

Enhancing Sustainable Development in Nigeria: Overcoming Barriers to Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals through Public Policy, Health, and Social Integration

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Abstract

Introduction: Although Nigeria made efforts to establish strategies to reach SDGs, there are lack of adequate actions that ensure its effective execution, being essential to promote multi-sectoral collaboration among civil society, the private sector and government institutions to solve these challenges.

Objective: The objective of this study is to discuss the current scenario of SDG implementation, find barriers and suggest recommendations to improve the progress towards these goals.

Method: Critical literature review using reports, academic journals and scientific articles.

Results: Despite Nigeria's commitment to the SDGs, inadequate infrastructure, socio-economic disparities, and environmental issues, particularly flooding, are challenges that continue to hinder progress. This study highlights that while frameworks for SDG implementation exist, they often lack the strategic actions needed for effective execution. The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed vulnerabilities in Nigeria's health systems, affecting SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being). To address these issues, the study recommends multi-sectoral collaboration, the integration of local knowledge, and the promotion of gender equity and environmental sustainability.

Conclusion: In conclusion, Nigeria must strengthen institutional frameworks and prioritize community-driven initiatives to overcome existing barriers and meet its SDG targets.

Keywords: Public Policy. Health. Social Integration. SDGs. Nigeria.

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● INTRODUCTION

The Federal Republic of Nigeria is located in West Africa and has a population of over 230 million inhabitants. The country is characterized by multiple ethnicities and cultural diversity and is composed of 36 autonomous states and the Federal Capital Territory. According to estimates by the World Bank Group, 61% of the population had access to electricity (2022) and only 39.2% of Nigerians had access to the internet (2023), with a life expectancy at birth of approximately 54 years (2023), and a Gross Domestic Product of 3.46% (2024)¹.

The country possesses vast oil reserves and a rich natural resource endowment; however, it is classified as a lower-middle-income economy and ranks 146th out of 166 countries in the 2023 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) Targeting Index, with a score of 54.3/100. This reflects the fact that the region still faces significant challenges to development^{2,3}.

Although Nigeria has strived to establish strategies to advance progress toward the SDGs of the United Nations' 2030 Agenda, it still needs to strengthen the actions required to ensure their effective execution⁴.

Nigeria's aggregate SDG performance is below global peers and shows mixed outcomes across goals, with some policy alignment but slow implementation and measurable regressions in key social indicators. National reviews and indices signal weak momentum, with specific sectors (maternal health, water, poverty) showing large gaps against targets³.

In this context, widespread poverty is known to affect approximately 40% of the population, and maternal mortality rates remain high (814 deaths per 100,000 live births). These factors reflect structural problems hindering development, such as: government corruption, inadequate infrastructure, particularly in the water and sanitation sectors, and a critical disconnect between well-designed national policies and weak implementation capacity at subnational levels^{4,5}.

Inadequate infrastructure, environmental challenges (such as flooding) and socioeconomic disparities that impact social equity and health outcomes significantly are still a reality, despite Nigeria's efforts to the SDGs^{4,6}.

Also, SDG 2 (Zero Hunger) and high poverty levels, that are harmful to achieve SDG1 (No Poverty), are affected directly by the flooding impact in agricultural production⁶. Beyond that, the achievement of SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being) was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, that has shown the Nigerian health system vulnerabilities⁷.

Within the context presented, it is observed that it is essential to promote multi-sectoral collaboration among civil society, the private sector and government institutions to solve these challenges. Increasing commitment and local knowledge integration to the process of policymaking can encourage effectiveness in the responses of the Nigerian communities' socioeconomic contexts (Benjamin, 2024). Furthermore, the promotion of environmental sustainability and gender equity are crucial for development and SDGs achievement⁸.

To conclude, besides Nigeria's progress to achieve

SDGs, a collaborative effort is necessary to overcome existing barriers. Improve investment on health and social programs, robust institutional structure and promote community initiatives that prioritize local needs are recommended. By implementing these strategies, Nigeria can strength its capacity to achieve SDGs and stride towards sustainable development in Africa.

Despite the progress made, further discussions are necessary to overcome the existing barriers delaying Nigeria's achievement of the SDGs. Promoting diverse institutional structures and integrating localized strategies into public policies is imperative to achieve sustainable development. For this reason, the objective of this study is to discuss the current scenario of SDG implementation, find key challenges, and suggest recommendations to improve the progress towards these goals.

Thus, it is possible to contribute to the identification of central challenges and to the strengthening of intervention strategies aligned with the national context.

● METHOD

This study is a critical literature review that aimed to synthesize and analyze the progress of the Sustainable Development Goals implementation in Nigeria. The research sources used were reports, academic journals and scientific articles that had information about challenges, progress and strategies to achieve SDGs, emphasizing social processes, public health and public policies. Both national and international publications were considered.

The data provided a critical discussion of the SDGs progress in Nigeria, that is affected by multisectoral factors that include environmental challenges, socioeconomic disparities and vulnerabilities in the health system. The review's findings form the basis for the recommendations proposed in this study and were presented in the results and discussion topic.

● RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Governance and Institutional Constraints Affecting SDG Performance in Nigeria

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)⁹, adopted by the United Nations in September 2015, were established to address the shortcomings of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). In Nigeria, the transition from MDGs to SDGs has faced significant challenges, primarily due to a delayed initiation of implementation efforts following the country's first Voluntary National Review (VNR) in 2017. Despite the ambitious framework of the 17 SDGs, Nigeria's progress has been notably sluggish, as evidenced by a mid-term review indicating that while a structure for implementation exists, it has not been effectively operationalized⁴.

Several factors contribute to the slow progress of the SDGs implementation in Nigeria. One of these is public official's corruption, an important barrier that weakens resource allocation and governance effectiveness¹⁰. Poor budgetary allocations to key sectors, such as education and health, make it harder to achieve the SDGs¹¹.

The interplay of these challenges illustrates the complex landscape in which Nigeria operates as it strives to meet its international commitments. The need for

coherent policy frameworks that integrate SDG objectives into national and local governance structures is critical¹². Resource allocation that prioritizes actions related to the SDGs is mandatory to transform goals into tangible results¹³.

A system capable of promoting public financial resources management to track and allocate budgets focused on the SDGs is essential to ensure that funds are directed toward initiatives with significant impacts¹⁴.

In conclusion, Nigeria has made advances in creating a framework to achieve the SDGs, but current implementation remains challenged by systemic problems, such as socioeconomic constraints, corruption, and inadequate funding. Overcoming these barriers is necessary for Nigeria to fulfill its commitments to the SDGs by 2030. These barriers are reinforced by weak programs and policies that fail to address the root causes of these issues⁶.

Food Insecurity as Cross-Cutting Challenges for the Achievements of Sustainable Development

Estimates from the World Health Organization indicate that, from 2023 to 2024, the global prevalence of moderate or severe food insecurity decreased from 28.4% to 28.0%, impacting the lives of 2.3 billion people. This represents 683 million more than recorded in 2015, when the Sustainable Development Agenda was adopted. Within this scenario, the African continent stands out, where the proportion of the population facing hunger exceeded 20% in 2024, affecting 307 million people. By 2030, it is projected that 512 million people may suffer from chronic undernourishment. Almost 60% of them will be in Africa. This highlights the immense challenge of mitigating food insecurity¹⁵.

Malnutrition is a significant barrier to be transposed in Africa. SDG 2's main target is to end hunger, provide food security, and create a basis for sustainable agriculture. Food insecurity and better access to nutritional food improve overall health, particularly for children and pregnant women, who are the most vulnerable group and the most affected by malnutrition. Solutions in the matter of providing nutritious food, improving food safety, and promoting sustainable agriculture prevent malnutrition and its associated consequences and health risks¹⁶.

Despite the food insecurity scenario that also affects Nigeria, there are public policies that contribute to progress in this area, such as the "Accelerating Nutrition Results in Nigeria (ANRiN)" program, which offers cost-effective nutrition services to pregnant women, adolescents, and children under five years of age in 11 states. Furthermore, more than 13.5 million beneficiaries of the program, including 9 million children and 4.3 million women, have received nutritional interventions, reducing malnutrition and stunting, and strengthening the states' capacity for large-scale nutrition programs¹.

Overcoming food safety is critical to achieving the SDGs, especially SDG1 (No Poverty), SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), SDG8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), and SDG 13 (Climate Action).

Several key interventions can help mitigate these challenges, such as:

- **Actions to reduce poverty and expand opportunities for decent work and economic growth:** In Nigeria, there is an over-reliance on oil revenue, youth unemployment, and weak social safety nets that limit poverty reduction^{4,17}. Thus, it is necessary to scale up social protection, targeted cash transfers, and youth employment programs linked to local economic diversification¹⁷.
- **Strengthening Regulatory Frameworks:** good food safety regulations and effective inspection mechanisms are often missing. Implement robust laws and policies and also, ensuring their monitorization and enforcement is crucial to reduce foodborne diseases and contaminants in the food chain¹⁸.
- **Capacity Building and Training:** to help reduce contamination from chemicals, pathogens and pesticides, that are responsible for a significant threat to public health, it is necessary to train food producers, regulators and handlers on safe practices and risk management, and also increasing their capacity¹⁹.
- **Promoting Sustainable Agricultural Practices:** To encounter the growing demand for food and keeping it safe it is critical to encourage sustainable farming practices, such as enhancing soil health and reducing the use of pesticides²⁰. These actions protect people while helping to conquer environmental sustainability (SDG 12).
- **Public Awareness Campaigns:** In order to reduce the risk of household contamination and empower individuals to make more informed food choices, it is necessary to take educational measures for consumers and communities regarding food safety, hygiene, and proper food handling²¹, which aligns with SDG 3.
- **Collaboration and Partnerships:** One Health approach is an example of a global cooperation that aims to unite environmental, veterinary and public health efforts to manage food safety issues. This kind of strategy is vital to control zoonotic diseases and ensuring food safety²² and contributing to achieve SDGs.
- **Adapted climate policies:** Existing climate policies at the state and local levels should be implemented, integrating them with agricultural extension. It is essential to scale up investments in renewable energy to support irrigation and reduce post-harvest losses, expand and finance rural water supply agencies to improve water efficiency in agriculture, and mobilize private capital through public-private partnerships aimed at climate-smart agricultural infrastructure^{5,23}.

When food safety challenges are managed, the countries are able to make significant progress toward sustainable development, promoting responsible consumption patterns and improving health outcomes.

It is significantly challenging for the countries

to achieve some of the SDGs. Particularly SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being), SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), and SDG 15 (Life on Land) are at risk of not being conquered, unless some actions towards food safety issues are effectively taken¹⁶.

Unsafe food continues to negatively impact economic opportunities, health and delays progress toward these crucial goals in developing countries. To ensure food safety is mandatory to promote well-being and public health, sustainable agriculture practices and protect ecosystems^{6,10,24-26}.

Health-related SDGs and Interlinkages With Social Determinants

Investment in actions that promote sustainable development contributes to the promotion of health among Nigerians and Africans. Although SDG 3 (Health and Well-being) is directly related to health, multiple other objectives also contribute to the promotion of health, investing in SDGs also contributes to improve and promote health, in Nigeria, Africa and the whole world²⁷.

Reducing Disease Burden and promote well-being and healthy lives at all ages is the main focus of SDG 3. In Africa, specifically in Nigeria, this means to face main health challenges, such as HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria and maternal and child mortality. Actions to strength healthcare systems and expand the access to healthcare, immunization and monetary resources to healthcare infrastructure are critical strategies to improve maternal and child health, helping to reduce preventable deaths and combat both communicable and non-communicable diseases, increasing better health outcomes²⁸.

For improvements in health, it is essential to strengthen Health Systems and Universal Health Coverage (SDG 3, Target 3.8), especially promote the assurance that all people have access to healthcare services without compromising their financial capabilities. The expansion of healthcare services in Africa, mainly in the rural and underprivileged areas, by financing and mitigating out-of-pocket expenses, is hypercritical for the improvement of the health outcomes and to ensure quality health services and equitable access^{29,30}.

It is important to highlight that the health sector has experienced disproportionate spending on recurrent expenditures compared to capital resources. This situation has impeded the construction of a robust health system, which is essential to achieve the SDGs related to health. There is precariousness in the health sector and in the funding of health research in Nigeria, which is still far from reaching the goals of international declarations. Recognizing the fundamental role of a solid base of health research, a substantial increase in budget allocations for health and health research is necessary in order to reach the targets of 15% and 2%, respectively, to achieve and sustain Universal Health Coverage and better health outcomes in Nigeria by 2030¹¹.

Furthermore, health is closely linked to education and gender equality (SDGs 4 and 5). SDG 4 has as its main goal to ensure inclusive and equitable education that can promote knowledge and improvement of health

practices and choices. SDG 5 aims for gender equality and the empowerment of women through access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities to improve maternal and child health and reduce gender-wise disparities in health assessment³¹.

Nigeria is developing initiatives to promote gender equality. Among these, the “Adolescent Girls Initiative for Learning and Empowerment - AGILE,” launched in 2021, stands out with the aim of improving secondary education for girls in 18 Nigerian states. By 2025, 2.1 million adolescents will have benefited from improved school infrastructure (13,000 classrooms, 8,900 water, sanitation, and hygiene facilities), and 466,876 vulnerable girls will have received scholarships, increasing enrollment rates and transitions to higher education; 225,000 students will have acquired digital literacy skills. Between 2022 and 2025, 200,000 girls will have participated in safe spaces programs, receiving training in reproductive health, menstrual hygiene, and self-confidence¹.

In this same vein, there is also the “Nigeria for Women Programme (NFWP),” which empowers women aged 18 and over, in six states, through Women Affinity Groups (WAGs) providing savings, livelihood subsidies, and vocational training. Over 1 million women have already benefited, forming more than 22,000 WAGs, saving over 5 billion naira, and accessing markets, credit, and decision-making roles, thus promoting financial independence and social inclusion¹.

Despite policies aimed at reducing gender inequality, the country still faces health vulnerabilities in this respect. There remains a need to strengthen women’s health, as maternal mortality remains very high due to limited access to quality maternal health services, reflecting broader gender-related barriers to care and service utilization^{23,32}.

Improving Access to Clean Water and Sanitation (SDG 6) is essential for promoting collective health. SDG 6 aims to safe and treated water and sanitation for everyone. The spread of diseases like cholera, diarrhea, and dysentery is a reality in Africa, including Nigeria, due to poor water treatment and insufficient sanitation protocols. These diseases are major causes of death, especially among children. The evolution of sanitation processes and facilities and the subsequent improvement of water quality, the promotion of education focused on hygiene and health can significantly improve well-being and decrease the incidence of disease³³.

Improving Access to Clean Water and Sanitation (SDG 6) is essential for promoting collective health is directly affected by climate change (SDG 13), especially in Africa, where heatwaves, floods, and droughts are extremely harmful for vulnerable populations. Environmental changes impact food production, leading to starvation, water scarcity, and the spread of diseases. The implementation of climate resilience strategies can mitigate health risks and strengthen local capacity to respond to health crises³⁴⁻³⁶.

With targeted actions in the coming years, especially during the critical period of 2025–2027, Nigeria can still significantly accelerate its progress towards the goals of the 2030 Agenda. The alignment of national policies

with the SDGs in Nigeria and other African nations can significantly improve public health by reducing health inequities and achieving sustainable development. To this end, it is necessary to reorient budgets, increase and ring-fence allocations for primary health care, maternal care, education, water, and sanitation^{4,5}.

Policy Integration and Multisectoral Approaches for Advancing SDGs

To increase Nigeria's progress towards SDGs, it is critical to make a large review and strengthen public policies and governance intuitions. This includes the introduction of stringent anti-corruption laws, the establishment of mechanisms for public transparency and accountability, and the promotion of rewards for ethical behavior in public offices²⁵.

Furthermore, fostering collaboration between government, civil society, and the private sector can create a more inclusive approach to achieving sustainable development²⁶. Nigeria can improve its efforts with the global agenda and work together by implementing these recommendations to achieve SDGs by 2030.

To achieve the Sustainable Development Goals in Nigeria is necessary an approach that involves not only governance, but also socioeconomic challenges and a policies reform. To overcome barriers is necessary to promote collaboration between key stakeholders, transparency and make institutions stronger. Also, by addressing important issues, such as food safety, it will be crucial to promote and ensure sustainable agriculture, consumption, environmental and health practices. Adopting these actions and promote cross-sectoral engagement can help Nigeria to accelerate its progress to achieving SDGs, conquering its commitments to sustainable development by 2030³⁷.

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● CONCLUSION

With a critical analysis of the scientific literature, it is possible to conclude that Nigeria's path to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) faces a lot of complex challenges, such as socioeconomic disparities, inadequate funding and systemic corruption. Although there are many frameworks for implementing SDGs, its execution remains below recommended, limiting Nigeria's substantial progress in their achievement. It is required an interdisciplinary approach to overcome these barriers, such as promote transparency and accountability of public offices, ensure anti-corruption measures and strengthen governance structures. Also, it is necessary to stimulate a multisectoral collaboration, involving civil society, the private sector and the government, aiming for the creation of sustainable and inclusive strategies.

Important aspects such as food safety, education, gender equality and healthcare must be prioritized, with more attention to resource allocation and the establishment of strong public financial management systems. By implementing these reforms and encouraging the integration of local community reality into policymaking, SDG is achievable in Nigeria by 2030. Finally, to overcome barriers and reach meaningful progress in sustainability in Nigeria and the whole of Africa, efforts compromising all sectors of the society are necessary.

Nigeria has the opportunity to transform challenges into opportunities, conquering a sustainable and better future, with commitment to equity and justice, collaboration and resilience achieving the SDGs.

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Resumo

Introdução: Embora a Nigéria tenha se esforçado para estabelecer estratégias para alcançar os ODS, há uma carência de ações adequadas que garantam sua execução efetiva, sendo essencial promover a colaboração multissetorial entre a sociedade civil, o setor privado e as instituições governamentais para solucionar esses desafios.

Objetivo: O objetivo deste estudo é discutir o cenário atual da implementação dos ODS, identificar barreiras e sugerir recomendações para melhorar o progresso em direção a essas metas.

Método: Revisão crítica da literatura utilizando relatórios, periódicos acadêmicos e artigos científicos.

Resultados: Apesar do compromisso da Nigéria com os ODS, a infraestrutura inadequada, as disparidades socioeconômicas e os problemas ambientais, particularmente as inundações, são desafios que continuam a dificultar o progresso. Este estudo destaca que, embora existam estruturas para a implementação dos ODS, elas frequentemente carecem das ações estratégicas necessárias para uma execução efetiva. A pandemia de COVID-19 expôs ainda mais as vulnerabilidades dos sistemas de saúde da Nigéria, afetando o ODS 3 (Saúde e Bem-Estar). Para abordar essas questões, o estudo recomenda a colaboração multissetorial, a integração do conhecimento local e a promoção da equidade de gênero e da sustentabilidade ambiental.

Conclusão: Em conclusão, a Nigéria deve fortalecer as estruturas institucionais e priorizar iniciativas lideradas pela comunidade para superar as barreiras existentes e atingir suas metas dos ODS.

Palavras-chave: Políticas Públicas, Saúde, Integração Social, ODS, Nigéria.

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