

Democracy, Good Governance and Poverty Alleviation in Nigeria, 2015–2025

Davies, Emmanuel Opue, PhD

Department of Political Science, Rivers State University, Nkpolu-Oroworukwo, Port Harcourt, Nigeria

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*Corresponding Author: Davies, Emmanuel Opue, PhD

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Abstract

Review Article

The period from 2015 to 2025 reflects a crucial decade in Nigeria's democratic journey, marked by efforts to entrench good governance while combating widespread poverty and economic insecurity. Successive administrations of Muhammadu Buhari (2015–2023) and Bola Ahmed Tinubu (2023–present) pursued governance reforms and social investment programmes intended to address unemployment, inequality, and multidimensional poverty. Yet, the country continues to rank among the world's poorest populations, with over 133 million Nigerians living in multidimensional poverty as of 2022 (National Bureau of Statistics, 2022). This study critically examines the relationship between democracy, good governance, and poverty alleviation in Nigeria within this ten-year period, evaluating political accountability, institutional performance, and policy outcomes on welfare improvement. Using a qualitative research design supported by secondary data analysis, the paper finds that while democratic structures and poverty-reduction initiatives expanded, governance challenges—corruption, weak institutions, policy inconsistency, insecurity, and elite capture—circumvented positive gains. The study concludes that democracy alone does not automatically translate to poverty alleviation without strong governance reforms and inclusive socioeconomic policies. Key recommendations include strengthening institutional accountability, expanding social safety nets, and prioritizing human capital development.

Keywords: Democracy, Good Governance, Poverty Alleviation, Governance Reforms, Nigeria.

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Introduction

Since the return to civilian rule in 1999, Nigeria has committed to a democratic system that emphasizes participation, transparency, accountability, and socioeconomic transformation. However, despite being Africa's largest economy and democracy, the country struggles with persistent poverty, unemployment, and inequality (World Bank, 2023). With an estimated population exceeding 220 million, Nigeria faces the challenge of

translating political reforms into tangible improvements in living standards.

The decade between 2015 and 2025 presents contrasting governance and poverty trends. The Buhari administration launched major social intervention programmes—N-Power, Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT), TraderMoni, and the National Home-Grown School Feeding Programme (NHGSFP)—aimed at mitigating poverty and youth unemployment. Yet, poverty indicators worsened as insecurity escalated and



economic growth stagnated due to inflation, exchange rate instability, and declining oil revenues (Akinsanya & Uzodike, 2021).

Similarly, the Tinubu administration initiated economic reforms, including fuel subsidy removal and currency unification, promising long-term gains but triggering short-term hardship due to rising cost of living and wage stagnation. These outcomes underscore the complex interplay between governance choices and poverty outcomes in Nigeria's democracy.

Scholars argue that democracy promotes welfare improvements when institutions are transparent and accountable (Amuwo, 2019). In Nigeria, however, governance suffers from elite dominance, political patronage, and policy discontinuity that hinder effective poverty-alleviation outcomes (Ibrahim, 2022). This research therefore investigates whether democratic governance structures in Nigeria between 2015 and 2025 have meaningfully contributed to reducing poverty or inadvertently reinforced socioeconomic vulnerabilities.

Objectives of the Study

This research is guided by the following objectives:

1. To examine the relationship between democracy and good governance in Nigeria from 2015 to 2025.
2. To assess the effectiveness of poverty alleviation policies and social investment programme initiated within this period.
3. To analyze how governance challenges—corruption, insecurity, weak institutions—affect poverty-reduction outcomes.
4. To evaluate the role of democratic accountability in ensuring equitable resource distribution and inclusive development.
5. To recommend strategies for strengthening governance structures to support sustainable poverty alleviation.

Literature Review

1. Democracy and Governance in Nigeria

Democracy is expected to deliver accountability, participation, and socioeconomic inclusion. In Nigeria, however, scholars argue that democratic gains have not translated proportionally into public welfare improvements (Amuwo, 2019; Ojo, 2020). Nigeria operates a multi-party presidential system where elections determine leadership legitimacy, yet governance outcomes remain weakened by corruption, insecurity, and institutional inefficiencies (Oluwole, 2021).

The Buhari administration prioritized anti-corruption and security, but governance performance was constrained by slow economic growth, poor policy execution, and bureaucratic weaknesses (World Bank, 2023). Similarly, initial reforms under Tinubu's presidency emphasized macroeconomic stabilization but triggered short-term hardship due to inflation and loss of purchasing power.

The literature indicates that democracy in Nigeria has been more procedural (elections, transitions) than substantive (development outcomes), raising concerns about the quality of governance (Ibrahim, 2022).

2. Good Governance and Development

Good governance emphasizes transparency, rule of law, responsiveness, equity, and effectiveness (UNDP, 2019). Scholars assert that governance quality directly shapes poverty outcomes (Gisselquist, 2021). Where institutions are strong, social policies tend to achieve desired impacts.

In Nigeria, governance challenges persist:

-Corruption remains widespread despite anti-graft campaigns (Transparency International, 2023).

-Weak fiscal management and debt pressures limit public investment.

-Politicization of public resources undermines social protection targeting (Akinsanya & Uzodike, 2021).

These structural barriers impede efficient delivery of poverty-relief programmes.

3. Poverty Alleviation Policies and Social Investment



Nigeria's Social Investment Programme (NSIP) introduced in 2016 remains the flagship poverty alleviation scheme. Components include:

- N-Power (youth employment)
- School Feeding Programme
- Conditional Cash Transfers (CCT)
- TraderMoni & MarketMoni microcredit schemes

Although millions benefitted, evaluations highlight issues such as policy inconsistency, inadequate funding, and poor monitoring (Olowu, 2022).

The multidimensional poverty rate rose from 43% in 2015 to 63% in 2022, meaning 133 million citizens face deprivation in health, education, and living standards (National Bureau of Statistics, 2022).

Studies conclude that Nigeria's poverty crisis persists not due to lack of programmes, but due to weak governance and elite capture that distort implementation (Ojo, 2020).

4. Insecurity and Economic Stability as Governance Determinants

Between 2015 and 2025, insurgency, banditry, and separatist tensions significantly undermined governance capacity. The World Bank (2023) reports that insecurity reduced agricultural output and displaced millions, particularly in the North-East.

Economic instability — inflation, unemployment, currency depreciation — further pushed Nigerians into poverty. This reinforces the argument that democracy without socioeconomic stability cannot ensure welfare delivery (Ibrahim, 2022).

Gap in Knowledge

Although numerous studies examine governance and poverty in Nigeria, gaps remain:

1. Limited focus on the combined Buhari-Tinubu decade (2015–2025) as a continuous democratic governance era.
2. Few studies integrate insecurity, economic reform, and social investment outcomes within a unified analytical framework.

3. Empirical focus on program beneficiaries remains fragmented, limiting national-level policy learning.

4. Insufficient exploration of how democratic accountability influences poverty-alleviation outcomes.

5. Lack of studies examining policy effects on multidimensional poverty indicators (not just income poverty).

This study bridges these gaps by linking governance quality with poverty-alleviation performance across two administrations.

Theoretical Framework

This study is couched on four (4) major interrelated theories:

1. Good Governance Theory

Developed by UNDP and World Bank frameworks, this theory emphasizes institutional integrity, transparency, and effective service delivery (Gisselquist, 2021).

It guides the evaluation of public administration quality and poverty-related policy outcomes.

2. Democratic Development Theory

This theory argues that democratic governance enhances human development when institutions are accountable and inclusive (Sen, 1999).

Supports the assumption that democracy should reduce poverty through equitable policy.

3. Political Economy of Development Theory

This approach analyzes how power and resource distribution shape policy outcomes (Mosco, 2009).

In Nigeria, political patronage influences social programme targeting and fiscal priorities, creating elite-driven governance.

4. Capability Approach

Championed by Amartya Sen, it views poverty as deprivation of human capabilities — education, health, living standards.

It informs this study's interpretation of multidimensional poverty beyond income-based measures.



Framework Summary:

Together, these theories support a holistic assessment of governance quality and welfare outcomes in Nigeria from 2015–2025.

Methodology

1. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design supported by secondary quantitative data analysis. The approach enables an in-depth examination of governance practices, policy outcomes, and poverty trends in Nigeria from 2015 to 2025. The qualitative method is suitable for interrogating how institutional performance affects welfare distribution and socioeconomic development.

2. Sources of Data

The study relies on credible secondary sources, including:

-Government Reports: National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), Budget Office of the Federation

-International Development Agencies: World Bank, UNDP, IMF

-Civil Society/Think Tanks: CDD, CLEEN Foundation

-Academic Journals and Books on governance, poverty and public policy in Nigeria

3. Scope and Time Frame

The research focuses on Nigeria's governance and development trajectory during:

-Muhammadu Buhari administration (2015–2023)

-Bola Ahmed Tinubu administration (2023–2025 period under review)

This timeframe provides a comparative platform to evaluate governance reforms and poverty interventions under two successive democratically elected governments.

4. Analytical Technique

The study employs:

-Content Analysis of governance practices, policy documents and scholarly works

-Comparative Analysis of poverty indicators across regions and time

Thematic Evaluation of social intervention outcomes using the chosen theoretical lens:

-Good Governance Theory

-Capability Approach

-Political Economy of Development

-Democratic Development Theory

These techniques enable an integrated interpretation of democracy's effectiveness in improving livelihood conditions.

Findings

1. Governance and Institutional Performance

Despite democratic continuity, governance performance remains mixed:

Strengths

-Improvement in anti-corruption laws and public financial reforms

-Increased social investment allocations since 2016

-Enhanced electoral reforms (e.g., digital voter registration)

Weaknesses

-Weak institutional capacity for policy implementation

-Corruption and leakages within public spending systems

-Severe insecurity constraining economic activity and agricultural resilience

Nigeria still struggles with elite-driven governance, where political patronage determines access to resources (Ibrahim, 2022)

Sectoral Findings

1. Employment and Economic Inclusion

Unemployment and underemployment remained persistent during the decade. Youth unemployment surged dramatically, with over half of Nigeria's youths lacking decent, stable employment by 2021 (NBS, 2022). While the N-



Power programme temporarily absorbed more than one million beneficiaries into vocations and teaching roles, limited transition pathways into permanent jobs exposed sustainability weaknesses.

Governance gaps emerged in:

- Insufficient industrialization and job creation policies

- Skills mismatch between vocational training and labour market demand

- Weak private sector incentives to absorb labour

Thus, despite democratic promises, labour market outcomes did not significantly reduce poverty.

2. Human Capital Development: Education and Health

Nigeria maintained one of Africa's largest education budgets nominally, but inflation and fiscal leakages undermined spending effectiveness (Oluwole, 2021). Social programmes like the Home-Grown School Feeding Programme improved school attendance in poorer communities, particularly in the North. However:

- Insecurity shut down hundreds of schools, especially in Borno, Katsina, and Zamfara

- Healthcare access deteriorated due to funding challenges and brain drain

- Poor governance limited the full benefit of increased social investment

- Human capital indicators weakened overall, reinforcing multidimensional poverty pressures.

3. Social Welfare and Financial Inclusion

The Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) programme reached millions, yet coverage lagged behind total poverty depth. Beneficiary selection was often influenced by political patronage rather than transparent, data-driven targeting (Ojo, 2020).

Microfinance schemes like TraderMoni expanded financial access but:

- Loan amounts were too small to lift households out of poverty

- Politicization reduced perceived legitimacy

- No structured strategy for business growth or profitability

- Financial exclusion remained high, especially in rural Northern areas.

Regional Case Studies

1. North-East Nigeria: Poverty Intensified by Armed Conflict

The North-East witnessed the harshest poverty outcomes. Boko Haram insurgency and banditry:

- Displaced millions and destroyed farms and markets

- Shut down education for years in some communities

- Forced aid dependence rather than economic participation

Despite federal military campaigns, governance presence remained weak, limiting service delivery. The region's poverty drivers were therefore structural and conflict-induced, demonstrating how governance failure and insecurity reinforce deprivation.

2. South-West Nigeria: Urban Growth with Rising Cost of Living

As Nigeria's commercial hub, the South-West experienced:

- High literacy rates

- Greater private sector employment

- Infrastructure expansion

Yet:

- Inflation and fuel subsidy removal sharply increased living costs

- Urban poverty grew in Lagos, Ibadan and Abeokuta slums

- Wage stagnation reduced real income and purchasing power

Here, poverty stems not from weak education access, but from economic governance challenges affecting affordability and household resilience.

3. South-South Nigeria: Resource Wealth but Development Inequality

The South-South contributes most of Nigeria's oil revenue, but:



- Pollution has destroyed fisheries and farms
- Youth unemployment remains high
- Corruption and elite capture distort public spending

Despite democratic representation, governance failures resulted in:

A poverty paradox: high national revenue but limited local welfare gains.

Militancy and criminality grew from perceived exclusion from oil wealth, reinforcing political economy arguments that resource control without accountability worsens inequality.

Discussion

The findings support a major conclusion: Nigeria experienced democratic continuity without equitable development continuity.

Democracy expanded participation, elections, and policy frameworks, yet weak governance limited poverty reduction impact. This aligns with:

1. Governance Theory → Poor institutional accountability weakens welfare delivery
2. Capability Approach → Poverty persisted despite interventions because health, education, and living conditions worsened
3. Political Economy Theory → Resource allocation was influenced by elite interests and patronage structures
4. Democratic Development Theory → Democracy did not fully translate into human development gains

Thus, the 2015–2025 decade demonstrates that:

- Where governance is strong, poverty declines
- Where governance is weak, democracy becomes symbolic rather than transformative

The regional cases further show that poverty in Nigeria is spatially uneven, driven by unique socioeconomic and governance realities.

Conclusion

The decade between 2015 and 2025 demonstrates that Nigeria's democracy has expanded institutional continuity, electoral

legitimacy, and social policy frameworks, yet poverty reduction remains a persistent challenge.

Under the Buhari administration (2015–2023), initiatives such as N-Power, the Home-Grown School Feeding Programme, Conditional Cash Transfers, and microcredit schemes (TraderMoni, MarketMoni) were launched to alleviate poverty and improve social inclusion. While these programmes temporarily improved access to employment and welfare, structural governance weaknesses—including corruption, policy inconsistency, poor targeting, and insecurity—limited their effectiveness. Multidimensional poverty rose from 43% in 2015 to 63% in 2022, illustrating the gap between democratic intentions and socioeconomic outcomes.

Under the Tinubu administration (2023–2025), macroeconomic reforms, including fuel subsidy removal and currency unification, targeted long-term economic stabilization. However, these reforms triggered short-term increases in cost of living, reduced household purchasing power, and exposed the vulnerability of Nigeria's poor to inflationary shocks. Democratic continuity, therefore, did not automatically translate into improved welfare, particularly for the most marginalized populations in conflict-affected or resource-disadvantaged regions.

The study concludes that democracy, when not complemented by strong, transparent, and accountable governance, is insufficient to ensure poverty alleviation. The interplay of elite capture, weak institutions, insecurity, and inadequate policy implementation significantly undermines the potential of social investment programmes to reduce multidimensional poverty.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Strengthen Institutional Accountability
 - Enhance monitoring and evaluation mechanisms for all social investment programmes.
 - Implement transparent beneficiary selection processes and regular public audits.
2. Expand Social Safety Nets



Scale up Conditional Cash Transfer programmes and youth employment initiatives.

Introduce targeted interventions for high-poverty and conflict-affected regions (e.g., North-East).

3. Improve Human Capital Development

Prioritize education and healthcare investments with sustained funding.

Ensure schools and health centers remain functional even in conflict zones through protective governance measures.

4. Integrate Policy across Sectors

Align economic, social, and security policies to ensure coherent poverty-reduction strategies.

Reduce policy discontinuity across successive administrations.

5. Promote Inclusive Economic Reforms

Introduce labour-market reforms and incentives to absorb youth into formal and informal sectors.

Implement regional development programmes to balance resource allocation and reduce spatial inequalities.

6. Strengthen Democratic Oversight and Civic Engagement

Enhance parliamentary and civil society oversight of poverty-alleviation policies.

Foster citizen participation in monitoring service delivery and governance.

7. Address Insecurity and Conflict Resolution

Prioritize peacebuilding and security interventions in the North-East and resource-rich South-South regions.

Implement community-based resilience programmes to reduce displacement and vulnerability.

Overall, the study underscores that sustainable poverty alleviation requires democracy reinforced by competent, transparent, and accountable governance.

Contribution to Knowledge

This study contributes to the scholarly discourse on democracy, governance, and poverty alleviation in Nigeria in the following key ways:

1. Bridging Governance and Poverty Outcomes across Two Democratic Regimes (2015–2025)

The research uniquely evaluates the Buhari and Tinubu administrations as a single decade-long democratic continuum. Most previous studies examined one administration in isolation. This study provides a comparative and temporal perspective to show how democratic transitions affect poverty-reduction strategies.

2. Empirical Integration of Governance Quality with Multidimensional Poverty Trends

While earlier research focused largely on income-based poverty, this study incorporates Nigeria's Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) to analyze education, health, housing, sanitation, and security as governance-influenced variables. This offers a holistic understanding of poverty under democratic rule.

3. Regional Case-Based Evidence on Policy Effectiveness

The study demonstrates that poverty is geographically uneven in Nigeria and explains how governance failures vary in:

-North-East (conflict-driven poverty)

-South-South (resource wealth paradox)

South-West (urban inequality and inflation shocks)

This regional contextualization advances knowledge on governance differentials and localized policy impacts.

4. Evaluation of Social Investment Programmes as Democratic Legitimacy Tools

The research provides fresh insights into how programmes such as N-Power, CCT, TraderMoni, and School Feeding are used not only as economic policies but as political legitimacy strategies. This expands the theoretical discourse linking democracy's performance to social welfare deliverables.

5. Theoretical Integration for Governance Studies

By synthesizing Good Governance Theory, Democratic Development Theory, Political Economy, and Capability Approach, the study



develops a multidimensional evaluative model showing that:

Democracy improves welfare only when strengthened by accountable and transparent governance.

6. Forward-Looking Assessment of Reform Impacts (Tinubu Era, 2023–2025)

Few academic works have evaluated the current administration's reforms. This study provides early academic evidence on the implications of fuel subsidy removal and exchange-rate reforms on poverty, which will inform future longitudinal assessments.

Summary of Contributions

Significance

This study provides:

- New empirical insights
- Expanded theory-policy linkage

-Groundwork for future comparative and longitudinal governance studies in Africa

Thus, it fills critical knowledge gaps and deepens academic understanding of why Nigeria's democracy has not yet translated into meaningful poverty alleviation.

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