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The Role Of Demographic Data In Mitigating Economic Disparity And Social Inequality In Nigeria: A Critical Review

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Abstract: *Economic disparity and social inequality remain persistent challenges in Nigeria, undermining inclusive growth, social cohesion, and sustainable development. These challenges manifest in unequal access to income, education, healthcare, political representation, and economic opportunities across regions, genders, and socio-economic groups. This paper critically reviews the role of demographic data in mitigating economic disparity and social inequality in Nigeria. Adopting a secondary research design, the study synthesizes evidence from peer-reviewed literature, national census and survey reports, and international development publications produced by institutions such as the National Population Commission, National Bureau of Statistics, World Bank, UNDP, and UNICEF. The review reveals that demographic data play a central role in identifying inequality patterns, targeting social interventions, informing economic planning, enhancing political representation, and monitoring progress toward national development plans and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Evidence shows that disaggregated demographic indicators are essential for addressing regional, gender, and rural–urban disparities, particularly in education, health, and poverty reduction. However, the study also identifies major constraints limiting the effectiveness of demographic data in Nigeria, including outdated census figures, political manipulation of population data, weak institutional capacity, limited access to disaggregated datasets, and public mistrust in official statistics. The paper concludes that strengthening demographic data systems through regular and transparent censuses, institutional capacity building, depoliticization of data processes, and improved data accessibility is indispensable for reducing inequality and promoting inclusive development in Nigeria. The study recommends sustained political commitment and strategic collaboration with international partners to enhance the credibility and utilization of demographic data for equitable national development.*

Keywords: Demographic data, economic disparity, social inequality, Nigeria, sustainable development, population policy.

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation, had an estimated population of 223 million in 2023 (World Bank, 2023). With an annual growth rate of 2.4 percent, driven by persistently high fertility and declining mortality (United Nations, 2022), the country's demographic profile remains predominantly youthful approximately 43 percent of Nigerians are under the age of 15, while only about 3 percent are above 65 years (UNICEF, 2021). This youthful structure presents both opportunities and challenges: it can serve as a demographic dividend through an expanded labor force, but it also poses risks of unemployment, poverty, and social instability if not effectively harnessed (Bloom et al., 2015). Furthermore, Nigeria's population is unevenly distributed, with high densities in the South-West and South-East regions and sparse settlement in the North-East and parts of the Middle Belt (NPC & ICF, 2019). However, Nigeria's demographic potential has been undermined by persistent economic and social inequalities that constrain inclusive growth. According to the National Bureau of Statistics (2022), over 133 million Nigerians representing 63 percent of the population are multidimensionally poor, facing deprivations in education, healthcare, housing, and living standards. Poverty is geographically concentrated, with the northern states recording the highest levels of deprivation compared to the southern regions (World Bank, 2022). These inequalities extend beyond income distribution to include disparities in access to social services and infrastructure. For instance, school enrollment and literacy rates remain significantly higher in the southern regions than in the North, perpetuating regional disparities in human capital formation (Okunola & Olanrewaju, 2021). Gender inequality further compounds these challenges. Women in Nigeria face systemic disadvantages in education, labor market participation, and political representation. The UNDP (2022) reports that female labor force participation stands at 48 percent, compared to 64 percent for men, while women occupy less than 7 percent of elective political positions nationwide. Maternal mortality rates remain among the highest globally, largely due to limited access to skilled health services, especially in rural communities (WHO, 2021). These disparities highlight the gendered dimensions of social inequality and the critical need for inclusive policies that empower women and marginalized

populations. Addressing these inequalities aligns with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goals 1, 5, and 10, which emphasize poverty eradication, gender equality, and reduced inequalities. Achieving these goals requires reliable demographic information to guide evidence-based policy formulation. Demographic data serve as a foundation for understanding population dynamics and their implications for development. They encompass systematically collected information on the size, structure, and distribution of populations, including variables such as age, sex, fertility, mortality, migration, education, and occupation (United Nations, 2014). In Nigeria, such data are primarily generated through censuses, household surveys, and administrative records, providing the empirical base for national planning and resource allocation (National Population Commission & ICF, 2019). Reliable demographic data enable policymakers to identify vulnerable groups, assess regional disparities, and design targeted interventions aimed at promoting equity and social inclusion. Economic disparity refers to the unequal distribution of income, wealth, and productive opportunities within and between populations (World Bank, 2020). It manifests in variations in living standards, employment, and access to economic resources. In Nigeria, economic disparity is evident in regional imbalances, where southern states benefit from higher industrial activity and income levels, while northern agriculture and informal labor markets (Aigbokhan, 2008). Such disparities have profound implications for poverty reduction, social cohesion, and national stability. Social inequality, on the other hand, involves structural and systemic differences in access to rights, services, and opportunities across social groups (Therborn, 2013). It extends beyond material deprivation to encompass disparities in health outcomes, education, gender relations, and political participation. In Nigeria, social inequality is reflected in unequal educational access, urban–rural gaps in healthcare delivery, and the persistent marginalization of women and minority groups (UNDP, 2022). Unlike economic disparity, which centers on wealth and income distribution, social inequality encompasses broader inequities in social structures and power relations. Taken together, demographic data, economic disparity, and social inequality are deeply interrelated. Demographic data provide the empirical foundation for identifying and quantifying these inequalities, revealing patterns of disadvantage across gender, age, region, and class. By mapping such variations, demographic data function not only as descriptive tools but also as strategic instruments for designing inclusive policies and monitoring progress toward equity. Strengthening Nigeria's demographic data systems is therefore crucial for harnessing its population dynamics to promote balanced, evidence-based, and sustainable development.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Understanding the interplay between demographic data, economic disparity, and social inequality requires a sound theoretical foundation. Two principal frameworks Human Capital Theory and Demographic Transition Theory offer valuable insights into how demographic information can inform policies aimed at promoting equitable growth and social inclusion.

Human Capital Theory

Human Capital Theory, rooted in the works of Schultz (1961) and Becker (1993), posits that investments in education, health, and skills formation enhance individual productivity and contribute to broader national economic development. The theory views people as assets whose capabilities, when nurtured through appropriate policies and investments, yield measurable returns in productivity and income growth. By expanding educational access, improving healthcare, and promoting workforce skills, societies can reduce inequality, facilitate upward mobility, and foster sustainable economic transformation. In the Nigerian context, demographic data serve as the operational backbone of Human Capital Theory. Reliable data on literacy levels, school enrollment, age structure, and health outcomes reveal spatial and social disparities that guide government and development partners in targeting interventions. For instance, data from the National Population Commission (NPC) and ICF (2019) indicate substantial variations in educational attainment and child health between the northern and southern regions. Policymakers can thus identify areas of deprivation, prioritize investments, and monitor progress in human capital development. Empirical studies further show that regions with higher educational attainment and better health indicators tend to exhibit lower poverty incidence and greater economic resilience (Aigbokhan, 2008; Okunola & Olanrewaju, 2021). Therefore, Human Capital Theory underscores demographic data as both diagnostic in identifying inequality gaps and prescriptive in informing targeted policy responses. By revealing where investments in people are most needed, demographic data translate the theoretical principles of human capital development into actionable policy tools that foster inclusive growth.

Demographic Transition Theory

Demographic Transition Theory (Notestein, 1945) provides another crucial framework for linking demographic change with inequality outcomes. The theory explains how societies evolve through distinct stages of demographic transformation from high fertility and mortality to lower fertility and mortality each stage bearing different implications for economic and social structures. During the early stages, high fertility and rapid population growth often strain resources, exacerbate poverty, and deepen inequality. As societies progress into later stages characterized by reduced fertility and improved health, dependency ratios decline, creating the potential for a demographic dividend a period when a growing labor force can stimulate economic expansion and enhance living standards. For Nigeria, demographic data on fertility, mortality, and migration are essential in assessing the pace

and character of its transition. With total fertility rates averaging 5.3 children per woman (NPC & ICF, 2019), the country remains in the early-to-middle stages of demographic transition. This situation presents both challenges and opportunities. Persistently high fertility rates contribute to unemployment pressures, limited social services, and increased poverty risks. However, effective use of demographic data enables policymakers to anticipate these challenges, forecast population trends, and design social investments that harness the benefits of demographic transition. Collectively, Human Capital Theory and Demographic Transition Theory reinforce the central argument that demographic data are not merely statistical artifacts but strategic instruments for promoting equity. While Human Capital Theory highlights how demographic information guides investments in education, health, and skill formation, Demographic Transition Theory illuminates how data help policymakers anticipate and manage structural changes in population dynamics. Together, these frameworks underscore the indispensable role of demographic evidence in achieving equitable and sustainable development in Nigeria.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Global Insights on Demographic Data and Inequality Reduction

Comparative global evidence demonstrates that countries with robust demographic data systems achieve more effective and equitable development outcomes. In the Nordic countries, for instance, comprehensive population registers form the foundation of universal welfare systems that have substantially reduced poverty and income inequality (Esping-Andersen, 1990). Through continuous data collection and integration, governments in Sweden, Denmark, and Norway can design, implement, and monitor social spending with remarkable precision. These systems ensure equitable access to healthcare, education, and social protection, thereby minimizing interregional disparities and promoting social cohesion. Similarly, in Latin America, demographic and household survey data have been instrumental in the design and targeting of Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) programs, such as Brazil's Bolsa Família and Mexico's Oportunidades. These programs, guided by demographic targeting mechanisms, have effectively reduced poverty and inequality by providing direct support to the poorest households (Fiszbein & Schady, 2009). Empirical evaluations reveal that CCT initiatives have improved school attendance, child health outcomes, and household food security among beneficiary populations (Rawlings & Rubio, 2005). These global experiences affirm the strategic value of demographic data as the empirical foundation for evidence-based policymaking. By enabling governments to identify vulnerable populations, assess inequality dimensions, and allocate resources efficiently, demographic information serves as both a planning instrument and a mechanism for social justice. Countries that institutionalize continuous demographic data collection through censuses, surveys, and administrative systems tend to exhibit stronger social protection frameworks and more equitable economic outcomes.

African Context: Using Demographic Data to Mitigate Economic Disparity and Social Inequality

Across Africa, demographic data has become a critical instrument for designing and implementing strategies that reduce economic and social inequalities. Countries across the continent increasingly recognize that evidence-based policymaking depends on accurate and disaggregated population data, which allows for targeted interventions and equitable development outcomes. In South Africa, large-scale household and demographic surveys form the foundation of comprehensive social protection programs such as the Child Support Grant and the Old Age Pension. Empirical evidence shows that these programs significantly narrow poverty gaps and income inequality, particularly among female-headed households (Seekings & Nattrass, 2005; Woolard & Leibbrandt, 2010). The continuous availability of demographic data enables policymakers to refine eligibility criteria, monitor progress, and ensure that welfare benefits reach the most vulnerable groups. Similarly, Ghana has leveraged demographic data, particularly through the Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS), to identify regional disparities in maternal and child health. These data have guided interventions aimed at improving skilled birth attendance, immunization coverage, and maternal care services. As a result, under-five mortality rates have declined significantly, reflecting the impact of data-driven public health planning (Ghana Statistical Service [GSS], Ghana Health Service [GHS], & ICF, 2018). In Kenya, demographic data have informed education reforms that expanded access to free primary education and reduced gender and regional inequalities in enrollment (Oketch & Rolleston, 2007). By identifying marginalized groups and underserved regions, the Kenyan government has been able to direct educational resources more effectively, improving human capital development and long-term economic inclusion. These cases collectively illustrate that reliable demographic data empower African governments to design context-specific policies that address both structural and spatial dimensions of inequality. They also highlight the importance of institutionalizing regular population data collection through censuses, household surveys, and administrative systems as a prerequisite for evidence-based governance.

Nigeria's Experience with Demographic Data in Addressing Economic Disparity and Social Inequality

Nigeria's experience with demographic data in mitigating inequality reflects both progress and persistent challenges. On one hand, the country has made important strides in generating population-based data through initiatives such as the Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS), the General Household Survey (GHS), and other instruments implemented by the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) and the National Population Commission (NPC). These datasets

provide critical insights into fertility, mortality, education, health, and labor patterns, forming the backbone of numerous development programs. For instance, NDHS data have informed national campaigns on maternal and child health, immunization coverage, and gender equity initiatives (NPC & ICF, 2019). Similarly, poverty and labor surveys by the NBS have guided the design of social protection interventions, including conditional cash transfer schemes and youth empowerment programs. Evaluations indicate that the conditional cash transfer program contributed to reducing the severity of poverty among beneficiary households, improving their access to food, education, and healthcare (World Bank, 2018). Despite these achievements, Nigeria's demographic data system faces serious limitations. The last national population census was conducted in 2006, forcing policymakers to rely on outdated projections (Makinwa-Adebusoye, 2014). The politicization of census outcomes—often marked by regional and ethnic contestations has further undermined public confidence in demographic statistics and reduced their policy utility (Isiugo-Abanihe, 2016). These credibility issues weaken the effectiveness of resource allocation, social planning, and poverty mapping. Moreover, inconsistencies in data collection, limited funding, and institutional fragmentation have constrained the development of an integrated and transparent demographic information system. Nevertheless, Nigeria's demographic surveys remain indispensable tools for addressing inequality. Their continued use in policy formulation underscores the country's recognition of the importance of demographic evidence for equitable development. Strengthening data governance through transparent census processes, periodic updates, and enhanced institutional capacity is essential for maximizing the role of demographic data in reducing both economic disparity and social inequality.

EMPIRICAL STUDIES

Empirical evidence across global, regional, and national contexts demonstrates a strong relationship between the use of demographic data and the mitigation of economic disparity and social inequality. Countries with robust demographic registers tend to achieve lower inequality, as evidenced by Esping-Andersen's (1990) comparative analysis of welfare regimes. The study found that Nordic states, through well-maintained population registers, significantly reduced inequality by efficiently administering universal welfare systems. Similarly, Rawlings and Rubio (2005), in a cross-country evaluation of Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) programs, revealed that education and health outcomes improved when demographic data were used to guide beneficiary targeting. Building on this, Fiszbein and Schady (2009) synthesized World Bank findings showing that CCTs narrowed poverty gaps and enhanced child welfare, emphasizing the importance of institutionalized, census-based targeting mechanisms. In related work, Bloom et al. (2015) employed econometric modeling to demonstrate that youthful populations can drive economic growth when complemented by strategic investments in health and education. Their findings highlight the role of effective demographic transition management in reducing structural inequality. At the policy level, the United Nations (2014) underscored that comprehensive and continuous vital registration systems are essential for closing data gaps and improving equity-oriented planning. Within Africa, Seekings and Nattrass (2005) used historical and demographic analysis to show that South Africa's social grant system supported by reliable household survey data played a key role in reducing racial income inequality. Woolard and Leibbrandt (2010) further demonstrated that cash transfers in South Africa lowered poverty gaps, especially among women, confirming that demographic data are fundamental for equitable policy design. Similarly, Oketch and Rolleston (2007), evaluating free primary education programs in East Africa, observed that access improved substantially though quality challenges persisted. They recommended the use of disaggregated education data to better address regional and gender disparities. Evidence from Ghana supports this trend. Using the Demographic and Health Survey (DHS), the Ghana Statistical Service (GSS), Ghana Health Service (GHS), and ICF (2018) found that maternal mortality rates declined while regional disparities in health outcomes narrowed, reflecting the effectiveness of demographic data in guiding social investment. Mutanda (2018), through a secondary data review, concluded that rapid population growth in Sub-Saharan Africa continues to sustain inequality, urging policymakers to integrate demographic data more systematically into development planning. In Nigeria, several empirical studies highlight both progress and limitations in using demographic data to address inequality. Makinwa-Adebusoye (2014) noted that recurring census controversies and delays undermine national development planning, while Isiugo-Abanihe (2016) argued that politicization of census results weakens their credibility and perpetuates inequality. More recent evidence from the National Population Commission (NPC) and ICF (2019), based on the Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS), revealed persistent high fertility and maternal mortality rates, particularly among poor and rural populations, indicating deep-rooted disparities in health access.

Using quantitative economic analysis, Aigbokhan (2008) found that while Nigeria experienced economic growth, inequality levels remained high, suggesting the need for consistent, survey-based monitoring. The National Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2022), in its Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) report, documented that approximately 133 million Nigerians (63 percent of the population) are multidimensionally poor, with poverty heavily concentrated in the northern regions. This reinforces the need for geographically targeted interventions. Okunola and Olanrewaju (2021), through regional comparative analysis, found that the South consistently outperforms the North in literacy and educational attainment, attributing the gap to structural imbalances in human capital investment. At the sectoral level, the World Bank (2018), in its evaluation of the

State Education Program Investment Project, confirmed that education investments increased school enrollment and retention but recommended improved state-level demographic monitoring for sustained impact. Similarly, UNDP (2022) reported Nigeria's poor ranking on gender equality indices, attributing this to entrenched structural barriers and emphasizing the importance of collecting gender-disaggregated demographic data. Olawole (2019), using urban survey data, found that rural–urban migration exacerbates urban poverty and inequality, calling for migration-sensitive census planning. Finally, Adebowale and Yusuf (2020), analyzing NDHS data, established that wealth and education remain strong predictors of health disparities, recommending that policy frameworks prioritize vulnerable groups to close inequality gaps. Collectively, these empirical studies underscore the transformative role of demographic data in identifying inequality patterns, designing targeted social interventions, and evaluating their effectiveness. However, they also highlight the institutional and political challenges that continue to constrain the use of demographic data in Nigeria. Strengthening data governance, transparency, and consistency remains essential for leveraging demographic information as a strategic tool for achieving social and economic equity.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a secondary research design, relying exclusively on the review and synthesis of existing data and literature. It integrates evidence from peer-reviewed academic publications, official census reports, national survey datasets such as the Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS) and reports from the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), as well as international development documents from institutions including the World Bank, UNDP, and UNICEF. Unlike primary empirical research that collects original data, this study undertakes a conceptual and analytical synthesis of existing sources to explore the role of demographic data in mitigating economic disparity and social inequality in Nigeria. By drawing on diverse and authoritative datasets, the paper identifies recurring themes, empirical trends, and policy implications that link demographic evidence to inclusive development. This methodological approach is justified because demographic and socio-economic data in Nigeria are already extensively collected by national and international agencies. Hence, the study emphasizes critical interpretation and integration over data collection, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of how demographic information informs inequality reduction strategies. The secondary research design also enhances comparative validity, as it enables cross-referencing findings from multiple contexts global, African, and Nigerian to derive broader theoretical and policy insights.

THE ROLE OF DEMOGRAPHIC DATA IN MITIGATING ECONOMIC DISPARITY AND SOCIAL INEQUALITY IN NIGERIA

A. Identifying Inequality Patterns: Disaggregated demographic data reveals and quantifies inequality patterns within populations. By analyzing indicators across gender, age, income, region, and education, policymakers can identify vulnerable groups and design targeted interventions. In Nigeria, data from the Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS) consistently expose regional and gender disparities. The 2018 NDHS demonstrated that maternal mortality remains disproportionately high in northern rural states, where women experience limited access to skilled birth attendants (NPC & ICF, 2019). Similarly, infant and under-five mortality rates remain highest among poorer households, reflecting socio-economic inequalities. Educational data further highlight disparities, as female literacy rates lag behind male rates, particularly in northern Nigeria (UNICEF, 2020). Globally, disaggregated demographic evidence serves as a tool for tracking marginalized populations. The World Health Organization (2015) warned that national averages can conceal inequalities when demographic breakdowns are absent. In Nigeria, the Multidimensional Poverty Index (NBS, 2022) illustrates that 65% of rural dwellers live in poverty compared to 35% in urban areas. Thus, identifying inequality patterns through demographic data goes beyond statistics it uncovers hidden vulnerabilities and ensures that social and economic interventions are both inclusive and equitable.

B. Targeting Social Interventions: Demographic surveys enable precision targeting of social interventions by identifying household characteristics, poverty status, and vulnerability levels. Governments and development partners use this data to design pro-poor programs that address inequality directly. In Nigeria, Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) schemes rely on demographic and household data to reach the poorest households, particularly in rural communities. The World Bank (2020) reported that these transfers boosted school enrollment and improved child nutrition outcomes. Likewise, the Home-Grown School Feeding Programme uses demographic data to select beneficiary schools in disadvantaged areas, ensuring that resources reach children most at risk of malnutrition. Comparable experiences in Latin America demonstrate how demographic evidence guides effective social interventions. Rawlings and Rubio (2005) showed that Progresa (Mexico) and Bolsa Família (Brazil) reduced poverty gaps and enhanced intergenerational mobility through data-driven targeting. In South Africa, demographic and income survey data informed the Child Support Grant, which provide effective in reducing income inequality among female-headed households (Seekings & Nattrass, 2005). The success of these programs rests on reliable demographic data. Without such evidence, social programs risk being misdirected or captured by non-poor groups, thereby perpetuating inequality rather than alleviating it.

C. Informing Economic Planning: Demographic data underpins economic planning and guides resource allocation. Population size, age structure, and labor force statistics help governments plan for employment, education, housing, and

health infrastructure. In Nigeria, labor force data from the National Bureau of Statistics (2020) revealed high youth unemployment, which prompted the government to launch initiatives such as the N-Power scheme and entrepreneurship training. Population distribution data also influence infrastructure development, ensuring equitable access to schools, hospitals, and road networks. At the macroeconomic level, demographic transitions shape growth prospects. Bloom, Canning, and Sevilla (2003) argued that when fertility rates decline and the working-age population rises, countries can harness a "demographic dividend" if investments in education and employment are well-aligned. East Asian economies capitalized on this demographic opportunity through data-driven planning, achieving rapid growth and reducing inequality (Mason, 2001). For Nigeria, averaging demographic data for planning remains essential given its youthful population. Failure to integrate demographic insights risks worsening unemployment, urban slum expansion, and regional disparity. In essence, demographic data serves not only as a descriptive tool but as a prescriptive framework for anticipating economic needs and preventing inequality from deepening.

D. Political Representation and Inclusion: Census data constitutes the foundation for political representation, constituency delineation, and resource allocation. Accurate population counts ensure equitable representation and amplify the voices of minority groups in governance. In Nigeria, census outcomes determine constituency boundaries and influence revenue distribution from the Federation Account. Akinyemi (2013) observed that population figures directly affect the allocation of political power, making census credibility a key democratic concern. However, as Isiugo-Abanihe (2016) noted, census exercises in Nigeria have often been politicized, eroding public trust and undermining data reliability. Globally, census data underpins inclusive governance. In the United States, decennial census results determine congressional representation and guide federal funding allocations (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). Similarly, in India, demographic data informs constituency delimitation and supports affirmative action for marginalized groups (Jenkins, 2004). Strengthening census integrity in Nigeria is therefore essential to foster inclusivity and promote social justice. Without credible demographic data, marginalized populations risk underrepresentation, thereby reinforcing structural inequalities. E. Monitoring Development Goals: Demographic indicators provide the empirical foundation for monitoring progress toward national and global development goals. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) emphasize inclusivity, requiring data disaggregated by gender, income, age, and location to evaluate whether progress benefits all social groups. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2022) highlighted that countries with robust demographic data systems are better equipped to track inequalities in education, health, and gender equality. In Nigeria, NDHS and NBS surveys serve as primary sources for tracking progress in maternal health, child immunization, school enrollment, and poverty reduction. NDHS data have shown gradual improvements in contraceptive prevalence and skilled birth attendance, indicating progress toward SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being) (NPC & ICF, 2019). Similarly, education statistics inform SDG 4 (Quality Education), particularly in measuring gender gaps in school participation. Beyond global frameworks, demographic indicators monitor Nigeria's Economic Recovery and Growth Plan (ERGP) and Vision 2050. However, gaps persist due to irregular census exercises and political interference. Jerven (2013) argued that weak statistical capacity in Africa undermines planning and hampers progress assessment. Strengthening demographic data systems is therefore both a technical and governance imperative. Ultimately, demographic indicators act as a yardstick for measuring inclusiveness, equity, and sustainability in development outcomes.

E. Monitoring development goals: Finally, demographic indicators are essential in monitoring progress toward national and international development goals. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) emphasize inclusivity, requiring data disaggregated by gender, age, income, and location to measure whether progress benefits all groups. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2022) highlighted that countries with robust demographic data systems are better positioned to track inequalities in education, health, and gender equality. In Nigeria, NDHS and NBS surveys provide the evidence base for tracking maternal mortality, child immunization, school attendance, and poverty reduction. For instance, NDHS data has shown gradual improvements in contraceptive prevalence and skilled birth attendance, reflecting Nigeria's progress on SDG 3 (good health and well-being) (NPC & ICF, 2019). Similarly, education data is central to monitoring SDG 4 (quality education), particularly in identifying gender gaps in school enrollment. Beyond the SDGs, demographic indicators also track Nigeria's Economic Recovery and Growth Plan (ERGP) and Vision 2050. However, gaps remain. The irregularity of census-taking and political manipulation of data limit effective monitoring. As Jerven (2013) argued, weak statistical capacity in Africa undermines development planning and progress tracking. Strengthening demographic data collection is therefore not only a technical necessity but a governance priority to ensure accountability. In sum, demographic indicators provide the yardstick for measuring whether development is inclusive, equitable, and sustainable.

CHALLENGES OF DEMOGRAPHIC DATA IN MITI GATING ECONOMIC DISPARITY AND SOCIAL INEQUALITY

I. Outdated Census Data: One of the most pressing challenges in Nigeria's demographic landscape is the outdated nature of census data. The last national population census was conducted in 2006, nearly two decades ago, despite UN recommendations that censuses be carried out every ten years (United Nations, 2014). Since then, Nigeria's population has

been estimated through projections, leaving policymakers without reliable current figures. This gap hinders effective planning in areas such as health, education, infrastructure, and electoral representation. For example, urbanization trends have accelerated, yet the absence of up-to-date census data means urban policies rely on estimates rather than accurate counts. As Makinwa-Adebusoye (2014) argues, the reliance on outdated projections limits Nigeria's capacity to align resource distribution with real population needs. Comparatively, countries like India and Brazil conduct regular decennial censuses that provide a strong statistical foundation for social and economic planning. Without updated census data, Nigeria struggles to monitor demographic transitions, migration patterns, and changing household structures, all of which are critical for addressing inequality. Thus, the outdated census remains a structural obstacle to evidence-based policymaking and contributes to persistent inefficiencies in governance.

II. Political Manipulation of Figures: Census-taking in Nigeria is deeply entangled with political contestation. Population figures directly influence the allocation of federal revenue, representation in the National Assembly, and political appointments. As a result, censuses often become politicized, with different groups perceiving them as contests over political and economic power rather than neutral data-gathering exercises. Makinwa-Adebusoye (2014) notes that manipulation and disputes over census outcomes have historically undermined their credibility. The 2006 census, for example, was widely contested, with allegations that certain states inflated numbers for political gain. This perception of manipulation erodes trust in official statistics and fuels regional rivalries. In comparison, countries like South Africa and the United States have more transparent census systems, supported by independent oversight and legal protections against manipulation (Seekings & Nattrass, 2005; U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). In Nigeria, however, the politicization of demographic data undermines its primary role as an instrument for equitable development planning. Unless mechanisms are put in place to ensure transparency and neutrality in census-taking, demographic data will continue to serve as a political tool rather than a foundation for social justice and economic planning. **III**. Weak Institutional Capacity: The weak institutional capacity of agencies like the National Population Commission (NPC) and the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) presents another critical barrier. These institutions are mandated to collect, analyze, and disseminate demographic data, yet they often face financial, logistical, and technical constraints. According to Jerven (2013), statistical agencies in many African countries, including Nigeria, operate under chronic underfunding, poor staffing, and lack of training, which compromise the accuracy and timeliness of data. For instance, delays in conducting the population census have been linked to limited resources and weak institutional readiness. Moreover, the frequent dependence on donor-funded surveys, such as the NDHS, underscores the lack of domestic capacity to sustain large-scale data collection independently (Isiugo-Abanihe, 2016). This institutional weakness hampers Nigeria's ability to generate disaggregated, reliable, and timely demographic statistics essential for planning. Strengthening institutional capacity requires not just funding but also political commitment to empower these bodies with autonomy, professionalism, and adequate technology. Without these reforms, Nigeria risks perpetuating a vicious cycle of data gaps and poor planning outcomes.

IV. Poor Access to Disaggregated Data: Even when demographic data is collected, access to disaggregated information remains limited. Policymakers, researchers, and civil society actors often struggle to obtain datasets broken down by gender, age, income level, or geographic location. This lack of accessibility constrains evidence-based interventions targeted at vulnerable populations. For instance, while the NDHS provides valuable national and regional indicators, micro-level disaggregated data are often restricted or delayed, limiting their utility for local-level planning (NPC & ICF, 2019). Similarly, education and labor statistics released by NBS are frequently presented in aggregated formats that obscure inequalities across states and sub-populations. Globally, disaggregated demographic data has proven essential in addressing inequality. The World Health Organization (2015) emphasizes that without granular data, marginalized groups remain invisible in national averages, perpetuating inequities. In Nigeria, poor access to disaggregated data not only hinders policy design but also weakens accountability, as civil society lacks the evidence base to monitor government performance. Ensuring open data access and transparency would significantly enhance the use of demographic statistics in reducing social and economic disparities.

V. Public Mistrust in Official Statistics: Finally, public mistrust in official statistics undermines the legitimacy of demographic data in Nigeria. This mistrust stems from a history of politicized censuses, inconsistent survey outcomes, and limited transparency in data collection. Isiugo-Abanihe (2016) observes that many Nigerians perceive official statistics as manipulated to favor certain regions or groups, particularly in census and election-related figures. This skepticism discourages public cooperation with data collection exercises, such as household surveys and censuses, which depend on respondents' trust and honesty. It also limits the credibility of demographic evidence in shaping policy debates, as stakeholders question the accuracy of official reports. Comparatively, in countries with high statistical credibility, such as Sweden and Canada, citizens trust census and survey processes, which enhances data quality and facilitates inclusive policymaking (Esping-Andersen, 1990). In Nigeria, rebuilding public confidence requires transparent methodologies, inclusive stakeholder engagement, and independent verification of census results. Without public trust, demographic data risks being dismissed as politically motivated, weakening its role in addressing economic disparity and social inequality.

DISCUSSION

Demographic data functions as a diagnostic tool, a planning instrument, and a mechanism for accountability. In contexts of deep inequality, such as Nigeria, its absence or distortion leads to misguided interventions and wasted resources. For instance, without accurate disaggregated population data, health programs may fail to reach vulnerable women in rural northern states where maternal mortality remains highest (NPC & ICF, 2019). Similarly, education initiatives designed without gender-sensitive enrollment statistics risk reinforcing disparities rather than narrowing them. Thus, demographic evidence is not optional; it is a prerequisite for effective governance. Strengthening Nigeria's demographic system offers a pathway to bridging gaps in education, healthcare, income distribution, and political participation. Reliable household survey data have already demonstrated their potential in shaping targeted social interventions such as conditional cash transfers and school feeding programs (World Bank, 2020). When grounded in robust demographic evidence, these initiatives reduce poverty and promote intergenerational equity, as shown in both Latin America and South Africa (Fiszbein & Schady, 2009; Seekings & Nattrass, 2005). Expanding this model in Nigeria requires regular population censuses, improved access to disaggregated data, and greater institutional capacity at the National Population Commission (NPC) and National Bureau of Statistics (NBS). Conversely, neglecting demographic information perpetuates structural inequalities and threatens national stability. Outdated census data, politicized figures, and weak institutional frameworks undermine trust and policy effectiveness (Makinwa-Adebusoye, 2014; Isiugo-Abanihe, 2016). Without credible demographic data, government policies risk being skewed toward politically dominant groups, deepening regional and gender divides. This erosion of trust fuels citizen disengagement and weakens democratic accountability. As Jerven (2013) argues, statistical weakness across many African states perpetuates "policy blindness," where governments lack the evidence needed to confront inequality effectively. Beyond domestic implications, demographic data is also central to Nigeria's global commitments, particularly the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Tracking progress on health, education, and gender equality requires disaggregated indicators that reflect the lived realities of marginalized populations (UNDP, 2022). Failure to generate credible demographic evidence not only hinders Nigeria's development but also undermines its standing in international accountability frameworks. In sum, the discussion underscores that demographic data is both a mirror and a compass it reflects the realities of inequality and guides the pathways to redress them. Strengthening Nigeria's demographic system is therefore not a technical exercise but a political and developmental imperative. Without it, interventions risk being blind and fragmented; with it, Nigeria has the tools to build a more inclusive, stable, and equitable society.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Demographic data is far more than numbers; it is the foundation of equitable development and inclusive governance. In Nigeria, where inequality remains entrenched along regional, gender, and socio-economic lines, reliable demographic data is indispensable for identifying disparities, designing targeted interventions, informing economic planning, ensuring political representation, and monitoring progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). As highlighted throughout this study, data gaps, outdated census figures, political manipulation, weak institutional capacity, and public mistrust have limited the transformative potential of demographic information (Makinwa-Adebusoye, 2014; Isiugo-Abanihe, 2016; Jerven, 2013). Addressing these challenges requires a deliberate shift toward strengthening the credibility, accessibility, and utilization of demographic evidence in Nigeria's policy landscape.

1. Regular and transparent censuses must be institutionalized: The absence of a population census since 2006 has left policymakers reliant on projections, undermining effective planning. The United Nations (2014) recommends decennial censuses as a global standard, and Nigeria must adhere to this, ensuring that each census is insulated from political interference through independent oversight and the adoption of technology-driven methods.

2. Building institutional capacity for demographic research is crucial: Agencies such as the National Population Commission (NPC) and the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) should be adequately funded, staffed, and technologically empowered to generate accurate and timely data. As Jerven (2013) argues, strengthening national statistical systems in Africa is essential for credible governance. Beyond funding, autonomy and professionalism are key to ensuring data integrity.

3. Ensuring open access to disaggregated, gender-sensitive data is necessary for inclusivity: Publicly available, disaggregated data enhances accountability and enables policymakers, civil society, and researchers to design interventions that reflect the realities of vulnerable populations. As the World Health Organization (2015) stresses, disaggregation by gender, age, and region is fundamental to leaving no one behind.

4 Depoliticizing demographic processes are vital: Census and survey data must be viewed as public goods, not instruments of political negotiation. Legal frameworks and independent monitoring can reduce manipulation and build trust in demographic outputs. In contexts like South Africa and the United States, transparency and independence have increased the credibility of census processes (Seekings & Nattrass, 2005; U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). Nigeria can adopt similar safeguards.

5. Collaboration with global agencies should be strengthened: Partnerships with institutions such as the UNFPA, World Bank, and UNICEF can provide technical assistance, funding, and best practices to enhance data collection and reliability. Such collaborations have already improved maternal health

monitoring in Ghana and social protection targeting in Latin America, proving the value of international cooperation (Fiszbein & Schady, 2009; GSS, GHS & ICF, 2018). In conclusion, robust demographic data is not merely a statistical requirement; it is the lifeline of equity, social justice, and sustainable development. For Nigeria, harnessing the full potential of demographic evidence means transforming data into actionable insights that dismantle structural inequalities and build a more inclusive future. The credibility of the nation's development trajectory depends on how effectively it collects, interprets, and applies demographic data in the service of its people.

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