Rising Inequality and the Challenge of Change in Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper presents a periscope of the incidence of rising inequality at the global and regional levels. It fundamentally highlights that the problem of rising inequality in Nigeria is ominously real. The paper decries the attitude of the Nigerian State when international rating and intelligence agencies submit critical reports about the reality of negative socio-political and economic developments in Nigeria. The paper argues that Nigeria's reaction usually amounts to state-sponsored propaganda. However, in a globalised world of very many information and technology possibilities, effective action easily attracts international acclaim and credibility, while defective policies and plans, easily beget scathing international submissions; which propaganda does little or nothing to countervail. The paper postulates that the operative language of progress in Nigeria is change but what negates the change process is principally political elitism. Hence, the Nigerian political elite must be ready for change; action-oriented change that engenders positive national results. The alternative to this hue of change, the paper posits, usually comes in undesirable decibels. The paper recalls that when the American State alerted Nigeria that she was harboring terrorists, the State led the Nigerian people, in reacting with massive measures of propaganda. Terrorism later became a bitter Nigerian reality. Similarly, the World Bank alerts Nigeria about the prevalence of the global phenomenon of rising inequality in Nigeria and the State reacts with further propaganda. The paper recommends that the Nigerian State should eschew all forms of propaganda and join the rest of the global community in accepting the reality of rising inequality, at the various domestic fronts. The consequences of refusal the paper notes will be regrettable. The way forward is to run a people-centered, truly inclusive government.

Keywords: Rising Inequality, Political Elitism, Terrorism, State-Sponsored Propaganda, the Challenge of Change, People-Centered Government, the Arab Spring

Introduction

Oxfam International (2013:1/2), has condensed the global inequality picture from various authoritative sources and posits as follows: Over the last thirty years inequality has grown dramatically in many countries. In the US the share of national income going to the top 1% has doubled since 1980 from 10 to 20%. For the top 0.01% it has quadrupled to levels never seen before. At a global level, the top 1% (60 million people) and particularly the even more select few in the top 0.01% (600,000 individuals - there are around 1200 billionaires in the world), the last thirty years has been an incredible feeding frenzy. This is not confined to the US, or indeed to rich countries. In the UK, inequality is rapidly returning to levels not seen since the time of Charles Dickens. In China, the top 10% now take home nearly 60% of the income. Chinese inequality levels are now similar to those in South Africa, which are now the most unequal country on earth and significantly more unequal than at the end of apartheid. Even in many of the poorest countries, inequality has rapidly grown. Globally, the incomes of the top 1% have increased 60% in twenty years. The growth in income for the 0.01% has been even greater. Following the financial crisis, the process has accelerated; with the top 1% further increasing their share of income. The luxury goods market has registered double digit growth every year since the crisis hit. Whether it is a sports car or a super-yacht, caviar or champagne, there has never been a bigger demand for the most expensive luxuries (Oxfam, 2013:1/2).

Citing Litchfied (1999), Osahon and Osarobo (2011:448) opine that inequality, implies the dispersion of a distribution, whether one is considering income, consumption or some other welfare indicators or attributes (Litchfied, 1999:1; Osahon and Osarobo, 2011:448). Inequality discourses however, sooner than later revolves around income inequality. The Gini coefficient, also known as the Gini index or Gini ratio, is the common measure of statistical dispersion for inequality of income or wealth. A low Gini coefficient indicates a more equal distribution, with 0 corresponding to complete equality, while higher Gini coefficients indicate more unequal distribution, with 1 corresponding to complete inequality (http://en.wikipedia.org).

In the African region, The World Bank (2013b: 25/26) asserts that with the average Gini coefficient across Sub-Saharan African countries estimated at 45.1, and 26 countries having a Gini of more than 40, inequality in Africa is already quite high. Nossiter (2013) also demonstrates that contrary to those African rising growth rates, there is also rising inequality in Africa!

Rising Inequality in Nigeria

Tremendous research evidence exists on rising inequality in Nigeria (see Aigbokhan, 2008; Babatunde, 2008; Adigun, et al, 2011; Osahon and Osarobo, 2011). Furthermore on rising inequality in Nigeria, Asu (2013) cites Nigeria's Finance and Coordinating Minister of the Economy, Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, as follows: Despite the growth in the Nigerian economy which is being driven by non-oil sectors, inequality has continued to rise. According to Okonjo-Iweala, the two main challenges facing the economy are inadequate job creation and rising inequality, as only ten per cent of the population enjoys the benefit of economic growth. Okonjo-Iweala further asserts: the other aspect that is worrying is that growth in Nigeria is unequal. Inequality is high and rising. Our GDP coefficient has gone from about 0.38 to where we are today; about 0.48. There is lack of inclusion. We are growing, but the small percent of the population is capturing most of this growth. In Nigeria, it is clear that the top 10 percent of the population is capturing most of the growth there is and the people at the bottom are being left behind. She added: we have to create wealth. If we don't put our minds to this problem, the whole economy may be in danger. Inequality is highly concentrated in certain regions of the economy. And therefore we also need to pay attention to what we do to take care of regional disparity.

Beyond the figures, let us empirically illustrate with the situation in Warri, South-South Nigeria, as reported by James (2013), who is cited very, very extensively, in the form of excerpts as follows: On the outskirts of Warri, the brooding commercial capital of Nigeria's oil rich Delta State, the streets leading into brand new multi-million dollar developments reek of crude oil. In a casual display of excess, gallons of the delta's "light and sweet" crude - are dumped daily into the open gutters to suffocate the mosquitoes breeding in the stagnant water. A small, emergent segment of the population - primarily politicians and former militants with access to government contacts and revenues - has grown spectacularly wealthy and powerful, while most Nigerians remain poor and beholden to the generosity of the elite. On Warri's swampy fringes, where new developments sit atop freshly cleared mangroves and dark mud soaked with crude oil, massive tank firms store petroleum products shipped in from the nearby creeks. The firms are owned by the new elites based in the city. Surrounding the tank firms, seagoing vessels line the waterways, waiting to load millions of barrels of raw crude oil before setting forth across the Atlantic. Despite being Africa's largest oil producing region, fuel for daily use is among Nigeria's scarcest and most expensive commodities. Due to constant power outages, Nigerians who can afford them rely on privately-owned generators for electricity. The poor live in darkness (James, 2013).

Oil provides roughly 87 percent of government revenues, 90 percent of foreign exchange earnings, 96 percent of export revenues, and almost half of Gross Domestic Product (GDP). However, despite the fact that the Nigerian Exchequer takes in more than $50 billion from oil annually, more than 90 percent of Nigerians live on less than $2 a day and 70 percent live on less than $1 a day. In the evenings, tanker drivers park their vehicles in line at the tank firms and bathe in nearby ponds coated with the sheen of diesel fuel. Weaving in and out of the waiting trucks are school-age children, hawking goods like sachet water and spiced meat, to help support their families and themselves. In Nigeria, where unregulated corruption has concentrated extreme oil wealth into the hands of a small group of elites, while systematically denying most of the population access to even the most basic amenities, a great many rely on individuals to fill the safety net, where the state has failed. Those without connections to the wealth flowing through the center, live a precarious and unrelenting life of day-to-day struggle for survival. Tucked away throughout back corners of the city's new developments are hordes of migrant laborers who have set up nomadic camps in the shells of the half-finished concrete mansions (James, 2013).

Poverty and inequality are intricately related. Hence, The World Bank says that about 100 million Nigerians currently live in abject poverty. The Country Director of the World Bank for Nigeria, Marie-Francoise Marie-Nelly, disclosed this in Enugu in November, 2013, at the bank's Country Programme Portfolio Review. She said that globally, 1.2 billion people live in destitution, out of which 100 million are Nigerians. Inequality is rising in many developing nations, she said (Adoyi, 2013:1). Nigeria's official reaction was issued by Chief Economic Adviser to the President, Dr. Nwanze Okidegbe, as follows:

We have read with utter dismay the statement by World Bank Country Director, Marie-Francoise Marie-Nelly that 100 Million Nigerians are living in destitution or extreme poverty. This spurious claim is astonishing on a number of levels. First, it clearly contradicts the position of the World Bank on the level of poverty in Nigeria. During the visit of the Bank's Vice President for Africa, Makhtar Diop, in May 2013, he declared that poverty has fallen under this administration from 48 percent to 46 percent. Given our current population of about 170 million people, the Country Director's imagery of 100 million Nigerian destitute seems to be based on a much higher poverty rate than that of her boss. The question that arises from this absurdity therefore is: who is right? Second, according to the World Bank itself, to live in extreme poverty is to live on less than $1.25 per day, including the cost of accommodation, clothing, feeding, and other incidentals. $1.25 per day translates into N200 per day (or N6, 000 per month). On feeding alone, a loaf of bread costs more than N200 in many parts of Nigeria while a plate of food, even from a roadside food vendor, costs about the same amount. More also, there are about 112 million active GSM lines in Nigeria. Even accounting for those who own more than one phone and netting out nearly 44 percent of Nigerians who are under 15 years (and mostly do not have phones), this is not a description of a country with 100 million destitute living in extreme poverty (Okidegbe, 2013).

This administration is undertaking critical reforms in all key sectors of the economy; to create jobs and reduce poverty continues Okidegbe (2013). For example, the reforms in the agricultural sector have increased production and created many job opportunities. In recognition of the fact that growth in the Agricultural Sector is pro-poor, we are confident that the consistent growth being recorded in agriculture is translating into further poverty reduction. Indeed, Nigeria was recently honoured for meeting the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) of reducing people living in absolute hunger by half, well ahead of the 2015 target set by the United Nations. On average, about 20 percent of the Subsidy Reinvestment Programme (SURE-P) is allocated exclusively to protecting the poor, through different types of social safety nets. One important area of success is the Conditional Grant Scheme with total conditional cash transfer to almost 40,000 households and recruitment of over 2,000 new health workers working on improving maternal and child health (Okidegbe, 2013). Rather than engage in peddling easily disprovable and inaccurate poverty numbers, we believe it would be better for the World Bank to focus its attention on designing programmes and interventions to support the government's efforts in accelerating poverty reduction in Nigeria ((Okidegbe, 2013).

Indeed, Nigeria's official reaction to the World Bank's position on the poverty profile of Nigerians, bordered on propaganda. In the first place, it completely contradicts the position of the Minister of Finance and Coordinating Minister of the Economy, already cited above. Incidentally, the position of Nigeria's highly influential Coordinating Minister of the Economy, chimes with the positions of the World Bank, making the Nigerian State's official position on rising inequality in Nigeria, to border more on emotions. In essence, Nigeria's official reaction suggests that the Nigerian state is one of the few places in the world, with declining inequality ratios.

To properly conceptualize propaganda, Standler (2005:2), relates it to rhetoric. According to him, rhetoric is the art of persuading someone. Unless you live as a hermit, totally isolated from people, rhetoric is a vital skill. Then, propaganda is a subset of rhetoric, in which the speaker/writer attempts to manipulate the audience with emotion or fallacious reasoning. A common theme in propaganda, continues Standler (2005:2), is the us vs. them posturing, in which the speaker/writer encourages you to join with reasonable people and oppose the enemy. Then the us vs. them posturing is particularly damaging to society, in that it is inherently divisive and erects barriers to working together to solve problems that affect everyone (Standler, 2005:2).

To accuse the Chief Economic Adviser to the President of Nigeria, of fallacious reasoning would be impudent. Yet, for him to think that very many millions of Nigerian citizens do not live on less than N6000 a month is unbelievable. The issue is not whether a loaf of bread goes for N200 in Nigeria. The issue has more to do with the percentage of Nigerians that can currently afford a loaf of bread. In addition, most of the "active" GSM lines, merely receive calls.

Some of these lines are not recharged for upwards of 6 months and when they are recharged; it could be for only N100 a month! Why did all the GSM operators introduce recharge cards of N100/N200 denomination? It is to enable them to penetrate the market, because, a greater percentage of Nigerians are in the income bracket of the N100/N200 recharge card users. My survey of the South East region of Nigeria shows that the "sales girls" of the average trader is paid between N3000 and N5000 in a month and these sales girls are ubiquitously found in the markets and business places of the South Eastern cities. Some of these sales girls are the bread winners of their families! It is not only that there are very many Nigerians who live on less than N6000 per month; there are many who live on nothing, because they are unemployed and even unemployable, as a result of the mis-education that they had acquired and there are no formal welfare schemes to accommodate them with their mis-education.

The Ineffectiveness of Propaganda in an Era of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Wonders

Of the 89 million recorded internet users in Sub-Saharan Africa, half of them are in Nigeria (The World Bank, 2013a: vii). What these internet users say about themselves is as important as what the State says about them as individuals. When they say they are hungry and the state says they are not, no amount of propaganda can vitiate the validity of what the citizen says about himself. The fact remains that when we reel out our own statistics, we place unnecessary emphasis on the numbers and de-emphasize the people. However, it is more plausible to focus on the people, in arriving at the numbers. The maverick Catholic Bishop of the Diocese of Sokoto, Nigeria, Dr Matthew Hassan Kukah, had posited in Kuka (2012) that 80 percent of Nigerians were poor. President Goodluck Jonathan was physically present when Kuka delivered his highly erudite Keynote Speech at the 2012 Annual General Conference of the Nigerian Bar Association (NBA), for which the Guest Speaker received an uncommon standing ovation. Kuka's speech is widely published on the internet and the Nigerian State did not question his position then; that 80 percent of Nigerians were poor; particularly as Mr President was in that audience. Perhaps, between 2012 and 2013, the Nigerian economy must have recorded such great improvements in the measurement index of development, to make the World Bank's 2013 statement on the poverty profile of Nigerians implausible. We tend to forget that these reports we react to, are invariably related to previous years' reports, which are globally available in an era of ICT wonders. Profusely citing Nigeria's National Bureau of Statistics (2010), (by the way, the NBS was off the internet, while this paper was being written, late December, 2013); Onuba (2012) reports:

The National Bureau of Statistics on Monday said that 112.519 million Nigerians live in relative poverty conditions. Relative poverty is the comparison of the living standards of people living in a given society within a specified period of time. It is the most acceptable poverty measurement which has been adopted by the NBS for many years. Apart from the relative poverty index, other poverty measurement standards are absolute measure, which puts the country's poverty rate at 99.284 million or 60.9 per cent; the dollar per day measure, which puts the poverty rate at 61.2 per cent; and the subjective poverty measure, which puts the poverty level at 93.9 per cent. Instructively, all the four methods used in measuring poverty by the NBS pointed to the fact that there was disconnect between the country's Gross Domestic Product growth rate of 7.75 per cent and the high poverty rate. The relative poverty figure of 112.5 million, which was contained in the 2010 poverty profile report of the agency, was released in Abuja on Monday. It represents 69 per cent of the country's total population. The 26-page report, which provides details of poverty and income distribution across the country, put the 2004 poverty measurement rate at 54.4 per cent. The Statistician-General of the NBS, Dr. Yemi Kale, while unveiling the report, noted that the figure might increase to 71.5 per cent when the 2011 figure is computed (Onuba, 2012)
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The NBS estimates that this trend may have increased further in 2011, if the potential impacts of several anti-poverty and employment generation intervention programmes are not taken into account, he said. In arriving at the 2010 figure, the NBS boss said data from 20 million households having an average of between four to six family members were collected. The agency has yet to carry out a survey of the 2011 poverty level as funds for the exercise are still being expected. According to the report, the North-West and North-East recorded the highest poverty rates in the country in 2010, with 77.7 per cent and 76.3 per cent respectively. On the other hand, the South-West geo-political zone, according to the report, recorded the lowest at 59.1 per cent. Among the 36 states of the federation, the report stated that Sokoto had the highest poverty rate (86.4 per cent), while Niger had the lowest at (43.6, per cent).

As at 2004, Jigawa State had the highest poverty rate (95 per cent), while Anambra, with a poverty rate of 22 per cent, was the least poverty-stricken state. Kale said, in 2004, Nigeria's relative poverty measurement stood at 54.4 per cent but increased to 69 per cent or 112.518 million Nigerians in 2010.

Using the absolute poverty measure, 54.7 per cent of Nigerians were living in poverty in 2004 but this increased to 60.9 per cent or 99.284 million Nigerians in 2010. Continuing, he said, The NBS adopts the relative poverty measurement for monitoring poverty trends in the country.

It remains a paradox, however, that despite the fact that the Nigerian economy is growing, the proportion of Nigerians living in poverty is increasing every year. Asked why the impact of the country's high GDP growth rate had not translated into poverty reduction, Kale said: Economic growth is not development. If you look at our GDP numbers, you will see that agriculture, wholesale and retail trade, and oil and gas constitute over 70 per cent of that growth. How many people can those three sectors employ? Not many. Agriculture is largely subsistence in nature because the local farmer is not looking at employing people and it is when agriculture is commercialized that it will be employment-generating and poverty-reducing. He also said that income inequality had risen from 0.429 in 2004 to 0.447 in 2010 (Onuba, 2012).

The above report (even if the NBS is off the internet) is widely available on the internet. Is the Chief Economic Adviser not aware that in 2010, the poverty profile of Nigerians as released by the Nigerian State was related to what the World Bank has released in 2013? The truth of the matter in the contemporary global economy is that, as each national economy effectively tackles its own challenges, the records also filter in to the global community. Hence, in a globalised world of very many information and technology possibilities, effective action easily attracts international acclaim and credibility; while defective policies and plans, easily beget scathing international submissions; which propaganda does little or nothing to countervail.

The Consequences of National Inaction in the Face of Rising Inequality

Citing Omeje (2004), Agbiboa (2013:76), contends that it is no coincidence that one of the worst forms of political violence in Nigeria today originates in the most socio-economically deprived parts of the country. In the north where unemployment and chronic poverty are rife, radical Islamists' groups have challenged the authority of the state. In the southsouth, specifically in the Niger Delta where Nigeria's oil resource is located, environmental degradation caused by irresponsible oil practices, has compromised the major source of livelihood of indigenous people. Angered by their poor conditions amidst plenty, a flurry of ethnic militia groups often consisting of unemployed youths have engaged in kidnappings, oil pipeline vandalisations, extortion, car bombings, and other forms of violent attacks against the Nigerian state and its oil industry (Agbiboa 2013:76).

Furthermore, Agbiboa (2013:76) cites Rogers (2012:3), National Population Commission (2009:118-120), Forest (2012) and NBS (2010), to posit as follows: in Borno State, the birthplace of Boko Haram, only 2% of children under 25 months have been vaccinated; 83% of young people are illiterate, 48.5% of children do not go to school; literacy rates were much lower among states in the north, and that 72% of children around the ages of 6-16 had never attended schools in Borno State; where Boko Haram was founded. Also, looking into each specific zone, the highest poverty rate of 64.8% is recorded in the North-East zone, followed by 61.2% in the North-West. On the other hand, the lowest poverty rate of 31.2% is recorded in the South-East, followed by 40.2% in the South-West (Agbiboa 2013:76).

We recall that following the 2009 Christmas Day attempted bombing of an American Airliner by Nigerian born Farouk Umar Abdumutallab, the United States officially listed Nigeria as a state that harbors terrorists. Dankano (2010) has graphically documented how Nigeria's handling of the surrounding diplomatic row between Nigeria and the United States, amounted only to some ineffectual brouhaha on the part of Nigeria. For the purposes of this paper, it is noted that the Farouk Umar Abdumutallab incident and the listing of Nigeria as a state to watch on terrorist activities by the United States, would have been an opportunity for Nigeria to immediately look inwards - instead, we responded on the basis of emotions – on the basis of propaganda, in which the Nigerian State and the Nigerian people all concluded that "it cannot happen here." Terrorism later became a bitter Nigerian reality. "It cannot happen here", borders on condemnable inaction.

The Challenge of Change

(Gaub, 2012:7), narrates as follows: In December, 2010, a single event sparked a series of uprisings and protests that led to significant and ongoing change in the Middle East and North Africa, now called the 'Arab Spring': a young Tunisian vegetable seller named Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire in order to protest against the security forces that had seized his cart, dying from his injuries.

What followed was an unprecedented wave of protests and riots all over the Arab world, eventually leading to the stepping down of two dictators (President Ben Ali in Tunisia and President Mubarak in Egypt), an international operation against the Libyan Qaddafi regime resulting in his downfall, and more unrest in Syria, Bahrain and Yemen, jeopardizing the respective current government, one way or the other (Gaub, 2012:7). Invariably, the Arab Spring was about change. Additionally, the Arab Spring had its genesis in inequality. In this respect, Gaub (2012:12/13) further says:

The fact that the 'Arab Spring' originated in Tunisia seemed anathema to many analysts at first; in comparison to other states in the region, Tunisia enjoyed continuous, though modest economic growth, a relatively secular society and free education for everyone. Its birth rates have been declining since the early 2000s, approaching European levels. Tunisia's successful transformation into a tourism hub for Europe, and comparatively well structured economic sector, gained it the title of 'most competitive state in Africa' by the World Economic Forum in 2010. In contrast to other Arab states, its economy did not experience a downturn as a result of the global economic crisis. In the 23 years he was in power, President Ben Ali managed to reduce the percentage of Tunisians living below the poverty line (living on less than 1$ a day) from 11% to 2% of the population in 2011 (10% of the population live off less than 2$ a day). In spite of these positive developments on paper, conditions for instability kept growing; poverty remained clustered in rural and uneducated parts of society, and economic growth generated jobs mainly for unskilled and temporary activities, such as in the textile and tourism sector. In addition, distribution of income was decidedly unequal: The top 20% of Tunisian society earn 47.9% of the country's total income, while the 20% at the bottom earn 5.7% of the income (Gaub, 2012:12/13).

Inequality therefore does cause change. The Tunisian economy was ostensibly doing well, but only by the standards of what Kuka (2012:2) calls Power Point civilization, by which we are daily inundated with dazzling, mesmerizing and psychedelic slides that project growth in Road and Railway mileages, megawatts and kilowatts of electricity which never leave the screens. Billions of dollars later, the Consultants pick up their briefcases and return to Washington or London, leaving us with more death traps and darkness (Kuka, 2012:2).

The core of the challenge of change, centers on the rejection of power point civilization, which emphasizes numbers and places less emphasis on human beings whom the numbers are after all, all about. As a matter of fact, the operative language of progress in Nigeria should be change. But what negates the change process is principally political elitism. The political elite in Nigeria, easily embraces the power point culture because, it facilitates the propaganda machinations, which we use to divert attention from our numerous perfidies. In this process, we have hoisted on the socio-political space, what Ndibe (2013) calls a culture of low expectations; under which the citizens would praise a Governor for instance, to high heavens because he has donated some buses, computers and desks to some schools. Meanwhile, the fundamental problems of inequality persist under the apparent inaction of His Excellency. The political elite need to embrace the challenge of change as a matter of national interest. The best method of going about this is for the propaganda-brandishing political class, to drop the instrument of propaganda as governance tool; and run a people-centered, inclusive government. One of the other alternatives is for the citizens to take up the challenge of change. Then, the consequences might look like the Arab Spring.

Summary and Conclusion

Inequality has indeed grown dramatically in many countries; from the United States to the United Kingdom and from China to South Africa. In Nigeria, inequality has continued to rise, despite propaganda to the contrary effect by State officials. The truth is that in an era of global ICT possibilities, such propaganda is ineffectual. The consequences of national inaction, in the face of rising inequality, are obviously undesirable. The fact remains that the problem of rising inequality in Nigeria is ominously real. The Nigerian State should eschew all forms of propaganda and join the rest of the global community, in accepting the reality of rising inequality. The answer to the incidence of inequality is change.

The consequences of refusal to accept the challenge of change is usually regrettable. The Arab Spring was about such consequences. In Nigeria, the best method of going about this desired change is for the propaganda-brandishing political class, to drop the instrument of propaganda in governance and run a people-centered, inclusive government; as one of the other alternatives is for the citizens to take up the challenge of change, whereupon the consequences might look like the Arab Spring.

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