

Nigeria, Poverty and the First Sustainable Development Goal

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Abstract

The study reviewed Nigeria's performance in her quest to achieve the first Sustainable Development Goal, namely, to end poverty in all its forms everywhere. Five direct targets were considered, covering various aspects of the goal. From a dialectical perspective, and the poverty climate of the country, it was concluded that Nigeria can neither check poverty in her domain nor achieve the first sustainable development goal by 2030. The study reiterated that if ending poverty in Nigeria will be at all possible, it certainly cannot occur by the target date. The likelihood is that poverty will remain, perhaps even blossom in some segments of the society where it was earlier strongly anchored, as well as some segments previously less susceptible to it. These include children and youths within the age bracket 15 to 35 years who have been mostly at risk, and men in the age range 35 to 55 years who were least at risk. Among others, it is recommended that the improbability of banishing poverty by 2030 should be officially recognized and a strategy to banish poverty redrawn.

Keywords: Poverty, Sustainable Development, SDG 1, Nigeria

JEL Classification: I32 Q01 Q15 Q18

1. Introduction

Poverty and the effort to overcome it now occupy a central place in the global development endeavour. The pervasive and dynamic nature of the phenomenon has given rise to concepts such as *slipping* into poverty, *pulling* people out of poverty and *poverty trap*. India, China and even the US have been successful at pulling rising numbers of their citizens out of poverty (Chaudry et al 2016, World Bank, 2022), while for some developing nations, more and more of their citizens appear to continually *slip* into poverty (World Bank, 2020). The fight against poverty therefore fittingly occupies a prominent place in the global collaborative development agenda: the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); and Nigeria is fully committed to achieving SDG One: 'End poverty in all its forms everywhere'.

This study assessed Nigeria's efforts to end poverty in all its forms in the country. The need for this lies in the fast approaching, collectively-agreed, target year for banishing poverty, which is 2030, and the seeming aggravation of natural and man-made events and conditions that force people into poverty. These include the disastrous floods in Nigeria in 2022 and again in 2024, which showed both avoidable and unavoidable components, inflation that refuses to be contained in a one-digit chamber, and the rising banditry in the food basket of

the nation. With these developments it is understandable if some anxiety surrounds Nigeria's efforts to banish poverty by 2030, hence the need to review the efforts to pull people out of poverty and commence remedial or supplementary measures if need be, and in good enough time.

This paper is structured as follows: a brief review of relevant literature follows this introduction. The research method is stated next, followed by a review of Nigeria's achievements thus far. Conclusion and recommendations bring the paper to a close.

2. Literature Review

The multi-dimensional perception of poverty now holds sway (OPHI, 2024). Its rise is linked with the dissatisfaction with the purely economic perspective, the *Voices of the poor* project of the World Bank as well as efforts of diverse researchers. It brings a perspective to poverty that is uniquely of those experiencing poverty, rather than those outside the phenomenon. The alternative, the so-called unified approach to understanding poverty (Townsend et al, 1999), has not been left behind. It finds some expression in the Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) developed by United Nations Development Programme and Oxford University (UNDP, 2024). MPI provides a world-wide measure of poverty using an international poverty line of less than \$2.15 per day at 2017 purchasing power parity. When to this monetary measure is added access to education and infrastructure, a beyond monetary measure of poverty is achieved, which promises some international comparability (World Bank, 2024), as well as meaningful tracking of national conditions.

Poverty has proved to be a universal phenomenon. In this regard, Townsend's relative deprivation hypothesis (Townsend, 1979) is validated. He argues that people can be said to be poor when they experience a lack that holds them below what their society sees as the norm. Basic human needs are universal and it is only the manner that those needs are met in different societies that differ. Thus every society will have its own poor, arising from shortfalls on what their society prescribes with regard to the basic needs, even though the needs are themselves universal. This makes room for meaningful use of multipolar measures such as the trending multidimensional versions. Indeed the concept of parity of purchasing power already acknowledges differences in the economies being brought together. These differences lie deep within the economies, manifest in the varying exchange rates and thus may not be arbitrary. The concept of relative deprivation, which is economy specific, thus connects cultural and social norms of specific communities, ensuring that policy does target the right group (Gordon, 2021).

Two basic approaches to address poverty have emerged over time (Reeves, 2015). The first focuses on the individual and the household, their productive capacity, their productivity and income. The second focuses on the environment, the society, the economy, its friendliness and supportiveness. This has to do with fairness, justice and equity; growth and the nature of growth; stability. The two areas are of course intertwined, are not at all exclusive, and as such call for holistic policies and multi-track policy implementation. While an immediate shield from deprivation is provided by direct transfers to individuals and households over a reasonable time frame (Olufemi et al, 2023), they facilitate a reallocation of household productive resources (Barrientos & Villa, 2015) and impact their productivity. Growth matters for poverty alleviation, in particular its composition and distribution as well as stability,

whether social, economic or political (Ames et al, 2001, Ayoo, 2022). Economic opportunities, gender and climate sensitivities all significantly contribute to poverty reduction (UN Women, 2024; Lopez-Calva, 2023).

PEAC (2021) selected four pillars to anchor the poverty reduction efforts, namely “Macroeconomic stabilization policies to improve the capacity of the economy to absorb shocks and avoid disruptive adjustment; Industrialization for economic growth and transformation of the economy; Structural policies and institutional reforms; and Redistributive Policies and Programmes to reduce levels of risk, vulnerability, shocks and deprivation.”

Using ILO statistics (UN, 2023), EGM (2024) concluded that globally no single target of SDG 1 is on track for full implementation. COVID-19 pandemic was considered the main culprit in reversing the hard won trend of decreasing extreme poverty, worldwide. The impacts of climate crises and the war in Ukraine also joined to accelerate the incidence of poverty. Sub-Saharan Africa and conflict zones are expected to be worst hit by the number of people slipping into extreme poverty. Nigeria already harbours the greatest pool of extremely poor people after India (World Bank, 2019).

Orubon and Adeleke (2024) considered the social protection programmes which the government of Nigeria directed at the most vulnerable members of the society in a bid to eliminate poverty. They found that such programmes showed promising results in reducing poverty and improving the lives of citizens. However, limited funding, inadequate coverage, and lack of coordination between programmes, militated against the elimination of poverty. Increased investment in the social protection programmes, expanding coverage to reach more people in need and improving coordination among stakeholders were recommended.

Emah (2023) reviewed Nigeria’s progress towards the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. Findings from content review analysis showed that the country had adequate structures in place across all levels of government to ensure a smooth implementation of the programmes. However, Nigeria’s progress in achieving the goals was judged as slow and poor, the structures notwithstanding. The lackluster performance was attributed to corruption among public officials, poor budgetary allocations to health and education, rising poverty and youth unemployment rates, and weak development policies and programmes. The study recommended a review of government institutions and policies, introduction of laws against corruption, and promotion of reward for good behavior in public office.

Bal *et al* (2022) took up the challenges and prospects of poverty reduction in Nigeria in pursuit of the Sustainable Development Goals. They outlined corruption, lack of effective policies, low level of accountability, security and poor infrastructure as some of the challenges plaguing poverty reduction efforts in Nigeria. On account of these subsisting challenges they concluded that Nigeria had made no meaningful progress towards poverty reduction (and SDG 1), and recommended a strong and reliable framework for the fight against poverty.

The Presidency (2020) carried out a Second Voluntary National Review, and sought to integrate Nigeria’s efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals into the national development planning. The magnitude of poverty in the country was acknowledged to be

40.1% and its composition shown to be rising in rural areas and northern zones while improving in the south. The drivers of poverty were identified as poor quality health and education services. The inadequacy of safety nets and social services was also acknowledged. The keys to progress were identified as the centrality of women, access to essential services, agricultural support and wider participation in decision making.

The literature is thus replete with indications of Nigeria's unsatisfactory performance in the effort to achieve the sustainable development goals. Some indications also exist of lackluster performance with regard to the achievement of the first goal. However, there appears not to be a systematic evaluation or at least a systematic review of the performance of the nation on a target by target basis particularly as it concerns the first goal which is arguably the most basic developmental goal. This study therefore seeks to fill this gap by reviewing the performance of Nigeria towards the achievement of the first sustainable development goal on a target by target basis.

3. Methodology

This study applied the dialectical methodology which entails the interrogation of competing ideas in the search for truth. The approach admits competing arguments and perspectives, examining them in a qualitative manner, and often mainstreaming in the course of development insights hitherto sidelined, for example gender, human capital and institutions. Korolyuk (2014) argues that excluding dialectic method in the study of economic studies risks the decrease of efficiency of cognitive process. Dialectical analysis thus allows a deeper understanding of the essence of economic processes (Leishvily, 2016).

4. Result

Nigeria's Performance in SDG 1

In reviewing the country's performance in SDG 1 we consider the five main targets. These were jointly developed for the task of ending poverty in all its forms everywhere in the world (UN, 2024) and also in Nigeria. For each target, indicators were further developed to aid and guide performance. The targets, in summary form, are:

- 1st: overcome extreme poverty.
- 2nd: achieve 50% reduction in general poverty.
- 3rd: develop social protection programmes for all.
- 4th: ensure equal rights for all.
- 5th: create vulnerability wedges for the poor.

Target 1: Overcome Extreme Poverty

Extreme poverty can be defined as living below the internationally defined poverty line, which is currently \$2.15 per day (UN, 2022). This poverty line has moved with time, beginning with \$1 per day at its conception. As living standards improved world over, and adjustments for purchasing power parity among nations became feasible, the poverty line progressed from \$1 per day to its current level. Nigeria's living standards have however not kept pace (for example, foreign exchange rate has retrogressed over the years) and this has led to great numbers of citizens slipping into extreme poverty. At the US\$1.90 per day poverty line, Statista (2024) recorded an increasing number of people experiencing severe poverty in Nigeria from 2016, one year after the commencement of SDGs, to 2022. As Table 1 shows, not only is the number of the extremely poor increase every year but there are more men than

women who are extremely poor; this, notwithstanding that the gender composition of Nigeria's population is about equal. This outcome is noteworthy because worldwide, women are generally poorer than men (Oxfam, 2024). The application of this reality in the rest of the world wherein women are poorer than men, accounted for the mainstreaming of women in economic activities as a key point in Nigeria's poverty eradication strategy (PEAC, 2021).

Even as the society grappled with the poverty-driving effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, there was an acceleration of similar events, driving even greater numbers into poverty. Among these are the floods of 2022 and 2024, induced by climate change and negligence, which devastated parts of the North East in particular (WEF, 2022; ACAPS, 2024). Also the spate of kidnappings and banditry which sacked and continue to sack entire communities from their homes (Okoli et al, 2024). All those who became internally displaced persons and had to live in camps provided by governments had to depend on handouts for their livelihood since they left everything behind. Aside the aforementioned events and their ignoble effects, there were some who faced harsh economic times and decreasing social services. National currency change management, petroleum/energy price hikes, and price volatility as well as decaying infrastructure have singly and jointly degraded many fringe enterprises and driven many more into extreme poverty. The conclusion on this target is thus that extreme poverty is not yet on the road to eradication, come 2030.

Table 1: Number living in extreme poverty in Nigeria (N'000)

Gender/year	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	Growth
Male (M)	35326	36164	37037	39353	42885	43814	44707	26.5%
Female (F)	34698	35510	36323	38547	41972	42861	43718	25.9%
Which is greater?	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M

Source: Statista (2024)

Target 2: Achieve 50% Reduction in General Poverty

Traces of national input in conceptualizing or defining multidimensional poverty can be observed in the structure of Nigeria Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) (NBS, 2022). The indigenous structure was originally based on its global counterpart. The national input referred to here, entailed adjusting some global MPI indicators to align with SDGs, to capture the deprivation among children and post-pandemic poverty. Additional variables were thus introduced to factor in national priorities such as security shock, food security, school lag, and child survival and development. On the basis of this adjustment, which can be described as indigenous in character and thus referred to as indigenous input, the outcomes could be regarded as being more indicative of the true status of poverty in the land, as well as the progress made, if any, to reduce poverty, and the likelihood of attaining the second target of SDG goal number one, come 2030.

Following the multidimensional poverty index survey in Nigeria (November 2021 to February 2022), the following poverty status was established (NBS, 2022): 63% of the population was found to be multi-dimensionally poor. Among children between ages 0-17 the rate was 67.5%. Nearly a third (29%) of school age children were out of school and of all children out of school, 94% were poor. MPI was estimated at 0.257, with child MPI at 83.5%. There exists no earlier comparable multidimensional poverty index to gauge progress. However an earlier monetary poverty index did exist and was estimated at 40%. The indications are probably

clear, therefore, which direction the country is heading with regard to cutting multidimensional poverty by one half, come 2030.

Target 3: Develop Social Protection Programmes For All.

Three basic types of social protection have been identified: social insurance, social assistance and inclusion efforts (Onyeonoru, 2018). All three are present to some extent on the Nigerian scene where the social protection response is organised around four main themes: assistance, insurance, child protection and the labour market (FMBP, 2016). With regard to insurance the government promotes the National Health Insurance Scheme (NHIS) and the Social Insurance Trust Fund (NSITF). A worrisome feature has been the spread of these endeavours. Pillah (2023) evaluated the performance of NHIS for the period 2004-2021. He found public participation to be quite low, indeed below 10% of the population. This was traceable to reasons such as rural exclusion, inadequate medical personnel and lack of standard facilities. In a sense, these challenges point to the inadequacy of social protection, even in the face of numerous programmes embarked upon by the Federal as well as State governments. (See Appendix 1 for Programmes implemented thus far). Notwithstanding the diversity of social intervention programmes listed in Appendix 1, and a subsisting National policy, the Nigerian Economic Summit Group (NESG, 2023) concluded that Nigeria needs a social protection system that can adapt to current and future challenges. The urgent need for this arose partly from their observation that many citizens had lost confidence in the government and public institutions on account of the lack of adequate protection for the poor and vulnerable groups, the very reasons for setting up the programmes. Sani et al (2022) observed that *since the adoption of Nigeria's social protection policy in 2016 and a significant increase in social protection budget from N261.65 billion in 2010 to N1.26 trillion in 2021, more Nigerians have been plunged into poverty with the number continuously increasing. They concluded that there was need to transform the social protection programmes in terms of wider coverage without 'segregating' their structures. Atakpa (2024) concluded that overall, the government's social protection programmes which sought to lift 100 million persons out of poverty did not achieve much, with 133 million being poor in 2023 as against 83 million in 2019. Citing Nigerian Bureau of Statistics (NBS) 2021 survey, he found that only 6% of responding households were either aware of, or had received, any transfers from the government, leaving out a whopping 94%.*

One programme that has been judged somewhat successful but for the same worrisome issues of coverage and continuity is the School feeding programme. Awojobi & Tinubu (2020) found that the school feeding programme increased attendance, enrolment, academic performance, and nutritional status, but the class test scores were not too impressive. Okolo-Obasi & Uduji (2021) used a combination of propensity score matching and logit modeling to analyse a sample of 2400 households across the six geopolitical regions of Nigeria. They found that the programme made significant contributions to improving the health and educational status of rural school children, stimulate job creation and boost rural economy. Orji (2024) however insisted that the inherent challenges with the manner of implementation of the school feeding programme made it not serve the envisaged purpose of enhancing pupils' nutrition and learning.

While some efforts are on and are probably hitting the mark, what need to be done to achieve social protection for all, and especially children, the elderly, the poor and vulnerable, appear to be much..

Target 4: Ensure Equal Rights for All

Equal rights to economic resources or even access to basic social services seem further far-fetched today than was previously the case. This is largely attributable to the concurrent developments that appear to further disempower the poor and weak. These developments include nation-wide insecurity (Omodero, 2024) and government failure (Okoi & Iwara, 2021; Audu, 2021); foreign exchange volatility (Nzekwu, 2006), unbridled inflation, policy and market failure (Herrick, 1994); food scarcity even across agricultural harvest seasons; political instability (Raji & Wahab, 2016), lack of jobs and youth restlessness (Akpokighe & Ejovi, 2020).

Target 5: Create Vulnerability Wedges for the Poor

Notwithstanding the provisions of Nigeria's National Climate Change Policy (2021 to 2030), little, if any, progress has been made in building up the desired resilience especially for the poor. In concrete terms, the nation was struck by floods in 2022 and again in 2024. These were extreme weather events related to climate change. In 2022, over 600 fatalities and 3.2 million people were affected across 34 states of the federation and the Federal Capital Territory. On response and coping mechanism, only 8% of affected households received assistance, and this assistance came largely from family and friends. Only a lamentable 1.5% of the households received assistance from government (NBS, 2023), even though the effort to achieve SDGs had been on for seven long years. This indicates that there was only a thin shield, if any, for the poor and vulnerable whenever disaster struck. And such was the case when, two years after, a much predicted extreme weather event took place once again. According to OCHA (2024) over 300 fatalities were experienced in the floods of 2024.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The study reviewed Nigeria's performance in her quest to achieve the first sustainable development goal, using a dialectical approach. The review was based on the internationally agreed targets, which were fashioned collaboratively, to guide globe-wide performance. Five such targets were considered covering various aspects of the goal. Judging from Nigeria's performance, the subsisting poverty climate of the country, and the functioning of the response mechanisms developed on various fronts, it appears reasonable to conclude that Nigeria can neither check the spread of poverty among her citizens nor achieve the first sustainable development goal, focused as the goal is on ending poverty in all its forms everywhere. If ending poverty in Nigeria will be at all possible, it certainly cannot occur by the target date, 2030. The likelihood is that poverty will remain, perhaps even blossom in some areas of the society where it was earlier strongly anchored, as well as some areas which were less susceptible to poverty. These include children, and youths within 15 to 35 age bracket, who have been mostly at risk, and men in the range of 35 to 55 years who were least at risk.

The following recommendations are therefore proffered: official recognition of the reality that banishing poverty in all its forms in Nigeria by 2030 is not feasible. Redrawing of the strategy

to banish all forms of poverty everywhere in Nigeria. Incorporation of the national ‘reality’ that men are as vulnerable to slipping into poverty as women, and paying special attention to males, aged 35 to 55 years. Incorporating into all future poverty combating programmes the two recurring challenges of coverage and continuity. Closer attention to macroeconomic stability, extreme weather events and insecurity.

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