

Review Article

Poverty Alleviation or Elite Enrichment: Assessing the Politics of Poverty Reduction in Nigeria (1999–2023)

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Abstract: Since the return of democratic governance in 1999, poverty alleviation has remained a dominant theme in Nigeria's development discourse. Successive governments have launched various poverty reduction programmes such as NAPEP, SURE-P, and the National Social Investment Programme. However, rather than lifting citizens out of poverty, these policies have largely served as instruments of political patronage and elite enrichment. This paper examines the politics behind poverty reduction in Nigeria from 1999 to 2023, highlighting how corruption, weak institutions, and elite capture have undermined genuine efforts at economic inclusion. Using a qualitative approach anchored on the Resource Curse Theory, the study finds that poverty alleviation in Nigeria has been politicized and weaponized by the ruling elite to consolidate power rather than empower the masses. The paper concludes that for poverty reduction to be effective, Nigeria must promote institutional transparency, citizens' participation, and equitable distribution of resources.

Keywords: Poverty, Elite Enrichment, Corruption, Politics.

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria's transition to democratic governance in 1999 was met with widespread optimism that democracy would usher in a new era of inclusive growth, social justice, and poverty reduction. After years of military rule characterized by authoritarianism and economic mismanagement, citizens expected that democratic institutions would ensure accountability, transparency, and equitable distribution of national wealth. It was believed that with democratic governance, the dividends of democracy would translate into improved living conditions, job creation, and social welfare for the people (Adejumo, 2020).

However, twenty-four years after the transition to democracy, Nigeria continues to struggle with widespread corruption poverty and inequality. The political elite has grown increasingly wealthy, while the majority of citizens remain trapped in deprivation. According to the National Bureau of Statistics (2023), over 63 percent of Nigerians approximately 133 million people are multi-dimensionally poor. This means that more than half of the population lacks access to basic necessities such as healthcare, education, housing, and clean water. Paradoxically, Nigeria remains Africa's largest economy and the sixth-largest oil producer in the world, a situation that underscores the deep contradiction between resource abundance and mass poverty (World Bank, 2022).

This paradox of "poverty in the midst of plenty" reflects a governance system dominated by political patronage, elite capture, and corruption. Rather than addressing structural inequalities, poverty alleviation programmes have been manipulated by successive governments as tools for political gain. From President Obasanjo's administration (1999–2007) to President Buhari's (2015–2023), each regime has launched ambitious anti-poverty initiatives such as NAPEP, SURE-P, National Social Investment Policy (SIP) and N-Power. Yet, the persistence of poverty and unemployment suggests that

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these programmes are more often designed to reward political loyalists, consolidate electoral support, and channel public resources into the hands of the elite rather than genuinely empower the poor (Omodia & Aliu, 2021; Akinola, 2020).

Poverty in Nigeria is therefore not just an economic problem but a deeply political one. The control of national resources, appointments, and access to state contracts is largely determined by political affiliation and patron-client relationships. As Joseph (2014) observed, the Nigerian state has been captured by a rent-seeking elite who view public office as a means of personal enrichment rather than public service. This culture of prebendal politics undermines the efficiency and credibility of poverty reduction efforts. Consequently, while billions of naira are allocated annually to social investment programmes, only a fraction reaches the intended beneficiaries at the grassroots level (Ojo, 2019).

Furthermore, weak institutions, lack of transparency, and poor policy continuity have compounded the failure of poverty alleviation initiatives. Governments often abandon the programmes of their predecessors, replacing them with new schemes that serve short-term political purposes. This cycle of inconsistency perpetuates dependency and underdevelopment. As a result, Nigeria's democratic project has not translated into economic empowerment for the people but has instead reinforced elite dominance and systemic inequality (Eze, 2022).

In light of this, it becomes necessary to interrogate the politics behind poverty reduction in Nigeria. Understanding how governance practices, corruption, and elite interests shape the design and implementation of poverty alleviation programmes is essential for addressing the root causes of persistent poverty. This study, therefore, assesses the politics of poverty reduction in Nigeria between 1999 and 2023, highlighting how state power and public resources have been appropriated for elite enrichment rather than genuine poverty alleviation.

Conceptual Clarifications

Poverty

Poverty denotes the lack of basic needs such as food, shelter, health, and education necessary for human survival (World Bank, 2022). It can be absolute (inability to meet basic needs) or relative (inequality compared to others in society). In Nigeria, poverty manifests through unemployment, poor infrastructure, low literacy levels, and inadequate access to healthcare.

Poverty is a multidimensional and multifaceted phenomenon and one of the major problems against development (Ogunniyi *et al.*, 2017, Oluwatayo, 2014). Omobowale (2014), describe poverty as a state where the people are deprived of good things of life and the ability to achieve the desired state of wellbeing and socially acceptable standard of living. Incidentally, the poverty prevalence is generally intense in rural areas, close to 80% or huge proportion of the population lives below poverty line with consecrated social and infrastructural amenities (Ogundipe *et al.*, 2019, Aderounmi, 2018).

Poverty Alleviation

Poverty alleviation refers to deliberate policies designed to reduce poverty through economic empowerment, social welfare, and inclusive development. It can also be seen as special intervention programmes designed by the government to reach the poor and excluded in society, who have not been impacted by normal development policies because of their peculiar circumstances. Common examples in Nigeria include NAPEP (2001), YOUWIN (2011), SURE-P (2012), N-Power (2016), and the Conditional Cash Transfer Programme (2017). However, most of these initiatives suffer from corruption, political interference, and lack of continuity (UNDP, 2020).

Corruption

Corruption has been defined differently by scholars of different orientations. Although it is difficult to agree on a precise definition, there is a consensus among scholars that corruption refers to acts in which the power of public office is used for personal gain in a manner that contravenes the rules of the game (Nye 1967, Janis 2001, Ogundiya 2004). In this sense, corruption is popularly conceived as the improper use of influence in order to gain undue personal or group advantage (Ogundiya 2004). To Jain, corruption refers to "those activities in which public officials, bureaucrats, legislators and politicians use powers delegated to them by the public to further their own economic interests at expense of the common good". Conceived in this manner corruption is seen as the utilization of official positions for personal or private gain, either on an individual or collective basis, at the expense of the public good in violation of established rules and ethical considerations, and through the direct or indirect participation of one or more public officials whether that be politicians or bureaucrats (Hope, 2000:8).

Scholars have categorized corruption as grand, petty, political, bureaucratic, systemic, elite, legislative, electoral, executive, and judicial etc. within the context of this study, corruption is essentially seen as largely an elite phenomenon bearing in mind that every segment of the society is dominated by one kind of elite or the other. However this study examined political corruption from the point of ruling elites and its agents. It is argued that the collaboration of these

political elites makes poverty alleviation an illusion rather than a reality and by extension makes corruption intractable in Nigeria.

Elite Enrichment

Elite enrichment is the process by which political officeholders and influential persons exploit state resources for personal and group benefit. As Ake (1996) and Ibeanu (2020) argued, African politics often serves the interests of the elite rather than the masses, making poverty alleviation a tool for patronage instead of development. Nigeria is a nation submerged by corruption. Right from independence, the country has been presided over by the ruling cabal or elite who put its narrow interest far above the interest of the people (Ojukwu, *et al.*, 2010). The euphoria, hope and aspirations which accompanied the country's political independence in October, 1960 was frustrated by this self-serving elite who are overly corrupt with insatiable appetite for looting. These elites have conspired to the poverty alleviation programme and the economy at large.

Theoretical Framework

Resource Curse Theory

This study adopts the Resource Curse Theory (Auty, 1993; Sachs & Warner, 2001) to explain the paradox of poverty amid abundance in Nigeria. The theory posits that countries endowed with vast natural resources especially oil, gas, and minerals often experience slower economic growth, weaker institutions, and persistent poverty compared to nations with fewer natural resources. Rather than serving as a blessing, resource wealth tends to foster corruption, elite capture, rent-seeking behavior, and overdependence on a single sector of the economy. This situation, commonly referred to as the "paradox of plenty," highlights how resource abundance can undermine good governance and sustainable development (Ross, 2012).

In theory, natural resources should provide the foundation for prosperity by generating revenues that fund public goods and social services. However, the Resource Curse Theory argues that when resource revenues are not properly managed, they distort political incentives and economic priorities. Governments that rely on resource rents often neglect other productive sectors such as agriculture, manufacturing, and education. The easy flow of oil income weakens the link between the state and its citizens, since leaders can fund their regimes without broad-based taxation, thereby reducing public accountability and transparency (Karl, 1997; Sala-i-Martin & Subramanian, 2003).

In the Nigerian context, the abundance of oil resources since the 1970s has produced similar outcomes. Oil rents have encouraged rent-seeking and clientelism among the political elite, who compete for access to state-controlled revenues rather than invest in productive enterprises. Because oil provides an easy and concentrated source of income, successive governments have relied heavily on it instead of promoting economic diversification or sustainable poverty reduction (Adangor, 2017). The consequence is a pattern of governance where state resources are treated as spoils to be shared among loyalists, further entrenching corruption and weakening public institutions (Omodia & Aliu, 2021; Akinola, 2020).

Moreover, the politicization of poverty alleviation programmes in Nigeria is a direct outcome of this resource-dependent system. Since oil wealth flows through the central government, political elites use social intervention schemes not as instruments for development but as channels to distribute patronage. Funds meant for empowerment projects are often diverted to reward supporters or maintain political alliances. This dynamic aligns with the Resource Curse Theory's claim that resource wealth, when captured by elites, perpetuates inequality and underdevelopment instead of improving the welfare of citizens (Obi, 2018).

Therefore, the Resource Curse Theory provides a robust framework for understanding why Nigeria, despite decades of oil wealth and numerous poverty alleviation initiatives, continues to experience widespread poverty and poor governance. The concentration of resource revenues in the hands of a small ruling class fosters a system of prebendal politics, where public office becomes a means of personal enrichment. As a result, poverty alleviation programmes merely recycle oil rents within elite networks rather than addressing the structural and institutional roots of poverty (Ojo, 2019; Eze, 2022).

In essence, the Resource Curse Theory reveals that Nigeria's poverty problem is not due to a lack of resources but to the mismanagement of resource wealth and the dominance of corrupt political structures. Unless governance becomes more transparent, institutions stronger, and resource revenues better utilized for inclusive growth, the paradox of poverty amidst plenty will persist.

Poverty Alleviation and the Politics of Patronage (1999–2023)

The Obasanjo Era (1999–2007)

President Olusegun Obasanjo introduced the National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP) and the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS) as major frameworks for reducing poverty and promoting

sustainable development in Nigeria. NAPEP was launched in 2001 to coordinate all federal poverty reduction efforts under one umbrella, focusing on youth empowerment, social welfare services, rural infrastructure, and natural resources development. NEEDS, introduced in 2004, was designed as a comprehensive reform agenda to promote private sector participation, transparency, and good governance, while addressing unemployment and income inequality (National Planning Commission, 2004).

Although these initiatives appeared well-conceived on paper, their implementation suffered from weak institutional capacity, corruption, and elite manipulation. According to Aliu (2013), funds allocated for poverty reduction were often diverted by political appointees and contractors connected to the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP). Many of the projects were poorly monitored, with some existing only on paper or executed in politically strategic locations to gain electoral advantage. Similarly, NAPEP became more of a political tool than a genuine poverty alleviation strategy, as beneficiaries were frequently selected based on political loyalty rather than need or merit (Omodia & Aliu, 2021).

Furthermore, NEEDS failed to achieve its objectives of economic diversification and social inclusion because it was largely donor-driven and lacked local ownership. While the policy emphasized good governance and institutional reforms, corruption within the bureaucracy limited its effectiveness. Public funds meant for micro-credit schemes and skill acquisition programmes were often mismanaged, and the benefits rarely reached grassroots communities (Ojo, 2019). Consequently, despite initial optimism, Obasanjo's poverty alleviation agenda achieved limited success in reducing unemployment or improving living standards, thereby reinforcing the cycle of poverty and inequality.

The Yar'Adua and Jonathan Administrations (2007–2015)

The administration of President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua (2007–2010) adopted the Seven-Point Agenda as its primary development framework. The policy aimed to address critical areas such as power and energy, food security, wealth creation, transportation, education, and security. Its overall goal was to fast-track Nigeria's socio-economic development and reduce poverty by expanding access to employment opportunities and improving infrastructure (Usman, 2010). However, Yar'Adua's ill health and short tenure hindered the full implementation of the programme, and progress was minimal.

Following his death in 2010, President Goodluck Jonathan continued some of these initiatives and introduced the Subsidy Reinvestment and Empowerment Programme (SURE-P) in 2012. SURE-P was designed to cushion the impact of fuel subsidy removal by investing the saved funds in job creation, public works, maternal health, and youth empowerment. Initially, the programme created optimism as it promised transparent management of oil subsidy savings and direct community benefits.

However, over time, SURE-P became a platform for political patronage rather than a genuine poverty alleviation mechanism. According to Awojobi (2014), the selection of beneficiaries was often based on political connections, and contracts were awarded to individuals linked to the ruling elite. The absence of effective monitoring and accountability mechanisms led to widespread corruption, duplication of projects, and poor execution. Funds were misappropriated, and many empowerment projects either stalled or failed completely (Akinola, 2020).

In addition, both the Seven-Point Agenda and SURE-P lacked a clear framework for sustainability and long-term impact. Programmes were often discontinued with changes in administration, leading to policy instability and waste of resources. As noted by Obi (2018), the politicization of anti-poverty schemes under successive governments reflects a pattern of elite capture where state resources are used to maintain political dominance rather than to genuinely improve citizens' welfare. Consequently, poverty levels remained high despite substantial government spending on social intervention programmes.

The Buhari Era (2015–2023)

President Muhammadu Buhari's administration introduced the National Social Investment Programme (NSIP) in 2016 as a flagship initiative to tackle poverty, youth unemployment, and social inequality in Nigeria. The NSIP consisted of multiple schemes, including N-Power, aimed at providing skills training and temporary employment for youths; TraderMoni, designed to provide micro-credit to small-scale traders; and the Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) programme, which provided direct cash support to vulnerable households (BudgIT, 2023). Collectively, these programmes represented one of the most ambitious attempts at social intervention in Nigeria, with annual funding reaching approximately ₦500 billion.

Despite the scale and visibility of the NSIP, its implementation was marred by corruption, inefficiency, and elite manipulation. Independent reports by Transparency International (2022) and BudgIT (2023) revealed that many beneficiaries of the programme were either politically connected or entirely fictitious, the so-called "ghost beneficiaries." For instance, lists of N-Power participants contained duplicate names and individuals with no record of actual engagement,

undermining the programme's credibility and effectiveness. Similarly, TraderMoni loans were sometimes awarded to businesses linked to political actors, rather than those in genuine need, demonstrating a persistent pattern of elite capture.

The politicization of NSIP reinforced public distrust in government programmes and highlighted the challenges of delivering social welfare in a system where political considerations often outweigh developmental goals. Moreover, the reliance on short-term interventions and lack of proper monitoring mechanisms meant that the programme had limited impact on long-term poverty reduction or structural unemployment. As Omodia and Aliu (2021) note, while NSIP created some immediate relief for certain groups, the broader aim of empowering the poor and reducing systemic inequality remained largely unfulfilled. The Buhari-era NSIP illustrates the recurring theme in Nigeria's poverty alleviation efforts: programmes designed to empower the poor are frequently transformed into tools for political patronage and elite enrichment. Without reforms to strengthen accountability, ensure transparency, and focus on sustainable development, such interventions risk perpetuating poverty rather than alleviating it.

Elite Capture and the Failure of Poverty Programmes

Poverty alleviation schemes in Nigeria have consistently struggled to achieve their intended outcomes, largely due to elite capture, a situation where politicians, bureaucrats, and influential individuals divert resources meant for the poor to serve personal or political interests they have adopted. Poverty alleviation programme as a means of appropriating state funds, rewarding political cronies, placating unemployed youths and the poor in their political parties and political camps. The pursuit of vested and acquisitive interest of the unproductive ruling class in Nigeria has rendered Poverty Alleviation ineffective in reducing poverty and tackling unemployment. This manipulation undermines the effectiveness of government interventions and entrenches systemic inequality. According to Transparency International (2023), Nigeria ranked 145th out of 180 countries with corruption perception index of 25 out of 100 points, as corruption increases it inadvertently brings about increase in the level of poverty in Nigeria.

Elite capture is reinforced by the timing and design of poverty initiatives, which are frequently launched during election cycles as a means to secure votes and reward political loyalty. Programmes such as NAPEP, SURE-P, and N-Power have, at times, been used to mobilize electoral support rather than genuinely reduce poverty. This strategic use of social interventions perpetuates a cycle of dependency, where the poor remain marginalized while the political elite consolidates power and wealth.

The consequences of elite capture are profound. Instead of fostering social mobility and economic empowerment, these interventions often exacerbate income inequality, unemployment, and social discontent. Young people, especially in impoverished regions, are left without meaningful opportunities, fueling frustration and creating fertile ground for criminal networks, insurgency, and separatist movements. As Omotola (2022) observes, poverty reduction in Nigeria has often been more of a political slogan than a developmental reality, serving the interests of a few rather than the majority. In essence, elite capture transforms poverty alleviation from a tool of empowerment into an instrument for political patronage and social control. Without robust institutional oversight, transparency, and citizen engagement, efforts to alleviate poverty in Nigeria will continue to be undermined by the very structures meant to deliver them.

Consequences of Politicized Poverty Reduction

The politicization of poverty alleviation in Nigeria has had far-reaching consequences beyond economic deprivation, deeply affecting social cohesion, governance, and national security. By turning anti-poverty programmes into instruments of political patronage, successive governments have exacerbated inequality, as resources intended for vulnerable populations are redirected to politically connected individuals and loyalists. This systematic exclusion of ordinary citizens from development benefits undermines the credibility of government initiatives and fosters widespread public distrust in state institutions.

One of the dire consequences is the link between poverty and insecurity. High rates of youth unemployment and lack of access to basic social services leave young people disillusioned and frustrated. These conditions make them particularly vulnerable to recruitment by insurgent groups, armed gangs, and separatist movements, especially in conflict-prone regions. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2022) highlights that Nigeria's persistent poverty, coupled with uneven distribution of resources, has contributed to the escalation of violence in the North-East, where insurgency remains rampant, and in the Niger Delta, where resource-based conflicts over oil wealth continue to destabilize communities.

Moreover, the exclusion of marginalized groups from poverty alleviation programmes fuels social and political unrest. Communities that perceive themselves as neglected or exploited are more likely to engage in protests, riots, or other forms of resistance, creating cycles of instability that hinder national development. In this sense, poverty is not merely an economic problem but a manifestation of systemic corruption, weak governance, and elite manipulation of public policy. Ultimately, the failure to depoliticize poverty reduction initiatives perpetuates structural inequality, hinders economic

growth, and threatens national security. Without genuine, inclusive, and transparent approaches to poverty alleviation, social instability in Nigeria will continue to grow, undermining the country's democratic project and the prospects for sustainable development.

CONCLUSION

Nigeria's experience with poverty alleviation from 1999 to 2023 highlights a persistent cycle of political manipulation, elite enrichment, and policy failure. Despite numerous programmes aimed at reducing poverty, such as NAPEP, SURE-P, and N-Power, the intended beneficiaries, the poor and vulnerable have rarely received meaningful support. Instead, these initiatives have often been co-opted by political elites to consolidate power, reward loyalty, and mobilize electoral support.

The paradox of poverty amid abundance reflects deep structural issues in governance, including weak institutions, poor accountability, and systemic corruption. Resource wealth, particularly from oil, has been used not as a tool for national development but as a means to sustain patronage networks that favor the elite. Consequently, poverty has remained entrenched, inequality has widened, and social unrest has grown, undermining the credibility of democratic governance.

In essence, the challenge is not merely the lack of resources but the mismanagement of available resources and the political exploitation of poverty. Genuine poverty reduction requires more than policy declarations; it demands transparent governance, effective institutional frameworks, and programmes designed to empower citizens rather than enrich the ruling class. Without addressing these structural and political constraints, Nigeria's efforts at poverty alleviation will continue to yield minimal impact, worse still, will continue to systematically enrich the elite at the expense of the poor.

Recommendations

To break the cycle of elite state capture and ensure effective poverty reduction, the following measures are proposed:

1. **Strengthen Anti-Corruption and Oversight Institutions:** Agencies like the EFCC, ICPC, and Bureau of Public Procurement should be empowered with adequate resources and autonomy to monitor, audit, and enforce transparency in poverty alleviation programmes.
2. **Depoliticize Poverty Alleviation Programmes:** Establish independent monitoring bodies to oversee the implementation of social investment initiatives, ensuring that beneficiaries are selected based on need rather than political affiliation.
3. **Promote Fiscal Federalism and Localized Initiatives:** States should be given greater fiscal autonomy to design and implement poverty reduction programmes tailored to their unique social and economic contexts, reducing overreliance on centrally controlled funds.
4. **Encourage Citizen Participation and Digital Transparency:** Use digital platforms and participatory monitoring mechanisms to engage citizens in tracking fund allocation, reporting corruption, and evaluating programme outcomes.
5. **Invest in Education, Skills, and Technology:** Develop programmes that enhance human capital, promote entrepreneurship, and create sustainable employment opportunities, ensuring that poverty alleviation goes beyond temporary financial relief.

Implementing these recommendations requires political will, institutional commitment, and sustained public engagement. Only when poverty alleviation becomes people-centered rather than politically driven can Nigeria move toward equitable development, social stability, and genuine economic transformation.

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