

The Paradox of Sustainable Development and Poverty Alleviation in Lagos, Nigeria: A Focus on Coastal Communities

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Abstract

This paper examines the paradox of sustainable development and poverty alleviation in Lagos, Nigeria, with a focus on coastal communities, including Makoko, Otodogbame, Ilasan, and Maroko. The ultimate goal of sustainable development is to meet the needs of the present without compromising the needs of future generations by balancing the economic, social, and environmental pillars. Despite the infrastructure, investment, and policies in these communities, a clear social inequality persists from these developments. The study adopts a qualitative approach, analysing policy documents, academic literature, and media reports to identify the gaps between urban development and grassroots realities. The study concludes that while Lagos has achieved progress in areas like transportation and smartcity initiatives, vulnerable coastal communities are often sidelined. These communities face displacement, environmental degradation, and economic marginalization. This paper recommends community-centred and accurate government policies to achieve effective results.

Keywords: sustainable development, coastal communities, urbanization, poverty, socioeconomic inequality, degradation

Introduction

The intersection between sustainable development and poverty alleviation shows a complex but key relationship between economic growth, environmental protection and social equity. These two

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topics are connected; while sustainable development provides a structure for poverty alleviation, poverty reduction is paramount in maintaining long-term sustainability (Brundtland Commission, 1987). In Lagos State, Nigeria, this connection is very important. As a rapidly urbanizing coastal city, Lagos faces intense challenges to strike a balance between environmental sustainability with inclusive economic growth. Several projects have been launched to advance sustainable development, such as the renewable energy scheme, affordable housing schemes and waste-to-energy projects, at the same time reducing poverty through job creation and improving living standards (Eze & Chukwu, 2023).

Even with these initiatives, the results have often been contradictory. The city's growth in population, in line with environmental degradation and socio-economic inequality, has placed great pressure on its infrastructure and public service (United Nations, 2022). Many coastal communities, especially within the high-end districts of Victoria Island, Lagos Island, and Lekki, which include Otodogbame, Ilasan, Maroko, and Makoko, have been affected by the negative outcome of these developments, which are induced displacements and gentrification. Urban growth and large infrastructural projects, such as land reclamation, shoreline protection, have frequently led to forced evictions and the marginalization of low-income residents (Justice & Empowerment Initiatives [JEI], 2021; COHRE, 2017). These initiatives, although within the scope of sustainable development goals, have promoted socio-economic inequalities, driving the vulnerable population into harder living conditions. Previous studies on sustainable development and poverty alleviation have discussed these two concepts separately, with smaller studies on their connection in respect to Lagos. This paper, therefore, addresses the gap by analysing how there will be effective results from the interconnectedness of sustainable development strategies and poverty alleviation goals, especially in coastal urban communities. It reveals the paradox of a megacity

that invests heavily in sustainability and development policies yet battles with poverty and socio-economic inequality (Ajayi, 2022). This study further emphasizes the need for community-centred, inclusive and environmentally friendly initiatives (Ibrahim & Bello, 2024). Ultimately, the aim is to proffer actionable options for policymakers, urban planners, and development practitioners in Lagos and largely other regions facing similar challenges.

Understanding sustainable development

Sustainable development is a concept that has been defined widely as achieving the balance between economic growth, social inclusion and environmental protection to meet the current needs without compromising that of future generations' abilities to meet theirs (WCED, 1987). With its origin from the Brundtland Report, the definition emphasizes a complete approach, maintaining that original development should be "sustainable" by blending a long-term economic, social and environmental pillar (Brundtland, 1987; Sachs, 2015). Worthy of note is that sustainable development may vary across contexts, with some focusing on economic promotion and others on environmental advancements.

In Nigeria, the concept of sustainable development is often viewed from the angle of poverty alleviation and management. Scholars such as Olaniyan and Lawal (2016) view sustainable development in Nigeria as a concept that needs extensive policy reforms, which must focus on poverty reduction, social equality and environmental degradation. They both stress that an unequal balance between the three pillars will result in the development becoming unsustainable (Olaniyan & Lawal, 2016).

On the global stage, the United Nations has established sustainable development through its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), a set of 17 goals that guide global development efforts toward 2030 (UN, 15). Sachs (2015) affirmed that the SDGs serve as a global blueprint for addressing the three issues, which are poverty, promoting social equity, and ensuring environmental

sustainability. These goals promote nations to classify economic growth at the same time, creating opportunities to increase social equality whilst protecting the environment, and address climate issues (Sachs, 2015). This viewpoint emphasizes the connection of these pillars, showing that the neglect of any of these pillars could potentially jeopardize the goal of sustainability. Despite this, the implementation of sustainable development has proved challenging in the world at large. In Nigeria, urbanized areas such as Lagos experience fast urbanization, which has an effect on the environment and threatens sustainability. There have been policies and programs by the Lagos State Government with the goal of providing solutions to waste management, infrastructural development and green spaces as part of its initiatives to balance economic growth, social equity and environmental protection (Lagos State Ministry of Environment, 2022).

In essence, the concept of sustainable development is multifaceted, including economic, social, and environmental pillars that need balance for better impacts. While there now exists an international structure like the SDGs that sets broad goals, local adaptation and reforms are important results that respect diversity. It is important to note that maintaining a balance between the economic, social and environmental pillars will result in sustainable development and will therefore lead to a resilient and better future.

Urban Poverty in Lagos

The issue of poverty in Lagos is multifaceted, influenced by rapid urbanization, an overstretched infrastructure, and an increasing cost of living (Olawale & Ajibola, 2023). The Lagos diagnostic study and pathway for transformation (2023) identifies three constraints that are preventing Lagos from fully realizing its developmental potentials: weak urban governance and finance systems, an ineffective urban planning system, fragmented land administration and a lagging business environment. Lagos is

noted as the state with the lowest poverty rate (4.5%), but 80% percent of the households are classified as poor according to LASG (Lagos Diagnostic Study and Pathway for Transformation, 2023). The high influx of migrants, driven by the perception of Lagos as a land of opportunity, has exacerbated pressure on housing and employment, leading many to work in the informal sector where wages are low and job security is minimal (Nwosu & Okonkwo, 2022). According to the National Bureau of Statistics (2023), about 37% of Lagos residents live in slums or informal settlements, lacking access to clean water, electricity, and healthcare. The World Bank reported that in 2013, Lagos' poverty rate was 40.3 per cent. Despite being Nigeria's economic hub and a rapid urbanization growth in the world, the city has experienced a paradox: it is a nucleus of significant wealth yet struggles with widespread poverty. The reasons for the high rate of poverty in Lagos are multidimensional, including structural, geographical, economic, and social factors that have been an obstacle for many of the inhabitants (World Bank, 2013)

Among the most vulnerable groups in Lagos are residents of its coastal communities, who face unique socio-economic challenges linked to both urban poverty and environmental risks. Coastal slums like Makoko, Otodogbame, Ilasan and Maroko, Ilaje, Ijora-Badia amongst others are home to thousands of people who rely on fishing, petty trade, and informal jobs for survival (Adebayo & Adeyemi, 2020). However, rising sea levels, flooding, and poor urban planning have intensified their socio-economic vulnerabilities, pushing many further into poverty (Ugochukwu & Nnamdi, 2022). Additionally, government-led urban renewal projects often displace these communities without providing viable alternatives, exacerbating their marginalization (Aluko, 2021).

Poverty Alleviation and Sustainable Development Initiatives in Lagos' Coastal Communities

Lagos state, Nigeria's commercial nervecentre and most urbanized southwest region, has implemented several initiatives over the years aimed at achieving sustainable development while addressing the high rate of poverty, especially in the coastal communities. These coastal communities, including Makoko, Ilasan, Otodogbame, Kuramo, Maroko and other parts of Lagos Island, Lekki and Victoria island, are not only vulnerable as regards the environment but have also been socio-economically marginalized. The Lagos state government has introduced several poverty alleviation policies, social intervention programs, and employment schemes with the goal of improving the vulnerable communities (Adelekan, 2010). This has attracted investments home and abroad and improved infrastructures; on the other hand, they have led to the displacement of coastal dwellers and the destruction of informal settlements without adequate compensation or relocation options (Human Rights Watch, 2017). For example, the demolition initiative of Otodogbame in 2017 in the name of urbanization displaced many residents; this led to the high cost of human development policies (Justice& Empowerment Initiatives, 2018). There are also several cases in Ilasan, Makoko, amongst others.

Lagos state has made progress in improving its economy through urban projects and smart city initiatives. These projects have benefited the elites and middle-income group residing in high-end areas in Victoria Island, Lekki, Victoria Island but have left the low-income to bear the negative cost (Agunbiade et al, 2013). As a result, support the paradox of sustainable development: policies that are in theory inclusive and progressive usually bring a challenge of socio-economic inequalities, thereby deepening the poverty rate when there is little or no account for the needs and rights of the urban poor. The vulnerable coastal communities that are to be protected are otherwise pushed into

further economic vulnerability due to evictions, gentrification, and lack of participatory planning (Amnesty International, 2020). Furthermore, the Lagos State Development Plan (2012-2025) and the THEMES agenda, although they have goals to improve global sustainable development, have been criticised for their insufficient grassroots engagements and poor implementation at the community level (Ibrahim & Bello, 2024). This rhetorical agenda calls for re-evaluation of goals and development policies to ensure that poverty alleviation is not merely theoretical but effectively implemented for all.

Case studies of coastal communities and projects in Lagos

The realities of sustainable development and poverty alleviation in Lagos become more evident when analyzed through the experiences of coastal communities, which serve as lenses through which the success or failure of urban development initiatives can be evaluated.

Makoko, a water-based slum settlement, exposes a major contradiction between policy rhetoric and community realities. Makoko, home to tens of thousands of residents, has long existed without formal recognition, infrastructure, or social amenities, despite being the subject of national and international development discussions (Braithwaite, 2020). While the government has dimmed the area to be unsuitable for living and habitations and an obstacle to Lagos urban renewal vision, efforts to remove the settlement under the guise of urban renewal have proved unsuccessful in considering the economic and cultural livelihood of its residents, who rely on fishing and informal trade. Attempts to integrate the community through sustainable development efforts, such as the Makoko Floating School project, were short-lived and lacked systemic government support (Kunle Adeyemi/NLE, 2013). In 2012 and subsequent years, the waterfront actions have increased the vulnerability of residents. The ‘megacity’ renewal agenda has led to forced evictions, destruction of housing and disruption of

fishing livelihoods, thereby increasing financial marginalization (Bakare,2024). The two contrasting views show difficulty in balancing modernizing-driven policies and inclusive development.

In Otodogbame, another waterfront community located in Lekki, the 2017 forced eviction of over 30,000 residents under claims of environmental and security concerns drew international critique. The demolition, carried out without proper legal backing or resettlement plans for residents, increased the poverty and vulnerability of already marginalized residents (Justice & Empowerment Initiatives, 2018). Despite being located in a prime area targeted for high-end real estate development, the community was treated as an obstacle rather than a stakeholder in Lagos' sustainability vision. The result was the loss of homes, livelihoods, and social cohesion, with many evictees forced into overcrowded informal settlements or homelessness.

The Ilasan Housing Estate, developed by the state government as part of its low-income housing strategy, was intended to resettle evicted residents from other parts of the city, including Maroko. However, the estate quickly became overwhelmed by population pressure, poor maintenance, and a lack of support services. While it remains a symbolic gesture towards poverty alleviation, its deteriorating condition reflects the state's challenges in sustaining affordable housing in the long term (Akinmoladun & Oluwoye, 2007). Beneficiaries complain of insecurity, infrastructural decay, and limited economic opportunities, which contradict the principles of inclusive and sustainable development.

Similarly, Maroko, which was forcefully demolished in 1990, remains a historical reminder of how state-led development initiatives have often displaced rather than empowered poor coastal communities. Thousands of displaced residents were relocated to areas like Ilasan and Jakande estates without adequate compensation or support, severing them from their sources of livelihood and community networks (Agunbiade et al., 2013). While the cleared land has since become part of the affluent

Victoria Island axis, the legacy of exclusion continues to shape policy distrust and deepen the socio-economic divide.

These case studies reveal the paradox of sustainable development in Lagos: while development projects aim to modernize the city and attract investment, they frequently do so at the expense of vulnerable populations, especially those in coastal zones. Rather than alleviating poverty, these interventions often displace poor residents and erode existing support systems. The absence of participatory planning, weak regulatory enforcement, and the prioritization of private capital over social equity contribute to these failures. Sustainable development, to be truly transformative, must go beyond infrastructure and economic growth to embrace justice, inclusion, and community agency.

The Landmark Beach Demolition

The Landmark Beach, located along the Lekki-Epe Expressway within the Lekki Peninsula in Lagos was partly demolished in April 2024 to make way for the Lagos-Calabar Coastal Highway. The demolition had a negative impact on over 50 residents and small business owners in the area, resulting in loss of livelihoods and displacements. (Adebayo & Bello, 2021). The incident also raised concerns among investors, many of whom had to reconsider investment options due to the fear of policy inconsistency (This Day, July 2024). However, according to the Minister of Works, Dave Umahi, “What was touched was Landmark’s encroachment on the front shoreline,” suggesting that the demolition was due to illegal developments that were against the government project and policies. This reveals that from the government perspective, the action was necessary and they were not encroaching legal areas to facilitate national development. Reconciling these positions shows that the tensions between large scale development projects and the need for social inclusion and consistent policies. While the government enforcements of planning laws is important, inadequate stakeholders consultation and poor compensation

scheme has weakened the public trust and fueled perceptions of inequality in development process

The redevelopment of Tinubu Square was a project in Lagos Island that raised concerns as to whether the initiative was to explore or exploit the coastal community. This project is an iconic landmark in Lagos with significant historical, commercial and cultural value. Supported by the Lagos state government, the goal was to modernize the square and surroundings by improving infrastructure, promoting tourism and preserving the area's cultural heritage (Egbodo & Ogunyemi, 2020). The redevelopment led to the upgrade of infrastructures such as roads, public transportation, water systems, and waste management (Egbodo & Ogunyemi, 2020). The initiatives prioritize preservation of cultural heritage while exploring the modern element as well. This helps to maintain cultural identity while achieving urbanization goals (Obafemi, 2019). There is also the promotion of tourist attractions because of this initiative, and it has generated revenues for the state, boosting the local economy (Egbodo & Ogunyemi, 2020). However, the initiative has also contributed to the exploitation of locals by displacement and gentrification since the area has led to a rise in property values that low-income individuals cannot afford. With this, the wealthier residents and businesses come on board, leaving out the previous residents and low-income vendors (Obafemi, 2019). Whenever there is a redevelopment, there is usually a strain on resources, especially if the infrastructure is large and requires businesses and production. This was another concern of this redevelopment: increased waste and pollution resulting in environmental degradation (Egbodo & Ogunyemi, 2020). There have been arguments that the redevelopment of the square has placed more importance on investors and developers over the needs of local communities. Infrastructure such as shopping malls, hotels does not address the necessity of the low-income residents and small-scale vendors who live in that area

(Obafemi, 2019). This initiative has shown the complexities of sustainable development in urban contexts.

Summary, Recommendations, and Conclusion

This study has examined the interconnectedness between sustainable development and poverty alleviation in Lagos State, with a particular focus on coastal communities, including Makoko, Otodogbame, Ilasan, and the historically demolished Maroko settlement, as well as several ongoing projects. It reveals that while sustainable development policies in Lagos aim to improve urbanization, infrastructure, environmental quality, and economic progress, they often fail to prioritize the needs and realities of marginalized populations. The paradox is that, in attempting to build a modern cityscape, the state has frequently deepened poverty among the very groups it claims to uplift. Through the lens of urban renewal projects, forced evictions, informal settlements, and housing programs, this study has revealed that the current trajectory of development in Lagos is characterized by exclusion, inequality, and inadequate community engagement. Rather than serving as vehicles for poverty reduction, many initiatives—particularly in the coastal zones—have displaced low-income residents, disrupted livelihoods, and contributed to cycles of vulnerability, marginalization, and instability.

To address these challenges, this study recommends proposed solutions. First, sustainable development policies in Lagos must adopt a people-centred, community-centred approach that prioritizes inclusion, social justice, and the protection of human rights. Urban renewal efforts should be guided by legal frameworks that ensure fair compensation, provide alternative housing, and ensure the meaningful participation of affected communities. Secondly, the government should invest in upgrading informal settlements rather than demolishing them, integrating basic infrastructure such as water, sanitation, and electricity while preserving local economies and social networks. Third, there is a need for stronger

institutional coordination among stakeholders, environmental agencies, and civil society organizations to ensure transparency, accountability, and responsiveness to local needs. Fourth, affordable housing schemes must be expanded and improved with mechanisms to support long-term sustainability. The state can achieve this through realistic financial strategies given that about 80 percent of residents fall below this margin. Sustainability can be ensured through innovative funding strategies such as Public-private partnerships, international development assistance, and community-driven housing cooperatives that include affordability and transparency. Lastly, development planning must incorporate climate resilience strategies that recognize the vulnerability of coastal communities to rising sea levels, flooding, and environmental degradation, and prioritize solutions that blend ecological protection with socio-economic empowerment.

In conclusion, sustainable development and poverty alleviation in Lagos will not succeed as separate agendas. They must be integrated in a manner that is spatially just, socially inclusive, and environmentally sound. The experiences of coastal communities in Lagos offer a critical test of this integration. If Lagos is to become a model of sustainable urbanism, it must first reconcile its development ambitions with the rights and realities of its most vulnerable populations.

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