



Poverty and Income Inequality in Sub-Saharan Africa: Structural Constraints and Pathways to Inclusive and Sustainable Development

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Abstract

Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) accounts for the largest share of the global extreme poor despite experiencing sustained periods of economic growth over the past two decades. At the same time, income inequality remains persistently high in most parts of the region, raising critical concerns about the inclusiveness and sustainability of prevailing development trajectories. This research argues that poverty persistence in SSA cannot be explained by insufficient economic growth alone. Rather, income inequality acts as a structural constraint that diminishes the poverty elasticity of growth, while the quality of institutions determines whether economic expansion translates into widespread welfare benefits. This study creates an integrated analytical framework that connects growth dynamics, income distribution, governance capacity, and



environmental vulnerability by drawing on development economics, political economy, structural transformation theory, and sustainability scholarship. Through a structured critical synthesis of empirical evidence and theoretical contributions, the study reveals that durable poverty reduction in SSA requires coordinated reforms in employment-intensive transformation, fiscal redistribution, institutional accountability, human capital development, and climate resilience. By repositioning inequality as a mediating mechanism within the growth–poverty nexus, this research contributes to contemporary debates on inclusive development and advances policy-relevant insights aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals.

Keywords: Poverty, Income Inequality; Inclusive Development; Institutions; Structural Transformation; Climate Vulnerability; Sub-Saharan Africa; Sustainable Development

1. Introduction

Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) remains at the centre of the global poverty challenge. The region comprises over 40 countries located south of the Sahara Desert, including major economies such as Nigeria, South Africa, Kenya, Ghana, and Ethiopia. This study places particular emphasis on Nigeria, given its status as the most populous country in Africa and one of the largest economies in the region. Nigeria’s development trajectory reflects many of the structural challenges observed across SSA, including high inequality, institutional weaknesses, and vulnerability to economic and environmental shocks.

Despite experiencing episodes of sustained economic growth during the early twenty-first century, particularly between 2000 and 2014, a period widely recognised as Africa’s growth resurgence (World Bank, 2015; IMF, 2016; Fosu, 2018), extreme poverty remains disproportionately concentrated within the region. According to recent global poverty assessments, the majority of individuals living below the international poverty line of \$2.15 per day (2017 PPP) now reside in SSA (World Bank, 2023). This persistence of poverty is accompanied by high and, in several cases, rising income inequality. Many SSA countries exhibit Gini coefficients above 0.40, and in some Southern African economies, inequality exceeds 0.60 (UNDP, 2022). The

coexistence of economic expansion, entrenched inequality, and persistent poverty presents a structural paradox that challenges orthodox development narratives.

Traditional growth-centred models of development assume that increases in aggregate income will eventually translate into poverty reduction through market transmission mechanisms. The implicit assumption underpinning this view is that rising national income, regardless of its distribution, will improve welfare for all income groups. Early empirical contributions reinforced this perspective. Dollar and Kraay (2002) argued that incomes of the poorest quintile tend to rise proportionally with average income growth, suggesting that growth is broadly neutral with respect to distribution and therefore inherently pro-poor. This conclusion shaped policy prescriptions across multilateral institutions, emphasising macroeconomic stability, trade liberalisation, and market reforms as primary tools for poverty reduction.

However, subsequent empirical and theoretical work has significantly qualified this view. Ravallion (2012) demonstrates that while growth is generally associated with poverty reduction, the strength of this relationship varies substantially across countries and depends critically on initial inequality levels. The concept of the poverty elasticity of growth (the percentage reduction in poverty associated with a one per cent increase in mean income) captures this conditionality. Where inequality is high, the poverty elasticity of growth tends to be lower, implying that growth generates weaker reductions in poverty.

This paper advances the argument that income inequality in SSA is not merely an outcome of development processes but a structural constraint that mediates the translation of growth into poverty reduction. Inequality shapes access to education, healthcare, credit, land, labour markets, and political power. High inequality restricts social mobility and limits the participation of lower-income households in growth processes.

Furthermore, institutional quality, defined as the capacity of governance systems to enforce rules, mobilise public resources, deliver public goods, and constrain elite capture (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012), conditions the effectiveness of redistribution and public policy implementation. Weak institutions undermine inclusive development by enabling resource capture and limiting fiscal capacity. Climate vulnerability adds another layer of complexity. SSA is disproportionately exposed to climate-related risks, including droughts, floods, and agricultural disruption

(IPCC, 2022). Environmental shocks threaten to reverse poverty reduction gains, particularly in economies heavily dependent on rain-fed agriculture.

In addition, insecurity, which manifested through armed conflict, terrorism, political instability, and communal violence, represents a critical structural constraint across many SSA countries, including Nigeria. Insecurity disrupts economic activity, discourages investment, displaces populations, and diverts public resources away from development toward security expenditure. It also weakens institutions and exacerbates inequality, thereby reinforcing poverty traps.

The central thesis of this paper is that poverty outcomes in SSA are determined by the interaction of five structural forces: economic growth, income inequality, institutional quality, climate vulnerability, and insecurity. Growth alone is insufficient. Inclusive and sustainable development requires coordinated structural transformation that addresses distributional, institutional, environmental, and security dimensions simultaneously.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Growth and Poverty: Revisiting the Conventional Wisdom

The growth–poverty relationship has long been a cornerstone of development economics. Early cross-country analyses suggested a strong and direct relationship between aggregate income growth and poverty reduction. Dollar and Kraay (2002), using cross-country panel data, concluded that growth is “good for the poor”, as the income of the lowest quintile tends to increase proportionally with mean income. This conclusion reinforced the primacy of growth-oriented policies in poverty reduction strategies.

However, this proportionality claim has been challenged. Bourguignon (2003) introduced a decomposition approach demonstrating that poverty reduction depends not only on growth but also on changes in income distribution. He contends that the dynamics of growth and inequality both influence poverty outcomes. Ravallion (2012) further demonstrates that poverty convergence is not automatic and that the poverty elasticity of growth varies substantially across countries. Countries with lower initial inequality experience stronger poverty reduction for comparable growth rates.

Fosu (2017), focusing on developing regions including SSA, provides empirical evidence that inequality significantly moderates the growth–poverty relationship. His findings indicate that high inequality weakens the poverty-reducing impact of growth. Importantly, he shows that countries achieving both growth and

distributional improvements experience substantially faster poverty reduction. These findings imply that growth-centric strategies may overestimate the automaticity of poverty reduction. Distributional conditions fundamentally shape the inclusiveness of growth.

2.2 Inequality as a Structural Constraint

Theoretical perspectives on inequality have evolved significantly. Kuznets (1955) hypothesised that inequality would initially rise during early industrialisation but decline as economies matured. This inverted-U hypothesis suggested that inequality was a transitional phase of development. However, empirical trajectories in SSA often diverge from this pattern. Rather than declining automatically with growth, inequality frequently persists or even increases during growth episodes, particularly in resource-dependent economies. Structural explanations emphasise historical legacies. Colonial extraction systems, land concentration, and dual labour markets have shaped unequal asset distribution across SSA (Oduola et al., 2017). Labour market segmentation between formal and informal sectors further reinforces income disparities.

Inequality constrains development through multiple mechanisms. First, unequal access to education and healthcare limits human capital accumulation among poorer households (Barro, 2000). Second, credit constraints disproportionately affect low-income entrepreneurs, limiting productive investment (Banerjee & Duflo, 2011). Third, inequality affects the dynamics of the political economy by facilitating the capture of fiscal and regulatory institutions by elites (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012). Stiglitz (2012) argues that high inequality undermines economic efficiency by weakening aggregate demand and reducing social mobility. Ostry, Berg, and Tsangarides (2014) find that lower inequality is associated with more durable growth spells, suggesting that equity may enhance macroeconomic stability. Thus, inequality is not merely an outcome variable but a structural determinant influencing growth sustainability and poverty reduction.

2.3 Institutions and the Political Economy of Inclusion

Institutional quality plays a central role in shaping development outcomes. Acemoglu and Robinson (2012) distinguish between inclusive institutions, which enable broad participation and protect property rights, and extractive institutions, which concentrate power and resources. Rodrik, Subramanian, and Trebbi (2004) argue that institutions

are fundamental determinants of long-run income differences, surpassing geography and trade integration.

In SSA, governance challenges such as limited tax capacity, corruption, weak bureaucratic capacity, limited accountability, etc., constrain redistributive effectiveness (Fosu, 2018). Fiscal systems often rely heavily on indirect taxation and resource rents, limiting progressive redistribution. Weak administrative capacity undermines social protection targeting and public service delivery (Besley & Persson, 2011).

Empirical studies show positive associations between governance indicators and poverty reduction outcomes. Countries with stronger institutions are better able to translate growth into social spending, infrastructure provision, and human capital development (World Bank, 2023). Thus, institutions condition the inclusiveness of growth. Without institutional strengthening, redistribution efforts risk inefficiency and capture.

2.4 Structural Transformation and Employment Dynamics

Structural transformation theory emphasises the reallocation of labour from low-productivity agriculture to higher-productivity manufacturing and services as a key driver of inclusive development (Lewis, 1954). Historically, industrialisation has generated employment-intensive growth pathways that reduce poverty.

However, Rodrik (2016) identifies premature deindustrialisation in many developing economies, including SSA. Countries reach peak manufacturing employment at lower income levels than historically observed in advanced economies. This limits the traditional pathway of inclusive industrialisation.

McMillan and Rodrik (2011), on the other hand, demonstrate that structural change can either enhance or reduce productivity growth depending on sectoral patterns. In SSA, growth concentrated on extractive industries generates limited employment spillovers, thereby constraining poverty reduction. Thus, the composition of growth (not merely its rate) determines distributional outcomes.

2.5 Climate Vulnerability and Sustainable Development

Climate change disproportionately affects Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (2022) documents the region's heightened vulnerability to droughts, floods, and agricultural disruptions. Stéphane

Hallegatte et al. (2016) estimate that climate shocks could push millions of people into poverty annually.

Environmental vulnerability interacts closely with existing inequalities. Poor households typically possess limited adaptive capacity, including restricted access to financial resources, technology, and social safety nets, thereby increasing their exposure to climate-related shocks. As a result, climate risks not only exacerbate existing poverty levels but also threaten the sustainability of prior poverty reduction gains. These dynamics reveal the need for integrated adaptation strategies that align climate resilience with inclusive and sustainable development objectives.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a structured critical literature review combined with conceptual synthesis as its primary methodological approach. Unlike traditional narrative reviews, a structured review aims to systematically identify, evaluate, and integrate findings across multiple strands of scholarship to generate theoretical advancement (Snyder, 2019). The objective of this research is not to produce new econometric estimates, but rather to reconcile fragmented empirical findings and develop an integrated explanatory framework capable of accounting for persistent poverty dynamics in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA).

The literature selection process followed three guiding principles. First, relevance: studies were included if they directly addressed poverty reduction, income inequality, institutional quality, structural transformation, or environmental vulnerability in developing countries, with particular emphasis on SSA. Second, methodological rigour: foundational theoretical works in political economy and development theory, as well as peer-reviewed journal articles using strong empirical techniques (panel regressions, dynamic models, decomposition approaches), were prioritised. Third, recency and foundational importance: while emphasis was placed on literature from the past three decades, seminal contributions such as Lewis (1954) and Kuznets (1955) were included due to their enduring conceptual significance.

Sources included articles from journals such as *Journal of Economic Growth*, *World Development*, *Journal of African Economies*, *Review of Development Economics*, and *Research in Economics*, alongside multilateral reports from the World Bank, UNDP, IMF, and IPCC. Cross-country datasets frequently referenced in the literature include the World Development Indicators (WDI), Standardised World

Income Inequality Database (SWIID), Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI), and Poverty and Shared Prosperity reports.

The analytical strategy proceeds in four stages:

- i. Synthesis of empirical findings on growth and poverty to identify patterns in poverty elasticity across contexts.
- ii. Identification of mediating mechanisms, particularly income inequality, that alter the transmission of growth into poverty reduction.
- iii. Examination of institutional conditioning effects, focusing on governance capacity, fiscal redistribution, and political economy constraints.
- iv. Integration of environmental vulnerability, incorporating sustainability considerations into long-run poverty dynamics, is essential for understanding how environmental factors can exacerbate poverty and hinder economic growth.

Rather than testing hypotheses statistically, the study builds a theoretically coherent model grounded in accumulated empirical evidence. This approach is appropriate where empirical results exist but remain fragmented across sub-disciplines. The methodological contribution lies in integration, theoretical clarification, and policy synthesis.

The primary limitation of this approach is the absence of new econometric testing. However, the study creates a framework that can direct future quantitative testing using dynamic panel models, mediation analysis, and structural equation modelling by synthesising established empirical regularities and theoretical insights.

4. Conceptual Framework

4.1 Reframing the Growth–Poverty Nexus

The conventional growth–poverty model assumes a direct and monotonic relationship:

Economic Growth → Poverty Reduction. However, empirical evidence demonstrates that this relationship is conditional. The conceptual framework developed here introduces mediating and moderating variables that reshape the growth–poverty transmission mechanism. The core proposition is that poverty outcomes in SSA are determined by the interaction of five structural forces:

- i. Economic Growth
- ii. Income Inequality

- iii. Institutional Quality
- iv. Climate Vulnerability
- v. Insecurity

These forces operate simultaneously rather than sequentially.

4.2 Inequality as a Mediating Mechanism

Income inequality mediates the effect of growth on poverty. In highly unequal societies, incremental income gains accrue disproportionately to upper-income groups. The poor capture a smaller share of growth dividends, resulting in lower poverty elasticity (Ravallion, 2012). Mechanisms through which inequality weakens poverty reduction include limited access to quality education and health services, restricted access to financial markets, informal labour market dominance, asset concentration (land, capital), political influence asymmetry. Thus, inequality reduces both economic opportunity and redistributive capacity.

4.3 Institutional Quality as a Conditioning Variable

Institutional quality conditions both growth processes and redistribution outcomes. Inclusive institutions strengthen property rights, reduce corruption, enhance fiscal capacity, and improve public service delivery (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012). Institutional weakness generates, narrow tax bases, inefficient public expenditure, elite capture of natural resource rents, and weak social protection systems; hence, institutions determine whether inequality is mitigated or perpetuated.

4.4 Climate Vulnerability as a Dynamic Moderator

Climate shocks interact with poverty and inequality dynamics. In SSA, large portions of the population rely on climate-sensitive agriculture. Environmental shocks reduce income, destroy assets, and increase vulnerability (IPCC, 2022). Even when growth reduces poverty, climate events can reverse gains. Climate vulnerability therefore moderates the sustainability of poverty reduction.

4.5 Integrated Interaction Model

The framework can be summarised conceptually as $Poverty = f(Growth \times Inequality \times Institutions \times Climate\ Vulnerability \times Insecurity)$

Where:

Growth reduces poverty directly.

Inequality reduces the magnitude of growth's effect.

Institutional quality conditions redistributive effectiveness.

Climate vulnerability affects the sustainability of outcomes.

Insecurity disrupts economic activity and weakens both institutions and distributional mechanisms.

This multidimensional model provides a comprehensive theoretical foundation for understanding persistent poverty in SSA.

4.6 Insecurity as a Structural Constraint

Insecurity constitutes a critical structural constraint on development in Sub-Saharan Africa. Armed conflict, insurgency, terrorism, and communal violence disrupt production systems, displace populations, and erode livelihoods. In conflict-affected regions, access to education, healthcare, and markets is significantly reduced, exacerbating poverty and inequality.

Insecurity also undermines investor confidence, reduces domestic and foreign investment, and shifts public expenditure toward military and security operations at the expense of social and economic development. In countries such as Nigeria, insecurity in regions affected by insurgency and banditry has significantly constrained agricultural productivity and rural livelihoods.

Furthermore, insecurity interacts with institutional weakness and inequality, reinforcing a cycle of underdevelopment. Weak institutions struggle to manage conflict effectively, while inequality can fuel grievances that perpetuate instability. Thus, insecurity is both a cause and consequence of structural development challenges in SSA.

5. Analytical Discussion

5.1 Growth without Inclusion: Sectoral Composition

Growth patterns in SSA have frequently been driven by capital-intensive extractive sectors, including oil and mineral exports. While these sectors contribute significantly to GDP, they generate limited employment spillovers (McMillan & Rodrik, 2011). Employment-intensive sectors such as manufacturing and agro-processing remain underdeveloped in many countries. The absence of labour absorption constrains poverty reduction. Growth becomes enclave-based rather than broad-based. This structural pattern explains why macroeconomic expansion does not consistently translate into improved household welfare.

5.2 Distributional Barriers and Social Mobility

High inequality constrains human capital formation. Poor households face barriers to quality education, healthcare, and credit access. These barriers limit productivity growth and reinforce intergenerational poverty traps (Banerjee & Duflo, 2011). Moreover, inequality influences political economic dynamics. Concentrated wealth increases the likelihood of policy capture, reducing redistributive effectiveness. Fiscal systems become regressive, and social protection coverage remains limited. Empirical evidence suggests that lower inequality is associated with more sustained growth spells (Ostry et al., 2014), indicating that equity contributes to macroeconomic stability.

5.3 Institutional Constraints and Governance Gaps

Institutional fragility remains a significant constraint in SSA. Weak bureaucratic capacity limits tax collection and public investment efficiency. Corruption undermines public trust and reduces fiscal space. Countries with stronger governance indicators exhibit better poverty reduction outcomes (Fosu, 2018). Institutional strengthening enhances both growth quality and redistributive capacity.

5.4 Climate Risk and Poverty Fragility

Environmental shocks exacerbate structural vulnerabilities. Droughts and floods disproportionately affect low-income rural households. Climate-induced migration increases urban informalisation, placing pressure on infrastructure and labour markets. Hallegatte et al. (2016) estimate that climate change could push tens of millions into poverty globally, with SSA bearing a disproportionate burden. Climate resilience must therefore be integrated into poverty strategies.

5.5 Interdependence of Structural Forces

Importantly, these forces are interdependent. Weak institutions allow inequality to persist. High inequality undermines institutional reform. Climate vulnerability exacerbates inequality. Extractive growth models reinforce institutional fragility. Thus, poverty persistence in SSA reflects a structural equilibrium characterised by mutually reinforcing constraints. Breaking this equilibrium requires coordinated structural transformation rather than isolated interventions.

6. Policy Architecture for Inclusive and Sustainable Development in Sub-Saharan Africa

The integrated framework developed in this study implies that poverty reduction in SSA requires coordinated policy interventions across economic, institutional, and environmental domains. Piecemeal reforms targeting isolated dimensions are unlikely to generate durable transformation. Instead, inclusive and sustainable development must rest upon a multidimensional policy architecture.

6.1 Employment-Intensive Structural Transformation

The first pillar of this architecture concerns the sectoral composition of growth. Empirical evidence suggests that employment-intensive structural transformation is central to inclusive development (Lewis, 1954; Timmer & Akkus, 2008). In SSA, industrialisation has frequently lagged, and growth has often been driven by extractive sectors with limited labour absorption (McMillan & Rodrik, 2011).

To reverse this pattern, industrial policies must prioritise labour-intensive manufacturing, agro-processing, and value-added agriculture. Investments in infrastructure, particularly electricity, transport networks, and digital connectivity, are essential to reduce production costs and enhance competitiveness. Market expansion and diversification are made possible by regional integration via the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). Importantly, structural transformation must avoid reproducing enclave economies. Domestic value chains should be strengthened to ensure that productivity gains diffuse across sectors.

6.2 Progressive Fiscal Redistribution and Social Protection

The second pillar involves fiscal reform. High inequality in SSA is partly rooted in regressive tax systems and limited redistributive capacity. Fiscal room for social spending can be increased by increasing progressive taxation, such as corporate taxes, property taxes, better resource rent taxes, etc. (Besley & Persson, 2011).

Social protection systems play a critical role in reducing vulnerability and smoothing consumption during economic shocks. Conditional and unconditional cash transfers, public works programmes, and targeted subsidies have demonstrated positive impacts on poverty reduction in various SSA contexts. However, administrative capacity and targeting mechanisms require strengthening to minimise leakage and inefficiency. Redistribution must be paired with institutional reform to ensure credibility and sustainability.

6.3 Institutional Strengthening and Governance Reform

Institutional reform constitutes the third pillar. Governance capacity determines the effectiveness of economic policy and redistribution. Strengthening rule of law, anti-corruption mechanisms, public financial management systems, and bureaucratic professionalism enhances state capacity (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012).

Transparent budget processes, digital governance tools, and independent oversight institutions can reduce elite capture and improve accountability. Strengthening local government capacity is equally important, as decentralisation without adequate institutional capacity may exacerbate inequality. Institutional reform is not purely technocratic; it is inherently political. Reform sequencing must account for political economic constraints and coalition-building strategies.

6.4 Human Capital Investment

Human capital investment forms the fourth pillar of inclusive development. Education and healthcare are fundamental drivers of productivity and social mobility (Barro, 2000). Universal access to quality primary and secondary education, alongside vocational and technical training, enhances labour force participation in higher-productivity sectors.

Healthcare access improves labour productivity and resilience to shocks. Investment in women's education and economic participation has multiplier effects on household welfare and poverty reduction. Human capital investment complements structural transformation by preparing the workforce for diversified economic activity.

6.5 Climate-Resilient Development Strategies

The fifth pillar integrates environmental sustainability. Climate adaptation and mitigation policies are essential to protect poverty reduction gains. Climate-smart agriculture, drought-resistant crops, renewable energy expansion, and resilient infrastructure reduce vulnerability (IPCC, 2022).

Climate finance mechanisms (both domestic and international) should prioritise vulnerable populations. Integrating adaptation strategies into national development planning enhances long-term sustainability. Sustainable development must balance economic expansion with ecological preservation.

7. Theoretical Integration and Research Implications

The integrated framework proposed in this study bridges multiple theoretical traditions: neoclassical growth theory, structuralist development theory, institutional economics, and sustainability science.

Neoclassical models emphasise capital accumulation and technological progress as drivers of growth. However, they often abstract from distributional dynamics. Structuralist perspectives highlight sectoral transformation and labour absorption. Institutional economics foregrounds governance quality and political economy constraints. Sustainability scholarship introduces ecological limits and intergenerational considerations.

By integrating these traditions, the framework challenges reductionist explanations of poverty persistence. It underscores that poverty outcomes reflect complex interactions rather than linear causal chains. Future empirical research should test the interaction model using dynamic panel estimation techniques, mediation analysis, and structural equation modelling. Country-level case studies may refine understanding of policy sequencing and institutional reform trajectories.

8. Conclusion

This study has argued that poverty persistence in Sub-Saharan Africa reflects structural inequality, institutional fragility, and environmental vulnerability rather than insufficient economic growth alone. Income inequality weakens the poverty elasticity of growth by constraining access to opportunities and limiting income transmission to lower-income households. Institutional quality conditions, redistributive effectiveness and governance capacity. Climate vulnerability influences the durability of poverty reduction gains.

The analysis demonstrates that inclusive and sustainable development requires coordinated structural transformation across economic, institutional, and environmental domains. Employment-intensive growth, progressive redistribution, institutional reform, human capital investment, and climate resilience must operate simultaneously.

Growth is necessary but not sufficient. Without addressing inequality and institutional capacity, growth episodes risk reinforcing structural disparities. Sustainable poverty reduction in SSA demands a multidimensional development strategy aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals.

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