

# Can the Poor Fight Corruption? The Views From Nigeria's Federal Capital Poverty Hubs of Bwari, Nyanya, Mararaba, Jikwoyi and Gwagwalada.

*Let this story begin from the beginning. Five years ago, the MacArthur Foundation, for example, came to a conclusion about corruption in Nigeria. Its own survey showed that corruption is at the heart of the crisis in Nigeria. That survey became the basis of its commitment to a program of amplifying 'voices from below' which is still on-going in various forms.*



*Earlier in February this year, Mr. Moletsane Monyake, a doctoral researcher at the Sussex Centre for the Study of Corruption in the Department of Politics at the University of Sussex, UK published an academic paper with serious policy import. Titled, "Can the poor fight back? A multilevel analysis of corruption, poverty and collective demand for accountability in Africa", the author came to a conclusion that challenged established wisdom. Contrary to existing wisdom, the author concluded that multilevel regression analysis of public opinion data from 35 African countries revealed that the more poor people experience corruption such as having to bribe their way, the more they are disposed rather than discouraged from collective anti-corruption action.*

*Although, neither the student of corruption nor MacArthur Foundation is aware of each other, their actions are connected or corroborative. The connection is that both student (theory) and MacArthur, (practice) believe that the masses, (the Talakawa) are angry against corruption and have the agency to act as a counter-foil against corruption if those 'voices from below' are sufficiently amplified. But, is that the case in Nigeria?*

*This is the question **Intervention** took to selected high density spaces in and around Abuja where those collectively known as the masses dwell. Abuja is chosen because it is a cultural or identity No-man's land in Nigeria. Four researchers, made up of two university lecturers, a corper and a staff of **Intervention** went out to the suburb/slums of Bwari, Nyanya, Jikwoyi, Mararaba and Gwagwalada from October 1<sup>st</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup>, 2019, with a question guide to talk with a minimum of seven, (7) respondents but who must fit into the Talakawa categorisation: housewife, artisans, (electricians, repairers, tailors, masons or bricklayers); traders, small scale business people, tea sellers, nail cutters, shoe shiners, wheel barrow managers, unemployed graduates; religious/community leaders and so on. The principle is to let the few speak for the many but in a sufficiently representative manner. It was thus insisted upon that the selection must also satisfy the criterion of balance in terms of religion, (Christians and*

*Muslims) regions, (North and South); gender, (men and women); generations, (young and old) and, finally, majority versus minority ethnic groups.*

*The justification for this report is, therefore, that it adds value to the agenda of amplifying 'voices from below' because it is on the foundation of these voices that the amplification agenda can stand or collapse. It is considered strategic to know how much members of the 'voices from below' share, contest or nurse even a completely different discourse of corruption from the popular revulsion against it in Nigeria.*



**Intervention's Ms Eneh Achadu who coordinated the interviews**

*The report from the field is as interesting as the totality of what the poor have to say. Queried on why there were many one sentence replies in the interviews she conducted, Eneh Achadu offered a Whatsapp response that deserves to be quoted: We tried to talk to people five times the number we got but they weren't willing to engage us. Some couldn't even speak English properly and were unable to answer the questions. Those who answered clearly didn't want to proceed further even when we asked follow up questions. I asked follow up questions for everyone but they wouldn't explain further. We had to even break down the question for a lot of them to understand and answer. Some won't even give us their age or full names because they called us government spies. Those ones were quite scared for fear of the details being used against them by government. We had a few people who told us that they're tired of answering questions on corruption, that nothing will change and, even after begging for their time, they would dismiss us, saying these questions will not put food on their table. Some of the business owners asked if we were paying them. A few potential interviewees asked if we were giving them refreshment. In some areas, we spent longer time because they had lots of customers".*

*The shocker was when the sentences were even shorter in the interviews in Bwari, conducted by a Lecturer in Mass Communications who is not a stranger to vox populi which is though a lighter variant of our approach.*

*What it means is that, although there were vocal interviewees who answered the questions without caring a hoot, the first main finding from the interviews is that the masses have already cut themselves from what the elite are doing. In any society that aims to go anywhere in history, that is a frightening indicator. But Nigeria rarely cares about early warning signs.*

*In the end, this is the breakdown of the interviews. Total number of persons interviewed is 35, working out at 7 per suburb. Of these, there are 24 men and 11 women and 23 Christians against 12 Muslims. In terms of distribution by occupation, this is it: three housewives one from each of Kaduna, Kogi and Enugu states; one unemployed graduate from Taraba State; three barbers from each of Benue, Kogi and Osun states; seven business owners made up of two from Benue and one from each of Ebonyi, Enugu, Gombe, Katsina and the FCT; one driver from Oyo State; one shoemaker from Benue State; three petty traders from each of Anambra, Kano and Katsina states; one repairer, (whatever that means) from Cross Rivers State and two tailors, all from Kogi State. Others are two tea sellers from each of Nasarawa and Katsina states; two welders from Ebonyi and Osun states; a female labourer/construction worker from Taraba State; a pastor from Oyo State; a female food vendor from Jigawa State, a mechanic from Delta State; two electronics dealers one from each of Delta and Kaduna states and three unclassified, one from each of Abia, Niger and the FCT.*

*One question at this point is how it might have happened that no one from states such as Abia, Adamawa, Akwa Ibom, Bauchi, Borno, Imo, Lagos, Rivers, Sokoto and Zamfara appeared on the list, accessed by the interviewers in the rather random manner every other participant was accessed. Are they so prosperous at home that Abuja is not their kettle of fish? That can be speculated for Rivers or Lagos State but not Borno State.*

*The report below is structured around the five questions which animated the research:*

1. What are your sources of information on corruption?
2. Do you assess yourself to be poor? Yes or No
3. In what sense is that so?
4. Do you see any connection between corruption and poverty in Nigeria?
5. What is your assessment of the anti-corruption war in Nigeria?

*Below then is the first part of voices of members of the poor on the phenomenon of corruption in Nigeria. The fear of government expressed by some of the respondents means that real names will not be published. But, there will be references to the location, trade line and such other details as well as quotations in the narrative.*



An original imagination of the monster. Credit to the creator as soon as known

## On Question 1

Question 1 elicited uncomplicated responses across the board. Aside from the Nyanya based tea seller who said he doesn't listen to any sources because he is permanently at work, all other respondents mentioned three main sources. The highest is television where TVC is specifically mentioned by a respondent. Next is social media. Social media is followed by news from social interaction. It is interesting that 13 respondents mentioned this as their key source of news on corruption although they called it different names. The main site for informal channel of news about corruption is football viewing centres. For a respondent, the name is 'street conversations'. For another, it is 'news from other people'. Yet, for another, it is 'news from family members'. There are those who mentioned conversation among customers as her main source of news in this regard. Finally, one called it 'news from my neighbours'. The sociological point of interest here is the power of 'bare foot journalism' or 'radio without wire' in contemporary Nigeria which is an indicator of the level of under-development of the country. The radio and newspapers were mentioned by only very few respondents.

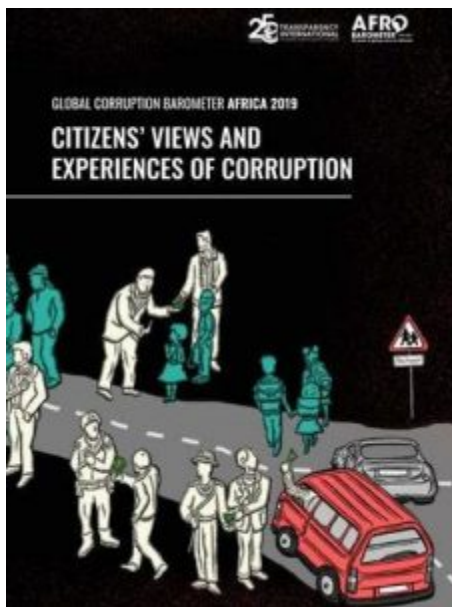
## On Question 2: The beginning of complicated responses

Unlike question 1, question 2 elicited complicated responses. Out of 35 interviewees, 24 disagreed with the classification of being poor, 10 agreed and one respondent was undecided.

The arguments of those who rejected being classified as poor can be summarised as follows:

There are eight respondents whose reason for rejecting being classified as poor is simply “because I can take care of myself”. The background of such respondents is mostly those who own stores or are selling a service and are earning stable income that they say does not make them rich but does not leave them in penury either. One of them who goes by the guy name of Youngster in Jikwoyi said he is hard working, he has big plans for which he is trying to raise money in addition to a shop already.

The second category are those who interpret accepting such classification as inviting a curse on one’self. The lady labourer on the interview articulated it best: if I say I am poor, I am cursing myself”. She then goes on to make a distinction between poverty and hardship. For her, poverty is when there is no hope at all. Otherwise, it is hardship. Her argument then is that she is not poor but she is suffering. Her suffering increases when there are no construction works and she has to move to something like guarding a poultry. She is just 28.



The third main category is the theologians. Their chief ideologue, a namesake of a recent Nigerian president, is an interviewee from Zuma 1 in Bwari. “My father in Heaven is not poor”. He adds how rich in spirit he is. His seconder is the 45 year old Nyanya based trader, (business owner) from Benue who says “I have God in me and He is giving me what I need”. The female voice here is the Gombe born Gwagwalada resident who is also a business owner and who says “I no poor. God de bless me because I am managing with my family”. For this group, classification as poor is rejected on the conviction that God is in charge.

There are a few who share similar position but not on theological grounds. For these ones, just two of them anyway, poverty is a mentality and “my mindset is rich”. In other words, they are constructivists, perhaps unconsciously so.

There is an interesting distinction again made by a lone voice, a driver from Oyo State too. He says one is poor if one's lack is total. So, he doesn't classify himself as poor because, as a driver, his is not complete lack. His is inadequacy of what he gets.

These fine distinctions and nuances makes reading the interview a serious seminar in itself. Although many of the respondents are obviously educated, many have had very little formal education. But they have very sharp, analytically powerful insights. The question then is how the idea of classifying them as poor might have arisen.

Could that be a product of Cartesian reasoning which insists on reality being something out there to be discovered when, in truth, reality is inside the beholder? That must be the source of the error in ranking people as poor once we don't see them with big houses, big cars and huge cash withdrawals but only to see them reject such labels when they have the opportunity to speak.

Structuralists coming into meaning making from the confidence of orthodox Marxists in particular would say that the masses are suffering from 'false consciousness' in not seeing the reality of their poverty. But how can consciousness be true or false when it is a highly discursive product?. So, they fall into the same Cartesian/Enlightenment thesis of which Marxism itself is a product.

It brings back the question of what is to be done, both at the level of theory and method and then praxis for all those involved in one way or the other with popular action for probity and accountability.

Questions 3, 4 & 5 will follow shortly!