

**MEANINGFUL AND EFFECTIVE PARTICIPATION IN ECONOMIC AND DEVELOPMENT POLICY-
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CHALLENGES OF MINORITIES RIGHTS TO ECONOMIC PARTICIPATION

It is note-worthy that the UN Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities (1992) states that persons belonging to minorities have the right to participate effectively in cultural, religious, social, economic and public life since they are recognized as “an integral part of the development of society as a whole”. Unfortunately, this set of people are the most marginalized and the most discriminated against through the systemic policies of various governments deliberately or inadvertently created to violate the rights of the minorities in both developed and developing countries.

Specifically, discrimination and marginalization of the minorities pervade most of the developing and developed countries that are multiethnic and multicultural in nature, including Australia, India, Pakistan, Nigeria etc. In Africa, for example, most of the multiethnic States often regard two or three ethnic groups as the major languages in such countries while other languages, no matter their number, are regarded as the minority. Ivory Coast, Ghana, Nigeria, Uganda, Kenya, DR Congo and Tanzania etc are noted for having many ethnic groups in Africa. For example, Nigeria has over 350 ethnic groups but only Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo are regarded as the officially recognized three major ethnic groups (and languages) while English Language is regarded as the country’s official language. The members of the two or three officially recognised major ethnic groups in each state often dominate both socio-political and economic power-base of the state to the detriment of the minorities to the extent that the latter are technically excluded in the decision-making policies affecting both the minorities and the majorities.

Similarly, the case becomes worse in a country where the minority groups are practising a “minority religion” which tends to exclude such group from participating in some economic activities. For example, some countries favour, say, Christianity or Islam, as the case may be as the main religion while other religions are a withholding licence to involving their adherents in the major economic activities of some countries. The implications for this tacit or open discrimination are myriad: some cannot get the appropriate employment based on their faiths, some cannot venture into a business of choice, some cannot even appropriate micro-credit as interest on bank loan is *haram*, while poverty is further entrenched in the lives of the religious minorities who are already poor and wary of the pang of religious law concerning their potential and legitimate economic activities vis a vis the permissibility of their religious faith.

It is important to note that there is another set of persons in the minorities all over the world whose further categorisation or classification may interweave with those traditionally regarded as the minorities. These are the rural poor, the poorest of the poor, the marginalized, the voiceless, and the down trodden. In Kenya for example, about 50 percent of the people are suffering from poverty while over 50 percent are affected in Nigeria. Most of these live in rural areas where governments’ poverty reduction strategies are ineffective because of greed and corruption. These people often face insurmountable barriers when it comes to getting employment in government or public places

as their statuses are discriminated against even when educated since they probably do not have certificates from schools in the major cities. Getting job for them is all the more difficult sometimes not because they do not have the qualification but because they do not have “godfathers” that could facilitate their getting job. These voiceless also face horrendous barriers in accessing loans from both regular and micro-finance banks as they, most of the time, do not have the collateral security. Worse still, it is these rural communities lacking in infrastructural facilities such as good road networks, primary health centre, portable water, electricity, including firms, factories and cottage industries that the governments tend to under develop. Theirs is double jeopardy – their communities suffer underdevelopment while their citizens suffer discrimination in major towns and cities.

It should be reiterated that MGDs by 2015 may not be achieved in most of the countries unless there is the political will while adequate attention is paid by various governments to the critical issues of the MDGs such as Goals 1 and 7 dealing with poverty and environmental issues respectively. It is sad to note that the minorities are excluded from most of the economic dialogue processes including the drafting of the poverty reduction strategies papers, MDGs domestication process, and dialogues on other economic frameworks. An adage says, “you don’t shave the head of a person that is not there” which tends to show that governments pretend to plan for all but tactfully exclude the minorities who are supposed to be part of the beneficiaries of such policies and programmes that they are planning. Therefore, to achieve MDGs becomes a problem as the minorities do not have a say on strategies to alleviate their poverty as in Goal 1 of the MDGs.

Furthermore, it is commonplace to find in some countries that their tradition ossifies the inclusion of the minorities in political process which in turn prevents the minorities from economic participation and benefits accruing to such countries. In some cases, it is the minority resources such as land and mineral that serve as the mainstay of their economy yet the minorities are impoverished by the majority that hold the political power. One may exercise restraints in mentioning specific countries where this anomaly occurs but it is apt to refer to what is happening in Nigeria where the Niger Delta fetches Nigeria over 90 percent of her foreign earning and yet this region suffers both political marginalization as well as economic hardship.

In addition, the anti-minority policies such as quota system or federal character has not been helpful in making the minorities “an integral part of the development of society as a whole” according to the spirit of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities. For example, the power rotational policy otherwise called the “zoning system” which is a policy of one of the major political parties in Nigeria is not favourable to the minorities in that country. According to the policy, the presidential slot in particular is shared only between the north and the south on rotational basis which implies that the power must rotate between the Hausa-Fulani in the north and Yorubas and Igbos in the southern part of the country after two terms of eight years each. By interpretation, it means other ethnic minorities numbering over 300 both in the north and in the south would not taste power till eternity as there is no plan to include them in power sharing formula arrangement of the ruling People’s Democratic Party.

IDENTIFICATION OF GOOD PRACTICE

The good practice is for governments all over the world to provide an enabling environment of equal opportunities for all irrespective of ethnic or religious background to fully participate in the political process of their countries. In the Nigerian example cited above, something close to good

practice was the court's pronouncement that the law court has no business peddling into the domestic affair of any political party in compelling a political party to abide by its policy of rotation which is not favourable to the minorities. This pronouncement came as a result of a litigation by a member of the party who felt the leadership of the party was not abiding by the principle of rotation as enshrined in that party's constitution. This singular pronouncement has given a rare opportunity for a person from the minority group for the first time in the political history of Nigeria to stand in for an election into the prestigious post of presidency.

Before now, the power sharing has been between the majority ethnic groups of Hausa/Fulani and the Yoruba; a discriminatory arrangement that human rights activists have been campaigning against over the years that minorities also have the rights to participate effectively in both economic and public lives. When the palaver of rotational presidency started in Nigeria, the CSOs had swung into action mobilising relevant stakeholders campaigning for the rights of the minorities in the political process. In this case, the campaign was on upholding the political right of the incumbent president who is from a minority group, and who merely acceded to power by divine connection because his boss (the former president) had died in office as a result of a protracted illness. The argument of the power brokers in the majority is that the incumbent president is only being allowed to complete the terms of office of the then president to whom the incumbent was a deputy, and therefore would not have the right to contest in the next year's general election as a presidential candidate as power must return to the majority in the north. The CSOs mounted serious campaigns to see that the incumbent president stand election next year. The crowning effort of these campaigns was the court injunction that tacitly allows the president to be among the contestants despite the opposition from his own political party.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The draft recommendations by the Independent Expert on Minorities Issues are apt and vivid, and therefore non-negotiable. However, one may need to add the following recommendations based on practical experiences:

Domestication of all instruments on minorities' rights should be advocated at state level. Some states are not aware of the rights of the minorities neither are they aware of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities (1992). This and other relevant international instruments on minorities including the rights to decent work should be popularised while states are encouraged to domesticate them.

Official recognition given to some languages or ethnic groups as being major out of several in a multilingualistic nationality is discriminatory and dehumanising leading to inferiority complex among the minorities. Cultural sanctity of each ethnic group should be respected while equal rights be accorded to all the language or ethnic groups in each state.

UN should mandate each state in ensuring that the development of minorities' settlement is given policy priority attention especially in the area of infrastructural development. Bad road networks, lack of power supply, health facilities, market centres, and environmental degradation prevent the minorities from effective participation in the economic process, and therefore in the development of their communities. Policies on poverty alleviation strategies including job creation in form of cottage

industries and provision of social facilities in minority communities should be taken as priority by governments of all states.

Anti-minorities policies such as quota system, federal character and zoning system, where in practice, should be jettisoned for more minorities-friendly inclusive policies focusing on equal opportunity employment and economic benefits for all irrespective of ethnic, religious, sex or other status.

While intense campaign should be mounted on the minorities' rights by all stakeholders, the Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) working in the area of socio-economic rights should mainstream minorities' rights into their plans and programmes. With the support of the office of the UN High Commissioner of Human Rights, CSOs coalitions or networks on the minority rights should be formed in each state so as to serve as the watchdogs and advocates for the rights of the minorities.

As a result of incessant economic activities of some extractive industries, for example, there are horrendous environmental degradations, pollution, demise of aquatic culture, and palpable underdevelopment in most of the indigenous minorities' settlements throughout the world. It has often being said that governments alone cannot bring development to a country, and the need for all stakeholders to help is of paramount importance. The adoption of public private partnership (PPP) strategy in development is necessary to make minorities have the sense of an integral part of the society that they belong to. The private businesses and conglomerates including financial institutions and extractive industries should be mandated in each state to abide by the spirit of corporate social responsibility (CSR) in ploughing back to the society part of what they have gained. It is also important for such companies to reflect local content in their employment policies by giving a considerable percentage to the indigenous minorities as their workers where they are operating their businesses.

Thank you.

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