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PERCEPTIONS AND CHARACTERIZATION OF POVERTY
IN NIGERIA: The People's Assessment

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ABSTRACT

The multidimensional nature of poverty makes it very difficult to capture using the conventional single income or consumption-based indicator. People's perceptions, generated through participatory open-ended research, are imperative for a cumulative in-depth understanding of poverty. This paper focuses on poverty in Nigeria, using information derived from two separate nationwide poverty assessment studies.

The dynamic and stark nature of poverty shows that poverty differs markedly with social groups and geographical context. Apart from the material expression of poverty, people also understand it in terms of a range of non-material qualities such as social exclusion, powerlessness, lack of hope and dignity, etc. Furthermore, the people identified a complex and overlapping cause-impact paradigm for poverty, which has resulted in pervasive vulnerability, risk and insecurity. However, in order to overcome poverty, the people adopt and employ a range of strategies that are not only restricted to cushioning poverty shocks or stress, but have become livelihood strategies for them. There is therefore a need for these livelihood strategies/coping mechanisms to be sustained and strengthened by government. This would involve strengthening and developing programmes that the people consider suitable and encouraging income diversification, employment generation, social security and good health. In a nutshell, understanding poverty ought to begin with the perception of the people about poverty and its impact on their lives.

JEL classification: I32, I38

1. Introduction

POVERTY is a global problem of mankind which undermines human dignity. It is a condition of living that affects billions of people around the world and limits their freedom and longevity, despite the general trends of global economic expansion, liberalized markets and increased trade (Omonona, 2001). The World Bank (2001) revealed that of the world's estimated 6 billion people, 1.2 billion (20%) live below the conventional poverty threshold income of less than one dollar a day. This situation could be quite alarming when the incidence and profile of poverty in a developing economy like Nigeria is considered.

In Nigeria, poverty is widespread and pronounced even though the country is richly blessed with abundant human and natural resources. As noted by World Bank (1996), this is actually a paradox of experiencing poverty in the midst of plenty. In order to appreciate the extent of poverty in Nigeria, FOS (1999) constructed a poverty profile based on the income/expenditure approach. Tables 1, 2 and 3 show the incidence of poverty over the years, using different criteria. The tables show that the level of poverty in the country has increased over the years.

Table 1. Poverty Incidence, Estimated Total Population and Population Living in Poverty in Nigeria

Year	Poverty Incidence (%)	Estimated Population (millions)	Population Living in Poverty (million)
1980	27.2	65.0	17.7
1985	46.3	75.0	34.7
1992	42.7	91.5	39.7
1996	65.6	102.3	67.1

Source: FOS (1999)

Table 2. Poverty Incidence by Gender

Year	Male-headed Households	Female-headed Households
1980	29.2	26.9
1985	47.3	38.6
1992	43.1	39.9
1996	66.4	58.5

Source: FOS, 1999.

Table 3. Poverty Incidence by Location

Year	Rural	Urban
1980	28.3	17.2
1985	51.4	37.8
1992	46.0	37.5
1996	69.8	58.2

Source: FOS, 1999

In addition to the above statistics, measures of poverty emanating from other sources reveal that irrespective of the angle from which one looks at the Nigerian situation, it is one of the poorest countries in the world (UNDP, 1998, UNDP, 1999). Specifically, the UNDP (1998) revealed that Nigeria ranks 54th in the human poverty index, making it the 20th poorest country in the world. Indices like life expectancy, infant mortality, daily calorie intake, literacy rate, etc., indicate that Nigeria is still below the recommended thresholds.

Having understood the extent of poverty in Nigeria, the conceptual issue now is whether there exists a general consensus in the people's perception of poverty. How do people understand poverty and what makes people poor? The income/consumption expenditure approach to poverty analysis has been found to be inadequate in explaining the living standards of the people (Omonona, Udoh and Owoicho, 2000). This is not unconnected to its multidimensional nature. Besides the nature of the income/expenditure dimension of poverty, other obvious dimensions are essential for the description of poverty. These include physical, moral, social and even psychological aspects and different views and understanding of poverty have been expressed. Therefore, while an economist would consider poverty from the view point of wants, needs and effective demand, the psychologist may look at it from the standpoint of deprivation, esteem and ego. While a nutritionist may view poverty as the inability to meet basic nutritional needs, a social health worker may view it as a function of life expectancy, child mortality, etc. (Ojha, 1970; Reutlinger and Selowsky, 1976; Singer, 1975 and Sen, 1983). However, from whatsoever perspective it is viewed, poverty is an undesirable condition of life. According to Chamber (1995), poverty is a subset of the general condition of deprivation, whose dimensions include social inferiority, isolation, physical lack, vulnerability, powerlessness and humiliation. This view is re-echoed by Ayoola et al. (1999) and Englama and Bamidele (1997) who described poverty as a state in which an individual is unable to cater adequately for his basic needs (food, clothing and shelter) or fulfil social and economic obligations.

Generally, to understand the multidimensional and complex nature of poverty requires qualitative poverty assessment rather than a quantitative approach.

Chamber (1995) expressed serious doubts on the popular income or consumption approach on the grounds that it furnishes a narrow and revolutionist view and fails to consider the complex, universal and local context in which the poor live. Considering the complexity and heterogeneity of societies, any objective measures used as indicators of poverty status must take into consideration the local people's own perception of poverty. For poverty alleviation or reduction programmes to be workable in Nigeria, therefore, there is the need to understand the local and household characteristics and perceptions of poverty. This is on the grounds that the poor are regarded as the best poverty experts (World Bank and DFID, 1999). Targeting delivery of services and resources to reach the poor is very essential; however, the whole process must be a bottom-up exercise based on the interests and understanding of the targeted people. This paper, therefore, seeks to elicit the perception of poverty by the people and their objective verdicts on the various poverty reduction programmes of the government.

The paper is based on case studies of participatory assessment and open-ended research conducted separately by the World Bank/DFID research group and the authors in 1999. In each study, the participatory approaches of the research explicitly contextualized the subject matter on social and spatial dimensions. By way of in-depth focus group discussions (FGDs)/interviews, relevant information was collected taking into account the heterogeneous nature of Nigeria. For further information on methodology and processes, see World Bank/DFID (1999) and Omonona et al. (2000).

2. Dimensions of Poverty

Poverty has various dimensions. According to Okunmadewa (2001), poverty exists at the global, national, community, household and individual levels. At the national level, poverty represents a state of general socio-economic underdevelopment arising from poor natural and/or human endowment, low productivity, low and stagnating national income or GDP, inadequate social and infrastructural facilities and services, and a general inability by ordinary citizens to attain a decent level of living for themselves. At the household/individual level, poverty is the inability to gain access to the basic necessities of life, or to fulfil basic economic and social obligations. It is characterized by a general lack of self-esteem, inadequate income to meet basic needs, lack of skill or opportunity for gainful employment, lack of access to productive assets and social constraints to self-improvement (Olayemi, 1997).

Based on the **basic needs approach**, poverty can be absolute or relative (Schubert, 1994 and Hemmer, 1994). Absolute poverty refers to the lack of the minimum physical requirements for the existence of an individual or a household. At its extreme, those affected are not able to live a life worthy of human dignity

and are literally starving. Absolute poverty therefore exists when an individual lacks the resources required to obtain and consume a variety of goods and services, including an objective minimum of basic necessities (D'Silva and Bysouth, 1992). Absolute poverty can be primary or secondary. It is primary if physical human subsistence (expressed in terms of nutrition, clothing, housing, etc.) is not guaranteed. On the other hand, it is secondary if only non-physical needs (participation, security, identity, the rule of law, etc.) are not guaranteed. Since what constitutes a subsistence income varies with the culture, space and historical period, it has been argued that the poverty threshold can only be defined relative to the measures of general well-being such as the median income. Relative poverty, therefore, exists when a person's provision of goods and services is lower compared to that of other persons. This does not mean the person cannot lead a life that is worthy of human dignity, rather, it means that because of the distribution structures in a society, certain people are extremely disadvantaged. In general, relative poverty is the ability to attain a given minimum contemporary standard of living and identifies those individuals that are the poorest within the overall pattern of income distribution in a given society (D'silva and Bysouth, 1992).

Poverty can be chronic (structural) or transitory, depending on how long an individual or a household stays in poverty. Chronic poverty is long-term and persistent, the causes of which are largely structural and endemic. Such causes include limited productive resources, lack of skill for gainful employment, locational disadvantages or endemic socio-political and cultural factors. Transitory poverty is on the other hand temporary, transient and short-term in nature. It is a situation in which normally self-sufficient individuals are thrown into a time of crises such as natural disasters (droughts, floods, etc.) and changes in domestic economic policies that may result in price changes.

Spatially, poverty can be urban or rural. Urban poverty is almost synonymous with slums and shanties and is characterized by environmental degradation, inadequate welfare services, social deprivation, low per capita income, overcrowded accommodation, low level of education and limited capital resources. Rural poverty, on the other hand, is characterized by poor material conditions, a higher rate of illiteracy, the lack of social infrastructures and modern technology, a low level of investment, high population growth rates, high levels of unemployment and underemployment, poor health and emigration.

3. Peoples' Perceptions and Characterization of Poverty

3.1 Local definitions of poverty

Definitions and characterization of poverty differ markedly depending on the social group and geographical context. Table 4 presents the distribution of

respondents based on the local definition of poverty in the context of gender and generational dimensions.

The table shows that many of the perspectives on poverty are common for all the social groups. Specifically, the modal definition of poverty is the lack of basic amenities (32.5%). This is followed by the inability to earn a living (22.5%) and lack of money (20%). It is striking that only the adult female sub-groups defined poverty as insecurity and violence while only the youths (both male and female) subgroup defined poverty in terms of lack of material possessions. Only the male subgroups defined poverty as a state of joblessness. These perceptions have both material and non-material expressions that perhaps view poverty beyond the unavailability of goods and services, but extend to an overwhelming denial of people's right to a qualitative life.

Table 4. Percentage Distribution of Respondents Based on Local Definitions of Poverty

Definition	Youths		Adults		Total
	Male	Female	Male	Female	
Lack of money	5	5	7.5	2.5	20
Lack of physical assets	2	2.5	-	-	7.5
Lack of basic amenities	5	10	7.5	10	32.5
Inability to earn a living	5	7.5	5	5	22.5
State of suffering	-	2.5	2.5	-	5
Insecurity/violence	-	-	-	2.5	2.5
State of joblessness	1.25	-	2.5	-	3.75
Low standard of living	1.25	-	2.5	2.5	6.25

On the geographical dimension, poverty is also perceived and characterized in different but inclusive ways. An analysis of the perceptions and definitions of poverty in both urban and rural areas revealed significant variations that were related to the social status of the people.

Both tables 5 and 6 reveal the various definitions that reflect the different perceptions of poverty in the communities. The tables clearly reveal common phenomenal categorization of poverty in the zones, with little geographical and ethnic diversity. In both cases, material and non-material expressions of poverty are repeatedly characterized. Across the zones, all the communities have a wider perception of poverty and this is an indication of diverse social and personal understanding of poverty and its correlates. Besides, these characterizations generate different economic statuses as perceived by the people.

Table 5. Poverty Definition (rural sites) in Nigeria

Criteria	North East	North West	South West	South East	Total
Poor housing structure	✓	✓	✓	✓	4
Low level of literacy			✓	✓	2
Feed poorly	✓	✓	✓	✓	4
Poor clothing	✓	✓	✓	✓	4
Doing menial jobs			✓	✓	2
No money	✓	✓	✓	✓	4
Poor family upkeep		✓	✓	✓	3
Socially excluded			✓	✓	2
No land and livestock	✓		✓		2
Relies on wife			✓	✓	2
Sells inherited properties			✓	✓	2
Depend on God	✓	✓	✓	✓	4
Cannot meet responsibilities				✓	1

Table 6. Poverty Definition (urban sites) in Nigeria

Criteria	North East	North West	South West	South East	Total
Poor housing structure	✓		✓	✓	4
Poor feeding/clothing	✓		✓	✓	4
Low level of literacy			✓	✓	3
No money	✓	✓	✓	✓	4
Unemployment	✓	✓	✓	✓	4
Borrows			✓	✓	2
Hopeless			✓		1
Social friction			✓	✓	2
Socially excluded	✓	✓	✓	✓	4
Can't afford meaningful social amenities	✓	✓	✓	✓	4
Cannot marry easily	✓		✓		2
Cannot contribute to development	✓			✓	2
Do menial jobs			✓	✓	2
Indebtedness	✓	✓	✓	✓	4

3.2 Socio-economic group-specific perceptions and trend

Using the criteria for identifying poverty, three socio-economic statuses for people are specified. These are the poor, the average and the rich. Analysis of these statuses and the ensuing trends reveal distinctive conditions for each of the sub-groupings.

Tables 7, 8, 9 and 10 show the various economic statuses and the criteria for the categories for adult male, adult female, young male and young female respectively. The poor, according to adult males are those whose living conditions are not desirable, who feed marginally and mostly survive on borrowing. For the adult female, a poor person is miserable and dejected and feeds sparingly. These descriptions are corroborated by both young males and females who also categorized poor persons on the inadequacy of both material and non-material attributes. There is, therefore, apparent agreement on how people perceive and understand poverty as a contributory factor to extreme vulnerability, insecurity and outright denial to both material and non-material possessions.

Table 7. Economic Status of Adult Males

Category	Percentage before	Percentage now	Criteria
Poor	30	50	Inadequate and poor diet, live in unhygienic places, has no landed properties, borrows to feed, uneducated (illiterates)
Average	40	35	Moderate feeding, work in government parastatals and ministries, live in rented apartments, and enjoy moderate modern facilities
Rich	30	15	Adequate and nutritious diets, have stock of capital, well-educated, own big businesses and own houses.

With regard to the people's perceptions of the trends in poverty, there is a general consensus that poverty has actually increased when compared with 10 years ago (see tables 7, 8, 9 and 10). Specifically, the adult male believe that the proportion of the poor in the community has increased from 30 per cent to 50 per cent while the proportion of the rich has reduced from 30 per cent to 15 per cent. This remains the same for other sub-groups. This trend analysis as enunciated in the tables clearly supports the records of the Federal Office of Statistics (FOS) (1999) that the incidence of poverty in Nigeria had increased sharply from 27.2 per cent in 1980 to 65.6 per cent in 1996.

Table 8. Economic Status of People as Perceived by Adult Females

Category	Percentage before	Percentage now	Criteria
Poor	40	60	Appear miserable and dejected, wear worn-out dirty clothes, cannot feed well, lack good jobs.
Average	55	35	They are junior public servants, live in rented one or two bedroom apartments, children attend public schools, own small-scale businesses and feed but not adequately.
Rich	5	5	Live in modern houses, own investments, afford quality education for children, children are in private schools or abroad, financially buoyant and feed very well.

Table 9. Young Males' Perception of Economic Status

Category	Percentage before	Percentage now	Criteria
Poor	30	60	Lack adequate and nutritious diets, lazy and idle, have a lot of children or large household size, live in overcrowded apartment.
Average	40	30	Feed moderately, own motorcycles or old cars, struggle to train children in school, they are mainly traders and teachers.
Rich	30	10	Work in banks and blue chip companies, own buildings with modern furnishing, children attend good schools.

Table 10. Economic Status of the People as Perceived by Young Females

Category	Percentage before	Percentage now	Criteria
Poor	30	70	Live from hand to mouth, dress shabbily, cannot afford good meals, are chronic debtors of small amounts.
Average	60	25	Work in government establishments, feed and dress moderately, fairly educated, have old cars.
Rich	10	5	Eat good food, own landed properties, and fat bank accounts, children have good education, they have modern cars.

3.3 Causes and impact of poverty

On the basis of gender and generational analysis, several factors were identified by the people to be the causes of poverty, and several impacts are noticeable with

the resultant poverty. Though there are some specific cause-impact paradigms for each sub-group, there is an overlap as regards the factors that are attributable to poverty vis-a-vis the resulting impacts. The impacts of poverty include ill health, lack of basic amenities, poor feeding, housing and clothing, and employment in menial jobs. The cause-impact analyses of poverty as given by the various sub groups are presented in figures 1, 2, 3 and 4.

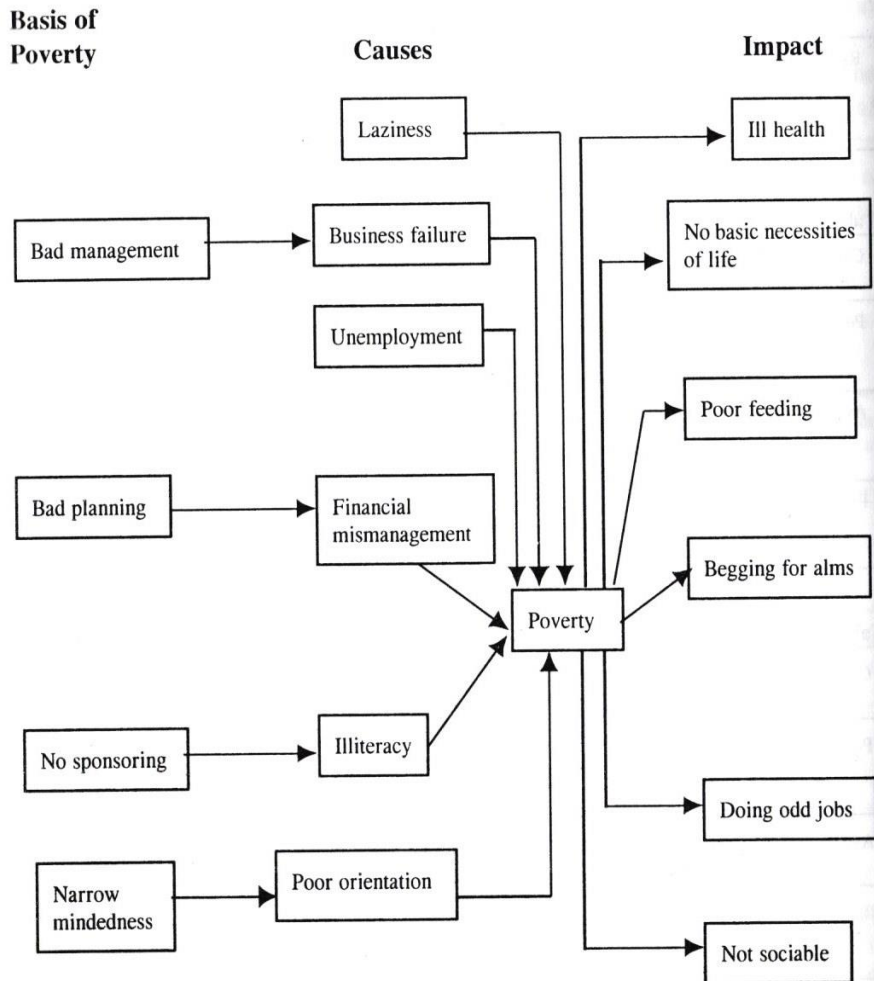


Figure 1. Cause-impact Analysis as Given by Adult Males

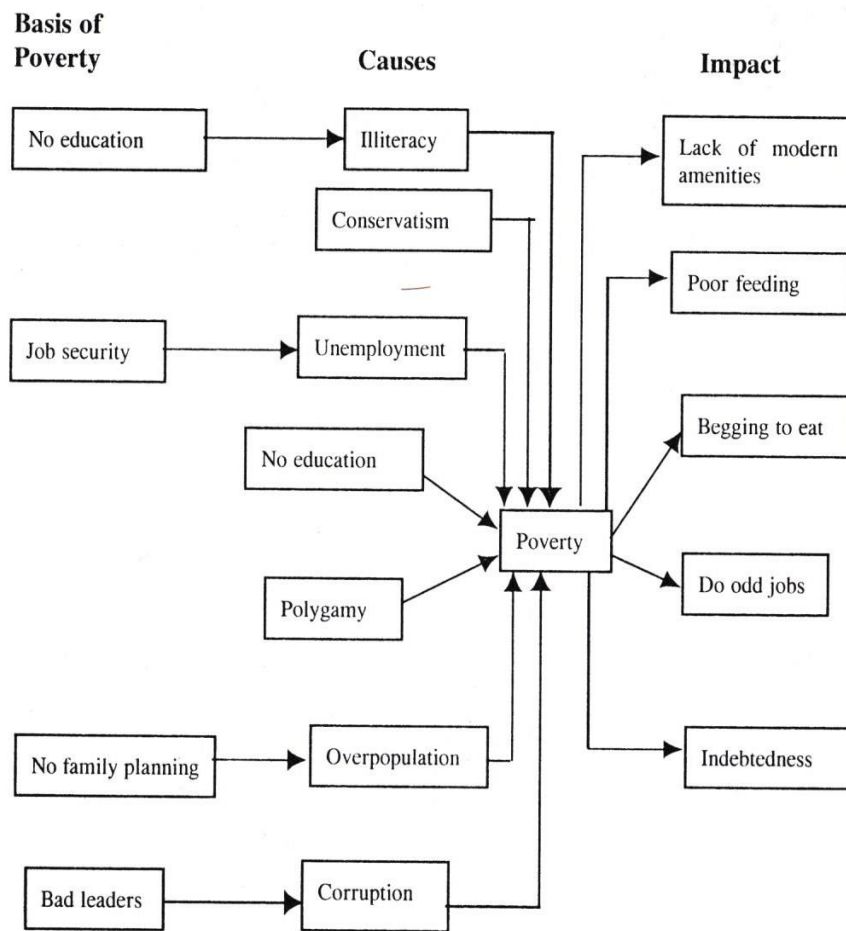


Figure 2. Cause-Impact Analysis as Given by Adult Females

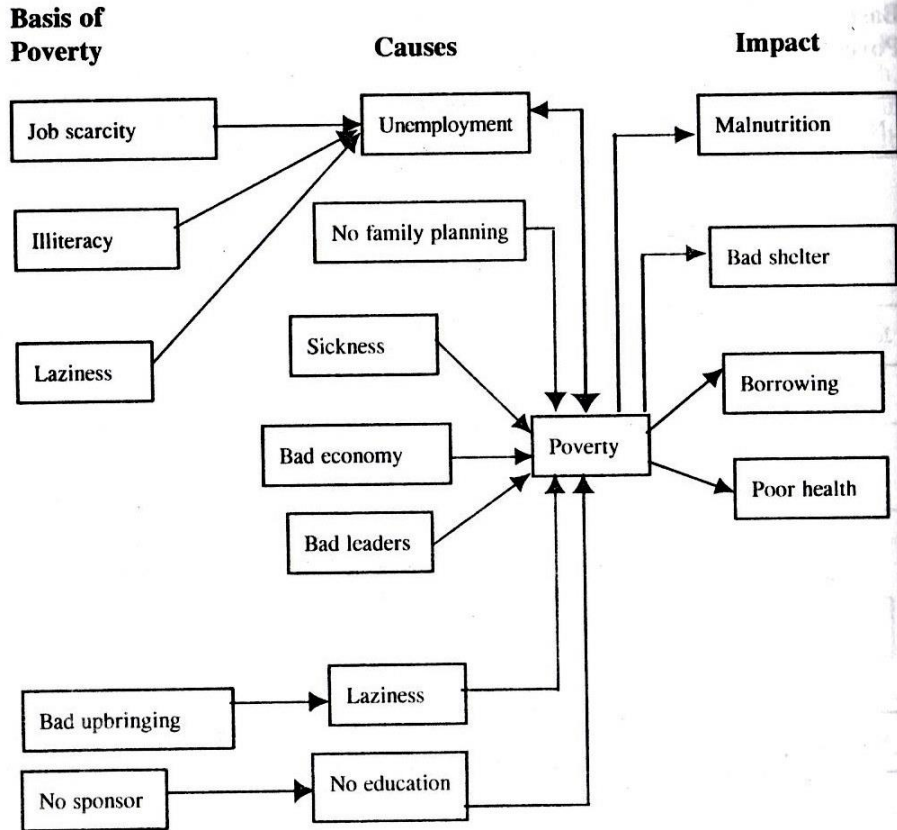


Figure 3. Cause-Impact Analysis as Given by Young Males

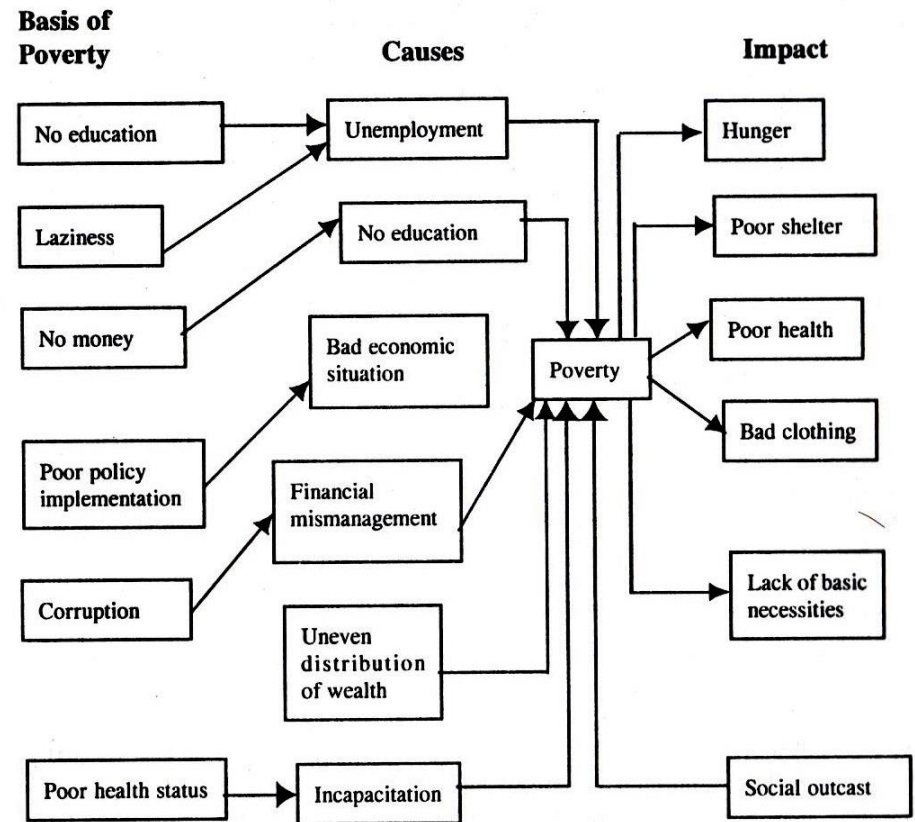


Figure 4. Cause-Impact Analysis as Given by Young Females

A cursory look at the different schema reveals that both internal and external factors promote poverty and vulnerability. Ultimately, the internally generated factors are perceived pathologies, such as laziness (adult males), polygamy (adult females), laziness and no family planning (young males) and laziness (young females). Externally induced factors escalate insecurity and disenfranchise the people. The combined effects of these factors cause social, economic and even cultural dislocation that could either be structural or transitory depending on the magnitude and diversity of the causal factors. As such the high concentration of these factors result in the acute vulnerability of the poor.

3.4 Coping strategies adopted by the people

In the context of cause-impact understanding of poverty and its correlates, the people have adopted multi-pronged approaches of targeting, safety netting and managing poverty within their available resources and endowments. These include a diverse range of coping strategies. These strategies, as enunciated by the subgroups, are listed in table 11.

Table 11. Coping Strategies for Handling Poverty by Various Subgroups

Subgroups	Strategies
Adult males	Diversification and multiple jobs, dependence on contributions and gifts, social capital, return to farming, borrowing, sales of farm products, sales of own labour, back migration, towing the line of the inexplicable (prayers and God's provisions), working harder, planning to have fewer children.
Adult females	Diversification and multiple cropping, secondary jobs, doing menial jobs regarded as men's jobs, working harder/ longer on farms, petty trading, eating of seed yams, sale of domesticated animals, begging.
Young males	Reduction of food intake, changing diet, migration to urban sites, taking menial jobs, intensification of farm work, diversification of income activities, learn more trades, craft making.
Young females	Take menial and odd jobs, changing diet, migration to urban sites, cut down spending, be modest, engage in secondary occupation, early marriage.

The description of coping strategies as shown in table 11 is diverse and extensive. It is however phenomenal in all the subgroups that the local people engage in multiple socioeconomic activities simultaneously to eke out a living. These strategies provide overall opportunities for social and economic mobility that allow for income diversification, more employment opportunities, more credit opportunities, skill acquisition and better empowerment. Ultimately, the coping strategies as adopted by each subgroup to handle poverty have transformed into livelihood strategies and have become daily routines for the people. Specifically, there are cases where women are involved in carrying building materials at construction sites. For farmers, multiple cropping is the emerging pattern of agricultural practice in southeastern Nigeria (Udoh, 2000) and in many other parts of Nigeria. In a nutshell, the structure and nature of coping strategies to handle poverty centre around what could be termed the 'third economy' that is neither formal nor informal, but which supports poor people where both the formal and informal sectors have failed. The aim is to achieve survival and resilience and an improved livelihood.

3.5 People's verdicts on government poverty reduction programmes

The various government and non-government organizations in Nigeria, realizing the enormity and pervasiveness of the poverty problem and realizing that not many poor people would benefit from broad-based growth and human capital improvement have established agencies, institutions, projects and programmes. These have been classified into nine categories, viz: sector-specific poverty alleviation institutions, agencies and programmes in agriculture, health, education, transportation, housing, finance, industry/manufacturing and nutrition, as well as mixed sector programmes (water and sanitation, environment, etc.)

Based on the perceptions by the poor of their expected roles in poverty reduction, an analysis of the various government and non-government projects/programmes in providing support in times of crises was carried out. The performance criteria used in the assessment of these programmes included: level of trust; local relevance; employment creation, income generation; easily understood; participation of local people; taking care of people's interests; sustainability/reliability and social security. On the basis of these criteria, the people's verdicts on the various projects for poverty reduction by past and present governments were scaled and grouped. The programmes were categorized into four groups, elitist, foreign, corrupt exercises and suitable.

Table 12. People's Perceptions of Various Government Poverty Reduction Projects

People verdicts	Projects/Programmes and Agencies
Elitist	Strategic grain reserve programme, UNICEF-assisted water and sanitation project, women's education programme, urban mass transit programme, low-cost housing scheme, Family Support Programme (FSP), Better Life for Rural Women, Family Economic Advancement Programme (FEAP).
Foreign	HIV/AIDS programmes, Health System Fund Project, UNICEF - Assisted Nutrition and Household Food Security Project, Country Women Association of Nigeria.
Corrupt Exercise	National Accelerated Food Production Programme (NAFPP), National Agricultural Land Development Authority (NALDA); Nomadic Education Programme, Small and Medium Size Enterprise Programme, National Poverty Eradication Programme, Poverty Alleviation Programme (PAP).
Suitable Programmes	Agricultural Development Project (ADP), River Basin and Rural Development Authority (RBRDA), IFAD-Assisted Artisan Fisheries Development Project, Primary Health Care Scheme (PHC), National Immunization Programme, Universal Basic Education (UBE), Nigerian Agricultural and Cooperative Banks (NACB), Community Banks, National Directorate of Employment (NDE)

The table clearly shows that the programmes, projects and institutions formed to address problems and issues on agriculture and basic health were considered suitable. Any programme that gave the people the privilege to interact directly with the administrators was considered important in poverty alleviation. The people believed that such programmes provided them with a steady source of real income, improved purchasing power, made good quality food abundant, enable them to have access to better basic health care facilities and good quality education. The people had absolute trust and confidence in the ability of the institutions/programmes to bring about development that would eliminate the causes of poverty. This reinforced the opinion that any programme that people perceived to be politically motivated was regarded as fraudulent.

4. Concluding Remarks

Developing a framework for understanding and characterizing poverty from the perspective of the people was the focus of this paper. People's perception of the meaning of poverty varies and is specific to geographical areas and social groups. This paper therefore provided, a local analysis of poverty by taking into consideration the opinion of the people.

The people viewed poverty as multidimensional and complex, and widespread in Nigeria. The local definitions point to the fact that it is an unfavourable and highly undesirable condition in which an individual or household is unable to provide and sustain all basic needs. The people repeatedly characterized poverty in terms of material and non-material attributes. To identify a poor person, the people considered the levels and adequacy of food, clothing, and orientation as major factors. Further, following certain observable characteristics, three socio-economic groups were identified: the poor, the average and the rich.

There was also a general consensus that poverty has actually increased when compared with 10 years ago and there are high levels of helplessness, vulnerability, insecurity and lack of social cohesion among the populace. Among the major causes of poverty, the paper identified both internally generated and externally induced factors, which included laziness, unemployment, polygamy, and government, etc. These factors, combined, impact negatively on the standard of living of the people. To overcome the woes of poverty, the people have developed different coping and livelihood strategies that allow for income diversification, employment generation, skill acquisition and better empowerment.

With regard to the people's perceptions of various government poverty reduction programmes, ample reservations and doubts were expressed. The majority of the programmes were regarded as defective at both the formation and implementation stages. Programmes however that touched primarily on

agriculture, basic primary health services, and the generation of employment were considered to be suitable and worthy to be encouraged.

In conclusion therefore, efforts aimed at alleviating poverty should take into consideration the indices as identified by the people. Intervention efforts should be directed toward agriculture, primary health services and employment generation. Safety netting and purposeful targeting of the 'endangered people' should be carried out in such a way that the cumulative impacts redirect the trend of poverty and ensure improved well being.

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