



**DEMOCRACY, POVERTY AND POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT
IN AFRICA**

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ABSTRACT

This paper takes a look at the background, conceptual framework of the phenomena: Democracy, poverty and political development in the historical perspective using the secondary source of data. Furthermore, the study explores democratization process in the Nigerian context as a case study to be replicated to the other African Countries. Significant progresses in terms of institutionalizing democratic momentum so far created and sustained were also explored. The study dovetail into the development scene in African continent and the emergence of parliaments and political parties in Africa's political development. Finally, the paper overviewed the role of parliament political parties in the fight against poverty and proffered a number of possible solutions to assist in the institutionalization of democratic process and fighting poverty in the African continent.

KEY WORDS: Democracy, Poverty, Development, Politics, Parliament and Party.

Background

When most of Sub-Saharan Africa embraced multi-party rule in the early 1990s following decades of one party regimes and military dictatorships, there was indeed an understandable wave of renewed optimism and excitement about the prospects for the development on the continent. The end of the Cold War as well as the demise of State sanctioned apartheid in South Africa reinforced the hope that better prospects for peace and development on the continent has never been higher. *Cawthra (2004:31)* noted "military dictatorships and one-party states especially in Africa had to reinvent themselves as multiparty democracies, or face international isolation or extreme pressure to change. The continent was undoubtedly in bad shape, poverty levels were soaring, corruption was endemic, conflict had seriously destroyed the little infrastructure inherited from the colonial era in some countries, and the various governance systems could neither deliver development or peace and security, nor even guarantee human rights.

Two decades later, while a lot of progress has been recorded in a number of areas including the creation of democratic institutional infrastructure, better human rights climate, some modest economic growth etc., questions are being asked as to whether there is a link between democracy and development, its nature, and whether it is casual one or not. This

is because poverty continues to be on the increase in a number of African countries, the quality of life for many Africans is still on a matter of concern, prompting policy makers, development partners and analysts to pause and wonder whether the expectations of the early 1990s about prospects for development on the continent and the democratization wave that swept through the continent were misplaced. Sub-Saharan Africa 'has the highest incidence of poverty in the world, and unlike other regions in the world, poverty in Sub-Saharan Africa has been rising over the last decade' (*Economic Commission for Africa Report: 2005*). This is attributable mainly to the growth of joblessness in many countries, as well as the deep inequalities in the distribution of major assets which persist.

In addition, due to realities of globalization, "many African Countries have been forced to open up their economies and, being primarily commodity exporters, they have consequently found themselves in a spiraling race to the bottom as each nation competes against others to provide lower standards, reduced wages and cheaper resources for corporations and richer nations." (*Venter and Neulands 2005:122*). This has further worsened the poverty problems on the continent.

While many Countries are still struggling to deepen their democracies and enhance their quality and impact, there is increasing evidence of declining evidence of trust of democratic institutions including parliaments and political parties. The low delivery of some of the governments has fueled the rise of populist regimes and the role of external powerful influences occasioned by globalization, trade protectionism and which others have led to a perception that domestic democratic processes do not matter after all. The deepening North/South polarization has also provided 'excuses' for those who are against multiparty democracy as they have tried to promote the notion that it is actually just a Western construct and that the idea of human right is a ploy to maintain a structural status quo that has undermined the interests of the South (*Mosquita & Downs, 2005*).

The above questions and concerns come in the context of further arguments where some look towards China and Russia as some of the examples which illustrates that greater wealth does not necessarily translate into greater political freedom. (*Mosquita & Downs, 2005*). The fact that all developed and richest Countries are democratic fueled the expectation that democracy and development will always coexist in the same space and in fact that there could even be a causal link between them. As *Bueno and Downs* have so aptly summed it up, "the argument in its simplest form goes like this – economic growth produces an educated and entrepreneurial middle class that sooner or later, begins to demand control over its own fate. Eventually, even repressive governments are forced to give in Authoritarian regimes all around the world are showing that they can reap the benefits of economic development while evading any pressure to relax their political control."

It is not clear whether this matter will ever be resolved one way or the other and how soon this could be particularly because evidence is mixed and almost contradictory. It may not be easy to prove casualty in this case but a relationship between the two does exist. It is obvious that development cannot take place under conditions of instability, war or even major

conflict. It is also a fact that democracy is the only system known today which can generate conditions of peace and security to sustain them (*Mosquita & Downs, 2005*).

Democratic regimes are more likely to come up with policies that are reflective of the will of the people. These policies provide the environment and context for development to take place. It is very important to underscore the fact that if we are interested in a people driven development, then, perhaps no other form of governance known today can deliver this better than a multiparty democratic framework that is geared toward the promotion of human rights. As *Maltosa, Elklit and Chiroro (2006)* have so rightly observed, "Democracy is a fundamental prerequisite for development, peace and security in Africa".

Conceptual Frame Work OfThe Phenomena: Democracy Poverty And Political Development.

The Concept of Democracy is usually defined as rule of the people, by the people and for the people. This is a very simple but enduring definition which continues to capture and express virtually all the key attributes of democracy. The key institutional infrastructure such as the Legislature, Judiciary and Executive are found in virtually all of them. In a democracy, political authority and legitimacy are derived from the people. They are acquired through a competitive process of selecting of leadership which is both participatory and inclusive. Elections have become the most commonly used method of selecting leaders in a democracy. Elections themselves are not synonymous with democracy but they are a very important aspect of democratic rule. Of critical importance to this competition are political parties (*Maltosa, 2006*).

The Concept of Development has evolved over time and so have the development paradigms and approaches. There was a time when development was seen as synonymous with economic growth. Not much concern was put into how the fruits of such development were distributed. Today, a lot has changed.

Seer (1960), attempted to define development in a much broader perspective to include the question of the quality of life of people. *Seers* had argued that in evaluating a Country's progress towards development, we should ask what has been happening to poverty, inequality and general quality of life of the people. He concluded that if these indicators were not on the decline, then it would not be appropriate to talk about development.

Not only is quality of life important, concern today is on infrastructural/economic development. It also emphasizes on the respect for human rights and the creation of equitable and inclusive systems of governance.

Within the above context, this paper focus on how to strengthen the capacity of democratic of democratic institutions such as parliaments and political parties in developing policy proposals geared towards sustainable development and effective poverty reduction.

The Concept Poverty is a common feature in many African states and it has a long history, which goes back to colonial days. Poverty is defined as the state of not having enough money to take care of basic needs such as food, clothing and housing (*Encarta Encyclopedia Dictionary, 2009*).

Today, nearly three billion people all over the world go without the most basic needs. We believe that everybody has a right to food and – decent clean water, shelter, healthcare and education. This means that day in day out, half the people of the world are struggling to survive let alone lead fulfilling lives.

In Africa today, one child dies every 3 seconds because of the basic lack of safe water, healthcare, shelter or food, the things we often take for granted, as noted by *World Vision (Economic Commission for Africa ECA, 2003)*.

It is therefore important that the international community should seriously engage and try to tackle this problem which is widely spread in the developing world, to save thousands of lives dying every day because of poverty, hunger and rampant diseases.

Democracy in the historical perspective

Originally, the word democracy is coined from the Greek word ‘*demos*’ (meaning the people) and ‘*kraein*’ (meaning to rule), political system in which people of a Country rule through any form of government that they choose to establish. In modern democracies, supreme authority is exercised for the most part by representatives elected by popular suffrage. The representatives may be supplanted by the electorate according to the legal procedures of recall and referendum, and they are, at least in principle, responsible to the electorate. In many democracies, such as the United States, both the executive head of government and legislature are elected. In typical constitutional monarchies such as the United Kingdom and Norway, only the legislators are elected, and from their ranks a cabinet and a prime minister are chosen. (*Encarta Encyclopedia, 2009: DVD Edition*).

Although often used interchangeably, the terms *democracy* and *republic* are not synonymous. Both systems delegate the power to govern to their elected representatives. In a republic, however, these officials are expected to act on their own best judgment of the needs and interests of the country. The officials in a democracy more generally and directly reflect the known or ascertained views of their constituents, sometimes subordinating their own judgment (*Encarta Encyclopedia, 2009: DVD Edition*).

Democracy in Ancient Greece and Rome

Ruled by the people, played an important part in the democracies of the pre-Christian era. The democracies of the City-states of classical Greece of Rome during the early years of the Republic were unlike the democracies of today. They were direct democracies, in which all citizens could speak and vote in assemblies that resembled New England town meetings (*Encarta Encyclopedia, 2009: DVD Edition*).

Representative government was unknown and unnecessary because of the small size of the city-states (almost never more than 10,000 citizens). Ancient democracy did not presuppose equality of all individuals; the majority of the populace, notably slaves and women, had no political rights. Athens, the greatest of the city democracies, limited the franchise to native-born citizens. Roman democracy resembled that of the Greeks, although Rome sometimes granted citizenship to men of non-Roman descent. The Roman Stoic philosophy, which

defined the human race as part of a divine principle, and the Jewish and Christian religions, which emphasized the rights of the underprivileged and the equality of all before God, contributed to the development of modern democratic theory (*Microsoft Encarta, 2009: 1993 – 2008*).

The Roman Republic ended in the despotism of the empire. The free cities of Italy, Germany and Flanders carried on the democratic traditions and applied some principles of democracy during the middle Ages. Slaves ceased to constitute a major portion of National populations. As feudalism ended, a rich commercial middle class arose, possessing the money and leisure necessary to participate in governmental affairs. One result was the rebirth of a spirit of freedom based on Ancient Greek and Roman principles. Concepts of equal political and social rights were further defined during the Renaissance, when the development of humanism was fostered, and later during the Reformation, in the struggle for religious freedom.

Beginning with the first popular rebellion against monarchy in England (1642), which was brought to a climax by the execution of King Charles I, political and revolutionary action against autocratic European Governments resulted in the establishment of democratic governments. Such actions were inspired and guided largely by political philosophers, notably the French philosophers Montesquieu and Jean Jacques Rousseau and the American Statesman Thomas Jefferson and James Madison. Before the end of the 19th century, every important Western European monarchy had adopted a constitution limiting the power of the Crown and giving a considerable share of political power to the people. In many of these countries, a representative legislature modeled on the British Parliament was instituted. British politics was then possibly the greatest single influence on the organization of world democracies, although the French Revolution also exerted a powerful influence. Later, the success of democratic institutions in the United States served as a model for many peoples (*Microsoft Encarta, 2009: 1993 – 2008*).

Nigerians Perspective

Nigeria was granted full independence in October 1960, as a federation of three regions (Northern, Western and Eastern) under a constitution that provided for a parliamentary form of government. Under the constitution, each of the three regions retained a substantial measure of self-government. The federal government was given exclusive powers in defense and security, foreign relations, commercial and fiscal policies. On October 1963, Nigeria altered its relationship with the United Kingdom by proclaiming itself a Federal Republic and promulgating a new constitution. A fourth region (the Midwest) was established that year. From the outset, Nigeria's ethnic, regional and religious tensions were magnified by the significant disparities in economic and educational development between the South and the North. This tensions eventually led to the outbreak of the Nigerian Civil War in 1966 which lasted for 30 months.

Following the Civil War, reconciliation was rapid and effective, and the Country turned to the task of economic development. Foreign exchange earnings and government revenues

increased spectacularly with the oil price of 1973-74. On July 29th, 1975, Gen. Murtala Muhammed and a group of fellow officers staged a bloodless coup, accusing the military government of Gen. Yakubu Gowon for delaying the promised return to civilian rule and becoming corrupt and ineffective. General Muhammed replaced thousands of Civil servants and announced a timetable for the resumption of civilian rule by October 1, 1979. Muhammed also announced his government's intention to create new states and to construct a new federal capital in the center of the Country.

The second republic, a constituent assembly was elected in 1977 to draft a new constitution, which was published on September 21st, 1978 when the ban on political activity, in effect since the advent of military rule was lifted. Political parties were formed and the candidates were nominated for president and vice president, the two houses of the National Assembly, Governorships and State Houses of Assembly. In 1979, five political parties competed in a series of elections in which a northerner, Alhaji Shehu Shagari of the National Party of Nigeria (NPN), was elected President. All five parties won representation in the National Assembly.

On August 1983, Shagari and the NPN were returned to power in a landslide victory, with a majority of seats in the National Assembly and control of 12 State Governments. But the elections were marred by violence and allegations of widespread vote rigging and electoral malfeasance led to legal battles over the results.

On December 31, 1983, the military overthrew the Second Republic, Maj. Gen. Muhammadu Buhari emerged as the leader of the Supreme Military Council (SMC), the Country's new ruling body. He charged the Civilian government with economic mismanagement, widespread corruption, electoral fraud and a general lack of concern for the problems of Nigeria. He also pledged to restore prosperity to Nigeria and to return the government to civilian rule but proved unable to deal with Nigeria's severe economic problems. The Buhari government was peacefully overthrown by the SMC's third ranking member, Army Chief of Staff, Maj. Gen. Ibrahim Babangida on August, 1985.

The Abortive Third Republic, President Babangida promised to return the Country to civilian rule by 1990; this date later extended until January, 1993. In early 1989, a constituent assembly completed work on a constitution for the Third Republic. In the spring of 1989, political activity was again permitted. In October 1989 the government established two 'grassroots' parties; The National Republican Convention (NRC), which was to be "a little to the right" and The Social Democratic Party (SDP) "a little to the left". Other parties were not allowed to register by the Babangida Government.

In December, 1991, gubernatorial and state legislative elections were held throughout the Country. Babangida decreed in December, 1991 that previously banned politicians would be allowed to contest in primaries scheduled for August 1992. These were cancelled due to fraud and subsequent primaries scheduled for September were also cancelled. All announced candidates were disqualified from again standing for President once a new election format was selected. The presidential election was finally held on June 12, 1993, with the

inauguration of the new president scheduled to take place August 27th, 1993, the eight anniversary of President Babangida's coming to power.

In the historic June 12, 1993, presidential elections, which most observers deemed to be Nigeria's fairest, early returns indicated that wealthy Yoruba businessman, M.K.O Abiola had won a decisive victory. However, on June 23rd, Babangida, using several pending lawsuits as a pretense, annulled the election, throwing Nigeria into turmoil. More than 100 persons were killed in riots before Babangida agreed to hand power to an "Interim Government" on August 27th, 1993. Babangida then attempted to renege on his decision. Without popular and military support, he was forced to hand over to Ernest Shonekan, a prominent nonpartisan businessman. Shonekan was to rule until new elections, scheduled for February 1994. Although he had led Babangida's Transitional Council since 1993, Shonkekan was unable to reverse Nigeria's ever-growing economic problems or to defuse lingering political tensions.

With the Country sliding into chaos, Defense Minister, Sani Abacha quickly assumed power and forced Shonekan's 'resignation' on November 17, 1993. Abacha dissolved all democratic political institutions and replaced elected Governors with Military Officers. Abacha promised to return the government to civilian rule but refused to announce a timetable until his October 1st, 1995 Independence Day Address.

In August, 1998, the Abubakar Government appointed the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) to conduct elections for Local Government Councils, State Legislators and Governors, the National Assembly and President. INEC successfully held these elections on December 5th, 1998, January 9th, 1999, February 20th and February 27th, 1999 respectively. For the Local elections, a total of nine parties were granted provisional registration, with three fulfilling the requirements to contest the following elections. These parties were the People's Democratic Party (PDP), the All People's Party (APP), and the predominantly Yoruba Alliance for Democracy (A.D.). Former military Head of State, Olusegun Obasanjo, freed from prison by Abubakar, ran as a civilian candidate and won the Presidential election. Irregularities marred the vote, and the defeated candidate, Chief Olu Falae challenged the electoral results and Obasanjo's victory in court.

The PRC promulgated a new constitution based largely on the suspended 1979 constitution, before the May 29th, 1999 inauguration of the new Civilian President. The constitution includes provisions for a bicameral legislature, the National Assembly, consisting of a 360 member House of Representative and a 109 member Senate. The Executive branch and the office of the President will retain strong Federal Powers. The Legislature and Judiciary, having suffered years of neglect must be rebuilt as institutions.

The Obasanjo Administration ushered in another phase of Democratic Nigeria in May, 1999 which ended 16 years of consecutive military rule. Olusegun Obasanjo became the steward of a country suffering from economic stagnation and the deterioration of its democratic institutions. Obasanjo, a former General, was admired for his stand against the Abacha dictatorship, his record of returning the Federal Government to civilian rule in 1979, and his claim to represent all Nigerians regardless of religion.

The new President took over a Country that was faced with many problems, including a dysfunctional bureaucracy, collapsed infrastructure and a military that wanted a reward for quietly returning to the barracks. The President moved quickly and retired hundreds of Military Officers, who held political positions, established a blue-ribbon panel to investigate human right violations, ordered the release of scores of persons held without charge and rescinded a number of questionable licenses and contracts let by the previous military regimes. The government also moved to recover millions of dollars in funds secreted in overseas accounts.

Most civil society leaders and most Nigerian see a marked improvement in human rights and democratic practice under Obasanjo. The press enjoys greater freedom than under previous governments. As Nigeria works out representational democracy, there have been conflicts between the Executive and Legislative branches over major appropriations and other proposed legislations. A sign of Federalism has been the growing visibility of State Governors and inherent friction between Abuja and the various State Capitols over resource allocation.

Problems of communal violence have confronted the Obasanjo since its inception. In May 1999 violence erupted in Kaduna State over the succession of an Emir resulting in more than 100 deaths. In November, 1999, the army destroyed the town of Odi, Bayelsa State and killed scores of civilians in retaliation for the murder of 12 Policemen by a local gang. In Kaduna, on February- May, 2000, over 1,000 people died in rioting over the introduction of criminal sharia in the State. Hundreds of ethnic Hausa were killed in reprisal attacks in South Eastern Nigeria.

In September 2001, over 2,000 people were killed in inter-religious rioting in Jos. In October 2001, hundred were killed and thousands displaced in communal violence that spread across the Middle-Belt States of Benue, Taraba and Nasarawa. On October 1st, 2001, President Obasanjo announced the formation of a National Security Commission to address the issue of Communal Violence. Currently, Nigeria has three major political parties. National Elections and State Gubernatorial Elections occurred in 2003. Nigeria re-elected Obasanjo as President then President Umar Musa Yar'adua in 2007 and President Goodluck Jonathan in 2011 (www.nigeria-plant.com/Democracy-and-Nigeria.)

Challenges of Democracy in Africa.

A number of Countries have made very significant progress in terms of institutionalizing democratic rule on the continent. However, there is also evidence that the continent still has to do more in order to consolidate the democratic gains made, and to ensure that the democratic momentum so far created is sustained. It is evident that the process of reinventing themselves from One Party or Military Dictatorships has not been a smooth one indeed and a number of factors point to this. First of all, while formal institutions of democracy exists, many people, particularly in rural areas are still to be educated and informed about the Modern System of governance and how it is supposed to be of service to them. Thus, there is a mindset problem where those who are led still fail to practically

appreciate and access the rights and freedoms provided in the constitutions, while on the other hand, some leaders fail to appreciate the true meaning of leadership in a democratic setting, as its implications for accountability.

Many people, including leaders in many parts of Africa still equate democracy to casting of the ballot. Thus democracy remains confined to formal political process, a fact which has prompted *Dr Maltosa (2006)* to rightly conclude that: “the fact that democracy is limited to formal political processes also suggests that it faces challenges for advancing socio-economic development” (pg57). In addition, many leaders on the continent still find it incredibly difficulty to hand over power peacefully as provided for in their constitution.

If they do, they would either try to continue dominating their ruling parties or just running them from outside. Thus, *Calderisi (2006)* has somewhat dramatized this problem by noting that; “some of these transfers of power have seldom been easy in Africa; many have been savage, others comical” (pp.69). Thus, free and fair election contests are still work in progress on the continent and resisted in some of the Countries. The Kenyan election early this year demonstrated tragically the depth of this misfortune. Because of the above, it is not surprising to note that post-election violence continues to haunt some parts of Africa and most importantly, to note that many Africans do not link their general welfare and situation to the vote nor feel empowered to use it to express their will.

Yet in order to consolidate and strengthen our democratic systems on the continent, people need to be educated about this new system and how it can be of service to them. To many Africans, particularly in rural areas, traditional systems of governance remain central to their lives and more relevant compared to the fine institutions at the Central or National level. Strong democracies on the continent are those which have built modern systems on traditional ones to ensure that what people understand is modernized and made to work for them. The Kgotla system in Botswana is a good illustration of this.

In Nigerian contemporary experience, during the military eras, Nigerian’s main Decision Making Organ was the exclusively military Provisional Ruling Council (PRC) which governed by decree. The PRC oversaw the 32 member Federal Executive Council composed of Civilians and Military Officers. This however resulted in the outright suspension of the constitution, characterized by high rate of human right violation, corruption, unpopular governmental policies, assassination of oppositions, poor infrastructural facilities, limited freedom of expression/media, inflation, interfering with judicial decisions and host of others. (<http://www.nigeria-plant.com/Democracy-and-Nigeria.html>).

This constituted the darkest moments of the Nation’s history with the citizens exposed to all forms of untold suffering, in the face of inflation, the take home salaries/wages is more of a peanut subjecting greater proportion of the population to abject poverty, the question of insecurity was high, crime rate also accelerated, falling standard of education and dilapidated civil service sector, unemployment was the order of the day. Thus, on transition to democratic regime in 1999, it was more of night mare by most Nigerians as they hardly believed it.

However, the Fourth Republic survived and became the beginning of an uninterrupted and stable democracy in the Country's history, though the democratization process of the fourth republic was difficult due to poor political culture and socialization as a result of the effect of a long military interference in politics that democracy managed to survive.

Other challenges confronting the Nation's democracy includes;

1. The politics of God-Fatherism.
2. The politics of 'Ghana must go' typical of the fourth and fifth republic.
3. Faith based politics.
4. Regional based politics inherited from the Colonial Masters.
5. Insecurity typical of Niger Delta Militants and the Boko Haram.
6. Corruption, nepotism and ethno-religious sentiments etc.

<http://www.nigeria-planet.com/Democracy-and-Nigeria.html>

The Development Scene of the African Continent

There was a time when development was seen as synonymous to economic growth. Not much concern was put into how the fruits of such development were distributed. Today, a lot has changed. Since the ground breaking essay of Dudley Seers in the 1960s, development has been defined much more broadly to include the questions of the quality of the life of people. Seers argued that in evaluating a Country's progress towards development, we should ask what has been happening to poverty, inequality and the general quality of life of the people. He concluded that if these indicators were not on the decline, then it would not be appropriate to talk about development.

Today, it is known that not only can growth not generate the employment necessary for the job seekers, the quality of such employment sometimes leaves a lot to be desired. This is particularly true in poor African Countries where the skills levels are also quite low.

Not only is the quality of life important, concern today is on human development. Development is also about the respect for human rights and the creation of equitable and inclusive systems of governance as earlier mentioned.

Within the above context, this paper focus on how to strengthen the capacity of democratic institutions such as parliaments and political parties in developing policy proposals geared towards sustainable development and effective poverty reduction.

Parliaments and Political Parties in Africa's Political Development

In 2005, the Economic Commission for Africa published a report whose theme was **Striving for Good Governance in Africa**. Among its most important recommendations are that the capacity of parliaments in Africa should be strengthened so as to enable them to perform their core functions and most importantly, so that they can improve their operational effectiveness. This is because legislatures in many parts of Africa remain weak and ineffective and thus marginalized in the day to day governance of their Countries typical of the Fourth and Fifth Assembly in Nigeria. The report noted that; "their

autonomy, though guaranteed by the constitutions is often compromised by the executive through lobbying, financial inducements and even intimidation” (pg.26).

The report was followed in 2006 by another key publication of the SADC Parliamentary – Civil Society Engagement Handbook edited by Tim Hughes which concluded among others that; “Parliament and committees in particular, cannot and will not be taken seriously by Executive branch unless they prove themselves to be well informed, well researched, proactive and constructive in their engagement with Ministerial departments” (pg.36).

Similar sentiments have been expressed in the African Parliaments which is an initiative of the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs. In their 2008 report, the issue of the lack of effectiveness of parliaments in holding the executive accountable is discussed further highlighting all the other major issues highlighted by other actors and observers. There are a number of regional and sub-regional networks which seek to among others that parliaments on the continents perform effectively. These include the Pan-African Parliament (PAP), the East African Legislative Assembly, the SADC-Parliamentary Forum and the Economic Community of West African States Community Parliament (ECOWAS-CP). One role played by these Parliamentary networks is that; “they promote globalized parliamentary-based democracy by developing the capacity of parliamentarians regardless of their ideological orientation” (*International IDEA, 2007:76*).

These concerns with parliaments and their performance underscore the very key role that parliaments have within a democratic setup. The role of any parliament in a democracy is promote participation in the democratic process. The democratic core business of parliament is to exercise oversight over the executive branch of government. This is parliament’s legitimate function that should be exercised effectively. This is key to ensuring public accountability and it is the cornerstone of good governance.

Within this area, a lot of progress has been made. However there are concerns that the ability of parliaments in Africa to exercise their oversight functions are limited by a number of factors; some internal with parliaments while others are due to a constraining environment which is not allowing this institution to independently and effectively discharge its functions. It has to be noted that in practice, this process tend to be reinforcing. The following are some of the factors which hinder the effectiveness of parliaments in exercising their duties;

- First of all, the legacy of the culture of the one Party era or Military dictatorship period is such that it is still difficult to accept at a practical level the exercise of this function. The culture of institutional tensions and criticism from other structures is still viewed by some governments with suspicion. As a commentator has observed with respect to the SADC region; “in many SADC Countries, attempt to exercise oversight are regarded as unpatriotic, disloyal, disrespectful or even treacherous. There is very little acceptance of the necessity of a healthy institutional tension between the executive and legislative branches for representative democracy to remain vital and vibrant” (*Hughes,2006:5*).

- Due to the political culture from the past, there isn't a strong culture in Africa for Civil Society and Parliament to interact. In fact, this is in part of the legacy of the past where the relationship between government and civil society was characterized by distance and outright confrontation and conflict. Thus, some have dubbed this state of affairs; "institutional elitism and chauvinism" in order to underscore a tendency for MPs to be regarded with high reverence and they stay out of touch with the public; as in Civil Society. It is indeed key to ask whether or not many of these parliaments are relevant institutions to those they serve.
- Most likely as a result of how they are viewed by governments, some parliaments end up being under resourced and therefore ineffective. Although constitutionally, they have to deal with serious policy issues and legislation which requires that they should be adequately informed, this is not so. Many do not even have sufficient library and research facilities in order to be able to enhance their effectiveness.
- Due to this and other weaknesses, sometimes parliaments are not taken seriously by the executive. This became pragmatic in the Jonathan's administration when the President said that the decision of the Federal House of Representative on the reverse of the fuel subsidy removal was a mere expression of thought. Despite being the representative of the people, sometimes they are not consulted when major international protocols are signed. They ultimately focus on critiquing what they barely understand and further undermining their own credibility before the executive.

It cannot be denied that in situation where the above weakness are present, there is no way that parliament will be able to monitor the performance of the executive and to keep it in check. Such checks will have to be exercised over a number of ways such as through budget analysis and scrutiny, policy analysis and to ensure that parliaments play a greater role in drawing up policies to address specific problems in the society. In addition, part of this oversight has to include monitoring of policy implementation to ensure that decisions are implemented and that what is agreed in parliament is put into practice. In this way, the will of the people as expressed through the composition of the parliament will be realized. The many policy frameworks designed to address poverty in Africa are not exception.

Members of parliament are mostly from political parties. In many parliaments in Africa, the independent members of parliament would be quite few. These members are coming into parliament from political parties. The political party as an instrument of collective action is a very important institution in a democracy. The institution has evolved like other institutions of democracy in Africa, some have become even more democratic internally and even run primary elections to be elect members. Political parties get voted into parliament presumably because of their policy positions on a number of issues. These include theoretically, policy positions on how they will tackle poverty.

Unfortunately, although this is theoretically or formally the case, there is no evidence to suggest that voters have reached that level of understanding where they connect their vote and its potential power with their needs and how they can achieve it.

A number of weaknesses of political parties have been evident over the years and are well documented. (See for example, *Salih & Nordlund, 2006; Maltosa, 2007; Chege, 2007, etc*). This interest in researching the contribution of political parties to the growth and consolidation of Africa has gained currency in the last few years. A lot of this work has been led by the international IDEA. Much of the earlier interest was on elections and on understanding how the other institutions are functions. It has become clear that African democratic project will be strengthened by an equal emphasis on political parties because of their significance in the political life of democratic nations.

A number of shortcomings of political parties have been noted. First of all is the caliber of some of the people they field to run for political office. While the challenges of development and oversight duties of members of parliament demand understanding of how economies function and how resources can be mobilized and so forth, democratic credentials within parties use a different yardstick and provide representatives, some of who do not have the understanding. This is part of the reason why quite often in parliament, governments are consistently at odds with members of parliament over policy choices, not only because the former dominate the policy choice selection process, but also because the latter are not really following what is going on.

Secondly, some parties do not even have offices or even facilities even to craft relevant policy positions on a number of issues. Thus, their approach may just be piecemeal and unformed on key issues. This contributes to them being marginalized by the executive or outright ignored.

The role of Parliament and Political Parties in the fight against Poverty; Which way forward?

Although, Parliaments and Political parties occupy a key position in the democratic landscape of democratic Countries, we have noted that in Africa, their role is hampered by a number of factors, most of which hinge on the state of democracy on the continent itself. The same reasons that work against the effectiveness of parliaments in providing oversight on a number of issues are also relevant for poverty eradication role. Although democracy provides the possibility that the wishes and the felt needs of people can be responded to by their government, much of that depends on whether or not such government interacts with their people. This is particularly relevant for the poverty and development area because experience from so many decades shows very well that the power to develop people and to take them out of poverty does not lie with governments or donors or bureaucrats. This power lies with the people themselves and sustainable models of reducing poverty which seeks to do anything else will keep failing.

Parliaments and political parties play a limited role in the poverty reduction field in many African countries for a number of reasons. First of all, it has to be noted that when many of

these countries stepped out of the military dictatorships and one party era to embrace democratic reforms, and took on the challenge of reinventing themselves as democracies, for many of these a key policy framework that soon has to be implemented in order to address development challenges and fight poverty was the now famous Structural Adjustment Programs. Governments found themselves on the defensive as some of the adverse consequences of these reforms brought about hardship and heightened political tensions.

Parliamentarians, Civil society and others, fired from the opposite side of the isle indicating that many political actors in these countries did were not part of these reforms and did not like them on the basis of their noted side effects. This is the same way in which parliaments and political parties find themselves on the outside as the donor community and government work out policies and have to only bring these institutions after. This happens because of the very large dependency of some of these countries on donor financing in order to run their programs. In Countries such as Mozambique, Lesotho or even Malawi, governments depend on this help for more than 50 percent of their resources. It is hard for a government that is so dependent on outside help to also be able to totally control its policy agenda.

The Poverty Reduction Strategies (PRSPs), Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are some of the most significant policy interventions introduced in order to fight poverty. PRSPs were highly consultative in some of the Countries (e.g Lesotho) but like other non-home grown initiatives, people still need to be taught about what they are about and what they mean for their daily lives.

Closer to Southern Africa, the SADC Indicative Strategic Plan and African Union's NEPAD framework are all important frameworks. However, the point we seek to make here is that parliaments keep trailing behind and having to catch up in terms of knowledge and information, this includes political parties.

Conclusion/Summary

It is not wonder poverty continues to be on the African continent. While some of the problems rightly emanates from factors outside Africa within the international economic system, it is also highly evident that the people in the form of parliaments and political parties still have to be brought into the center of fighting the war on poverty. This is not only about giving parliaments information, it is also about ensuring that the political institutions and how they work ensure that people themselves take charge of their own development. The current practice where both in terms of building democracies and seeking to drive the process of development, nations are focusing on building from center or national level is not bearing fruit. As *Prof. M. Rukuni (2007)* has so rightly noted in his latest book on 'Being Afrikan', this is almost the same as attempting to build a house from the roof, it is not happening. On the basis of the points and challenges noted above, it is important to realize that there will be no easy solution to this problem as some of the solutions necessary require political solutions and hence, great compromises to be made. A number of possible solutions to be tried include the following;

- Strengthen the role of the parliaments in the national governance system by ensuring that their constitutional roles are performed and that the executive commits to respecting the institution. Undermining parliament denies people a change to be hearer in a democracy.
- Strengthen the capacity of parliaments to perform their roles better. The operational efficiency of these institutions must be improved. Training for parliamentarians is necessary.
- Efforts should be made to ensure that both government and the population at large are educated about the role of this institution.
- Strengthen the interaction between parliament and civil society and establish a culture of accessibility of this institution to the public. In this regard, some have even suggested the formation of a Parliament Civil Society Forum.
- Greater efforts should be made to build the capacity of political parties to not only reach out to the people and get to be more effective in their in their interest aggregation role, but they must be encouraged to build the necessary infrastructure for them to function as credible entities that can even be interested to govern. Some are in a state that leaves a lot to be desired. Part of the problem here in building political party as an institution emanates from the fact that while ruling parties find it easier to mobilize resources and even use state resources at times to further their own party functions, the private sector in many African countries equate funding the ruling party with strengthening democracy. While they do this in order to ensure economic benefits from state business, they also undermine their own future by assisting to concentrate power in once center and thus weaken democratic prospects. This must be discussed as a public challenge requiring a solution.
- Political parties have to finally realize that the era has passed when could just field lower caliber candidates and improve in this respect. Otherwise, they would continue to marginalize by the executive as they bring forward people who hardly understand what is going on or what their role should be.
- Both parliaments and political parties have to strive to ensure that they bring in women and youths in their mainstream leadership structures because it is these groups that are most highly affected by poverty and who should become part of an effort to find a solution to this problem.

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