis of Poverty Alleviation Programmes (PAPs). While some of the agencies like Better Life Programme (BLP), Family Support Programme (FSP), National Directorate of Employment (NDE), People's Bank of Nigeria (PBN), to mention just these, were classified as core PAPs designed to increase access of the poor to micro-credit facilities, others such as the Agricultural Development Programmes (ADPs), Directorate of Food, Roads and Rural Infrastructure (DFRRI), Petroleum Trust Fund (PTF) were labelled non-targeted programmes aimed at providing

various services particularly access to infrastructure that could enhance productivity, income and welfare of the poor (Eminue, 2005). The non-core programmes with mandate to alleviate rural poverty included among others, the following:

The Agricultural Development Programmes (ADPs) and River Basin Development Authorities (RBDAs) established in the 1980s. The schemes aimed to, among other things, develop infrastructure such as roads, dams, irrigation canals and so forth, which the farmers could use to boost agriculture.

- National Primary Healthcare Development Agency.
- Expanded Programme on Immunization (EPI).
- Nomadic Education Programme (NEP).
- The Adult Non-Formal Education Programme.
- National Programme on Immunization (NPI).
- Directorate of Food, Roads, and Rural Infrastructure (DFRRI).
- National Agricultural Land Development Authority (NALDA).
- Petroleum (Special) Trust Fund (PTF).
- Oil Minerals Producing Areas Development Commission (OMPADEC) now Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC).
- National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS), State Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (SEEDS), Local Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (LEEDS) established in 2003.

Chinsman (1998, as cited in Eminue, 2005) outlined the objectives of PAPs particularly an undertaking to address the basic social and economic needs of rural dwellers such as rural electrification, rural water supply, rural roads, primary healthcare et cetera.

Infrastructure Delivery: A Tool for Rural Empowerment and Poverty Reduction.

Basic infrastructure delivery is a potent weapon for empowerment and alleviation of poverty at the grassroots in several ways, some of which are highlighted hereunder.

Improvement in agriculture: Provision of adequate infrastructural facilities such as electricity, rural feeder roads, potable water and healthcare delivery will lead to and guarantee innovation in agriculture, that is, improved agricultural technologies and effective production services, which will increase or boost farm yield. Good road and rail networks, as

well as waterways reduce the transportation costs of moving products to markets or farm inputs to the farms. Better access to infrastructures reduces the transportation costs that may distort the distribution of intermediate inputs to final goods producers (Age'nor, 2013). Lack of infrastructure represents one of the most serious constraints to investment in agriculture and rural development (Eminue, 2005p.390).

Entrepreneurship development: Availability of core infrastructure creates opportunities for rural off-farm employment and enterprise development. It diffuses the existing technologies and increases the innovation capacity of a country (Age'nor, 2013). New business ventures are explored and established; new method of production evolved and therefore new products introduced; new markets opened up. This paves the way for the development of successful enterprises, a prerequisite for becoming successfully self-employed thereby reducing the incidence of unemployment.

Economic development: The proliferation of entrepreneurs means more micro, small and medium-scale enterprises (MSMEs) in the rural and urban centres thereby accelerating private inputs in the production of goods and provision of services, which increase real national income that exerts a direct positive impact on economic growth. Age'nor (2013) notes that technologies developed abroad and or the creation of new ones are important engines for economic growth also in less developed nations.

Enhancement of well-being: Both physical and social infrastructures increase the welfare of citizens. Access to quality education, healthcare, potable water has a positive impact on citizens' welfare in general and the working population cum workforce in particular. Health and human capital have been found to be of immense significance to productivity and economic growth in the long-run. Rural development involves programmes aimed at eliminating the problems of poverty, ignorance and disease, and the provision of a conducive environment for people to be able to earn a living capable of sustaining a reasonable standard of living (Ijir, 2003p. 95).

The cost of business operations: The poor state of infrastructure in Nigeria particularly the inadequate and epileptic supply of electric power, the high cost and inadequacy of telecommunications have been the greatest impediments of expansion and diversification of the productive sector (Asiodu, 2000; Onyeneho, 2013). Poor infrastructure makes capital and running costs so high that it discourages investment in Nigeria, and adversely affects the quality of projects, the result being rising inflation which exacerbate the poverty situation.

Thus, there is need to provide adequate, efficient and quality infrastructure to reduce the cost of doing business in the country.

Empowerment of the poor: Infrastructure is a key stimulant to empowerment and poverty alleviation among the poor. It strengthens the capacity of rural women to perform their productive roles more effectively, and has a major impact on poverty reduction (International Centre for Entrepreneurship and Career Development, 2008). Similarly, Age'nor (2013) argues that a better access to infrastructure can alleviate the burden of domestic work on the women, allowing them the opportunity to allocate their own time to engagements or endowments among market work, home production, child rearing and healthcare. In such circumstances, therefore, women become more productive, earn higher incomes and acquire more assets.

Improved natural resources harnessing and management: Presence of adequate infrastructure facilitates the tapping, harnessing, management, and conservation of natural resources. With good network of infrastructure, natural resources such as land, water, mineral, forestry, and other natural endowments are better harnessed and utilized, or conserved for future use. Infrastructure attracts huge investment, capital and increase in economic activities including employment (Okonkwo, 2008).

Reduction in rural-urban migration: The availability of basic amenities in the rural areas will stampede the rapid rural-urban drift in the country. The presence of electricity, potable water, transport and communication facilities will certainly tame the tide of rural-urban drift because since the living conditions in the rural areas would change, the 'push' desires in the youth to relocate to the cities will equally be minimized.

Conclusion

Basic infrastructure is essential and necessary to empower the rural dwellers, alleviate the pervasive poverty among them and uplift their living conditions. This is predicated on the fact that apart from improving agriculture, stimulating entrepreneurship growth and generating self-employment, it reduces the cost of business operations, promotes economic growth and enhances the well-being of the entire citizenry. Genuine efforts must, therefore, be made by the tripod of government, private and voluntary sectors in ensuring that public utilities such as electricity, water system, good road network are available in the rural areas to enhance the economic fortunes of the people and improve their standard of living.

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