

## **Poverty Alleviation Strategies for Underrepresented Populations in Sub-Saharan Africa: Insights from Theories of Poverty**

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### **Abstract**

*Poverty remains a pressing issue in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), particularly among underrepresented populations. This review study examines poverty alleviation strategies for underrepresented populations in SSA. Existing literature often focused on poverty reduction strategies in general, without adequately considering the unique needs and circumstances of underrepresented populations. Underrepresented populations in SSA are characterized by individuals and communities who face multiple forms of discrimination and disadvantage; women and girls, ethnic and religious minorities, indigenous communities, people with disabilities, and rural populations, and these groups often experience limited access to education, healthcare, employment opportunities, and political participation; placing them at a higher risk of poverty and social exclusion. Several theoretical frameworks provide valuable insights into poverty alleviation strategies for underrepresented populations in SSA. The study discusses key theories of poverty, being, the human capital theory, capability approach theory, structural violence theory, and the intersectionality theory. Poverty eradication, as drawn from theories of poverty, calls for a comprehensive approach that take into account effect of corruption*

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*and political will. Based on the review, the study emphasises on adopting strategies rooted in theories of poverty, that include; empowerment, rule of law, social inclusion, and bottom-up approaches by policymakers to overcome the challenges faced by marginalized communities. Effectively dealing with corruption at all levels, enhancing political will, and promoting inclusive development, SSA can work towards reducing poverty, achieving sustainable growth, and ensuring a brighter future for all its citizens. The study further recommends that; through addressing the unique challenges faced by the marginalized groups and tailoring interventions to their specific needs, poverty alleviation strategies can be more inclusive and effective.*

**Keywords:** *Corruption, Governance, Politics, Poverty, SSA, Underrepresented Population*

**JEL Codes:** *D63, D73, E64, H53, I32, I38, J14, J15, J16, N37, P46.*

## **1. Introduction**

Poverty remains a persistent challenge in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), particularly among underrepresented populations who face additional barriers and marginalization. The conditions remain since Yahie (2000) and Chimhowu (2010) indicated that most nations in SSA are faced with serious and worsening poverty. Mahuni, Taru & Bonga (2020) also narrated that the burden of poverty weighs heavily on the shoulders of the inhabitants of the African continent at a time when other nations have advanced tremendously. SSA is home to the world's poorest, with more than half of the population living on around US\$1.90 a day (Jongwe, 2023). Over the past three decades, there have been world efforts to try to fulfil the "dream of a world free of poverty". Bretton-Woods Institutions in 1999 launched the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) initiative. The United Nations Millennium Declaration was signed in September 2000, obligating world leaders to combat poverty, hunger, disease, illiteracy, environmental degradation, and discrimination against women. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) strongly applied to developing countries. 2015 was the set date to attain set objectives by nations.

One other target was halving extreme poverty rates. In September 2015 a historic UN Summit came up with 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which are universal. They came into force in 2016. The SDGs form the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Goal number one is to eliminate poverty in all its forms. All these efforts have been aimed at eliminating poverty, yet poverty remains in existence, with some parts of the world reaching extreme levels.

As indicated by Gupta, Davoodi & Alonso-Terme (2002), high and rising corruption can be one of the reasons for increase in income inequality and poverty. Corruption significantly impedes poverty alleviation efforts by diverting resources away from intended beneficiaries. According to Transparency International, the SSA region in 2023 had a corruption perception index average score of 32 out of 100. The score indicates high levels of corruption. Seychelles (70), Botswana (60), and Cape Verde (60) were the least corrupt in the region. Human rights groups and scholars in SSA say that corruption is a human rights violation, denying the poor in the region access to basic services like healthcare, education, electricity, clean water, and sanitation facilities (Jongwe, 2023). Corruption undermines the provision of essential services, exacerbates social inequality, and perpetuates the cycle of poverty. Additionally, the lack of political will poses a major obstacle to effective poverty reduction. Without the commitment from governments and policymakers to prioritize the needs of underrepresented populations, poverty alleviation efforts are likely to fall short. Despite the importance of addressing corruption and political will in poverty alleviation, there is a knowledge gap regarding the specific challenges faced by underrepresented populations in SSA. Existing literature often focuses on poverty reduction strategies in general, without adequately considering the unique needs and circumstances of marginalized communities. Therefore, there is a need for more research that explores the intersectionality of poverty, corruption, and political will within underrepresented populations. By examining the intersection of poverty, underrepresentation, and theoretical frameworks, we can gain valuable insights into effective approaches and interventions to address this pressing issue.

Underrepresented groups, such as women, ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, indigenous communities, and marginalised groups often experience limited access to resources, opportunities, and services, exacerbating their poverty levels. Underrepresented populations face unique challenges in terms of poverty and access to

resources in SSA. Van der Nest (2023) confirms that females in SSA are underrepresented in formal employment and ownership of firms. Corruption and the lack of political will further exacerbate their marginalized status, hindering poverty alleviation efforts. In support, Latif and El-Gamal (2024) believe that institutional failures aggravate feelings of exclusion where some people or groups are systematically denied rights, opportunities, or resources that may be available to other segments of the population. Further restrictive cultural practices, discriminatory laws, and highly segmented labour markets impact the marginalised groups. Such exclusions in many SSA states invite conflict by undermining the principles of fairness and inclusivity vital for sustainable development. This study aims to shed light on effective poverty alleviation strategies for underrepresented populations, considering the influence of corruption, political will, and insights from theories of poverty. The study takes note of the African Union 2063 Agenda. The 2063 Agenda is aimed at "An integrated, prosperous and peaceful Africa, an Africa driven and managed by its citizens and representing a dynamic force in the international arena."

The paper is structured in six sections. The introduction is followed by a brief discussion of underrepresented populations in SSA. Next, the paper examines theoretical perspectives on poverty alleviation in the region. The subsequent section delves into the tripartite causes of poverty in SSA. Building on this analysis, the paper then provides recommendations grounded in theories of poverty. Finally, the conclusion section summarizes the key findings and implications.

## **2. Underrepresented Populations in Sub-Saharan Africa**

Underrepresented populations in SSA are characterized by individuals and communities who face multiple forms of discrimination and disadvantage. This includes women and girls, ethnic and religious minorities, indigenous communities, people with disabilities, and rural populations. These groups often experience limited access to education, healthcare, employment, and political participation, placing them at a higher risk of poverty and social exclusion. Recognizing their unique challenges is crucial for developing targeted poverty alleviation strategies. As indicated by Yahie (2015), there is

a range of civil society organisations whose participation is essential to address appropriately the challenge of poverty reduction. Private sector firms, non-governmental organisations, and community-based organizations, have a role to play in promoting welfare which was traditionally expected from the state. This is particularly warranted as African governments are confronted with shrinking resources.

## **2.1 Women and Girls**

According to the World Bank (2019), women and girls in Africa are disproportionately affected by poverty. According to the 2030 Agenda, there can be no sustainable development without gender equality. Women and girls face numerous challenges, including limited access to education, healthcare, economic opportunities, and decision-making power, which contribute to the persistent gender poverty gap. Women are less included in the formal financial sector than men, especially in developing economies (Bonga & Mlambo, 2016), yet women are the primary financial managers in most families, saving to invest in and protect their families and their children's future (Dhliwayo, 2014). The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (2019) reports that women make up the majority of the poor in sub-Saharan Africa, with poverty rates among women and girls often higher than those among men and boys. Women are vulnerable to extreme poverty. Wanjala (2021) indicates that women face greater burdens of unpaid work, possess fewer assets and productive resources, and earn less than men. Furthermore, the majority of women work in lower-average-income sectors, and some are engaged in part-time work. There is greater need to seek long-lasting solutions to poverty among women and girls in SSA. According to UN Women (2020), the number of women and girls living in extremely poor households in the SSA region is expected to increase from 249 million to 283 million between 2021 and 2030.

## **2.2 Ethnic and Religious Minorities**

SSA is home to a diverse range of religious and cultural practices. The majority of the population in the region adheres to various forms of Christianity and Islam; however,

there exist significant populations practicing indigenous religions, Hinduism, Buddhism, and other faiths. Religious minorities in SSA include groups that adhere to non-dominant religions or have distinct religious beliefs within the larger religious landscape of the region. Some countries have small Jewish communities, particularly in countries like South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Uganda. The Bahá'í faith is a relatively small religious community in SSA, with followers in many countries across the region. There are Hindu communities in countries such as Mauritius, South Africa, and Madagascar. Buddhist communities can be found in a few countries in SSA, including South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Tanzania.

SSA is a diverse region with numerous ethnic groups, each with its own distinct languages, cultures, and traditions. Common are Pygmies, San, Twa, and Nubians. Pygmies are indigenous groups found in several countries in Central Africa, including the Democratic Republic of Congo, Cameroon, and Gabon. They have distinct cultural practices and often face marginalization and challenges in accessing resources and opportunities. The San people, also known as Bushmen, are indigenous groups residing in southern Africa, including Botswana, Namibia, and South Africa. They have a unique hunter-gatherer lifestyle and face social, economic, and political challenges. The Twa people are another indigenous group found in the Great Lakes region of Central Africa, including Rwanda, Burundi, and parts of the Democratic Republic of Congo. They often face discrimination and marginalization. Nubians are an ethnic group found in countries such as Kenya, Uganda, and Sudan. They have their own distinct cultural practices and are considered minorities in some regions.

### **2.3 People with disabilities**

Broadly defined by Montes & Swindle (2021) disability refers to any impairment, mental or physical, that deters or prevents a person from carrying out an activity. Approximately one billion people worldwide live with disabilities and about 80 percent of them in developing countries (World Bank, 2024). In support, the World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that around 15% of the global population lives with a disability, and a significant proportion of people with disabilities live in low- and middle-income

countries, including those in Sub-Saharan Africa. Children with disabilities make up around 150 million of the billion people with disabilities in the world, and SSA countries have a large number of those who have restricted access to healthcare and rehabilitation care (Adugna et al, 2020). To shed more light, as indicated by Moyo (2023), about 1.4 million people have some form of disability in Zimbabwe, the 2018 Population and Housing Census found that 1,734,250 persons have disabilities in Malawi, approximately three million people are living with disabilities in Kenya, Zambia, Uganda, and Botswana has an estimated 15 percent, 12 percent and 4.5 percent of their population living with disabilities respectively. It is widely recognized that individuals with disabilities are more likely to experience poverty and face additional barriers to accessing education, healthcare, employment, and other essential services. According to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, people with disabilities are more likely to experience poverty due to factors such as discrimination, limited access to inclusive services, and exclusion from social and economic opportunities. Further facts gathered as indicated by World Bank (2024) show that; (1) disability rates are higher in rural areas; (2) women experience higher rates of disability than men; (3) older people report more disabilities; (4) persons with disabilities have a lower level of educational attainment; and (5) participating in the labour force is a challenge for persons with disabilities. The observed facts highlight the significance of supporting high-quality education for children with disabilities, boosting human capital investment in girls, and fixing health systems for old people.

#### **2.4 Indigenous Communities**

It is recognized that indigenous communities often face higher poverty rates and socio-economic challenges compared to the general population in many regions worldwide. SSA has many indigenous communities. Indigenous communities often experience historical marginalization, discrimination, and limited access to basic services and resources, contributing to their vulnerability to poverty. Common indigenous communities are the San, Pygmies, Maasai and Himba. The San people, also known as Bushmen, are indigenous hunter-gatherer communities found in southern Africa, including countries such as Botswana, Namibia, South Africa, and Angola. They have a

deep connection to the land and possess rich cultural knowledge and practices. Pygmies are indigenous groups primarily residing in the Central African rainforest regions, including DRC, Cameroon, Gabon, and the Republic of Congo. They are known for their unique forest-based livelihoods and close relationship with the natural environment. The Maasai people are indigenous pastoralist communities found in multiple countries in East Africa, including Kenya and Tanzania. They have distinctive cultural traditions, such as cattle herding and vibrant artistic expressions. The Himba people are indigenous semi-nomadic pastoralists residing in the Kunene region of Namibia and parts of Angola. They are known for their distinctive appearance, intricate hairstyles, and their close connection with the land.

## **2.5 Rural Population**

Rural areas in Africa make up a large proportion of the continent. In 2015, an estimated 62 % of people in SSA were living in rural areas (Saladin, 2018). According to Macrotrends (2024), SSA rural population for 2022 was 698,021,184, a 1.59% increase from 2021. The rural population in Sub-Saharan Africa tends to experience higher poverty rates compared to the urban population. Limited access to basic services, inadequate infrastructure, and lower levels of economic opportunities are some of the factors contributing to rural poverty in the region. Rapid urbanisation is occurring in many SSA countries, but the trend varies across countries. South Africa has a relatively high level of urbanisation in the region. Nigeria has experienced a significant increase in urbanisation from 17% in 1960 to over 50% in 2020. Ethiopia, Chad and Uganda have a relatively low level of urbanisation, with urban populations of 21%, 24% and 25% in 2020, respectively (World Bank, 2022). Urbanisation is traditionally connected with positive economic outcomes, such as increased income and growth. Sakketa (2023) indicate that integrating urban and rural areas can enhance productivity, growth, and living standards. However, another class of literature argues that urbanisation has not led to economic development or national economic growth, thereby referring such as “urbanisation without growth” (Jedwab & Vollrath, 2015).



## **2.6 Marginalised groups**

Marginalised groups is a broad term, it cover the already discussed categories. Marginalized groups in the SSA region, such as ethnic minorities, religious minorities, indigenous communities, and people with disabilities, often experience higher poverty rates and face additional barriers to accessing resources and opportunities. According to the World Bank (2024), poverty rates in Sub-Saharan Africa remain high, and certain groups are particularly vulnerable. Ochi (2023) narrates that poverty in SSA has not only spread, but also worsened compared with the rest of the world. The African Development Bank highlights that inequalities persist, with marginalized populations often excluded from economic progress and development initiatives. Inequality, especially in income and gender, indirectly compromises the fight against global poverty.

## **3. Theoretical Perspectives on Poverty Alleviation**

Several theoretical frameworks provide valuable insights into poverty alleviation strategies for underrepresented populations in SSA. This section will discuss key theories of poverty, being, the human capital theory, capability approach theory, structural violence theory, and the intersectionality theory.

### **3.1 Human Capital Theory**

Human capital theory emphasizes the role of education, skills development, and health in poverty reduction. Accordingly, Wilfred & Mbonigaba (2019) narrate that evidence in SSA suggests that poor human capital formation and low productivity levels area result of little progress made in raising the levels of education in general. SDG number four (SDG-4) strongly stresses quality education, which is fundamental to human capital development. Investing in quality education and training programs targeted at underrepresented populations can enhance their employability, income potential, and overall well-being. In support, Bonga (2024) echoes that investing in quality education and skills development programs is important for individuals living in poverty. This theory underscores the importance of providing equal access to education and skills

development opportunities to address poverty among marginalized groups. In support, Bazie, Thiombiano & Maiga (2023) provide that the efficacy of governments in fighting corruption is necessary for human capital accumulation in SSA countries.

### **3.2 Capability Approach**

The capability approach, developed by Amartya Sen, focuses on enhancing individuals' capabilities and freedoms to live a life they value. Poverty alleviation strategies informed by this perspective prioritize expanding opportunities and removing barriers that hinder underrepresented populations from exercising their capabilities. This may involve interventions that address gender inequalities, promote inclusive governance, and ensure access to basic services. According to Bonga (2024), SSA nations considering the capability approach are tipped to seek an understanding of the sources and nature of capability deprivation and inequity as they are keys to removing existing injustice in society, as well as re-establishing ethics to be at the centre of policy discussions. For empowering deprived or marginalized groups, Guambe, Ige & Tshabalala (2017) suggest the participatory model as an ideal instrument for ascertaining the needs of all persons within a community. For example, cooperatives have the potential to empower disabled people, and this is realised through a democratic operation. Members of any group, once experienced elevated capabilities, should equally participate in the daily business and inclusion of others in decision-making processes. This can give everyone a sense of belonging and worth in society.

### **3.3 Structural Violence Theory**

The theory of structural violence highlights how social, economic, and political structures perpetuate poverty and disadvantage. Lee (2019) defined structural violence as a form of violence wherein social structures or social institutions harm people by inhibiting them from meeting their basic needs. Jorondrazana (2021) added that structural violence is a tyrannical framework that manoeuvres through powerful associations, organizations, and institutions that warrant privilege amongst its front-runners, prioritization of their political

agenda, and enforcement of their methods and ideologies. Poverty alleviation strategies informed by structural violence theory seek to address systemic inequalities and power imbalances that marginalize underrepresented populations. Unequal power differentials in countries are used to create more unequal structures. As indicated by Stiles (2011) power imbalances indirectly result in injury to others through exclusion and exploitation. Strategies may involve advocating for policy reforms, addressing discriminatory practices, and promoting social justice to create a more equitable society.

### **3.4 Intersectionality Theory**

The term was coined in 1989 by Kimberlé Crenshaw to describe how race, class, gender, and other individual characteristics “intersect” with one another and overlap (Coaston, 2019). Intersectionality theory emphasizes that individuals do experience multiple forms of disadvantage simultaneously, shaped by intersecting factors such as gender, race, class, and disability. According to Bauer et al (2021) human experience cannot be adequately understood by considering social positions independently but believed to be jointly shaped by multiple social positions. Poverty alleviation strategies informed by this theory recognize the unique challenges underrepresented populations face and tailor interventions to address their specific needs. This includes recognizing the different experiences of women within ethnic minority communities or the barriers faced by disabled individuals in accessing services and opportunities.

## **4. The Tripartite causes of poverty in Sub-Saharan Africa**

The persistence of poverty in SSA is a multifaceted phenomenon, with underrepresented populations bearing a disproportionate burden. Central to this complex issue are three interconnected causal factors. Firstly, pervasive corruption within governmental and economic systems serves to concentrate wealth and resources among the elite, marginalizing the poor. Secondly, a dearth of political will among leadership to implement meaningful reforms and social safety nets exacerbates existing disparities. Finally, deep-seated structural inequalities rooted in colonial legacies and neo-colonial

economic policies continue to impede socioeconomic progress for the region's most vulnerable communities. Addressing this triad of drivers is crucial to effecting sustainable poverty alleviation in SSA.

#### **4.1 Corruption**

Neopatrimonialism has dominated many African states, though at varying degrees, and it is directly linked to corruption and damage to the long-term culture of democracy (Bonga, 2021). Corruption acts as a significant barrier to poverty alleviation efforts by diverting resources away from essential services and programs intended to uplift marginalized communities (Transparency International, 2023). The pervasive nature of corruption is evident in the region's high Corruption Perception Index (CPI), reflecting the extent to which public trust in institutions is undermined.

While examining 60 situations in 17 African countries where corruption accusations arose around oil, gas, or mining sector transactions since 2005, Gillies (2020) reveals that both public and private sector actors engage in illicit tactics to capitalize on the surge in resource rents. For example, companies took significant risks to secure deals with government decision-makers, while officials devised innovative methods to benefit themselves and their allies. The cases featured a diverse range of players, including fixers, national oil companies, and offshore shell companies.

A study by Njangang et al. (2024) sheds light on the detrimental effects of corruption, particularly at the executive and legislative levels, on hunger in Africa. Through an examination of panel data from 45 African countries, it is revealed that higher levels of corruption are associated with increased levels of hunger, with executive corruption exerting the most significant impact, followed by legislative corruption. Interestingly, the paper also identifies a mitigating effect of the distribution of political power among social groups, suggesting that countries with more equitable power structures experience reduced vulnerability to corruption-induced hunger.

## **4.2 Political will**

The absence of political will and governance shortcomings hinder effective poverty reduction initiatives, as governments prioritize elite interests over the needs of underrepresented populations (Gupta et al., 2002). This lack of commitment to addressing systemic issues exacerbates socio-economic disparities and perpetuates cycles of poverty. According to Gupta et al. (2002), despite international commitments to poverty reduction, some governments in SSA demonstrate a lack of political will to address the root causes of poverty. In support, Bonga (2021) narrates that the probable reason may be that existing political rulers may never criticise their actions, as it comes from their inside agenda. This is evident in the prioritization of short-term political gains over long-term development strategies that benefit marginalized communities. Botswana's Trade and Industry Deputy Permanent Secretary, Lesedi Kgotlele, said in closing the 29th Meeting of the Intergovernmental Committee of Senior Officials and Experts of Southern Africa (ICSOE), a statutory meeting of the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), "There is need to optimize political will to face and directly confront the actual root causes of socio-economic challenges in the region to conquer the poverty, inequality, unemployment and all the associated vulnerabilities that plague the continent."

## **4.3 Structural Inequalities**

Structural inequalities further compound the challenges faced by underrepresented groups, including women, ethnic minorities, indigenous communities, people with disabilities, and rural populations. These groups encounter systemic barriers to accessing education, healthcare, employment, and political participation, exacerbating their vulnerability to poverty (Razzaque, Ehsan & Bhuiyan, 2019). Historical marginalization, discriminatory practices, and limited resource allocation contribute to the persistence of structural inequalities, which perpetuate cycles of poverty across generations.

## **5. Recommendations from Theories of Poverty**

A clear definition of poverty is vital to identifying the causes of poverty, measuring its extent, and assessing progress towards its eradication (Ayoo, 2022). Drawing from theoretical perspectives discussed earlier, several poverty alleviation strategies can effectively address the needs of underrepresented populations in SSA. These are highlighted below:

- **Education and skills development:** Investing in quality education, vocational training, and lifelong learning opportunities for underrepresented populations can enhance their employability, income potential, and social mobility.
- **Access to financial services and microfinance:** Promoting access to financial services, such as microfinance, can empower underrepresented populations to start and expand their businesses, build assets, and improve their economic conditions.
- **Empowerment and capacity building:** Implementing interventions that empower underrepresented populations through leadership training, entrepreneurship support, and community mobilization can enhance their voice, agency, and participation in decision-making processes.
- **Social protection programs:** Designing and implementing social protection programs, such as conditional cash transfers or targeted subsidies, can provide a safety net for underrepresented populations, ensuring their basic needs are met and reducing their vulnerability to shocks and crises.
- **Gender mainstreaming and women's empowerment:** Integrating gender perspectives into poverty alleviation strategies is essential to address the specific challenges faced by women and girls. This involves promoting gender equality, addressing discriminatory norms, and ensuring access to reproductive health services, education, and economic opportunities.
- **Community-based approaches and participatory development (Bottom-up approaches):** Adopting community-based approaches that involve underrepresented populations in the design, implementation, evaluation and monitoring of poverty alleviation programs can enhance their ownership, sustainability, and effectiveness. This participatory approach ensures that interventions are tailored to the specific

needs and aspirations of these communities, improving their effectiveness and sustainability.

- **Empowerment and agency:** Adopt an empowerment-focused approach that enhances the agency of underrepresented populations. This can be achieved by providing access to quality education, skills training, and entrepreneurship programs. Empowering individuals enables them to participate actively in decision-making processes, break free from poverty traps, and build sustainable livelihoods.
- **Rule of law and accountability:** Strengthen institutions and promote the rule of law to combat corruption effectively. Implement transparent and accountable governance structures that ensure the equitable distribution of resources and prioritize the needs of underrepresented populations. Strengthening anti-corruption measures and promoting transparency in public administration can help curb corruption and ensure resources reach their intended recipients.
- **Social inclusion and representation:** Foster social inclusion by promoting diversity and representation within political systems. Encourage the participation and representation of underrepresented populations in decision-making processes at all levels. This can be achieved through affirmative action policies, quota systems, and targeted support for political and civic engagement.

## **6. Conclusion**

Addressing poverty among underrepresented populations in SSA requires a comprehensive approach considering the impact of corruption and political will. By adopting strategies rooted in theories of poverty, such as empowerment, rule of law, social inclusion, and bottom-up approaches, policymakers can overcome the challenges faced by marginalized communities. By addressing corruption, enhancing political will, and promoting inclusive development, SSA can work towards reducing poverty, achieving sustainable growth, and ensuring a brighter future for all its citizens. By addressing the unique challenges these marginalized groups face, and tailoring interventions to their specific needs, poverty alleviation strategies can be more inclusive and effective. Policymakers, development practitioners, and researchers must work

collaboratively to implement and evaluate these strategies, ensuring that no one is left behind in pursuing sustainable development and poverty eradication in the region.

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