

Developing Small Towns as a Panacea to Poverty Reduction in Nigeria: A Focus on Itam And Ikot Ekpene in Akwaibom State, Nigeria

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Abstract

Nigeria's economic development has most times been centred on promoting the expansion and growth of major cities in the country, while relegating the small towns to the background. Much attention has not been placed on rehabilitating and providing better living conditions for inhabitants of small towns. This has resulted in the continuous influx of goods and services into bigger cities, with the aim of finding greener pastures. This incidence invariably brings about overpopulation problems as encountered in these cities. Most of the poverty incidence experienced in Nigeria is often times situated in small towns where there are high level of income inequality and illiteracy. It is against this background the paper adopts a textual analysis to ascertain the rate of poverty incurred in small towns as a result of rural-urban migration. The paper also establishes the facts that developmental incentives in small towns is a panacea for equal development across the unit of the country. From the evidence in the paper, it is recommended that one way to reduce the poverty rate anchors on the need for government to ensure that measures for allocation of public investment across different sized urban agglomerations should be implemented selectively based on landmass so as to avoid over-crowding.

Key words: *Development, Growth, Nigeria, Population, Poverty, Small towns.*

Introduction

A closer assessment of small towns in any part of the globe reveals that they play a key role in ensuring qualitative economic growth through the reduction of poverty and income inequality to a minimal level. The growth rate experienced in this towns is expected to create jobs in every sphere of the economy ranging from Agriculture, commerce, mining, forestry, and so forth. Based on this framework, the IMF county report (2005) has identified the various efforts which has been made by the Nigerian government to improve the living conditions of people living in small towns. This is seen in the various programmes anchored by the government, one of which is the establishment of Local Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (LEEDS). Through the LEEDS programme, futile efforts have been made to provide jobs, housing scheme, health care services, as well as promoting peace and securities in small towns (IMF County Report, 2005).

Suffice to note that small towns have become viable tools in the growth and sustenance of any nation. According to Lambe (2008), most small towns have become the main source of rural economic development in recent times. These towns are characterized with a proactive nature, having a tendency of projecting the future, while also embracing possibilities and assuming risks. This further reveals the fact that small towns as an entity are always equipped with ideas and steps of achieving greatness in a long run. Such visions can be actualized if the leaders of these towns are given the opportunity to initiate and plan developmental strides that could bring about total transformation of such towns.

As observed by Lambe (2008), it is important to note that the most important asset which a small town can ever possess is its inhabitants. Thus, a leader of a small town is expected to gain true legitimacy and acceptability of the people, as the success of any developmental stride embarked upon is highly dependent on the people's efforts.

Based on these ideas, the paper intends to analyse the following questions:

- What efforts has been made by the Nigerian government to revamp the economy of small towns?
- How has the development strides reduced the level of poverty in these towns?
- How can an equilibrium be maintained in the economy of small towns?

Concepts Defined

- **Economic Development**

The rationale for economic development is to improve a quantitative and qualitative general wellbeing of an individual or group of individuals in a given society. Thus, economic development generally deals with concerted efforts and actions of various actors in policy making process to improve the living conditions of citizens as well as the economic rehabilitation of such an entity.

A nation's economic development can however be revealed when certain indices are being reflected and observed in the international community. Indices to look out for includes, but not limited to a spontaneous increase in the living conditions of inhabitants as well as the establishment of a free and fair society characterized by equality and justice for all and sundry. On a whole, Economic development thus deals with an increase in the level of literacy, health care sector, human capital, jobs, and the overall welfare of the citizens of such areas. These development can however be attained when the entire populace are willing to work together.

- **Small Towns**

Proffering a definition for the concept of small town is quite problematic in developing countries like Nigeria. This is because some of these towns could exhibit and possess the characteristics of both rural and urban areas. There are also variations in the size of people that inhabit those areas. While some states could possess 5000-10000 people living in a particular small town, other states could have a range of 8000-15000 people.

Be that as it may, a small town is simply an antithesis of a big city. According to Sule (2006), a secondary or small town finds its expression within the continuum of a village and a city. It is a transitional community or society which has all the trappings to metamorphose with time into a city. A society that fits this description is characterized by low or outright absence of agricultural activities, presence of marginal public utilities, social infrastructures and amenities. However, it is note-worthy that the public services present in a secondary town are not as sophisticated, hence not comparable with what is obtainable in a city or mega city. Small towns are generally characterized with a bunch of jovial and friendly people who know almost everybody; and can explain vividly the family history of anybody. A small town in Nigeria is thus considered to be simple, straight and down to earth.

For example, In Nnetim town in Akamkpa Local government area, the people are largely unsophisticated, diverse and dynamic in their way of living. This town however possess the characteristics of both the rural and urban settlements. Rural features in Netim town can be traced to the presence of Agriculture as the major drive of the economic sector, while the urban nature of the town is reflected in the presence of electricity companies which also serves as an engine drive to the economy, as well as the sophisticated living condition of some members of the town. Small towns in Nigeria are predominantly a homogenous societies who believe in fostering its economic growth and sustantation.

- **Poverty**

Poverty can simply be seen as a condition where people's basic needs for food, clothing, and shelter are not being met. Poverty generally is a concept that embraces all aspects of life as the term could be utilized in the economic, political, social and psychological perspective. Poverty has remained one of Nigeria's biggest challenge in recent times, despite its records of its economic growth rate averaging 7.4% (World Bank, 2014). Some scholars are of the view that poverty is an issue that is only faced among the rural dwellers. This is because most macro-economic shocks tend to affect the rural areas, small towns inclusive, much more than the big cities. (Kanayo, 2014).

It is thus believed that most of the hardships faced in Nigeria are situated in small towns where the government barely pays proper attention to the inhabitants. Although, it is also believed that the rate of poverty is reducing in Nigeria, evidence has however revealed that this reduction is mostly experienced in big cities. As such the reduction in poverty level in big cities will invariably lead to an increase in the poverty level of small towns. This social problem will further lead to crime and insecurity in those town.

- **Urban Areas**

As observed by Sule (2004; 2006) all cities are urban areas, but not all urban centres are cities. For this scholar, the word urban is a statistical concept as defined from one country to the other, indicating the level of population agglomeration at a particular point in time in any given country. As such, definitions of this nature may be made by the government of the country in question. On the other hand, a city is more than just a large number of people inhabiting or agglomerated at a particular point in time and space. The city is rather characterized by complex political, economic and social entity. Hence, there is heavy presence of economic production, religious centres, as well as, learning and cultural focal point within a population spatial system.

Poverty Incidence In Nigeria

Nigeria is regarded as the giant of Africa in the international system mostly because of its population. The high population does not however reflect the size of Nigeria's economy as well as the poverty level experienced by the populace. As observed by Kanayo (2014), Nigeria is often times seen as one of the most unequal societies in the world which is heavily characterized with an unfair and inaccurate income distribution model that does not ensure the growth of equity in the society. As rightly observed by Chinonso (2013), the issue of poverty in Nigeria is so complex and remains quite significant despite recording one of the highest economic growth rates in the world. The country possesses vast amount of natural resources that could bring about the establishment of a highly developed economy, yet, it still retains a high level of poverty, with 69.0% living below \$1 daily, implying a high decline in the principle of equity (Nigeria Bureau of Statistics, 2010). The inequality rate has continued to strive higher despite various efforts made by the national and states governments to revamp and boost qualitative and sophisticated economic growth. In fact, current estimates puts the poverty rate incurred in Nigeria at about 70%, and perhaps, about 40% of these group of people may rightly be described as the 'core poor' (Chinonso, 2013). These set of people are often times found among the rural dwellers, with each family having about 7-10 numbers of offspring. They are so impoverished that they often times are not able to afford three square meals a day, and even when some families are able to eat three times a day, such meals do lack adequate nutritional contents that will facilitate the healthy growth of the young children. As such, nutritional deprivation and the possible risk of acquiring certain chronic ailments due to food insecurity becomes the order of the day.

According to World Bank Report (1999), poverty as a social menace appears to be more present among rural dwellers than their urban counterparts. This view has further been corroborated by the 2008 World Bank report which states that of the extremely poor, about 85% of this group of people live in rural areas and more than two-thirds live in various farmlands.

Recent trends has however shown that the scourge of poverty goes beyond measuring a family's household's expenditure or welfare (Nigeria Bureau of Statistics, 2010). Poverty has over the years evolved many dimensions which has also affected the level of a nation's economic development. Some of these new strands of measuring the poverty level of a country may include inadequate access to basic utilities and services of the government in power, environmental issues that may affect the health conditions of the populace, poor infrastructural facilities that may limit the economic growth of such areas, high level illiteracy and ignorance of majority of the populace, insecurity that may limit the inflow of investors, as well as social and political exclusion in such areas (Nigerian Bureau of statistics, 2010).

Thus, poverty does not just deal with the inability of the immediate family within a community to afford a comfortable way of life. It involves the ability of an entire community to read, write, and understand the

intricacies involved the process of governance. For one to get passed the stage of poverty, it is expected that such group of people should develop and practice a participant political culture where every citizen is aware of the role they can play in ensuring that their rights and privileges as enshrined in the constitution are being protected.

Developments In Small Towns As A Prerequisite For Poverty Reduction In Nigeria

Secondary or small towns have been conceived as societies that find expression within the continuum of a rural area and a city. While some may argue that such societies are transitional given that life becomes complex by the day, especially if they are an agglomeration of urban areas, some may maintain that their growth level cannot go beyond that of a secondary town nor climax at the level of city or a mega city. Suffice to note that land mass or populations are not the major features that qualifies a place to be termed as a town, rather, a place can properly be described as a small town due to the presence of a qualitative and sophisticated elements that can boost economic growth (Sule, 2007). Thus, an important characteristic of a small or secondary town is the quality of jobs and services that people take-up and offer which further constitutes a centripetal force, thereby making it a convergence point for some class of persons.

Let's take for instance, we were all ask to assess how economic development in small town can reduce poverty, what will be the bone of contention? The answer to this question is quite broad as poverty is a social problem that has eaten deep into the whole facet of an individual's life. Research has shown that the target population of poverty is usually those in the small towns. This is because most developmental projects are often times located in big cities with a high level of urbanization. This invariably leads to a lot of migration into the urban areas as each person keeps striving to achieve ends meet, thus making the small towns a place of isolation, pain and suffering.

The question that follows soothe is, how can small towns serve as an opportunity for job creation and possible survival?

It is important to note that these opportunities can only be created when an effective role is played by the government in power and at the same time when the target population are aware and enlightened about the impact which these positive strides may have on the community. The government can facilitate the economic drive of small towns through working with various representatives of each small town. Based on this, the government needs to identify this target group, analysing concretely the major source of livelihood of these small town dwellers. According to Adah (2015), majority of citizens in towns or villages engage mostly in the production of Agricultural products through farming. In Akamkpa town for instance, there are over 168 farmers who are involved in the cultivation of various agricultural products such as rubber plantation, pineapple farming, fishery, fruits and vegetables etc. In such instances, the expansion of these incentives can create a large number of jobs for its dwellers, as such, an increase in productivity (Cross River State small holders' farmers' cooperative ltd.2011).

The positive relationship between economic development in small towns and poverty reduction in Nigeria can be properly understood through analysing the case studies presented below:

CASE 1: Possible Economic Developments In Itam

Taking Itam in present Itu Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria as a case study, every visitor in the state may easily conceive Itam as part of Uyo which is the capital city. The reason for this is very simple. First, Itam shares a common boundary with the capital, Uyo. Secondly, in an effort to upgrade the economic status of Uyo as a state capital, most industrial and other economic activities are shifted to those adjoining environments that agglomerate around Uyo, the State capital. To this end, Itam was created with the status of an industrial town that plays host to a major daily market called Itam main market that brings people from all walks of life to converge for commercial activities. The town also plays host to a major bus stations, where bus and taxi services are offered at a relatively affordable cost. Accordingly, a building material market is also located in this town which also plays host to the Hausa-Fulani community who are engaged in the sales of basic food items brought in from the northern part of the country. The list of commercial activities that takes place in Itam is endless. What this brings to mind is that while there are lots

of economic activities going on in Itam, the environment does not possess the sophistication of a city, but neither is it a rural area or a village in its present day setting. It however serves as an avenue for employment generation for the populace in the small town called Itam.

Another salient feature which corroborates the view of many scholars is that less than 10% of the people in this part of Itam depend on agricultural activities. More so, comparatively, the number of persons that now reside in Itam today are far more than the number that used to reside there as at 1999 when the urbanization drive of the state kick-started. To state the obvious, through the deliberate efforts of the government, Itam has been given a face lift and this has automatically attracted people from nearby rural areas and other parts of the state and country to catch-in on the opportunities presented by the bee-hive of commercial activities to make ends meet. It is noteworthy to state that the comfort and succour that comes with residing and doing business in Itam is accompanied with the fact that means of living is not as expensive as residing and doing business in Uyo City. Hence, it can be affirmed that the features/social infrastructures/amenities/public services and utilities present in a small town goes a long way to define the class and category of people in such areas. For instance, getting involved in commercial activities like selling in the building material market, Itam main market, working in a bus and taxi station, offering of services at a beauty and barbing salon, mason, painting, etc, all fall within the sphere of semi-skilled industry. A small town is thus, not just an embodiment of agricultural economic activities, but also involves activities that can be comfortably offered by semi-skilled and unskilled persons. This however agrees with the assertion of Christiaensen, Weerdt and Todo (2013) that economies of scale and agglomeration would thus favour urban concentration, provided it also maximizes employment generation for the (unskilled) poor. However, the emphasis that seeks relevance here is that secondary towns has the potential of contributing to the socio-economic development of the society through the availability of job opportunities created by the existing public utilities, especially, with support from the government, as well as, reducing poverty.

CASE 2: Economic Developments In Ikot Ekpene Town

Here, emphasis is being placed on Ikot Ekpene, a town known throughout Nigeria as “The Raffia City’ or locally simply as “IK” in Akwa Ibom State (Nair, 1972). Ikot Ekpene is a town located on the A342 highway that parallels the coast, between Calabar to the South East and Aba to the West, with the State Capital, Uyo, to the East and Umuahia to the North. Ikot Ekpene is known as a regional centre of commerce, with notable exports of palm products, especially palm oil, kernels, raffia products including raffia fibres and its sweet wine, as well as ground crops like yams, cassava and corn. The population is made up of primarily of the Annang people with a small member of Igbo traders and Hausa Suya (roasted beef) vendors. Significant exports products in IK also include basket weaving, sculpture, and most notably raffia cane furniture (hence, the colloquial name of the town).

A characteristic feature of Ikot Ekpene which distinguishes it from Itam as a secondary town is that the latter is predominantly a non-farm economy, while the former is a mix of non-farm economy and agricultural activities which combine to develop the economic base of the ancient town. This implies that there is an evidence of two different classification of secondary town within a state: (1) a secondary town that is sharing a common boundary with a capital city that thrives solely on non-farm economy, and (2) a secondary town that is totally delineated from the capital city, but which 30-40 percent of her population still depending on agricultural activities. This notwithstanding, both towns are capable of contributing to the socio-economic development off the society through the creation of jobs and reduction of poverty.

Possible Strategies That Can Aid Economic Development In Small Towns.

Economic developments in small town don’t just happen like an accidental act of God. Rather it is a purposive, conscious and deliberate action that should be undertaken by various actors in the political system. Thus in order to achieve this, various strategies should be effectively put in place so as to alleviate the sufferings of the people in such towns.

Of the many strategies, community development seems to be the most encompassing as it includes a broad set of activities and framework of building the economy of a small town. As rightly observed by Lambe (2008), if community development is generally considered to include a broader set of activities aimed at

building the capacity of a community, then capacity-building and other strategies typically associated with community development should be encouraged so as to produce positive economic outcomes. Such community development approach should encapsulate leadership development, youth entrepreneurship and skill acquisition exercises as this will enhance the community's capacity to take on more traditional economic development projects within their sphere of control.

Suffice to note that community development usually involves the adoption of both short-range and long-range strategies. As such, successful small towns tend to balance short-term economic gains with longer-term community development goals so as to achieve a sustainable development goal (Lambe, 2008).

Closely related to the idea of community development is the principle of sharing a common vision by the populace. This is because no policy initiative can be actualized without the cooperation and coordination of those who are directly involved. Thus, most small town within Nigeria should understand the importance of establishing and maintaining a broadly held vision, including goals for all manner of development activities. The actors that are involved in the implementation of such programmes should include representatives from government, community organizations, profit and non-profit organizations, interests groups, resource providers and average citizens of the community. In fact, anybody could join the effort, and this perception of an inclusive and open-door process of promoting economic development should be held widespread across small towns in Nigeria. It is also pertinent to note that promoting communal cooperation can largely be enhanced by the effective efforts of local chiefs and traditional rulers. This is because they are the representatives of the government at the grass root level. Thus, they should create an avenue where they get to meet individually with members of the community so as to create more understanding and enlightenment on the importance of self-development and community developments. According to Lambe (2008) people are always the most important resource any community could ever possess, as such, communities with limited resources cannot afford to exclude anyone from planning or development efforts. This argument presents the fact that for a small town to achieve any successful and meaningful development, the populace should be treated with utmost importance. This is because a committed group of local residents who are willing to work hard for their community's interests can change the fate of an otherwise hopeless community (Lambe, 2008).

Conclusion/Way Forward

It is true that the Nigerian government has in the past made great efforts to encourage Productivity in small towns. This is evidenced in the establishment of a system of community banking in the early 1990s. Since its establishment, these banks have the sole responsibility of providing micro finance services as well as other basic banking services such as deposits and savings in small towns. Through the allocation of loans and other micro finance incentives, these banks are expected to help in promoting and developing the agricultural and manufacturing products in small towns. In addition, the micro finance banks are also saddled with the responsibility of providing loans to women for starting up small scale business, as well as promoting services that can be managed and handled by the poor.

Small towns in Nigeria are usually the host communities of vital minerals and natural resources which attracts a lot of government investment. In order to invest, there has to be a process of exploitation. Often times, such exploitations usually end up bringing about health and environmental hazards on the people. This holds therefore that poverty is not just tied down to the provision of jobs, the health of the people is also paramount in the poverty eradication process. In fact, a survey undertaken in 37 small towns in Nigeria revealed that the inhabitants are often faced with water and sanitation problems. The survey revealed that not more than 15% of the populace had access to water from protected boreholes, while 20 percent got their water from communal wells.

It has been established that growth in secondary towns create jobs and this serves as a source of poverty reduction. But, in comparison with the large cities, it has been emphasized in this paper that differences in skills, educational level and cost of living may differ and therefore affect the choice of one's residence. The implication of this is that growth in secondary town may bring about a corresponding growth in the large cities due to the quest for adventure to test city life. More so, it should also be noted that with time, every society tends to harbour some form of slum settlements. This is expected because the pull factors that acts as

centripetal forces which brings people to preferred locations like secondary towns, also constitutes centrifugal forces. This occurs when an individual, after settling down in a town demobilizes himself by moving out in pursuit of better life in terms of: salaries, condition of service, job opportunities, security, conducive environment and education, etc.

The resultant impact of secondary town in relation to large cities is that while it provides the latter with manpower, it also has the potential of creating urban slums. This agrees with the view of Sule (2004) who opined that many residents only find accommodation under the bridges and squatter settlements in many of the large cities most especially in the developing countries. Typical examples are found in Mexico City, Lima in Peru, Lagos in Nigeria, to mention but a few. Thus, for the economy to thrive perfectly well, the general health and welfare of the people must be guaranteed. This is because the people actually constitute the labour force that will bring about the much expected economic change in the small towns.

This can only be achieved if the following are put in place:

- For many African Countries like Nigeria, research has shown that agriculture often serve as the catalyst for growth and development. Agriculture is in fact the centre piece of people's efforts to achieving growth, reduction in poverty and income inequality, as well as ensuring the socio economic wellbeing of citizens. Thus, it is expected that agriculture as a sector has to be made worthwhile through establishing effective and efficient technological innovations in the sector which will further lead to productivity. These objectives can only be actualized if the government comes into play. Thus the government in its entirety is expected to be the initiator of such big elephant projects. In addition, micro finance loans should be made easily available and assessable to these people so as to bring about effective performance in these sectors.
- There is need for government to ensure that measures for allocation of public investment across different sized urban agglomerations should be implemented selectively based on landmass so as to avoid over-crowding. More so, investment in urban agglomeration and secondary town should not be made in ways that will create avenue for slum environment. Like in most developed climes, every plan for allocation for public investment should rather put into consideration the impending increase and expansion of population.
- Government policies towards the development of secondary town should lay emphasis on the establishment of social services and infrastructures like water for all purposes, electricity, solid waste disposal and management facilities, educational services; medical services (primary, secondary and tertiary); recreational activities, and commercial activities like shopping centres, malls, warehousing services, etc. Other infrastructures include good roads and other industrial components.
- There is need for government to include in their plan, public housing, services and social environment of low income, environment safety. In addition, the government programme as contained in the white paper in urban housing policy of 2003 that was aimed at providing housing and the development of towns and cities in Nigeria should be given priority.
- As part of the government's effort to diversify the economy, the domestic capacity of the people in the secondary towns should be built, encourage and sustained for increased productive activities; first, for domestic consumption; and second, for exports. This can be achieved with pragmatic efforts of the government and firm political will to allocate scarce resources to infrastructural development.
- Can these dreams be actualized in an environment characterized by corruption? The answer is definitely NO. This therefore calls for an effective fight against corruption, as such, an effective mechanism which encourages rewarding hard work and punishes offenders should be put in place. This will go a long way to reduce the corrupt practices experienced in these towns, while also ensuring the economic sustainability of the people and the town in general.

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