

URBAN POOR CULTURE AND POVERTY ALLEVIATION: A STUDY OF SELECTED AMIKE-ABA FAMILIES

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Abstract

The pervasive poverty among many Nigerian societies is a serious concern. This prompted the study of the everyday life of the indigenous population of Amike-Aba in Abakaliki urban, Eastern Nigeria. It sought for values and behaviour that have perpetuated poverty among the people. The community approach to urban studies was adopted with continuous monitoring technique from 2023-2025. Oscar Lewis' culture of poverty is the study's theoretical berth. The mixed method technique was used to select the participants. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the participants' characteristics. It was found that an average native appeared apathetic, alienated, and over-whelmed by the pace of social change, got disoriented with dim and distorted traditions and marginal urban structures as poor spring-board for action. It is recommended that poverty alleviations should be customized by strategic intervention to detach the people and reorient them to urban opportunities and high achievement needs that would crush apathy and poverty. The unique contribution of the study is the insight that poverty alleviation program should be culture specific. An intervention that works for a society may not work for another society due to differences in cultural norms.

Keywords: *Culture, Personality, Poverty, Socialization, Urban.*

Introduction

Poverty is a fluid concept but generally implies low consumption in absolute sense. The World Bank (1990) defines poverty to mean the inability to meet the physical needs for survival, lack of basic security and absence of resources to assume basic responsibilities and to enjoy fundamental rights. When poverty is applied in relation to a particular group or area, it becomes relative. So relative poverty refers to a lack of resources to achieve a standard of living that allows people to play roles, participate in relationships and living that is deemed normative of the society to which they belong. For measurability however, poverty has been taken as a condition of living on an income below a certain minimum amount. The World Bank fixes this amount of income and updates it at intervals. Poverty has been a concern in many societies for well over a century (Johnson, 2008). As at 2025, about 10.3% of the world population was in extreme poverty (World Bank, 2025). Programmes and projects are designed and executed under a notion of "War on Poverty" by national and international bodies. But poverty appears to bid defiance to the world's weapons of war, for no society can claim not to have some level of poverty both at individual and societal levels.

Efforts of many advanced industrialized nations to eliminate poverty in their countries have been made ineffective by the inescapable reality of globalization, which has integrated local, national and international economics. The emergent global economic melt-down of the early

2000s, the 2019/2020 COVID 19 pandemic and its after-math and local and international wars and humanitarian crisis further dashed any ground hitherto gained against poverty. Facts and statistics of poverty, to be presented later, confirm concerns that poverty has not been reduced by as much as was hoped.

International strategies like the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), SDGs and new African partnership for Economic Development (NEPAD) have the unrealized goal to eradicate poverty in Africa. Sub-regional economic integrations such as ECOWAS, EAD, SADDAC are formed for the same poverty eradication. National strategies like the defunct operation feed the Nation, structural Adjustment Programme, Green Revolution, Family Economic Advancement Programme, Directorate for Food, Road and Rural Infrastructure, National Poverty Eradication Programme, Youth Enterprise with Innovation in Nigeria, Tradermoni and numerous scheme such as NELFUND and National Youth Empowerment Scheme that currently transfer cash into individuals bank accounts have been used to fight poverty in Nigeria. Yet poverty remains undaunted! In war, tactics is as important if not more important than arsenals. Existing thrust of the governments at fighting poverty appears lopsided.

The programmes are established to eliminate poverty conditions by attacking the economic system which created unemployment and underemployment by giving individuals, families and communities access to fund for investment in agriculture and cottage production. The products, the government believes, will trickle down to the poor and lift them out of poverty. Anthropology of being poor is never considered. There is non recognition of the need to attack the values and behaviours of the poor. These values are intrinsic. There are inter-generationally transmitted and by themselves perpetuate poverty by interfering with upward mobility in spite of the government's given assistance. It is from this background that this study arises to empirically test Oscar Lewis "culture of poverty" theory on an Igbo indigenous community of Amike-Aba, Abakaliki, Ebonyi State.

Statement of Research Problem

Amike-Aba community occupies a greater part of Abakaliki Urban. It is bounded in the south by Ogoja Road that separates the old Ebonyi State Government House; Ogbaga village in the North, some five kilometers from the old Government House; former Abakaliki main market through new layout in the east, and Ugwuachara area in the west. Although the community covers nearly 60 percent of Abakaliki Urban, the native population huddled in a blighted fringe settlement, a kilometer away without access road, hospital, electricity, shelter nor any visible means of livelihood. Land speculators have bought up the native land leaving the population landless. There is no land for gardening and no wares to sell. Every uncompleted but abandoned L- or I- shaped bungalow in the area belongs to the native who sold off land and started the house. Any lay-about man met in the day is a native. Seven out of every ten quarry women and daily labourers are natives. The youths are not into trading, craft, trade, apprenticeship or formal education. Eight out of every ten loafers in the street are from Amike-Aba who is likely to transit into adult lay about. Thus, Amike-Aba is a slum, the family type of slum described by Andrew (2007). Urban slum inhabited by indigenous family

homes. Values and behaviour are developed and transmitted among the people from generation to generation. This kind of physical and social environment appears to hinder the people's receptivity to social innovation like the government's poverty alleviation programmes.

Efforts of the Government at Poverty-reduction by way of micro-financing, FADAMA projects, National Directorate of Employment activities, National Poverty Eradication Programme, Community-based Poverty Reduction Programme etc are rendered in effective by the peoples poor attitude to self reliance and social inertia. The programmes have not impacted on the people; neither are the people motivated by the high achievement need and associated attitudes of non-native residents in their environment. The natives are happy to receive gift of money than learn the art of moneymaking from their alien neighbours. In the circumstance, existing poverty alleviation strategies exist not utilized by the community. This is the study problem, hence the need to examine the pervading culture of the people in search for a solution.

Flowing from the study problem are these guiding questions:

What cultural traits have perpetuated poverty among the natives of Amike-Aba?

How can these traits be changed?

What kind of poverty-reduction programme will be functional for Amike-Aba people

Review of Related Literature

Poverty is an elusive concept. It is popular to locate it at two broad levels of expression: objective-absolute level and subjective relative level. Absolute poverty occurs when people could not garner or receive "sufficient" resources to support a minimum of physical health and efficiency of social performance. What is "sufficient" is however relative to society, class or individual. (Abercromble, Hill and Turner, 2000). In any case, poverty is known by its dreaded epiphenomena: hunger, disease, loss of self worth, and such miserable conditions.

Operationally, a benchmark in monetary unit may be specified as a level of average income per a day below which a person is considered to be poor. The benchmark figure is usually based on purchasing power parity (PPP), which basically suggests that prices of goods in countries tend to equate under floating exchange rates and therefore people would be able to purchase the same quantity of goods in any country for a given sum of money. That is, the notion that a dollar should buy the same amount in all countries. Hence if a poor person in a poor country living on a dollar a day moved to the USA with no changes to his income, he would still be living on a dollar a day. By this method, international poverty line (IPL) set by the World Bank (2024) specified \$3.00 a day as the poverty line. At N1500 (CBN rate subject to market fluctuations) for a dollar, \$3.00 is equivalent to N4,500. Then the monthly poverty line is N135,000. In real terms, how many Nigerian earn above this figure per a month? It is far above the basic salary of over 70% of Nigerian workers in the public sector, and more than the total emolument of an average worker in the private sector.

Poverty facts and statistics are frightening. Inequalities at continental, national, class and individual levels are the primary cause of poverty. Inequality may be in the form of unequal national and individual endowments. More than 80 percent of the world's population live in countries where income differentials are widening. World Bank indicators show that the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the 41 heavily indebted poor countries is less than the wealth of the world's 7 richest people combined. World GDP in 2024 was \$48.2 trillion. The world's wealthiest countries (approximately 1 billion people) accounted for \$36.6 trillion dollars (76%). The world's billionaire-just-497 people (approximately 0.000008% of the world population) were worth \$3.5 trillion (over 7% of world GDP). Low-income countries (2.4 billion people) accounted for just \$1.6 trillion of GDP (3.3%). Middle income countries (3 billion people) account for just 2.4% of world exports.

The total wealth of the top 8.3 million people around the world rose 8.2 percent to \$30.8 trillion in 2024, giving them control of nearly a quarter of the world's financial assets. In other words, about 0.13% of the world's population controlled 25% of the world's financial assets in 2024. The poorest 40 percent of the world's population accounts for 5 percent of global income. The richest 20 percent accounts for three-quarters of world income.

These inequities have disheartening affects. A UNICEF report show 5000 children die each day due to poverty. And they die quietly in some of the poorest villages on earth, far removed from the scrutiny and the conscience of the world. Being meek and weak in life makes these dying multitudes even more invisible in death. Around 27-28 percent of all children in developing countries are estimated to be underweight or stunted. The two regions that account for the bulk of the deficit are south Asia and sub-Saharan Africa.

Nearly a billion people entered the 21st century unable to read a book or sign their names. Infectious diseases continue to blight the lives of the poor across the world. An estimated 40 million people are living with HIV/AIDS, with over 3 million deaths in 2024. Every year there are 350-500 million cases of malaria, with 1 million fatalities. Africa accounts for 90 percent of malaria deaths and African children account for over 80 percent of malaria victims worldwide, although water problems affect half of humanity, some 1.1 billion people in developing countries have inadequate access to water, and 2.6 billion lack basic sanitation. The result is that close to half of all people in developing countries suffer at any given time from a health problem caused by water and sanitation deficits. For instance, some 1.8 million child-death each year is as a result of diarrhea.

In developing countries, some 2.5 billion people are forced by poverty to rely on biomass-firewood, charcoal, and animal dung-to meet their energy needs for cooking. In Sub-Saharan Africa, over 80 percent of the population depends on traditional biomass for cooking, as do over half of the population of the India and China. Indoor air pollution results from the use of solid fuels. It is a major killer. It claims the lives of 1.5 million people each year, more than half of them below the age of five: that is 4000 deaths a day. To put this number in context, it exceeds total deaths from malaria and rivals the number of deaths from tuberculosis.

Poverty facts and statistics tilt against Sub-Saharan Africa. Globalization, which is increasing in spread and intensity is worsening Africa's poverty situation. The World Bank 2024 reported a decline in economic growth, life expectancy, education and literacy level but increase in infant and child mortality from 1980-2020. In Nigeria, statistics show that poverty level declined from 46.3% in 1985 to 42.7% in 1992, but rose again to 65.6% of the population in 1996 (FOS 1999). By the definition used by Federal Office of statistics, the percentage of moderately poor rose from 28.9% to 36.3% while the core poor increased significantly from 13.9% in 1992 to 29.3 in 1996. The proportion of the total income spent on food by the core poor and the moderately poor were approximately 75% of their total income on food (FOS 1999).

Rural areas may accent for much of the core poor. However, urbanization is not synonymous with human or economic progress. Modern city generates mobility aspirations (Davis, 1949) no doubt, but urban residence is an individual experience as well as a collective one. People interpret their physical and social surroundings and behave accordingly (Blumer 1969). It implies that the same objective circumstances may result in quite different responses from different individual. Many city dwellers may utilize urban opportunities to raise their statuses to a remarkable degree. But others, perhaps much more, will remain low or will be downwardly mobile. These non-achievers are the chronic city poor concentrated in the urban slums. In our class-conscious society, the poor are disreputable and they respond unconsciously with apathy, alienation or antisocial behavior (Matza and Miller 1976).

Urban slum growth is increasing at increasing rates as globalization, corruption and inequalities increasingly push people into the poverty slum. Preponderance of urban dwellers lives in slum areas. Slum is an index of poverty. Slums differ widely with respect to the social organization of their inhabitants. They range from the slum in which the inhabitants are strangers to one another and wish to be to family slum in which there is wide acquaintance and kinship ties between inhabitants (Anderson, 2007). Family slum is always an indigenous settlement not subject to residential mobility. In the circumstance, the proclivity for enculturation is high. Attitudes and cultural traits are traditional and shared.

Culture in the broadest sense is a form of highly participatory activity, in which people create their societies and identities. Culture shapes individuals drawing out and cultivating their potentialities and capacities for action and creativity. Amike-Aba is a family slum with poverty that appears generational and culture hinged. It partly accounts for degenerating poverty among the natives in spite of their urban environment which Weber many years ago had explained as a set of social structures that encourage innovation. This social fact must be considered for the urban poor in Nigeria

These statistics appear old but the poverty condition has not changed. In 2025, the largest economy on earth is Luxembourg with a national GDP of USD 140, 941 and USD 141.1 per capita. This higher than the national GDP of 123 poorest countries with Afghanistan being the least and the rest being from the sub-Sahara Africa with \$1.6 GDP per capita on the

average South Sudan has a per capita GDP of \$0.3, the least and Nigeria has \$0.8. The world average GDP per capita is 14.2 (IMF, 2025). This poverty is a concern.

Theoretical Framework- Culture of Poverty Theory

Culture of poverty theory states that the poor in a society have behavior patterns that accommodate the difficulties and insecurities of their lives which may differ considerably from those practiced or considered desirable by others. The theory was developed by Oscar Lewis in 1966 (Lewis 1966). The assumption is that social characteristics passed on to the next generation through socialization promote stability of social rank. The poor often imbued with apathy, cynicism, hopelessness, distrust of institution e.t.c, pass these attitudes to their children who continue the poverty cycle as a culture.

Amike-Aba natives live within a slum in Abakaliki urban. The urban environment ideally encourages innovation and mobility aspiration. The government also extends projects and incentives meant to pull individuals out of poverty. But the study population could not utilize these opportunities due mainly to social inertia that run through the families and transmitted by socialization and culture. Culture of poverty tends to grow and flourish in societies with a set of conditions among which is the existence of a set of values in the dominant class which stresses the accumulating of wealth and property, the possibility of upward mobility and thrift and explains low economic status as the result of personal inadequacy or inferiority.

The way of life, which develops among some of the poor under this condition is the culture of poverty. The culture of poverty is both an adaptation and a reaction of the poor to their marginal position in a class stratified, highly individuated, capitalistic society. It represents an effort to cope with feelings of powerlessness and despair, which develop from the realization of the improbability of achieving success in terms of the values and goals of the larger society. Indeed, many of the traits of the culture of poverty can be viewed as attempts at local solutions for problems not met by existing institutions and agencies because the people are not eligible for them, cannot afford them, or are ignorant or suspicious of them.

The culture of poverty, however, is not only an adaptation to a set of objective conditions of the larger society. Once it comes into existence, it tends to perpetuate itself from generation to generation because of its effect on the children. Slum children usually absorb the basic values and attitudes of their subculture and are not psychologically geared to take full advantage of changing conditions or increased opportunities, which may occur in their lifetime.

The import of this analysis is that government's extension of credits, loans, grants subsidies and other facilities to help the poor may be important. But what is made of these facilities is value-determined. A frontal attack must be made on values and behaviour that encourage social inertia.

Method

The study has a cross sectional research design. It lasted from 2023 to 2025. A preliminary pilot survey of the community identified 2248 households in the area. By Taro Yamene sampling method

$$N = \frac{2248}{1+N(e)} = \frac{2248}{1+2248(0.02)}$$

we have 49 households selected. From each of the households selected, the breadwinner and the eldest de-facto son/daughter of the household aged at least 16 years of age were purposively chosen. Where no son/daughter of the household was physically present at the time of the visit, only the breadwinner was selected. The process produced 98 respondents who were rigorously observed and interviewed on the established categories.

The community approach was used in the study in order to have a holistic insight into the everyday life of the native population. Forty nine (49) families were identified and observed between 2023 – 2025. It was a continuous-monitoring technique meant to discover the values and behaviour exhibited in their everyday life. Continuous monitoring entails watching a subject or a group of subjects for a specific period of time, and recording their behaviour as faithfully as possible. The continuous monitoring technique provided qualitative data. The 98 participants were grouped into 10 each group had ten members except one group that had eight members. The groups were engaged on focused group discussions at different times within the study period. The discussions were not meant to count incidences but to obtain deep insight on the participants' attitudes to the key variables from where their culture was inferred. However, the descriptive statistics were used where necessary.

The data have the following categories: attitudes to independence, entrepreneurship, apprenticeship, and leisure, conspicuous consumption and productivity, procrastination, satisfaction with the family economic status.

Sample's Characteristics

Forty-nine (49) households were identified. Amike-Aba community practices neo-local residential system, so each family is equally a household. Only 6 (12%) had wife-female as the breadwinner of the family. The rest of the households 43 (88%) had husband-male breadwinner. Out of 49 persons observed 12 had farms 37 (76%) could not be associated with any farm, trade or craft. All the respondents professed Christianity. Most of the breadwinners 38(76%) had participated in at least one form of poverty alleviation programme in the period covered by the study.

Result

The study sought for the respondents' attitudes to independence, entrepreneurship, apprenticeship, savings, leisure, conspicuous consumption, productivity and procrastination. On independence, each of the bread winners 49(100%) manages a farm worked on by all the members of the household as a collective enterprise. Working in the farm was in addition to

whatever occupation any member of the household might have. Apart from occasional labour, no other member of the household than the breadwinner contributes finance nor inputs to the household farm. But the eventual yield will be consumed by the household. Asked why the grown members of the household did not have individual farms, general response was that it was not necessary and there would not be available land for all to farm individually. All the members of a household lived together in a house and shared food and other means of sustenance together. This attitude is averse to individual independence.

On entrepreneurship, it was found that all the respondents working 62% of them engaged in traditional occupations of farming, petty trading, and clerical works. Only 3 respondents (3%) said they had individual farms each. None of the clerical workers (20%) combined it with any private business. This shows a poor innovative attitude to life.

On apprenticeship, respondents aged 16-20 years ought to be in schools or on apprenticeship learning one form of work or the other. But out of 25(25%) persons within this age interval, only 2 were learning phone repairs, 6 were in secondary school in the community, the rest loamed the streets.

On savings, all the respondents chuckled on this issue complaining of not having enough to eat how much more to save. Saving is a culture and only the upwardly inclined person imbibes it.

On leisure, the respondents had penchant for leisure. Almost all the households visited 40(82%) of them had one form of traditional leisure game or the other that engage their time. The respondents enjoyed conspicuous consumption financed by borrowing or land sales. Funeral ceremonies take between 3-7 days with non-stop spending activities on foods, drinks, clothing, and dances.

On productivity, the respondents lack time perspective on productivity. They marry early and began family at an average age of 22 years for males and 18 years for females. Early marriage generally shifts one's focus to family building and stifles saving and investment.

On procrastination, the respondents had no idea of time in relation to accomplishments. Anytime anything is accomplished is acceptable as most of them said "No time is late. The important thing is that something is accomplished at last," one respondent aged 17 years without education nor work said did not mind if he becomes a commissioner at age 70. "I am prepared to wait and hope" he concluded.

On attitude to the family economic status, 61 (61%) expressed satisfaction with their individual families economic statuses; 30(31%) could not express their attitude attributing economic standing to God's favour. The rest, 8(8%) replied that they hoped for a better future without saying how they intended to make that better future.

Discussion

The sample studied showed a queer perception of poverty. Not worried by their deprivations, they lived freely and seemingly happy with themselves. There was no evidence of reflection on their environment and conditions but appeared satisfied with daily feeding. This is disorientation and unconscious ideology of helplessness leading to complacency in poverty. All that matters is momentarily satisfaction of hunger or other physiological needs. This behaviour agrees with a 1961 UNESCO report that:

In the least developed area, the worker's attitude toward labour may entirely lack time perspective let alone the concept of productive investment. For example, the day labourer in a rural area on his way to work, who finds a fish in the net he placed in the river the night before, is observed to return home, his needs being met ... (UNESCO 1961:79).

These attitudes give rise to a social inertia that poses a tremendous hurdle to economic development of individuals. A people poor but with no sense of lack, a people unresponsive to monetary incentive—all these are part of the obdurate handicaps to be overcome by any poverty-alleviation effort.

Many cases in the study sample were often heard talking of “hard times” but always in general sense. They never seemed to feel they were poor, although they were observed envying neighbouring non-natives who led some richer life. They described such neighbours with sarcastic words as many of them went to churches and discussed Christian eschatology expectantly. Many lived in revelry over cheap gin/wine, food and meat. Discussions on business ideas or contacts were seldom heard. Theirs were routine life of search for what to eat, eating up what is found—a cyclical get and eat habit. Thus their concept and perception of personality development and what expectations they hold from life is poverty-breeding.

It does appear that such poverty-breeding perception of life pervades much of African urban slums. I once read a story, a joke also containing a core truth about an American traveling through Zaire and seeing Zaireans in a bar drinking. They were not very well dressed, they did not look extremely well fed, they were quite jovial. They asked the American what he was doing in their country. He said he came to make money. They asked him what he was going to do with the money, and he said he was going to use it to make money and when he would have made a lot of money he would then build a house, buy transport vehicles, marry and then do all sorts of things. Then they asked him what next and he said he would then relax and enjoy himself. The Zaireans replied, “here we are, already we are enjoying ourselves”. Like the Zaireans in the story, most urban slum poor are not development conscious and are not going to lift themselves about their present stage in life. Money given to them in the name of poverty alleviation will go on revelries.

The people were observed to belong to many associations. The household heads belong to an average of three associations. Most of the associations meet every Sunday. Some meet twice a month. Two of the associations meet every night with the same members but varying

constitution, members make contributions to a common pool. But the associations were all eleemosynary; their funds were used for ceremonies and revelries. Funerals and marriage ceremonies are marked with exceptional expenditure. Thus the problem of the people has never been to muster money for productive ventures. Their cooperative association could have done that for members on rotation basis. The problem is that they do not value and could not take the risk of postponed consumption for saving and investment. The repercussion is generational poverty.

Elements of Effective Poverty Alleviation Programme

Existing poverty alleviation programmes recognize only the economics of being poor (Schultz, 2000), which assumes that the poor is concerned with improving their lot as much as the rich do but they do not have money. This assumption is insufficient and perhaps misleading. There must be recognition of the anthropology of being poor. The choices that the study sample made were determined more by cultural preferences rather than scarcity constraints. Thus poverty alleviation programme designed merely to give money to the poor may not alleviate poverty. Rather, government should embark on macro policies that would force down the cost of living—food, fuel, education, water, health-care, and housing etc. Employment should be stepped up so that anybody willing to work can find work, receive pay and help the poor. Social welfare stipend should be paid to the unemployable, the handicapped persons and the aged. Prices of essential commodities should be controlled to remain within the reach of everyone. A programme of entrepreneurial education by extension services/counseling should be introduced to re-socialize the poor before giving them credit facilities. These will crack the culture of poverty, and the poor may live without suffering.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The study explored the problem of persistence of city poverty in spite of government programmes to alleviate it. It focused on an urban slum (Amike-Aba) in Abakaliki Urban. The people existed in a specific settlement, relatively homogeneous and somewhat self-contained particularly in ideational threshold. So their everyday life was observed for insight into how they construct their world. It was a community approach. The culture of poverty theory lends itself as the study framework. Certain patterns of attitude, feeling, belief and behaviour are fatalistic predisposing those who share them to poverty and reproduce poverty over their generations. Any poverty alleviation strategy must recognize the anthology of being poor rather than its mere economics.

The study reviewed global poverty facts and statistics and found them titled against the third-world countries. Within Nigeria, the poverty situation has worsened partly because of social inertia of the poor's apathy and cynicism to investment themselves. City poverty is a slum and the poor have fatalistic values that keep them in poverty in spite of the government's efforts to alleviate the problem. The poor perception of poverty is illusory and complacent.

In the circumstance, the poor cannot lift themselves from the clutches of poverty. Attack on poverty should be made on the values and behaviour that sustain poverty among the poor in addition to restructuring the larger social system. The poor need to be aided by preparing without their participation in the short-run, a comfortable ground for operation by way of

making available easy access to social amenities, liberal employment, price control and social security stipend. Entrepreneurial education or extension services should be designed for the rural and urban poor to ignite in them the need for achievement.

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