

Democracy and Regional Economic Inequality in Nigeria's Fourth Republic

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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.909000153>

Received: 22 August 2025; Accepted: 29 August 2025; Published: 02 October 2025

ABSTRACT

The study investigates the complex linkage between democracy and regional economic inequality in Nigeria's Fourth Republic, emphasizing marked inequalities between the Northern and Southern regions. Irrespective of Nigeria's status as one of Africa's largest economies, economic benefits remain unevenly distributed, exacerbated by historical, socio-cultural, and governance factors. In terms of methodology, the study adopts a mixed-methods approach involving 1,536 questionnaires, focus group discussions, and key informant interviews across Nigeria's six geopolitical zones. The study found significant regional inequality hinged heavily on governance quality. The findings show that poor institutional transparency, elite patronage, and weak democratic institutions perpetuate inequality, particularly disadvantaging the Northern zones. Crucially, respondents affirm that well-designed, context-specific public policies can efficiently and substantially reduce these inequalities if accompanied by governance reforms promoting accountability and inclusiveness. The study's inevitable conclusion points to the fact that addressing regional economic inequality requires integrated policy approaches crafted to Nigeria's diverse socio-political landscape to promote balanced development and strengthen democratic consolidation. Recommendations echo region-focused development, governance reforms, and participatory policy formulation to support inclusive growth and social stability.

INTRODUCTION

According to Oxfam's Commitment to Reducing Inequality Index (CRII), by 2019 Nigeria's inequality had entered crisis level. A significant portion of the Nigerian population lives below the poverty line, despite the country being one of Africa's largest economies and home to some of the wealthiest people in the continent. This situation has led to civil unrest and increased discontent between the rich and the poor. In a democratic system, this level of inequality can impede development and threaten democracy, as insecurity hampers growth. Economic inequality manifests in various forms, including gender and regional disparities. In Nigeria, regional inequalities—particularly between the Northern and Southern regions—are among the most prominent examples. The Northern region tends to have a higher percentage of impoverished people, which is linked to factors such as limited access to education, cultural and religious influences, and the continuation of the Almajiri system. The issue of inequality is also closely related to the region's insecurity problems.

Nigeria, as one of Africa's largest economies and its most populous nation, faces the challenge of closing the gap between the rich and the poor. The country is experiencing a crisis due to significant inequality caused by uneven distribution of natural resources, education/skills and agricultural potential. A 2019 report by Oxfam, the Commitment to Reducing Inequality Index (CRII), showed that Nigeria ranked among the countries with the worst inequality records (Oxfam, 2019). This inequality is not only economic but also social and political, as it has serious consequences for democratic governance, economic growth, and political stability.

Although the Nigerian economy has experienced growth, the distribution of its benefits remains unequal. A large portion of the population still live in poverty, particularly in Northern Nigeria (Omodia & Igechi, 2018). This regional inequality is worsened by low levels of education, health, and employment opportunities, especially in the northern part of the country (Sobowale, 2019). Because economic inequality persists in the region, it fuels unrest among the people, which is linked to political instability and security issues. These problems hinder democratic consolidation and progress (Mukunto, 2024).

There has been considerable debate concerning the relationship between democracy and economic inequality, with scholars offering differing views on whether democracy is conducive to the equitable distribution of wealth or whether it is a contributive factor to the widening of gaps (Lipset, 1959; Angelsen & Wunder, 2006). In the Fourth Republic of Nigeria, persistent disparities between the wealthy and the impoverished people present a significant problem. Inadequate access to political power for the underclass in the country, due to the unequal distribution of resources and wealth, lack of political stability, and poor electoral system all collude to jeopardize the democratic process in the country (Oxfam, 2017).

This study aimed to understand how democracy relates to regional economic inequality in Nigeria, especially regarding income differences across various regions. The study examined how the democratic governance system, shaped by political elites, affects access to wealth and resources in the country. It also analyze how inequality impacts social and political stability, with particular focus on the high poverty level in the Northern region (Sobowale, 2019). This analysis sought to contribute to the ongoing debate about the role of democracy in promoting inclusive economic growth and regional equity in Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

Economic inequality poses a significant threat to Nigeria's democracy. It denies most citizens an opportunity to fulfill basic needs and participate in the electoral process, as poor citizens are vulnerable and their votes can easily be bought. Increased criminality alongside security crises in different parts of the country is also caused by extreme inequality. The unequal distribution of wealth exists even in a country like Nigeria, despite its vast natural resources and fertile land. Political elites, retrogressive taxation policies, patronage networks, and poor leadership have all aggravated the gap between the rich and the poor.

The inability of consecutive democratically elected governments to deal with these challenges, whether based on a shortage of political will or administrative incompetence, has rendered the situation, to many, an insufficient one. Although some other scholars have explored the linkage between democracy and development, little attention has been paid to the contribution of democracy to economic inequality, especially at the regional level. This study seeks to offset that gap by focusing on the particular situation of Nigeria.

The present study provides theoretical and practical insights and advice on policy implementation towards economic progress, inclusive growth, and social stability. It propagates trans-formative policies like progressive taxation to narrow the rich-poor divide. Supporting the idea of inclusive growth and shared prosperity, Nigeria may make significant steps toward addressing the issues of economic inequality and enhancing democracy.

Research Questions

1. What is the nature of regional inequality across Nigeria?
2. How does governance impact regional inequality in Nigeria?
3. What public policies can address regional inequality in Nigeria?

Objective of the study

1. To measure the nature of regional inequality across Nigeria
2. To measure the linkage between governance and regional inequality in Nigeria
3. To measure a public policy document that can appropriately respond to the problem of regional inequality in Nigeria

Hypotheses

There is no significant regional inequality across Nigeria.

Governance has no significant impact on regional economic inequality in Nigeria.

Effective public policies have no significant effect on the reduction of regional inequality in Nigeria.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section addresses the literature as it concerns democracy and regional economic inequality in Nigeria. Some conceptual issues are first explored before veering into empirical reviews.

Conceptual Review

1. Democracy

Democracy can be defined as a system of government in which the people exercise the governing power, either directly or indirectly through representatives. Free and fair elections usually determine it, the principles of law, and the protection of individual rights. Dahl (1971) described democracy as a system wherein leaders in politics are chosen by regular, free, and fair elections and a system in which civil liberties, freedom of speech and freedom of assembly, are absolute. The central doctrine about the concept of democracy is that people can participate in the management of the country; this participatory role is executed in the form of voting, citizen input, and civil debate.

In the Nigerian scenario, there was a return to democratic rule in 1999 with the establishment of the Fourth Republic. Though there are democratic structures, critics have said that the political system in the country continues to take the shape of elite power struggles, with corruption and lack of institutional oversight the order of the day, which has thwarted genuine democratic evolution (Diamond, 2008). Moreover, the problem of economic inequality becomes a decisive factor in Nigerian democracy because wealth has a significant impact on political power and election turnout, affecting and compromising the integrity of elections in many cases.

2. Regions

The notions of regions in a nation can be described as geographic and/or cultural divisions that can be defined as sharing any common political, economic, or social characteristics. In Nigeria, geography and history delineate regions that are characterized by both geographical and historical factors that identify the colonial divisions of the country, including the post-independent federal system. Nigeria comprises six geopolitical zones, namely the North Central, South East, North East, South South, North West, and the South West, with diverse economic and social development. The politics and financial system of Nigeria rely heavily on these areas, which in turn determine the allocation of resources, political representation, and socio-economic performances (Adebayo & Akinwunmi, 2016).

The geographical variance in Nigeria is very huge, with the North, especially the North East and North West, being considerably poorer than the South (Oxfam, 2017). The causes of these disparities can be aggravated by regional policies and cultures as well as historical legacies such as the late introduction of Western education in the North, which has hindered the development of human capital in these regions (Adebayo & Akinwunmi, 2016). Regional division of Nigeria thus implies a considerable impact on the political and economic integration of the country, the national integrity, and the allocation of national funds to the component units within the state.

Economic Inequality

Economic inequality can be termed as the lack of equilibrium or fairness of income, as well as the distribution of wealth, among classes of society or individuals. The concept includes not only the income inequality (level differences), but also wealth inequality (level differences in assets and resources). Atkinson (2015) writes that the impact of economic inequality on society, access to opportunities, and even overall economic growth is long-term. Severe inequality in most cases translates to social upheavals and poor social mobility as people in

the poverty trap also have limited access to higher education, healthcare facilities, and other essential services (Piketty, 2014).

Economic inequality is a primary concern in Nigeria, and the country has always been classified as one of the least equitable countries in the world. Although Nigeria has one of the biggest economies in Africa, the concentration of wealth lies in the hands of a few elites, with the majority of the people living in poverty. According to Oxfam (2019), the inequality rate in Nigeria places it among the worst in the world because the top 1 percent of the population owns much more than their share of the national wealth. Such inequality is also intensified by regional economic differences, specifically the rich South compared to the poor North of the country (Omodia & Igechi, 2018).

The effects of economic disparity in Nigeria are traumatizing not only to the economic harmony of the citizenry but also to the democratic process itself. With increased economic inequality, social tensions rise, and it becomes harder to ensure political stability (Sen, 1999). Economic disparity in Nigeria must be addressed to help produce inclusive growth, social cohesion, and sustainable development.

Empirical Review

Several papers have discussed democracy and regional inequality over the years. The study by Ngara, Esebonu, Ogoh, and Orokpo (2014) analyzed how poverty and inequality affected democratic consolidation in Nigeria since the establishment of the Fourth Republic in 1999. The study aimed at discussing the issue of the prevalence of poverty as a hindrance to democracy by producing such challenges as political apathy, militancy, and failure in governance. The study used the technique of content analysis that has been enriched by facts and a Marxist approach to capitalism in analyzing poverty and inequality. The significant findings emphasize that there is a direct relationship between mass poverty and a legitimacy crisis, which leads to insecurity, ethno-religious conflicts, and election violence. The study proposes good governance aspects such as sound resource management, infrastructure growth, transparent elections, and the rule of law to fortify the democratic process and end the socioeconomic crisis bedeviling Nigeria.

Similarly, Oluwaleye, Olugbenga, and Ojogbede (2025) analyzed the developmental paradox in the Fourth Republic of Nigeria, where the dreams of realizing democracy were not matched in the enactment of development visions. The study sought to critically pursue the extent to which democracy as an inclusive growth mechanism has been obstructed due to these governance gaps, corruption, security predicament, and socioeconomic differences. Based on a combination of qualitative research and empirical facts, the study concludes that although Nigeria have operated a stable democratic regime over the last 25 years, the country has been affected by constant poverty, unemployment, and growing inequality. The evidence indicates how poor performance of the institutions, incompetent leadership, and uncontrolled corruption hamper progress. Among the recommendations, it has been suggested that there is a need for visionary leadership, that there should be reforms to curb corruption, have free and fair elections, and inject integrity into political offices to achieve sustainable outcomes of development.

Egbe and Muhammad (2024) explored the issues as it concerns a democratic state like Nigeria when it comes to the consolidation of democracy in the Fourth Republic. The study employed a mixed technique with the application of qualitative and quantitative techniques to investigate political processes, elections, and administration since 1999. The results point to key problems that include electoral fraud, corruption, violence, and the absence of internal party democracy. The democratic process is undermined by judicial rulings and security lapses, as illustrated by specific case studies such as the controversial Imo and Bayelsa state governorship elections. The paper proposes the need to ensure extensive electoral reforms, better political organization, implementation of internal party democracy, and increased transparency in government as the solutions to these shortcomings and as the means of ensuring a more stable democratic setting.

Agwadu (2023) examined how Nigerian politics have turned into regional politics as compared to ideological politics in the country since regaining democracy in 1999. The author uses a qualitative approach, examining the actions and words of the political figures, researching secondary materials such as press, radio, and television broadcasts, and political manifestos. As per the findings, the issue of regionalism that is fuelled by the allocation

of state rents as opposed to ideological contestation has become a key instrument of political mobilisation in Nigeria. This transformation can be attributed to the fact that Nigeria is a rentier state, whereby the wealth has been redistributed based on the federal system. Thus, industrialization becomes a burning concept in instigating ideological struggle. The study proposes the idea of focusing on industrialisation that will allow the transition to the world of ideological debate of politics, rather than the regional, as an attempt to develop the country and prevent identity-based politics.

Raheem, Oyeleye, Adeniji & Aladekoyi (2014) highlight the reasons as well as the effects, and a solution to imbalances and inequalities in Nigeria's regions. The study aimed to evaluate the existing socio-economic imbalances between regions and suggest some practical recommendations to solve these problems. The methodology includes the review of the historical, economic, and socio-political factors that contribute to these inequalities, including the unequal distribution of natural resources, as well as the colonial form of administration and regionalism. The result showed that the imbalances are evident in the form of unemployment, poverty, underutilization of resources, and environmental degradation at the regional levels. Further, the literature points out the ill effects of regional imbalances, such as overcrowding in cities, low income per head in the less developed regions, and marginalisation, which is becoming the cause of restlessness. A set of recommendations were suggested, such as integration of sectoral and spatial planning, good regional planning policies, decentralisation of development through growth poles, and decentralisation of administrative capitals to facilitate even development. According to the research, the implementation of such measures may be the way to ease regional differences and balance economic growth and national development.

Agbaenyi & Ezeanya (2022) analyzed the correlation among democratic deficits, insecurity, and development in the Fourth Republic of Nigeria. The study deployed a descriptive qualitative approach based on documentary research and the theory of democracy and development in Africa by Claude Ake. The results indicate that the trend between democratic deficit (with weak institutions, arbitrary rule, and political exclusion) and the problem of widespread insecurity in the country is closely related. This insecurity comes in different forms, such as insurgencies and conflicts based on ethnicity. This study cautions that these problems are so deep-rooted because of past legacies during the colonial and military times, such that development has been pushed to the background. The study, in its recommendations, argues that the structure of the political system in Nigeria should be reorganised, power should be decentralised, a stronger emphasis should be placed on democratic values, and people should be encouraged to play a bigger role to achieve a more inclusive and secure environment.

Ogah (2024) discusses the impacts of economic inequality on the voting Behaviour in Nigeria. It investigates how the existence of socioeconomic differences might influence the way people vote and prefer parties within Nigerian democracy, using secondary data and desk research studies. The results show that the existence of a high level of economic inequality causes political disappointment among lower-income individuals, which translates into lower voter turnout levels as well as greater susceptibility to vote-buying. There is also regional diversification, whereby regions that are less ethnically diverse are stronger, and the affluent areas tend to vote in parties that are pro-economic development. The political elites take advantage of these divisions to hold on to power, hence inequality. As a means of dealing with inequality and promoting democratic involvement in society, the study proposes a progressive tax structure, better electoral education, affirmative action in political representation, and investments in community development as the most effective means to alleviate the factors that create disparity in the conditions that underpin societies and democracies.

Adagbabiri & Okolie (2019) studied the linkage between democracy and national development within the Fourth Republic in Nigeria. The study's objective was to comprehend the impact of democracy on the socio-economic development of the country and its relation to national development, promoting it successfully through the political system. The methodology called for a cross-sectional survey with a structured questionnaire that was administered to 400 respondents in Delta State, with data analysed in terms of Pearson correlation and regression. The results demonstrate a positive and significant relationship between democracy and national development, implying that democracy has been essential in promoting development when sound governance principles are practiced. Nevertheless, the negative side of democracy also emerges in the study because the welfare of the citizens is ignored, and themes such as corruption and electoral malpractices hamper national development. The research, based on these findings suggests the concept of stronger democratic institutions, adherence to the rule

of law, and more egalitarian economic policies as a factor towards enhancing the promotion of national development in Nigeria.

Abdullahi & Baba-Bala (2023) reviewed the 23 years of democracy in Nigeria since its reinstatement in 1999, the outcomes of the various developments, and the challenges encountered. The study sought to evaluate whether the country's democracy has resulted in significant socio-economic development. The authors deployed a qualitative approach as they examined the development of the political parties in Nigeria, the functions of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), and governance in general. The results show that, despite infrastructural development and the promotion of democratic culture in Nigeria, there is still a lot to be done to address the challenges that have continued to affect this country, including the increase in poverty levels, insecurity, a poor education system, and poor healthcare, among other issues like corruption. For meaningful development in Nigeria, the paper suggests reforms that should be done through improving electoral integrity, strengthening the political party system, ensuring the authenticity of INEC independence, and addressing the issue of corruption in the system.

Faluyi & Olutola (2025) examined the nexus between political inequalities and income in the context of the Fourth Republic in Nigeria, paying attention to how these two aspects relates. By taking a qualitative method of research with the element of content analysis, the study searched through literature sources to understand how the domination of the elite in both economic and political arenas betrays the majority, as they are denied political participation. The study recognizes that corruption, monetization of politics, and a hostile political environment contribute to maintaining these inequalities. The proposed suggestions comprise an unbiased anti-corruption campaign, easy access to political participation, poverty alleviation programs, and infrastructural development. Further, the study appeals to the minimization of remuneration for political offices and demystification of politics to entice more people to participate.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

Through a mixed-methods approach, both qualitative and quantitative sources of data were used in conducting the study. Such a complementary condition was advantageous because the strengths of one offset the shortcomings of the other.

Field of research

The study was carried out in the six geopolitical zones of Nigeria. The economic inequality has varied patterns in the various regions of the most populous nation in Africa. In this way, the principal Investigator, together with five Research Assistants, conducted data collection and analysis in the six geopolitical zones. They are North East, North Central, North West, South East, South South, and South West. Further investigation was done at the Nigerian Institute of Social and Economic Research (NISER), Ibadan.

Study Population

All the states in Nigeria were used as the study population. Nigeria has thirty-six states and the federal capital territory, which constitute the component units of the federation. The population of Nigeria now consists of 255 million people (Worldmeter, 2025 estimate).

Table 1:Geo-Political zone Estimated Population

North West	60 million
North East	45 million
North Central	30 million
South West	50 million

South South	40 million
South East	30 million
Total	255 million

Source: Worldmeter (2025)

Sample Size and Sampling Technique

Krejcie and Morgan's Sample Size Determination Formula:

$$S = \frac{X^2 \cdot N}{X^2 + (N - 1) \cdot e^2}$$

Where:

SS = required sample size

X^2 = the table value for the desired confidence level, which is 3.841 for a 95% confidence level (which is standard)

N = population size, e = margin of error (which is typically 0.05 for a 5% margin)

Since the total population of Nigeria is 255 million (according to the Worldmeter projection of 2025), a margin of error of 0.05 (5.0%), the necessary sample size was calculated. The population of 255 million, with a 95 percent confidence level and a margin of error of 5 percent, is around 1,536 in sample size.

There were therefore 1,536 participants in the sample size of the questionnaire. Regarding the sampling method, the judgmental (purposive) sampling method was used because the researcher sought the help of informed and pertinent sources in the field of economic inequality in Nigeria. Six (6) key informants who are professors of Economics in a University or serve as officials in NISER, Ibadan, were interviewed through Key informant interviews and focus group discussions.

Instruments and Method of Data Collection

Data was sourced via Questionnaire, Focus Group Discussion (FGD), and Key Informant Interview (KII).

Table 2: Methodology Matrix

Instruments	Respondents	Sample size
Questionnaire	Officials in the Ministry of Finance	1,536
Focus Group Discussion (FGD)	NISER Officials	3
Key Informant Interview	Economic experts	3

Method of data analysis

Data collected from the field via questionnaire were analyzed with mean tests as shown below. These were later aligned with FGD, KII, and existing literature through thematic analysis.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Table 3a: Questionnaire Results: Weighted Mean Scores and Decisions

Item	SA (%)	A (%)	D (%)	SD (%)	SA (Count)	A (Count)	$\bar{X}$
There are significant economic disparities between Nigeria's	45	30	15	10	691	461	3.1

different regions.							
The quality of governance significantly influences the economic inequality between regions in Nigeria.	40	35	15	10	614	538	3.05
Public policies can effectively reduce regional economic inequality in Nigeria.	47	28	18	7	722	430	3.15

Table 3b: Decisions Based on $\bar{X}$ Scores

Item	Decision
There are significant economic disparities between Nigeria's different regions.	Accepted
The quality of governance significantly influences the economic inequality between regions in Nigeria.	Accepted
Public policies can effectively reduce regional economic inequality in Nigeria.	Accepted

The statistics in Table 3a provide critical information on how the respondents perceive economic inequality in Nigerian regions, governance, and the contribution of public policies in Nigeria. The first, "There exist substantial economic differences between the various states of Nigeria," has a weighted mean score of 3.1, implying that most interviewees rate the statement positively. The visible disparity that regional inequality is not a minor problem in the country is observed when 45 percent strongly agree and 30 percent agree with this statement. This opinion is further weakened by the number of respondents who agreed with them (691 strongly agreeing and 461 agreeing), indicating the level of awareness of regional disparities. Nevertheless, they also had a percentage of 15 not agreeing and 10 strongly not agreeing, hence showing that some respondents feel that the disparities are not as alarming as they believe or that they are not as great as depicted.

The second statement, which is "The quality of governance is a major determining factor of regional economic inequality in Nigeria," has an equal mean of 3.05. This also reflects an overall finding of concurrence with the statement, where 40 percent strongly concurred and another 35 percent concurred, indicating the general view that governance is a major predisposing factor when it comes to regional inequality. The number of respondents (614 strongly agreed and 538 agreed) also shows that there is great confidence in the relationship between governance and economic disparity. The 15% disagreement and the 10% who strongly disagree indicate that not all people will perceive that governance is the primary cause of inequality; some might be suggesting that there are other causes of inequality.

The third statement, which is a belief that there are adequate policies in place whereby regional economic inequality in Nigeria could be lowered, scored the highest with its weighted panel's mean centered on 3.15, which is slightly better than the other two statements. Given the strong agreement of 47 percent and somewhat agreement of 28 percent, the respondents feel that regional inequality can be solved through public policies. The number of strong agreement respondents of 722 against those who disagree by 18 percent illustrates a considerable degree of optimism regarding the efficacy of policy intervention. Although 7 percent very much disagreed, the consensus is that policies can lead to significant differences in correcting regional economic differences.

The route for determining the weighted mean values of the three items in table 3b, resulted in a 3 item acceptance because the weighted mean values were lower than five indicating that the large portion of the respondents hold that there exist significant regional disparities, the influence of governance in these disparities, and the possibility of public policies in actualizing a reduction in these disparities. The findings in this case imply that the respondents share a common perception regarding the pivotal role of governance and policies in alleviating regional economic inequalities in Nigeria. The common ground that public policies can have a positive impact indicates the existence of a need to develop specific and compelling policy measures that can help achieve balanced development of regions.

Hypotheses Testing

There is no significant regional inequality across Nigeria. Governance has no significant impact on regional economic inequality in Nigeria. Effective public policies have no significant impact on the reduction of regional inequality in Nigeria.

To test the hypotheses based on the provided data, we can break down each hypothesis and assess it using the data in Table 3a, focusing on the weighted mean scores ($\bar{X}$) and decisions from Table 3b.

Hypothesis 1: There is no significant regional inequality across Nigeria.

The relevant item for testing this hypothesis is:

"There are significant economic disparities between the different regions of Nigeria."

The weighted mean score ($\bar{X}$) for this item is 3.1, which indicates that respondents largely agree with the statement. According to Table 3b, the decision based on this score is "Accepted," suggesting that the hypothesis "There is no significant regional inequality across Nigeria" is rejected. This supports the conclusion that significant regional inequality exists.

Hypothesis 2: Governance has no significant impact on regional economic inequality in Nigeria.

The relevant item for testing this hypothesis is:

"The quality of governance significantly influences the economic inequality between regions in Nigeria."

The weighted mean score ($\bar{X}$) for this item is 3.05, indicating that respondents also agree that governance affects regional economic inequality. Based on Table 3b, the decision is "Accepted," meaning the hypothesis "Governance has no significant impact on regional economic inequality" is rejected. This suggests that governance does indeed have an impact on regional economic inequality.

Hypothesis 3: Effective public policies have no significant impact on the reduction of regional inequality in Nigeria.

The relevant item for testing this hypothesis is:

"Public policies can effectively reduce the level of regional economic inequality in Nigeria."

The weighted mean score ($\bar{X}$) for this item is 3.15, indicating strong agreement that public policies can reduce regional inequality. The decision in Table 3b is also "Accepted," meaning the hypothesis "Effective public policies have no significant impact on the reduction of regional inequality" is rejected. This suggests that public policies can effectively reduce regional inequality.

Based on the weighted mean scores and decisions from Table 3b, all three hypotheses are rejected:

Regional inequality exists across Nigeria. Governance significantly impacts regional economic inequality. Public policies can reduce regional inequality.

Excerpt of data generated from Focus Group Discussion and Key Informant Interview (KII)

Focus Group Discussion (FGD)

"Regional inequality in Nigeria is a major issue, especially when you look at the North and South disparities. The lack of consistent and quality governance in the northern states has left many people without opportunities, and this only worsens the already existing economic divide."

Focus Group Discussion (FGD)

"Regional inequality in Nigeria is deeply entrenched, and it's clear that the economic differences between the northern and southern parts of the country are widening. The absence of strong policies that address education and job creation in the northern regions has led to persistent poverty and social unrest."

Focus Group Discussion (FGD)

"The economic gap between regions in Nigeria can be traced back to decades of neglect in the northern states, where basic infrastructure and social services are lacking. To reduce inequality, the government needs to prioritise economic empowerment in these regions, starting with quality education and skills development."

Key Informant Interview (KII)

"Governance plays a critical role in reducing regional inequality; unfortunately, the political elites often exploit regional disparities for their own gain. Effective public policies targeting education, healthcare, and infrastructure development in underserved regions are essential to addressing the economic gap in the country." (KII,1)

Key Informant Interview (KII)

"The unequal distribution of wealth in Nigeria is not just a matter of resources but also of governance. Political will is critical in addressing regional disparities, and we need more inclusive economic policies that ensure the benefits of growth reach all corners of the country, particularly in the underserved regions." (KII,2)

Key Informant Interview (KII)

"Governance in Nigeria, especially at the state level, often fails to address regional inequality because resources are poorly allocated and not effectively. What's needed is a focused approach on regional development through decentralised governance and tailored policies that meet the unique needs of each zone." (KII,3)

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The quantitative evidence, which was based on a wide range of the most influential administrative officials, highlighted the significant economic disparities in the Nigerian regions, particularly the North and the South. This statistical fact aligns with Adebayo and Akinwunmi (2016) because, according to them, this historical and geopolitical division of Nigeria is one of the root causes of the imbalance in regional development. Sobowale (2019) also confirms that the underprivileged minimal access to education, the dominance of the Almajiri system, and insecurity in the Northern regions are the causes contributing to systemic poverty in the same area. These empirical dynamics are reflected in the perspectives expressed among the FGD participants comprising NISER officials, who explained how deep-rooted structural/educational and security gaps, and longstanding cultural traditions influence poverty in the North. The stories they give offer a local, contextualized context to the statistical gradients the survey indicates, ratifying what they tell us all along: geography, history, and social policy are intertwined in the elevation of economic inequality.

In analyzing the effect of governance quality on the phenomenon of regional inequity, the quantitative and qualitative accounts seem to align in the opinion that the quality of governance has a significant impact on regional inequity. Still, the latter is not the only one. The survey results showed a very good degree of agreement (75% in total, including both vigorous and moderate agreement) that the quality of governance determines the regional economic disparities. This reflects on the empirical evidence provided by Adagbabiri and Okolie (2019), which explicitly showed the relationship between the reform of democratic government and the development of a country. The dissenting views, as measured in the survey (25% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing) and in KIIs, however, suggest acceptance of other causative factors, including rent-seeking politics and identity-based patronage, themes not discussed in detail by Agwadu (2023) in his study of rentier state dynamics in Nigeria. The importance of federal resource distributions as a key to the issue of

inequality was highlighted by key informants, who noted that resource distributions are frequently biased by a political economy tainted by ethnic favour and elite capture. This is part of the reason that democratic institutions can be understood, in theory, to be synonymous with equity, yet in practice are only so in three steps. Forward-looking, Dahl (1971) and Diamond (2008) speak to the danger of economic inequalities to the inclusiveness that is the promise of democracy.

The perceived fitness of public policy as an instrument of redressing economic imbalance in regions enjoyed a wide-ranging and albeit hesitant support across the data sets. There was robust quantitative evidence supporting the importance of intervention-specific public policies, as noted by Agwadu (2023), Sobowale (2019), and the Oxfam Commitment to Reducing Inequality Index (2019), which call for more inclusive growth policies, industrialization, and progressive taxation. What both FGDs and KIIs also suggested, however, was an important caveat to the argument, although in the past, historical skepticism and institutional shortcomings have undermined the implementation of policy. Their views emphasize not only policy and instrumentation, but sound practices of transparency, accountability, and local responsiveness; consistent with Adagbabiri and Okolie (2019), stating the importance of policies addressing elite capture and poor institutional capacities.

The quantitative information, FGD, and KII, and the literature work reviewed confirms the multidimensional nature of regional economic inequality in Nigeria and highlights the potential of democratic governance as a remedying tool. The results of the three approaches demand perspectives that incorporate the structural, cultural, and political complexity that influence inequality. These are not only the fortification of the governance and public policy but also the adjustment of the interventions to reflect regional and local peculiarities, solving the key reasons of the disenfranchisement, and the institutional resilience. This is necessary to promote both fair economic growth and the democratic project in Nigeria.

CONCLUSION

This paper has been critical of the character of regional economic inequality in Nigeria on the backdrop of its democratic era of the Fourth Republic. The research results and analyses established that there have been wide gaps between economic development in the different geopolitical zones of the country, with the Northern geopolitical zones lagging in poverty eradication and access to social amenities. This affirms and expands the available body of literature which links these inequalities to history, culture, and infrastructural influences, together with enduring security challenges.

Quality of governance has emerged as an essential element that determines the extent and persistence of regional inequality. Although most respondents and experts agree that governance is core in determining economic outcomes, the disputing question indicates that governance is not the only factor to explain rooted causes. Instead, the dynamics of the socio-cultural and political economy aspects, including rent-seeking and patronage, also account for economic inequality. The Nigerian democratic system, though in theory permissive concerning inclusive development, falls short of converting the democratic principles to equitable economic growth, partly because of weaknesses in its institutions as well as the political elites' constraints.

It is acknowledged that public policy can play an essential role in regional inequality, especially in the case of well-designed, context-specific policy interventions involving openness and accountability. The burden of history to question the validity of the policy and issues with implementation, however, demands overhauling institutional structures as well as policy creativity. On the whole, the relationship between democracy, quality of governance, and effectiveness of the public policy further indicates that it is imperative to ensure that the reduction of regional-economic inequality in Nigeria will require a complex and locally sensitive approach to governance reforms and integrative socioeconomic planning.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the results of the study, the study recommends the following:

The federal and state authorities are to develop and introduce the region-focused developmental programmes, considering peculiarities of each geopolitical area, in particular their historical, cultural, and socio-economic

aspects. To decrease the structural sources of poverty and exclusion, it is necessary to focus on enhancing the educational infrastructure, security, and social services in the Northern areas.

Governance reforms ought to be targeted at promoting institutional transparency, accountability, and capacity building at the federal level and regionally to curb the ill effects of rent-seeking and political patronage on resource allocation. Other mechanisms, such as anti-corruption, need to be strictly implemented to ensure that the democratic institutions can serve all parts of the country fairly and equally, increasing the effectiveness of Public Policy.

And lastly, the government ought to formulate and adopt a set of policies that will help it to adopt industrialisation, balanced interstate fiscal transfers, and inclusive growth, as advocated by some Key informants and FGDs, as was observed in this study. The participatory policy formulation should take inputs from the marginalized regions, civil society, and experts in economics to be relevant to the context.

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