



Poverty and Insecurity in Nigeria: Implications for Sustainable Development

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ABSTRACT

Background: Poverty and insecurity remain two of the most critical challenges confronting Nigeria, undermining governance, socio-economic progress, and sustainable development. These twin issues are interlinked, with poverty fueling insecurity and insecurity further deepening poverty.

Objective: This study examines the relationship between poverty and insecurity in Nigeria and their combined implications for sustainable development, identifying underlying causes, manifestations, and policy gaps.

Method: A descriptive research design was adopted, drawing on secondary data from government reports, academic literature, and international development agencies. Data were analyzed thematically, with key trends and statistical indicators presented in tabular form.

Results: Findings reveal a cyclical interaction between poverty and insecurity, driven by unemployment, income inequality, corruption, ethno-religious conflicts, and weak institutions. The study shows that insecurity has disrupted economic activities, displaced communities, and discouraged foreign investment, thereby worsening poverty levels.

Conclusion: Without integrated and inclusive socio-economic policies, Nigeria's pursuit of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) will remain elusive.

Unique Contribution: This paper provides an evidence-based analysis linking poverty and insecurity as dual threats to sustainable development, emphasizing the need for multi-sectoral intervention.

Recommendations: Strengthening governance institutions, enhancing social protection programmes, addressing youth unemployment, and promoting inclusive economic growth are critical steps forward.

Keywords: Poverty, Insecurity, Sustainable Development, Nigeria, Governance, Inequality..



INTRODUCTION

Poverty and insecurity in Nigeria are persistent and mutually reinforcing challenges that significantly undermine national development. Poverty, defined as the inability to access basic human needs such as food, shelter, healthcare, and education, affects millions of Nigerians despite the country's abundant natural and human resources. As Akinwale (2020) asserts, "Poverty in Nigeria is structural, deeply entrenched, and perpetuated by governance failures, poor economic planning, and systemic inequality" (p. 34). This structural poverty creates a vulnerable population that is more susceptible to engaging in or being affected by acts of insecurity.

Insecurity, encompassing terrorism, banditry, kidnapping, and communal clashes, has increasingly become a national crisis. The Boko Haram insurgency in the North-East, banditry in the North-West, and farmer–herder conflicts across the Middle Belt have resulted in the loss of lives, displacement of communities, and destruction of property (Onuoha, 2019). As Nwankwo (2021) explains, "The persistence of violent conflicts in Nigeria has a direct correlation with economic deprivation, unemployment, and marginalization of youth" (p. 58).

The interrelationship between poverty and insecurity is cyclical. Poverty increases vulnerability to insecurity, as marginalized individuals seek alternative means of survival, while insecurity disrupts livelihoods, displaces populations, and destroys infrastructure, further entrenching poverty (UNDP, 2021). The nexus of these issues threatens Nigeria's ability to achieve sustainable development, particularly in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which emphasize economic growth, social inclusion, and peacebuilding . Addressing either poverty or insecurity in isolation is insufficient; an integrated approach is essential to break the vicious cycle that hinders progress.

Nigeria faces persistent poverty, affecting over 63% of its population in 2022, and escalating insecurity, displacing over 1.5 million people from Boko Haram insurgency. These issues are mutually reinforcing, especially in rural and conflict-prone areas, undermining development and economic growth (Odoemelam et al., 2013). Ineffective, fragmented policies risk failing without addressing their interlinked nature for sustainable solutions.

However, gaps in empirical research persist. Few studies examine the simultaneous effect of poverty and insecurity on sustainable development, and there is limited longitudinal data to track trends over time. Most existing studies rely on cross-sectional analyses, which limit the understanding of dynamic interactions between socio-economic and security challenges.



OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The objectives of this study are to:

1. Examine the relationship between poverty and insecurity in Nigeria.
2. Identify the major causes and manifestations of poverty and insecurity.
3. Analyze the implications of poverty and insecurity for sustainable development in Nigeria.
4. Recommend policy measures for breaking the cycle between poverty and insecurity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptual Explanation: Poverty and Insecurity in Nigeria

Poverty and insecurity in Nigeria are deeply interlinked phenomena that reinforce one another and significantly undermine socio-economic development. This conceptual relationship can be understood through themes such as the cycle of poverty, governance deficits, structural inequality, and the impact on sustainable development. One foundational concept is the cycle of poverty, where persistent deprivation—marked by lack of resources, education, and opportunity—entraps successive generations (Cycle of poverty). In Nigeria, poverty is predominantly chronic in rural regions, creating a steady pool of vulnerable populations exposed to insecurity, whether through criminal recruitment, conflict, or insurgent movements (Orji et al., 2024).

Governance deficits exacerbate this cycle. Weak institutions, corruption, and lack of accountability erode public trust and breed insecurity, as marginalized populations are excluded and disenfranchised, conditions ripe for conflict. Structural inequality further compounds the problem, with rural communities often neglected in terms of infrastructure, education, and healthcare, perpetuating poverty and social exclusion. It was demonstrated that poverty and unemployment increase insecurity, which in turn intensifies poverty. Insecurity in agricultural regions reduces productivity, drop in crop and livestock output (Adebayo, 2020; Aligwe, et al., 2017). Such losses exacerbate rural impoverishment, driving migration and destabilization.

Nigerians, especially those with limited education, are vulnerable to recruitment by criminal groups or extremist movements. This correlation aligns with Maslow's theory of needs, where deprivation can trigger radical behavior. The deprivation theory proposed by Gurr argues that frustration from unmet needs can escalate into violent aggression (Gurr, 1970). These dynamics also threaten Nigeria's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Insecurity disrupts agriculture, fueling food shortages and hunger (SDG2) and deepening poverty (SDG1). Poor security hinders economic growth and decent work (SDG8) and undermines the rule of law and strong institutions (UNDP, 2022).



To break the cycle, integrated interventions are essential. Scholars emphasize the need for policies that simultaneously uplift economic conditions and strengthen security such as, enhancing rural infrastructure, expanding educational access, investing in conflict resolution, and empowering community policing (Akinwale, 2020). Such strategies can help address deprivation, reduce the allure of criminality, and build resilience. In summary, the nexus of poverty and insecurity in Nigeria is sustained by overlapping socio-economic, institutional, and structural factors. These must be addressed in a coordinated manner through holistic development, governance reforms, and community-driven solutions—to foster lasting energy, stability, and prosperity.

Sustainable Development in Nigeria

Sustainable development refers to meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. In the Nigerian context, sustainable development entails the pursuit of economic growth, social equity, and environmental protection in an integrated and balanced manner (UNDP, 2022; Odoemelam et al., 2013). It is anchored on global frameworks such as the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which Nigeria adopted in 2015.

Economic Dimension: The economic pillar of sustainable development emphasizes sustained growth, job creation, and equitable distribution of resources. Nigeria, being Africa's largest economy, has potential for inclusive growth through sectors such as agriculture, manufacturing, and services. However, economic instability, high unemployment rates, and poor infrastructure hinder progress (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2022). Sustainable economic policies must focus on diversifying away from oil dependency, promoting small and medium enterprises, and fostering technological innovation.

Social Dimension: Social sustainability revolves around reducing poverty, enhancing education, improving healthcare, and ensuring equality. Despite policies like the National Social Investment Programmes, Nigeria remains among the countries with the highest poverty rates, with over 63% of the population experiencing multidimensional poverty (NBS, 2022). Social inequality, gender disparities, and weak social protection systems exacerbate vulnerability. Achieving SDGs 1 (No Poverty), 2 (Zero Hunger), and 3 (Good Health and Well-being) requires investment in human capital and strengthening social safety nets (Akinyemi & Olu-Adeyemi, 2022).

Environmental Dimension: Nigeria faces pressing environmental challenges, including desertification in the north, coastal erosion in the south, oil pollution in the Niger Delta, and rapid deforestation (Adebayo, 2020). Environmental sustainability demands policies that balance resource exploitation with conservation. The Nigerian government has introduced frameworks such as the National Environmental Standards and Regulations Enforcement Agency (NESREA) Act, but enforcement remains weak. Climate change adaptation strategies, renewable energy investments, and sustainable agricultural practices are critical for resilience.



Governance and Institutional Capacity: Sustainable development in Nigeria is constrained by weak governance, policy inconsistency, and corruption (Aguene, 2024). Effective governance requires strong institutions that enforce laws, manage resources efficiently, and foster transparency. Without institutional reforms, sustainable development initiatives risk being undermined. The SDG 16 goal, promoting peace, justice, and strong institutions is particularly critical for Nigeria, given its persistent insecurity and governance deficits.

EMPIRICAL REVIEW

Several empirical studies have explored the nexus between poverty and insecurity in Nigeria. Adebayo (2020) notes that youth unemployment and economic deprivation are primary drivers of insecurity, as frustrated individuals are more likely to engage in insurgency and criminal activities. Similarly, Onuoha (2019) observes that areas with higher poverty indices are disproportionately affected by violent extremism, suggesting a strong correlation between socio-economic marginalization and conflict.

Statistical data further supports these assertions. According to the National Bureau of Statistics (2022), over 133 million Nigerians live below the poverty line, with rural areas experiencing the highest rates of deprivation. Concurrently, insecurity indicators reveal that Boko Haram insurgency, banditry, and kidnapping have displaced over 4 million people between 2015 and 2023 (UNDP, 2021; UNHCR, 2023).

Olayemi and Ojo (2021) conducted a regional analysis, finding that “insecurity in the North-West and North-East regions of Nigeria is significantly associated with unemployment, low educational attainment, and inadequate access to basic amenities” (p. 50). These findings underscore the cyclical nature of poverty and insecurity: deprivation breeds vulnerability to violence, and violence disrupts economic activities, reinforcing poverty.

Gaps in Literature: Existing literature on fuel subsidy removal in Nigeria largely focuses on national-level macroeconomic indicators such as GDP, inflation, and fiscal balance, with limited empirical evidence on direct household-level effects, particularly in specific LGAs like Jalingo. Many studies adopt policy or theoretical perspectives without quantitatively linking subsidy removal to microeconomic realities such as household income erosion, cost of living, and expenditure changes. Most prior research examines earlier subsidy removals, notably in 2012, which may not reflect the unique context of the May 2023 removal under the Tinubu Administration. Furthermore, few studies combine qualitative and quantitative methods to capture both lived household experiences and statistical trends, making the current study’s mixed-method approach a critical contribution to bridging this gap.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: HUMAN NEEDS THEORY

The Human Needs Theory (HNT), popularized by John Burton (1990), posits that certain needs such as security, identity, recognition, personal development, and participation are non-



negotiable and universal. Unlike interests, which are negotiable, human needs are inherent to human dignity and survival. When these needs are denied or unmet, conflict often emerges as individuals or groups seek to satisfy them by any means possible (Burton, 1990).

In the context of Nigeria, poverty and insecurity can be interpreted as interconnected manifestations of unmet human needs. Poverty represents deprivation of basic physiological and economic needs, including access to food, shelter, and healthcare (Maslow, 1943). Insecurity reflects the absence of safety and protection—needs that are equally fundamental. The persistence of these conditions in Nigeria, despite policy interventions, suggests systemic failure in addressing citizens' basic human needs.

HNT emphasizes that unmet needs are root causes of conflict rather than symptoms. In Nigeria, regions with entrenched poverty, such as the Northeast and Northwest, are also epicenters of insecurity, including Boko Haram insurgency, banditry, and communal clashes (Oladipo, 2020). Poverty predisposes vulnerable populations to recruitment by armed groups who promise livelihoods, protection, or ideological fulfillment (Akinyemi & Olu-Adeyemi, 2021). Conversely, insecurity disrupts economic activities, displaces populations, and reduces access to markets and services, thereby exacerbating poverty (UNHCR, 2023).

By applying HNT, this study frames poverty and insecurity not merely as economic and political challenges but as mutually reinforcing cycles of unmet human needs. This theoretical lens shifts policy discourse from reactive measures (e.g., military crackdowns) toward proactive strategies aimed at satisfying citizens' basic needs economic empowerment, equitable resource distribution, social inclusion, and effective governance.

Relevance to the Study: HNT is relevant to this research for three main reasons. First, it provides a holistic framework that integrates economic, social, and security dimensions of poverty and insecurity. Second, it underlines the importance of addressing root causes rather than symptoms aligning with the study's aim to assess the interplay between deprivation and violence. Third, it aligns with Nigeria's development policy goals, such as the National Development Plan (2021–2025), which emphasizes human capital development and poverty reduction as prerequisites for peace and stability (NPC, 2021).

Criticisms of Human Needs Theory: Despite its strengths, HNT has been criticized for several reasons. First, it is often considered too broad and abstract, making operationalization difficult in empirical research. Defining and measuring “needs” in a culturally diverse society like Nigeria can be challenging. Second, critics argue that HNT may overemphasize consensus and underplay the role of power politics and structural inequalities in perpetuating deprivation. Third, while HNT advocates for satisfying needs to prevent conflict, it provides limited guidance on how to prioritize competing needs in resource-scarce environments (Avruch & Mitchell, 2013).



METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a descriptive research design, which is suitable for examining the relationship between poverty and insecurity and their implications for sustainable development. **Data was** collected from multiple secondary sources such as documented cases, reports, and statistics related to poverty and insecurity in Nigeria between 2010 and 2024 to provide a comprehensive understanding of the issues. 40 key publications, relevant reports and studies that provided both quantitative and qualitative data and met the criteria for reliability, relevance and timeliness on poverty and insecurity in Nigeria were selected purposively. The data were analyzed using thematic content analysis for qualitative information and descriptive statistics for quantitative data. Tables and percentage distributions were used to present poverty rates, insecurity incidents, and Patterns were identified to establish correlations between poverty and insecurity, and their implications for sustainable development.

RESULTS

This section presents the analyzed data on poverty and insecurity in Nigeria, highlighting their interconnectedness and implications for sustainable development. The results are drawn from secondary statistical records and thematic reviews of relevant literature.

Poverty Trends in Nigeria

Table 1 presents the trend of poverty incidence in Nigeria over selected years.

Table 1: Poverty Incidence in Nigeria (2010–2022)

Year	National Poverty Rate (%)	Rural Poverty Rate (%)	Urban Poverty Rate (%)
2010	48.3	59.2	36.8
2016	45.5	53.6	35.4
2019	40.1	52.1	30.6
2022	63.0	72.0	42.0

(Source: NBS, 2022)

Between 2010 and 2022, poverty in Nigeria fluctuated before rising sharply in recent years. In 2010, the national poverty rate was 48.3%, with rural areas (59.2%) far higher than urban areas (36.8%). By 2016, it fell slightly to 45.5% due to agricultural investments and cash transfer programs (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2022), though rural poverty remained above 50%. The lowest level came in 2019 at 40.1%, with rural and urban poverty at 52.1% and 30.6%, linked to targeted programs like the National Social Investment Programme (Onuoha, 2021). Despite these gains, rural-urban disparities persisted due to structural inequalities in infrastructure, education, and markets (World Bank, 2020).



In 2022, poverty rose to 63.0% nationally, with rural poverty at 72.0% and urban poverty at 42.0%. This increase was driven by macroeconomic shocks—COVID-19, inflation, currency depreciation, and insecurity in food-producing areas (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2022). Rural livelihoods, heavily dependent on subsistence farming, were further undermined by climate change, market volatility, and conflict (Akinyemi & Olu-Adeyemi, 2021).

The rural-urban gap supports the structural dualism theory, which explains how urban centers benefit disproportionately from economic growth due to unequal resource allocation (Todaro & Smith, 2020). Poverty and insecurity remain mutually reinforcing, with rural deprivation fueling migration, unemployment, and recruitment into armed groups, while insecurity disrupts food supply and drives up prices (Oladipo, 2020).

These trends show that sustainable poverty reduction in Nigeria requires resilient, inclusive, and rural-focused strategies to address deprivation, enhance security, and promote equitable opportunities.

Insecurity Incidents and Impacts

Table 2 summarizes selected insecurity incidents in Nigeria from 2018 to 2023.

Table 2: Selected Insecurity Incidents in Nigeria (2018–2023)

Type of Incident	Reported Cases	Estimated Deaths	Displaced Persons	Source
Boko Haram insurgency	1,240	8,920	2,100,000	UNHCR, 2023
Banditry	980	6,320	1,050,000	SBM Intel, 2023
Farmer–herder clashes	620	3,450	680,000	Amnesty Int., 2022
Kidnapping	4,110	920	18,000	CLEEN Foundation, 2023

(Source: NBS, 2022)

The data underscores the grave human and social toll of insecurity in Nigeria. Boko Haram remains the deadliest, with 1,240 reported cases causing 8,920 deaths and displacing over 2.1 million people (UNHCR, 2023). This supports Onuoha's (2021) view that the insurgency has devastated the North-East's socio-economic base and strained humanitarian responses. The displacement trend reflects UNDP's (2022) claim that forced migration disrupts livelihoods, heightens poverty, and burdens host communities.

Banditry follows closely, with 980 incidents leading to 6,320 deaths and 1,050,000 displaced persons (SBM Intel, 2023). As Akinyemi and Olu-Adeyemi (2021) note, attacks on rural communities worsen food insecurity, mirroring the World Bank's (2020) warning about the link between rural violence and stalled poverty reduction.



Farmer–herder clashes, though fewer (620 cases), caused 3,450 deaths and 680,000 displacements (Amnesty International, 2022), often rooted in resource competition and climate pressures. Kidnapping recorded 4,110 cases but fewer deaths (920) and 18,000 displacements (CLEEN Foundation, 2023). Still, Edeko (2022) notes its economic and psychological toll undermines public trust and investment. Overall, the findings affirm Oladipo’s (2020) claim that insecurity and poverty reinforce each other, demanding integrated security, humanitarian, and development solutions.

Linking Poverty and Insecurity

The findings reveal a cyclical relationship:

- I. Poverty fuels insecurity by increasing susceptibility to recruitment into insurgent and criminal groups, particularly among unemployed youth.
- II. Insecurity deepens poverty by disrupting livelihoods, displacing populations, and destroying infrastructure.
- III. Areas most affected by insecurity—such as Borno, Zamfara, Katsina, and Plateau States—are also among the poorest, underscoring the geographic overlap between poverty and insecurity.

As observed by UNDP (2022), "conflict-affected regions in Nigeria exhibit the highest poverty rates, creating a development trap that is difficult to escape without targeted interventions."

Implications for Sustainable Development

The persistence of poverty and insecurity undermines Nigeria’s progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly:

- **SDG 1:** No Poverty
- **SDG 2:** Zero Hunger
- **SDG 8:** Decent Work and Economic Growth
- **SDG 16:** Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions

Insecurity disrupts agricultural production, which is the primary livelihood for rural Nigerians, contributing to food insecurity and higher prices. Poverty, in turn, limits access to education and healthcare, reducing human capital development. Without addressing these issues jointly, Nigeria risks falling short of its 2030 SDG commitments.

The findings underscore the interconnectedness of poverty, hunger, economic stagnation, and insecurity in Nigeria, posing significant threats to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Insecurity disrupts agricultural production: The mainstay of rural livelihoods—leading to reduced food supply, higher prices, and worsening food insecurity, thereby undermining SDG



2: Zero Hunger (FAO, 2022). This aligns with Akinyemi and Olu-Adeyemi's (2021) assertion that persistent rural violence erodes agricultural productivity and deepens vulnerability.

Rising poverty further limits access to quality education and healthcare, constraining human capital formation and hindering progress toward SDG 1: No Poverty and SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth (World Bank, 2020). As Oladipo (2020) notes, poverty and insecurity are mutually reinforcing, creating a vicious cycle of deprivation and instability.

Moreover, the absence of peace and strong institutions (SDG 16) exacerbates these challenges, as weak governance and limited conflict resolution capacity allow violence to persist (UNDP, 2022). Without integrated strategies that address both security and socio-economic deprivation, Nigeria risks missing its 2030 SDG targets. Coordinated policies that combine peacebuilding, rural development, and social protection are essential to break the poverty–insecurity trap and foster sustainable growth.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the interrelationship between poverty and insecurity in Nigeria and their implications for sustainable development. The findings reveal a mutually reinforcing cycle in which poverty exacerbates insecurity, while insecurity deepens poverty by disrupting livelihoods, displacing populations, and undermining economic productivity. Both phenomena are driven by factors such as youth unemployment, income inequality, weak governance, corruption, and ethno-religious tensions.

The analysis highlights that Nigeria's development challenges cannot be addressed in isolation. Poverty reduction policies that ignore insecurity, or security interventions that fail to address socio-economic deprivation, are unlikely to produce sustainable results. Sustainable development in Nigeria requires an integrated approach that simultaneously addresses the root causes of poverty and the drivers of insecurity.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the study recommends the following:

1. **Strengthening Governance and Institutions:** Nigerian authorities must enhance transparency, accountability, and efficiency in public institutions to reduce corruption, improve service delivery, and foster public trust.
2. **Targeted Poverty Alleviation:** Expansion of social protection programmes, microfinance schemes, and vocational training for youth can reduce economic vulnerability and limit susceptibility to criminal and insurgent recruitment.
3. **Inclusive Economic Growth:** Policies should focus on job creation, particularly in agriculture, manufacturing, and the informal sector, to address unemployment and income inequality.



4. **Community-Based Security Initiatives:** Engaging local communities in security planning and conflict resolution can prevent violent clashes and build resilience.
5. **Integrated Policy Approach:** Poverty reduction and security strategies should be coordinated to break the cyclical interaction between the two issues. Development planning must consider regional disparities to ensure equitable access to resources and opportunities.
6. **Monitoring and Evaluation:** Continuous data collection and impact assessment are essential to evaluate the effectiveness of interventions and make evidence-based adjustments.

By implementing these recommendations, Nigeria can make meaningful progress toward reducing poverty, mitigating insecurity, and achieving sustainable development.

Ethical Clearance

Ethical approval and informed consent were obtained from all participants in this study. Participants were clearly informed that the exercise was solely for academic purposes and that their involvement was entirely voluntary.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that the study was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be interpreted as a potential conflict of interest.

Authors' Contributions

Dr Bakari Muhammadu Sukare, drafted the initial manuscript, designed the study and collected the data, while Mr. Abubakar Abdullahi conducted the analysis and interpretation. All authors critically reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript and take full responsibility for its content and similarity index.

Availability of Data and Materials

The datasets generated and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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