

What manner of cheap deaths?

By John Mayaki

Every day in Nigeria, lives are being lost in ways that should shame the conscience of any nation. People die in road accidents that could have been prevented, from treatable illnesses, from the scourge of armed robbery and kidnappings. As if this catalogue of tragedies were not enough, a new and heartbreaking dimension has emerged: deaths from stampedes during the distribution of palliatives by generous individuals and organizations. This is the ultimate betrayal of a society's promise to its people; a grim reflection of the endemic poverty and systemic failure we face from family units, communities, local government areas and state levels. Take the tragedy in Ibadan, where over 37 people lost their lives during the sharing of a meager N5,000 for 5,000 indigent citizens. Similar stories have emerged from Abuja, where 10 people died at a Catholic Church in Maitama and in Okija, Anambra State, where 20 more perished while scrambling for relief items. Sadly, these individuals died not because of natural disasters or conflicts, but because they dared to hope for survival in a society that has left them behind. As George Orwell once wrote in *How the Poor Die*, "The thought of unnecessary suffering is a far more terrible thing than the suffering itself." This is not just a Nigerian problem.

As Amartya Sen argues in *Development as Freedom*, poverty is more than the absence of income; it is the denial of basic freedoms, such as the ability to live with dignity and security. When people must risk their lives for palliatives, it speaks volumes about the depth of their desperation and the failure of our systems to meet even their most basic needs. While not lamenting this for too long, let me quickly suggest an action plan which is farming as our liberation. So, what can we do? My solution has always been simple: let us return to farming. As Gandhi envisioned in *India of My Dreams*, rural empowerment and self-reliance can restore dignity and security to our people. We cannot die from farming. I don't think so. Or you think the amount of people who died recently from these stampede would have died if we all farm? We cannot die from farming, if the government does its part to protect us from marauders and bandits. This is not an impossible task. Local governments, villages, and even urban centers can implement strategies to ensure safety while encouraging agricultural productivity. Why can't we transform our underutilized forests into productive farmlands? Why not depopulate our overcrowded cities by encouraging migration back to rural areas, where farming opportunities abound? Even urban farming, as seen in cities like Singapore and Havana, can be a game changer. Imagine rooftop gardens, backyard vegetable patches, and community farms flourishing in Lagos, Abuja, or Benin City. Countries like Rwanda have shown us the power of prioritizing agriculture and protecting smallholder farmers. Singapore's urban farming initiatives and Cuba's resilience during economic crises prove

that farming can thrive even in unconventional spaces. I simply think that Nigeria can replicate these successes.

It is not too much to ask that every family own a small farm, growing enough to feed themselves and contribute to local markets. This is a practical way to address the food shortages and poverty staring us in the face. But here's the real tragedy: Mike Davis, in *Planet of Slums*, warns of the consequences of neglecting rural development and allowing cities to swell with desperate, underserved populations. In Nigeria, the overcrowding of urban centers has created a dangerous imbalance, where opportunities are scarce, and survival becomes a daily struggle. Barbara Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dimed* reminds us that systemic inequalities reduce people to mere statistics, their suffering seen as inevitable rather than a failure of leadership. What is most heartbreaking about these stampede deaths is the irony: people are dying because they want to live. They are not just scrambling for palliatives; they are scrambling for hope, for a future. As Chinua Achebe lamented in *The Trouble with Nigeria*, "The trouble is simply and squarely a failure of leadership." Our leaders must recognize that palliatives are not solutions; they are bandages on deep, festering wounds. We need policies that empower people, not temporary handouts that fuel desperation. A nation cannot thrive when its people are reduced to scavengers in their own land.



What are we doing with our budgets? From the federal government's ministry of agriculture with no single land for farming to state governments who budgets billions of money for agriculture to the local government areas across the country? I think we need to start reimagining our societies, our states and our country. Let these tragedies serve as a wake – up call. We must reimagine Nigeria as a nation where dignity, not desperation, defines our existence. This is not a utopian dream but a necessity. If we fail to act now, the cycle of cheap deaths will continue, and our collective humanity will erode further. The solutions are clear: prioritize agriculture, protect farmers, and invest in systems that empower rather than diminish. As Thomas Pogge reminds us in *World Poverty and Human Rights*, "The fact that millions of avoidable deaths occur year after year is no accident; it is the result of choices made by those in power." We can make better choices. We must make better choices. Because no one should have to die in the name of survival – as in, attempting to survive to die. My heartfelt sympathies go out to the families and loved ones who have lost their lives in these tragic incidents. May their souls rest in peace, and may these needless losses compel us as a society to address the root causes of such desperation.