

Re-imagining Social Safety Nets and Civil Society Humanitarian Interventions: A Catalyst for Sustainable National Development in Nigeria

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Abstract: Over the years, Nigeria has been plagued with developmental challenges arising from inequality and vulnerabilities. Social safety nets are a range of public-spirited policies and programmes designed by the Government and non-for-profit organisations such as Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) to safeguard and protect individuals and families from internal and external economic shocks and social exclusion effectuated by government policies such as subsidy removal regime. The social safety measures being adopted in Nigeria include; food and financial support to vulnerable populations to access essential services as health care, housing and education. The paper notes that while these measures have brought temporary succour to the needy households, however, they often fall short in promoting sustainable solutions to the country's socio-economic crises. The paper argues the need for a paradigm shift towards reimagining social safety nets and civil society humanitarian interventions in Nigeria in curbing the incidence of vulnerabilities which affect sustainable national development in the country. It recommends the need to ensure partnerships between the government, Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), private sectors and international agencies towards addressing poverty, inequality and vulnerabilities that impede sustainable development in Nigeria while also making sure that programmes such as Social Safety Nets (SSNs) designed to promote sustainable development are depoliticised.

Keywords: Social Safety Nets, Civil Society Organisations, Humanitarian Interventions, Development, Sustainable National Development.

Introduction

Globally, humanitarian emergencies have become an issue of deep concern; from Russian to Ukrainian wars, from Israeli to Palestinian wars, and lots of natural disasters. The crisis in Ukraine has displaced an estimated 3.7 million people inside the country while nearly 6.5 million people have been forced to seek asylum in neighbouring countries. Afghanistan faces more than four decades of displacement, in fact, Afghan refugees are one of the largest protracted refugees in the world (Albert & Abah, 2024). Similarly, about 3.2 million Afghan refugees are still domestically displaced, while 8.2 million are being housed in neighbouring nations. Similarly, Syria continues to have the biggest refugee issue in the world due to more than ten years of internal strife. There are still 7.2 million internally displaced persons out of the total 14 million displaced people (Albert & Abah, 2024).

Also, in 2022 alone, 11.6 million people were internally displaced by conflict and violence in sub-Saharan Africa, the greatest number ever documented in the region. Rising tensions in the middle Sahel and Lake Chad regions, as well as fresh waves of violence in eastern Africa were the main causes of the movements. In southern and central Africa, particularly in the CAR, DRC, and Mozambique, displacement also took place (Albert and Abah, 2024). As a result of the state system's continued inability to fulfil its traditional role of protecting its citizens, however, the involvement of international community and civil society humanitarian intervention inspires hope.

In recent decades, Nigeria has been plagued with significant challenges in addressing economic crises such as unemployment, inequality, vulnerability and attendant poverty occasioned by economic reforms. Despite being one of the largest economies and Africa's most populous nation, the country is grappling with a daunting effect of poverty (Olubiye, 2025). Recent data from the World Bank indicates that as of 2024, over 129 million Nigerians representing 56% of the population are living below the national poverty line. This is a significant increase from 115 million reported in 2023 with 14 million more individuals falling into poverty within just one year. This further implies that more is needed to be done by Nigerian leaders to stem the tide of poverty across the country.

Social safety nets and civil society humanitarian aids are one of such crucial schemes which can help in mitigating the daunting effects of poverty and providing humanitarian relief to the victims of disasters thus promoting sustainable national development. While social safety nets (SSNs) and humanitarian interventions by civil society organisations and other stakeholders are essential in responding to this crisis however, widespread corruption, structural inefficiencies, poor targeting, mismanagement of the of the available resources and a lack of funding frequently make these interventions less successful. Buttressing the foregoing, Ogunnubi (2024) opines that social protection schemes in Nigeria have largely failed to bridge the widening inequality gap due to

major challenges such as low coverage, corruption, institutional deficits, poor targeting, and a lack of political commitment. Similarly, Bamidele (2023) argues that SSNs have been largely politicised as such programmes are often used as instruments by political leaders to win and maintain public office, thereby shifting the focus from welfare delivery to political patronage. Corroborating the above assertions, Amaechi (2023) identifies barriers to effective SSN implementation in Nigeria to include; lack of access and awareness, low effective coverage, gender inequality in design, lack of government commitment, poor coordination and planning, and inadequate monitoring and evaluation.

According to Shehu & Abba (2020), international development initiatives like the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 16 which focuses on promoting peaceful and inclusive societies, providing access to justice for all, and building effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels and scholarship on sustainability and development like that done by Schipper and Pelling (2006); Eriksen and O'Brien (2007); Strömberg (2007); Tamminga (2011); Centre for Global Development (2017), and Blind (2019) all acknowledged the significance of ensuring synergy between development interventions with humanitarian crises in unstable regions and areas affected by natural disasters. These studies that have examined the connections between humanitarian crises brought on by natural catastrophes and sustainable development share the idea that development policy is significantly impacted by the vulnerability, poverty, and suffering that follow natural catastrophes. When people lose their lives and means of subsistence, disasters worsen poverty and halt progress (Shehu & Abba, 2020).

Social safety nets (SSNs) and civil society humanitarian interventions have emerged as crucial mechanisms for providing relief and support to the most vulnerable segments of the population. These programmes, which include cash transfers, food assistance, public works, and emergency relief, are designed to reduce poverty and improve the overall well-being of citizens. However, despite the essential role they play, these interventions have been criticised for their limited scope, inefficiencies, and failure to address underlying structural issues such as governance weaknesses, corruption, and excessive politicisation. It is against this backdrop that this paper reimagines the imperativeness of social safety nets and civil society humanitarian interventions towards enhancing sustainable national development in Nigeria.

Conceptual Clarification

Social Safety Nets

Social safety nets refer to the non-contributory transfer programme that aims at preventing the poor and vulnerable from slipping below a minimal standard of living, particularly in times of economic hardship. These mechanisms include; conditional cash transfers, food assistance, public work initiatives, and social pensions intended at dwindling poverty and consequently promote social inclusion, and enhancing resilience among disadvantaged populations (World Bank, 2018).

According to Barrientos (2010), social safety nets serve both protective and promotional functions providing immediate relief from deprivation while also supporting long-term human capital development. Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler (2004) categorise safety nets as part of a broader social protection system that not only mitigates poverty but also addresses structural vulnerabilities and inequality. In developing contexts, such as Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, social safety nets are increasingly recognised as essential instruments for achieving inclusive development and safeguarding livelihoods (Gentilini et al., 2020). Therefore, social safety nets are not merely emergency responses but integral components of national development and poverty alleviation strategies of a nation.

Humanitarian Interventions

Humanitarian Intervention is a controversial issue in political science, moral philosophy, and international law. The post-Cold War trends in international human rights protection has, probably, reignited this conversation (Kardas, 2003). However, the field of international relations is increasingly addressing this concern. To improve the understanding of this idea, a disaggregated technique is used. This approach entails conceptualising "humanitarian" and "intervention" separately. On the one hand, the adjective 'humanitarian' is used to describe actions aimed at improving the status and well-being of human beings, ranging from the distribution of aid to disaster victims to the use of force to uphold certain basic rights, while the noun 'intervention' betokens a continuum of actions, which may range from a simple condemnation of a certain domestic policy to imposing trade quotas against another country (Kardas, 2003).

Consequently, humanitarian interventions are such actions made by both internal and external parties directed at stopping or lessening suffering caused by natural disasters, conflicts, or other crises. Aid, protection, and better access to essentials like food, water, and shelter which contribute to making life more abundant and meaningful are examples of these interventions. While humanitarian efforts have good intentions, their efficacy and effects can be complicated and contentious. Supporters of interventions contend that they are necessary to save lives and advance human rights, while critics often argue that they can occasionally worsen conflicts or threaten local sovereignty. However, the coordination, openness, and inclusivity of all participants are critical to the success of humanitarian operations.

Civil Society Organisations (CSOs)

According to Edwards (2014), CSOs, are a diverse group of organisations that share the objective of promoting public welfare outside of the public or private spheres. These groups include; advocacy groups, non-profit organisations, social movements, professional associations, and faith-based organisations. They play a crucial role in promoting democracy, advocating for human rights, and addressing social issues in communities around the world. These organisations work independently of the government to empower citizens, hold public officials accountable, and provide essential services to marginalised populations. CSOs often bridge the gap between citizens and the government, acting as a voice for the people and facilitating dialogue between different stakeholders. Civil society organisations (CSOs) are essential to responding to humanitarian emergencies, especially when there is violence, relocation, poverty, or social marginalisation. When the state's response is either inadequate or delayed, these organisations frequently fill the void.

Corroborating the foregoing, Salamon (2017) maintains that CSOs are essential to democratic societies because they empower marginalised populations, create a forum for public engagement, and use public advocacy and collective action to hold governments responsible. In Nigeria, these organisations champion the cause for gender equality, environmental sustainability, and protection of human rights. Indeed, CSOs humanitarian actions are crucial in reducing the effects of poverty, social inequality, and violence, despite the fact that they confront numerous obstacles such a lack of finance, political repression, and the possibility of being coopted by state actors.

National Development

It often proves a herculean task to lock down an acceptable definition of the term 'development' due to the diversity in interpretation of the concept. This is aggravated by the multidisciplinary applicability of the concept, engaging various academic fields such as Economics and Political Science. However, scholars and practitioners have attempted to conceptualise development to denote an increase, transformation, and expansion in several facets of life. It implies providing more goods and services, as well as utilising a nation's human resources more effectively (Nwapi, 2018).

National development, according to Sen (1999) is the process of enhancing a country's overall quality of life through economic growth, social progress, political stability, and environmental sustainability. The author believes that development should improve human freedoms, talents, and opportunities, rather than focusing exclusively on economic growth. For Todaro and Smith (2015), national development refers to the multifaceted process that involves the re-organisation and re-orientation of the entire economic and social systems including raising income levels, distributing resources more equitably, making institutional changes, and eliminating poverty and inequality.

National development, therefore, is that process through which a nation enhances the economic, social, and political welfare of its populace. This entails the execution of policies and programmes consciously designed to improve infrastructure, education, healthcare, and overall quality of life. National development is essential for a nation to attain enduring sustainability and prosperity. It necessitates strategic planning, efficient governance, and the involvement of all societal sectors. National development transcends mere economic growth; it aims to foster a more equitable and inclusive society where all citizens can flourish and contribute to national prosperity.

Theoretical Framework

Collective Stewardship Theory

Collective stewardship theory assumes that everyone is a steward of all of the planet's resources and is expected to act in the best interests of the planet by utilising existing resources in ways that benefit everyone, society and the environment. According to Chapin et al (2010) referenced in Ozili (2025), collective stewardship theory believes that if people are left to their own whims and caprices, they would consider themselves to be good stewards of the planet's limited resources and consequently, this action would cause them to place a higher premium on their preservation, efficient and responsible use in order to prevent the depletion of these resources to the detriment of current and future generations.

According to Davis, Schoorman and Donaldson (1997), stewardship theory suggests that pro-organisational and collectivistic behaviours are more beneficial than individualistic and self-serving behaviours (Waldkirch and Nordqvist, 2016). The theory offers a crucial theoretical framework for analysing the intricacies of social safety nets and CSO-led humanitarian interventions in the context of this paper as it emphasises shared accountability between stakeholders, such as the government, CSOs, the commercial sector, and local communities. The fact that the theory argues that cooperation is necessary to guarantee the efficacy and sustainability of these safety nets, it supports this paper's contention that concerted efforts are needed to address Nigeria's social safety net issues.

Collective stewardship theory serves as a crucial theoretical underpinning for this paper because it makes the assumption that, in order for an organisation to guarantee the best possible performance of its objectives, multi-stakeholder partnerships must be

formed and maintained over time. These partnerships are what propel long-term and successful initiatives like CSO humanitarian interventions. Given the paper's focus on sustainable national development, protocols that guarantee both quick and long-lasting interventions are required. The concept underscores the importance of stewardship for long-term sustainability, making sure that present initiatives do not endanger chances for advancement in the future.

In conclusion, the theory offers a strong framework for examining and resolving the interrelated problems of humanitarian interventions, social safety nets, and sustainable national development, making it extremely pertinent to the paper.

An Overview of Social Safety Nets and CSO Humanitarian Interventions in Nigeria

In order to alleviate poverty, vulnerability, and socio-economic inequality in Nigeria, social safety nets and humanitarian interventions by such organisations as Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) are essential. For emphasis, social safety nets are governmental and non-governmental initiatives created to give the most vulnerable groups material, monetary, or food support. CSOs function as autonomous organisations that use community involvement, service delivery, and advocacy to address humanitarian issues. They work with other stakeholders to lessen socioeconomic difficulties and consequently promote sustainable development.

Nigeria's humanitarian and development landscape is significantly influenced by the activities of CSOs. These groups, which include faith-based organisations (FBOs), community-based organisations (CBOs), and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), collaborate with government agencies to address important socio-economic imbalance. In Nigeria, CSOs have played a crucial role in delivering humanitarian aid, tackling problems including poverty, health, education, and crisis management in areas impacted by violence. Examples include the Nigeria Network of Non-governmental Organisations (NGOs), NACA, Girls Not Brides, and the International Rescue Committee. These organisations handle a wide range of humanitarian needs, including HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, development, and community support.

International Civil Society Organisations Providing Humanitarian Intervention in Nigeria

S/N	Civil Society Organisations	Focus
1	Action Aid Nigeria	Women's rights, education, disaster response, and livelihood programs.
2	Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders)	Emergency medical aid in conflict and disaster zones, particularly in the Northeast.
3.	International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)	Emergency aid, water and sanitation, and support for internally displaced persons (IDPs).
4.	Save the Children Nigeria	Child protection, education, health, and nutrition
5.	Oxfam Nigeria	Poverty alleviation, food security, gender justice, and water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH).

Source: Authors' compilation, 2025.

National Civil Society Organisations Providing Humanitarian Intervention in Nigeria

S/N	Civil Society Organisations (CSOs)	Focus
1	Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD)	Advocacy for democracy and good governance, with programs addressing conflict-affected communities.
2	Nigerian Red Cross Society	Disaster response, health services, and community-based interventions.
3.	Borno Women Development Initiative (BOWDI)	Empowerment programmes and support for women and children in IDP camps.
4.	CLEEN Foundation	Peacebuilding, conflict resolution, and emergency response in crisis-prone areas.
5.	Oxfam Nigeria	Poverty alleviation, food security, gender justice, and water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH).
6.	Reach Out Integrated	Youth empowerment, health, and education in underserved communities

7.	Catholic Relief Services (CRS)	Health, education, disaster relief, and agricultural programmes.
8.	Christian Aid Nigeria	Poverty alleviation, health, and disaster relief efforts.
9.	Islamic Relief Nigeria	Humanitarian aid, orphan care, and sustainable development.
10.	Faith Foundation for Social Justice	Community empowerment and humanitarian assistance.

Source: Authors' compilation, 2025.

Social Safety Nets and CSO Humanitarian Interventions in Nigeria: Examining the Pitfalls

Despite the fact that SSNs and CSO humanitarian interventions remain a crucial component of Nigeria's poverty reduction strategy as these programmes help to promote social inclusion, achieve sustainable development goals (SDGs), economic growth and productivity and ensure social cohesion and peace-building, however, the implementation of the programmes is being hampered by certain factors. Some of the challenges reported in the literature are:

Nigeria's social intervention programmes have faced allegations of corruption and mismanagement. To be sure, in January 2024, the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission arrested the National Coordinator of the National Social Investment Programme Agency (NSIPA) for allegedly misappropriating over ₦37 billion intended for poverty alleviation schemes (Punch, 2024). In a research conducted by Bamidele (2023) it was reported that SSNs in Nigeria have often been excessively politicised, serving as tools for political patronage rather than genuine poverty alleviation. This over-politicisation has led to poor targeting, where the most vulnerable populations who genuinely need this support are alienated from accessing the benefits. Similarly, the International Centre for Investigative Reporting (ICIR) in 2023 noted that despite the significant financial allocations being made by the Nigerian governments, many of these social intervention programmes have failed to achieve their intended impact due to poor planning, lack of direction, and inadequate implementation.

Mismanagement of funds, corruption, and insufficient funding have posed significant challenges to the successful implementation of the programme. The efficient implementation of social development projects is also hampered by reliance on outside aid and a lack of resource mobilisation (Ezeudu, 2023).

Another major obstacle to the effective execution of SSNs' and CSOs' humanitarian assistance is institutional challenge. A lack of human resources coupled with the necessary skills and capacity, inefficient bureaucratic processes, and a lack of coordination and cooperation among stakeholders inhibit successful implementation of social development programmes in Nigeria (Ezeudu, 2023).

Social Safety Nets, CSOs Humanitarian Intervention and Sustainable National Development in Nigeria: Interrogating the Nexus

Social safety nets (SSNs) and civil society organisations (CSOs) humanitarian interventions have become pivotal in addressing the persistent challenges of poverty, inequality, and social instability in Nigeria. While social safety nets are designed as government-led initiatives to provide a minimum level of income and resources to the most vulnerable populations, CSOs serve as independent actors that complement these efforts through their humanitarian aids.

Social safety nets encompass non-contributory programmes such as cash transfers, food assistance, and public works aimed at alleviating poverty and reducing vulnerability. On the other hand, CSOs' humanitarian interventions are driven by non-governmental entities focused on delivering emergency assistance, advocating for marginalised groups, and fostering societal change. CSOs in Nigeria have been instrumental in filling the gaps left by governmental social safety nets. They provide critical services such as food distribution, health care, and shelter in emergency situations. Beyond immediate relief, CSOs also engage in advocacy for policy reforms and capacity-building initiatives that promote sustainable development. In Nigeria, these interventions often address gaps in governmental programmes, particularly in regions plagued by conflict and economic instability.

To be sure, social safety nets and CSOs humanitarian interventions are critical to achieving sustainable national development by ensuring that vulnerable populations have access to basic needs, thereby fostering human capital development. Programmes such as the Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) and the National Home-Grown School Feeding Programme (NHGSFP) have demonstrated greater tendency in reducing the daunting effects of poverty. The nexus between social safety nets and CSOs' humanitarian interventions therefore, lies in their shared goal of reducing poverty and fostering sustainable development.

Conclusion

Nations of the world, particularly those of the Southern hemisphere struggle to achieve economic sustainability through different poverty reduction strategies and programmes. However, much of their efforts is yet to drastically reduce the incidence of poverty which consequently affects sustainable national developmental efforts in these countries including Nigeria thus requiring an urgent need to re-imagine social safety nets and CSOs humanitarian intervention. Indeed, there is need for a shift from short-term relief efforts to more sustainable, long-term solutions that can foster economic stability and social inclusion. This includes not only enhancing the reach and impact of government-run social safety interventions but also fostering greater collaboration with civil society organisations (CSOs). This paper explores how these mechanisms can be restructured and re-imagined to contribute more effectively to sustainable national development. It highlights the need for inclusive policies that empower the poor, improve governance frameworks, and promote active participation from all sectors of society. This paper concludes that, to achieve sustainable national development in Nigeria, efforts should be directed towards integrating social safety nets and civil society humanitarian efforts into a coherent strategy that addresses the immediate needs of the people as this re-imagined approach would serve as a potent model for other nations grappling with similar challenges to emulate.

Recommendations

To ensure sustainable national development in Nigeria, the following recommendations are advanced:

There is need to ensure formal partnerships between the government, CSOs, private sector, and international agencies to align efforts in addressing poverty, inequality, and vulnerabilities that act as impediment to sustainable national development.

There is need for the involvement of local communities in the design, implementation, and monitoring of social safety nets and humanitarian programmes as this would help ensure that interventions address specific challenges peculiar to each community.

There is need to develop robust accountability frameworks to track the flow of resources and evaluate programme outcomes as this would mitigate corruption and inefficiency that hamper the effectiveness of social safety nets and humanitarian interventions in Nigeria.

There is need to expand the scope of current social safety net programmes and humanitarian interventions to encompass vulnerable populations, including women, children, the elderly, and individuals with disabilities as this would help address systemic inequalities.

There is need for the establishment of sustainable funding framework through public-private partnerships (PPPs) and innovative financing, such as social bonds or donor funds in order to ensure the continuity and sustainability of safety nets and humanitarian interventions in Nigeria.

There is need to give training and technical support to civil society organisations and government agencies to augment their capacity for programme delivery and governance and this would help promote sustainable programme implementation.

Poverty alleviation programmes like SSN should be depoliticised such that the people who genuinely need these intervention programmes are targeted and provided for rather than being alienated.

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