Neoliberalism and the Paradox of Poverty Reduction: A Synthesis of the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper Experience in Benin and Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper interrogates the context that Poverty Reduction Strategy operates as a development policy framework implemented in Benin and Nigeria, and how this provides opportunities and constraints for the objective of poverty reduction. Also, it argues that within the context of a neo-liberal ideology and strategy of development which guide the formulation and implementation of poverty reduction strategy, poor developing countries have not experienced a reduction in poverty or a promised development.

Keywords: development, neoliberal ideology, implementation, poverty, strategies.

Introduction

The prevalence of poverty in many African countries after several adjustment programmes and poverty reduction strategies makes it imperative to continuously interrogate why past poverty reduction strategies have failed. It is also important to draw lessons for improvement in future interventions in these countries. According to the UNDP (United Nations Development Programme) *Human Development Report* for 2003, 54 countries were poorer in 2000 than in 1990, and 34 countries had experienced a fall in life expectancy. Though extreme poverty is estimated to have been below 11 percent globally in 2013, a drop of more than two-thirds since 1990, substantial human deprivations persist despite the progress. One person in nine in the world is hungry, and one person in three is malnourished (Human Development Report, 2016).

Since the 1990s, Nigeria and Benin have been classified as poor nations based on their low Gross National Product (GNP). The UNDP, using its Human Development Index (HDI) ranked Nigeria and Benin 152 and 167 respectively amongst the 188 poor countries in the world (UNDP, 2016).

However, in order to enhance the contribution of their interventions to international poverty reduction efforts, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank in 1999 adopted a new strategy for their assistance to low-income countries. Bond (2005, p.232) observed that notwithstanding their failures, the World Bank and the IMF demanded even more latitude to design the nature of reformed neoliberalism during the late 1990s, in areas such as debt relief, structural adjustment and institutional governance. Hence, a general concern for the use of laissez-faire economic liberalism which include economic liberalization policies such as privatization, austerity, deregulation, free trade and reductions in government spending in order to increase the role of the private sector in the economy and society. And their success is witnessed by the fact that neoliberalism remains the dominant policy paradigm in Africa, notwithstanding systemic failure.

The IMF and World Bank, recognising and learning from past failings, announced a new way of doing business in poor countries. Countries would develop a poverty reduction strategy in consultation with civil society and other stakeholders, and put this forward to the IMF and World Bank in the form of a Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) (Oxfam, 2001).

The main planks of this new strategy were twofold: (i) both institutions were to base their concessional lending and debt relief to low-income countries on Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) prepared by the countries themselves; and (ii) IMF concessional lending was to be provided through a revised lending facility, the Poverty Reduction and Growth Facility (PRGF)—with a stronger poverty reduction focus (International Monetary Fund, 2003, p .4).
The principles underlying the approach are that national poverty reduction strategies should be country-driven, results-oriented, comprehensive and long-term in perspective, and based on domestic and external partnerships (Ahmed & Nankani, 2002). The strategies were expected to be embodied within a Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs), which would serve as a framework for development assistance beyond the operations of the IMF and the World Bank.

There was much optimism on PRSP to solve the problem of poverty and engender development of poor countries. According to Sembene (2015 p.5), "Poverty reduction strategies implemented under the PRSP approach were expected to help improve growth and poverty reduction outcomes in developing countries given the broad principles that were meant to guide their preparation. These include their country-driven nature and expected adaptation to country-specific circumstances, as well as the broad participation of all stakeholders in their design and monitoring".

The introduction of the PRSP offers a significant opportunity to deepen the focus on broad-based growth strategies for poverty reduction in Africa, and to enhance African ownership of these strategies (Cheru, 2006). And the previous policy framework of development, the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) had been criticised for not being able to address the problem of poverty in many African countries.

In Africa south of the Sahara, where the incidence of poverty remains high by world standards, the PRSP approach created high expectations among policymakers fuelled by its promise of providing concessional financing and debt relief under the enhanced Heavily Indebted Poor Country (HIPC) Initiative (Sembene, 2015). It was believed that PRSP provides an opportunity to address some critical problems in both the governance of poor countries and the institutional framework of development assistance (Booth, 2003). In particular, it could be the solution to the chronic tendency of much aid for poverty reduction to undermine the conditions of its own success, by weakening the capacities of governments and other national institutions to act for themselves. Hence, the hope of PRSP redeeming poor countries was great. But today, high levels of poverty in Africa south of the Sahara remains. Poverty in absolute terms has been continuously rising in developing countries, and income and wealth inequality have been widening globally (Nur, 2015).

One critical question often posed is whether PRSPs has led to broad-based domestic ownership for HIPC countries. The thinking was that broad based domestic ownership of development strategy would produce an all-inclusive solution to poverty challenges in those countries.

A number of studies have looked at this issue based either on case studies or general reviews of PRSPs (Amo-Agyemang, 2017; Ruckert, 2007; Booth, 2003; Bond & Dor, 2003). These studies have generally sought to take into account the motivations and actions of various groups involved in the PRSP including the International Financial Institutions (IFIs), donor governments, HIPC country governments and civil society in HIPC countries (Briseid, Collinson, Klein & Schjetiein, 2008). It is in this light that this work interrogates the context within which PRSP as a development policy framework was implemented in Benin and Nigeria, and how this provides opportunities and constraints for the implementation. The paper argues that within the context of neoliberal ideology and strategy of development which guide the formulation and implementation of poverty reduction strategy, poor developing countries have not experienced reduction in poverty and the promised development.

Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper: Principles and Frameworks

The PRSP was intended to provide a framework for addressing poverty in a comprehensive and long term manner, as well as guide donor assistance strategies and coordination. Hence, the framework was originally conceived as a condition of the Heavily Indebted Poor Country (HIPC) initiative. Countries seeking debt relief through the HIPC programme were required to prepare a PRSP to show how money freed up from debt servicing would be used to alleviate poverty (Malaluan & Guttal, 2003).

For the World Bank and the IMF to endorse a PRSP, they must be satisfied that such a PRSP satisfies the conditions laid down by the institutions for the preparation of PRSP. The moment it is endorsed, the PRSP also forms a framework for all other donors to relate to the country (CIDSC, 2004). In addition to requiring a coherent policy strategy for poverty reduction, which will be assessed jointly by the Bank and Fund in terms of its objectives and policy content, the Bank Boards will also be concerned with the extent to which governments have consulted with civil society and how governance issues will be addressed (Wood, 2000). The main principles of the PRSP include: country-driven, involving broad-based participation of civil society; result-oriented and focused on outcomes that benefit the poor; comprehensive to address the multidimensional nature of poverty and the policies needed to reduce it; partnership-oriented, involving all stakeholders and with/among donors, particularly the IMF and World Bank; and a long term perspective for poverty reduction (CIDSC, 2004).

These principles suggest the participatory and all-inclusive nature of the PRSP, and that poverty in developing countries should be analysed comprehensively. This process must involve broad stakeholders including making use of local knowledge, and the principles implied a much greater role for a country's people and civil society organizations in identifying and constructing policies that would support them to move out of poverty (Khan, 2010).

In theory, a PRSP is intended to be a document prepared by a country's government—under the supervision of Bank-Fund teams—that identifies the incidence and causes of poverty, who the poor are, and the strategies for overcoming poverty, including policy and expenditure targets. It is supposed to be "locally generated and owned," developed through "wide participatory dialogue," and focused at both the micro and macro policy- making levels (Malaluan & Guttal, 2003, p.2).

The process of preparing PRSP is a two-stage approach. Countries must first prepare an interim PRSP (I-PRSP), which is intended as a roadmap for preparation of the full PRSP.

I-PRSP paves the way for the country to qualify for its 'decision point' and interim support (or a loan) from the IMF's Poverty Reduction and Growth Facility. Upon submitting the full PRSP, countries are allowed to jump through the 'completion point' which qualifies them for full debt stock reduction, but only one additional year of good macroeconomic performance (Cheru, 2006). PRSP is updated every three years with annual progress reports. The reports will identify: (i) Poor populations and the causes of poverty; (ii) Strategy for overcoming poverty for example social sector programmes, actions to promote growth and capacity building, rural development, local infrastructure, job creation by the private sector, increasing participation and good governance; and (iii) Outcome indicators which will be set and monitored through participatory process (Cheru, 2006). And in general, PRSPs aim to describe a country's "macroeconomic, structural and social policies and programmes over a three year or longer horizon, to promote broad based growth and reduce poverty, as well as associated external financing needs and major sources of financing" (Ali as cited by Nur, 2015, p.86).

A careful examination of the principal components of the new approach suggests that it builds on conventional stabilization and structural adjustment policies by adding two new elements (UNCTAD, 2002). While economic growth is considered essential for poverty reduction, it is also recognized that growth may not automatically trickle down to the poor. Thus, the approach emphasizes policies that facilitate the access of the poor to human, physical and financial assets to improve their earning capacity. Again, while macroeconomic stability and structural reforms continue to be considered to hold the key to sustained and rapid growth, it is also recognized that stabilization and structural adjustment policies may exert a temporary adverse impact on the poor. It is, therefore, advocated that such policies should be accompanied by safety nets and targeted spending programmes to mitigate their possible adverse consequences for poverty (UNCTAD, 2002, p.4). Thus, PRSPs were designed to break from the past, a time when it was perceived that the development policies of poor countries were set by the International Financial Institutions (IFIs).

Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers in Benin and Nigeria

Benin

The Republic of Benin is situated on the Gulf of Benin and bordered by the Atlantic Ocean in the South, Burkina Faso and Niger in the North, Togo in the West, and Nigeria in the East. It stretches 700 km from the Atlantic Ocean to River Niger, and its widest point measuring 325 km. With the current population of 11, 314, 317 based on United Nations estimates, and ranked 167 among the 188 of poor countries in the world on 2016 HDI. Benin is still characterised as one of the world's least developed countries (Bertelsmann Stiftung, BTI 2016).

The PRSP approach in Benin is an attempt to consolidate a number of approaches previously developed and to integrate them into a coherent framework focused on the overall objective of poverty reduction. Its four key characteristics are comprehensiveness, results-orientation, donor coordination and country ownership (Bierschenk, Thioléron and Bako-Arifari 2003, p.71).

Benin is said to have a solid tradition of national consultation. It held in succession the National Conference of Civil Service (1979), the Conference of Vital Forces of the Nation (1990), the National Economic Conference (1996), the Symposium on Common Minimum Social Services (1998), and the National Long-Term Perspectives Studies on Benin in 2025 (1997/1998), which stand as successful experiences with the participatory process in the country. To build on these experiences and ensure ownership of the strategy by the people, the government engaged in a broad range of consultations before preparing the PRSP (Benin PRSP 2002). The PRSP preparation process was supported by a consultative and participatory process involving local governments, civil society organisations or representatives, NGOs, the private sector, and development partners.

Since 1999, Benin has been implementing a national poverty reduction strategy for sustainable human development. After laying out an Interim Poverty Reduction strategy (PRS, 2000), a three-year strategy (2003-2005) was defined and has subsequently been used as a strategic reference framework, for programming and budgeting of the actions of the Government and for guiding dialogue with the Technical and Financial Partners (TFPs) (IMF Country Report, 2008). And following the positive, yet cautious, assessment of the Bank-Fund Joint Staff Assessment of the I-PRSP in September 2000, Benin became eligible to the Enhanced HIPC initiative. The first Poverty Reduction and Growth Facility (PRGF1) became operational in April 2000 (Bierschenk, Thioléron & Bako-Arifari, 2003).

The implementation of PRS 2003-2005 made it possible to make notable progress not only on the institutional level, but also with the implementation of reforms and with performance in terms of sustainable development. However, the IMF Country Report of 2008 shows that, overall, the evaluation of PRS 2003-2005 shows that while many reforms were undertaken, the results fell short of the goals laid out in terms of growth and poverty reduction. Hence, this relative shortfall is explained by: (i) insufficient attention devoted to the issues of diversification and growth, in particular the revitalization of the private sector and the development of sectoral and regional growth poles; (ii) underestimation of the role human capital plays in the growth and poverty reduction process; (iii) underestimation of the internal limits of the Public Administration vis-à-vis the changes implied by the principles of performance-based management and good governance; and (iv) the weakness of local government involvement in the development process (IMF Country Report, 2008).

Growth Strategy for Poverty Reduction (*Stratégie de Croissance pour la Réduction de la Pauvreté*-SCRP)" constitutes a second generation strategy for the three-year period 2007-2009, and is aimed at consolidating the gains of the earlier strategy while emphasizing diversification of the economy and the intensification of growth with a view to stepping up the fight against poverty and speeding Benin's achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (IMF Country Report, 2008).

The 2007-2009 GSPR was adopted by the Government in February 2007 and approved by the Bretton Woods Institutions in June 2007. It takes into account the shortcomings of the first edition of the GSPR, and is in line with the new development vision of the new government following the presidential elections in March 2006. The GSPR is the instrument of implementation, over the period 2007-2009, of the Strategic Development Guidelines (SDG) with which Benin has to meet the challenges of growth and that of an emerging country.
The Growth Strategy for Poverty Reduction (2007-2009 GSPR), which is the second generation after the first Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper of Benin (PRSP 2003-2005), emerges as the implementation of the Strategic Guidelines for Development, to the extent that its development was based primarily on the latter. Its development is also the result of a participatory approach, to which public administration, local government, the private sector and civil society have been closely associated. However, implementation of these strategies produced mixed results in the areas of economic growth and poverty reduction, owing to the external and internal shocks faced by the country in recent years (IMF Country Report, 2011).

The mid-term evaluation of the 2007-2009 GPRS indicated that over its three-year implementation period, the annual average growth rate stood at 4.0 percent, an increase from the 3.3 percent noted during the implementation period of the PRS 1. However, this rate remains below the minimum 7 percent required to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and points to a number of challenges to be tackled in the context of the GPRS 2011-2015, which include; improving the business climate and quality of governance, diversifying the economy…and implementing priority sector programmes and projects efficiently, in particular, improving the budget execution rate (IMF Country Report, 2011, p.17).

The strategic pillars of the GPRS 2011-2015 are the same as those set forth in the 2007- 2009 GPRS. However, the content and scope of the priority fields in each area have been strengthened in light of the determinants and factors driving poverty in Benin, on one hand, and the new development constraints and challenges facing the country, on the other.

Nigeria

Nigeria is a federal republic comprising thirty-six states and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Abuja. The states form the second tier of government and are further sub-divided into 774 local government areas (LGAs), which constitute the third tier of government.
Nigeria covers an area of 923,769 square kilometres (909,890 square kilometres of land and 13,879 square kilometres of water) and is situated between longitude 3° and 14° East, and latitude 4° and 14° North (Nigeria MDGs Report, 2010).

The United Nations Report on Nigeria's Common Country Analysis, CCA described Nigeria as one of the poorest and most unequal countries in the world, with over 80 million or 64% of her population living below poverty line (Opejobi, 2016).

National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS) is Nigeria's home grown poverty reduction strategy (PRSP). NEEDS 2004 – 2007 is Nigeria's reform based medium-term plan for economic recovery, growth and development. NEEDS was conceptualized in 2003 and launched in 2004, as a response to the numerous challenges facing the nation (IMF Country Report, 2007). Thus, NEEDS builds on the earlier two-year effort to produce the interim PRSP (I-PRSP), and the wide consultative and participatory processes associated with it. NEEDS is a medium term strategy which derives from the country's long-term goals of poverty reduction, wealth creation, employment generation and value re-orientation. NEEDS is a nationally coordinated framework of action in close collaboration with the state and local governments and other stakeholders to consolidate on the previous achievements and build a solid foundation for the attainment of the county's long-term vision of becoming the largest and strongest African economy and a key player in the world economy (Executive Summary, NEEDS document 2004).

The preliminary draft of the interim poverty reduction strategy paper for Nigeria was issued in October 2001 with a brief description of the institutional arrangement that the Federal government has put in place for the nationwide participatory and public education outreach on the poverty reduction strategy process for Nigeria.

NEEDS rests on four key strategies:

- Reforming the way government works and its institutions - a goal geared towards restructuring, right-size, re-professionalize and strengthening government and public institutions to deliver effective services to the people.

- Growing the private sector- NEEDS is a development strategy anchored on the private sector as the engine of growth; for wealth creation, employment generation and poverty reduction.

- Implementing a social charter- NEEDS's focus is on the people, it is about the people: it is about people's welfare, their health, education, employment, poverty-reduction, empowerment, security and participation.

- Value re-orientation- part of the reform agenda of NEEDS is to ensure that hard work is rewarded and that corruption and rent-seeking are punished (NEEDS Document, 2004).

The framework for actualizing the goals of NEEDS is anchored on three pillars; (i) Empowering people and improving social delivery; (ii) Fostering private sector led growth through creating the appropriate enabling environment, (iii) Enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of government, by changing the way government does its work. Hence, a key element of the implementation of NEEDS in Nigeria relates to a system of collaboration and coordination between the Federal and State Governments, donor agencies, the private sector, civil society, Non-Governmental Organizations and other stakeholders.

The importance of coordination was recognized very early in the development of NEEDS. Through the statutory organs for intergovernmental coordination (the National Economic Council, the National Council for Development Planning, and the Joint Planning Board), state governments did not only endorse the thrusts of NEEDS but were also committed to developing State Economic Empowerment and Development Strategies (SEEDS). The states also agreed on a minimum set of priorities that each state government must reflect in its SEEDS, namely, agriculture, small and medium-size enterprises, rehabilitation and maintenance of infrastructure (especially roads), and public finance reforms and transparency (IMF Country Report, 2005). And a coordinated approach among the three tiers of government was to produce the intended outcomes. Given the comprehensiveness of analysis of policy thrust of NEEDS, no doubt NEEDS is a well thought-out strategy for development. The question then is to what extent did implementation of NEEDS reduce poverty in the country?

A major deficit of this strategy of poverty reduction in Nigeria as observed elsewhere is that the majority of the population were not correctly targeted by most of the programmes of NEEDS (Quadri, 2008). This is because there was no broad-based participation in the conception of the strategy. According to the report of ANEEJ (2003, p.22), "participation in the design of the NEEDS' policy excluded quality involvement by the civil society and non-governmental organizations in the country. The quality of civil society participation in Nigeria is worsened by two main constraints namely: inadequate information or reluctance of government in providing information about what the vision is and political boundaries on participation". The report specifically notes that in October 2003, an Economic Summit tagged "Agenda for Economic Recovery" was held by the ruling party then, the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) and its leadership, without the involvement of the participation of the other parties' members, let alone, the civil society. Poverty situation in Nigeria reveals that the incidence of poverty is still very high in the country. Statistics show that the incidence of poverty using the rate of US $1 per day increased from 28.1 percent in 1980 to 46.3 percent in 1985 and declined to 42.7 percent in 1992 but increased again to 65.6 percent in 1996. The incidence increased to 69.2 percent in 1997. The 2004 report by the National Planning Commission indicates that poverty has decreased to 54.4 percent. But by 2010, the poverty rate has increased again to 65.1 percent (Igbuzor, 2013). The 2017 Atlas of Sustainable Development Goals shows that as at 1990, 51 million Nigerian were living in abject poverty but increased to 86 million by 2013.

Why it may not be out of place to say that poverty reduction strategy has failed to reduce poverty of many countries in Africa, equally important for analysis is the discussion of how PRSP framework as a strategy of poverty reduction is linked with the neoliberal ideology?

Neoliberalism and the Paradox of Poverty Reduction

Since the commencement of implementation of PRSP in developing countries, especially in nations in Africa south of the Sahara, Human Development Index (HDI) has stagnated and declined in many of them. The question as to whether poverty can be reduced under the ideology of neoliberalism has continued to engage the interests of scholars, policy analysts and critics. Many of the arguments are based on the fact that PRSP is not different from previous development assistance rendered to developing countries. In practice, there is little evidence showing a genuine shift away from the neoliberal principles that drove structural adjustment policies (Nur, 2015). PRSP is firmly embedded in the neo-liberal economic policy framework which underpinned the conception and implementation of structural adjustment policy in developing countries. According to Stein (2014), Neoliberalism has multiple definitions and has been described in the literature as an ideology, philosophy, doctrine, assertion and theory. However, Stein observed that despite the difference, there is generalised recognition of common policy paradigm, which assumes that growth and development will arise from conservative monetary and fiscal policy, liberalisation and privatisation of economies (Stein, 2014).

Thus, neoliberalism supports the 'reduced' role of the state and emphasises the allowance of the market forces of demand and supply to determine its direction and outcomes (Balarabe-Kura & Zagga, 2014). Some of the main characteristics of neoliberalism as described by Duménil & Lévy (2005, p. 10) include: a new discipline of labour and management to the benefit of lenders and shareholders; the diminished intervention of the state concerning development and welfare; the dramatic growth of financial institutions; the implementation of new relationships between the financial and non-financial sectors, to the benefit of the former. Adejumobi (2006) also notes that the features of liberalisation, deregulation and privatisation of the economy including social services, which undergird SAP, are also core elements of the PRSPs. In Malaluan and Guttal's (2003) view, not much has changed in the *modus operandi* of the Bank and the Fund, despite their promises that borrowing countries will have greater say in determining economic programmes under the PRSP framework. What then is new in this strategy of poverty reduction and development? The answer may be found in the critical assessment of the PRSP as a strategy of poverty reduction.

According to Seshamani (cited in Nur, 2015, p.87), there are many new features with the PRSP approach: the conceptualization of poverty as a multi-dimensional phenomenon; the participation of stakeholders, in particular the civil society, in formulating the PRSP document; a more comprehensive coverage of sectors and cross-cutting themes (e.g. governance, gender, HIV/ AIDS); outcome-oriented expectations from resource allocation and spending―all these, no matter how inadequately met on ground, are unprecedented.

Nur (2015) observes some innovative changes which marked a departure from the usual way of doing business. Under the new PRSP framework for poverty reduction, the IFIs directly target poverty through specific measures rather than relying on growth to effect a reduction in poverty levels. The explicit inclusion of multiple branches and layers of government as well as the poor in the consultative process became the new ways of doing business. The idea that the first draft of the document that will guide the PRSPs should be initially drafted by the recipient country, and not the World Bank or the IMF, is also a change from what obtained in the past. Furthermore, special purpose financing arrangements for the provision of basic social services to the poor and for those marginal to or temporally adversely affected by adjustment processes is also a laudable innovation (Nur, p.*88*). However, Nur (2015) argues that despite this apparent shift in focus and agenda, critics argue that PRSPs are rhetorical at best or, at worst, a reconstituted SAPs masked in misleading claims like "participatory" and "pro-poor" to stifle criticism and grassroots resistance. The depressing reality according to Amo-Agyemang (2017, p.4) is that "contra prevailing dogma fervently invoked by the proponents of neoliberal orthodoxy notably the Fund and the World Bank, and neoconservative theorists, the radical and progressive African political economists have ferociously and persuasively pointed out that after decades of promoting and implementing adjustment packages, the evidence on the ground does not support the optimism and the euphoria that greeted the approach".

The World Bank and the IMF realised after the failure of Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) in most developing countries that the exclusion of these countries from the process of developing strategies of reducing poverty in their countries might be responsible for the failure of SAP. However, many have observed and argued that PRSP is not different from the old strategy of development which it tried to replace. Johnston (2005) noted that although the IMF and the World Bank have recognised some criticisms of earlier structural-adjustment and stabilisation policies, the new lending facilities linked to Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSP) remain based on a neoliberal economic-policy recipe.

The recent shift in the development thinking of the World Bank and the IMF according to Ruckert (2007) has been greeted with two opposing responses in academia.

> On one hand, supporters of the IFIs posit that the Post Washington Consensus (PWC) and the PRSP approach represent a fundamental rupture in development practice and a progressive move away from policy conditionality towards country ownership and home-grown development strategies. On the other hand, critics of the IFIs have suggested that the shift towards the PWC and the introduction of the PRSP approach in the late 1990s do not represent a departure from the neoliberal policy advice espoused by the IFIs during the era of structural adjustment. Rather, this discursive shift towards the PWC is understood to be part of an effort to address the growing criticisms of IFI policies, and to further tighten the grip of the IFIs over developing countries through forms of "deep interventionism," foreclosing social and political alternatives to neoliberal practice (Ruckert, 2007, p.92).

From whatever angle one examines the argument, IMF and World Bank's new strategy of poverty reduction embodies all the trappings of neoliberal orientation. In making the PRSPs a requirement for debt relief and further lending, the World Bank and the IMF have, in effect, extended their sphere of influence well beyond economic matters and into every aspect of social policy (Bond & Dor, 2003). Piko (undated) also noted that the IMF and the World Bank did not fail to ensure the strengthening of their own influence and power in the process. In the end, there is the same final authority deciding whether to approve the PRSP or not. The rhetoric of poverty reducing interventions and strategies and specifically, the PRSP framework with its emphasis on inclusive with popular "participation" and greater country "ownership" of policies - as well as the promotion of the ideals of good governance, was to enhance donor power in the formulation and implementation of client countries policy processes (Amo-Agyemang, 2017, p.6). This implies the continuous domination by the IMF and the World Bank of the countries' policy processes and exclusion of the poor and many stakeholders.

McKinley (2004) observed that a glaring inconsistency exists between economic policy conditionalities which were based on neoliberalism, and the social focus of Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers. The agenda of the poor in the process of the PRSPs dissolves with the dominant conditions of the neoliberal agenda which pervades both the formulation and implementation of PRSPs in Africa. Abugre (2000) is more vociferous in his critique:

> PRSPs are a classic case of empty rhetoric. It could provide a useful veil for the World Bank and IMF to continue their neo-liberal agenda. Judging by the gap between what the World Bank and IMF say, and what they do, PRSPs may well result in the worst of both worlds for poor economies and poor people within them, by legitimizing and institutionalizing yet additional conditionalities without significant benefit either by way of debt reduction or real change in the content and "ownership" of policies (Abugre, 2000 p.21).

PRSP's principles emphasised participation, comprehensive analysis of poverty and inclusiveness, local ownership among others. This aims at granting considerable autonomy to countries in the design of safety nets and targeted anti-poverty spending programmes. Achieving the objective of local ownership for instance, became difficult given the demands of PRSP's endorsement of poverty documents by the IMF and the World Bank for poor country to claim complete ownership. Local ownership can be perceived as an approach to embed the local elite into the neoliberal administrative structures to exploit the local formal and informal structures (Hahn, 2008). PRSs assume that simply by committing to do things in a participatory way with stakeholders, governments will be more likely to be called to account for their actions and results by those stakeholders. Not surprisingly, evidence suggests that this does not work well in practice (Booth as cited in Handley, Higgins, Sharma, Bird & Cammack, 2009, p.12). And as further observed, freedom of action of recipient governments in the determination of the nature and content of macroeconomic stabilization and structural adjustment programmes, or more generally of their development strategies, continued to be severely constrained by conditionalities attached to multilateral lending and debt relief (UNCTAD, 2002). This has resulted not only in loss of sovereignty of such countries (Malaluan & Guttal, 2003) but also has engendered conflicts and crises in some of these countries. According to Malalaun and Guttal (2003):

> Experience shows that Bank-Fund conditions often prove to be more powerful than national laws since deeply indebted and cash strapped governments do not usually have access to alternative sources of development finance. Crucial national policies related to trade, investment, assets ownership, natural resources, fiscal management, banking, public administration, social development and even judicial systems are determined more by Bank, Fund and donor pressures than by domestic priorities and aspirations (Malaluan & Guttal, 2003 p.2).

A critical issue on whether PRSP process is truly broad-based and participatory has been raised by Nur (2015, p.90). Initial IMF and World Bank documents in the early 2000s admittedly show that participation of civil society is largely confined to assessments of the extent and causes of poverty as well as the monitoring of programmes implementation, and, in some cases, impact evaluation. In most cases, however, civil society involvement has been limited to consultation and provision of raw information. Even if the idea of broad participation in the PRSP drafting has succeeded in improving poverty diagnostics and to a certain extent in improving transparency and accountability, it has failed to influence macro-economic choices (Hugé & Hens, 2007, p.2). Time-frame of implementation stipulated by the strategy framework is seen as one of the problems. According to Oxfam International (2001), countries needed time to do a proper analysis of pro-poor strategy and formulate policies in that direction. Countries however, believe that the faster they complete a full PRSP, the quicker they will have access to increased IMF and World Bank resources. The desperation to access loans and aids made them develop and implement pro-poor policies without a comprehensive analysis with consequences of non-performance. What this implies is that the link between strategy of reducing poverty and its implementation seemed to have been ignored by many of the poverty reduction papers leaving the development and implementation of pro-poor policy much to be desired. Furthermore, the neoliberal assumptions pay little or no considerations to domestic factors such as the dependent and peripheral nature of developing economies, particularly in Africa south of the Sahara where capitalist development has not significantly flourished (Egharevba, Imhonopi & Iruonagbe, 2015) and consequently, such economies suffered from the entrenched inequalities in the global economy.

There are limits to what the policy aspirations of the poor can contribute directly to the formulation of an effective poverty reduction strategy (UNCTAD, 2002). Majority of the citizens in poor countries do not influence the policy process. Powerless, by the condition of their poverty, the poor are often excluded from decision process, their voices muted, and as such, often times policies targeted at the poor failed to address their problems. In many instances, expectations of the PRSP process have been dashed and experiences are at odds with the claims made by the IMF and World Bank (Bond & Dor, 2003). The agenda of the poor in the process of the PRSPs tends to fizzle out with the dominant conditions of the neoliberal agenda which pervades both the formulation and implementation of PRSPs in Africa.

Conclusion

The Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) of the IMF and the World Bank was criticised as not being able to address poverty challenges in most Highly Indebted Poor Countries of Africa. The PRSP was launched to correct the ills of SAP as a poverty reduction strategy. However, this work has demonstrated that the PRSP policy framework as championed by the IMF and World Bank has not led to the reduction of the incidence of poverty in many African countries.

Especially as shown in this study, development indicators are yet to improve significantly in Benin and Nigeria. Even where growth occurs in both countries; it is often not reaching the poor. Persistent poverty and the worsening of conditions under which the citizens of these countries live is a manifestation of the failure of neoliberal policies of poverty reduction. PRSP as a strategy of poverty reduction experienced tension both with formulation and implementation as evidenced in poverty situation of Benin and Nigeria. However, engendering sustainable development in Africa and future focus of poverty reduction strategy will require greater inclusion and integration of the African nations in policy formulation and implementation.

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