
Are you Being Served? Collective Deprivation and Governance in Africa

CPPA Visiting Senior Fellow-in-residence, Dr. Melvin Ayogu and Research Associate, Kingsley Onyeka of the Center for Public Policy Alternatives (CPPA), assess how governments' refusal to implement proactive development policies impoverish citizens.

With a grant from the Ford Foundation, a study titled "Are you being served? Governance and Deprivation in Nigeria", compares wealth inequality among countries in the African region. The goal is to evaluate how long-term performances of these governments have improved the general welfare of their citizens. Nigeria which is the principal focus of the study is benchmarked against the performance of other African states.

The authors highlight that life expectancy, health, education and other human services are within the proper scope of governments. In fact, governments have ministries responsible for providing these services. The thesis of the paper therefore notes that it is rational to blame what the authors call 'collective deprivation' or 'immiseration' (rapid increase of aggregate inequality) on poor governance. The study aims to prove the thesis in two ways- methodologically and empirically.

Methodologically, the authors link aggregate inequality to the quality of governance. They derive an index of quality of governance based on the level of impoverishment of the citizens. Empirically, the index highlighting the quality of governance is calculated by comparing the performance of governments across 46 African countries.

Why should we care about inequality?

The authors argue that governments have the power to improve human welfare through policy instruments. In simple terms, policy instruments are interventions implemented by policy makers to achieve an outcome. The desired outcome is called an operating target, which Ayogu and Onyeka suggest could be political variables, macroeconomic variables, social variables, or a combination. Operating targets can be manipulated and have a predictable effect on intermediate targets– which are considered to be factors that respond quickly to policy actions and presumed to have a predictable relationship with goals of the policy. The intermediate targets considered in this study are long and healthy life, knowledge, and a decent standard of living.

Considering the importance of human welfare, the authors note that the world should be worried about “inequality and its many manifestations”. The paper states that “very few, if any of the aid agencies and philanthropies would not overtly count poverty eradication and inequality as core concerns”. Wealth inequality is disconcerting because “a society that is growing more unequal is problematic.” Ayogu and Onyeka warn that inequality can lead to “immiseration of the middle class” and thus impede economic development. They reveal that a thriving middle class will be empowered “to foster entrepreneurship, shift the composition of consumer demand (i.e. promote increase in product varieties) as well as induce and support economic reform”.

Although the government should be able to control the governed (citizens), the authors insist that it is imperative that there is a “dispersion of power among the citizenry” to avoid what the authors describe as “an increasingly high concentration of wealth in a few hands”, a situation they say will weaken social foundations.

The Findings

When evaluated solely on its immiseration record, the Government of Nigeria (the principal focus of the study) ranks 36 out of the 46 independent states in the African region. Nigeria's standing has been described as disappointing, especially for a country that is "the largest oil-producing state in Africa, has the largest GDP, and a generous endowment of natural resources".

Empirical results also show that the impoverishment index across the 46 countries indicate a prevalence of *oppressor regime* – a term the authors describe as government's sustained inability to improve the welfare of its citizens. The assessment was over a 24-year period.

Ayogu and Onyeka conclude by stating that "distributive policies which are skewed towards investment in health and education can change wealth distribution over time through influencing income dynamics."

Therefore, recognizing the crucial role of health and education in changing the narrative on inequality, the authors boldly insist that the next step is to ask– how should we get the government to respond positively?

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