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**CHILD POVERTY AS STRUCTURAL INJUSTICE: A
PHILOSOPHICAL REFRAMING FOR THE NIGERIAN
CONTEXT**

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Abstract

Child poverty remains one of the most persistent and morally troubling realities of contemporary Nigerian society. Conventional approaches interpret child poverty largely through economic lenses, emphasising income deprivation, but such perspectives fail to capture the deeper moral and structural dimensions of the problem. This paper argues that child poverty in Nigeria should be understood not merely as an economic deficiency but as a form of structural moral injustice. Drawing on John Rawls' theory of justice, the capabilities approach developed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, and African communitarian perspectives on personhood and social responsibility, the study develops a philosophical framework for understanding child poverty as a systematic violation of human dignity and fundamental capabilities. It contends that children occupy a distinctive moral position characterised by dependency, vulnerability, and non-responsibility for their circumstances, imposing heightened obligations on families, communities, and the state, and demonstrates that corruption, governance failures, structural inequality, and inadequate public investment have driven the persistence of child poverty in Nigeria. The study concludes that addressing child poverty requires structural transformation rooted in justice, accountability, and the protection of children's capabilities, rather than welfare interventions alone.

Keywords: Child poverty, structural injustice, human dignity, capabilities approach, social justice, Nigeria, childhood vulnerability

Introduction

Childhood occupies a unique and irreplaceable stage in human existence, during which physical growth, cognitive development, emotional formation, and social identity are shaped in ways that profoundly influence the entirety of human life. Any society that neglects the welfare of its children compromises not only those children's futures but its own. The persistence of severe child deprivation therefore raises questions that extend beyond economics and public policy into philosophical ethics: why should a child be denied opportunities for flourishing because of circumstances over which she exercises no control, and can a social order be regarded as just when substantial numbers of its children are deprived of the conditions necessary for human development?

Nigeria presents one of the most striking examples of this reality. The 2022 Multidimensional Poverty Index Survey reveals that 67.5 percent of Nigerian children aged zero to seventeen are multidimensionally poor, simultaneously deprived across health, education, living standards, and protection, and that children constitute half of all poor people in Nigeria (National Bureau of Statistics, 2023, p. 28). Nigeria had approximately 18.3 million out-of-school children in 2024 (UNICEF Nigeria, 2024a), and approximately 11 million children under five, one in every three, were experiencing severe food poverty that makes them up to 50 percent more likely to suffer life-threatening malnutrition (UNICEF Nigeria, 2024b). These conditions are particularly severe in rural communities, conflict-affected regions, and economically disadvantaged households.

Most contemporary discussions of poverty remain dominated by economic interpretations that reduce child deprivation to income indicators, overlooking that poverty is also a moral condition involving unequal opportunities and the denial of capabilities essential for flourishing. This paper argues, against this dominant paradigm, that child poverty in Nigeria should be understood primarily as a structural moral injustice rather than an economic deficiency: a systematic failure within social, political, and economic institutions that prevents children from realising capabilities necessary for human flourishing. Because children are dependent, vulnerable, and not responsible for the conditions into which they are born, deprivation experienced during childhood possesses a distinct moral significance; it constitutes not merely a social problem but a violation of justice.

The study draws on three complementary philosophical traditions: Rawls' theory of justice, the capabilities approach of Sen and Nussbaum, and African communitarian philosophy, which together ground a reframing seeking to demonstrate that child poverty violates human dignity and basic capabilities, identify the structural factors responsible for its persistence, and explore the implications for public policy and social responsibility. The plight of millions of Nigerian children cannot be adequately addressed through charity alone. What is required is a commitment to justice, one that recognises every child as a bearer of dignity entitled to the social conditions necessary for a fully human life.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative philosophical methodology grounded in critical analysis, normative evaluation, and documentary research. Because the objective is not to measure poverty statistically but to examine its moral meaning, the study relies principally on philosophical argumentation and conceptual analysis, interrogating prevailing assumptions that reduce poverty to economic insufficiency and Documentary materials, including books, journal articles, policy reports, and reports from international organisations such as UNICEF, the World Bank, the United Nations Development Programme, and the National Bureau of Statistics, supply the empirical foundation against which this normative analysis proceeds.

The study adopts an interdisciplinary orientation, integrating insights from political philosophy, development ethics, social theory, and African philosophy, since child poverty is a multidimensional

phenomenon whose causes and consequences transcend disciplinary boundaries. Its purpose is interpretive and evaluative rather than empirical: not to generate new statistical findings but to provide a philosophical framework through which child poverty can be examined as a question of justice rather than merely welfare or economic management.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation of this study is derived from three complementary philosophical traditions: John Rawls' theory of justice as fairness, the capabilities approach developed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, and African communitarian philosophy. Together, these perspectives provide a robust normative framework for understanding child poverty as a form of structural injustice.

3.1 John Rawls and Justice as Fairness

In *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls argues that justice constitutes the first virtue of social institutions, just as truth constitutes the first virtue of systems of thought (Rawls, 1999, p. 3); a society is just only when its institutions protect the interests of all members, especially the least advantaged. Central to Rawls' theory is the original position and the veil of ignorance: individuals designing the principles of society choose social arrangements without knowledge of their future social position, wealth, ethnicity, religion, gender, or abilities, and under such conditions rational persons would select principles that protect the most vulnerable (Rawls, 1999, pp. 11-17). No rational individual operating behind the veil of ignorance would endorse a social order in which millions of children lack access to education, healthcare, and security. Rawls' Difference Principle strengthens this argument: inequalities are permissible only if they benefit the least advantaged, yet Nigerian child poverty reveals arrangements that disadvantage those already vulnerable, a failure of distributive justice demanding structural reform.

3.2 Amartya Sen's Capabilities Approach

While Rawls focuses on institutional fairness, Amartya Sen shifts attention toward what individuals are actually able to do and become, criticising approaches that define poverty exclusively in terms of income. Poverty, on his view, is capability deprivation: the deprivation of the real freedoms and opportunities people have to live lives they have reason to value, rather than mere material scarcity (Sen, 1999, p. 87). Applied to child poverty, this framework reveals that deprivation extends far beyond material scarcity: a child who lacks access to education is deprived not merely of schooling but of future opportunities for participation and self-development, and a child suffering chronic malnutrition experiences not merely hunger but diminished cognitive potential and reduced life prospects.

3.3 Martha Nussbaum and Human Flourishing

Building on Sen's work, Martha Nussbaum develops a more explicit normative account of human flourishing, arguing that every human being is entitled to certain basic capabilities indispensable for living a life consistent with human dignity, including life, bodily health, bodily integrity, practical reason, affiliation, emotions, play, and control over one's environment, which a just society must guarantee to all its members above a threshold level (Nussbaum, 2011, p. 33). When evaluated through this framework, the condition of many Nigerian children reveals multiple capability failures: malnutrition threatens bodily health, educational exclusion undermines practical reason, child labour compromises bodily integrity, and social exclusion restricts affiliation. Such conditions indicate not merely economic hardship but violations of fundamental human dignity.

3.4 African Communitarian Perspectives on Childhood and Social Responsibility

An adequate analysis of child poverty in Nigeria must also engage African philosophical traditions, which emphasise the interconnectedness of persons and the moral obligations arising from communal existence. Thinkers such as Ifeanyi Menkiti, Kwame Gyekye, and Kwasi Wiredu argue that personhood is realised within a network of social relationships rather than in isolation (Menkiti, 1984,

pp. 171-181; Gyekye, 1997, p. 35; Wiredu, 1996, p. 21). The African notion of Ubuntu captures this insight succinctly: “A person is a person through other persons” (Ramose, 1999, p. 49); the suffering of a child is therefore a communal concern implicating families, communities, religious institutions, and the state, and child welfare becomes a shared moral responsibility rather than a private family matter. Taken together, Rawls’ theory of justice, the capabilities approach, and African communitarian philosophy establish that every child possesses an inherent claim to the conditions necessary for flourishing, and that society bears corresponding obligations to secure them.

The Moral Status of the Child: Why Child Poverty Is a Distinctive Justice Problem

A philosophical examination of child poverty must begin with a fundamental question: why should child poverty be regarded as a distinctive justice issue rather than simply one aspect of poverty in general? Historically, theories of justice have focused primarily on autonomous adults, treating children as dependents under parental care rather than as subjects possessing independent moral claims. Contemporary moral philosophy, however, increasingly recognises that children’s claims upon society arise not from productivity or contribution but from their humanity, such that any social order neglecting children’s wellbeing undermines the equal worth of all persons.

4.1 Children as Subjects of Justice

One of the most significant developments in contemporary ethical thought has been the recognition of children as rights-bearing subjects rather than mere recipients of adult benevolence. David Archard’s philosophical analysis of childhood establishes that children’s moral claims arise not from productivity or contribution but from their vulnerability, dignity, and developmental needs (Archard, 2004, pp. 23-45), and Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift similarly ground children’s strong moral claims on parents and the social order in their developmental needs rather than their rational autonomy (Brighouse & Swift, 2014, pp. 56-87). Human dignity is not earned through achievement or productivity; it belongs equally to all persons by virtue of their humanity. Consequently, child poverty must be interpreted not merely as a condition of need but as evidence that important obligations toward children remain unfulfilled.

4.2 Radical Dependency and Human Vulnerability

A second distinguishing feature is radical dependency. Children rely upon parents, caregivers, communities, and institutions for virtually every aspect of their existence, a dependency extending beyond physical survival to intellectual, emotional, and moral development. Whenever one party possesses power over another who is vulnerable and dependent, moral obligations arise; parents, communities, religious institutions, and governments therefore occupy positions of fiduciary responsibility toward children. Martha Nussbaum’s capabilities theory is particularly attentive to this claim, arguing that traditional theories of justice, by focusing on cooperative arrangements among equal adults, systematically neglect the justice claims of those in conditions of profound dependency (Nussbaum, 2006, p. 98). When these responsibilities are neglected, dependency becomes a source of injustice rather than merely individual hardship.

4.3 Developmental Vulnerability and Irreversible Harm

A third feature is developmental vulnerability. Childhood is a critical developmental period during which capacities essential for adult life are formed, and nutritional deprivation, educational exclusion, and exposure to violence during this period can generate permanent consequences (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000, p. 210). Unlike many forms of adult deprivation, childhood deprivation is frequently irreversible: a child deprived of adequate nutrition during critical developmental stages may never fully regain lost cognitive capacity, and years of missed schooling may permanently reduce life chances. This irreversibility intensifies society’s moral obligations: justice requires timely intervention, since delayed responses may come too late to prevent lasting harm.

4.4 Non-Responsibility and Moral Innocence

A fourth feature is non-responsibility for circumstances. Children do not choose their families, communities, ethnicity, or national context, nor do they create the structures that shape their opportunities. A child born into extreme poverty, excluded from school, or suffering malnutrition has done nothing to deserve these conditions. This absence of responsibility is morally significant because it highlights the injustice inherent in child poverty: justice requires that burdens not be distributed according to factors beyond individual control, yet the life prospects of millions of Nigerian children are determined largely by the accident of birth.

4.5 Childhood, Human Dignity, and Social Obligation

The combined realities of dependency, vulnerability, developmental sensitivity, and non-responsibility establish that children occupy a unique moral position, among the most vulnerable members of the human community and therefore possessing the strongest claims upon collective responsibility. A just society is measured not by the privileges enjoyed by its strongest members but by the protection afforded to its weakest. Understanding children as subjects of justice in this way provides the foundation for the central argument of this paper: child poverty is not merely a developmental challenge requiring technical solutions but a structural moral injustice that violates the dignity, capabilities, and legitimate claims of those least responsible for their circumstances and most vulnerable to their consequences.

Child Poverty as Structural Moral Injustice

Having established the distinctive moral status of children, the argument may now proceed to its central claim: child poverty in Nigeria should be understood not merely as an economic condition but as a form of structural moral injustice. As Iris Marion Young observes, such injustice frequently emerges not through direct wrongdoing by identifiable individuals but through social processes that place some groups at systematic disadvantage while benefiting others (Young, 1990, pp. 15-65). Child poverty in Nigeria exhibits all the characteristics of structural injustice: it is widespread, persistent, predictable, and disproportionately concentrated among particular populations, rooted not in accident or nature but in institutional arrangements and governance structures that have failed to secure the conditions necessary for children's flourishing.

5.1 From Need to Justice

The first implication of this reframing is a shift from the language of need to the language of justice. A child suffering from hunger is not merely in need of food; she is being denied a basic condition necessary for human flourishing. Charity depends upon voluntary generosity; justice rests upon obligation. Charitable interventions frequently substitute for structural reforms in Nigeria, alleviating suffering while leaving intact the conditions that produce deprivation.

5.2 Poverty as a Violation of Human Dignity

A second implication concerns human dignity. From a Kantian perspective, every person must be treated as an end in themselves and never merely as a means to the ends of others (Kant, 1997, 4:429); this principle applies with equal force to children, whose worth does not depend upon future productivity or economic contribution. The persistence of severe child deprivation within a society of considerable wealth reveals a gap between the recognition of human dignity in principle and its realisation in practice. Child poverty should therefore be understood not simply as a lack of resources but as a violation of the respect owed to persons.

5.3 Identifying Agents of Responsibility

A third implication is the identification of agents of responsibility. A structural justice perspective insists that social arrangements are human creations, and that those who design and benefit from them bear responsibility for their consequences. Rawls' Difference Principle is instructive: an arrangement

in which two-thirds of Nigerian children live in multidimensional poverty, while the least advantaged children in the most deprived states face a 92 percent probability of such poverty, fails this test decisively (Rawls, 1999, p. 65; National Bureau of Statistics, 2023, p. 28). Responsibility in the Nigerian context is particularly evident in corruption, weak institutions, and inadequate educational funding; these are not inevitable conditions but the outcomes of decisions made by individuals and institutions exercising authority.

5.4 Beyond Welfare: The Demand for Structural Transformation

A fourth implication concerns the nature of an appropriate response. If poverty is rooted in structural injustice rather than mere economic deficiency, welfare measures alone are inadequate: they may alleviate symptoms without addressing underlying causes. Structural transformation requires changes in the institutions, policies, and social arrangements that generate deprivation, including strengthened governance, expanded access to quality education and healthcare, and cultural change challenging practices such as gender discrimination, child labour, and early marriage that contribute directly to capability deprivation. Such transformation is not merely a political or economic project but a moral one, requiring recognition that investment in children is a requirement of justice rather than an act of generosity.

5.5 Child Poverty and the Failure of Social Institutions

Ultimately, child poverty reveals a deeper failure of social institutions. The family, the community, the educational system, the healthcare system, religious organisations, and the state all possess responsibilities toward children, and the widespread deprivation experienced by many Nigerian children indicates that these institutions have not consistently fulfilled them. This reinforces the central thesis of the present study: child poverty is a manifestation of structural moral injustice rather than a developmental challenge or economic inconvenience, and recognising it as such obligates society to pursue deeper structural reforms capable of transforming the conditions that sustain deprivation.

A Capabilities Audit of Nigerian Childhood: Assessing the Dimensions of Deprivation and Human Flourishing

The capabilities approach developed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum provides one of the most compelling frameworks for evaluating child poverty, asking not merely what resources a child possesses but what she is actually able to be and do. Nussbaum identifies a number of central capabilities that every just society should guarantee its members; applied to the documented conditions of Nigerian children, these capabilities reveal a pattern of systematic deprivation extending across multiple dimensions of human flourishing.

6.1 The Capability for Life and Survival

The most basic capability is the ability to live a normal human lifespan. The under-five mortality rate in Nigeria stands at 117 per 1,000 live births, more than twenty times the rate in high-income countries, and approximately 11 million children under five, one in every three, are experiencing severe food poverty that makes them up to 50 percent more likely to die from preventable causes (UNICEF Nigeria, 2025, p. 2; UNICEF Nigeria, 2024b). Such mortality reflects failures of governance and public investment rather than merely medical deficiencies.

6.2 Bodily Health and Nutrition

Closely connected to survival is bodily health. Chronic malnutrition affects 37 percent of Nigerian children under five, causing permanent neurological damage during the first thousand days of life, while contaminated water affects 70 percent of households (UNICEF Nigeria, 2024b; World Bank, 2024). Longitudinal studies following stunted children into adulthood consistently find reduced IQ and diminished productivity persisting decades after the initial deprivation (Victora et al., 2008, pp.

340-357); access to healthcare and nutrition must be regarded as entitlements of dignity, not privileges.

6.3 Education, Knowledge, and Cognitive Development

Education occupies a central place within both Sen's and Nussbaum's understanding of human capabilities, yet educational deprivation remains one of the most visible manifestations of child poverty in Nigeria. Approximately 18.3 million children were out of school in 2024, the largest such population in the world, and learning poverty affects 65 to 74 percent of those enrolled, meaning enrolment without learning does not fulfil the demands of justice (UNICEF Nigeria, 2024a; World Bank, 2024). Educational exclusion restricts the development of practical reason, imagination, and intellectual autonomy, limiting children's capacity to pursue lives they have reason to value and reinforcing intergenerational poverty.

6.4 Bodily Integrity and Protection from Exploitation

Another essential capability concerns bodily integrity: freedom from violence, exploitation, and trafficking. Approximately 15 million Nigerian children are engaged in child labour, including 6.3 million in hazardous work, alongside widespread trafficking and forced marriage (International Labour Organization, 2021, pp. 23-45). A child in hazardous labour is simultaneously deprived of education and health, illustrating the interconnectedness of deprivation; protecting bodily integrity requires conditions that reduce vulnerability, not merely legal prohibition.

6.5 Emotional Development, Affiliation, and Play

Human flourishing also requires opportunities for emotional development, social participation, and play. Poverty frequently undermines these dimensions of wellbeing: poor children often experience social marginalisation and reduced self-esteem, while child labour, household responsibilities, and inadequate community facilities leave little room for recreation or creative expression. Nussbaum identifies play as a central human capability in its own right; its absence may appear less urgent than hunger or educational deprivation, but it has profound developmental consequences for social skills, emotional resilience, and self-confidence, reminding us that justice concerns the whole person and not merely survival.

6.7 Capability Deprivation and the Cycle of Poverty

Together, these capability failures demonstrate that child poverty in Nigeria cannot be reduced to a lack of income. The deprivations reinforce one another: poor health affects educational performance, educational exclusion limits future employment, and economic insecurity increases vulnerability to exploitation, producing a cycle of deprivation that is difficult to escape. This cycle is empirical and philosophical confirmation of the study's central thesis: child poverty is a broad assault on human dignity, not merely a shortage of resources.

Structural Roots of Child Poverty in Nigeria

The preceding analysis has demonstrated that child poverty constitutes a deprivation of essential capabilities and a violation of human dignity. To describe poverty as structural injustice, however, requires more than identifying its consequences; it requires examining the structures that produce and sustain them. Its persistence despite decades of economic growth suggests deep structural deficiencies in the political, economic, and social organisation of the state, rather than mere resource scarcity.

7.1 Corruption and the Diversion of Public Resources

Among the most significant structural drivers of child poverty in Nigeria is corruption. Daniel Jordan Smith's ethnographic analysis demonstrates how the systematic diversion of public resources, from education, healthcare, and infrastructure budgets into private accounts, directly reduces resources available for child welfare (Smith, 2007, pp. 45-89), leaving schools underfunded and social welfare programmes failing to reach vulnerable populations. Nigeria is consistently ranked among the most

corrupt countries in the world, with direct negative effects on public spending on education, health, and social services; education receives less than the internationally recommended 20 percent of public spending, and health less than the 15 percent recommended by the Abuja Declaration (Transparency International, 2024, pp. 77-89; African Development Bank, 2020, pp. 34-56). Rawls' theory of justice offers a useful lens here: institutions exist to protect the interests of the least advantaged, and corruption represents a direct assault on this objective.

7.2 Governance Deficits and Institutional Weakness

Closely related to corruption is the broader issue of governance. Nigeria has adopted numerous policies aimed at improving child welfare, yet implementation often remains inconsistent, undermined by bureaucratic inefficiencies and poor coordination, producing a persistent gap between policy intentions and lived realities. Institutional failure is morally significant because it undermines society's capacity to fulfil its obligations toward children: strong institutions are instruments of justice, not merely administrative necessities.

7.3 The Resource Curse and Economic Inequality

Nigeria's abundant natural resources present a striking paradox: substantial oil and gas revenues coexist with widespread child poverty. Political economists describe this as the resource curse, in which resource wealth generates governance pathology and inequality rather than broad-based prosperity (Karl, 1997, pp. 78-95). Revenue frequently fails to translate into improved education or healthcare, becoming concentrated within limited segments of society instead.

7.4 Colonial Legacies and Historical Structures of Inequality

Contemporary patterns of poverty cannot be understood without reference to history. Colonial administration disrupted indigenous institutions, altered economic relationships, and established governance structures designed primarily to serve external interests (Rodney, 1972, pp. 23-89). Although colonial rule ended decades ago, its institutional and economic legacies, uneven development, regional inequality, and dependence on extractive industries, continue to shape contemporary realities. For children born into conditions shaped by these historical structures, poverty represents an inherited disadvantage encountered long before their birth.

7.5 Cultural Practices and Insecurity

Cultural practices and insecurity constitute two further structural drivers. Early marriage, gender discrimination, and restrictive gender roles continue to affect children's development, with girls frequently experiencing reduced educational opportunities and heightened vulnerability to exploitation; African communitarian philosophy's emphasis on collective responsibility demands that such practices be evaluated ethically rather than rejected wholesale. Armed conflict, communal violence, kidnapping, and displacement have likewise disrupted the lives of millions of Nigerian children, destroying schools and livelihoods and exposing children to trauma whose effects often persist long after conflict ends; the protection of children in conflict situations is therefore a fundamental requirement of justice.

7.7 Structural Injustice and the Reproduction of Poverty

These structural factors do not operate independently; they interact, reinforcing one another as corruption weakens institutions, weak institutions undermine service delivery, and resulting deficits limit opportunities and increase vulnerability to exploitation. The regional patterning of child poverty makes this reproduction visible with near-mathematical precision: a child born in Sokoto State faces a 92 percent probability of multidimensional poverty, against approximately 31 percent in Lagos (National Bureau of Statistics, 2023, p. 28), an accident of birthplace that violates the Rawlsian standard that arrangements should not benefit the advantaged while burdening those least able to bear it (Rawls, 1999, p. 65). Genuine solutions therefore require structural change rather than immediate

relief alone; only through such transformation can society move beyond managing poverty toward realising justice for children.

Implications for Public Policy, Religious Institutions, and Social Responsibility

If child poverty is understood as a structural moral injustice rather than merely an economic deficiency, then the responses required to address it must also be transformed, extending beyond humanitarian concern toward deliberate action aimed at dismantling the structures that perpetuate deprivation. Because the causes are multidimensional, the response must be comprehensive and sustained, requiring government, religious communities, civil society, families, and citizens together; no single actor can resolve it alone.

8.1 Government and the Imperative of Justice

The primary responsibility for protecting children rests with the state, whose legitimacy derives from its capacity to promote the common good and protect those unable to protect themselves. Government responses to child poverty must move beyond short-term welfare initiatives toward structural reforms: substantial investment in education and healthcare, strengthened mechanisms of accountability and transparency, and the recognition that public expenditure should be guided by principles of justice and human dignity rather than economic efficiency alone. Ultimately, a just state must treat children's welfare as a central measure of national development.

8.2 Religious Institutions and Prophetic Responsibility

Religious institutions occupy a unique position within Nigerian society, possessing significant moral influence and deep community trust. If child poverty is understood as structural injustice, religious engagement must extend beyond charity to prophetic advocacy, naming the institutional arrangements that produce deprivation as morally indefensible, a stance the biblical tradition supports by consistently linking concern for the vulnerable with demands for justice rather than mere compassion.

8.3 Civil Society, Families, and Communities

Civil society organisations serve as important intermediaries between citizens and the state, generating awareness, monitoring government performance, and advocating for policy reform; children themselves, where appropriate, should also be given opportunities to contribute to discussions affecting their lives. Families remain the primary environment within which children develop, yet many struggle to fulfil their responsibilities because they are themselves trapped in poverty; supporting children therefore requires supporting families through policies that strengthen employment and social protection. Communities, too, possess important responsibilities, and African traditions of solidarity and mutual support remain relevant resources for community-based initiatives that complement governmental efforts.

8.4 Education and a Culture of Justice for Children

Addressing child poverty also requires moral and civic education, since structural injustices persist partly because of attitudes that tolerate inequality. Educational institutions, and universities in particular, bear responsibility for promoting ethical consciousness and contributing, through research and public scholarship, to solutions addressing poverty's structural dimensions. Ultimately, child poverty should be recognised as a moral challenge testing the ethical character of society itself, one requiring political courage, institutional integrity, and communal solidarity at every level; only when children's welfare becomes a central social priority can the structural conditions that sustain poverty begin to change.

Conclusion

This study has argued that child poverty in Nigeria should be understood not merely as an economic condition but as a structural moral injustice. Drawing upon the theories of John Rawls, Amartya Sen,

Martha Nussbaum, and African communitarian philosophy, it has demonstrated that children occupy a distinctive moral position whose dependency, developmental vulnerability, and non-responsibility for their circumstances generate special obligations on the part of families, communities, institutions, and the state. Child poverty in Nigeria is neither accidental nor inevitable; it is produced and sustained by identifiable structural factors, including corruption, governance failures, the resource curse, colonial legacies, and harmful cultural practices, that systematically undermine children's access to education, healthcare, nutrition, security, and meaningful social participation.

The capabilities audit conducted in this study revealed that child poverty affects virtually every dimension of human flourishing, limiting children's ability to survive, remain healthy, learn, participate in community life, and realise their potential. Such deprivation constitutes a violation of human dignity and therefore a matter of justice rather than charity alone. Meaningful responses accordingly require structural transformation: accountable governance, equitable resource allocation, quality education, accessible healthcare, and active engagement by religious institutions, civil society organisations, and local communities, since welfare programmes and humanitarian interventions, while valuable, cannot substitute for reforms that address the underlying causes of deprivation.

Ultimately, the measure of any society lies not in the wealth accumulated by its strongest members but in the opportunities available to its most vulnerable members. As Sen has argued, the purpose of justice theory is not to achieve theoretical clarity as an end in itself but to guide the removal of manifest injustices from the world (Sen, 2009, p. 21). The plight of poor children in Nigeria is therefore not merely a developmental concern; it is a moral challenge that demands urgent and sustained attention, since to confront child poverty effectively is to affirm the dignity of every child and to acknowledge that justice requires more than compassion, it requires transformation.

Contribution to Knowledge

This study contributes to scholarship on poverty, ethics, and social justice in five ways. First, it advances a philosophical reframing of child poverty, moving beyond economic interpretations to conceptualise it as structural moral injustice. Second, it integrates Rawlsian justice theory, the capabilities approach, and African communitarian philosophy into a unified analytical framework for understanding child welfare within the Nigerian context. Third, it highlights the distinctive moral status of children as subjects of justice, establishing a stronger ethical foundation for public obligations toward child welfare than is common in conventional poverty studies. Fourth, it introduces the concept of a capabilities audit for assessing the multidimensional impact of child poverty across health, education, dignity, and human flourishing. Fifth, it contributes to policy discourse by demonstrating that sustainable solutions require structural transformation rather than charitable intervention, providing a philosophical justification for governance reform and rights-based approaches to child development.

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