

The Role of Civil Society Organizations in Poverty Eradication and the Recovery from Multiple Crises.

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1.Preamble.

What is poverty? This question has been asked many times because, poverty has been defined and described in various ways across the world. Some have defined poverty in the economic sense, to portray lack of the necessities of life, such as food, shelter, clothing, lack of or in ability to access opportunities or afford social services.

To others, poverty can be seen in the form of lack of income or sustainable livelihoods, hunger, malnutrition, ill health, limited or lack of access to education, homelessness or lack of inadequate housing, social discrimination, and exclusion.

Going by the World Bank description, poverty is hunger, lack of shelter, being sick and not being able to see a doctor, not having access to school and not knowing how to read. Poverty has also been linked to lack of control over resources, such as land and habitat, skills, knowledge, capital, and social connections, and live below \$1.90 per day.

No matter how we define or describe poverty, it is a situation that many people will not want to be in or experience in their lifetime. Not being able to meet or afford one's basic needs is a painful situation, which many people in the world are facing today. One cannot help but to agree with the statement in our Aide-Mémoire, which said that poverty as a complex societal issue, and that there is no unique definition of poverty as there are many aspects and dimensions of poverty.

The statistics available have shown that more than half of the world's population are living in situations or circumstances that can be described as poverty. According to Secretary General's report (August 2018), poverty rates are still high in many countries in Africa and the least developed countries. He went further to say that, out of the 783 million people living in extreme poverty in 2013, more than half were in sub-Saharan Africa and close to a third lived in Southern Asia, though there are also pockets of poverty in middle- and high-income countries.

It is notable that, the United Nations General Assembly in its resolution 72/233, proclaimed the period 2018-2027 as the Third United Nations Decade for the eradication of poverty with the theme, “Accelerating global actions for a world without poverty” which is in line with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This theme calls for urgent actions from everyone to tackle and eradicate poverty in all countries to achieve sustainable development.

2. Poverty Eradication Strategies

Many countries all over the world have proposed and implemented various policies and strategies to ensure that everyone, no matter where they live is free from poverty, thereby eradicating poverty. However, poverty eradication in all its forms and dimensions today remains one of the greatest problems facing all countries in the world, and particularly for those in the global south.

The SDGs Goal 1 says: End poverty in all its forms everywhere, while 1.1 says that by 2030, eradicate extreme poverty for all people everywhere, currently measured as people living on less than \$1.25 a day. Going by the diversity among developed, developing and the least developed countries, there should be diverse strategies for eradicating poverty if we must achieve sustainable development and leave no one behind.

Our strategy cannot be a one size- fits all, and as such must reflect various national contexts, priorities, capacities, and fiscal constraints. In some developing countries, the governments and their agencies have focused their efforts on designing winning policies and programmes to eradicate poverty.

Despite the numerous poverty eradication policies and strategies, about half of the population of these countries are still living in poverty. They live in homes with inadequate water supply, poor sanitation facilities and no electricity. They lack access to good schools, health care, modern transport facilities, and employment opportunities. Many are malnourished as they cannot afford adequate nutrition.

It is a fact that some actions and programs are being taken to tackle poverty, and the question is, are we taking the right actions? Some policies that may be effective in Europe or America may not necessarily work in Africa. Indeed, what worked even in a country or region in Africa may not necessarily work in another country or even in different zones within the same country.

Poverty eradication requires the commitment of all to ensure an inclusive, resilient, and more equitable recovery from multiple crises and to fully implement the 2030 Agenda. Every poverty eradication strategy should endeavour to include measures

aimed at dismantling those structural barriers that is preventing people from escaping poverty and focus on expanding the opportunities for them to enhance their capacities and improve their economic and social conditions. We also need to pursue policies which will ensure that everyone has access to adequate economic and social protection programmes no matter their gender.

Gender inequality in Africa and some other countries in the global south has contributed to the large number of women and girls living in poverty, particularly the female headed households. Women are denied access to resources including land ownership and inheritance in many communities in Africa. Poverty eradication strategies should endeavour to eliminate the injustice and barriers faced by women and strive to encourage and strengthen their participation in leadership and decision -making processes.

In our efforts and strategies towards poverty eradication, there are some questions we still need to answer. Who are the key players in our policies and program interventions? Who have we included and recognized as key players and who have we neglected and excluded? What can they bring to the table to tackle the fight against poverty?

Similarly, the issue of some global crisis also comes to play such as the impact of COVID -19 on countries, climate change, political conflicts and wars going on in some countries, which has further pushed more people into poverty. There is also the issue of accurate data which is needed to adequately plan and execute poverty eradication programs.

In all these, what is the role of civil society organizations, community leaders, traditional and religious institutions, and other gate keepers in poverty eradication policies and programs? They are key stakeholders who should be engaged, but have we fully engaged them in the process?

3.Why Civil Society Organizations?

Civil Society Organizations have originated in various countries in response to various political, social, economic, and cultural conditions and challenges, such as unemployment, natural disasters, health, education, social injustices like poverty, marginalization, abuses, inequality, and gender relations.

These and similar problems have plagued various societies of the world at different stages of their development. The inability of various governments, to provide basic services to their people and alleviate some of the socio- economic and cultural

conditions has prepared a fertile ground for CSOs to thrive. Most CSOs started as a small group getting together on very specific activities, but their desire to do something useful for the benefit of those in need drove them to voluntary work.

The role of civil society organizations in development has been laudably recognized particularly by the international development partners and the United Nations.

I recall the consultation meeting I attended at the UN headquarters, in February 2023, with the Third Committee of the UN General Assembly which was convened to provide an opportunity for Member States and Representatives of Non-Governmental Organizations in consultative status with the UN ECOSOC, to share thoughts on the outcomes of the 77th session of the Third Committee as well as provide insights into how to ensure the effective engagement and contributions from civil society stakeholders in the areas under discussion in the Third Committee.

In his keynote address, the President of the General Assembly said it was necessary to deepen the engagement with CSOs, because they are on the ground and have local knowledge of issues on the ground. He said CSOs bring the voices of the marginalized to the global space, and encouraged CSOs to bring forward proposals that are concrete, justifiable, and workable.

Many of the representatives of Member States present at the meeting, agreed with the Chair, and also highlighted the services and expertise that civil society organizations bring to the work of the United Nations and supported the call and move for a closer working relationship between civil society organizations and the Third Committee.

That is exactly the point we CSOs have been making. Civil society organizations should be seen and recognized as partners with Member states, the United Nations and development agencies, in order to deliver on the goals for sustainable development.

4. Operational Lessons and Workings of Civil Society Organizations.

As stated earlier, Civil Society Organizations are established on idealism. They are mostly made up of professionals who are willing to contribute to development without being in government or private sector.

CSOs are not expensive institutions, usually having very few core staff and many volunteers. CSOs often work at grassroots level, having a clear understanding of

development as a participatory process which empowers the communities for self-reliant.

Today, Civil Society Organizations carry out specialised assignments including research, data collection and measurements, negotiations and missions, capacity building and trainings, program implementation, bringing their profession and training to bear in the development work.

One of the most spectacular qualities of CSOs is their ability to promote and practice the cost-effective use of resources in dealing with identified needs. They are not hindered by bureaucracy, which is often associated with governmental processes, and also do not promote mega projects that will be abandoned midway. CSOs establish self-monitoring which helps to avoid project failure when technical assistance is withdrawn.

They are accountable, accounting for funds received from donors, and also to the community in whose name funds have been received. CSOs are progressive but politically independent, having no ideological, religious, or tribal bias.

5. Roles of CSOs in Poverty Eradication and the Recovery from Multiple Crises

There are four basic roles carried out by most civil society organizations in the world.

5.1. Advocacy and Policy Influencing.

Civil Society Organizations very often are engaged in advocacy and policy influencing with policy makers, decision makers and traditional institutions on various issues affecting the poor and marginalized sections of the population. Many CSOs have also engaged in poverty eradication programs, sourcing funds and delivering on projects aimed at eradicating poverty in communities.

A good number of CSOs are professionals in their own right and are knowledgeable on the implementation of guidelines and provisions of the United Nations Conventions, International Treaties and Protocols. They are able to bring their knowledge and expertise, if and when they are included in processes, programs and schemes aimed at eradicating poverty and recovery from crisis.

Civil Society Organizations are on the ground, in touch with the grassroots and are able to work with community leaders, traditional and religious institutions, and gate keepers on poverty eradication programs. Their closeness to the people at the local level gives them the opportunity to understand the core issues affecting the

people. The inclusion of civil society organizations early in policy and program designs will ensure the success of such interventions.

For us as an organization, our advocacy meetings with traditional institutions and community leaders in many rural communities in the southeast states of Nigeria, on widowhood rites and practices led to the elimination of some obnoxious widowhood rites and mourning periods for women in those communities. We are also working with these gate keepers on the inclusion of women in decision making and inheritance rights.

The role of civil society organizations in poverty eradication and recovery from crisis is huge. Member states and their agencies need to realize that partnering with civil society organizations will boost their programs and impact better on the communities.

5.2. Sensitization and Awareness Raising.

Civil Society Organizations are versed in sensitization and awareness raising, with groups and particularly with gatekeepers, opinion leaders, women groups, and youths on key issues, to achieve behavioral change or secure their support and participation in any developmental process.

The leaders and members of communities need to be carried along in any poverty eradication or crisis recovery programs for it to succeed.

Civil society organizations are better equipped to sensitize the communities and secure their cooperation and commitment to such programs. Community leaders and members can participate through adequate consultation in policy and program designs and interventions, and civil society organizations can effectively play the role and ensure that there is inclusion for better outcomes of the interventions.

There were cases of poverty eradication interventions mounted by some agencies of government, without adequate inclusion of civil society and leaders of communities in the designs. The outcomes of such interventions were not successful.

Yes, someone may be poor but he or she has their dignity, and this must be respected when designing or implementing poverty eradication programs. Civil society organizations understand and practice the principle of respect and personal dignity; hence they work very well with the marginalized and community members. CSOs are also able to sensitize and create awareness among the communities on crisis situations such as the COVID- 19 pandemic or climate change issues, and how to mitigate the impact.

5.3. Community Service Delivery.

My organization and many civil society organizations have carried out community services ranging from construction of VIP toilets, refuse disposals / composting pits, smokeless cooking stoves, boreholes for drinking water supply, to training and equipping livelihood skill development centers. CSOs have carried out various capacity building and skill development trainings for many grassroots women, community leaders, youths on various issues towards economic empowerment and poverty eradication.

Civil society organizations have also established non- formal education centers for out of school youths and children in hard-to-reach communities. They have also developed IEC materials and promotional leaflets and distributed them towards economic empowerment and eradication of poverty in communities. Many civil society organizations are involved in reproductive health issues, including HIV /AIDS prevention and counseling.

It is important to include civil society organizations early in poverty eradication schemes, as well as programs designed to mitigate crisis in communities. Many civil society organizations operate locally, and as such fully understand and have local knowledge of the terrain and are well fitted to deliver on interventions to eradicate poverty and respond to other global crisis.

5.4. Data Gathering, Monitoring and Evaluation

The role of CSOs in data gathering, monitoring and evaluation of programs and projects can never be over emphasized. Our organization have been involved in data gathering, monitoring and the evaluation of many donor- funded projects including the MDGs programmes and projects in Nigeria.

Civil society organizations are well positioned to gather and analyze data on various issues which can support effective policy design and program interventions. As the voice of the voiceless, CSOs serve and protect the interest of the marginalized groups, including women and youths.

CSOs have their ears close to the ground, act as watchdogs and whistle blowers, once they hear or see any action or inaction that will derail the move towards development.

Data gathering and program monitoring are key to ensuring that program objectives are achieved, while evaluation enables us to assess the impact on the beneficiaries. CSOs have the capacity and are better placed to deliver accurate data and reports that are useful for innovative approaches for eradicating poverty.

6. Conclusion

If we must leave no one behind and reach the furthest behind first, then we need to strengthen the role of civil society and non-governmental organizations in national development efforts. Civil society organizations should not be excluded when issues of poverty eradication and recovery from crisis are on the table.

Civil society organizations are closer to the people and often times speak up on their behalf. Many members of CSOs are professionals in their own right and should be recognized and seen as partners in development.

We need to build multi stakeholder partnerships, which will allow all aspects of our society to effectively contribute to the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. CSOs should be invited to participate in various discussions, dialogues and negotiations being undertaken by our governments, its agencies, as well as the United Nations and its agencies.

We should ensure that the voices of CSOs are heard in the various United Nations Commissions, including the High-Level Political Forum and the General Assembly.

While I commend the United Nations for their efforts in recognizing the work of CSOs, I call upon the UN to do more. Many CSOs task themselves to attend and participate in many United Nations Commission meetings at their own expense.

The UN should acknowledge these efforts and continue to ensure that CSOs are included and that they participate in spaces where critical decisions or negotiations affecting the lives of our people are made.

CSOs do not want to be included as an “after thought”. The UN charter says, “we the people of the United Nations” and CSOs are part of “we the people”. More importantly “don’t talk about us, without us”.

We appreciate the efforts of the United Nations for including the NGO Committee on Social Development into some spaces at the UN, including the UN Expert Group Meetings. We encourage the UN and Member States to please increase your engagement and inclusion of Civil Society Organizations in more critical spaces and also to provide some level of resources to enable them engage more effectively in these processes.

Finally, working together with all the partners, and civil society being adequately included, will guarantee our ability to accelerate global actions for a world without poverty.

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“Accelerating global actions for a world without poverty”