



Research Paper

# Poverty Alleviation Strategies in Sub-Saharan Africa: Insights from Theories of Poverty

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## Abstract

The issue of poverty is as old as humanity. Poverty suppression and elimination remains a central issue in world political, social, and economic discussions. Poverty eradication in all its forms everywhere is the first bold statement mentioned in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. This paper examines poverty alleviation strategies in SSA, drawing on insights from theories of poverty. The objective is to provide a comprehensive overview of the theoretical frameworks that underpin poverty reduction efforts and identify key strategies that have shown promise in addressing poverty in the region. Prominent theories of poverty, including the capability approach, the human capital theory, and the sustainable livelihoods approach were explored. The study obtained that addressing poverty in SSA effectively requires comprehensive strategies that consider the multidimensional nature of poverty and the unique socio-economic context of the region. By focusing on expanding capabilities, building sustainable livelihoods, implementing social protection programs, adopting participatory approaches, and promoting gender mainstreaming, SSA can make significant progress in poverty alleviation and create a more inclusive and prosperous future for its people.

**Keywords:** Capability Approach, Gender Mainstreaming, Human Capital Theory, Poverty, SSA, Sustainable Livelihoods Approach

**JEL Codes:** D63, E24, E63, F63, H41, H53, I24, I32, N37, P46

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## I. Introduction

Poverty remains a persistent challenge in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), where a significant proportion of the population continues to grapple with extreme poverty and its associated hardships. Poverty refers to the lack of the basic capabilities (economic, human, political, socio-cultural and protective) and conditions necessary for living in dignity. Poverty is dictated clearly by International Human Rights Law (IHRL) as a violation of several human rights. Every living person has the right to an acceptable standard of living which includes the rights to food, clothing, health, housing, medical care and social security. SSA accounts for about two-thirds of the global extreme poor population (Schoch & Lakner, 2020). The World Bank Group (2023) indicated that almost 700 million people around the globe live today in extreme poverty and just over half of these people live in SSA. The statistics could have been higher, if no works from social security. According to Romig (2024) social security benefits play a significant role in reducing poverty in every state, thereby lifting more people above the poverty line. Extreme poverty is measured as the number of people living on less than \$2.15 per day. Schoch & Lakner (2020) used the less than \$1.90 definition of extreme poverty. Addressing this issue requires comprehensive poverty alleviation strategies that consider the unique socio-economic context of the region.

Poverty has many effects to people, society, state and world at large. Poverty can also be passed to future generations. Shelton (2016) narrates that vicious cycle of poverty means that lifelong barriers and troubles are transferred on from one generation to the next. Through history, Oscar Lewis (1961), an anthropologist, argued that children who grew up in deprivation internalised a culture and value system from their parents and grandparents that socialised them to also live in poverty. Worth noting is that the effects of poverty are interrelated to the extent that one problem rarely occurs alone. Accordingly, hunger, illness, and poor sanitation are some causes and effects of poverty. In poverty complexity, bad sanitation may make one susceptible to diseases, while hunger and lack of clean water cause one to be vulnerable to diseases. This study explores poverty alleviation strategies in SSA, drawing insights from theories of poverty. Additionally, the

study provides recommendations based on these theories to guide effective poverty reduction efforts in the region.

## **II. Understanding the Dynamics of Poverty in Sub-Saharan Africa**

To effectively address poverty in SSA, it is crucial to understand its underlying causes and complexities. It is critical to tackle poverty in all its dimensions (World Bank Group, 2023). The multidimensional nature of poverty in this region is influenced by factors such as limited access to education, healthcare, clean water, inadequate infrastructure, political instability, and social inequality. Generally, a complex interplay of factors, being, historical, economic, social, and political aspects determine poverty dynamics in SSA. For the past decade, the region has registered meaningful economic growth and development but such could not eliminate poverty for many of its population. A study by Baah & Lakner (2023) indicates that fragility, conflict, and violence, that is, lack of peace and security, stand as chief barriers to poverty reduction in the region. These observed poverty factors perpetuate a cycle of poverty, making it indispensable to adopt a holistic approach to poverty alleviation.

**Economic factors.** SSA faces challenges such as limited access to credit, inadequate infrastructure, and overreliance on primary commodities. According to United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (2016) numerous African economies with plentiful natural resources suffer from sluggish growth and widespread poverty. The heavy dependence on commodities frequently fails to cause development due to international prices volatility which subsequently have the capacity to generate macroeconomic and political instability. In support, some authors have mentioned and showed concern of dependence in natural resources. Carmignani (2010) in a study mentioned that SSA has been characterized by a weak growth performance and a high and persistent dependence on natural resources. These factors for many years have contributed to economic vulnerability and hindered sustainable development. Without development and growth, elimination of poverty in the region becomes a dream that will never come true. Moreover, high levels of income inequality aggravate poverty, with a significant portion of the population lacking access to essential resources and opportunities. A study by Amponsah, Agbola & Mahmood (2023) confirms that for SSA income inequality adversely impacts poverty and worsens inclusive growth.

Further observed by Mbaku (2020) is that in SSA, poverty is persistent due to governance deficiencies attributable to incompetence, mismanagement and corruption across countries in the region. Corruption disrupts success and development, and its costs are borne by the citizens (Bonga, 2021). Numerous cases of corruption have been recorded in SSA, with some labelled severe. Listing a few cases; Cashgate scandal of 2012 in Malawi, Salarygate scandal case in Zimbabwe in 2013-2014 period, Tegeta Escrow Account scandal in 2014 in Tanzania, Luanda leaks for Angola, two decades of unscrupulous deals that made dos Santos Africa's wealthiest woman, National Petroleum Fund (NPF) scandal in Botswana, Gecamines scandal in Democratic Republic of Congo, Lesotho Water Project Corruption, Biscuit Gate Scandal in Mauritius, Secret loans affair scandal in Mozambique, Fishrot scandal in Namibia, Disability Grants scandal in Swaziland and Tshwane Prepaid Meters scandal in South Africa. The few corruption scandals discussed shows the presence of corruption in the SSA region. Further added, Neopatrimonialism has dominated many SSA states, though at varying degrees. According to Bonga (2021a) neopatrimonialism is regarded as a dominant feature of the developing countries of Africa, being seen as a core feature of local politics in Sub-Saharan Africa. Accordingly, neopatrimonialism have negative impacts on development by causing public resources divergence to serve private interests rather than enlightened interests.

**Agricultural dependence.** Agricultural sector plays a crucial role in SSA states, being a significant employer. Production in the sector is linked to poverty levels of the citizens. Mahuni, Taru & Bonga (2020: 112) opines that one such factor causing weak internal trade in the continent is the over reliance of most of the member states in primary commodities. Productivity levels in the agricultural sector are often low due to factors such as restricted access to modern farming techniques, climate change, and inadequate irrigation systems. These challenges can lead to food insecurity and perpetuate poverty cycles. In support, Richie (2022) narrates that agricultural productivity across SSA needs to improve so as to reduce hunger, poverty, and the destruction of biodiversity. Literature argues that raising the total factor productivity in agriculture is prior to off-farm growth and poverty alleviation (Djoumessi, 2022). Also noted within the region is that most countries have very low crop yields over the past years. As indicated by Ritchie (2022) growing food in this way imply using a lot of land that would otherwise be used for something else, for example, habitat for wildlife hence growth of tourism sector.

**Rapid population growth.** The impact of population size and growth on poverty reduction and economic growth has been debated by many authors. According to Ahlburg (1996) rapid population growth is likely to reduce per capita income growth and well-being, which tends to increase poverty. SSA region has one of the highest population growth rates globally. A study for Uganda by Klasen & Lawson (2007) combined macro and microeconomic approach, using panel data investigated the impact of population growth on per

capita economic growth and poverty. The study obtained that population growth contributes significantly to low achievement in poverty reduction and is linked with households being persistently poor and moving into poverty. While population growth can be a potential driver of economic development (Nyoni & Bonga, 2017), it also poses challenges when there is a lack of corresponding job opportunities, social services, and infrastructure. Important to note as indicated by UNFPA (2014) is that poverty has a bilateral impact with population dynamics, including population growth, age structure, and rural-urban distribution. Insufficient investment in education and healthcare further exacerbates poverty dynamics.

**Conflict and political instability.** Several countries in the region have experienced prolonged periods of conflict and political instability, which have devastating effects on socio-economic development. According to SIPRI 2020 Yearbook, as of 2019 at least 15 countries in SSA experienced active armed conflicts: Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, the Central African Republic (CAR), Chad, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Ethiopia, Kenya, Mali, Mozambique, Niger, Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan and Sudan. As indicated long ago by Mbaku (1988) pertaining SSA political instability has become endemic. Political instability has contributed to poor implementation of Africa's regional blocs targets and the continent is full of various conflicts, both internal and external (Mahuni, Taru & Bonga; 2020: 112). Further indicated by Fang, Kothari, McLoghlin & Yenice (2020) SSA has been marred by conflicts during the past several decades. As indicated by Davis (2020) conflict dynamics and ethnic and religious tensions recorded in the region often are rooted in a mix of state weakness, corruption, poor delivery of basic services, rivalry over natural resources, inequality and a sense of marginalization. Conflicts disrupt infrastructure, displace populations, and divert scarce resources away from poverty reduction efforts. More worrying fact, as narrated by Mueller, Piemontese & Tapsoba (2017) and Novta & Pugacheva (2020) is that conflict can affect economic development beyond the conflict period and cause significant long-term output loss. Therefore, the impact of conflicts on poverty dynamics can be long-lasting and difficult to recover from. While conflict has been prevalent in the region, it is also worth mentioning that SSA has made important peace and security gains over the years, in the sense that large-scale political violence has declined (Bello-Schünemann & Moyer, 2018). Conflict patterns and intensity in the region for each nation is unique. Some countries are more at risk of instability and violent conflict, each with own unique set of pressures and potential lanes to instability. Hence, the impact on poverty reduction is equally different in these nations. In a study of SSA Fagbemi & Fajingbesi (2022) obtained that larger populated nations exhibit a greater propensity to political instability in comparison to smaller populated ones.

**Social factors.** Gender inequality, limited access to education, and inadequate healthcare services contribute to the persistence of poverty in SSA. Women and girls, in particular, face significant barriers to economic empowerment and often bear the burden of poverty disproportionately. Sociological theories are in place to explain poverty its address and does this from five perspectives. As outlined by Cerio (2019) the five perspectives (which form the fundamental causes of poverty) are namely; attributes, culture and religious beliefs, social circumstances, access and entitlements, political and economic conditions, and unpredictable shocks. Bayudan-Dacuycuy & Lim (2013) interprets that attributes, beliefs and culture theory identified laziness, population growth, negligence of planning for the future, poor sense of history, violence, premature marriages, commitment to the robust family system, larger family size, overdependence on agriculture, seasonal employment and lack of education are the chief poverty determinants.

### **III. Recommendations from Theories of Poverty**

Poverty is not desirable, yet it is real. It is projected that by 2030 Africa will house 90 percent of the world's impoverished population (Carbone & Ragazzi, 2023). This will only happen if effective policies are not effected in the respected nations. United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) (2010) indicated that a fundamental precondition for poverty reduction is a pattern of growth and structural change that breeds productive employment, increases earnings and contributes to the general welfare of the population. Addressing poverty in SSA requires using some insights from poverty theories at hand to aid policy formulation and implementation.

**Capability approach.** The Capability Approach, developed by economist Amartya Sen, emphasizes the significance of increasing people's capabilities and freedoms. The approach is a normative evaluative approach to understanding poverty, well-being, and justice (Kimhur, 2020). The approach greatly assist in understanding as well as ways to reduce poverty. In support, Hick (2012) narrates that capability approach can reflect numerous ways that human lives are blighted and offers a promising framework for poverty analysis. To apply this theory in Sub-Saharan Africa, policymakers should focus on enhancing access to education, healthcare, and basic services to empower individuals and enable them to improve their own lives. Investing in quality education and skills development programs can enhance employability and economic opportunities for individuals living in poverty. SSA nations considering capability approach are tipped to seek understanding of the sources and nature of capability deprivation and inequity as they are key in order to remove existing injustice in society, as well as re-establishing of ethics to be at the centre of policy discussions. As indicated by

Berry (2017) there is greater need to reconnect ethics and economics to ensure significant poverty reduction. Public policy has a corrective starring role in sinking injustice and unequal opportunities.

**Sustainable livelihoods approach.** The Sustainable Livelihoods Approach highlights the significance of building the economic assets and resilience of individuals and communities. The approach is based on the belief that people require a range of assets to achieve positive livelihood outcomes. The approach comprised of two vital components: (1) a framework that assist in understanding the complexities of poverty and (2) a set of principles that guide the implementation of activities in order to address and reduce poverty. In Sub-Saharan Africa, efforts should be made to promote sustainable agriculture, improve access to credit and financial services, support small-scale enterprises, and develop rural infrastructure. These interventions can enhance income-earning opportunities, reduce vulnerability to shocks, and promote sustainable economic growth. A study by Su et al (2021) using theoretical research methods found that developing local industries and governmental financial support improve the sustainable livelihood of farmers and eradicate absolute poverty. Furthermore, a positive association between poverty alleviation measures and natural and social capital for sustainable livelihood was obtained.

**Social protection.** Generally, social protection is a human right. As indicated by Brownie (2015) social protection is concerned with protecting and assisting people who are poor and vulnerable, like children, women, older people, disabled persons, the displaced, the unemployed, and the sick. Social protection programs play a vital role in poverty reduction. World Bank (2023) indicates that social protection systems are at the heart of boosting human capital and empowering people. SSA states should ensure that they consider seriously social protection systems. Implementing comprehensive and inclusive social safety nets can provide a basic level of support to vulnerable populations. Devereux & Sabates-Wheeler (2004) state the four social protection functions as; protective, preventative, promotive and transformative. Cash transfer programs, conditional cash transfers, and targeted subsidies for essential services like healthcare and education can help alleviate immediate poverty and improve social well-being. In support, World Bank (2023) indicates that social protection systems aid individuals and families, more so the poor and vulnerable group, to cope with crises and shocks, find jobs, advance productivity, invest in the health and education including their children, and protecting the old. It is worth to take note that rapidly changing nature of work in many countries at all income levels calls for a new approach to social protection and labour policy. Investing heavily in initiatives to improve jobs and earnings opportunities, and social insurance programs expansion are crucial.

**Participatory approach.** The Participatory Approach involves engaging local communities and individuals in the decision-making processes that affect their lives. Robb (1999) explains that without insights from the poor only a part of the reality of poverty, its causes, and the survival strategies of the poor is known. Working with incomplete information yield ineffective results. People with direct experience of poverty should be given more space in poverty research (Bennett & Roberts, 2004). SSA countries should embrace participatory approach for effective poverty reduction. Governments and development organizations should actively involve communities in designing and implementing poverty alleviation programs. By considering the local context and empowering individuals to play an active role, interventions can be tailored to the specific needs and priorities of the communities, leading to more effective and sustainable poverty reduction outcomes. Furthermore, participatory approaches to research and inquiry into poverty rests on the right of people in poverty to express own realities. If given opportunities they can influence effective policy and practice thereby attaining greater heights.

**Gender mainstreaming.** Council of Europe (COE) (2024) define gender mainstreaming as an act of integrating a gender equality perspective at all stages and levels of policies, programmes and projects. The thinking in gender mainstreaming is that women and men have diverse needs and living conditions and circumstances. Also worth mentioning is that situations of women and men also vary according to country, region, ethnic or social origin, age among other factors. Gender inequality is a significant driver of poverty in SSA. Despite high levels of female labour force participation in SSA, most female employment is vulnerable employment (World Bank, 2023a). Furthermore, as indicated by Jato (2004) a woman's multifarious responsibilities continue to subject her to time coerces and time poverty. Integrating gender perspectives into poverty alleviation strategies is essential for achieving long-term and sustainable impact. Empowering women through education, access to healthcare, and economic opportunities can have a transformative effect on reducing poverty levels. Higher women's income is highly linked with advancement in household dietary diversity, family's nutritional status and family's education. Additionally, addressing discriminatory norms, promoting gender equity, and ensuring women's equal participation in decision-making processes are crucial steps towards poverty eradication.

#### IV. Conclusion

The study has been motivated by the persistent nature of poverty in the SSA. The study adopted an explanatory approach to explore and examine poverty reduction ways considering insights from theories already developed. The study obtained that addressing poverty in SSA effectively requires comprehensive strategies that consider the multidimensional nature of poverty and the unique socio-economic context of the region. Insights from theories of poverty have the capacity to guide policymakers and development practitioners in designing effective interventions. By focusing on expanding capabilities, building sustainable livelihoods, implementing social protection programs, adopting participatory approaches, and promoting gender mainstreaming, SSA can make significant progress in poverty alleviation and create a more inclusive and prosperous future for its people. The success of SSA in achieving sustainable development and significant poverty reduction rests not only in the local conditions of the individual countries, but on how these states interface with the rest of the world

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