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23rd April 2013

Poverty in New Mexico

New Mexico is currently ranked second after Mississippi in terms of poverty index in the United States. According to a report released by the census bureau on 23rd January 2013 the poverty rate in New Mexico stands at 22.2 percent with Mississippi being 24 percent (Census Bureau, 2013). The median income in New Mexico dropped to \$43,000 from \$46,000 in the period between 2008 to 2010 (Census Bureau, 2013).

Further reports have indicated that more than thirty percent of children in New Mexico live in abject poverty which is a serious indication that the income of many individual families is not enough to cater for the basic needs such as food, clothing, shelter and basic education (U.S Census Bureau, 2007).

Although, political leaders and nonprofit organizations are doing everything possible to alleviate the poverty problem in New Mexico by educating, empowering and supporting the youths in the state, long term solutions to the poverty problem need to be determined in order to solve the poverty problem in this state once and for all. In the past, task forces have been formed to develop policies that need to be adopted and implemented by the New Mexico state government to tackle the poverty issue in the state.

According to Governor Susana Martinez, the most urgent problems that need to be addressed include ending homelessness and providing adequate food supply to many citizens that cannot feed themselves. Importantly, sanitation is also a priority because lack of clean foods and water is associated with onset of illnesses due to poverty problem (Savage, 2008). The purpose of this paper is to explore the issue of poverty in New Mexico by investigating why New Mexico is poor by exploring how the geography of the state has contributed to the poverty problem. In the second part, solutions to the poverty problems will be provided.

Causes of poverty in New Mexico

Historical/cultural geography

The state of New Mexico has an area equivalent to the size of Ohio, Pennsylvania and New York combined (Murphy, 2000). The geography of the state spans from frozen peaks to a hot desert. Among the agricultural activities in New Mexico include animal keeping and cultivation of different types of crops. A large percentage of New Mexico population lives in the urban areas while vast areas of the rural parts of the state remain sparsely inhabited (Murphy, 2000).

In the rural areas, more than 600,000 people work, live and grow different crops that supply the rest of the state with food. Despite the hard work demonstrated by the rural folks in the production of agricultural foodstuffs, they still live in abject poverty with the rate of poverty among them being double that of the national average, which is 24% (Murphy, 2000).

As a matter of fact, half of the rural population in New Mexico has limited access to food. New Mexico is home to people from different cultures such as the Native Americans,

Latino and Hispanics, African Americans and Asian Americans who claim to be the original inhabitants of the state of New Mexico (Murphy, 2000).

Native tribes in New Mexico are known for their high affinity to cultural practices and traditions which take most of their resourceful time to practice. These comprise the native tribes that have inhabited New Mexico for many years before the arrival of Europeans. Most of the native people in New Mexico live in the rural parts of the state characterized by high levels of poverty.

One of the reasons for high rates of poverty among the native tribes is individual condition. These include lack of basic education, underemployment, and other individual challenges (Hacker, 2006). Lack of basic education among the native tribes such as Mesquero Apache, Jicarilla, Navajo Nation, and the pueblos is one of the known major causes of poverty in New Mexico.

For a long time, these tribes have failed to regard education as an important investment in their children. Partly, the negative attitude towards education has been fuelled by cultural and traditional practices that do not regard education as a priority in these cultures. As a result, native people in New Mexico lag behind in almost every aspect of agricultural and economic activities. In agricultural areas occupied by these native tribes, the output is only meant for household consumption with little meant for commercial purposes. Without financial resources, the native tribes rely on agriculture for their survival thus leaving nothing for investing in the education of their children (Walker, 2013).

Underemployment is also another individual condition that causes poverty in New Mexico. The highly cultural contrast among the people in New Mexico has resulted into division of the people into two geographical segments. These include the people from the rural areas and the people from the urban areas. As stated before, the rural areas are largely inhabited by the native tribes while the urban areas are inhabited by the Hispanics and Latinos, Asian American and to some extent African Americans.

The Hispanic and Latinos as well as Asian Americans are regarded as enterprising people. These consist of groups of people largely responsible for job creation in New Mexico. However, employment priorities are accorded to the people from these two groups which mean that educated people from the native tribes and African Americans are accorded low paying jobs because of their minimal contribution to job creation.

As a result, the level of underemployment among the native tribes and African Americans in New Mexico is very high. In most cases, holders of college degrees among the native tribes and African Americans in New Mexico find it difficult to secure better paying jobs in the urban areas. The wages paid to these groups are too low to support themselves and their families (Hacker, 2006).

This explains the reason why the rural areas in New Mexico are deeply immersed in abject poverty due to few sources of income among the rural folks and the minimum wage which the educated few from the rural areas earn in urban areas. It can be construed to mean that the competing interests between historical and cultural aspect of different groups in New Mexico is therefore a cause of poverty particularly among the rural folks in New Mexico.

Other challenges

Due to the low quality of agricultural activities undertaken by the native tribes in the rural areas of New Mexico, it is impossible for financial institutions to support these tribes through financial support such as agricultural loans. In the same perspective, agricultural incentives provided to the ranchers and other large scale agricultural producers by the state government do not reach the small scale farmers located in the rural areas of New Mexico. This has made it difficult for the farmers in these regions to engage in commercial agricultural activities. The little agricultural produce by the small scale farmers from rural areas is divided between household consumption and commercial purpose which only generate enough finances for buying inputs for the next planting season. Hence, lack of agricultural incentives from the state government and lack of financial support from financial institutions comprise some additional challenges that culturally amount to contributors of poverty in New Mexico.

Insufficient infrastructure

Geographically, New Mexico is the size of Ohio, Pennsylvania and New York combined covering an approximate area of 1231 670 square miles (Murphy, 2000). Statistics have shown that New Mexico is the most sparsely populated state in the United States. The largest concentration of the population is located in Monzano town in Torrance County. Interestingly, the economy of New Mexico is based mainly on cattle farming, dairy products, and food processing. Other economic activities include coal and petroleum mining and exploration, stone and clay mining and some formal economic activities such as publishing, printing, electric equipment and glass selling (Murphy, 2000). Notably, most of these activities are undertaken in the rural areas of New Mexico where infrastructure is poor.

The complete disconnect in infrastructural development between the rural and urban geographical areas in New Mexico are therefore a major cause of poverty in the state because farmers are unable to transport their agricultural products such as dairy products to the market. Being a vast state in terms of distance from one place to the other, only the farmers located in close proximity to the towns are able to deliver their products to the market.

The rest rely on middlemen and women who buy agricultural produce cheaply from the farmers and sell them at high prices in the market. Hence, the geographical vastness of New Mexico State is another major contribution of poverty in New Mexico because it contributes to unequal infrastructural development leading to rural areas being landlocked.

Lack of water for irrigation

From the geographical point of view, New Mexico has an approximate water surface area of 245 square miles out of the total land area of more than 120,000 square miles (Murphy, 2000). It means that the rest of the land mass in New Mexico does not have water resource which can be used for irrigation. From an industrial perspective, industries are mainly located in areas sufficiently supplied with water which means that only a few industries such as food processing industries are possible to establish in New Mexico because these industries are located near the farmers. The vast land mass in New Mexico remains idle due to the inadequate water supply making it difficult for young and able-bodied people to engage in constructive economic activities.

A part from geographical as well as historical and cultural factors that cause poverty in New Mexico, other causes of poverty in New Mexico include;

Single-parents families

New Mexico has one of the highest cases of single-parent families in the United States. Single families are caused by a number of factors such as increased teenage pregnancies which transform young girls into mothers (Bassuk *et al.* 2011). These young women grow into mature women as single parents which make them bear the burden of bringing up their children as single parents. In addition, poor health services particularly among the rural native tribes result to unnecessary deaths of both men and women which also cause single parenthood in New Mexico. The vast nature of the state of New Mexico makes it difficult for the native tribes located in the remotest places to access healthcare services which also contribute largely to deaths caused by illnesses. All these result to single families which eventually become a burden. This cycle is repeated over different generations making poverty and common issue among the native tribes of New Mexico (Bassuk *et al.* 2011).

The problem of Drug abuse

This is another major cause of poverty in New Mexico. Notably, New Mexico shares the same international border with Mexico (Murphy, 2000). Mexico is one of the known countries where numerous cartels involved in drug smuggling operate. Most of these drugs find way into New Mexico where they are largely consumed by the young able bodied men and women both in rural and urban areas.

Consumption of hard drugs such as cocaine and marijuana has been associated with increased dependency of young people to their families instead of contributing towards the improvement of the economic status of their families. The problem of drug abuse which is

rampart in New Mexico can be attributed to the geographical location of the state where it shares an international border with Mexico.

Inequitable income distribution

As mentioned above, more jobs are created in urban areas than in rural areas. The cultural disconnect between the natives and other cultural groups such as the Hispanics and Latinos, Asian Americans and African Americans are portrayed in job distribution in New Mexico. This increases the gap between the highly paid and the low paid workers that yields to unequal income distribution (Murphy, 2000). In this regard, inequitable income distribution is a major contributor of poverty in New Mexico because it makes some segments of the population poorer while other segments become rich.

Reducing poverty in New Mexico

From the preceding sections, it is clear that the causes of poverty in New Mexico are varied. In the same perspective, the problem of poverty in New Mexico can be solved through varied methods as discussed below;

Opening up rural areas through infrastructural development

It is evident that the rural areas inhabited by the native tribes and the urban areas inhabited by other cultural groups such as Hispanics and Latinos, Asian Americans and African Americans are disconnected by poor infrastructural development which make it difficult for the rural folks to reach the market with their agricultural products (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007). The state government should invest heavily in infrastructural development such as road and rail transport in order to open up the rural areas to the markets. This will not only enhance the

movement of goods from the farms to the market but it will also enhance cultural interaction between native tribes and the rest of the cultural groups (Adams & Pearlle Strother-Adams, 2001).

Empowering the rural native tribes with educational opportunities

The success of agricultural and other economic activities in New Mexico is highly dependent on the level of education for both the native tribes and other cultural groups in New Mexico. In this regard, the state government should invest heavily in education and open more public schools in rural areas so as to increase the enrolment of children in schools and eliminate the negative culture that regards education as unimportant investment (Adams & Pearlle Strother-Adams, 2001). Empowering the citizens particularly the rural native tribes through education will enhance and improve the quality of agricultural and other economic activities undertaken by every citizen in New Mexico.

Deal with the problem of drug abuse

As stated above, the citizens of New Mexico have fallen prey of drug abuse problem due to the close proximity of New Mexico to the Mexican country. This has continued to rob the state of New Mexico an important resource in manpower because young energetic and able bodied citizens are deeply immersed to the drug abuse problem. Although this can be associated with the hopelessness nature that many young people find themselves, the government should establish rehabilitation centers in rural and urban areas so as to help the young people caught up in drug related problems transform from being a burden to the state into important resources of

production (Zweig, 2004). Hence, increased government intervention is required to alleviate the drug abuse problem by sealing the loopholes through which the hard drugs enter the state.

Maximum utilization of available resources

New Mexico boasts of numerous resources such as dairy products, agricultural products and other minerals. These are important drivers of the economy which must be maximally utilized to ensure that they benefit both the native tribes and people from other cultural groups. Income generated from these resources should be used to develop both the rural and the urban areas especially setting up mineral and dairy processing plants in the rural areas so as to create employment in these areas.

Manual jobs should be allocated to the less educated rural folks while the official jobs that require technical expertise should be allocated both to the educated folks in rural and urban areas. Such blending of people from different cultural groups will help break away from negative stereotypes that affect the relations between different cultural groups in New Mexico and advance the economic activities of the state. Maximum utilization of the available resources would also help greatly in decreasing the income distribution gap between the rural and the urban populations.

Introducing the back to school principle targeting teenage mothers

The problem of single parenthood is associated with increased cases of teenage mothers who abscond their studies for purpose of taking care of their children. However, once they get well, these teenage mothers find it hard to be integrated back to the education system for different reasons (Dáil, 2012). Most of them give up the hope of continuing with education

which makes them burdens to their families. The state government should institute proper and effective measures to ensure that young girls that get pregnant early in life are taken back to school to prepare and empower them to be resourceful in the society in future.

In conclusion, it is evident from the above sections that various reasons contribute to the rising levels of poverty in New Mexico. These reasons range from historical/cultural factors to geographical factors. Nevertheless, the problem of poverty in New Mexico can also be solved by undertaking key and effective measures to that range from provision of quality education and making education accessible to all as well as improving agricultural activities in order to empower the rural native tribes economically.

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