



Justice for the Poor in Nigeria from the Perspective of Human Rights and Christian Social Teaching in the Face of Global Insecurity

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Abstract

The paper titled *Justice for the Poor in Nigeria from the Perspective of Human Rights and Christian Social Teaching in the face of global insecurity* investigates the nature, causes, and effects of extreme poverty in Nigerian society. Poverty is here defined as the lack of the basic necessities for existence and for a meaningful life. Poverty is widespread with millions of Nigerians living below the poverty line. Unemployment is high, with many people out of work each year, illiteracy is a major problem, with millions of school children out of school and the mortality rate is high. This situation of abject poverty has brought indignity to the lives of many in Nigeria. Poverty is an assault on human dignity. Its existence has engendered many other forms of unwanted behaviours in society. If anything is not done to ameliorate the situation, it can lead to a serious social problem in the country. The problem of poverty in Nigeria is usually discussed, and solutions are sought from political and economic angles as the reviewed literature has revealed. This work looks at the problem from the human rights perspective and Christian social teaching. The work employs descriptive-sociological and philosophic-theological methods in its data analysis and interpretation. The available data suggest that the problem has its roots in the unethical behaviour of the leaders of the people. The government has not done enough to ensure an all-inclusive society that respects the rights of every citizen. Rather, it has continued to maintain an unjust and asymmetrical power relational structure which has continued to impoverish the people. There is the denial of rights of the people by the leaders who are supposed to see to their protection and well-being. They are simply excluded from the scheme of things in the national discussion. All stakeholders, especially the government, have the onus to ensure an inclusive society by prioritizing every citizen's dignity and good life by investing in critical areas of education, healthcare, job creation, and improving basic infrastructure.

Keywords: *Justice, Poverty, Human Dignity, Human Rights, Christian Social Teaching, Education, Healthcare, global insecurity.*

Introduction

From August 1-10, 2024, the citizens of Nigeria especially the youth took to the streets in many major cities across the country protesting against the government over the severe hunger and hardship that was ravaging the land. There were reports of violence, killings, disruption of normal socio-economic life, damage to public infrastructure, and looting of private businesses. This was as result of people being no longer able to cope with the biting pains of poverty and hardship in the country. The basic needs of life sustenance: food, water, shelter, security, education, and health had become unavailable and unaffordable. This situation reached this melting point because successive governments did not prioritize the needs of the people or the common good, rather they have continued to enrich themselves and their cronies.

Nigeria society has had a social relationship that is not all-inclusive but rather has benefitted only the rich and privileged few in the government circle. Available data indicate that the governments have not done enough to ensure an all-inclusive society that respects the rights of every citizen. Rather, they have continued to maintain an unjust relational structure that impoverishes the people. Such unjust asymmetrical power relations have made it practically difficult for the masses to benefit from the dividends of democracy and to participate actively in the governance process of their country. In the recent past, social media networks were filled with the news and discussion of the mapping out a whopping 15 billion naira for the renovation of the residence of the vice president of Nigeria and other outrageous amounts voted for personal use of the president and some other politicians.

Materials and Methodology

Poverty is widespread in Nigeria with millions of Nigerians living below the poverty line. Unemployment is high and illiteracy is a major problem, with millions of school children out of school. The mortality rate is also high. These are evidence of the undisputable result of the denial of the rights of the people by their leaders whose principal duty is to see to their protection and wellbeing. The situation has brought indignity to the lives of many. Poverty is an assault on human dignity. Its existence has also engendered many other forms of unwanted societal behaviours and increase in frustration among the people.



Before the discovery of oil in commercial quantity, the Nigerian economy was agricultural dependent. The introduction of the oil economy in the 1950s brought about a shift of interest and quickly moved the country from being an agricultural-dependent to a crude oil-dependent nation. The era of the oil boom of the nation from the 1970s to the early 1980s subjected Nigeria further to a monolithic economy. Today, oil revenue accounts for almost 90% of the nation's gross export revenue. But in spite of the oil wealth which is the major contributor to the nation's GDP, the dividends have not been reflected in the lives of the populace. The National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) in her report of "2019 Poverty and Inequality in Nigeria" indicated that 40 percent of the entire Nigerian population amounting to 80 million people in Nigeria live below the poverty line of N137, 430 per year. This report is based on the living standard survey conducted in 2018-2019 ([www. nigerianstat.gov.ng](http://www.nigerianstat.gov.ng)).

With the fluctuation of oil prices, together with a resultant sharp decline in the world oil price in recent periods, and the rise in insecurity, the economy of the country has reached a crisis situation.

Forced out by the upsurge in insecurity, millions of people live with fear and uncertainty in their own homes, while others seek shelter in camps as Internal Displaced Persons (IDP) in unfamiliar lands. In addition, inflation is very high and hits hard on Nigerians. The value of the country's currency (Naira) has been depreciating at an uncontrollable rate daily. The purchasing power of the Naira dwindles every day. Starvation is experienced among the poor.

Many people can no longer afford to send their children to school due to the hike in school fees. UNESCO report of 2021 records Nigeria as having 20 million out-of-school children, which puts the nation among the three highest countries with out-of-school children (UNESCO, 2021). In the same manner, Nigerians who cannot afford the money for proper healthcare have taken to self-medication and, in some cases, resorted to religious or spiritual solutions. This has led to increased health complications and a high mortality rate in the country. In 2021, the mortality rate was 11.382 while the growth rate was -1.680% (www.macrotrends.net). Furthermore, due to a lack of funds and the unavailability of equipped health facilities, pregnant women and nursing mothers lack proper medical care. In 2021, the infant mortality rate in Nigeria stood at 70.6, a figure which is alarming in comparison with other nations. The life expectancy in Nigeria has been rated at 55.12 years, among the lowest in the African region (www.macrotrends.net).

The problem of poverty in Nigeria has generally been discussed and solutions proffered mainly from the perspectives of socio-economic and political approaches, yet the problem persists. Ubi and Effiom (2010) did an empirical study of poverty in Calabar and its environs. Bello and Abdul (2010) examined Poverty situation in Nigeria by studying MDG expenditure. Okoroafor and Nwabueze (2013) looked at poverty and economic growth in Nigeria. Oyinbo and Rekwot (2014) studied Agricultural production and economic growth and implications for poverty alleviation. Nurudeen and Ibrahim (2019) studied the relationship between poverty and insecurity. Ucha (2010) and Olowa (2012) studied the causes of poverty, to mention but a few. The present study proposes a different approach by looking at the problem of poverty in Nigeria from the perspectives of human rights and Christian social teaching. It recognizes that the problem of abject poverty in Nigeria is also an ethical issue. This approach brings to focus the dignity of the human person which must be respected and upheld. All stakeholders, especially the government, have the onus to ensure an inclusive society and promote the dignity of every person by ensuring that citizen's dignity and good life are prioritized through proper investment in the education sector and healthcare, in creating jobs, and in improving infrastructure for the common good of all.

The aim of the study is to examine the problem of poverty in Nigeria in relation to human dignity, human right and Christian social teaching. The specific objectives are: To expose the reality of poverty in Nigeria. To raise the ethical questions embedded in the reality of extreme poverty in Nigeria. To expound the understanding of human dignity, Human Rights and Christian Social Teaching in relation to problem of poverty. To proffer solution towards eradicating extreme poverty in Nigerian.

This study is an exploratory study that deploys a qualitative research methodology. It employs descriptive-sociological and philosophic-theological methods in its data collection, analysis and interpretation. A critical discourse analysis was employed to generate data mainly from secondary sources: textbooks, journal articles, newspaper and internet materials. The data collected were subjected to content analysis and interpretation from which insightful conclusions were drawn.

The concept of poverty has been described by scholars and experts in relation to its nature, place and pervasiveness. For this study, however, the measurement of poverty should be understood from two categories. First is poverty defined by the 'headcount index' which measures poverty from the point of view of minimum personal income per day. By 2022, \$1.90 was considered the minimum sufficient to maintain an acceptable living standard in a given country (World Bank, 2022). The second is a multi-dimensional dimension, which measures poverty by income per person, and in addition, considers the people's access to health, education, and living standard indicators like sanitation, potable water, electricity, and housing.

According to the United Nations (UN, 1948), Human Rights are rights inherent to all human beings, regardless of race, sex, nationality, ethnicity, language, religion, or any other status. Human rights are values and principles that recognize and protect the dignity of all human beings. It directs how individual human beings live in society and with each other, as well as their relationship



with the State and the obligations that the State should have towards them. Human rights and human dignity are like two sides of the same coin. Human rights are standards that recognize and protect the dignity of all human beings. Human dignity is the acknowledgment that human beings have a special value intrinsic to their humanity and as such are worthy of respect simply because they are human beings.

Human rights are norms that aspire to protect all people everywhere from severe political, legal, and social abuses (Weston, 2023). The root for the modern human rights discourse can be linked to the classical times and natural law tradition. For Plato, a just community can be formed by linking human rationality and the nature of good found in the soul (Hayden, 2000). This means that customs and traditions of people are not the giver of rights but are inherent in the human nature. Aristotle observed that the values of virtue and justice are crucial in the political community. The Stoics in their concept of cosmopolitanism declared the idea of a universal community that challenges discrimination of all kinds among people existing in any given human community. (Weston, 2023). Christian philosophers and theologians like Augustine of Hippo and Thomas Aquinas expounded the universal laws and equality of humans of the classical philosophers from the perspective of the Judeo-Christian teachings. The American Declaration of Independence in 1776 recognized these human rights when it declared, “all men are created equal and are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Social justice tends to defend human rights with a focus on fairness in relations between individuals in society and equal access to wealth, opportunities, and social privileges in a society. Social justice also upholds a more egalitarian society and diminishes the exploitation of certain marginalized groups due to the vast disparity between the rich and the poor (*Compendium*, 2004).

According to the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (2004), Christian Social Teaching is a compendium of Christian principles that seeks to proclaim the Gospel and make it present in the complex network of social relations. It is not simply a matter of reaching out to the human in society- human beings as the recipients of the proclamation of the Gospel- but also of enriching and permeating the society itself with the Gospel. Christian Social Teaching deals with matters of human dignity and the common good in society. It also addresses socio-economic and political issues such as social organization, political responsibilities, social justice, labour and the rights of workers, and wealth distribution in society.

The theoretical conversation of this paper is informed by the principles of Human Rights discourse and Christian Social Teaching on wealth and poverty in society. The Christian Social Teaching is based on the Judeo-Christian scriptures and the writings of the early Fathers of the Church like Ambrose of Milan and John Chrysostom. This school of thought was later expounded by Thomas Aquinas and in modern times by the Magisterium of the Catholic Church.

Results and Discussion/Findings

The Indicators of the Reality of Poverty in Nigeria 2007-2021

Nigerian Poverty Rate

Poverty is embedded in a social context and can only be understood when the context is understood (Beyers, 2014). Looking at Nigeria and its numerous resources, poverty is still pervasive. Available statistics reveal that the poverty incidence in Nigeria has been on the increase.

Table 1: Poverty Rate Data 2008 - 2018

YEAR	NIGERIA		BANGLADESH		EGYPT		GHANA	
	% Under \$5.50/Day	Annual Change	% Under \$5.50/Day	Annual Change	% Under \$5.50/Day	Annual Change	% Under \$5.50/Day	Annual Change
2018	92.80%	-0.90%						
2017					72.60%	8.20%		
2016			84.20%	-3.40%			55.10%	-3.70%
2015	89.50%				64.40%	-3.30%		
2014								
2013								
2012	90.50%				67.70%	-2.80%	58.80%	-17.10%
2011								
2010	90.80%		87.60%	-1.60%	70.50%	-6.90%		
2009	92.90%	-1.80%						
2008					77.40%	-0.30%		

Source: macrotrends.net (2019)



From the data above (Table 1), Nigeria had above 90.50 % of her population living below \$5.50 per day in 2012, while countries like Ghana had 58.80%, and Egypt had 67.70%. The Nigerian figure is comparative much higher than that of Ghana on the same geographical sub-Saharan Africa. Even when compared with Bangladesh from another continent, Nigeria poverty rate still stood higher in 2010 with a figure of 90.80%, while Bangladesh had 87.60%. This Nigerian poverty rate figure is indeed too high despite the enormous human and natural resources that are available in the country.

**Nigerian Economic Growth and Poverty Incidence**

YEAR	NIGERIA			BANGLADESH			EGYPT			GHANA		
	Product	Per Capita	Growth	Product	Per Capita	Growth	Product	Per Capita	Growth	Product	Per Capita	Growth
2020	\$432.29B	\$2,097	-1.79%	\$324.24B	\$1,969	2.38%	\$363.07B	\$3,548	3.57%	\$72.35B	\$2,329	0.41%
2019	\$448.12B	\$2,230	2.21%	\$302.56B	\$1,856	8.15%	\$303.08B	\$3,019	5.56%	\$67.23B	\$2,210	6.51%
2018	\$397.19B	\$2,028	1.92%	\$274.04B	\$1,698	7.86%	\$249.71B	\$2,537	5.31%	\$65.32B	\$2,194	6.20%
2017	\$375.75B	\$1,969	0.81%	\$249.71B	\$1,564	7.28%	\$235.73B	\$2,444	4.18%	\$58.85B	\$2,021	8.13%
2016	\$404.65B	\$2,176	-1.62%	\$221.42B	\$1,402	7.11%	\$332.44B	\$3,520	4.35%	\$54.50B	\$1,913	3.37%
2015	\$486.80B	\$2,687	2.65%	\$195.08B	\$1,248	6.55%	\$329.37B	\$3,563	4.37%	\$47.50B	\$1,706	2.12%
2014	\$546.68B	\$3,099	6.31%	\$172.89B	\$1,119	6.06%	\$305.60B	\$3,380	2.92%	\$51.72B	\$1,900	2.86%
2013	\$508.69B	\$2,962	6.67%	\$149.99B	\$982	6.01%	\$288.43B	\$3,263	2.19%	\$62.82B	\$2,361	7.31%
2012	\$455.50B	\$2,724	4.23%	\$133.36B	\$883	6.52%	\$279.12B	\$3,230	2.23%	\$41.27B	\$1,588	9.29%
2011	\$404.99B	\$2,488	5.31%	\$128.64B	\$862	6.46%	\$235.99B	\$2,792	1.76%	\$39.34B	\$1,549	14.05%
2010	\$361.46B	\$2,280	8.01%	\$115.28B	\$781	5.57%	\$218.98B	\$2,646	5.15%	\$32.20B	\$1,299	7.90%
2009	\$291.88B	\$1,891	8.04%	\$102.48B	\$702	5.05%	\$189.15B	\$2,331	4.67%	\$26.05B	\$1,078	4.84%
2008	\$337.04B	\$2,243	6.76%	\$91.63B	\$635	6.01%	\$162.82B	\$2,045	7.16%	\$28.68B	\$1,217	9.15%
2007	\$275.63B	\$1,883	6.59%	\$79.61B	\$558	7.06%	\$130.44B	\$1,667	7.09%	\$24.83B	\$1,081	4.35%

Table 2: Gross Domestic Product Data

Source: macrotrends.net

The data in table 2 above shows that the GDP of Nigeria in 2007 stood at 275.63B with per capita of \$1,883 and percentage growth of 6.59%. From 2007 - 2020, the GDP experienced an average decrease in percentage growth and in 2020, the growth was -1.79% and the GDP stood at 432.29B with per capita of \$2,097. It can be shown that Bangladesh, Egypt and Ghana boasted of better Economy than Nigeria with constant growth in their per capita income, the gradual population they enjoyed between 2007 and 2020 assisted their economy while the population explosion of Nigeria affected her economy hence putting more people into poverty.



Poverty and Unemployment in Nigeria

Table 3: Unemployment Rate Data (2007 – 2020)

YEAR	NIGERIA		BANGLADESH		EGYPT		GHANA	
	Unemployment Rate (%)	Annual Change	Unemployment Rate (%)	Annual Change	Unemployment Rate (%)	Annual Change	Unemployment Rate (%)	Annual Change
2020	9.01%	0.48%	5.30%	1.08%	10.45%	0.72%	4.53%	0.41%
2019	8.53%	0.08%	4.22%	-0.07%	9.73%	-0.09%	4.12%	-0.04%
2018	8.45%	0.06%	4.29%	-0.08%	9.82%	-1.92%	4.16%	-0.06%
2017	8.39%	1.33%	4.37%	0.02%	11.74%	-0.67%	4.22%	-1.23%
2016	7.06%	2.75%	4.35%	-0.03%	12.41%	-0.64%	5.45%	-1.36%
2015	4.31%	-0.25%	4.38%	-0.01%	13.05%	-0.06%	6.81%	0.29%
2014	4.56%	0.86%	4.39%	-0.04%	13.11%	-0.04%	6.52%	0.26%
2013	3.70%	-0.04%	4.43%	0.37%	13.15%	0.55%	6.26%	0.33%
2012	3.74%	-0.03%	4.06%	0.35%	12.60%	0.75%	5.93%	0.31%
2011	3.77%	0.00%	3.71%	0.33%	11.85%	3.09%	5.62%	0.30%
2010	3.77%	0.02%	3.38%	-1.62%	8.76%	-0.33%	5.32%	0.18%
2009	3.75%	0.16%	5.00%	0.71%	9.09%	0.57%	5.14%	0.35%
2008	3.59%	-0.03%	4.29%	0.38%	8.52%	-0.28%	4.79%	0.10%
2007	3.62%	-0.07%	3.91%	0.32%	8.80%	-1.69%	4.69%	0.05%

Source: macrotrends.net (2020)

From Table 3 above, the unemployment rate in Nigeria has increased from 2007-2020. In Nigeria, unemployment is a key contributor to poverty. Unemployment and poverty are linked in a significant way. Statistics show that the unemployment rate in Nigeria has been on the rise since the year 2007. The percentage rate of unemployment in 2007 stood at 3.62% and in 2020, the unemployment rate rose to 9.01% which represents about a 135% increment from 2007 to 2020. When the unemployment rate of Nigeria is compared with those of Bangladesh, Egypt and Ghana, it can be seen that Bangladesh only experienced 62% increment in the unemployment rate for about 2 decades, Egypt had 16% unemployment growth and Ghana had 56% decrease in unemployment rate within the same period of time. This analysis shows that unemployment rate in Nigeria has really impacted on her economy, hence, putting more of her people in poverty.

Poverty and Corruption in Nigeria

The document titled *Detailed Breakdown of Allocation to States, Federal and Local Government from June 1999 to May 2007*, by the Federal Ministry of Finance, states that N5.2 trillion or 32% of the N16.44 trillion total disbursements from the Federal Account in a country of about 167 million people functionaries as salaries and allowances. From June 2007 to May 2011, N4.7 trillion was appropriated for the same number of functionaries. The recurrent expenditure which is as high as 80.3% in the federal budget in 2003, 74.4% in 2011, 72.3% in 2012, and 68% in 2013, speaks volumes of how the vast majority of the populace is excluded and marginalized in the governance process. Again, in the year 2011, the government merely budgeted about N500 billion for the payment of oil subsidies, however, the oil marketers in complicity with other organizations involved in the deal, claimed N2.17 trillion, nearly half of the federal budget and more than the capital expenditure that year even when the supposed vessels that transported in the quantities were on several occasions either non-existent or were somewhere else in the world at the time of purported supply (Irikefe, 2013). The democracy that is practiced in Nigeria is very flawed. Government institutions that are supposed to provide checks and balances over various arms of government and their parastatals have become avenues for the siphoning of public funds. Budgets are inflated by ministries, agencies, and commissions, and the surpluses are diverted to the individual purses to the detriment of the poor masses.

Poverty and Education in Nigeria

Education has the potential to reduce poverty in a significant manner. According to the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, every person has the right to an education. Many Nigerian children are the denied the right to education, which is one of the biggest causes of poverty in the country. According to UNESCO record (2022), Nigeria has one out of every five out-of-school children in the globe (www.premiumtimesng.com). Over 10.5 million children aged 5 to 14 years are not in school. While the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and



Cultural Organization (UNESCO) advises allocating between 16 and 25% of a developing country's budget to education, Nigeria's government appropriations to education rarely exceeds 6%, significantly below the internationally recommended threshold as indicated in Table 4 below.

Table 4. Budget Allocations to Education (2007 – 2021)

Year	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
EDUCATION (SNB)	150.78	163.98	224.68	249.09	306.30	400.15	426.53	493.00	392.60	369.60	550.00	605.80	620.50	691.07	742.52
% OF BUDGET	9.75	10.04	8.79	4.83	6.16	8.20	8.55	9.94	7.74	6.10	7.38	7.03	7.03	6.70	6.56

Data Sources: Budget Office of Nigeria; <https://budgetoffice.gov.ng>,

In Nigeria, the percentage of the budget allocated to education in 2007 was 9.75% which amount to 150.78B and in 2021, 6.56% of the annual budget went to education amounting to 742.52B. From 2000 – 2021, the percentage of the budget allocated to education never exceeded 10% which is far cry from the UNESCO recommendation for developing countries which is between 15 to 20% annual budget. This shortcoming has impacted on our economy and development, thereby subjecting more Nigerians into poverty, since the required facilities for development are lacking in our various level of education due to poor budgetary allocation to education.

Poverty and Infrastructural Development in Nigeria

The infrastructural deficit is also contributing to the increased poverty situation in the country. For instance the roads are not in good shape to transport goods and services to different parts of the country. Out of the 193,200 km roads in the country, only about 28,900 km are paved (Irikefe, 2013). Farmers in rural areas have difficulty bringing out their farm produce to urban areas where they can sell at a reasonable price, this causes wastage of those produce and demoralization to the farmers who suffer the risk of great loss. Nigeria has also the problem of power supply, and power is very necessary for investment and job creation. Nigeria with about 167 million people generates about 4000MW of electricity, an amount that is far too insufficient for the population size. Whereas a country like Brazil with a population of 201 million people, generates 100,000 MW and South Africa with 50 million population generates 40,000 MW (Irikefe, 2013). The resultant effect of this shortage in power supply is increased production cost for business and industries as they rely on generating their own alternative power supply. This high cost, therefore, has stifled many commercial establishments in the country both large, small and medium-scale ones. For example multi-national companies like Michelin and Dunlop have ended their operations in Nigeria, and other textile industries have shut down also. According to the survey conducted by the Manufacturing Association of Nigeria (MAN) in 2010, Nigeria lost about 834 manufacturing companies due to difficulty in overall process of doing business in the country.

Human Rights Approach to Poverty

Numerous variables are taken into account in the human rights approach to reducing poverty (OHCHR, 2005). First, there is a growing understanding that poverty is a result of the denial or non-fulfilment of human rights. Second, the prevalence of poverty prevents the full and effective enjoyment of human rights (OHCHR, 2005). This understanding has influenced the definition of and discourse on poverty. Poverty is understood as being more than the lack of money or the hardship brought on by financial restraints. Human Rights are kept in focus to protect the dignity of the person by ensuring that there exist possible conditions for the fulfilment and development of the entire person. Although the human rights approach to poverty does not eliminate the economic constraints of poverty, it emphasizes that promoting human rights is a more comprehensive approach to poverty alleviation



and is becoming more widely acceptable (OHCHR, 2005). The human rights approach includes some factors that are treated below.

Right to Work and Labour Standard

Article 23, no. 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR, 1948) states that everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment. It also continues in no 3 to declare that everyone who works has the right to a just and favourable remuneration to ensure an existence worthy of human dignity for oneself and one's family, supplemented if necessary, by other means of social protection. It is the responsibility of the Nigerian government and employers of labour to adhere to the stipulations above, thus providing people with conditions for a meaningful life and lifting them out of poverty.

Workers in Nigeria experience violations of their rights to fair working conditions both in the formal and informal sectors. Workers are paid inadequately, they lack access to insurance and medical care, and often live in poverty. In Nigeria, the labour unions that should stand out for worker rights often play politics with politicians, and sometimes labour laws are broken without proper legal consequences. Therefore, it is not unexpected that a significant portion of the working population experiences extreme income poverty despite their best efforts. As a result, social and economic security, which are essential to human security, are in grave danger. However, the provision of employment for the poor, vulnerable, and marginalized groups, particularly in the unorganized sector, is a critical strategy for addressing extreme poverty and social exclusion, which the Nigerian government must take seriously and implement in light of the high unemployment rate. The implementation of the Human Rights Declaration on the right to work and labour standard will certainly assist in curbing the situation of abject poverty in Nigeria.

Right to Good Health and Life

Any form of threat to a Nigerian's right to life constitutes a violation of that right. The necessities for a good life include food, security, shelter, a hygienic environment, access to potable water, sanitation, and functional health infrastructures for quality medical care. Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR, 1948) also states that everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of oneself and family, including food, clothing, housing, medical care, the necessary social services; and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lacks of livelihood in circumstances beyond one's control. The socio-political and economic well-being of a nation is reflected in the health of its citizens. A person's ability to survive the challenges of life is dependent on the quality of one's health, and unhealthy conditions make people economically less productive. Therefore, without achieving the right to good health, a nation may never truly accomplish the right to life and the dignity of human beings. For a nation to reach its full potential for greatness, it must safeguard the socioeconomic rights of its citizens. In this regard, the United Nations' first three Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations: elimination of poverty, eradication of hunger, and the promotion of the health and well-being of all should precede in a nation's annual budget in order to ensure that no one is left behind. The African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights offers a good clarification of the interrelatedness of the right to life and the right to health when it states that civil rights cannot be totally disconnected from economic, social, and cultural rights in their conception or in their comprehensiveness and that the fulfilment of economic, social, and cultural rights is a prerequisite for the enjoyment of civil and political rights (ACHPR, 1981).

Right to Education

One of the most essential human rights is the right of access to quality education. Every person has the right to a free elementary education, regardless of colour, gender, nationality, ethnicity, or social background, religion, or political preference, age, or disability. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR, 1948), the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR, 1966), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW, 1979), and the Child Rights Convention (CRC, 1989) all include the right to education as a fundamental human right. A number of regional accords have also embraced it, including the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (1981) and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of Children. Furthermore, the Nigerian national law known as the Child Rights Act states that "every child has a right to free, mandatory, and universal basic education and it shall become the responsibility



of the Government of Nigeria to provide such education." (<http://www.nigeriarights.gov.ng>). Although the right to education is widely recognized, there are significant differences on its practical application at the national and state levels. As already noted above, Nigeria records a high right of out-of-school children and the rate differs in the various geographical regions and states.

Right to Social Inclusion

Right to association, inclusion, and integration in the human community is a necessary factor for dealing with poverty. This is because segregation and exclusion denies one the opportunities for personal development, material improvement and independence. However, following the statement of Article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives. Everyone has right to equal access to public service in his country. It has therefore become expedient to call for the utilization of social inclusion which enhances poverty alleviation and create enabling environment for human thriving by giving people a sense of belonging, encouraging participation, reciprocity, and diversity. The practice of social inclusion will bring everyone on board in both the planning and execution of developmental projects of a nation, so that no part or section of the population would be left behind.

Poverty in the Light of Christian Social Teaching

The Christian perspective on the issue of the right of humans to a good and meaningful life has its basis in the Judeo-Christian Scriptures. It has its foundation in the idea of the dignity of the human person created in the image and likeness of God (Gen. 1:26-27). The human person that is created in the image of God is also called to be in relation with God (Gen. 1:16), with one another (Gen 2:28; 3:9-11), and with the rest of creation (Gen 1:28; 2:15). As noted in Ezech, 2018:

Creation in the image of God is the Christian basis of human dignity and its teachings on the fundamental human rights with regards to the political, social, economic, religious and cultural order. It is the foundation of the Christian defence of the intrinsic and inalienable fundamental human rights expressed in philosophical language. The non-respect or violation of basic human rights is therefore considered as injustice (Ezech, 2018:1).

Central to understanding the biblical concept of justice is this idea of the God-given dignity of the human person and the regulation of relations in the human community following the rightful covenant relationship. For this reason, the biblical idea of justice goes beyond the philosophical concept of fairness in giving one what is one's rights. Biblical justice implies treating every person, even the most vulnerable, according to his/her God-given dignity as a child of God (Ezech, 2018). Therefore, a situation whereby millions of citizens live in abject poverty, while the political class and the elites appropriate to themselves and enjoy the wealth of the nation is considered a matter of grave injustice to the poor. It is from this perspective that the prophets of social justice like Amos (Am 5:21-24), Isaiah (Is 58: 5-7), Micah, (6:10-16), and Jeremiah (Jer. 22:3-4) stood vehemently in opposition against the false religion and injustice of their time (Ezech, 2018).

In the New Testament, Jesus was uncompromising on people's rights to the basic necessities of life. This is illustrated in the passage on feeding the five thousand people Matt. 14: 13-21; Mk. 6:30-44; Lk. 9:10-17 and Jn. 6:1-14. The narrative tells us that Jesus recognized the right of the hungry crowd following him to have food and insisted on the moral responsibility of his disciples to provide for it, rather than send them away hungry. By instructing his disciples to give the people something to eat, Jesus taught them to reject inaction and get involved in ameliorating the dehumanizing condition of the hungry crowd. Indeed, Jesus took the lead to provide abundance for the people and ordered the gathering of the leftovers to avoid waste (Matt. 14:20; Ezech, 2020). As highlighted by Ezech (2020):

This action of Jesus underscores the fact that it is morally unacceptable for rich individuals, corporate bodies, and wealthy nations to hoard and waste food, while millions of people starve as victims of anthropological poverty. In modern society, it should be considered a moral obligation of justice and equity that the superfluous wealth of rich individuals and countries be mobilized and used for the benefit of and the service of hungry people and poor nations (Ezech 2020:12).

Biblical sense of justice demands moral responsibility to eradicate all obstacles that inhibit the poor from sharing fully in the benefits and commitments of the human community.



The Tradition of the Church: Interventions of the Church Fathers on Poverty in Society

The scriptures set a perspective for Christian understanding and dealing with the issue of poverty. It especially influenced the early Christian writers who contextualized the scriptural teachings to address the poverty and issues of injustice of their times. The *Didache* which refers to the teachings of the twelve Apostles is instructive about how to deal with the issue of poverty and the poor who suffer the taunt of poverty. According to Duffy, 2008:44, “*Didache* is praising hospitality, strongly urging almsgiving and a sharing of goods, and recommending kind treatment of slaves”. Clement of Alexandria encouraged Christians to share what they did not need and to be careful not to distinguish between those deserving of their help and those not deserving of it. Ambrose of Milan gave also moral guidelines regarding wealth, poverty, and the relationship with the poor in society. According to Ambrose, every person created by God has the right to share in the universal wealth of creation that God gave generously to humanity. He condemned greed which is the foundational attitude of people that robs the poor of their share in the wealth of creation (Evans, 2006). Augustine, influenced by stoic philosopher Cicero, maintained that injustice is inimical to the human community. He insisted that for the proper functioning of any society or government, it is necessary to have a high degree of justice. For Augustine, justice will naturally flow where God is put first in the lives of every man and woman. According to Thomas Aquinas, the non-commitment to the common good and injustice against the people is the principal cause of poverty in society. This is because when peoples’ dues are not rendered to them, they are deprived of their means of livelihood and survival (ST, q.58). For Thomas Aquinas, it is the lack of compassion that gives rise to poverty in human society.

Modern Magisterial Teaching on Poverty

Pope Leo XIII in his encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*, (1891), addressed the problem of the exploitation and deplorable working conditions of workers in the wake of the Industrial Revolution in Europe. The encyclical criticized the exploitative excess of the capitalist and socialist systems which pressed unjustly hard on majority of the workers. It asserted the natural rights of humans to ownership of private property and defined the ethical implications and moral responsibilities that go with such rights. It also stated that workers should be able to form unions for mutual assistance. The pope challenged factory owners and labour employers to provide proper remuneration to workers, sufficient for one’s self and one’s family to live a meaningful life in accordance with human dignity.

John XXIII in his publication, *Pacem in Terris*, (1963), maintained that the right to life is interconnected with quality of life and therefore with the right to a decent and healthy standard of living. He insisted that to achieve this, every person has the right to equal assessment to the wealth of the Mother Earth, which is the common patrimony of all human beings. He contended that it is a scandal and a grave injustice to have people live in abject poverty amid many wealthy people, institutions, corporations, and nations. The Second Vatican Council in the document *Gaudium et Spes* (1965) decried the scandal of glaring poverty amidst so much wealth in various communities in modern times. According to them, “In no other age has mankind enjoyed such an abundance of wealth, resources and economic well-being; and yet a huge proportion of the people of the world is plagued by hunger and extreme need while countless numbers are totally illiterate” (*Gaudium et Spes* No. 4). The document also condemned the unjust socio-economic structures which privilege the rich at the expense of the wellbeing of the poor. It called for the reform of such structures as very pivotal in dealing with the issue of injustice in society.

Paul VI called for a new social order in the following terms:

It is not just a matter of eliminating hunger, nor even of reducing poverty. The struggle against destitution, though urgent and necessary, is not enough. It is a question, rather, of building a world where man and woman, no matter their race, religion or nationality, can live a fully human life, freed from servitude imposed on them by other people or by natural forces over which they have not sufficient control; a world where freedom is not an empty word and where the poor man Lazarus can sit down at the same table with the rich man. This demands generosity, much sacrifice and unceasing effort on the part of the rich person (*Populorum Progressio*, 1967:47).

The magisterial response to the socio-economic issue has continued to date. This Christian social teaching is relevant in addressing poverty in Nigeria. The Catholic Bishops Conference has also continued to be a moral voice in calling out the government through homilies, visits, and communicate and demanding from them responsible leadership which will position the nations on the path of prosperity and thereby eradicate abject poverty and other unfortunate situations that are ravaging the country. According to Ezech (2020),

Indeed, Christian social teaching carries with it important ethical implications and challenges. It demands a reform of lifestyle to reject greed and corruption in order to enable everyone to have a



healthy and decent standard of living and thus, put a check to widespread socio-economic inequality. It challenges the rich to adopt a simple lifestyle that upholds fairness in the use of the common good and makes the poor less dependent on charity and palliatives (Ezeh, 2020:12).

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has created awareness on the reality, the causes and the ethical implications of poverty in Nigeria. It has demonstrated how successive governments of the nation did not prioritize the common good, but have rather misused the public treasury for personal enrichment, thus leaving the vast majority of the populace in abject poverty. The research has also expounded the Human Rights' principles as a more comprehensive approach in addressing the problem of abject poverty in society. It has similarly demonstrated the pragmatism of Christian Social Teaching in dealing with social justice concerning poverty and wealth in society. This is meant to provide an opportunity for the government of Nigeria, the citizens and all stakeholders to rethink and unite in partnership to form a common front and offer a sustainable panacea to the perennial problem of abject poverty in a supposedly wealthy nation. Since the issue of poverty affects the entire populace, it is hoped that the citizens of Nigeria would be educated through the study to avail themselves of the necessary information to ameliorate the conditions of their lives and thus contribute meaningfully to a lasting solution to the injustice of poverty in society.

Therefore, the study recommends the following: Nigeria should develop its non-oil economy and establish functional checks to eliminate the embezzlement of public wealth. More entrepreneurial skills acquisition and vocational training centres, as well as small-scale business should be established to lift people out of poverty. Government should invest more and raise its budgets in the Education and the Health sectors to meet the recommendations of the United Nations. The principles of human rights should henceforth guide wealth distribution in Nigeria to eradicate poverty. Election to the positions of the Executive and the Legislative arms of the government should be based primarily on the integrity of character and the political willpower to promote the human dignity and the rights of people. The Judiciary should work in tandem with the Executive and the Legislators to ensure that the dignity and rights of the citizens are always and everywhere upheld and protected. Nigerians must be constantly reminded of the ethical implications of poverty and the moral responsibility to eradicate it.

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