Unlocking Nigerian Universities' Role in Poverty Reduction: Challenges, Opportunities, and Pathways to Sustainable Development

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Abstract
Reducing poverty and achieving sustainable development are critical goals for Nigeria. Universities, as hubs of advanced learning, possess the capacity to generate the knowledge, skills, and innovations necessary to tackle the fundamental issues contributing to poverty. However, for universities to fully harness this potential, they must address several challenges, including inadequate funding, insufficient equipment, and subpar teaching quality. This paper explores the role of Nigerian universities in poverty alleviation, as well as the challenges and benefits of their involvement. The discussion focuses on the concept of poverty, its prevalence both globally and specifically in Nigeria, a review of existing literature on poverty reduction strategies in Nigeria, and the primary causes of poverty in the country. Additionally, the paper highlights various barriers and opportunities for universities to enhance their contributions to poverty reduction in Nigeria. It advocates for the creation of a conducive environment for teaching, learning, and research within Nigerian universities and calls for stronger collaborations between academia and industry to promote entrepreneurship and innovation, ultimately supporting the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 1.

Keywords: Universities, Sustainable Development Goal, Poverty, Nigeria

Introduction
Nigeria as the most populous black nation is currently passing through a turbulent time that has manifested itself into a myriad of problems ranging from a high level of poverty, insecurity and persistent clashes between herders and farmers and lack of trust among the various ethnic groups on the other hand in the country which has resulted in agitations for separate republics like Biafra and Oduduwa Republics. A large number of problems confronting Nigeria as a nation could be rightly tackled if the government pays adequate attention to the country's educational system. Education serves as the foundation for national development, with the quality of education in a country directly impacting the quality of life of its citizens. An educated population tends to be more productive, thereby contributing to overall national prosperity. As such, providing high-quality education is not only beneficial but is also crucial for poverty reduction (Oranga et al., 2020). Higher education, in particular, is pivotal for economic growth and poverty alleviation, as it produces experts across various fields essential for economic progress (Bhandari, 2021). Consequently, the role of universities in reducing poverty cannot be overstated. Lin (2004) noted that higher education significantly influences economic growth, which is a vital component of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Ensuring access to quality education, regardless of gender or race, is fundamental to achieving these goals.

In September 2015, global leaders signed an agreement aimed at eradicating poverty, improving living standards, fostering inclusive societies, and reversing environmental degradation. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development emphasizes balanced development—economic, social, and environmental—across all nations, ensuring that no one is left behind, especially the most impoverished and marginalized. This agenda includes 17 SDGs, each with specific targets to measure progress. The SDGs are comprehensive and ambitious, addressing issues such as peace, justice, and inclusive societies, which are critical for sustainable development. They aim to complete the

unfinished business of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and tackle new challenges that have emerged, such as growing income inequality, insecure employment, climate change, and environmental degradation.

The 17 SDGs encompass a wide range of areas, including the eradication of poverty, ending hunger, ensuring good health and well-being, providing quality education, promoting gender equality, ensuring clean water and sanitation, and fostering affordable and clean energy. They also focus on promoting decent work and economic growth, building resilient infrastructure, creating sustainable cities and communities, ensuring responsible consumption and production, taking urgent climate action, protecting life below water and on land, promoting peace and justice, and fostering partnerships for the goals.

Sustainable development advocates for a holistic approach that integrates economic, social, and environmental objectives (United Nations, 2019). Achieving these objectives also requires good governance, which involves governments performing essential functions to ensure societal prosperity. Key government responsibilities include providing social services such as healthcare and education, developing infrastructure like roads and power, ensuring public safety, promoting scientific research and innovation, and enforcing regulations to protect the environment. Education is a crucial tool for advancing social, economic, and political development. According to Section 1(4a) of the Federal
Republic of Nigeria's 2013 policy, education is a means for national development, encompassing the generation of ideas, their integration for national progress, and the interaction of people and concepts.

In pursuit of the SDGs, the Nigerian government has implemented various measures, such as ensuring inclusive education for all children, regardless of cultural, ethnic, or religious background. Quality education is recognized as a vital instrument for achieving the SDGs, as noted by Osunwusi (2020), who described education as a fundamental human right essential for sustainable development. This recognition is one reason why primary education in Nigeria is made free, compulsory, and universal. To support the attainment of the SDGs, Nigeria has introduced laws, policies, and models, such as the Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) initiative launched in 1992. It is essential that all levels of education contribute to the 2030 transformation agenda of the SDGs. Guan *et al.* (2019) underscores the importance of mobilizing public participation in realizing the SDGs. The first of the SDGs, "No Poverty," aims to address and ultimately eradicate global poverty. Poverty encompasses various forms of deprivation, including low income, lack of basic needs such as shelter, clothing, and transportation, and broader multidimensional deprivation (Odi, n.d.). A nation's poverty level significantly impacts its social, economic, and political stability, making it a critical issue to address for achieving a stable and sustainable society.

Poverty is a global challenge, especially in developing countries, where it remains prevalent despite efforts by governments, non-profit organizations, and individuals to alleviate it (Bawa et al., 2018). According to the World Bank (2023), the global poverty rate increased from 648 million to approximately 659 million people in 2019, based on the international poverty line of $2.15 per person per day (2017 PPP). This suggests that over 11 million more people are living in extreme poverty, underscoring the importance of the United Nations' goal of eradicating poverty as the first SDG. Universities play a crucial role in achieving this goal by incorporating poverty eradication into their core missions and leveraging their unique resources to address this challenge.

Nigeria, as a developing nation, faces a significant poverty challenge. In May 2020, Nigeria's National Bureau of Statistics released the 2018/2019 Nigeria Living Standard Survey (NLSS), which provided the first official estimates of poverty and welfare in nearly a decade. The survey revealed that 30.9% of Nigerians lived below the international extreme poverty line in 2018/2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic (World Bank, 2023). The World Bank report further highlighted that poverty reduction in Nigeria was slow before the pandemic and has been exacerbated by subsequent crises, including the impact of the Ukraine conflict on global commodity markets, the depreciation of the naira, and severe flooding affecting domestic food supply. By October 2022, inflation had reached 21.1% year-on-year, its highest rate in 17 years, with food inflation at 23.7%, leaving many Nigerians below the poverty line. Those living in poverty lack access to essential services such as healthcare, clean water, sanitation, and quality education (Pokhrel, 2015).
In affirming the global causes of poverty, Myers (2018) identified the following as some of the causes:

i.   Under-employment i.e many people living in the developing countries of the world, live without good jobs and over-exploitation of many natural resources that could create job opportunities are mostly under pressure, leading to conflict and land disputes. Again, in some countries like Nigeria and Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), many citizens work with low salaries and allowances, making a lot of families to live in extreme poverty.

ii.   Wars and conflicts: Poverty sprouts when many infrastructures and basic facilities are destroyed. It could make families to sell their properties and leave behind valuable items. For instance, nearly 50% of the entire population of Syria is in extreme poverty. In Nigeria, many farmers were killed, and kidnapped on their farm sites and a lot of insecurity surrounding agricultural practices has resulted in low economic output

iii.   Inequality: either in social or economic decision are dominant in gender, tribal, religious issues, thus resulting into poverty because the affected people are deprived of the tools to prosper.

iv.   Poor Education: many children especially girls are deprived of good education due to low income of parents, and non-realization of the benefit of education to girl child. UNESCO estimated that over 171 million people could be liberated from poverty with good education and poverty can be reduced if not totally eradicated.

v.   Climate Change: millions of people globally are usually affected with natural disasters like heavy rainfall, drought, flooding, erosion, earthquakes. This is because many populations rely solely on agricultural practices like for survival. Substance farming, hunting, fishing and abundant harvest are gotten during rainy season without adequate reserve.

vi.   Government Influence: with the lack of Infrastructure like good roads, streetlights, and internet services from the government, travelling and communication are affected. The cost implication of the wasted time and money would result to poverty. With the ineffective and poor governance, many families live in fear and anxieties because large portion of the country's wealth is in the hands of a few politicians. In Ethiopia for example, repeated drought resulted into failure and very low harvest while in Nigeria, in 2022, repeated kidnapping of people by "Boko Haram", "Bandits" has scared so many citizens to walk alone or go out to seek livelihood. All in all, results to hunger crisis, reported cases of "child selling" and pulling children out from school and respected shocks have resulted into extreme poverty.

In order to address these problems, higher education can play a vital role by providing socio-economic benefits to society. For instance, higher education can benefit people through provision of quality education, conducting groundbreaking research and innovation and involvement in community service and development.

Roles of Universities in Poverty Reduction
Universities globally have been placing significant importance on sustainability and driving positive changes within their host communities through the town and gown relationship. Phill (2023) reported that the Times Higher Education Impact Rankings 2022 scored- Western University (Canada), Queen's University (Canada), University of Johannesburg (South Africa), University of Guelph (Canada) and University of Indonesia among the universities highest on SDG 1(No Poverty) using the following metrics: Research on poverty, students receiving financial aid due to poverty, university and community anti-poverty programs.

According to Pokhrel (2015), a causal relationship exists between poverty and education with both reinforcing each other. Poverty is characterized by restricting education opportunities while access to education plays a vital role in alleviating poverty by enhancing skills and abilities. There are several ways in which the university can contribute to the nation's poverty eradication. This includes:

1. Provision of Quality Education: Through provision of quality education to individuals and communities, universities have capacity to reduce poverty rate to a substantive percentage. Higher education catalyzes positive change by providing individuals with the knowledge, skills, and abilities required to create a better living. By offering education in areas such as agriculture, engineering, medicine, education and entrepreneurship, universities can equip individuals with necessary skills needed to create sustainable livelihoods thereby improving their economic conditions. For instance, provision of training in cultivation of crops, rearing of livestock, irrigation, and other farming techniques would increase farmers' productivity. The role of higher education becomes obvious as skills and productivity brings about higher earnings opportunities for people and as such improve the quality of their lives (Kiani, 2011).

2. Research and Innovation: Through conducting cutting-edge research, universities can improve the lives of the world's poorest communities. Therefore, research activities of universities that can bring about innovation and develop human capacity can help raise standard of living (Bhandari, 2021).Through partnerships with governments, non-profit organizations, and private enterprises, universities can collaborate to identify innovative solutions to poverty and provide extension services that will benefit the society.

3. Empowerment: Universities can also play a role in empowering communities and individuals by providing avenue that will spur the zeal for taking ownership of their own poverty-alleviation initiatives. Universities can foster leadership and create platforms that empower people and organizations to strive for progress and promote sustainable development in their own communities. By providing access to educational resources, mentorship, and funding opportunities, universities can spark innovation, enhance capabilities, and generate authentic solutions to reduce poverty. For instance, universities can establish and provide access to community-based learning and service opportunities that enable students and faculty to engage in renewable programs and initiatives that address poverty firsthand.

4. Vocational Education and Training (VET): Vocational education and training (VET) programs have a tendency to enhance the employability and entrepreneurship of graduates through provision of practical and technical skills that are in demand in various sectors, such as agriculture, manufacturing, services, and ICT. VET programs can also foster innovation and creativity among students, enabling them to create new products and services that can generate income and employment as well as improving access to credit facilities. This is in line with Okafor (2008) who opined that vocational and technical education systems play a crucial role in the social and economic development of a nation. Owing to their dynamic nature, they are continuously subject to the forces driving change in the schools, industry and society.

5. Scholarship Programmes: Universities can also grant scholarships to indigent students by granting them scholarships that would either fully or partially cover tuition fees and accommodation costs. The scholarship can either be initiated by the universities, government agencies, multinational companies, alumni members or NGOs. This would enable the students have access to quality education and also assist them in breaking the poverty cycle.

6. Provision of free hostel accommodation for indigent students. A typical example is the donation of Falkad Hostel by a philanthropist to the management of the University of Ilorin to cater for the housing needs of indigent students free of charge.

7. Development of curriculum with course contents geared towards meeting the immediate needs of the host communities. For instance, the newly proposed CCMAS by the Nigerian National Universities Commission which is an upgrade of the Minimum Benchmark for Academics (BMAS). The new curriculum requires that each university develop 30% of its curriculum to meet the peculiarities of each university and also have impacts on the immediate host community.

8. Establishment of University-wide Exhibition of Innovation and Creativity: The programme is in its first edition at the University of Ilorin. It was put in place to encourage students to become innovators and creators. In the first edition, the winner was given a monetary reward of one hundred thousand naira by the university and two hundred thousand naira by the organizers- Opolo Global Innovation.

Potential Challenges of Universities Engagement in Poverty Eradication
Universities play a vital role in poverty reduction in Nigeria by producing quality human capital, conducting relevant research and providing extension services to the society. They produce skilled human capital, generate and disseminate knowledge, and foster innovation and entrepreneurship. However, universities face many challenges that limit their effectiveness and affect their role in poverty reduction in Nigeria are:

1. **Corruption and Political Instability**: Corruption is the abuse of public office for private gain, while political stability is the absence of violence, unrest and instability in the political system. Both corruption and political instability undermine economic growth and poverty reduction by creating uncertainty, discouraging investment, diverting resources, eroding trust and weakening governance. Universities can directly reduce poverty by being committed to the delivery of quality education, which can be hindered by interference of politics in the running of education affairs, and non-implementation of well-articulated policies (Maiyo et al., 2009). Universities can contribute to improving institutional quality by educating citizens on their rights and responsibilities, promoting ethical values and civic engagement, exposing and denouncing corruption

and malpractice, advocating for good governance and accountability, and providing policy advice and solutions to the government and other stakeholders.

2. **Inadequate funding:** Universities in Nigeria are poorly underfunded by the government and rely heavily on tuition fees and other sources of income, which are often insufficient to meet their operational and developmental needs. This affects the quality of education, research, and infrastructure in the universities. For example, according to a World Bank report, Nigeria's public expenditure on education as a percentage of GDP was only 0.76% in 2018, compared to the Sub-Saharan Africa average of 4.25%. This resulted in poor learning outcomes, low research output, and dilapidated facilities in many universities.

3. **Inadequate Infrastructural Facilities:** Infrastructural facilities in most Nigerian public universities are grossly in short supply to the point that they could be dehumanizing to both lecturers and students (Ayoko *et al,* 2023). Proper teaching and learning cannot take place in a system if there are insufficient classrooms, resource rooms, staff rooms, laboratory equipment, computers, and the like.

4. **Poor governance:** Universities in Nigeria suffer from poor governance and management, characterized by corruption, nepotism, politicization, and lack of accountability. This undermines the autonomy, academic freedom, and integrity of the universities. For example, a study by Transparency International revealed that corruption was prevalent in Nigerian universities, affecting admission processes, examination conduct, grading systems, and staff recruitment. This eroded the credibility and reputation of the universities.

5. **Low quality and relevance:** Universities in Nigeria have low standards of teaching and learning due to the proliferation of universities by both state governments and private individuals, as well as outdated curricula that do not reflect the needs of the labour market and society. Many graduates are unemployable or underemployed, and many researchers produce low-quality or irrelevant publications. For example, a survey by Jobberman showed that 72% of Nigerian employers were dissatisfied with the quality of graduates they hired in 2019. Similarly, a bibliometric analysis showed that Nigeria ranked 110th out of 239 countries in terms of research impact in 2018. Kakwagh (2013) opined that the declining quality of intellectual output in Nigerian tertiary institutions is because of a lack of economic, political and social factors.

6. **Limited access and equity:** Universities in Nigeria are inaccessible and inequitable for many segments of the population, especially the poor, women, rural dwellers, and people with disabilities. The high cost of education, the low quality of secondary education, the inadequate infrastructure and facilities, and the social and cultural barriers are some of the factors that hinder access and equity in higher education. For example, according to the National Bureau of Statistics, only 10.3% of Nigerians aged 15-24 had completed tertiary education in 2019. Moreover, there were significant disparities by gender (13.1% for males' vs 7.5% for females), location (15.6% for urban vs 5.3% for rural), and region (23.8% for South West vs 4% for North East).

7. **Insufficient collaboration and networking:** Universities in Nigeria have weak linkages with other stakeholders in the national and global innovation system, such as industry, government, civil society, and other universities. This limits their ability to engage in multidisciplinary and collaborative research, technology transfer, and community service.

Conclusion

Universities are critical players in global poverty reduction efforts. They hold the potential to drive change the narrative by creating valuable educational opportunities, conducting innovative research, and empowering communities worldwide. Addressing poverty is a complex and challenging problem, and universities can play a role in taking an interdisciplinary approach to achieve the United Nations' SDG Goal 1, which is geared towards eradicating poverty. At the same time, universities can spark partnerships at the local, national, and international levels to promote sustainable development and help create a world that is free of poverty.

Suggestions

For universities within the country to fully fulfil their potential, there is the need for all stakeholders to take holistic steps in solving the numerous problems bedevilling the country's educational sector, most especially the universities. It is therefore recommended among others that

1. The government should increase the budgetary allocations to the ailing education sector
2. There is the need for the government to invest more in the provision of adequate infrastructure to enhance meaningful learning.

3. There is a need for collaboration between academics from different fields of studies in providing cutting edge research output that can be used to solve societal problems
4. There should be a more robust constructive collaboration between the academia and the industries in promoting entrepreneurship and innovations that can help alleviate poverty

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