

Chapter Five

Addressing Inequality: Strategies for Inclusive Development in 21st Century Nigeria

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Introduction

Inequality remains one of the most pressing challenges of our time, exacerbated by the rapid advancement of technology in the 21st century. In Nigeria, most socio-cultural, economic and political problems are traceable to inequality – often translated as a consequence of marginalisation. This paper explored strategies for addressing inequality and promoting inclusive development in Nigeria. Data for the study were generated mainly from secondary sources like texts, texts, journal articles, periodicals and internet materials, and analysed qualitatively. Applying structural-functionalism as the most suitable theoretical framework, the paper argued that using the instrumentality of government, social institutions and the educational system, the Nigerian state is capable of attaining a significant level of integration and cohesion, essential for inclusive development. By examining the multiple dimensions of inequality, including economic, social, and digital divides, the paper identified major interventions and policy measures that could foster equitable opportunities across the board, which include economic diversification, education and skills development and good governance, among others. Drawing from empirical evidence, the paper recommended among others, a robust process that would further lead to proper policy initiatives, to inform policymakers, practitioners, and stakeholders about effective strategies for building a more inclusive Nigerian state.

One of the most popular concepts among Political Scientists and indeed, social scientists – especially development scholars – is inequality. Inequality may be conceptualised as the unequal distribution of resources, opportunities, and privileges among individuals and groups within a society. There is no doubt that to a significant extent, inequality poses a significant challenge to sustainable development in many countries. Nigeria is thus not an exception. In Nigeria, the socio-economic landscape is marked by stark disparities in income, wealth, education, healthcare, and political representation. To Thomas Piketty, the concrete, the physical reality of inequality is visible to the naked eye and naturally inspires sharp but contradictory political judgments. Peasant and noble, worker and factory owner, waiter and banker: each has his or her unique vantage point and sees

important aspects of how other people live and what relations of power and domination exist between social groups, and these observations shape each person's judgment of what is and is not just. Hence there will always be a fundamentally subjective and psychological dimension to inequality. (Piketty, 2014, 2-3).

It is no secret that Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa, with about 229,379,082 people from more than 250 ethnic groups (<https://www.worldometers.info>). Despite its rich natural resources and the largest economy in Africa, however, the country faces pervasive poverty, high unemployment, inadequate infrastructure, and significant regional disparities. The oil sector, which drives the economy, is yet to translate into broad-based economic growth. This failure, which is traceable to leadership, has left large segments of the population in abject poverty (Dode, 2023). Be that as it may, it should be noted that inequality is often perpetuated by systemic factors such as historical injustices, discriminatory practices, and unequal policies, which can create barriers to social mobility and economic advancement. In other words, policies and actions that do not promote fairness, equity, and inclusivity to ensure that all individuals and groups have equal opportunities to succeed and thrive, invariably perpetuate inequality.

Inequality undermines social cohesion, economic stability, and political stability. It leads to a cycle of poverty and underdevelopment. High levels of inequality can intensify social tensions, contribute to conflict, and erode trust in institutions. The most recent example was the #EndBadGovernanceinNigeria protest which lasted from August 1, 2024, to August 10, 2024. Given that reducing inequality is capable of spurring economic growth and development, improving health care services and education, promoting political stability, etc., for sustainable development to thrive; this paper explored how inequality can be addressed to pioneer inclusive development in contemporary Nigeria. The primary objective of this paper was to explore the historical context and dimensions of inequality in Nigeria, the challenges to inclusive development, and propose pragmatic ways of addressing these issues.

The Problem

Despite Nigeria's abundant natural resources and status as Africa's largest economy, significant portions of its population remain entrenched in poverty and inequality. This development, Dode (2023, p.35) argued, "... have turned the Niger Delta into a very harsh environment..." The pervasive disparities in income, wealth, education, healthcare, and political representation highlight the multifaceted nature of inequality in Nigeria. These inequalities manifest in various dimensions and have grave implications for the country's socio-economic

development. Nigeria has one of the highest income inequality rates in the world. A small fraction of the population controls a large portion of the nation's wealth, while a substantial majority lives below the poverty line with the poverty rate estimated to have reached 38.9% in 2023, with an estimated 87 million Nigerians living in poverty (www.worldbank.org).

According to the World Bank's Inequality Report (2021), Nigeria scored 35.1 in the 2022 Gini coefficient on countries with wealth inequality, making her 11th in West Africa and 100th out of 163 countries. The report further revealed that income inequality in Nigeria is 1 to 14 (1:14) for the top 10% to the bottom 50% of the population; and 1 to 37 (1:37) for the top 1% to the bottom 50%. In simple terms, the income of one person in the top 10% of the population will pay 14 persons in the bottom 50%, while the income of one person in the top 1% of the population can pay 37 persons in the bottom 50%. In other words, income inequality between the top 1% and the bottom 50% is 1:37 (1 to 37). By extension, wealth is concentrated among a few individuals and families, leading to significant economic disparities between the rich and the poor. Added to the above-painted scenario is an uneven distribution of access to quality education. This has led to significant disparities between urban and rural areas, and among different socio-economic groups. There is a significant socio-economic divide between the northern and southern regions of Nigeria, with the North lagging in terms of development indicators such as literacy rates, healthcare access, and income levels (UNDP, 2020).

The North, in particular, suffers from low enrolment and high dropout rates (UNESCO, 2020). For instance, UNICEF (2023) revealed that the primary school dropout rate in the North-East is 51%, North-West; 44%, while North-Central has 26%. In healthcare, there is an avalanche of literature that has alluded to the fact that healthcare services are inadequately distributed, with rural areas experiencing a severe lack of medical facilities and professionals. High maternal and infant mortality rates and the prevalence of diseases further compound social inequality (WHO, 2020). On infrastructural development, urban areas, particularly cities like Abuja, Lagos, Port Harcourt, Asaba, Lokoja, Maiduguri, and Kano enjoy better infrastructure and services compared to rural areas, which mostly lack basic amenities like clean water, standard healthcare facilities, accessible roads and electricity, among others. The persistence of these inequalities poses significant challenges to Nigeria's sustainable development and constitutes major sources of unrest and riots like the “#ENDSARS” protest which started on 8th October 2020 (continued in major cities across the country). High levels of inequality undermine economic growth, social cohesion, and political stability, creating a cycle of poverty and underdevelopment (OXFAM, 2017). How do we tackle these challenges to ensure that development benefits all Nigerians?

Theoretical Framework

Structural-functionalism was the preferred theoretical framework for this paper. Prominent, pioneer theorists of the structural-functional school of thought included Spencer (1874-96); Almond (1966); Parsons (1937, 1961); Merton (1957); Davis (1959); Evans-Pritchard (1940); and Fortes (1945). Almond (1966), one of the principal proponents of structural functionalism, argues that every political system performs certain functions. It emphasises how the structures of the political system function and how (through the functions and other ways) they adjust with other systems as well as with the environment surrounding it (<http://niu.edu.in>). The theory views society as a complex system comprised of interconnected parts that work together to maintain stability and social order. From the functional perspective, therefore, societal structures, such as education, healthcare, and economic systems, perform specific functions that contribute to the overall stability and functioning of society.

Varma (2003) opined that structural-functionalism revolves around two basic concepts namely; functions and structures; based on which he raised three major questions: What basic functions are fulfilled in any given political system? By what structures? Under what conditions? Varma (2003) emphasised that while functions deal with consequences (that is, involving objectives as well as processes) of patterns of actions, structures refer to arrangements within the systems, which perform the functions. Although Auguste Comte may be identified as a structural-functionalist (<https://web.pdx.edu>), the perspective was developed primarily through the works of Emile Durkheim, who emphasised the central role that moral consequence plays in maintaining social order and creating equilibrium or a normal state of society (<https://www.researchgate.net>). Merton (1968 cited in Keith, 2012), defined function as those observed consequences, which make for the adaptation of adjustment of a given system. A major assumption of the structural-functional framework is that all systems have structures which can be identified, and those structures perform a specific set of tasks if they are to remain in existence and maintain their relevance to the system.

Political systems are compared in terms of how structures perform the expected functions in society. Fish (2015) explained that while structures are arrangements within the system which perform functions which could either be diffused or diffracted, functions are the objective consequences emanating from the workings of the system or what the system does. Thus, in applying functionalism to the issue of inequality and strategies for inclusive development in 21st-century Nigeria, insight is given into how different social structures and policies can contribute to societal equilibrium and progress. In Nigeria, structural inequalities are evident across various dimensions. Concerning economic inequality, income

differentials, wealth distribution, access to economic opportunities, etc., all perpetuate social stratification. Functionalism can be used to analyse how economic policies can be structured to promote equitable distribution of resources and opportunities, thereby ensuring social cohesion and stability. Again, unequal access to quality education reinforces social inequalities. Structural functionalism would emphasise the role of education in socialising individuals, transmitting cultural values, and preparing them for productive roles in society. Strategies like educational reforms, scholarships, and vocational training programs are viewed as mechanisms to reduce inequality and enhance social mobility.

Structural-functionalism highlights the importance of institutions, such as government, family, education, and healthcare systems, in maintaining societal equilibrium. In Nigeria, government policies, like social safety nets, healthcare reforms, and infrastructure development, can function to promote inclusive development. Policies aimed at poverty alleviation, healthcare access, and job creation are viewed as essential for reducing inequality and promoting social integration. Going by the assumptions of structural-functionalism therefore, inclusive development can be said to be a process where all societal members have equal access to opportunities and resources; hence adequate as an anchoring paradigm for the total analysis of our subject matter.

Context of Inequality in Nigeria

Nigeria's history has significantly shaped the socio-economic disparities observed today. Pre-colonial Nigeria was characterised by diverse ethnic groups with distinct social, economic, and political systems (Dode, 2014b). Inequality existed within and among these groups, often influenced by factors such as lineage, caste, and occupation. Kingdoms like the Oyo Empire, Benin Kingdom, Kanem-Bornu Empire, and Sokoto Caliphate had hierarchical structures where the elite controlled resources and political power. Between 1861 and 1960, British colonial rule intensified economic disparities by restructuring Nigeria's economy to serve British interests. The colonial administration focused on extracting raw materials, such as oil, minerals, and agricultural products, with little regard for developing local industries or improving the living conditions of Nigerians (Ake, 1981). This pattern succeeded a well-orchestrated four decades of slave poaching in Africa; which immensely depleted the workforce of the Continent, to the advantage of Europe and the Americas. The colonial policy of indirect rule reinforced existing regional inequalities by empowering traditional leaders in the North while introducing Western education and infrastructure primarily in the South. This created a lasting educational and economic divide between the northern and southern regions of Nigeria (Dode, 2014b).

At independence in 1960, there was hope for economic growth and national unity. However, political instability and ethnic tensions culminated in the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970), exacerbating regional and ethnic inequalities. The 1970s oil boom led to rapid economic growth but also increased corruption and economic mismanagement (Osaghae, 1998; Dode, 2023). The concentration of wealth in the hands of a few individuals and regions, particularly those controlling oil resources, deepened economic disparities. Prolonged periods of military rule (1966-1979, 1983-1999) were marked by authoritarian governance, corruption, and neglect of social services. The lack of democratic accountability further entrenched inequality as the military elite amassed wealth at the expense of the general population (Dode, 2014a). In 1999, Nigeria transitioned to civilian rule, raising hopes for better governance and equitable development. However, despite some economic reforms, persistent corruption, and governance challenges have continued to hinder progress in reducing inequality. There have been efforts to diversify the economy beyond oil, through the promotion of agriculture, technology, and manufacturing (UNDP, 2020). However, the impact of these policies has been limited by infrastructural deficits and policy inconsistencies (Nweze, 2016).

Dimensions of Inequality in Nigeria

Inequality can be economic (differences in income and wealth distribution among individuals and groups), social (disparities in access to education, healthcare, housing, and other social services), political (unequal influence over decision-making processes and access to political power and representation), and cultural (disparities arising from discrimination based on race, ethnicity, gender, religion, or other cultural identities), among others. An examination of these aspects of inequality vis-à-vis access to opportunities in Nigeria is further examined in this paper.

Economic inequality and access to opportunities in Nigeria

Economic inequality in Nigeria is quite pronounced. This is because it contributes to disparities in access to opportunities across various segments of society. Economic inequality manifests in income inequality (we are all alive to the fact that in July 2024, the Nigeria Government stood its ground that it cannot pay more than ₦70,000= monthly salary as national minimum wage, when a bag of rice in the same year, sold for between ₦75,000= and ₦120,000, respectively), disparity in wealth distribution, access to financial services, employment opportunities, among others. Nigeria exhibits significant income inequality, with a small percentage of the population controlling a disproportionate share of national income. The Gini coefficient, a measure of income inequality, remains high, indicating substantial disparities between the rich and the poor (World Bank, 2021). Wealth is highly

concentrated among a small elite, through enabling factors like corruption, unequal access to economic and political opportunities, and the dominance of the economy by the oil sector. Economic inequality can also translate into unequal political influence, affecting policy decisions that could promote inclusive economic growth and opportunity.

High unemployment rates; put at 5% in Nigeria (<https://tradingeconomics.com>), particularly among women and youth, limit access to formal job opportunities. The informal sector absorbs a large portion of the workforce, often characterised by low pay, lack of social protection, and precarious working conditions (ILO, 2020). There is some disconnect between the skills possessed by job seekers and the skills demanded by employers, contributing to underemployment and limited career advancement opportunities. Access to financial services remains limited, especially in rural and underserved areas. The majority of Nigerians lack access to formal banking services, credit, and insurance, hindering entrepreneurship and economic empowerment (CBN, 2022). My recent research (2024) on this subject matter came out with the finding that a thickly populated, semi-urban community like Jesse (Ethiopia West Local Government Area) did not have a single bank; even an ATM centre.

The North-South development divide equally deserves a mention. There is a notable socio-economic divide between the northern and southern regions of Nigeria. The northern region generally lags in development indicators such as education, healthcare, and infrastructure, limiting economic opportunities for residents (UNDP, 2020). Urban centres, particularly major cities like Port Harcourt, Ibadan, Asaba, Enugu, Onitsha, Lagos and Abuja, attract more investment and offer better economic opportunities compared to rural areas where poverty and lack of infrastructure prevail. Economic inequality has a far-reaching impact. In the case of Nigeria, about education, children from low-income households often receive lower-quality education, limiting their ability to compete for higher-paying jobs or entrepreneurial opportunities (a visit to the majority of the public Primary and Secondary Schools will provide empirical evidence to this assertion). In healthcare, limited access to healthcare services and insurance tends to disproportionately affect poorer segments of society and reduce productivity. In entrepreneurship, the concentration of wealth and limited access to finance hinder entrepreneurial ventures, particularly for women and marginalised groups.

Social inequality and marginalised groups

Social inequality in Nigeria is intertwined with economic disparities and manifests in various forms of marginalisation faced by vulnerable and disadvantaged groups. Nigeria's diverse ethnic and religious composition includes over 250 ethnic groups

and significant religious diversity. Ethnic minorities often face discrimination in political representation, resource allocation, and access to opportunities. Social inequality and marginalisation have profound impacts on the well-being and opportunities of vulnerable groups in Nigeria. For instance, discrimination and exclusion from economic activities constrain income generation and economic mobility. Also, barriers to political representation and participation by marginalising groups' voices in decision-making processes; hinder inclusive governance and policy development.

Political inequality in Nigeria

Political inequality refers to the disparities in political power, representation, and opportunities among different groups. It is a historical fact that certain regions and ethnic groups have historically held more political power than others in Nigeria. Political leaders often distribute resources and favours in exchange for loyalty and support, perpetuating inequality. Issues like voter suppression, rigging, and violence undermine democratic processes and disproportionately affect marginalised groups. As already alluded to, limited access to quality education and information hinders political participation and engagement, particularly for rural and disadvantaged communities. Regarding gender representation, women are under represented in Nigerian politics, holding fewer than 10% of political offices (WRDC, 2019). Economic disparities and poverty, thus limit political participation and influence, with the wealthy holding more political power. The iron law of oligarchy seems to be playing out, full-time in contemporary Nigeria.

Strategies for inclusive development in Nigeria

Addressing the challenges of inequality and promoting inclusive development in Nigeria necessitates comprehensive strategies that target economic, social, and governance reforms. These strategies aim to create opportunities for all citizens to participate in and benefit from economic growth and development.

Economic diversification

There is a need to diversify the economy beyond oil by supporting sectors such as agriculture, manufacturing, services, and technology (Dode, 2023). As Dickson and Ezirim (2017) put it, substantial structural reforms aimed at altering the course of the nation's economic system is a desideratum. In other words, there is a need to diversify the nation's economy, particularly investing in the non-oil sectors such as manufacturing and agriculture production. This policy thrust will go a long way to reduce dependence on volatile oil revenues and create diverse employment opportunities. Support for Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) through access to finance, technology, and markets is also essential. MSMEs are crucial for job creation and inclusive economic growth, particularly in rural areas.

Education and skills development

Education and lifelong learning are pivotal for personal development, economic growth, and societal progress in Nigeria. Thus, there is a need to improve access to primary, secondary, and tertiary education, especially in underserved areas. Investment in infrastructure, teacher training, (unfortunately, Nigeria has through policies almost put into extinction, all the existing teacher training colleges, etc.) and curriculum development to ensure quality education for all, is a *sine qua non*. There is a need to expand vocational and technical education programs to equip youth and adults with relevant skills for employment and entrepreneurship. We thus ask, where are the Government Technical Colleges (GTC) that dotted different states of the federation in the 1980s and 1990s?

It is expedient to improve the quality of teaching and learning in primary and secondary schools through curriculum reforms, teacher training programs, and infrastructure development. There is also the need to ensure equitable access to education for all children, including those in remote and marginalised communities, by addressing barriers such as poverty, gender disparities, and disabilities. Also important, is the need to integrate digital technologies into classrooms to enhance teaching methods, student engagement, and access to educational resources. This requirement is tied to enhancing the quality of tertiary education institutions through accreditation processes, faculty development, and research funding to promote excellence and innovation. The educational sector should equally be enhanced to expand vocational/entrepreneurial training programs aligned with market needs to equip youth and adults with technical skills for employment and entrepreneurship opportunities. Subsequently, a system should be established to foster partnerships between universities, technical institutions, and industries to bridge the gap between academia and the labour market, thereby promoting practical skills development.

This strategy should be useful for the expansion of adult literacy programs and continuing education opportunities to empower adults with basic literacy skills, digital literacy, and vocational training for career advancement. So too is the provision of opportunities for professionals to enhance their skills through workshops, seminars, online courses, and certifications to stay competitive in evolving industries. This process will further integrate entrepreneurship education into curricula at all levels to cultivate an entrepreneurial mindset, innovation, and business acumen among students and professionals. It would not be out of place to develop and promote e-learning platforms and open educational resources (OER) to increase access to education, especially in underserved areas lacking physical infrastructure. Furthermore, platforms can be deployed to facilitate remote learning options through mobile apps, video conferencing, and online platforms, ensuring

educational continuity during emergencies and disruptions (as was the case when COVID-19 ravaged the globe). The promotion of digital literacy among students, teachers, and the general population to harness the full potential of digital technologies for learning and skill development, is very important.

The government and stakeholders should develop and enforce policies that prioritise education and lifelong learning as national priorities, allocating adequate resources and fostering multi-stakeholder collaboration. In addition to the above-mentioned, there is a need to establish practicable monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to assess progress, identify challenges, and make data-driven decisions to improve educational outcomes and lifelong learning opportunities.

Healthcare access and universal health coverage (UHC)

There is an urgent need to invest in healthcare infrastructure, equipment, and training of healthcare professionals. This will ensure the equitable distribution of healthcare facilities and services, particularly in rural and underserved areas and expand access to affordable healthcare services through UHC schemes, reducing out-of-pocket expenses and improving health outcomes for all citizens.

Infrastructure development

This requires improvement of infrastructure such as roads, electricity, water supply, and telecommunications to connect rural areas and enhance productivity and living standards. This should be complemented by promoting sustainable urbanisation by investing in housing, public transportation, and green spaces to improve urban living conditions and attract investments.

Good governance and accountability

It will be expedient to vigorously strengthen the existing agencies to ensure good governance. This generally implies a system that entails sound public sector management, accountability, exchange and free flow of information and a legal framework for development (<https://www.ohchr.org>). Such will equally include anti-corruption measures, promotion of transparency, and enforcement of accountability in public institutions and governance processes. Good governance will help to build trust and capacity in public administration, streamline bureaucracy, and enhance service delivery to ensure efficient and responsive governance.

Environmental sustainability

This strategy will aid the implementation of policies and practices to mitigate climate change impacts and build resilience in vulnerable communities. The result of this will be sustainable management of natural resources, including land and water, to protect ecosystems and support livelihoods, especially in an era when the globe is going green and discarding fossil fuels.

Bridge the digital divide and access to technology

The digital divide in Nigeria refers to disparities in access to and use of digital technologies, which can cause socio-economic inequalities. Urban areas have better internet infrastructure and higher rates of internet penetration compared to rural areas where connectivity remains limited. Inadequate infrastructure, including unreliable electricity supply and poor network coverage, hampers access to and use of digital technologies in remote and underserved communities. High costs of internet services and devices pose barriers to access, particularly for low-income households and individuals in rural areas (NCC, 2021; Alliance for Affordable Internet, 2023). Added to these are limited digital literacy skills among segments of the population, especially in rural and older demographics, which hinder their ability to effectively utilise digital tools for education, employment, and entrepreneurship.

The digital divide in Nigeria has profound implications for individuals and communities. For instance, limited access to digital learning resources and online educational platforms hampers educational attainment and skills development. It also widens educational inequalities. NITDA (2023) reaffirmed that unequal access to digital platforms for commerce and entrepreneurship limits income generation and economic mobility, particularly for micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs). In the same vein, differential access to digital technologies reinforces existing social inequalities, affecting participation in civic engagement, social networks, and cultural exchanges.

Strengthening social safety nets and welfare policies

Strengthening social safety nets and welfare policies is essential for reducing poverty, which will in turn make a way for addressing inequality, and promoting inclusive development. To this end, there is a need to expand and improve conditional cash transfer programs targeting genuinely vulnerable households, including women, children, the elderly, and persons with disabilities, to alleviate poverty and improve livelihoods. The government should introduce and scale up social pension schemes for elderly citizens who lack adequate financial support, ensuring dignified living conditions in old age. The need to implement food assistance programs and nutritional support for disadvantaged populations to combat hunger and malnutrition, particularly in rural and conflict-affected areas cannot be over emphasised.

Community engagement and participatory development

Community engagement and participatory development are critical approaches to fostering inclusive governance, sustainable development, and social cohesion in Nigeria. Thus, there is a need to promote decentralisation and devolution of powers to local governments, empowering communities to make decisions and manage

resources based on local priorities and needs. It is thus heart-warming to note that the Local Government financial autonomy law will be implemented, subsequently (2024). Support for community-based organisations (CBOs) and civil society organisations (CSOs) to facilitate grassroots participation, advocacy, and community development initiatives will further enhance growth and development. The government should also facilitate the development of participatory local development plans and policy-making that involves community members in identifying priorities, allocating resources, and monitoring project implementation. Other viable strategies include enhanced civic engagements, public consultations and citizen feedback mechanisms.

Conclusion

This paper set out to among others, address inequality and developmental challenges in Nigeria. It applied a detailed analysis of the subject matter, using among others, the structural-functional framework, and context of inequality in Nigeria, dimensions of inequality, and measures for ensuring inclusive development in the country. The chapter concludes that addressing inequality in Nigeria in the twenty-first century requires a multifaceted approach that combines economic, social, and political strategies. As earlier stated, prioritising policies that support fair access to economic, healthcare, and educational opportunities while making sure that marginalised groups are actively involved in decision-making processes is crucial for fostering inclusive growth. Addressing systemic inequities would also require enhancing governance, decreasing corruption, diversification of the economy and establishing a more open and accountable system. Nigeria can create a more equal society and raise the standard of living for all of its residents by emphasising inclusive and sustainable growth.

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