Poverty and Seasonal Migrations as Direct Consequences of Desertification in Sokoto State (1976-2014)

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Abstract

Desertification is the extreme deterioration of land due to loss of vegetation and soil moisture. It has been caused, in various places in the world, by a combination of natural and artificial factors. It is also an established fact that there is desertification in Sokoto State. The state, situated in the North-western zone of Nigeria has experienced desertification since the beginning of the 19th century. The consequences of this phenomenon in Sokoto State have been very devastating and dangerous. The most disturbing consequence of the phenomenon is poverty, which invariably led to mass migration of the citizens of the State to various parts of Nigeria as both permanent and seasonal migrants in search of livelihood. These led to serious social and economic crisis in the State leading to slow sustainable socio-economic development in the area. In this paper attempt is made to trace the history of desertification in the State highlighting the impact of the phenomenon in entrenching poverty and the departure of many people in the State to other places for greener pastures.

Key Words: Sokoto State, Desertification, Overgrazing, Deforestation, Drought, Poverty, Seasonal Migration

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Sokoto State 1976 to 2014 (Scope and Area of the Study)

Sokoto State, in this paper, refers to a balkanized part of the defunct Sokoto Caliphate. The Caliphate was established in the opening years of the 19th Century following the successful execution of the Sokoto Jihad. Sokoto Caliphate was the largest polity in the 19th century Central Sudan, the biggest in terms of landmass, human and material resources. Sokoto has undergone series of changes politically and geographically from 1804 through 1960 to 2014. The town has always been the Headquarters since 1808 when it was established by Sultan Muhammadu Bello. In 1967, Sokoto was the capital of the North Western State made up of Sokoto and Niger Provinces. In 1976 Sokoto and Niger Provinces were each made a State and Sokoto town became the headquarters of the new State. Sokoto State at that time comprised Sokoto, Kebbi and Zamfara areas. In 1991, Kebbi area was carved out of Sokoto State and made a state of its own. In 1996, Zamfara area has also been made a State. In this paper, Sokoto State refers to Sokoto State comprising the modern day Sokoto, Kebbi and Zamfara areas from 1976 to 2014.

Desertification

It is the extreme deterioration of land in arid and dry sub-humid areas due to loss of vegetation and soil moisture. Desertification is caused by natural factors, principally climatic changes and made worse by human factors. Sometimes desertification is caused by man-made activities and influenced by climatic variations. Desertification can also be caused by overgrazing, over-drafting of ground water and diversion of water from rivers for human consumption and industrial use, all
of these processes fundamentally driven by overpopulation. Other reasons for desertification included over cultivation, increased fire frequency, water impoundment,
deforestation, increased soil salinity and global climatic change. These factors are human-induced activities which would make land to lose its vegetation, fertility and productive capacity. It is thus a process by which land is degraded mainly by human activities. Desertification is thus both an environmental and developmental problem because it affects local environment and populations’ ways of life. One of the aggravators of desertification in Sokoto State was slash-and-burn farming practice and other forms of cultivation by an expanding human population. The main causes of desertification in Sokoto State included over-cropping, overgrazing and deforestation.

Over-cropping was necessitated by the shortage of land in Sokoto State. The system of farming in the past in Sokoto State was such that when the soil was losing its fertility the farmers left it hollow for certain years to rest before coming back to it. But with time and the ever expanding population in the area, the practice of hollow was abandoned. The result was excessive and intensive cultivation of the available land in the State. In some parts of the State, the use of heavy equipment such as tractors as well as the use of chemical fertilizers engendered soil erosion and loss of fertility.

Overgrazing, on the other hand, resulted from the large number of livestock feeding on the shrinking pastures of the State. Livestock production in Sokoto State was an important agricultural activity involving large number of people and large number of livestock. Coupled with that, were also decreasing size of available grazing land and farmlands in the State caused by increasing population of both human and animals. Industrial, commercial and Governmental activities have been eating up farming and grazing lands in almost all the towns and cities of the State from 1976 to 2009 and that led to the current scarcity of grazing land. The available
grazing lands have therefore been overgrazed and that resulted in serious land degradation in many parts of the State including farmlands used by the teeming number of livestock. The gradual encroachment of herders and their herds into farmlands led to frequent clashes between farmers and herders in many parts of Sokoto State during the period of this study. Many herders have also been migrating southward towards the Zamfara area and beyond, from northern parts of Sokoto State, during the dry season, for available pastures. In this process more clashes occurred between them and the farmers, whose farmlands were entered and sometimes crops destroyed.iii

It is also observed that in some areas, herders or nomads moving to less arid areas disrupt the local ecosystem and increase the rate of erosion of the land. The main reason for north-south migration carried out by herders was to escape the desert, but because of their land use practices, they were bringing the desert with them.iv This meant that by pounding the soil with their hooves, livestock compact the substrate, increase the proportion of fine materials, and reduce the percolation rate of the soil, thus encouraging erosion by wind and water. Thus, grazing and collection of firewood reduced or eliminated plants that bound the soil and prevented erosion.

Deforestation, on the other hand, was a necessity in many parts of Sokoto State. Fire wood was one of the major sources of household energy both in the villages and in the urban centres of Sokoto State. Deforestation was also associated with the increasing number of population in the State, which necessitated increasing demand for fire wood as a major source of energy. The consequence of deforestation has always been soil erosion and ultimately further desertification. Deforestation was one of the means of survival to many communities such as those of Gundumi in Goronyo LGA of Sokoto State and Tago in Arewa LGA of Kebbi State. The communities
depended on cutting and felling down of trees for firewood sold to make ends meet. This has a very serious repercussion on the environment in the State. For instance, in 1997 while the total forest area protected was 400,000 hectares, the total area deforested in the same year was 9.1 million hectares in Nigeria. Thus, the protected forest area as a percentage of total land area was just 10 percent in 1997.\textsuperscript{v} For Sokoto State, the figure has been given below on the current page.

According to many of my informants as well as my on-the-sport assessment, desertification was already in Sokoto State, mainly in the northern parts, since the 1970s.\textsuperscript{vi} It was seriously affecting parts of Isa and Sabon Birni LGAs. It was there in Gada, Gwadabawa, Illela, Tangaza, Gudu, Binji, Silame, Arewa, Dandi and Argungu LGAs. It was also in some parts of Bagudo and Gwandu LGAs. An estimated area of 67,280 sq kilometres was susceptible to desertification, which represented about 65 percent of the total land area of Sokoto State.\textsuperscript{vii} In fact, desertification was affecting many other areas of the State in one way or the other thereby limiting agricultural yields and income of the people, which in reality affected their quality of life. The menace of desertification and drought in the Northern parts of Nigeria particularly areas beyond latitude 12oN began to receive serious attention nationwide as a result of the spell of the devastating drought experienced in 1973.\textsuperscript{viii} This led to the establishment of Shelter Belts Programme in Mamman Suka village of Gwadabawa LGA starting from 1976.\textsuperscript{ix} From Mamman Suka the tree planting programme spread to cover areas such as Illela, Gada, Balle, Sabon Birni, Zauro, Yeldu, Faru, Kurdulla and Bachaka.\textsuperscript{x} This further gave rise to the establishment of another programme known as Arid Zone Afforestation Programme, (AZAP), which provided boreholes to some of the areas prone to desertification.\textsuperscript{xi} In Kware District, up to the 1970s,
Government officials had been directing for the planting of aguwa trees mostly near streams to protect them from drying up. In the 1970s, there were 12 streams in Kware District but by 2009, there was only one flowing with water, others have dried up. The one, which had survived was in Sabon Birni village to the north-east of Kware town. In Illela LGA the menace of desertification first showed itself on plants. Up to the 1970s, rainfall in the area was normal every year. But by 2009, rain was no longer coming in the usual time of April-May. It began to be delayed to June, and sometimes up to early July. Desertification problem started to manifest in Illela area around 1984 and since that time it was expanding. Before 1980 there was enough food in the area due to availability of rain, which made it possible for cultivation to take place in good time and the yields to be impressive. From the late 1980s to date, agricultural yields were not sufficient, which led to food scarcity in the area. However, due to improvement in the transportation sector, the scarcity was not manifestly clear because various kinds of food stuff from all the parts of the country were brought to Illela town for sale especially on Saturdays and Sundays. But surprisingly, the people of Konni in Niger Republic did not show any fear of the desertification problem saying that it was the problem of the people of Agadez only.

According to several sources, droughts cause desertification. But they were not the sole factors. They were only contributing factors to the problem of desertification especially in the vulnerable areas such as Sokoto State. The State was vulnerable in the sense that, it was one of the frontline States, to the region where desertification was very much pronounced. The causes of desertification were both natural and human activities as mentioned above in the form of excessive utilization of the environment. The consequence of desertification was decline in
rainfall. It is therefore certain from the above that desertification was strongly related to poverty. The two phenomena complemented each other. Each caused the other in Sokoto State.

**Poverty**

In essence, this paper argues that virtually every society was and is still affected by the phenomenon of poverty depending on the nature and magnitude of the scourge. This has been the case since time immemorial, but it has become unbearable in recent decades particularly in Sokoto State where it has defied solutions. Poverty has been seen from several angles and that is why, it is said to be multi-dimensional and multi-sectoral.\(^{\text{xviii}}\) Some are of the view that poverty is in the eyes of the beholder.\(^{\text{ix}}\) Some described it as an elephant that could easily be seen but difficult to define.\(^{\text{xx}}\) Whatever it is, there is no disagreement that it exists in all societies. It is thus, imperative to give a few definitions of the phenomenon of poverty despite the hardness of doing that.

In simple terms, poverty means material deprivation or lack of what is needed for material well-being. It also explains lack or limited access to capabilities that could facilitate long and healthy life, good education, adequate standard of living and meaningful participation in decisions affecting one’s life.\(^{\text{xxi}}\) Normally, the poor people live below a specified minimum standard because they could not afford the essentials of life that could ensure acceptable standard of living. This makes poverty not only economic but also social in outlook. Any attempt at defining poverty purely on economic issue might not capture all the dimensions of the phenomenon.\(^{\text{xxii}}\)
Some people still comprehend poverty as disasters and obstructions of their sources of livelihoods. It is obvious from the above few definitions, that poverty has always been seen from negative point of view. Indeed poverty has been associated with backwardness, retrogression, deprivation, inequality, humiliation, disability, illiteracy, diseases, etc. These particulars associated with poverty have ever since been the harbingers for serious negative consequences especially in Sokoto State whose socio-economic development has never been sustainable but epileptic, unstable, fluctuating and on many occasions retrogressive. One of the serious causes of poverty in Sokoto State has been desertification as shown above.

**Seasonal Migration**

The movement of people from one place to another between the end of wet season and the end of the dry season i.e. seasonal migrations were a significant feature of the Nigerian society ever since in history. This has been the case since the pre-colonial period and up to the present. However, according to Adamu, during the pre-colonial period not all the migrations were of the cin rani category. Migrations were aspects of human activities. What is to be noted here is that one of the ways in which migrations could be categorized is in terms of permanent migrations and temporary migrations. Basically, in permanent migrations people left home without the intention of coming back. In temporary migrations, on the other hand, people left home intending to return after being away for a short time, mostly a few months. In some temporary migrations, the timing of the departure from home, and of the return journey, was not important. However, in others the timing was important because the departures from home and the return were connected with the seasons of the year. Some temporary migrants left home at the end of the wet season
farming activities to try their hands in other places throughout the dry season and then go back home as the new wet season approached. The movements of people connected with the beginning and the end of seasons is called seasonal migration. This type of migration was called cin rani by the Hausa people. Many factors are attributed to these movements (seasonal migrations). The economic and social conditions prevailing in Sokoto State during the period of study, such as desertification, were the prime factors that forced many people of Sokoto State to embark on seasonal migrations.

According to Tsafe, seasonal migrations from the north and northwest of Sokoto State into the southeast (all in the Rima Region, former Sokoto State), were occasioned by lesser demand for labour in the much drier northern Districts. He said that these movements were regular trends at the beginning of rains on the northwest-southeast axis and that the magnitude of seasonal migration accelerated by successive crop failures in the drier areas, and became social crisis.

According to Audu, a survey of three villages in Gwadabawa District during 1976 found out that between 46 and 74 percent of dry season migrants left their homes to look for work because of poverty, taxes and poor harvests.

Indeed, seasonal migrations were historically known to have been caused by several factors especially those related to poverty such as desertification, droughts, famines etc. Five major drought periods with resultant famine have been reported in Nigeria in the 20th century and they
are 1913-1914, 1931-1932, 1942-1943, 1972-1973 and 1983-1984.\textsuperscript{xxix} Other droughts that occurred later in Sokoto State were those of 1993, 1997 and 2005. Michael Watts has said that
droughts and famine were integral parts of the economic ebb and flow of the desert edge of the Central Sudan during the 19th Century and that the history of this area had been coloured by long and short term cycles of growth, famine and recovery. Tsafe states that drought, fari, in Hausa language, is a climatic phenomenon while famine, yunwa, is a social crisis and that the former causes the latter, which makes the latter the logical effect of the former.

The area where Sokoto State was located was an agrarian society, whose agriculture largely depended on upland cultivation and as such dependent upon rain-fed upland cultivation and precipitation. It is for this reason that the large part of this area has been experiencing water or rain deficit especially at the onset of the rain. Thus, the prosperity of the growing season was dependent upon the quantity and the distribution of annual rainfall. The consequence of inadequate rainfall was drought and subsequent famine. Apart from inadequate amount of rainfall in the area, other environmental factors also contributed towards backwardness in agricultural production such as diseases, pests and weeds infestation and erosion. Michael Watts and Tsafe concluded that drought was wholly gravitated by environmental conditions, while famine depended on the severity of drought and was gravitated by social conditions such as mode of food control, distribution mechanisms and effectiveness of the distribution systems. Famine is the widespread scarcity of food affecting human and animal species that would result in malnutrition, starvation, epidemic and increased mortality.

**Conclusion**

It is the conclusion of this paper that the social and economic conditions in the Sokoto area since the pre-colonial period have been the reasons for poverty and seasonal migrations involving the
people in the area. One of the factors for those social and economic conditions has always been desertification that has been encroaching every year into the Sokoto area as shown in the paper. Indeed, the people of Sokoto State are one of those that engaged in seasonal migrations ever since in their history as shown in the paper. Poverty is also one of the social ills ravaging the area for a long time, especially with the encroachment of desertification more especially from the 1970s. This is however, not the only factor for the presence of poverty in the State and the participation of the people in seasonal migrations. Other factors are also there but desertification, as shown in thus far, has been a very serious factor in forcing people to emigrate for greener pastures and livelihood. In short, one can say that desertification and poverty are both interdependent variables, both causing each other, and of course, both simultaneously shaping the nature, character and dynamics of seasonal migrations in Sokoto State of Nigeria.
Notes


iv Ibid

v Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN), 1997, cited by M. A. Adebiiy, op cit, He further said forests and rangelands cover about 84 percent of the earth’s land surface, but in Nigeria it is only 10 percent.

vi This necessitated various tree planting campaigns in the State by both the Federal and State governments over the years especially in the 1990s during the Military regimes

vii Report of the Committee on Environmental Baseline Data Collection and Compilation in Sokoto State, October, 1989, p. 15

viii Ibid, p. 15

ix Ibid, p. 15

x Ibid, p. 15

xi Ibid, p. 15

xii Interview with Sarkin Yamman Kware, Alh Aliyu Abubakar, aged 64, on Sunday, 12/4/2009

xiii Ibid, they included Marmaron Sangame, Marmaron Agullai, etc

xiv Interview with Magaji Illela, Alh Garba Abdullahi, aged 68 and Dangaladiman Darnar Tsolawo, Abubakar, aged 57, on Monday, 30/3/2009

xv Interview with Alh Abarshi Konni, aged 76 and Usman Adamu Konni, aged 67, on Wednesday, 1/4/2009, Agadez was a State in Niger Republic situated on the north-east of the country. It is said that, if it rained in Agadez the way it did in Konni, the building structures in Agadez would have collapsed. It was concluded
in Konni that desertification was the problem of the people of Agadez and not those of Konni which is bordering parts of Sokoto State

xvi *Tackling Environmental Problems for Sustainable Development*, op. cit


xviii For details consult the PhD thesis of Aliyu Abubakar Kware titled “Poverty in Sokoto State: An Historical Study, 1976-2009”, Department of History, Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto, Pp, 7-18, 2012. See also Shamaki, Mu’azu Alhaji, “The Incidence and Spatial Manifestations of Urban Poverty in Sokoto Metropolis”, Unpublished M. A. Dissertation, Department of Geography, Usman Danfodiyo University, Sokoto, p, 46. Poverty has been described as social, economic and cultural situation that transcends economic description and analysis. It is also said that Poverty manifests itself in the sphere of economics as deprivation, in politics as marginalization, in sociological issues as discrimination, in culture as ruthlessness, and in ecology as vulnerability, and in all, these dimensions reinforce one another

For details on his perception of poverty and more from others, see Tella A. Sheriffdeen, “A Schema for Monitoring Poverty Alleviation” in Poverty Alleviation in Nigeria: Selected papers for 1997 Annual Conference of the Nigerian Economic Society, NES, p, 74

As defined by Sokoto State MDGs Report 2006, Goal one.


Local people of Tsamaye village in Sabon Birni Local Government Area, Yar Rimawa village in Goronyo Local Government Area, Kuka Mai-raffu village in Talata Mafara Local Government Area as well as those in Gidan Kano village in Maradun Local Government Area have understood poverty as when water from Bakolori and Goronyo Dams submerges their houses and farm lands especially at the time of harvest. To them there is no poverty like losing one’s agricultural produce as a result of flooding of the two Dams.

For details see R. M. Prothero, Migrant Labour From Sokoto Province Northern Nigeria, University of Liverpool, Department of Geography, printed by the Government Printer, Northern Region of Nigeria, 1958, and also R. K. Udo, “Sokoto and the Rima Basin” in Geographical Regions of Nigeria, London: Heineman Educational Books Ltd, 1970


Ibid, p, 301


xxxii Ibid

xxxiii For more on that see Ibid, pp. 171-172

xxxiv See M. Watts, op, cit and K. S. Tsafe, p. 173 and also in p. 178