

CHALLENGES TO RURAL COMMUNITIES

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***Abstract:** One major characteristic of developing countries is the increasing disparity between the urban and rural centres in terms of concentration of infrastructures and investment. The rural areas are the repository of agricultural production and agriculture contributes no less than 40% of the GDP of Nigeria and employs over 55% of the population, yet the area remains an abode for the poorest population as poverty and other social issues thrive. The paper explores the variegated challenges confronting the rural areas and communities in Nigeria. By juxtaposing the rural areas with the urban centres, the paper makes a case that poverty is predominantly a rural phenomenon. It is the fundamental argument of the paper that the rural areas are socially excluded from the development equation in the country. By reflecting on the colonial era, the paper further argued that the social exclusion of the rural areas is borne out of the colonial Township policies and programmes continued and pursued by the post-colonial Nigerian state which is meant particularly to overlook the rural areas from the urban areas. The study relies particularly on extant literatures obtained through the internet, Library and journals. The paper ends by making recommendations for integrating the principles of sustainable development into the country's policies and programs for the rural areas, and recommends a focus on the capacity of the rural people through education.*

Keywords: Poverty, Rural Communities, Remote Rural Areas, Social Exclusion, Development, MDG, Environmental Challenge.

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INTRODUCTION

This paper draws attention to the variegated challenges confronting the rural areas. A major characteristic of the developing countries is the increasing disparity between the urban and rural centres. This gap according to Igboeli (1992) cited in Akpomuvie (2010:88) is rooted in the neo-classical economic theories which presumed that "development can be accelerated by concentrating investment in the cities and that rural poverty will possibly be ameliorated by the trickle down of benefits from the urban industrial growth". The realities confronting the rural areas in recent time however stand in clear opposition to such trickle down hypothesis adumbrated by neo-classical theorists.

Rural communities are the hub of agricultural production in any society, be it developed or developing. Oil exploration and exploitation activities, especially in Nigeria takes place in rural communities. Thus, the economic and social relevance of rural areas to every society is of immense nature (European Commission, 2008). The activity of rural communities in terms of agricultural productivity is the bane of food supply to the urban areas or metropolitan centres. In spite of this, rural communities continue to be backward in all ramifications, and rural investment is lacking. Over time, rural communities in Nigeria have been neglected and abandoned. The chronic and alarming circumstances and influences surrounding rural communities however present a clear and impending threat to future human settlement. The nature of the rural condition vis-à-vis the abundant resources is thus a paradox (Abbass, 2003). Over time, there has continuously been a growing differentiation between the rural areas and the urban areas. This differentiation, with a view to urban bias, has generated a demarcation in identification between these two areas. On the one hand, the rural areas have become practically known by the nomenclature – remote rural areas (RRAs) (Bird et al. 2001). While on the other hand, the urban areas have continuously advanced from urban to metropolis, to mega-polis, and even mega-cities. Generally, this distinction borders on the lack of various facilities in the rural areas, due mainly and particularly to neglect, abandonment and deprivation (Deaville, 2003; Oreh, 2008; European Commission, 2009). This is only a testament of the increasing divide between these two, but that is just by the way as our focus in this paper is reducible to the rural areas.

Therefore this paper underscores the multiplicity of challenges facing the rural areas, which has collapsed rural development and investment opportunities. It is argued in this paper that the rural areas or communities as it were are a socially excluded area in the development equation of Nigeria. This exclusion as will be shown here, ranges from poor infrastructural facilities, health challenges, environmental challenges to rural poverty. The dynamics of this social exclusion as portrayed here is the bane of rural-urban drift that has provoked the burgeoning urban population crisis. The paper is structured into seven sections. Immediately following the introduction is the section on rural community as a concept, the third section focuses on infrastructural challenges and rural communities. In the fourth section, we examine the challenge of poverty and rural communities, while the fifth section deals with health, HIV/AIDS and the rural people. The sixth section highlights the environmental challenges confronting rural communities, and is followed by the concluding remark. For the purpose of clarity and to avoid any form of confusion and ambiguity, the concepts, rural areas and rural communities are seen as the same and are used interchangeably in this work.

RURAL COMMUNITY AS A CONCEPT

In this section our goal is to attempt to demystify the concept, rural community. But first before we go into that, we have to comprehend the meaning of the term rural. Then from there we would equally make an attempt at understanding the meaning of a community. The question that immediately comes to mind is, where does urban

begin and rural end? When one thinks of the term "rural," in most countries it is associated with the occupation of farming, as against factory or other industry with concentration of population. Many other factors are thought to be associated with rural people. Some of these feelings are mere stereotypes; others are factual. These differences have stemmed from basic differences in their environments that have had consequent impact on their personalities and their lives.

The concept "Rural" can first be said to differ from that of "Urban". This is so because those who reside or live in villages can be referred to as rural dwellers, whereas those who reside in cities and metropolises are urban dwellers. The term, "Rural" can be defined as areas with low population density, and relative isolation, where the major economic activity is basically agricultural production, and where the people are relatively homogenous in their values, attitude and behaviour (Beter *et al.* 1975). The U.S Census Bureau refers to 'rural' as constituting an area of fewer than 1000 people per square mile (Griffiths *et al.* 2010). On the other hand, Mundi (2006) is of the view that the areas considered rural are the settlements that have between 100 and 200 households. In Nigeria, rural areas have been defined as areas with a population less than 5,000 in 1956, less than 10,000 in 1963 and more recently, less than 20,000 (Igbokwe, 2001). Though, to a large extent the concept varies in the context of comparison between developed and developing societies, but may share some common similarities especially in terms of population. Staying alive is one of the most herculean tasks of the rural areas, as they are subjected to all sorts of pressures, and in many cases, leaving for the urban areas becomes even understandable and this is quite common with developing countries.

The next step here is to comprehend the meaning of a community. First, a community can be seen as a conglomeration of people of similar interests. The term "community" has been used equally to denote something both psychological and geographical. Psychologically, it implies shared interests, characteristics or association as in the expression "Community of interests", "the business community", "the academic community" or "a farming community". Geographically, it denotes a specific area where people cluster (Cavaye, 2001). Bruhn says there is no single agreed upon definition of the concept of community. Yet, to him, "it may generally imply a group of people in a certain geographical locale or in cyberspace that go beyond casual acknowledgement" (Bruhn, 2011:12). These relationships are closer than casual relationships, as he pointed out, because the group shares some common goals, common values and perhaps a way of life that reinforces each other, creates positive feelings, and results in a degree of mutual commitment and responsibility. However, the sociological definition of a community combines the two meanings and denotes a people within a common locality having shared interests and behavioural patterns. Such shared interests' and behavioral patterns show mainly in the areas of: production, distribution and even consumption. Clearly therefore the above depicts the characterization of rural communities, as they are a people within a given locality with

shared interests and a behavioural pattern. Such behavioural patterns are obvious in their culture, belief system as well as productive capability.

INFRASTRUCTURAL CHALLENGES OF RURAL COMMUNITIES

Rural communities are clearly distinct from urban settlements, particularly in the provision and maintenance of infrastructures. Nigeria has a population of about 170 million (CIA, 2013), 75% of this population according to (Agbodike, 2010) is in the rural areas. Nigeria's over 170 million people are largely rural residents and thus rural-urban distribution of amenities shows a lopsided balance against the predominantly rural population. This trend therefore demonstrates that urban policies and preferences, under the pretext of rural development in Nigeria, have dominated public proclamations and pronouncements of the political leadership in false slogan of rural transformation, poverty alleviation, etc (Abbass, 2003).

According to Olayiwola and Adeleye (2005) infrastructural facilities are elements in the package of basic needs, which a community would like to procure for better living. Rural infrastructural facilities can be classified into three main types; these include, physical infrastructure– such as roads, water, rural electrification, storage and processing facilities; social infrastructure such as, health and educational facilities, community centres, fire and security services; and institutional infrastructure which include credit and financial institutions, agricultural research facilities (Kahn, 1979). Comparatively, some scholars have maintained that social infrastructural development is more preferable to both physical and institutional infrastructures (Jahan and McCleery 2005; Jerome and Ariyo 2004). This is so in that investment in social infrastructure, which embraces investment in education and health, is more significant to achieving poverty reduction vis-a-vis physical and institutional infrastructure. Therefore increasing social infrastructure according to Ogun (2010) can help to improve the welfare of the people and offer better life chance opportunities. Though both physical and institutional infrastructures are without doubt quintessential, the existence of social infrastructures is a major determinant or key performance indicator for driving private investment. Fakayode *et al.* (2008) observed that rural infrastructures are very crucial to the growth of agriculture. But poor access to infrastructural facilities leads to a low agricultural production and investment in rural areas. The linkage between infrastructural developments, investment and poverty in the rural areas has been the subject of most scholarly argument. In a study, Ogun (2010) found that investment in infrastructure in general had a positive effect on poverty reduction. This was further corroborated by the work of Okoh and Ebi (2013) which indicated a positive relationship between infrastructural investment and economic growth.

The investment conditions in rural areas taken together with the generally prevailing lower incomes found in these areas create particular challenges related to the pricing of services and willingness of the private sector to participate (Brushett and John-Abraham, 2006). Rural communities are however in a mix when it comes to infrastructural

development, as one is usually constrained to a whole lot of difficulties before having access to one thing or the other, which undermines the willingness to invest and investment opportunities in the area. The state of rural infrastructure in Nigeria's rural communities is particularly worrisome given the fact that these rural communities are dispersed and, at times widely isolated. The exclusion of rural communities from infrastructural development presupposes its underdevelopment in Nigeria.

The social exclusion of the rural communities from the development equation can best be understood if one should reflect on pre-independence development policies. By 1917 the colonial government promulgated the Township Ordinance. This ordinance classified settlements in the country into three classes: namely, the first, second and third class townships. The first class townships harboured the whites and their workers. There was heavy concentration of infrastructure in these settlements (an example being Lagos). They differed from the second and the third class townships, which received little or no facilities. This created a huge gap between and amongst the townships, translating into urban development and rural abandonment. The situation continued until 1952 when the local government councils were established in Western Nigeria (Olayiwola and Adeleye, 2005). The expectation of course was that the Local councils were to be the vehicle to usher in infrastructural advancement for the rural areas. The reverse was the case, as the Local councils were gravely underfunded, hence undermining such expectations. Even after the attainment of independence, the indigenous government equally continued this anomalous system of exclusion. According to Olayiwola and Adeleye,

"Yet ironically, inspite of the limited benefits of the colonial policies, the investment pattern established during the colonial period was further consolidated by subsequent governments after independence. This is evident in all the development plans initiated since 1960" (Olayiwola and Adeleye, 2005:92).

It would appear however that rural infrastructural development may not have actually been the desire of the post-colonial government to fulfill. This is so in that the priority given to rural infrastructural development and indeed rural development in general in the first and second Development Plan was rather very low. Such priorities further expanded the inequities (as shown in figure 1) between urban and rural areas in terms of, for instance; portable or piped water supply,. Such disproportion in the coverage of water supply between the two centres does not in any way justify any good intention by the government. Thus, this readily brings to mind, the argument of Nduonof it and Nkpah (2012) that the post-colonial government is but an approximation of the colonial state, as the postcolonial government only continued and pursued very similar rural exclusion programmes. In view of this, Abbass (2003) posited that with nearly forty (40) poverty-related programs introduced in Nigeria some twenty (20) years ago, none has actually worked

Abbass (2003) further observed that an astonishing feature of the Nigerian social setting is the wide inequalities that continue to exist between the town and the country side; caused primarily by the state policy. Further studies on the source of portable water in rural communities shows that rural communities lack clean water. Data from the Federal Office of Statistics (FOS), now the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2005), reveal that water in the majority of rural communities in the Niger Delta states comes from unsafe supply facilities, including rivers, lakes or ponds, unprotected wells and boreholes (see figure 2). An NDES Report (2000) covering the states of the Niger Delta region, except Cross River State, also found that most settlements depend on untreated surface water and wells, which leads to health problems from waterborne diseases. It was estimated that only 20 per cent to 24 per cent of rural communities and 45 per cent to 50 per cent of urban communities have access to safe drinking water (UNDP, 2006). The variations in the percentage access to safe drinking water alone, speaks volume of the exclusion of the rural areas from development. Available data and coverage estimates according to (UNICEF, 2008) show that improved drinking water and sanitation coverage rates are low in Nigeria. UNICEF states that the proportion of the urban population with access to improved sources of drinking water in Nigeria (see Fig 3) decreased by 15% from 80% in 1990 to 65% in 2006. The rural areas recorded a decrease of 4% from the 34% in 1990 to 30% in 2006. In spite of this, the dichotomy between the rural and urban centres still varies to a large extent. Relatively, 50 million people remain without access to improved sources of drinking water in the rural areas in 2006 vis-à-vis 24 million people in the urban centres. With this figure, UNICEF maintains that Nigeria is completely not on track to meet the MDG target on safe water. As such, should the present negative trend of water coverage continues, statistical estimates indicates that only 44% of people in Nigeria will have access to improved water sources, far short of the MDG target and the rural areas will certainly form majority of this percentage.

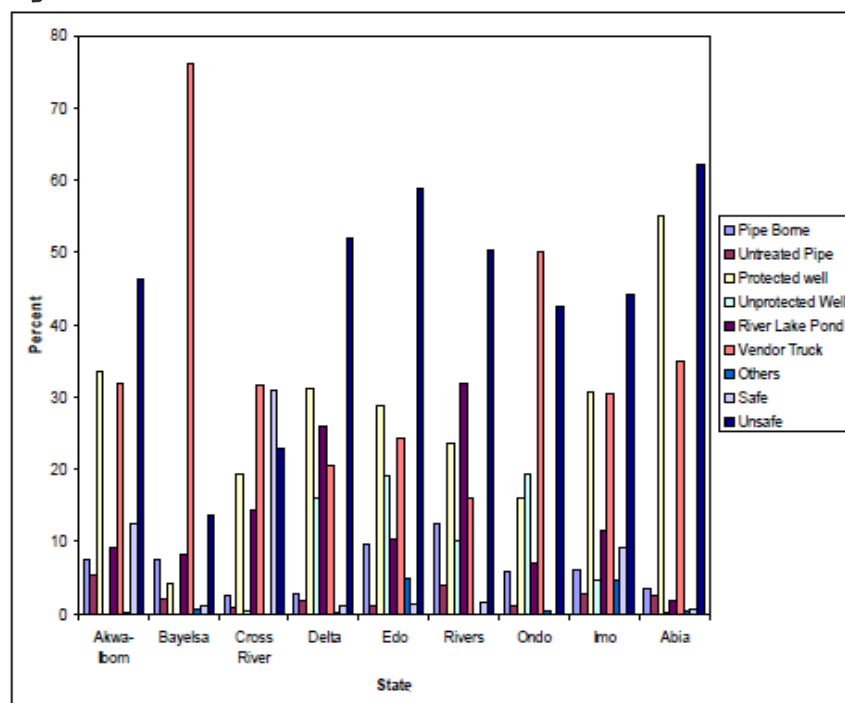
One can aptly state that the place of rural infrastructure in the development of the rural communities cannot be over-emphasized. In as much as rural communities are gravely challenged 'infrastructurally', progress becomes a cost. Since people cannot have access to certain facilities that can promote change for a better living, the option of rural-urban migration becomes inevitable. Such movement however populates the urban areas and introduces new social problems. Kidi *et al*/ (2013) noted that rural-urban migrant 'hopes of a greener pasture are usually devastated, as they become jobless, they become economically marginal people living on the fringe of society. By definition these are people without any adequate means of livelihood. Since they cannot afford decent housing or livelihood, they eventually locate areas where they live - the emergence of ecologically marginal areas. These are indecent areas with make-shift semi-houses, and such places are marginally degraded.

Figure 1: Coverage of Water Supply in Fifteen States in 1978

| States | Area in km (000) | Total population (m) | No. of centres (Urban) | Urban % served | Rural % served (a) | Rural % Served (b) | Pop served by piped water (m) |
|-------------|------------------|----------------------|------------------------|----------------|--------------------|--------------------|-------------------------------|
| Anambra | 17 | 5.69 | 32 | 37 | 64 | 9 | 1 |
| Borno | 117 | 4.53 | 18 | 70 | 0 | - | 0.5 |
| Benue | 43 | 3.53 | 8 | 80 | 88 | - | 0.2 |
| Cross River | 28 | 5.08 | 19 | 85 | 8 | 5 | 1.1 |
| Gongola | 100 | 3.5 | 17 | 31 | 2 | - | 0.2 |
| Imo | 12 | 5 | 9 | 100 | 20 | 1 | 0.7 |
| Kaduna | 70 | 6.4 | 22 | 31 | 13 | 4 | 0.7 |
| Kano | 43 | 8.36 | 20 | - | - | - | - |
| Kwara | 154 | 2.7 | 21 | 85 | 13 | 2 | 0.8 |
| Lagos | 34 | 4.53 | 4 | 94 | 4 | - | 2.2 |
| Oyo | 22 | 7.6 | 24 | 79 | - | - | 6 |
| Ogun | 16 | 2.6 | 10 | 100 | 14 | 10 | 0.8 |
| Plateau | 53 | 3.19 | 19 | 83 | 0 | - | 0.6 |
| Rivers | 28 | 2.02 | 13 | 66 | 35 | 1 | 0.3 |
| Sokoto | 64 | 6.55 | 16 | 100 | 39 | - | 0.9 |
| Total | | 68.13 | 239 | 68 | 18 | 2 | 16 |

Source: Federal Republic of Nigeria, Fourth National Development Plan (1981- 85) Vol. 1, Lagos: National Planning Office, 1981. Pp. 325.

Figure 2: Sources of Portable Water



Source: National Bureau of Statistics, 2005.

Figure 3: Urban-Rural Disparities in Access to Water, 2006.

| Year | Improved Water (%) | | |
|------|--------------------|-------|-------|
| | Total | Urban | Rural |
| 1990 | 50 | 80 | 34 |
| 2006 | 47 | 65 | 30 |

Source: UNICEF: Water and Sanitation Monitoring Platform, 2008.

THE CHALLENGE OF POVERTY AND RURAL COMMUNITIES

In 1981 half the citizens in the developing world lived in poverty (World Bank, 2013). By 2010 there was a reversal to 21 percent in spite of the progressive increase of 59 percent in the developing world population. Notwithstanding this progress many countries in the developing world continue to experience incremental growth in poverty, and Nigeria is part of this equation. Poverty rate has remained astronomical, pervasive, multifaceted, and chronic in Nigeria, but of course much more prevalent in the rural areas. Poverty trend in Nigeria by head count in the rural areas for 2003-2004 and 2009-2010 has remained 83.9% and 77.7% as against 75% for the urban areas (NBS, 2012). This prevalence is a salient effect of the social exclusion of rural communities from the development agenda. Nigeria is predominantly rural, less than a quarter of Nigerians live in towns or urbanized centres, yet the greatest number of people experiencing poverty in the country are those in the rural communities. Kempe (2008) stated that poverty in Africa is predominantly rural with approximately 59 percent of the rural population living in poverty. Poverty is a grave challenge to the rural people and this has impoverished rural livelihood, hindering the self-actualisation of the rural youth. The question then is, what is poverty?

Poverty is a relative concept, and it is hard to define. Different writers see it differently. Generally speaking, poverty is said to exist when an individual or a group of people, in a particular society cannot attain a 'minimum' level of well-being. A rural discussant in a focus group discussion (FGD) described poverty as,

"The poor person is one who cannot pay school fees for his children; cannot meet any needs, including food; has no farm land and cannot farm well; cannot take part in age-grade activities (responsibilities that are specifically designated to some age groups in communities); cannot afford to send his children to school; wears tattered clothes; is very lean; and has no house to live in. In short, a poor person is one who has nothing. Consequently, he 'has no voice' in the community" (UNDP, 2006:59).

The above description however shows that poverty is an abject state. Concurring, Okafor (2004) posited that poverty is an abject state of being, in which an individual is incapable of utilizing resources around him to improve himself economically, socially, politically and otherwise. César Calvo and Stefan Dercon (2009) maintained that, poverty is considered a state of deprivation, with a living standard below some minimal level. This minimal level in most standards is quantified in terms of income and, or consumption. With regards to income, the rural areas are chronically poor and this has corresponding impact on their nutritional base. To this end, our definition of poverty is that it is a state of exclusion from the social processes of growth and development that defines the quality of human existence. As earlier mentioned, poverty is most prevalent in the rural areas. This has frustrated rural households from decent meals and education. Being educated is a fundamental component of the quality of life of an individual. Hence, the lack of education is an intrinsic form of deprivation. Moreover, education and training provision play a fundamental role in determining levels of human capital, which in turn, have an impact on rates of economic growth of the area (European Commission, 2008). Therefore, the understanding of the existing differences in education between rural and urban areas underscores poverty and social exclusion in Nigeria. The poor state of the rural areas has also created the information gap between rural and urban centres, making information accessibility quite difficult. (Mtega and Malekani, 2009).

In a study, (Omonona, 2010) noted that poverty in Nigeria is predominantly a rural phenomenon. As shown in (Figure 4 above), he observed that rural poverty increased from 28.3 percent in 1980 to 63.8 percent in 2004. The predominance of rural poverty over urban has been consistent during 1996 to 2004. In 1996, about 70 percent of rural households were poor, as compared with 58 percent of the urban households. In 2004, the incidence of urban poverty declined more rapidly than rural poverty with 64 percent of rural households being poor (indicating a 6 percent decrease) while urban poverty decreased by 15 percent to 43 percent. However, as stated by (NBS, 2007), the proportion of the urban poor rose from 17.2 percent in 1980 to 43.1 percent in 2004. Within rural areas approximately 44.4 percent of households in 2004 could not meet their food expenditure requirements. Another 19.4 percent could meet their food expenditure requirements, but not the minimum expenditure to cover other basic needs.

Figure 4: Trends in Rural and Urban Poverty (1980- 2004)

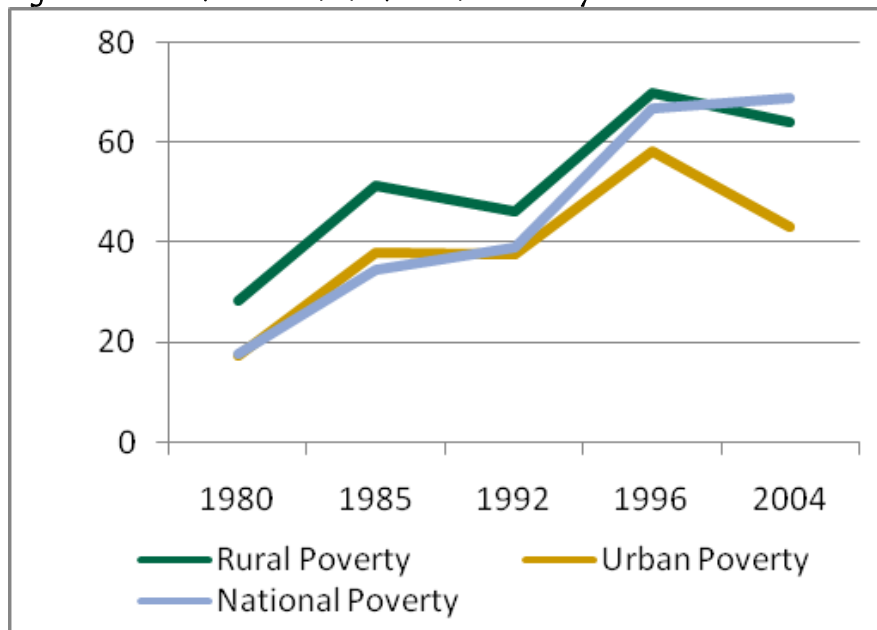
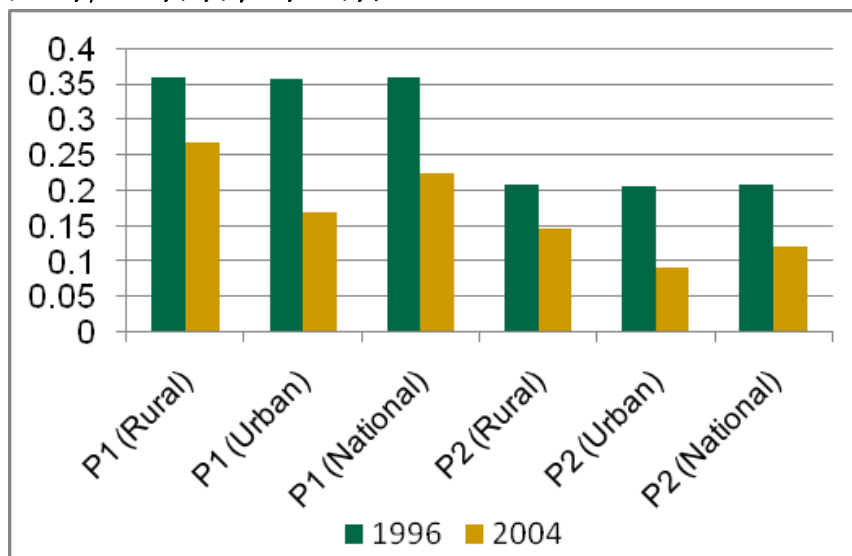


Figure 5: Poverty Depth (P1) and Severity (P2) by Location (Rural, Urban and National)



Furthermore, Omonona (2010) showed that the depthness and severity of poverty are extreme in rural communities. In 1996, according to him, the National poverty depth (P1) as indicated by (figure 5) and poverty severity (P2) were 0.358 and 0.207, but these decreased respectively to 0.225 and 0.122 in 2004. On the other hand, the incidence, depth and severity of poverty among rural households were relatively higher than both the national and urban poverty figures. Reflecting on this, it means poverty is fundamentally a serious challenge and a grave obstacle to sustainable livelihood and development in the rural communities and this stands strongly contrary to the millennium development goal one (1), which aims at eradicating poverty and hunger by 2015.

HEALTH, HIV/AIDS AND THE RURAL PEOPLE

This section of the paper deals with one of the numerous challenges confronting rural communities – health. According to the WHO (1992) cited in (Ekwuruke, 2005), health is the state of complete physical, mental and social well-being of an individual, and not merely the absence of infirmity. One of the major challenges facing Nigeria today is the issue of health. Health care delivery has become quite strangulating in this part of the world, especially in rural communities, where access to even basic health care services is difficult; to the German Foundation for World Population (DSW, 2008) posits that, lack of access to qualitative health care delivery services accounts for much of the deaths in rural sub-Saharan Africa. Wadinga (2009) also stressed that very young children and pregnant women; especially in remote rural areas (RRAs) are the vulnerable demographic groups at highest risk of diseases, especially malaria. In many cases even when there is access to medical health centres, there is dearth in medicines and even medical personnel's (Nurses and doctors) so much so that most emergency cases in the rural areas in end up in the death of the patient. Poor infrastructure/amenities (access roads, electricity, dilapidated buildings, etc) equally hinder effective health care delivery services in rural communities.

Ekwuruke (2005) is of the view that the rural areas have more illnesses and getting proper medical attention and care is very difficult. This is so because most government physicians are reluctant to transfer to these areas, and private physicians are equally uninterested in locating their hospitals in poor areas since it does not attract profits. This generally affects the spatial distribution of hospitals and medical health care practitioners. The few existing public health care centers, especially government medical centres are all either in moribund and offering little or no assistance. The centres lack doctors, nurses, and critical supplies such as drugs, syringes and sterilizers. Few privately run clinics exist, but services there according to UNDP (2006) is quite exorbitant. Thus, community members resort to local and traditional remedies to deal with their health conditions. Local and traditional remedies have unguided prescriptions and in many ways this has led to the death of women and many young persons, especially infants in the rural communities. The fact that rural women have lower incomes as well as reproductive needs make them the most vulnerable cohort group, as they are denied certain basic

opportunities. Majority of the poor, illiterate rural dwellers are women. The combination of gender inequality and poverty is an impediment to women in the developing world as this undermines their informational capacity (Shabi, 2012). UNICEF (2010) states that 70% of the total female populations are poor. The productivity of this rural poor is further diminished by HIV/AIDS. UNAIDS (2006) in Shabi (2012) notes that rural women accounts for the 61.5 percent of all adults living with HIV/AIDS. The most vulnerable are people in the sexually active age.

To Saliu and Adejoh (2010) these groups are those in the agriculturally productive age and agriculture according to Poroma *et al*/ (2012) contributes 45% of the country's GDP and employs about 55% of the population. Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO, 2000) estimated that out of the 27 most affected countries in Africa, 7 million agricultural workers have died from AIDS and more deaths are likely in the next decades. The gap between the inadequate food supply and demand may further widen if the health of the smallholder farmers who produce about 90 percent of the nation's food and fibre are not given attention (Okoro 1987). This is because the quality and quantity of labour supply is highly dependent on the state of their health (Umeh 1999). As shown in (Table 1), Saliu and Adejoh(2010) avowed that HIV/AIDS exist in the rural communities and specifically among farmers. They maintain that negative perceptions of farmers about HIV/AIDS test and even infection can further intensify the spread of the disease, which certainly can have a negative impact on food production in rural communities. More farmers (see table 1) were infected with HIV/AIDS in 2001 than the year 2002 and 2004-2005. Despite relative reduction, the 2005 rate still remains relatively high.

Table 1: Rate of HIV/AIDS Infection among Farmers (2000 - 2005)

| YEAR | FREQUENCY | PERCENTAGE |
|-------|-----------|------------|
| 2000 | 100 | 10.12 |
| 2001 | 500 | 50.61 |
| 2002 | 100 | 10.21 |
| 2003 | 90 | 9.02 |
| 2004 | 110 | 11.13 |
| 2005 | 88 | 8.91 |
| TOTAL | 988 | 100 |

Source: O. J. Saliu & S.O. Adejoh, field survey 2006.

HIV/AIDS that was initially an urban phenomenon has rapidly moved into the rural communities, (BNARDA, 2003). As at the end of 1999, cases of HIV infections had already been diagnosed and reported in all the 774 local government areas of the country, cutting across all the social strata of the society. The rapid transmission moved from near zero prevalence in 1990 to 5.8% among the adult population (15 - 49 years) in the year 2001 (Saliu and Adejoh, 2010). With an estimate of 3.5 million cases in Nigeria, the

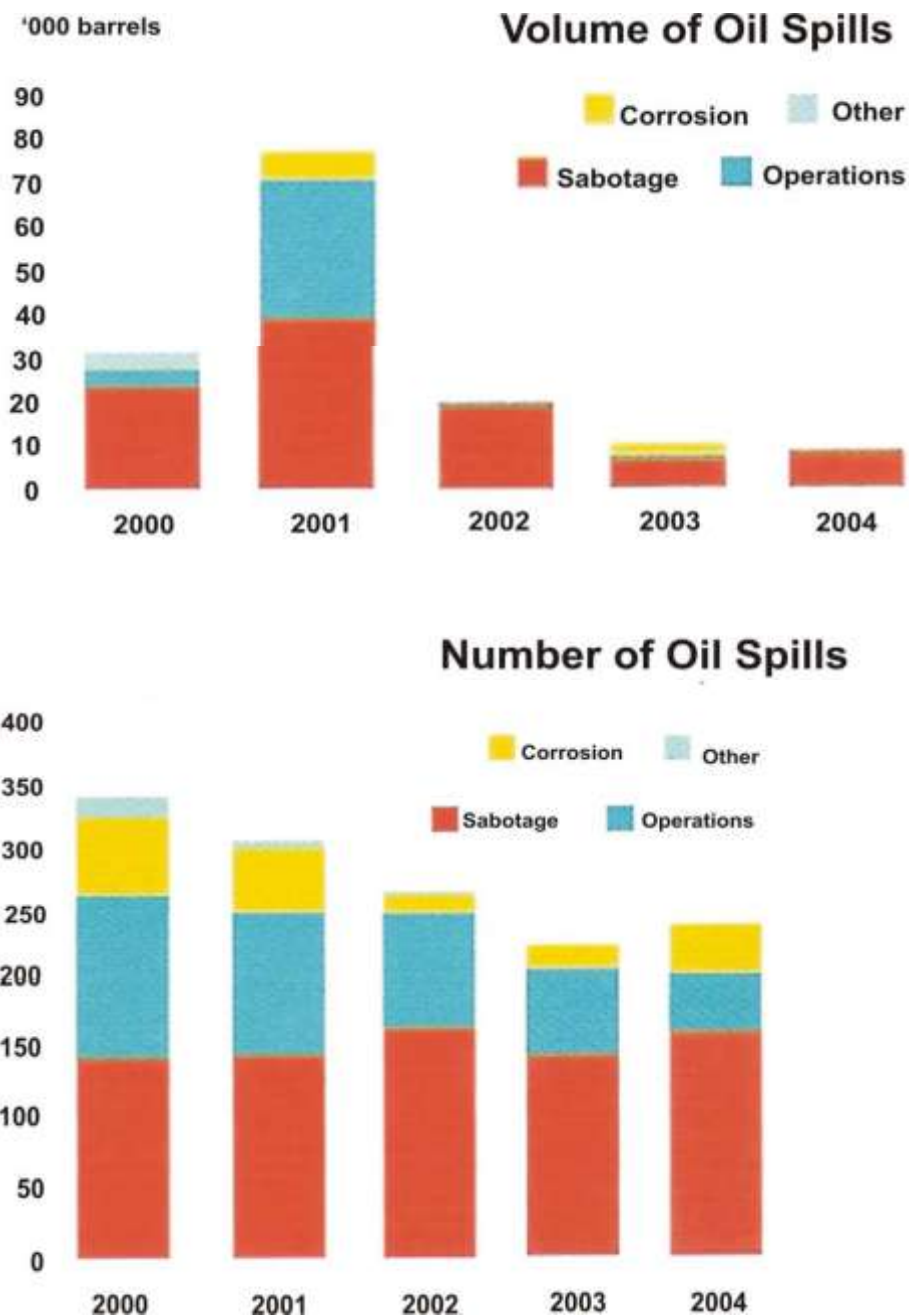
country thus ranked second in sub-Saharan Africa and fourth in the world. Nigeria, as at 2002, had the highest number of AIDS orphans in the world. It has been estimated that the number of HIV/AIDS orphans in Nigeria has increased to 1.97 million by 2005 and would be 4.2 million by 2015 (NIMR 2003), leading to under 5 mortality rate of 138 in 2009, while infant mortality (under 1) rate as at 2009 is 86 (Nduonofit and Nkpah, 2012). HIV/AIDS also generates poverty. As those with the virus fall ill and die, a family or community loses much needed human capital or productive resources. Poverty today proves to be one of the biggest killer of people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA) in rural Nigeria, as they cannot even afford transport fares to the city for free antiretroviral drugs and this has a direct negative impact on both the physical economic and social well-being of PLWHA. In all, the rural areas are certainly the worst hit and this is compounded by the fact that poverty thrives. In the midst of this, being sick and being unable to access medical health care leads to untimely death.

ENVIRONMENTAL CHALLENGES

Rural areas experience a vast number of environmental problems like pollutions of air, water and land, land degradation, deforestation and many more. Air Pollution in rural communities is caused particularly by burning of agricultural wastes and straw, burning of fire wood and dung cakes, and decomposition of crop wastes and animal wastes. Considerable amount of methane produced due to bio-degradation of crop residues and animal wastes contribute heavily in the rural air pollution (ECOSENSORIUM, 2010). The natural environment is the source of livelihood, and basically the base of rural economy. Hence, its importance to the social survival of the rural people cannot be over-emphasize. Historically, rural communities have depended on the environment for their employment. In recent time, the story is a bit different as the environment has been degraded, and polluted owing to the activities of large scale-industries and Multinational oil cooperation's exploration and exploitation of fossil fuel. These activities of the International Oil Companies (IOC) have destroyed the flora and fauna of the rural economy thus leaving the rural people jobless, foodless and poor. This state of the rural people thus aligns with the UNDP Human Development Report (HDR) of 1998 on Nigeria, which describes the country as "a rich country with a poor population" and "the poorest and most deprived OPEC country" (UNDP, 1998). The Nigerian Population Commission record shows that women contribute 70% of labour force in agriculture, yet rural women constitute majority of the poor, and are those especially affected by the degradation of the natural resources since they rely heavily on natural resources to gather food, grow crops and collect wood for fuel to support their immediate families. With the expansion of oil production, it is on record that the incidence of oil spills has increased considerably in many of the oil-bearing communities of the Niger Delta region. The spills occur through deliberate drilling activities though and also through the deliberate actions of the local people, who sabotage pipelines in protest against the operations of the Federal Government and oil companies (UNDP, 2006) and more recently, oil theft.

Available records according to UNDP show that a total of 6,817 oil spills occurred between 1976 and 2001. Approximately 6 per cent spilled on land, 25 per cent in swamps and 69 per cent in offshore environments (see Figure 6). In recent time, as indicated by the red bars in figure 6, oil spills appear to be because more by willful damage to facilities than by accidents. By extension, rural communities contribute to their environmental challenges. The point is, in the midst of this rural communities must survive, they must eat, and to eat they must equally degrade the environment by engaging either in unsustainable agricultural practices, and or, more recently oil theft through vandalization of oil pipes. Recent data according to SPDC (2013) indicates that sabotage and crude oil theft was the predominant cause of 24,545 barrels of oil that spilled from SPDC facilities in 1,523 incidents, an average of about one spill every other day, accounting for around 95% of the spilled volume in 2012.

Figure 6: Quantities and Causes of Oil Spills from Shell Petroleum Development Company Operations in the Niger Delta, 2000-2004



Source: Shell Petroleum Development Company Annual Report 2004.

As stated above, rural people have always depended heavily on their natural environment to make a living. They extract a wide variety of forest products for both domestic and commercial use. These include fuel wood, fibres, leaves, dyes, fruits and nuts, medicinal plants, barks and roots, spices, palm wine, snails, wild game, and many others(UNDP,

2006). The much-reduced forest cover has increased pressure on the remaining forests, which now suffers from overuse that is further exacerbated by high demand from the expanding towns and cities. It has been well established that the rich of the urban areas utilize far more forest resource derivatives than the poor who directly depend on them. Thus to make a living and earn income rural communities engage in unsustainable deforestation for income to eliminate immediate hunger. The exclusion of the rural communities from meaningful development has fostered poverty in the rural areas. Poverty and environmental degradation are related, in many cases poverty accelerates environmental degradation and degradation further exacerbates poverty in the rural communities (Pinstrup-Andersen and Pandya-Lorch, 1995).

Elvira Veksler wrote that, a senior UN official warned that climate change could become a catalyst for "sudden and abrupt" shocks worldwide and have "far-reaching implications for global stability and security" (Veksler, 2011:5). Climate change is just another environmental challenge rural communities have to contend with in this era of globalization. Studies have shown that global temperatures as well as sea levels are rising, and will definitely continue to rise (UNDP, 2009; European Commission, 2008). The driving force of the change in the climate are multifaceted, but the actions of humans particularly deforestation, the burning of fossil fuels, and unsustainable agricultural practices are the catalysts of this change by increasing atmospheric concentrations of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases (GHGs). The aftermath of such actions however results in severe weather extremities - changes in rainfall patterns, heat and cold waves, and increasing droughts and floods. Various rural communities in Nigeria are beginning to experience extreme weather, particularly flood as farmlands have been washed-off or displaced by erosion and landslides. The cases of Nanka and Agulu in Anambra State, Isikweabor and Arochukwu in Abia State are examples of such rural communities (Ebirim, 2009). Recent development in weather change has been disastrous in Nigeria as more than 100,000 people were displaced from their homes, with most rural communities in the Niger Delta sacked. Water level rose to cover buildings, houses, and destroyed farmlands in various States in the country like Kogi, Anambra, Delta, Bayelsa and Rivers state among others (Ajani, 2012). Rural communities are however at the receiving end of this as the general means of social survival is completely obliterated and people displaced, giving room for hazardous health implications.

CONCLUSION

The challenges confronting rural communities especially in Nigeria are multifaceted. Rural communities as shown here, even from the colonial times have been socially excluded from the development equation in Nigeria. Infrastructure wise, rural communities lag behind and cannot be compared nor equated with the urban areas where social amenities and infrastructures abound to a reasonable extent. Water, transportation, good roads, decent toilets and so on are completely in a state of moribund in many if not all the rural areas in Nigeria. Most poverty in the world is rural, and reaching the International Development Targets means giving high level priority to rural development.

Although, poverty has been declining in Africa with concomitant improvement in economic performance (UNIDO, 2004), yet poverty still remains a major challenge in Africa and for which the rural areas are mostly affected. The poverty level in rural communities has proven to be the main source handicapping people of the area from access to education among other things. It is clear that the rural areas are the source of food supply to the urban centres, yet the rural areas remain anonymous and lacking. Health is wealth as the saying goes, but this is however difficult to say for and about the rural areas, as health facilities are gravely challenged. The lack of strategic location of health care centres and the poor state of rural health facilities are however associated with the mortality state of rural dwellers, especially women and children. The health challenges of rural communities as shown here, is definitely a challenge to food production. HIV/AIDS now prevalent among rural population, especially the productive cohort group will doubtless hinder the progress of food and agricultural production in the rural areas if nothing urgent is done going forward.

This paper has equally demonstrated that both internal and external environmental degradation concerns have rather immediate, clear and present attributable effects primarily on the rural poor. They affect not only human health, but people's livelihoods and survival also. The rural poor are most affected because of the substantial quantitative contribution that environmental resources make to their households for subsistence. Where poverty reigns, the environment becomes easy target for livelihood; hence environmental degradation becomes an inescapable phenomenon in these communities. It becomes imperative to tilt towards the direction of social policy for amelioration and mitigation of the spiral of environmental destruction. As a matter of policy implication, it is worthy to recommend here that government policy must be socially inclusive of the rural areas. This must come in the form of integrating the principles of sustainable development into the country's policies and programs and reversing the loss of environmental resources. Any attempt at breaking or even, reducing the poverty gap between the rural and urban areas must be matched with renewed focus on education and infrastructural development. When the rural people are educated, especially the women, then agricultural production and consumption patterns would follow a sustainable pattern assuring food security and safety of the environment. With such health mitigating policies, health facilities would become even closer to the people and of course promote better living and reduce mortality in the remote rural areas (RRAs). An enlightened community, individual or social category will know what to do to avoid HIV/AIDS, and or access drugs to enhance existence. Education will definitely aid rural dwellers understand their challenges and how to overcome it. It is further recommended that government policies must be monitored and followed to the latter to mitigate oil spill and gas flaring that destroys rural livelihood. It is further recommended that community leaders should take up the challenge of enlightening their youths about the ills of oil theft and should even go further by reporting and arresting youths involved in such practices as they all add up to cause more poverty to the rural areas.

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