

## **Social Costs of Poverty: The Case of Crime in Nigeria**

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**Abstract:** *Poverty in Nigeria, like in most developing nations of Africa, is widespread and seems to be on the increase by the day. When poverty is coupled with high levels of economic and social aspirations, the stage is set for criminal activities - particularly official corruption, robbery and dealing in illegal goods and services. People, who are thwarted in attaining desired social and economic goals legally, may seek to obtain them illegally. This paper using anomie theory, analysis how poverty, resulting from unemployment and inflation, increases criminal activities in Nigeria. The discussion stresses that poverty is a social problem that deserves serious attention. It noted that the social problems which afflict Nigerians as a people are the result of the faulty strategy of development which has prevailed in the country, the particular set of economic and social policies to which that strategy has given rise and the particular structural arrangements which have produced and sustained both the strategy and the policies. It recommends a drastic modification of the development strategy, both at the macro and micro levels.*

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### **I. Introduction**

Poverty in Africa is a threat to economic and social stability. About 45 percent of the approximately 590 million people in sub-Saharan Africa live below the poverty line, implying that potential human resources are underdeveloped and underutilized. Citizens are often disenfranchised and politically frustrated. The risk of social upheaval is increased by the high and growing inequality in many African countries. The severe crisis that engulfed the African social sector in the 1980s has not abated. High rates of unemployment, currently estimated at 30 per cent, may well continue to the end of the century, contributing to the high levels of poverty which remain the main challenge to development efforts in Africa (ECA/UN.1995).

Nigeria, for example, reported by the World Bank (1996), is rich but the people are poor. Per capita income today is around the same level as in 1970. And in between, over \$200 billion has been earned from the exploitation of the country's oil resources. This, and the management of the great oil windfall, have dominated the progress and decline of Nigeria's economy over the past two decades, and have significantly influenced the evolution and perception of poverty. The economy is currently characterized by a large rural, mostly agricultural-based, traditional sector, which comprises about two-thirds of the poor, and by a smaller urban capital-intensive sector, which has benefited most from the exploitation of the country's resources and from the provision of services that successive governments have provided.

While it is true that Nigeria has made much progress over the last 30 years and that many of the people today have higher living standards than they did before independence in 1960, absolute poverty and deprivation still exist on a scale which is unacceptable in the 21st Century. It has been estimated that the share of the population in poverty was 34 percent in 1992, a decline from 43 per cent in 1985 (World Bank, 1996). Events since 1992 have, however, eroded many of the positive changes that took place. With a reversal of many of the policies that contributed to growth and poverty reduction during 1986-1992, Nigeria's fragile economy has again fallen on hard times, and poverty has certainly worsened. Due to the increasing poverty, many people suffer other deprivations: insufficient food, illiteracy, inadequate shelter, disease, lack of remunerative employment, exploitation and insecurity of life and property.

When poverty is coupled with high levels of economic and social aspirations, the stage is set for criminal activities - particularly official corruption, robbery and dealing in illegal goods and services. People who are thwarted in attaining desired social and economic goals legally may seek to obtain them illegally. In addition, the costs of being apprehended and convicted of a crime are less for those living in poverty than for persons from middle and upper income groups. The latter certainly have more to lose in terms of income - if not in terms of social status. Thus we found that slums of large cities produce a disproportionate share of criminals. The incidence of robbery and traffic "in illegal goods tends to be high among members of minority groups who feel the burden of both economic and social discrimination.

The standards and social values of a society are an important determinant of criminal activities. Society's attitudes toward corruption, cheating on one's income tax, embezzling, fraud, and interfering with the right to privacy help set the stage for acts that may be considered criminal. In Nigeria, there is a tendency to exalt the rich without bothering about the source of the wealth.

One of the most pronounced nation-building problems in Nigeria is that of poor political leadership. (Times week, Oct 7, 1991 pp 3-54). The political leaders have been largely corrupt, inclined towards non-democratic practices and such capricious redistribution of the nation's wealth in manners that promoted poverty among many and opulence among a small privileged class. While such issues as the provision of pipe-borne water, electricity, agricultural inputs, free education and health care rank low on the programs of these successive regimes, they largely favored white elephant projects that reinforced poverty among a large section of Nigerians. As articulated in the Africa Common Position on Human and Social Development (UNECA, 1994), there is a massive under-investment in the social sector in Africa, typified especially by the neglect of areas such as poverty alleviation and employment generation which should have priorities.

### **The Theoretical Perspective**

Tard (1894) was one of the earliest writers to establish a relationship between crime and environment. He believed that people learn crime through imitation or contact with criminals in their environment. It is his view that unhealthy exposure to certain environments would induce criminality. While agreeing largely with Tard, Bonger (1916) and Dahrendorf (1976) argue that poverty as a social condition or existence plays a vital role in crime. The poor are led to crime because of their relative deprivation and acute sense of want. As a result; the social environment of the poor rather than their physical environment leads them to crime. This observation seems to tally largely with the existing reality in Nigeria today where a person's worth in life and his contribution to society is solely measured by his wealth. The structural expectation imbued in this may lead one to corrupt and criminal practices in order to ascend the societal status ladder.

The most relevant theory in this paper is anomie theory. Anomie is a term closely associated with two theorists, Emile Durkheim and Robert K Merton. When Durkheim introduced the term in his 1893 book, *The Division of Labor in Society*, he used it to describe a condition of "deregulation" occurring in society. By this, he meant that the general procedural rules of a society (the rules that say how people ought to behave toward each other) have broken down and that people do not know what to expect from each other. This deregulation, or formlessness, easily leads to deviant behavior. Durkheim used the term anomie later, in *Suicide* (1897), to refer also to a morally deregulated condition (Olson, 1965) where people have inadequate moral controls over their behavior. Thus, a society may be anomic if people do not know when to quit striving for success, or how to treat other people along the way. Whichever of these two descriptions of anomie is used, a breakdown in either the rules of society or the moral norms, it is clear that Durkheim was talking about a disruption of normal societal conditions.

Anomie, then, refers to the breakdown of social norms and a condition where those norms no longer control the activity of societal members. Without clear rules to guide them, individuals cannot find their place in society and have difficulty adjusting to the changing conditions of life. This in turn leads to dissatisfaction, frustration, conflict, and deviance. Studying France and Europe after the Industrial Revolution, Durkheim saw economic crises, forced industrialization, and commercialization as factors producing anomie.

Like the Industrial Revolution, the Great Depression of the 1930s, in the United States of America, also produced insights for social psychologists. An entire generation of social psychologists could observe the collapsing and deregulation of social traditions and the effect that it had upon both individuals and the institutions of society. Merton noted that crime was not necessarily an intrinsic part of the person and rejected individualistic views of pathology (Merton and Ashley- Montagu, 1940). The increasing popularity of Durkheim's discussion of anomie, when combined with the Depression, provided psycho-sociological insights into the connection between social structure and deviant behavior. Similarly, the notion of the division of labor opened up possibilities for an examination of the role of aspirations and opportunities in society.

Merton's (1938) anomie theory is, above all, a theory of deviance, that is, it does not focus on criminality. Further, Merton's conception of deviance is relatively general. When one conceives of a society which emphasizes well-structured goals for its members and equally structured avenues to reach those goals, deviance becomes any behavior that does not follow commonly-accepted values. For example, Merton uses the term deviance to refer to bureaucratic behavior, as well as to criminal behavior. Merton noted that there are certain goals which are strongly emphasized throughout society (he uses the example of financial success). Society also emphasizes (legitimizes) certain means to reach those goals. When these goals are too strongly stressed, as Merton said financial success was in the United States, the stage is set for anomie. Not everyone has equal access to the achievement of legitimate financial success and, as a result, may search for other, perhaps illegitimate, ways of succeeding.

Because of social disorganization, the approved means to reach the success goals are not readily available to certain groups in society, even though the goals are said to apply equally to all. Certain groups of people, the lower social class and minorities, for instance, may be at a disadvantage in gaining business positions which would allow them to pursue the goal of financial success. When this inequality exists because of the way society itself is structured, Merton views the social structure as anomie. Given the evidence that there

are several segments of society in which legitimate avenues to success are severely restricted, without a corresponding reduction in the emphasis on achievement, Nigerian society seems to be in a permanent state of anomie. The individuals caught in these anomic conditions (largely the lower classes) are then faced with the strain of being unable to reconcile their aspirations with their limited opportunities.

Of note, however, is the fact that legitimate means are not necessarily the most efficient methods of reaching the goals. Other means, although perhaps illegitimate or de-emphasized by society, may not only be available but also more efficient. It is also important to keep in mind that Merton was only using the focus on financial success as a consistent example throughout his work; he did not mean to imply that it was the only major goal which exists in society. In fact, Merton later stated that

"The theory holds that any extreme emphasis upon achievement – whether this be scientific productivity, accumulation of personal wealth or, by a small stretch of the imagination, the conquests of a Don Juan – will attenuate conformity to the institutional norms governing behavior resigned to achieve the particular form of 'success,' especially among those who are socially disadvantaged in the competitive race. It is the conflict between cultural goals and the availability of using institutional means - whatever the character of the goals – which produces a strain toward anomie" (1968:220).

Merton presents five ways (modes) of adapting to this strain. If the emphasis on socially approved goals and means is maintained even in the face of realization that the means are restricted, an individual will remain conforming. Most people follow this adaptation, Merton maintains; if they did not, the very existence of society would be threatened. The remaining four modes, however, represent a departure from this all-endorsing adaptation and thus are the "real" deviant modes of adaptation.

First is the case in which the emphasis on the approved goals of society is maintained while legitimate means are replaced by other, non-approved means. This mode of adaptation is called innovation and is the most common of the four deviant types. It is of interest that innovative means, especially for some segments of society, may actually be more efficient in reaching a goal than the approved means to do so. For example, instead of saving money and letting it slowly earn interest in a bank, a faster way of accumulating a lot of money would be to rob the bank.

If, on the other hand, the goals themselves are rejected and focus is shifted to the means, the mode of adaptation is that of ritualism. In this mode the means can become the aspirations of an individual, as when one may attempt to treat a job (means) as a form of security instead of using the job as a means of achieving success. In this example, keeping the job has become a goal by itself, resolving the frustration of unsuccessfully chasing the original goal.

A third mode, retreatism, involves a rejection of both the goals and means. Retreatists are those individuals who opt not to be innovative and, at the same time, need to resolve their inability to reach the important goals in life. Their solution is that they simply quit trying to get ahead. This pattern is best seen as "dropping out" of society and is exemplified by vagrants, drunkards and drug addicts. The final mode of adaptation, rebellion, is of a different type from the other three. Where they emphasize rejection of means or goals, or both, rebellion focuses on the substitution of new goals and means for the existing ones. Merton's conception suggests that rebellion,

"... Leads men outside the environing social structure to envisage and seek to bring into being a new that is to say a greatly modified, social structure. It presupposes alienation from reigning goals and standards" (Merton, 1968:209).

These individuals, then, are precisely what the term indicates: rebels and revolutionaries. In short, Merton's anomie theory explains how the social structure itself contributes to the creation of deviance on all levels, although the primary focus of the theory is on the lower class. Because of the societally-induced disjunction (separation) between cultural aspirations and the approved methods of attaining those aspirations, the lower class is most likely to exhibit deviant, non-approved, adaptive behavior.

Anomie theory is a positivist theory. In contrast to other positivist theories that locate pathology within the individual, anomie theory locates pathology within the social structure. Merton is explaining how a pathological social structure (one in which there is an undue emphasis on goals, especially economic ones, without corresponding avenues of access available to all the members of that society) serves to create a strain in certain segments of society and, ultimately, a push toward deviance. Because of this concern with structural strain, anomie theory is often referred to as a "strain theory."

The assumption of a consensus of values also characterizes anomie theory. Nigerian society, for example, imposes upon us the "right" things to do and the "right" ways to do them. Unless there is considerable unanimity about societal goals and means, there can be no anomic condition which results in adaptations to those goals and means. In other words, adaptations or deviations would merely be alternate modes of success or achievement.

Anomie is a structural theory. It focuses on the way society is structured and the way in which that structure serves to create deviance within our society. It does not, nor did Merton intend to, specify the process

by which individuals become deviant. Instead, anomie deals with the pathology of existing social structure and the subsequent forms of deviance arising in the various segments of society as a whole. In short, Merton intends to explain variations in rates of deviance (Merton, 1968:186) among societal groups and not how the process of choosing among adaptations takes place. This broad scope and emphasis on explaining social structure also makes anomie a macro theory. Finally, anomie theory is often called a functionalist theory. Functionalism presumes that it is desirable to explain a social phenomenon in terms of its effect on, and its consequences for, the social structure in which it exists. In other words, Merton uses the conception of cultural goals and norms to explain how they serve to produce both conformity and deviance within the social structure.

## **II. Poverty in Nigeria**

Using data from the Federal Office of Statistics (FOS), such as the National Consumer Survey (NCS) conducted by the FOS in 1985 and 1992, the Demographic Household Survey (1992) and the General Household Survey (1990), the World Bank, recently, presented a poverty profile for Nigeria. The World Bank (1996) analysis showed that the proportion of the population in poverty in Nigeria fell from 43 per cent in 1985 to 34 per cent in 1992—from 36 million people (out of a population of 83 million) to 34 million people (out of a population, of 102 million). While the population decline is significant the decline in number is negligible reflecting the high growth rate of population. This small decline of the number in poverty masks the different trends for the urban and rural areas. Urban poverty increased and rural poverty declined. The number of poor in rural areas fell from 26.3 million to 22.8 million, while those in urban poverty rose from 9.7 million to 11.9 million. For those in extreme poverty there is a similar trend of urban immiseration. Incidence of extreme or core poverty increased nationally from 10 million to 14 million people between 1986 and 1992 with a tripling of the headcount in urban areas (1.5 million to 4.3 million) and a small increase in rural areas (from 8.6 million to 9.6 million).

The World Bank (1996) also compared the incidence of poverty in Nigeria with other countries using a poverty line of US\$1 per day per person converted to "purchasing power parity." Such a comparison indicates that income inequality in Nigeria in 1992 was substantially greater than in Cote d'Ivoire and Ghana. Both West African neighbors of Nigeria. Factors Contributing To Poverty

## **III. Unemployment**

The World Bank study, like most other studies, noted that employment is a strong indicator of poverty. According to the World Bank (1996), where the head of the household was working, poverty fell substantially, by 1992, from 52.5 to 35.1 percent for: the self-employed; and from 46 per cent to 28.4 per cent for wage earners. However, the Labor Force Sample Survey conducted by the FOS in June, 1995, indicated that the urban unemployment rate rose from 2.3 per cent in June, 1994 to 3.6 per cent in June, 1995 while the rural rate dropped from 1.7 to 1.4 (opposite). The low trend should, however, be interpreted with caution as the low rate of open unemployment could be attributed to the large size of informal sector activities, even though most of the people involved in such activities were underemployed. According to the Central Bank of Nigeria (1996), indicators were that the problem of unemployment intensified in 1995.

## **IV. Inflation**

The economic indicator with which this paper has tried to gauge inflationary pressures is the Consumer Price Index (CPI). Data from the Federal Office of Statistics (FOS, 1996) showed that the average all-items composite Consumer Price Index in 1995 stood at 2,040.4 (1985 = 100). This implies an inflation rate of 72.8 percent compared with 57.0 percent in 1994. In fact, there has been a steady increase in all items CPI in the last five years (see Table 2 over). At 2,017 (1985 = 100), the food index which accounted for 69.1 percent of the total household expenditure rose by 71.8 percent compared with 46.8 percent in the preceding year. Again, the rise in food index has been consistent in the last five years. The increase in non-food components of the index ranged from 55.0 per cent for transportation to 92.1 per cent for household goods and other purchases (Table 2): The trend in price movement was the same in both the urban and rural areas, although prices increased faster in the rural centres, reflecting largely the high distribution cost of food items arising from the poor conditions of roads and high maintenance cost of vehicles (FOS, 1996). The inflationary trend is in spite of a relatively stable GDP per capita over the past five years. The result of the unemployment and inflationary trend is a felt worsening economic condition and decline in welfare for most Nigerians.

## **V. Crime**

There are many young people who are not gainfully employed, some of them being highly educated. For survival, they may resort to criminality and will tend to rationalize this act on the grounds of economic survival. Strain theory argues that criminal involvement should be relatively high whenever legitimate opportunities to achieve success are closed to the individual (Merton, 1968; Cohen, 1955; Cloward & Ohlin,

1960). Since the realm is the legitimate opportunity structure for adults, it follows that unemployment ought to be positively associated with criminal involvement. The Nigeria Police Force confirmed that property crime, which is a crime associated with economic survival, records the highest proportion of reported crimes in Nigeria (FOS, 1996). Property crimes include theft and other stealing, and robbery, burglary, house-breaking, store-breaking, false pretence and cheating, forgery, receiving stolen property, arson and unlawful possession. Data from the Nigeria Police Force for recent years, indicate an increase in the occurrence of property crime in Nigeria. It is thus obvious that as poverty, produced by unemployment and inflation increases, crimes against property will increase. Incidence of armed robbery and other associated crimes can be observed to be inversely proportional to the state of the economy, i.e., when the economy is buoyant, there is less crime, and the reverse is the case when the economy is down. The longer people remain unemployed, the more they are tempted to commit crimes to satisfy their needs.

## **VI. Conclusion**

In Nigeria, it seems emphasis is placed on individual pursuit of wealth to the neglect of social development which is concerned with a general improvement in the quality of life of the people. In any country experiencing rapid techno-industrial change, the emergence or aggregation of certain social problems is to be expected. However, unless government tackles earnestly the socioeconomic problems, criminal activities will not abate. For example, raising living standards, increasing incomes, eliminating unemployment, providing social welfare services, improving housing and offering medical or psychiatric services, where necessary, will reduce crime or at least will prevent the commission of more crimes.

The neglect of social development can be held, among other causes, as the factor responsible for the development of institutional structures which foster and encourage mass unemployment, inequality, exploitation, poverty, deprivation and frustration. This kind of environment tends to encourage crime. In fact, the ongoing change in the country is enough to create those conflicts and disjunctions in values, inter-personal relationships and the social situation generally, which are the veritable sources of social problems.

As Akeredolu-Ale (1982) had noted, those who have advocated policies of income redistribution in developing countries in the past have usually done so only on the argument that a reduction of income inequality is necessary for greater social justice. The emphasis in the equity argument may be valid but, in a fiercely materialistic world, it has usually not proved convincing to those who are in charge of the planning machinery and can influence policy decisions. Improvements in the standard of living, especially of the masses, are not a dimension that most economists would include in a minimal definition of economic development, either in the sense that such improvements, in themselves, constitute part of the development phenomenon, or in the sense that they are necessary conditions for further sustained economic growth, at least in the medium- and long-term. The former sense is essentially an equity argument, but it seems that the later sense deserves to be emphasized more strongly as a basis for more egalitarian income distribution policies. It is important to demonstrate and underline; especially for the benefit of the planners and policy-makers how income redistribution and general poverty alleviation measures, hitherto regarded simply as a welfarist expedient, can be a crucial socioeconomic investment and a sensible approach to solving some of society's more pressing problems, even in the sphere of economic production and performance.

There are spill-over benefits to society of provision of social services like education and health programmes to the poor. For instance, many believe that over and above the direct benefits to the individuals who receive education (greater productivity, earning power, and direct consumption benefits), there are additional benefits to the society as a whole. Some of the spill-over commonly cited are a better functioning democratic process stemming from greater voter literacy, more enlightened citizens to make the society a more pleasant place in which to live, better government services to the community, improved community sanitation techniques and facilities, reduced crime rates, and reduced fire hazards.

A refusal to apply poverty alleviation measures can result in costs to the society. Poverty is a social problem that, for instance, increases the risk of criminal activities and social upheaval, and can be a threat to economic, social and political stability. For example, very rapid urbanization, where the poor are concentrated and growing crime and violence is a concern as it affects economic growth. Where crime is significant and affects government (as in Lagos), we see growth down. To estimate correctly the cost of violent crime, we would start with the loss of earnings (or value of production services rendered) of the victims and of those close to the victims. Obvious costs of crimes against property are the values of property destroyed or damaged. It is not at all clear that there is a comparable didn't cost to the society of traffic in illegal goods and services - the Yoduqion and the sale of these adds to the well-being of their consumers but may at the same time impose offsetting spill-over costs on the society as a whole. Additional costs of the whole range of criminal activities consist of the costs of prevention; apprehension, and resources used for these purposes could have been used to produce alternative goods and services valuable to consumers.

Poverty should thus be seen as a social problem which induces patterns of behavior with important negative repercussions on individuals and society as a whole. Lack of effective policy in the redress of the negative effects of poverty on development can be attributed to the lack of political commitment, ineffective co-ordination of activities and insufficient data. Scientific understanding of the social costs of poverty is necessary for relevant policy formulation and implementation sufficient to combat this social problem in an effective, and ultimately a cost benefit manner.

The social problems which at present afflict Nigerians as a people are the adult of the strategy of development which has prevailed in the country, the particular set of economic and social policies to which that strategy has given rise and the particular structural arrangements which have produced and sustained both strategy and the policies. Admittedly, several measures have been introduced over the years to deal with these problems. But, judging from the fact that the social problem situation is only getting worse, such measures can be said to have proved ineffective. Such practical measures have proved ineffective principally because they were mostly misconceived.

Social problems are, essentially and in general, a reflection of the level of marginalization in society; a consequence as well as a measure of the extent to which people are alienated from the mainstream of production and consumption, from power and decision-making processes, and from themselves. There is now an urgent need for a drastic modification of the development strategy; in particular, there is need for democratization of the development process.

The kind of transformation necessary will require two different levels of intervention, namely:

- (1) at a macro-national level, whose objective is to transform the institutional structural dynamics in the country and render them more conducive to the pursuit of democratic economic and social development;
- (2) at a micro-sectoral level of intervention whose objective is to produce visible change and amelioration of the present situation, in particular human/social development sectors.

This operational demarcation is proposed in view of the fact that the social questions which need to be resolved as a basis for and in the process of the kind of transformation envisaged at the macro-national level (the form of economic organization, the role of the state in the economy, the structure of political power, economic inequality, etc) are essentially political in nature and their resolution is expected to emerge in time. In contrast, the kind of transformation envisaged at the micro-sectoral level is addressed mostly to questions concerning the quality of life of the people and of their capacity to perform effectively and optimally and to contribute towards stable improvements in their own life-quality and towards national socioeconomic development.

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