
Abstract

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) emanated from the UN Millennium Declaration of September 2000. The eight-point target goals bind countries to do more individually and collectively to reduce poverty by half by the year 2015. In the said document, which Nigeria was a signatory, the country agreed to free its people from the abject poverty they have been suffering from, in addition to hunger, illiteracy, diseases, gender inequality, child, and maternal mortality, environmental degradation among other MDGs intervention programmes. Northern Nigeria is one area in Africa where one can see apparent poverty amongst the populace. The Federal government in conjunction with the States in an effort towards achieving the MDGs embarked on the purchases and distribution of motorcycles among the youths who were seen as the most vulnerable, for the purpose of commercial transport (“Achaba” or “Kabukabu”, also known as “Okada” in the Southern part of the country), to enhance their income base. This article assess this “Achaba” project and tries to find out why, in spite of the various interventions towards achieving MDGs, the Northern States in Nigeria, among other things, adopted the Achaba provisioning. It argues that from the case study, the state governments in the Northern States have not seriously addressed the poverty reduction mechanisms to achieve the MDG.

Keywords: Development, Nigeria, ACHABA, Poverty.

Introduction

In spite of the various theories, policies, programmes and efforts geared towards ending, reducing, or alleviating poverty, it has continued to linger in Africa and other developing parts of the world. The concern to end poverty has recently taken a multilateral dimension after the realization that the end of poverty, especially in the developing World, requires a global network of co-operation among peoples and nations. Hence, the UN met in New York in September 2000 to identify key international development objectives, while setting a time frame for their actualization to end poverty. Known as the UN Millennium Declaration (UNMD) or Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the plan of action was set to reduce poverty by half by the year 2015 and extreme poverty by 2025.
Nigeria is a country burdened with poverty in the midst of plentiful human and material resources. This may appear stunning, yet it is a fact. In Nigeria, the gap between the rich and the poor has been on the increase, particularly in recent times. While the rich are getting richer, the poor are falling even below the poverty line. With this situation, the Nigerian economy and society have become increasingly divided beyond normalcy into two groups, namely, the rich/privileged class and the poor/marginalized class (UNDP, 2001).

It is expected that by the year 2015, this poverty rate would have been reduced to 35.1% or 39 million through joint concerted efforts in poverty-reducing programmes or projects. This article assesses the Achaba transport business, as a major scheme or project in the poverty reduction efforts in Northern Nigeria. The Achaba was meant to empower the youths with a two-wheel machine driven transport for commercial purposes to supposedly reduce unemployment, increase their real incomes, and consequently reduce their pains in the country’s deteriorating economic environment. The article elucidates the dynamics of the poverty reduction strategy in contemporary Northern Nigerian states. It argues that the Achaba has ironically provided the youths with the excuse for abandoning the rural areas to relocate to the already-congested cities, which therefore negatively impacts on rural capacity for production particularly in agriculture. This approach to poverty reduction that emphasizes a shift to the informal sector (providing services rather than production) has affected the economy rather badly, paradoxically making the reduction of poverty a futile exercise.

The Achaba alternative in Northern Nigeria

The Achaba is basically a two-wheel motorcycle mode of passenger transportation that started in Nigeria in the mid 1980s (Ashafa, 1998: 54 – 76). Mainly intra-urban based, the Achaba has gained prominence to some extent in the semi-rural areas, essentially limited to the basic human activities that involve the movement of persons and lighter luggage.

In the northern states of Nigeria in particular, the increasing urbanization and urban population rate due to rural-urban migration (among other factors), have made the demand for transportation over the years to increase proportionately for the movement of persons within and around the cities and towns. This ever-increasing population, in addition to the very low level of transport alternatives such as railways and subways, has placed serious strains on the transportation system and facilities, especially on the taxis and buses, the traditionally known mode of urban transportation in Nigeria.
In the urban areas and to some extent semi-urban centers, but particularly in the Local Government headquarters in the northern states, workers, school children, petty traders artisans and other urban or semi-urban dwellers used to experience great difficulties in their movement to and from work places, schools, markets and other centers of business (Ashafa, 1998).

In addition, when the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) was introduced in Nigeria in the mid-1980s, the high cost of vehicle spare parts, high inflation, the relative devaluation of the currency, among others, combined to keep the prices of vehicles beyond the reach of the poor and the middle class. In the emerging scenario therefore, a paradox surfaced, namely, a tremendous collapse of public services (transportation inclusive) and an increasing demand for such services. Hence, the Achaba as a private commercial motorcycle business surfaced to supplement the visible shortages.

Nigerian cities entirely do not have the opportunity to build a public transport system that is city-based compared to the cities of the industrialized world. In addition, the quality of infrastructures and services in the urban centers in the northern states was not only poor where such services existed, but also the general conditions of their operations leave much to standards and scheduling the road transport remains predominant in both the urban and semi-urban areas in the northern states (Usman, 1989: 24 – 41).

In the 1990s therefore, the Achaba became more popular amongst the people, especially due to the relative successes recorded by the cyclists in alleviating the socio-economic and financial stress in the country then. This attracted more private participation in the business. In fact, the term Achaba connotes the profitability involved in the business in terms of providing the cash for immediate needs. The way and manner it assisted in changing an individual’s economic and financial stress had been examined elsewhere (Ashafa, 1998).

When it began and was becoming accepted, the Achaba not only supplemented public and private transportation services, but also succeeded in establishing a strong competitive position because it was comparably more flexible in areas of its operations. This flexibility was in terms of its coverage of the length and breadth of the feeder township roads, while also penetrating and criss-crossing areas inaccessible to the traditional commercial motorists in the towns and cities.

Further to this, the Achaba operationally provides ward-to-ward, house-to-house and even door-to-door transport service to its commuters irrespective of gender and age groups. More interestingly, its fares were not normally fixed but mostly negotiated, compared to the fixed and higher fares charged by commercial motorists. The Achaba is not characterized by the bureaucratic organization known of commercial motorist operations because the bike rider versus bike owner relationship is mostly informal, that
is, in the case of those operatives who do not own motorcycles but are hired to ride them (Ashafa, 1998).

Even though it is one of the major causes of fatal accidents and means of a quick get-away used by criminals in the townships, the Achaba is mostly preferred especially in towns and cities whenever the traffic flow becomes saturated and extremely slow. In such periods, the Achaba merely meanders through every available narrow space, zipping and zapping away in a manner that normally leaves motor operatives and their commuters in envy or exasperation. Its ability to evade the slow traffic movements by taking easy shortcuts to their passenger’s destinations make it more convenient and attractive to a hurrying commuter.

The emergence of Achaba could be seen to have reduced social/spatial and temporal exclusion. Social/financial exclusion occurs where public transport is nonexistent or where it is not commercially/financially viable for operation. It occurs in urban peripheral areas where public transports are less frequent or demand for services is often higher than the supply. Such exclusion also occurs in the rural areas with no access to public/private transportation. This mostly affects the low-income urban segment of northern Nigerian populace who are mostly found in distressed peripheral city-areas and run-down peripheral housing estates of the cities and towns.

In fact, the ability of the Achaba informal sector to provide employment for the unskilled persons and, to some extent, unemployed school leavers, makes the managers and co-coordinators of the Poverty Alleviation Programme to take particular interest in the scheme as a means of empowering the unskilled and the unemployed youths in the society. The main problem however has been that the ability of the scheme in alleviating poverty is still a mirage.

The Achaba and poverty Reduction in Northern Nigeria

For over two decades now, the various governments in Nigeria have been concerned with the issue of fighting poverty. They have commissioned various programmes, created agencies, embarked on projects and commissions to that effect. However, there are no appreciable successes recorded. When in 1999 Olusegun Obasanjo came to power as a civilian President, the government realized that another way to make the people appreciate the need to have and guard democracy was to lessen their level of poverty and economic stress. In the cliché of Nigerian politicians and public officials, this is referred to as ‘dividends of democracy’ in the sense that the government is presented as solving existing problems. In line with the global concern on poverty, the democratic government in Nigeria initially launched the Poverty Alleviation Programme (PAP) and later in 2000 after the inauguration of the MDGs it was rechristened “Poverty Eradication Programme”. This was to become one major pillar of the economic and political agenda.
of the Obasanjo government. While inaugurating the National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP), President Obasanjo observed that:

The target of the Federal Government is to eradicate absolute poverty among Nigerians. This simply implies that all Nigerians are to have access to basic and elementary requirements for human survival including portable water, food, clothing, primary health care, education, and recreation (Obasanjo, 2001).

One central aim of the NAPEP, which is also in consonance with the MDGs goals, was to empower the youths and the provision of social welfare services. Consequently, NAPEP was designed in a manner as to:

a. Multi-sectorally coordinate and monitor all poverty eradication efforts in the country with a view to harmonizing previous efforts and bringing about the focus, partnership and complementation required at all levels to ensure better delivery, maximum impact and effectiveness;

b. Extend specific but scaled intervention programmes and projects on stressed, critical and sensitive sectors of the economy periodically to supplement and provide relief in the sector with a view to enhancing the impact of the efforts of the statutory implementing ministries, agencies and government parastatals (NAPEP, 2001).

In order to ensure that NAPEP covered the entire poverty eradication institutional landscape and targeted intervention areas in the country, four (4) multi-sectoral schemes were thus identified, namely:

i. Youth Empowerment Scheme (YES)-meant to address issues of employment generations, skill acquisition and improvement in wealth generation and youth development through among others Micro Credit Delivery Programme (MCDP);

ii. Rural Infrastructural Development Schemes (RIDS) meant to address issues related to the provision of basic but critical infrastructure among others Rural Transport Programme (RTP) also called the Achaba and Keke-NAPEP.

iii. Social Welfare Service Schemes (SOWES) meant to address the issue related to the provision of needed core social and welfare services (Waziri, 2001).

In 2001 therefore, the Federal Government imported and distributed over 3,000 units of three-wheeler Piagio diesel engine automobiles to the unemployed youths to operate Achaba in the major cities and other selected urban areas nationwide. This was on credit under the KEKE-NAPEP project. To ensure that YES, MCDP and RTP were a success, the states, local governments, political parties, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and Community Based Organizations (CBOs) were involved. The purpose, according to the Federal Government appointee in charge of the Poverty Eradication Programme in Kaduna State in an interview with the authors, was to make the programme effective and to meet the Millennium Development Goals.
Thus, at another level the states were to partner with the local government councils to eradicate poverty. It is at the state levels that the YES, MCDP and RTD became more concentrated in the provision of the two-wheel motorcycles used for the *Achaba*. In line with this, we can say the northern states in Nigeria became a kind of motorcycle kingdom especially between 2001 and 2004. The distribution of motorcycles in the northern states was in the manner indicated Table 1 below:

**TABLE 1: DISTRIBUTION OF MOTOR CYCLES IN THE NORTHERN STATES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S/N</th>
<th>State</th>
<th>No of motor cycles distributed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Adamawa</td>
<td>50,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Bauchi</td>
<td>42,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Benue</td>
<td>47,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Borno</td>
<td>N.A.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Gombe</td>
<td>48,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Jigawa</td>
<td>31,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Kaduna</td>
<td>92,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Kano</td>
<td>N.A.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Katsina</td>
<td>N.A.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Kebbi</td>
<td>31,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Kogi</td>
<td>1093 (record of 2005 purchase only)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Kwara</td>
<td>N.A.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Nasarawa</td>
<td>46,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Niger</td>
<td>N.A.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Plateau</td>
<td>N.A.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Sokoto</td>
<td>36,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Taraba</td>
<td>40,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Yobe</td>
<td>N.A.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Zamfara</td>
<td>108,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>FCT</td>
<td>N.A.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*NA=Not Available*

*Source: NAPEP Annual Evaluation Reports 2004 and data collected from fieldwork across the Northern States.*

Perhaps, looking at how it has affected rural production, one may be tempted to say that the Poverty Eradication Programme through the provision of motorcycles in the northern states was not based on a broad and gender participation. In fact, it was not comprehensive in scope and without long-term vision. The provisioning of motorcycles was rather exploited either as a means of reproducing political hegemony of apologists of governments at state levels because the programme hardly served any productive purposes. It was hardly a framework for positive poverty transformation or for achieving the MDGs.
What is noteworthy is that the global consensus around the achievement of the MDGs has elevated the development targets of the developing countries. Originally, it elevated the development targets to the new ‘gold standard’ of international development co-operation so that donor policy and performance are increasingly measured against the global efforts towards reaching the MDGs. Consequently, the humanitarian imperative behind the Millennium Declaration and reiteration of unanimous political support in the Monterrey consensus, the G8 Kananaski Declaration amongst a host of other UN and International Communiqués places a new onus on the policy instruments for development and poverty reduction in the developing world.

Reaffirmed in Monterrey and Johannesburg, the MDGs goals called on the rich countries to relief debt, increase aid and give poor countries their fair access to their markets and their technology as a test of political will to build stronger partnerships. On the other hand, the developing countries have the responsibility to undertake policy projects or initiatives to liberate the creative energies of their people. The intervention area targets were focused on the reduction of hunger via agricultural production, nutrition, education, energy, and transportation among others (UN Millennium Project, 2005). If by intervention we mean investment in goods, services and infrastructure as distinct from mere institutional policies, then the *Achaba* is not a suitable intervention mechanism or variable towards poverty reduction in northern Nigeria.

The *Achaba* does not appear to be a response in good faith towards a full commitment to achieve the expected MDGs. Though the project depends on public fund injected in the private sector as a major share of capital flows from official sources to the low-income people, it is not a proper mix of resources necessary for the achievement of poverty reduction and the MDGs, which is the ultimate. Already, the *Achaba* project has not been conceived as a long-term process but as a mere social spending priority to showcase visibly ‘dividends of democracy’.

This is because having been ‘empowered’ with a means of getting little daily income, the *Achaba* operatives in the rural areas embark on a sojourn to the urban areas where businesses are more flourishing. In a situation where primary school teachers are provided with motorcycles on loan and the remittance from monthly salaries is deducted, the monthly take-home pay is definitely affected. To supplement the normal income, having collected the motorcycle on loan, these people resort to releasing them for the unemployed youths to operate for them commercially, while they themselves operate it on part-time basis after closing from work. So, instead of serving as incentives to teachers to work in rural schools to improve literacy as one target area of intervention to achieve the MDGs, it rather begins to impact on teachers’ performances adversely, especially as many struggle to make up the salary cut for the motorcycle loan.
The migration to urban areas to operate the *Achaba* in the northern states is based on the assumption that the Achaba would provide a better income. In the northern states, productive economic activities (apart from agriculture and artisanship) are normally small in nature.

Land, in the northern states, is perhaps the most visibly abundant resource for primary production and the area, despite the threat of desertification, has vast area of arable land capable of growing almost all types of tropical and sub-tropical crops. About 75% of the Northern States’ land mass of almost 600,000 sq.km can be brought under cultivation. Hence, agriculture remains the major sector in which the *Achaba* aspect of the Poverty Eradication Programme has affected rather negatively. Thus, if agriculture is in trouble, the entire populace in the northern states is in serious trouble too. The argument is that the *Achaba* entrained the predominant youths from the rural areas and therefore from agriculture production into the urban areas. Compared to farming, the *Achaba* easily brings small income for solving immediate want particularly daily feeding, and occasional little savings depending on the area of business.

Our expectation in this regard is that the governments should have arranged the project in a manner that would have effectively covered inter and intra-sectoral linkages such as health, education, agriculture, and infrastructure development. That is to say, the motorcycles should have increased incentive to work in rural schools, provided access to health care clinics and services, reduced cost and time wastage to rural health workers, etc. It is argued that improved transport in the rural areas reduces cost of foodstuff in the urban areas, thus increasing income and enhancing urban income-generating opportunities and access to services (UN Millennium Project 2005).

The *Achaba* phenomenon has become part of the PEP to increase or supplement income from the informal sector. The tendency among Government officials, especially those saddled with the PEP at the state levels, is that the sight of these loaned-motorcycles is an indication that people are being transformed from have-nots into haves, and therefore the successes of the PEP (Mu’azu, 2005). Such poverty of ideas suggests that we can measure prosperity or absence of it in Nigeria just by looking at the people riding PEP loaned-motorcycles around one can visibly see poverty on their faces.

Most operatives say they hardly have anything after the day because litigation and the depreciating rate of the Naira currency do not increase any real income after all. So if real income is the standard gauge to measure poverty in terms of its ability to meet the desires of a household, it means therefore that in spite of the *Achaba*, real income does not appreciate to a meaningful extent. Most operatives argue therefore that the *Achaba* has become a necessity since they cannot remain idle without employment nor means of little income. That is to say, the *Achaba* only enabled most operatives to afford the day’s meal.
and to survive the vagaries of the harsh economy rather than making any meaningful savings.³

Moreover, *Achaba* is a male occupation, which therefore denied the women access to informal sector, property rights and increased participation in an economic activity that appear so dear to the governments. That is to say, from its inception, the idea of motorcycles distribution by governments was not comprehensive in scope and was not based on long-term benefit⁴.

What we have discovered from most of the States and Local governments in the Northern States is that politicians distribute the motorcycles on partisan basis than otherwise, so that those in opposition hardly benefit, as those in the opposition decried the situation in most of the States for example. Therefore, the idea of distributing poverty alleviation materials is being exploited as a means for reproducing political hegemony

**Conclusion**

The poverty alleviation programme is one of the central pillars of the economic agenda of the United Nations Development Goals since 2000 when it was launched. The target of the program was to enhance the efforts of nations in the world, such as Nigeria to eradicate absolute poverty among their citizens. In trying to achieve this lofty dream, the various governments in Nigeria, at federal and state levels adopted different programs in order to achieve the objective. One of viewed mechanisms to immediately address poverty issue by these tiers of government was the distribution of motor cycles as a means of empowering the populace to engage in the informal sector to fend for themselves. This resulted into the increasing magnitude of the *Achaba* operatives particularly in the urban centers in the Northern States. Mostly from the rural areas, the *Achaba* operatives in the 19 Northern States of Nigeria were mostly youths, who in trying to fend for themselves via *Achaba* had dire consequences on agricultural input.

Through this policy of creating employment in the informal sector, the agro-climatic zones in the North have witnessed mass exodus of youths to the urban areas. To this extent, urban areas in the Northern States have been transformed into what we may call “motorcycle towns” due to the legion of motorcycle operatives flowing along all the nook and crannies of the towns doing business. The *Achaba* helps in no small measure in the transportation system in the urban and semi-urban areas in the Northern States, the level at which it is being complimented by increased real income is difficult to establish due to increasing inflation in the economy.

While most of the youths felt that agricultural activities do not yield profit and therefore took to the urban areas in search for better opportunities, which the *Achaba* often provides, this affect rural food production. The *Achaba* itself did not help much in reinvigorating inter-sectoral linkages that are lacking in the economy to leap standards of
living vis-a-vis reducing poverty and so the positive impact is not being felt in many of the rural areas in the Northern States.

Notes

1Fieldwork interview with Ahmed Mu’azu, the Acting NAPEP Coordinator for Kaduna State, 19 March 2005 in Kaduna.

2Interview with Shuaibu Abdulsalami in Sokoto on 10 March 2005, age 25 years.

3Group interview at Kaduna with Nalado Skido, Hamisu Adamu, Dauda Ilyasu and Danladi Abubakar 20 March 2005, age 25, 31, 23 and 27 respectively

4For any program on poverty eradication to succeed it must encoparte all male and females to balance the income generation in the family and communities at large. Thus, similar program should be targeted to the women folk.
References


