

Cultural Heritage: A Tool for Poverty Eradication and Social Development in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Cultural resources are pivoted to the development of heritage industry, tourism and economic fortune of a nation. Nigeria has a diverse and rich heritage consisting of natural and cultural sites of universal importance. Economy and cultural imperatives are recognized as the most powerful forces shaping human development. This paper looks at how preserving and promoting cultural heritage is fundamental to the eradication of poverty and usher in peace and harmony and the importance of community participation in implementing such measures. The paper examines federal government policy and the practical challenges of empowering people to harness the economic potentials of their cultural heritage for their material benefits. And therefore recommend the need for the federal, State and Local Government to put in place measures by which youths amongst others are empowered thereby reduction of poverty through the exploitation of our cultural heritage.

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Introduction

Nigeria today is a nation with over 120 million people, located on the west coast of Africa. The nation enjoys a diverse and rich physical heritage consisting of natural and cultural sites of world importance to human origins in Africa; and non-physical heritage of great traditional festivals and now, the incipient contemporary yearly carnival shows organized in different states of Nigeria. The economist David Throsby said that “in an increasingly globalized world, economic and cultural imperatives can be seen as two of the most powerful forces shaping human behaviour.” Throsby infers to the increasing recognition of the important role of culture in economic development. This author wishes to emphasize on how preserving and promoting cultural heritage and cultural products is fundamental to the eradication of extreme poverty and usher in peace and harmony in developing countries like Nigeria that are economically poor but endowed with rich and diverse cultural heritage. Local communities in these countries can harness cultural heritage to stimulate sustainable economic growth and, thus, help meet some of the country’s Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

Nigeria’s current efforts to eradicate extreme poverty are similar to those of other developing countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. This author believes there should be direct correlations between local participation in preserving and promoting cultural heritage and success or failure of poverty reduction measures and the long-term sustainability of other poverty eradication interventions. Although Nigeria federal government policy documents recognize the importance of community participation in implementing such measures, more must be done to address the practical challenges of empowering people to harness the economic potential of their cultural heritage for their material benefit.

Nigeria A Rich Country

Over the past 20 years, Nigeria has been grappling with issues of mass poverty. The situation is extreme in rural areas where over 50 percent of the population lives. According to UNICEF and world bank reports, Nigeria is one of the rich countries in the world. At this same time, it may be said that Nigeria is one of the richest countries in the world when it comes to natural and cultural heritage. Situated at the Geographical heart of the West Africa, Nigeria has long been a cultural melting pot, as evidenced by the 350 ethnic grouping and over 450 different indigenous languages belonging to distinct linguistic groups.

Poverty Eradication in Nigeria: General Overview

Right from the period of Nigeria’s independence that lead to the first republic through the different military requires up to the third republic, many forms of poverty alleviating programmes were conducted, that cut across many sectors of Nigeria’s endeavours, including:

- a) The health sector embracing such project as the primary health care scheme, UNICEF assisted guinea worm eradication programmes and other, health issue such as adequate nutrition, health education, safe drinking water and sanitation, maternal and child health and the recent health insurance scheme. (Egbe, 2005).
- b) Housing sector: In the housing sector government undertook the construction of prototype house which were sold to low income earners. National Housing construction was lunched in 1994/95 with about 121,000 housing units in view. (Egwara 1997)
- c) Agricultural Sector: Programmes such as the operation Feed the Nation (OFN), Green Revolution (GR), the National Agricultural Land Development Authority (NALDA), Industrial Crop Production Programme (NAICPP), National Accelerated Food Production Programme (NAFPP), were

established at different times aimed at self-sufficiency in food supplies and to alleviate poverty. (Esu 2001).

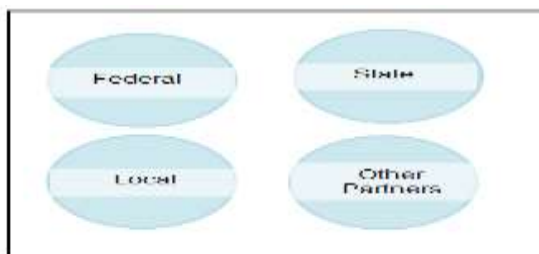
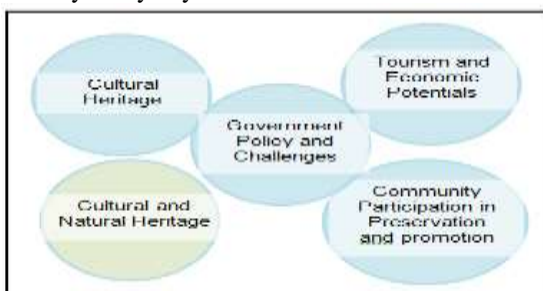
Other programmes under Transport, Education and Financial Sector were executed towards poverty alleviation. Skill improvement and creation of avenues for self-actualization were channeled through the National Directorate of Employment (NDE) Peoples and Community Bank Schemes, Collage Industry Scheme and Better Life and Family Support Programme were also geared towards poverty alleviation.

To minimize rural/urban migration Family Economic Advancement Programme (FEAP) was established; to develop the potentialities of the local people.

Looking at all these programmes executed over the years, through different governance and leadership, programmes in the cultural sector were not prominently pursued. And most of the aforementioned programmes established over the years through different sectors did not achieve their desired objectives of poverty alleviation.

Cultural Heritage: Visualizing History

For many people, historic sites means places like Mount Vernon, Gettysburg Battlefield, and the Chrysler Building. There is no question of the importance these landmarks and other American icons have had in shaping our cultural identity. But while there is only one nation capitol; there are 50 state capitols and countless country courthouses, city halls, and municipal building. Every state and local government area can boast special places embodying the important stories of past people and events. These places are sources of evidence that document how those who came before us lived and died, worked and played, expressed their creativity and beliefs, and governed themselves. We want people to become more aware of their community resources, the places they may walk by every day.



Can Cultural Heritage Contribute To Poverty Eradication, Social Development?

To address the question of whether cultural heritage activities can contribute to poverty eradication in Nigeria and other countries, a clear understanding of the terminology is imperative. As used by this author, the term “cultural heritage” includes both the tangible or physical remains of cultural practices and/or performance of a people. Cultural resource management professional now pay attention to the dramatic arts, languages, traditional music, folklore and the spiritual and philosophical systems underlying those creations.

In Nigeria, the concept of heritage preservation is new; no distinction is made between natural and cultural heritage and the intangible and tangible aspects of cultural heritage. Today’s concept of cultural heritage also incorporates contemporary culture as much as that of the past. Nigeria’s National Cultural policy defines cultural heritage as consisting of artistic and cultural expressions. Artistic expression includes “the various art forms and artifacts while cultural expressions includes indigenous knowledge and skills, local languages, values, norms and traditions.” the forms of Nigeria’s cultural heritage include oral traditions, languages, historic sites, natural sites, sacred sites, museums, handicrafts, rituals and festive events, rites and beliefs, music (vocal and instrumental), traditional knowledge and practices, literature, poetry, folklore, performing arts, traditional medicine, food and cooking, and traditional sports and games. The country’s poverty eradication plan must recognize cultural heritage as intrinsically valuable and an important dimension of identity to all Nigerians, cultural heritage should be recognized as a form of capital which when well harnessed can help to move people, especially the rural community out of income poverty.

If the community is involved in the cultural heritage project planning process, it can help with decision regarding the location of services beneficiaries, and community leadership. Participation also ensures control over the allocation and mobilization of community resources and the sustainability and ownership of the projects.

Turning to community participation, the term implies that people are directly involved in projects intended to improve their lives. Participation is especially important when it comes to cultural heritage projects because culture is a human activity first and foremost, and without people, cultural heritage is meaningless, community participation helps keep the lines of communication between the government and the community open, which, in turn, makes a good approach and conflict prevention, thus bringing in peace and harmony among the people. The third school of thought belongs to the cultural practitioners and the majority of members of local communities. Due to the lack of vital information, they are uncertain whether cultural heritage has potential to reduce poverty. Some of them are skeptical, while others just admit they do not know.

One need not look far into Nigeria for proof of cultural heritage’s potential as a significant factor in poverty eradication and development. Cultural heritage can directly contribute to poverty eradication by acting as a resource that cultural practitioner and local communities can use to generate income, create employment for themselves and others, and ultimately improve living condition. Today, many young Nigerians are engaged in music – a cultural industry – and earning money from producing and selling recordings and performances. The handicraft industry employs many Nigerians in the commercial production and marketing of items such as baskets, mats and decorations from which they earn an income to support their families. Nigeria also has many traditional healers whose main source of income is the practice of medicine and the sale of medicinal herbs. A good reference is the frequent on-going herbal medicine trade-fares all over Nigeria.

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Furthermore, cultural heritage can indirectly contribute to poverty eradication by cultivating environment in which other poverty reduction intervention can succeed. Cultural heritage influences how people make choices and respond to various development initiatives in their localities. If development initiatives ignore cultural considerations, they can easily fall short of achieving the desired impact on the lives of target communities, according to Bernard Bakaye, in the late 1990s, the government of Uganda had initiated a project to facilitate the transport of goods for the Bakonjo people of the Kasese district in the southwest. The Bakonjo live in the Rwenzori Mountains and have to transport goods from Kasese Town at the foot of the mountains to their communities in the hills. Perhaps due to inadequate consultation and community involvement in the planning process, the government procured male donkeys for use as pack animals. The Bakonjo refused to use the donkeys because according to Bakonjo culture, the carrying of goods is the domain of females. Has cultural considerations been part of the planning process, this unfortunate misunderstanding could have been avoided.

The following case studies by Bernard Bakaye show some of the ways in which cultural heritage and community participation can continue to play central roles in government efforts to eradicate extreme poverty in Uganda as it applies elsewhere.

The Twebobe Reconstruction Project

A symbol of Buganda's cultural heritage, the Twebobe is the official residence of the kabaka, or King, of Buganda, one of three extant structures within the palace grounds (the lubiri) at mengo. In 1966, Obote's army, led at the time by Idi Amin, badly damaged the Lubiri and the Twebobe, turning what remained of the later into an army barracks. In preparation for the Kabaka's royal wedding in 1999, the katikkiro (the prime Minister of Uganda,) Joseph Semwogerer Mulwanyamuli, called on the Baganda (the people of Buganda) to help rebuild the palace. Semwogerere's successful appeal was a measure of the strength of the traditional cultural institution of the Kabaka and the tradition of *bungi bwansi*-working for the common good – that is said to have inspired the construction of Makerere University, Namirembe Cathedral. Rubaga Cathedral, Kibuli Mosque, and the Bulange (Bugabda Parliament building). The project also showed the power of cultural heritage and identity as a driver of economic development.

The sociologist Charles Kley Meyer has observed that-

A strong sense of shared identity can energize people and inspire them to take collective action to improve their lives. When individuals see themselves as proud members of a culture, they are more likely to organize and work for change. Organizations built on the bedrock of cultural identity seem better able to single out common problem and collectively seek appropriate solutions.

In the case of the Twebobe, the Baganda and other Ugandans believed in the importance of Bugandan cultural heritage and generously contributed materials, labor and money towards the restoration effort. The project also provided employment opportunities for Bugandan and other Ugandan engineers, masons, laborers, and other tour guides. Outside the cultural resource areana, local and national leaders have used Bugandan cultural heritage and identity to mobilize community support for government sponsored development programs in agriculture, immunization and disease prevention and education.

Sukur World Heritage Project

We can also recall here the efforts of the people of Sukur Kingdom in Adamawa state. How the local and national leaders have used Sukur Universal Heritage Site to mobilize community support for federal and state governments sponsored development programs in agriculture, immunization and disease prevention, and education and Sukur site development for international tourism. Sukur indigenes are now building hotels and other recreational facilities to support tourism in the area. Efforts are made by both governments to ensure that the indigenes of Sukur receive adequate health care facilities at their hilltop natural dwellings. They grow some of the best crops and their market economy is improving due to the exposure of Sukur to tourism. Today sukur stands as the only world heritage declared so far in Nigeria.

Development Of Handicraft Industry In Nigeria

Nigeria is yet to develop fully the handicraft export strategy to tap the industry's latent economic potential to create wealth, generate income, and reduce poverty in rural and urban areas. Although clearly economic development – driven – the objective of the handicraft strategy is “to build the capacity of handicraft producers and exporters in order to meet international standards and to penetrate international markets” the strategy recognizes Nigeria's wide array of traditional handicraft products ranging from metal objects such as bronzes, wood sculptures, basketry, mats, ceramics, beads, pottery, textiles, toys, jewelry, bags, ornaments, leather products, and batiks, these items are produced in nearly all regions of Nigeria using locally available raw materials, with product differentiation based on sources of materials, cultural tradition and skills handed down from generation to generation. Although these traditions have weakened over time, and the number of master craftsmen has diminished, traditional handicraft production is on the upswing thanks to a growing number of artisans, traders and sustainable business venture.

Handicrafts export in Nigeria is till significant compared to raw materials export, but it has great growth potential. In order to achieve that potential however, Nigeria must address a number of important issues. Currently, local artisans are neither well organized nor mobilized to produce quality goods for an international market, and they lack convenient access to external financing for investment to improve productivity. Nigeria itself lacks a pro-artisan marketing strategy that protects handicraft makers against exploitation. Furthermore, Nigeria has no national permanent body or institution dedicated to coordinating and overseeing the handicraft industry. In most cases it is by individual efforts. The Nigerian export promotion Board and the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) and other national organization and private bodies should help to promote traditional handicrafts and also help in promulgating a comprehensive national handicraft policy.

The Future Marketing Heritage In Nigeria

As Nigeria moves towards eradicating extreme poverty and realizing the United Nations' other Millennium Development Goals, policy makers have an unprecedented opportunity to create a favorable policy environment that will encourage active community participation in, as opposed to passive acceptance of, cultural heritage development project. They must take community participation into consideration, the federal government must move beyond theory and into practice. It must also address the existing operational and practical challenges that hinder participation at the local level. By involving local government officials may well discover that people are willing to work hard to make sure their cultural heritage development program achieve the desired objectives.

The federal government must develop acts that will radically change the nature of decision making in the country by decentralizing many government functions in culture and tourism. It seems logical that the federal government must adjust its cultural heritage policies do that they fall in line with the law and thereby strengthen cultural heritage decision-making at the local level. Local governments, municipalities, and town councils (the lowest government levels with executive powers) should be able to make resource allocation decision for specific cultural heritage projects and programs in their jurisdictions. Cultural heritage policies that support decentralization would also empower community development workers to devise and implement appropriate strategies, foster positive attitudes towards cultural heritage, and improve community involvement in heritage development projects.

Although increased public sector investment in cultural heritage projects is desirable, experience has shown that this approach may not be feasible given that cultural heritage in Nigeria is still competing with other funding priorities. The more pragmatic approach, at least for the near future, would be to utilize the resources of the communities themselves and supplement them with external support from development partners, nonprofits, and the private sector. An integrated funding strategy that emphasizes community participation would enhance community ownership while at the same time discourage donor dependency, which can subvert sustainability. The federal government could create a public-private partnership for supporting the ration of handicraft cooperatives and other cultural enterprises at the local level that would have poverty eradication and sustainability as their central focus.

Local communities must have access to specialized knowledge and skills for managing cultural heritage projects effectively. They will need to develop the creative capacity necessary for producing and marketing cultural goods and services that meet industry standards if Nigeria is to participate in international trade. Demonstration projects would help tremendously in this regards, as would training – “learning by doing,” essentially – in new technologies for improving productivity and the quality of products.

Conclusion

Nigeria is at a development crossroads. It must explore all possibilities for stimulating economic growth and eradicating extreme poverty will enhance peace and harmony. Concentrating development efforts, in a few economic sectors, notably agriculture, which is extremely competitive on the international market, may not be the main solution. Cultural heritage and the cultural industries it support offer equally attractive opportunities for creating jobs, increasing

incomes and export earnings, and improving lives. The country's national culture policy, tourism policy, and national handicraft export strategy all point in the right direction. The government must make a concerted effort to strengthen the role of traditional cultural institutions, invest in cultural heritage industries at the national and local level, and help the population, especially Nigeria's youth, and understand the value of their cultural heritage.

Ali Hassan Mwinyi, the former president of the United Republic of Tanzania, in 1990, told a group meeting in the town of Arsha that ---

“Our major resource is our people. We all recognize the inherent relation between people and development. We are fully conscious of the fact that the primary objectives of development is to improve the living conditions of our people. But we also know that it is the people who are the principal actors in the recovery and development process very much depends on the effective participation of the people in that process.”

Ladies and Gentlemen: the answer lies in integrating cultural heritage into Nigeria's poverty eradication strategies but with the effective participation of those who own that heritage. We will find more peace, harmony and prosperity at the local level much more than we are now.

Recommendations

The paper strongly recommends, that the federal, State and Local government arears should as a matter of urgency look in wards towards poverty eradication and empowerment through the exploitation of cultural and traditional or native heritage.

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