

POVERTY AND INEQUALITY: THE CHALLENGES TO SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA**Rasaki Stephen Dauda^{1*} & Olusola Joel Oyeleke¹**¹Department of Economics, Redeemer's University, Ede, Osun State

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Abstract

Nigeria is positioned 160th out of 205 countries in the 2020 sustainable development index, having scored 49.28. The nation ranked 159th out of 185 countries surveyed in 2019. Several factors are responsible for such poor performance. However, the role of poverty and inequality cannot be explained away. High poverty and inequality in their various forms constitute drags on sustainable development because development has always been a problem in an unequal and poverty-driven society. This study examines poverty and inequality as major challenges to the attainment of sustainable development in Nigeria, using stylized facts and review of related literature. It argues that the current state of poverty and inequality in Nigeria is capable of preventing sustainable development. It is therefore recommended that reducing poverty and various forms of inequalities through the appropriate policy measures will enhance sustainable development in the country. Such policies should include investment in health and education, with priority given to the girl-child education. There should be genuine commitment to fighting corruption in the public and private sectors. The economy should be diversified away from primary-product dominated one to industrial and services economy. Women should also be given free chance to participate in politics and labour market while the practice of street begging (almajiri) by children and young persons in certain part of the country should be prohibited.

Keywords: Poverty, Inequality, Sustainable Development, Nigeria.**JEL Classifications:** I14, I15, I24, I25, I32, Q01.**Introduction**

At the expiration of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2015, a new agenda for sustainable development was launched. The agenda contains seventeen (17) global sustainable development goals (SDGs) with 2030 as the target year. Prominent among the goals are two that are relevant to this study. They are: goal 1 (to end poverty in all its forms), and goal 10 (reducing inequality within and among countries).¹

Since the launch of the goals, nations across the globe have embarked on policies and programmes that are aimed at achieving them, even before the target year. Most countries in Europe, North America, Asia, and some part of Africa (North Africa to be précised) currently, have recorded tremendous progress in the attainment of the goals, as reported in the 2020 SDG indices and ranking (see Sachs, Schmidt-Traub, Kroll, Lafortune, Fuller & Woelm, 2020). However, a good number of African countries appear to be slacking in making appreciable progress as revealed by the indices and ranking. Goals 1 and 10 are among the foremost development challenges already confronting some countries in the continent (NguyenHuu & Schwiebert, 2019;

¹ Although the concept of poverty does not lend itself to one definition, Cahyat, Gonner & Haug (2007, 2) as cited in Dauda (2017) however, defines it as a situation whereby an individual or household finds it difficult to fulfil basic needs, 'lacks opportunities provided by an enabling environment to sustainably improve its wellbeing or is vulnerable to losing its current standard of living.' Definition and measurement of poverty are considered from multidimensional absolute, relative, subjective and social exclusion perspectives (Dauda, 2021). Similarly, inequality reflects in income (income inequality), gender (gender inequality), region (regional inequality), between urban and rural areas (urban and rural inequalities), etc. Thus, the term is viewed as a dispersion of a given distribution whether in terms of income, consumption, or some other indicators or attributes of welfare (Osahon & Osarobo, 2011).

and Seery, Okanda & Lawson, 2019). As indicated in the 2030 agenda for sustainable development, poverty eradication “in all its forms and dimensions, including extreme poverty, is the greatest global challenge and an indispensable requirement for sustainable development” (United Nations, 2015).

Goals 1 and 10 of the SDGs in themselves constitute grave challenges to the attainment of sustainable development in Nigeria. In fact, the case of the country seems worrisome with its recent pronouncement as the poverty headquarters of the world, in which about 44.2% (86.9 million) and 47.7% (93.7 million) of her population were said to be living on less than US\$1.90 per day in 2018 and 2019 respectively, having overtaken India (see Kharas, Hamel & Hofer, 2018; and Toromade 2019). A recent report by National Bureau of Statistic (2020); however, revealed a lower rate of about 40.1% (over 82 million), which still appears very high. Moreover, her human development index in 2019 was 0.534, which put her in the 158th position out of the 189 countries surveyed (UNDP, 2019).

Similarly, various dimensions of inequality gap in the country looks too wide. For instance, her gender development index (GDI), which was 0.847 in 2015, rose to 0.868 in 2019, ranking her 158th out of the 189 countries surveyed the same year (UNDP, 2019). According to Federal Ministry of Health (2016), as at 2016, about 50% women were illiterate as against 25% of men while 45% of women as against 62% of men had secondary education. In 2017, the nation’s Gini-coefficient was 43.0; coefficient of human inequality, 34.6 while inequality in education stood at 38.1% (see UNDP, 2018a). The foregone have the capacity to depress sustainable development in the country.

Furthermore, the recent outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic which has been taking its toll on the economies of nations globally has further aggravated the problems of poverty and inequality in Nigeria; making progress in the attainment of the SDGs more difficult. The severity of poverty and inequality in the country was further brought to the fore when the youths took to the streets on 3rd October, 2020 to protest against Police brutality. However, it later became apparent that the purpose of the protest was beyond Police brutality to include hunger, poverty and inequality that pervade the land. These youths in their thousands went on looting spree, vandalising several property and carting away food items on sight. All these make the discussion on poverty and inequality in the country more relevant and imperative.

Thus, this study examines poverty and inequality as challenges to sustainable development in Nigeria. The justification for this is not far to seek. Poverty and inequality are among the foremost development challenges, and where they abound, sustainable development will remain a mirage. This seems to be the case with Nigeria; and sustainable development cannot be achieved without addressing these problems.

Moreover, available studies, particularly on Nigeria regarding these issues appear scanty, with majority of them focusing on poverty and growth (Aigbokhan, 2008; Ijaiya, Ijaiya, Bello & Ajayi, 2011; and Dauda, 2017 & 2019); poverty reduction strategies (Ogwumike, 2001; Aluko, 2003; and Oshewolo, 2010); poverty and unemployment (Aiyedogbon & Ohwofasa, 2012); inequality, unemployment and poverty (Akinbobola & Saibu, 2004), inequality and its price (Aigbokhan, 2017); and inequality and growth (Oluwatosin, Ogunyomi, Daisi & Oluwashikemi, 2013; and Ifeakachukwu, 2020). Two studies on inequality, poverty and sustainable development (Ewuim et al., 2015; and Deinne & Ajayi, 2019), deviate significantly from the current paper in terms of methodology and focus. For instance, while Ewuim et al., (2015) adopts documentary analysis with concentration on gender inequality and the Rapti Women Empowerment Project in Nepal, Deinne and Ajayi (2019) focuses on Delta State, Nigeria, using survey data collected through non-probability and probability sampling techniques. Thus, it is apparent that none of these studies on Nigeria assesses how poverty and inequality affects sustainable development in the country. This leaves a gap, which the current study tries to fill.

The rest of the paper covers section two, which provides facts on the situation of poverty, inequality and sustainable development in Nigeria. Section three dwells on literature review, section four presents the

methodology of the paper, section five discusses poverty and inequality as challenges to sustainable development and assesses drivers of poverty and inequality in Nigeria while section six provides the way forward. Section seven however, concludes the study and presents policy implication of the paper as well as its limitation and direction for future research.

Poverty, inequality and sustainable development in Nigeria: the situation

Poverty

Nigeria is considered as one of the poorest and unequal societies globally. Empirical evidence and reports appear to support this stance (see Mbanasoret *al.*, 2014; Ajakaiye *et al.*, 2016; Anderson *et al.*, 2016; Egbiremolen, 2018; Kharas *et al.*, 2018; Kataya & Wadhwa, 2019; and National Bureau of Statistic, 2020). Moreover, the rising poverty figure in the country further confirms this. For instance, as cited by Dauda (2017), National Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2012) shows that the proportion of Nigerians considered moderately and extremely poor rose from 21% and 6.2% in 1980 to 34.2% and 12.1% respectively in 1985. By 2010, approximately 30.3% and 38.7% of the country's population remained moderately and extremely poor in that order. Similarly, the number of people in absolute poverty increased from 17.1 million in 1980 to 34.7 million in 1985, and by 1986, it had surged to 67.1 million and about 112.47 million in 2010. Nevertheless, the figure has declined to 84.0 million in 2019 (NBS, 2020).

UNDP (2016, 54a) has argued that measuring poverty from one dimension like income may not reveal “more about the depth and overlapping nature of people's non-income deprivations.” It is therefore imperative to view poverty from multidimensional aspect, and this explains why Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI)² was introduced. However, available evidence on non-monetary measure of poverty in Nigeria places the country among the poorest nations globally. From Table 1, it is apparent that Nigeria is nonetheless battling with high poverty burden, given the greater proportion of her population in various forms of multidimensional poverty. The data presented for Nigeria in the table contrast significantly with achievements in most countries in Africa and beyond.

Table 1: Multidimensional Poverty (MPI) Related Statistics for Selected Developing Countries, 2019

Country	MPI	Population in MP (%)	Population Vulnerable to MP (%)	Population in Severe MP (%)	Intensity of Deprivation (%)	Population Living Below Income Poverty Line (%)	
						National poverty line	PPP \$1.90 a day
Nigeria	0.291	51.4	16.8	32.3	56.6	46.0	53.5
Thailand	0.003	0.8	7.2	0.1	39.1	8.6	0.0
Libya	0.007	2.0	11.3	0.1	37.1	-	-
Tunisia	0.005	1.3	3.7	0.2	39.7	15.2	0.3
Brazil	0.016	3.8	6.2	0.9	42.5	26.5	4.8
Egypt	0.019	5.2	6.1	0.6	37.6	27.8	1.3
Indonesia	0.028	7.0	9.1	1.2	40.3	10.6	5.7
South Africa	0.025	6.3	12.2	0.9	39.8	55.5	18.9
Morocco	0.085	18.6	13.2	6.5	45.7	4.8	1.0
Ghana	0.138	30.1	22.0	10.4	45.8	23.4	13.3

Source: Compiled by Authors from UNDP (2019)

²Developed in 2010 by the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI) for the Human Development Reports Office (HDRO), MPI is computed solely for developing countries to measure “non-income dimensions of poverty and shows how human deprivations overlap” “at the household level across the” dimensions of health, education and living standards (UNDP, 2018a, 7, 9).

From the table, compared with other nations, about 51.4% of Nigeria’s population was in multidimensional poverty in 2019 while the population in severe multidimensional poverty was 32.3%, with the intensity of deprivation being 56.6%.

Inequality

Nigeria’s inequality situation appears to follow the same abysmal pattern as poverty. As presented in Table 2, the ratings from UNDP (2019) showed that Nigeria’s HDI in 2019 was 0.534. When this figure was adjusted for inequality, it stood at 0.349. With these, it is evident that the country performed awfully compared to most nations in the North, Southern, East, and even West Africa, let alone advanced economies like Norway, Switzerland and Ireland. Furthermore, income inequality in the country as at 2019 was 28.2% while the average Gini-coefficient for the period 2010-2018 stood at 43.0. Equally, inequality in education was 38.1%, which was far below what African countries like Tunisia, Egypt, South Africa, Cape Verde, and Ghana recorded. These notwithstanding, it looks as if Nigeria is doing better considering her Gini-coefficient value compared to African countries like Botswana, South Africa, and Cape Verde. Education inequality in other non-African countries like Norway, Australia, Switzerland, Germany, Denmark, Canada, United States, Canada, and Sweden has remained single digit as shown in the table while inequality in income has also been low in these countries.

Table 2: Inequality-Adjusted Human Development Index (IHDI) and Related Statistics, 2019

Country	HDI	IHDI	Inequality in Education (%)	Inequality in Income (%)	Gini Coefficient (2010–2018)
Nigeria	0.534	0.349	38.1	28.2	43.0
Norway	0.954	0.889	4.4	14.9	27.5
Switzerland	0.946	0.882	1.9	14.5	32.3
Australia	0.938	0.862	2.7	17.3	35.8
Germany	0.939	0.861	2.7	17.7	31.7
Sweden	0.937	0.874	3.8	13.0	29.2
Denmark	0.930	0.873	3.0	11.4	28.2
Canada	0.926	0.852	1.4	17.4	34.0
United States	0.920	0.797	5.5	26.6	41.5
Tunisia	0.739	0.585	32.8	18.9	32.8
Botswana	0.728	-	-	-	53.3
South Africa	0.705	0.463	17.3	57.7	63.0
Egypt	0.700	0.492	38.1	36.5	31.8
Morocco	0.676	-	-	21.7	39.5
Cape Verde	0.651	-	-	-	47.2
Ghana	0.596	0.427	34.9	25.3	43.5

Source: Compiled by Authors from UNDP (2019)

Inequality also exists in gender in Nigeria. Women are highly discriminated against, particularly in political office holding. Table 3 indicates gender inequality related issues for Nigeria and selected economies. From the table, the country’s gender development index (GDI) in 2018 was 0.868, which appears encouraging. However, the index could be viewed as low compared to the values for several nations in Africa and beyond. The share of seats in parliament that goes to women in Nigeria is far from the ideal. For instance, only 5.8% of parliament’s seats went to women as indicated in the table. Moreover, the labour force participation rate for men ages 15 and above was 59.8% in the country; however, the one for women was 50.4%. Expected years of schooling for men stood at 10.8 while the one for women was 9.2. The same trend is observed in the mean years of schooling for both sexes. These statistics contrast greatly with happenings in other countries both within and outside Africa.

Table 3: Gender Inequality Related Issues for Nigeria and Selected Countries, 2019

Country	GDI	Share of Seats in Parliament by Women (%)	Labour Force Participation Rate (% ages 15 and older)		Expected Years of Schooling		Mean Years of Schooling	
			Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
Nigeria	0.868	5.8	50.6	59.8	8.6	10.1	5.3	7.6
Argentina	0.988	39.5	49.0	72.8	18.9	16.4	10.7	10.5
United States	0.991	23.6	56.1	68.2	16.9	15.7	13.5	13.4
Sweden	0.982	46.1	61.1	67.6	19.6	18.0	12.5	12.3
Norway	0.990	41.4	60.2	66.7	18.8	17.4	12.6	12.5
Canada	0.989	31.7	60.9	69.7	16.6	15.6	13.5	13.1
South Africa	0.984	41.8	48.9	62.8	14.0	13.3	10.0	10.5
Singapore	0.988	23.0	58.0	68.9	16.4	16.0	11.1	12.0
Denmark	0.980	37.4	58.1	65.9	19.8	18.4	12.7	12.4
Australia	0.975	32.7	59.7	70.5	22.6	21.6	12.7	12.6
Germany	0.968	31.5	55.3	66.2	17.0	17.2	13.7	14.6
Tunisia	0.899	31.3	24.3	70.6	15.8	14.4	6.4	7.9
Morocco	0.833	18.4	21.4	77.4	12.6	13.6	4.6	6.4
Ghana	0.912	12.7	63.6	71.5	11.4	11.7	6.4	7.9

Source: Compiled by Authors from UNDP (2019)

Gender inequality is more pronounced in the Northern part of Nigeria than the south. For instance Gender Inequality Index (GII) in 2013 was “highest in the North-West (0.774) and lowest in the South-East (0.397)” geopolitical zones; with the values in all the southern zones lower than the national average of 0.579 as against the figures for the northern zones, which are greater than the national average value (UNDP, 2016b).³ The same pattern occurred in 2016, with virtually all states in the Northern zone recording very high GII. The 2016 GII report on the country revealed that states such as Borno, Kogi, Yobe, Taraba, and Kaduna among others had the values of 0.908 (37th), 0.905(36th), 0.881(35th), 0.860(33th), and 0.860 (32th) respectively while states in the south such as Lagos, Ondo, Enugu and Anambra had 0.422, 0.458, 0.479 and 0.481 in that order (see UNDP, 2018b).

On the subject of women occupying political offices in Nigeria, the situation is worrisome. As evident in Table 4, no woman had ever occupied the position of the presidency or vice presidency in the country since the beginning of civilian rule in 1999 till date. Moreover, according to Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) results on various general elections; out of the 109 senate seats, only 3 were women in 1999, 4 in 2003, 9 in 2007, 7 in 2011, 8 in 2015 and only 7 in 2019.

Similarly, 360 house of representative seats exist since 1999; out of which, 7 went to women in 1999 general election, 21 to them in 2003, 27 in 2007, 25 in 2011, 14 in 2015 and 11 in 2019 respectively. For state governorship position, there was none in 1999, when civilian administration began; none in 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015 and 2019. For the deputy governorship post, there was 1 in 1999 and 3 each in 2007 and 2011. At the state level, 24 out of the 990 state house of assembly seats went to women in 1999. It increased to 40 in 2003; 57 in 2007, and 68 in 2011. At the local government level, 13 women were chairpersons of their various local governments out of the existing 774 in 1999. The figure rose slightly to 15 in 2003, and later to 27 in 2007. However, it declined to 11 in 2011. The figures for 2015 and 2019 could not be compiled or ascertained since elections were not conducted to fill the seats of chairmanship in most of local government councils in Nigeria. Regarding councillorship, there were 8,810 local councils manned by Councillors since 1999. Out of these, only 69 went to women in 1999, 267 in 2003, 235 in 2007, and 164 in 2011. Out of the 41 names transmitted

³Gender Inequality Index (GII) measures “inequality between males and females in the population,” and tries to incorporate three dimensions, which are: “reproductive health, empowerment and labour market”, with their indicators being maternal mortality rates (MMR), Adolescent Fertility Rates (AFR), share of parliament seats for males and females, and labour force participation rate” (UNDP, 2016b, 19). A higher GII shows a wider inequality gaps between males and females while a lower one reveals lower inequality gaps between males and females.

to the national assembly by the president to be screened for ministerial appointment in July 2019, only seven (17.07%) were women.

Table 4: Women in Political Offices in Nigeria, 1999-2019

SN	Post	No of Seats Available	Number Occupied by Women					
			1999	2003	2007	2011	2015	2019
1	President	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
2	Vice President	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
3	Senate	109	3	4	9	7	8	7
4	House of Representatives	360	7	21	27	25	14	11
5	Governor	36	0	0	0	0	0	0
6	Deputy Governor	36	1	na	3	3	4	4
7	State Houses of Assembly	990	24	40	57	68	46	40
8	Cabinet Ministers	44	Na	na	na	na	7	7
9	Local Government Chairpersons	774	13	15	27	11	na	na
10	Local Government Councilors	8810	69	267	235	164	na	na

Source: Compiled by Authors from UNDP (2019).

The prevalence of inequality in its various forms and dimension in Nigeria is capable of inhibiting development agenda. As a matter of fact, inequality has the capacity to aggravate poverty level, depress economic growth, hamper living standard and prevent sustainability of development. According to African Development Bank (AfDB, 2016, iii), “inequality along geographical, social and gender lines has prevented many Africans from enjoying the benefits of growth.” It further reiterates that “widespread inequality is limiting both growth and poverty reduction across Africa” while “unequal access to resources and opportunities” by women as well as unacceptable levels of interpersonal violence” against them continue to militate against their “participation in economic, political and social development.”

Sustainable development

Data on three sustainable development goals (SDGs 1, 5 and 10) in 2019 and 2020 are considered in this section for Nigeria and some selected countries (see Table 5).⁴ Nigeria scored less than 50% in the SDG index in both years; ranking 159th out of 185 countries surveyed in 2019, and 160th out of 205 countries considered for similar survey in 2020. This is an indication of a poorer performance, comparing her ranking in 2019 with 2020 (Sachs et al 2019; 2020). Moreover, in goal 1 (zero poverty), the country scored 17.24% in 2020, which was a mild difference from the 2019 value of 17.15%. However, there was a marginal improvement in the country’s performances in the 5th and 10th SDGs between 2019 and 2020. Her rating in the 5th goal that captures gender equality was 41.28% in 2020, which indicated narrower gender parity when compared with 36.50% recorded in 2019. Her score (9.06%) in the 10th SDG was among the worst in 2019. This however rose to 19.55% in 2020, implying a slight reduction in inequality. Overall, Nigeria’s performance in the SDGs appears worst relative to that of selected countries in Africa and beyond.

⁴SDG 1 centres on reducing poverty to zero level; SGD 5 captures gender equality while SDG10 focuses on reducing inequality. The indices were computed for all the 193 UN member countries, with the index of each showing the level of its attainment. A zero (0) score implies worst performance while a hundred (100) score means the best performance. The import of this is that the closer a nation to 100, the better (see Sachs et al (2020).

Table 5: Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) Indices and Ranking for Selected Countries, 2019-2020

Country	Rank	SDG Index	SDG1 2019	SDG5	SDG10	Rank	SDG Index	SDG1 2020	SDG5	SDG10
Nigeria	159	46.4	17.15	36.50	9.06	160	49.28	17.24	41.28	19.55
Sweden	2.0	85	99.03	88.87	100.00	1	84.72	99.03	89.38	93.49
Denmark	1.0	85.2	99.57	84.83	96.49	2	84.56	99.58	86.96	97.55
Finland	3.0	82.8	99.84	89.24	97.26	3	83.77	99.84	91.23	96.75
Germany	6.0	81.6	99.64	77.00	83.41	5	80.77	99.64	77.35	82.41
France	4.0	81.5	99.54	86.51	85.65	4	81.13	99.54	86.72	83.62
Malaysia	68.0	69.6	99.98	55.56	42.51	60	71.76	99.98	55.86	56.25
Singapore	66.0	69.6	98.37	58.52	-	93	67.00	98.36	69.88	-
Algeria	53.0	71.1	97.84	51.11	88.74	56	72.27	97.88	52.79	88.67
Tunisia	63.0	70.0	97.77	52.67	61.20	63	71.37	97.80	49.94	64.78
South Africa	113.0	61.5	49.85	80.05	0.00	110	63.41	50.02	82.47	0.00
Ghana	104	63.8	69.02	54.11	58.63	100	65.37	70.27	53.08	48.02

SDG1 = No Poverty; SDG5 = Gender Equality; and SDG10 = Reduced Inequalities

Source: Compiled by Author from Sachs *et al* (2019; 2020)

Poverty, inequality and sustainable development: the literature

Theoretical review

Within the context of classical economics, some early studies reported that inequality enhances better economic performance, particularly growth (see Kaldor, 1960; Kalecki, 1971; Forbes, 1998; Li & Zou, 1998; Barro, 1999; and Dollar & Kraay, 2002). Some of the authors according to Rodríguez (2000) base their findings and stance on the assumption of a fixed savings rate in which capitalists are presumed to save greater proportion of the resources transferred from workers; thereby, raising aggregate savings rate in the economy and this helps to boost economic growth. This view stems from the contributions of early classicalists like Adam Smith and Karl Marx to economic growth and development wherein workers (labourers) sell their labour to the capitalists (owners of means of production who also engage in savings) and earn subsistence wage that is only sufficient for consumption. Thus, as the income gap between the workers and the rich capitalists increases, more savings are undertaken; which raises investment and capital accumulation, and invariably leads to economic growth and development.

The positive relationship between growth and inequality reported by the studies may not be unconnected with the model and estimation techniques employed in addition to the assumption of subsistence wage earned by workers, which leave nothing for savings after consumption (Forbes, 1998; Li & Zou, 1998; and Barro, 1999). The current stance of growth and development literature, particularly those that are based on neoclassical and endogenous growth theories diverges significantly from this because households are assumed to own resources and engage in savings (Todaro & Smith, 2015; and Romer, 2019). Therefore, the less the inequality gap, the lower the level of poverty and this can in turn raise savings; thus, contributing to better economic performance and enhancement of sustainable development.

High poverty and inequality in their various forms constitute drags on sustainable development because development has always been a problem in an unequal and poverty driven society. In fact, inequality can cause poverty and poverty can create inequality while both of them depress development (see Ogbeide & Agu, 2015; and Dauda, 2019). Most of developing nations in Africa are beset with high level of poverty and inequality, because poverty and inequality are among the root causes of underdevelopment while underdevelopment can

also engender poverty and inequality (McKnight, 2018). It thus implies the existence of bidirectional causality between poverty and underdevelopment as well as between inequality and underdevelopment.

According to UNRISD (2010, 5 & 6), poverty and inequality are interconnected parts of the same problem, and where they exist, they prevent development. Moreover, “poverty is closely related to various dimensions of inequality, including income status, gender, ethnicity and location” while “inequalities manifest across several dimensions, such as employment, earnings and access to social services.” The agency contends that “inequalities are often interlocking and dysfunctional for development.” It highlights four reasons to buttress this argument, which are: i) inequalities “make it harder to incorporate the poor and disadvantaged in the growth process” because they tend to constrain the productive capacity of the poor “and their potential contribution to development.” ii) “in highly unequal societies, the poor are more likely to be locked into a subsistence economy”, which “may limit the size of the domestic market and thus retard the potential for sustained growth.” iii) “high levels of interlocking inequalities may undermine the realization of civil, political and social rights”; and could “raise the level of crime and plunge societies into conflict.” iv) “high levels of inequality may create institutions that maintain the political, economic and social privileges of the elite and lock the poor into poverty traps from which it is difficult to escape.” Aigbokhan (2017, 3) reiterates that “inequality is the cause and consequence of the failure of the market system as well as the political system”; and it also contributes to economic and political instability, which in turn leads to increased inequality.

Review of previous empirical studies outside Nigeria

a). Inequality and sustainable development

Empirical evidence across literature supports the view that poverty and inequality constitute a clog on the wheels of sustainable development. In fact, poverty and inequality are part of the major challenges deterring development and its sustainability across the globe, especially in developing Africa, Asia and Latin-America. Therefore, policies aimed at addressing these twin challenges will boost sustainable development.

In a study by Stewart (2014) on how inequality and sustainability relate; it was revealed that greater inequality prevents the achievement of the three specific types of sustainability (macro-economic sustainability; environmental sustainability; and political sustainability). According to the author, when inequality declines, improvement is expected to occur in these three types of sustainability. The study also found that less inequality is associated with higher growth and its sustainability in both rich and poor countries.

Moreover, higher and longer robust growth has been reported in more equal societies than unequal ones (see Barro, 1999; Berg et al, 2012; Kumhof et al, 2015; Berg & Ostry, 2017; and Aremo & Sule, 2020). Wilkinson & Pickett (2010, 7, 16, 26, 28, 43) contend that “improvements in societal wellbeing are now more likely to follow from greater equality rather than from further economic growth” and therefore, in order “to achieve sustainability we must become less unequal.” Accordingly, while inequality aggravates deprivation, greater equality improves health and wellbeing as well as “quality of life for almost everyone.” Gender equality can eradicate poverty, and lead to efficient and sustainable development (World Bank, 2002; Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, 2003; British Council, 2016; and Nieuwenhuis et al, 2018). This is predicated on the fact that “men and boys usually have an advantage over women and girls in access to resources, decision-making, and capacity to take advantage of social, political, and economic opportunities” due to their socially-constructed roles (World Bank, 2002, 1). Hence, when gender inequality is reduced to the barest minimum, the tendency is high that the level of poverty will reduce drastically, and this will enhance growth and sustainable development.

Chowdhury et al (2014) conducted a study in Bangladesh where gender inequality is high, focussing on the coastal fishing communities of Cox’s Bazar. The study examines indicators of gender inequality, using the Analytical Hierarchy Process (AHP) integrated Quality Function Deployment (QFD) for data analysis. The findings show “that ensuring education, access to financing and skill development” for women “are the most

important factors in mitigating gender inequality for sustainable development” in Bangladesh. It then canvasses for the empowerment of women to achieve sustainable development in this country. Similarly, Breunig & Majeed (2016) have found pronounced negative impact of inequality on growth in countries with high poverty rate.

Clementi, Fabiani and Molini (2019) also reported that despite the stable and sustained growth most countries in the Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) experienced for nearly two decades, poverty still persisted as a result of the offset of growth impact on poverty by distributional changes. In other words, inequality in these countries has prevented growth from alleviating poverty. The implication is that inequality is capable of preventing sustainable development.

b). Poverty and sustainable development

Poverty equally can inhibit sustainable development wherever it exists. Osei-Hwedie (1995, 1) argues that programmes geared towards sustainable environment will suffer if people’s welfare is not improved on a continuous basis because the poor, who “tend to be the hardest hit by environmental degradation” are also responsible for much of the damages as a result of “short-term requirements, lack of resources and ignorance.”

Adeleye, Gershon, Ogundipe, Owolabi, Ogunrinola and Adediran, (2020) assess growth-poverty-inequality relationship from 2000 to 2015 with focus on 58 SSA, Latin American and Caribbean countries, measuring poverty and inequality using per capita consumption expenditure growth and Gini index respectively. The findings showed that economic growth exhibits some poverty-reduction properties. However, inequality intensifies poverty and at the same time prevents growth from reducing poverty.

The findings above however appear to be at variance with an earlier study by Fosu (2015) in which it was reported that in most countries’ in SSA changes in income and inequalities have led to decline in poverty, particularly since the mid-1990s than during the period 1980 to 1990s. The author noted that while growth contributed to the success generally in the region, in some specific countries, reduction in inequality enhanced poverty reduction. This result is also in tandem with the findings of a study along the same line by the author (see Fosu, 2017).

Empirical and theoretical literatures have also acknowledged the existence of a bidirectional relationship between poverty and inequality (see Ravallion, 1997; Burtless & Smeeding, 2002; Bourguignon, 2004; and Ogbeide & Agu, 2015). This implies that poverty and inequality are interconnected and act to reinforce each other. Most of these studies found that where the level of inequality is high, poverty tends to be higher while extreme poverty also engenders high rate of inequality.

Review of previous empirical studies in Nigeria

High gender inequality and poverty persist in Nigeria with negative implications for sustainable development (Ewuim et al., 2015; and Alao, 2015). However, studies that examine how poverty and inequality affect sustainable development in Nigeria are not enormous. Apart from Ewuim et al (2015) and Deinne and Ajayi (2019), which assess inequality, poverty and sustainable development, other available empirical works in the country centre on poverty and growth (Aigbokhan, 2008; Ijaiya et al. 2011; and Dauda, 2017 & 2019); poverty reduction strategies (Ogwumike, 2001; Aluko, 2003; and Oshewolo, 2010); poverty and unemployment (Aiyedogbon & Ohwofasa, 2012); inequality, unemployment and poverty (Akinbobola & Saibu, 2004), inequality and its price (Aigbokhan, 2017); inequality and growth (Oluwatosin, Ogunyomi, Daisi & Oluwashikemi, 2013; and Ifeakachukwu, 2020); and poverty and inequality (Mbanasor et al, 2014; Ogbeide & Agu, 2015; and Dauda, 2021). Moreover, the studies of Ewuim et al (2015) and Deinne & Ajayi (2019) defer from the current paper in the area of focus and methodology employed.

Mbanasor et al (2014) carried out a study in Abia State, Nigeria to determine income inequality and poverty dynamics among rural farm households. The study employed multistage sampling technique to select 240

households on which data were collected in 2010 and 2011. The authors used Gini coefficient to establish income distribution among the respondents while mean household income, headcount ratio and poverty gap index were employed to measure poverty line, poverty incidence and gap. The findings revealed high level of inequality, with a Gini index of 0.987 and per capita income less than the national minimum wage. Similarly, poverty level was high, giving the head count index of 0.567 as well as a poverty gap of 0.568.

In fact, geographically, the levels of all forms of inequality and poverty are higher in the Northern than in the Southern part of Nigeria (see Aigbokhan, 2000; World Bank, 2016; Mayah et al., 2017; and Dauda, 2017). Accordingly, inequality appears higher in the rural compared to urban areas in the country while poverty rate in the rural area exceeds the rate in the urban area. It therefore implies that policies geared towards poverty alleviation can reduce inequality while programmes aimed at lowering inequality can also reduce poverty. Ogbuide and Agu (2015) using Granger causality techniques reported a direct “causality between poverty and inequality as well as indirect channels through unemployment and low life expectancy on inequality, which exacerbate poverty in Nigeria.”

In a latest study, Dauda (2021) shows that inequality has been one of the critical problems contributing to high poverty rate in Nigeria, with both preventing the attainment of sustainable development. To address this, the author suggests a progressive tax system, exception of low income earners from paying income tax, raising of minimum wage to reflect living wage, genuine fight against corruption, paying “political office holders as their counterparts in the civil service”, giving more chance for women to participate in politics, investment in human capital, and eradicating *god-fatherism* in politics. These to a large extent will reduce inequality and poverty in the country, and enhance sustainable development.

Methodology

The study employed stylized facts and systematic review of related literature. This is informed by the nature of the paper, which is to present facts on the state of poverty, inequality and sustainable development in Nigeria, review literature, discuss issues, and provide the way forward. On the basis of the trends of these variables coupled with evidences presented in the literature, conclusion can be drawn on whether or not sustainable development is affected by the state of poverty and inequality in Nigeria over the years.

Poverty and inequality as challenges to sustainable development in Nigeria

Sustainable development Goals (SDGs) are outlines to ensure sustainable future for people living on the planet earth by 2030. The seventeen (17) seek to address global challenges such as poverty, inequality, injustice, environmental degradation, climate change, among others. However, exterminating poverty in all its forms remains a serious challenge confronting humanity (UNDP, 2019), especially the under developed nations of the world. Therefore, the prevalence of poverty and inequality in the economy of Nigeria has the capacity to compromise the achievement of all the 17 SDGs by the target year (2030).

For instance, goal 1, no poverty will be difficult to achieve in a highly unequal society while goal 2, zero hunger, is impossible in a poverty ridden society. Similarly, goal 3, good health and well-being cannot be attained in any society plaque with poverty because the level of income is always low in such a society, thus, given rise to low savings and low investment, which will further depress income and aggravate poverty, and in turn lead to poor health and well-being. These all appear to be visible in the Nigerian economy.

Moreover, a nation bedevilled with high rate of poverty and greater inequality will continue to experience poor sanitation, upsurge in insecurity, and deforestation, among others. The import of this is that achieving sustainable development in an unequal and poverty ridden society will be highly difficult, if not impossible. Aigbokhan (2017, 3) has observed that Nigeria is paying a very high price for inequality such as “unstable economic system, less efficient economic system, less growth and non-inclusive growth, a less cohesive society, and a democracy that has been put in peril.”

Drivers of poverty and inequality in Nigeria

It is interesting to note that most drivers of extreme poverty in Nigeria are also responsible for the high rate of inequality in the country. Some of these factors are deliberate while others are not. Among them are economic, political, cultural, religious, demographic and social factors.

With respect to deliberate causes, it appears that policies are intentionally put in place to keep the poor in perpetual poverty and widen inequality gap between the rich and the poor. According to Mayah et al (2017, 4), in Nigeria, “the overlap between political and economic power bends the allocation of opportunities, income and wealth to vested interests, and biases policy-making in favour of the rich.” And this is one of the major reasons successive governments over the years have not succeeded in solving the problems of poverty and inequality in Nigeria, notwithstanding poverty and inequality reduction policies put in place.

Regarding culture and religion, it is apparent in some part of the country that girls are not allowed to go to school. Majority of them are married at a very young age while women are prevented from participating in labour market activities because their faith forbids seeing them in public. In addition, religious and cultural beliefs permit parents in certain part of the country to allow their children to engage in street begging (*arimajere*), the practice which continues and has produced an army of youths without education and employment.

Conflict and insecurity are highly detrimental to sustainable economic growth and development. In Nigeria, conflicts and insecurity appear to be rising and these are capable of aggravating poverty and the level of inequality, and prevent the attainment of sustainable development. Ajodo-Adebanjoko and Walter (2014) have found that both conflict and insecurity which prevent meaningful development contribute to high rate of poverty while poverty has also been viewed as responsible for insecurity and conflict in Nigeria as evident in areas such as the Niger Delta region, some part of Middle-Belt, and recently the North-East part of the country.

In summary, some of the factors driving poverty and inequality, capable of preventing sustainable development in Nigeria include: low per capita income, low savings, and high rate of unemployment (Ayoade & Adeola, 2012; Ucha, 2010; and Dauda, 2019). Others are high rate of inequality (Garcia et al, 2006; and Dauda, 2019), bad governance and corruption (Ighodalo, 2012), over dependence on import and inappropriate macroeconomic policies (Dauda, 2019), conflicts and insecurity (Dode, 2012; and Ajodo-Adebanjoko & Walter, 2014), high rate of illiteracy, poor human capital development, absence of economic infrastructure, and irregular power supply (Uma et al, 2013); failure of growth to trickle down to the poor and rent-seeking (Aigbokhan, 2017; and Dauda, 2017 & 2019); and militancy and religious violence (Evans & Kelikume, 2019).

The way forward

It is evident from the findings of the various literatures reviewed that development cannot be feasible let alone sustainable in Nigeria if the current state of poverty and inequalities in the country is not addressed. Given the level of natural and human resource endowment of the country, it is obvious that Nigeria has the potentials to achieve sustainable development. The nation can easily tap and harness these resources for poverty alleviation and reduction of inequality in order to drive sustainable development. However, these may not be possible if certain policies are not initiated and implemented.

For instance, Nigeria needs to embark on rigorous structural transformation of her economy. The economy for so long has depended on foreign exchange earnings from crude oil export (primary product). This has been the major bane of the nation’s development. Structural and economic transformations are highly important if Nigeria will reduce poverty and inequality in order to engender sustainable development. The current diversification policy cannot in actual fact bring about sustainable development.

The current drive to farming is encouraging; however, this should be substituted with industry-driven policies to ensure sustainable development. No nation can develop on crude agricultural practices, particularly when it

is undertaking at the subsistence level while the produces are exported raw. Industrialization and development of the services sector are imperative for poverty reduction and bridging of inequality gaps. These have the capacity to generate more employment, increase income and bring about sustainable development of the nation's economy.

The role of a vibrant health sector in sustainable development cannot be overemphasised. This became evident during the outbreak of COVID-19. It is essential that Nigeria develops her health sector for poverty reduction and decline in inequality. Infrastructure development is also a hub to employment generation and improvement in the health sector, which are critical for bridging inequality gap and poverty alleviation. Moreover, genuine political will and commitment to the fight against corruption are vital for reducing inequality and poverty in order to foster sustainable development. The fight against corruption should be total and all encompassing. The private sector should not be excluded because corruption exists in some private establishments as well as among individuals in the country.

It is apparent in Nigeria that functional education for every child; irrespective of sex is *sine qua non* for development. Education empowers the poor, bridges the gap of inequality and contributes to sustainable development. The country should make education free and compulsory up to the secondary school level. Investment in the girl-child education should be undertaken, especially in the Northern part of the country.

Conclusion, policy implications, limitation and direction for further research

Conclusion

This study examines the level of poverty and inequality in Nigeria *viz-a viz* sustainable development. It provides stylized facts on the variables, reviewed relevant literature, and identify drivers of poverty and inequality in Nigeria. It concludes that given the levels of poverty and inequality in the country, attainment of sustainable development will remain a mirage. To prevent this, the study makes the following recommendations.

Policy implications

The economy requires structural transformation from a primary-product dominated one to industrial and services economy. Moreover, there should be adequate investment in education and health while education at the primary and secondary levels should be free and compulsory. The girl-child education should be encouraged. Rural infrastructure development should be prioritised in government finances.

In addition, there should be genuine commitment to the fight against corruption at all levels and sectors in the economy. Women should be encouraged to participate in politics and labour market while the practice of street begging (*almajiri*) by children and young persons in certain part of the country should be prohibited.

Limitation of the study and directions for further research

The paper is limited by the methodology employed. Further study may consider using multivariate regression of various types with time series data.

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