

REMARKS OF THE CHAIRMAN AT THE POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY COLLOQUIUM ON NATURE OF POVERTY¹

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The invitation to be the Chairman at this unique colloquium is a great honour and a tremendous pleasure. I am touched. It is a great honour given to few and an honour, which I cherish. I sincerely thank the organisers, particularly the convener, Hon (Pharm) Wafarninyi Theman, and his energetic and progressively minded team. It is indeed most gratifying that of all the cerebral and shining personalities gathered here, the organisers opted to make me the chairman. I am truly grateful.

I salute all the very distinguished personalities here today, particularly the First Lady, Hajiya Aisha Buhari, Mr Boss Mustapha, the Secretary to the Government of the Federation, the Honourable Minister of the FCT, Alh Mohammed Musa Bello, the Chairman of the APC in Adamawa State, Alh Ibrahim Bilal, the Chief Host, Ambassador Fatima Sa'ad Abubakar, the Keynote Speaker, Barr Daniel Bwala and the Goodwill Message Ambassador, Professor Magnus L Kpakol. I heartily welcome each and every one of all the distinguished personalities and political heavyweights who are gathered here. The presence of each one of you is specially acknowledged and highly appreciated. Your dignified presence is a testimony to your individual and collective resolve to address the multivariate challenges of poverty that have arrested the development of our people and remained cogs in our wheel of progress.

Tonight's gathering is a welcome development as an effort by a progressively minded team in the political class to focus on poverty, perhaps, the most challenging drawback to individual and collective human survival. The United Nations has identified poverty as the severest threat to human survival that should be eradicated or reduced to the barest minimum at the onset of the Millennium in Year, 2000. Hence the declaration of the eradication of poverty as Goal One in the MDGs and later the SDGs.

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In Nigeria, poverty is a multi-faceted challenge that has impeded the process of personal and societal development. It affects every facet of life in the land; it is ubiquitous and prevalent in every part of the country. The manifestation of poverty can be deciphered in the general quality of life of the people, their access to basic needs and their individual and collective participation in income generating activities.

Poverty means many things to different people. One of the definitions suggests that it is a state of deprivation resulting in: “not having enough to eat, a high rate of infant mortality, a low life expectancy, low educational opportunities, poor water, inadequate health care, unfit housing and a lack of active participation in the decision making process”.(Nigeria’s National Planning Commission, 2021). It could also denote “absence or lack of basic necessities of life” or “lack of command over basic consumption needs such as food, clothing and or shelter”(Oyemi, 2013).

It has “many dimensions, among them poor access to public services and infrastructure, unsanitary environmental surroundings, illiteracy and ignorance, poor health, insecurity, voicelessness and social exclusion as well as low levels of household income and food insecurity. These features which are part of the social reality of the poor in Nigeria tend to be mutually reinforcing, trapping the poor in a vicious circle” (UNICEF, 2020). Poverty deprives its victims of “basic capabilities” and denies him or her the required ingredients for meaningful survival. It leaves the victim demonized and permanently preoccupied with the sheer problem of survival.

The severity and impact of poverty in the country vary from one part to another. Some states have higher incidence of poverty than others; the incidence is higher in the Northern states than in the Southern states. The rural areas have higher poverty prevalence than the urban areas. And, even in the urban areas, the slums suffer higher incidence of poverty than the advantaged parts of the towns.

In the communities, poverty has a female face. Poverty impacts on far more women than men in our context due to many cultural, social, economic and political reasons. And, because of poverty, we suffer from fluctuating, if not falling life expectancy rate and the predominance of acute diseases of deprivation that are poverty driven like TB, cholera and malnutrition, and malaria, not to talk of infectious ones like HIV (AIDS).

The causes of poverty in our context are numerous. While some could be historical, many more are structural, systemic and managerial and they are existentially challenging. They include the following but not restricted to: Poor management of our natural resources; poor management or politicization and ethnicisation of our diversities; conflicts; corruption; population growth without expanding opportunities; killing of the Local Government system in many states; systemic and institutional weaknesses, disregard for the rule of law; and infrastructural deficits and quite importantly, bad governance and poor leadership.

Poverty and leadership: There are numerous explanations on the causes and worsening situation of poverty among our people. Without trying to preempt the Guest Speaker, I think one area that we need to interrogate is that of the elites and leadership in our country. Societies are led by their elites who show the way for the people to follow. Generally, there are five categories of elites: political, intellectual, bureaucratic, military and business. I think we need to interrogate the role of the elites in how they have fared in leading Nigeria and Nigerians out of poverty over time? Can it be correct to say that the Nigerian elite have failed the nation? Are they, as some people claim that the elite are very corrupt, selfish and visionless to the extent that they do not hold any promise to transform the country from being the poverty capital of the world to a nation with very low poverty index? Could it be valid to say that the elite have rendered the people too poor and pitifully subdued to do be able to do anything to liberate themselves from the poverty trap?

I can recall that over time several policies, actions and efforts have been initiated and implemented by our governments and the international system to address the poverty challenge in our communities and nation. But the results are still not comforting and reassuring on our exit from the poverty club very soon. The message is clear: we have much more work ahead to do. There are numerous global lessons to learn from and newer strategies to adopt for our nation to reject poverty.

Does every one agree that we have a problem at all with deepening and devastating poverty in our land? Who or what are the obstacles to fighting poverty? How do we circumvent the problematic people or how do we elicit their cooperation? Can we agree on the enormity of the poverty challenge and its consequence on the survival of the nation? Even with maximum cooperation and effort to tackle the challenge, how long will it take us to

achieve the objectives of eradicating poverty? These are few questions that I hope our gathering today should be to answer.

Finally, let me re-emphasise my conviction in the role of leadership in helping Nigerians to be delivered from the demons of poverty. Apart from keeping the country one and safe, the first task of any legitimate leadership is the management of public funds, raising revenue, controlling expenditure, saving and ensuring that public funds are accountably spent and used strictly to uplift the quality of lives of the people for them to be free from poverty, corruption, insecurity, hunger, illiteracy, squalor, and all sources of deprivation that subverts the human spirit and capability. May Allah grant us prosperity and protect us from poverty, today and always.

Once again, I thank the organisers for inviting me. Above all, I thank you most profoundly for your kind attention.