

# Inclusive Development Framework for Nigeria (IDFN): A Multi-Dimensional Strategy for Building Equitable and Sustainable Communities

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**Abstract:** Nigeria has historically struggled with gender and socio-economic disparities that continue to hinder sustainable and equitable development. Despite numerous policy reforms and development initiatives, progress remains uneven, with persistent exclusion of marginalized communities. Existing approaches to inclusive development focus narrowly on economic growth or sector-specific interventions, neglecting the structural drivers of exclusion embedded in Nigeria's socio-political systems. These include disparities in resources, power, and access, which shape opportunities across communities. There is often a lack of critical reflection on implementation, which is essential for building equitable and sustainable communities. In response, this paper examines the shortcomings of existing development models and proposes an alternative, context-specific framework tailored to Nigeria's socio-political realities. Using a theoretical and comparative policy analysis approach, the paper develops the Inclusive Development Framework for Nigeria (IDFN), drawing on global examples from Rwanda, India, and Brazil and situating the framework within Nigeria's unique institutional context. No primary data were collected; the methodology relies on qualitative synthesis of secondary literature and policy reviews. The IDFN introduces four pillars: participatory governance, digital access, gender equality, and infrastructure parity. It proposes a three-tiered executive implementation mechanism operating within existing governance structures: a National IDFN Coordination Council (N-ICC), State Inclusive Development Units (SIDUs), and Local Implementation Hubs (LIHs). The paper's original contribution is the design of an implementable framework that emphasizes inclusion as a systemic capability. IDFN is a comprehensive guide for civil society actors, policymakers, and government institutions to collaborate in addressing the drivers of exclusion, positioning Nigeria for measurable, inclusive development.

**Keywords:** Inclusive Development, Sustainable Development, Gender Equality, Nigeria, Digital Equity

## 1. Background

The discourse on development has evolved, shifting its focus from economic growth to a more comprehensive perspective that encompasses social inclusion and human development (Omoyiola and N'Zué, 2024). Within this evolving paradigm, global initiatives such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Leave No One Behind (LNOB) agenda have shaped the inclusive development debate. However, these frameworks often rely on aggregate growth metrics and do not fully address the complex and context-specific forms of exclusion seen in countries like Nigeria (United Nations, 2022). While these narratives suggest a decline in poverty, they often neglect the role of systemic factors like gender inequality, spatial marginalization, digital exclusion, and similar factors that continue to drive disparity regardless of macroeconomic advancements (Aluko et al. 2024). However, theoretical gaps remain in applying global development models to nations with diverse socio-political realities and entrenched structural barriers (Olanrewaju, Aremo, and Binuyo 2020).

Nigeria, as Africa's largest economy, exemplifies this paradox: despite its economic capacity, more than 40–50 million citizens remain in poverty, with inequality impeding sustainable progress (Archibong, 2018; Dauda and Oyeleke,

2021). Gender disparities in education and employment further constrain inclusive growth (Lawanson and Umar 2019). Furthermore, weak institutional mechanisms limit the translation of economic gains into equitable opportunities (Olanrewaju, Aremo, and Binuyo 2020). Although the SDGs offer valuable benchmarks, they often fall short in addressing underlying causes of exclusion, such as imbalanced power relations, unequal access to resources, and limited community participation (United Nations 2021). Existing development models often overlook governance structures and the need for localized solutions that reflect the complexities of federal systems, such as Nigeria's. Addressing challenges such as urban–rural disparities and gender inequality in access to infrastructure and opportunities highlights the limitations of existing development models (World Bank 2023). Without a robust theoretical framework that addresses seated issues within Nigeria's socio-cultural context and federal structure, development efforts are likely to remain ineffective (The Nigerian Economic Summit Group (NESG), 2025).

In response to these challenges, this paper introduces the Inclusive Development Framework for Nigeria (IDFN), a multidimensional strategy grounded in systemic equity, intersectionality, and decentralized governance. The IDFN aims to move beyond traditional distributive models by embedding participatory governance, gender equity,

infrastructure parity, and digital access into the core of inclusive development practice. This study is significant as it introduces an actionable, context-specific framework capable of addressing entrenched disparities and advancing inclusive development in Nigeria.

## 2. Conceptual Foundation

### *The evolution of inclusive development theory*

The concept of inclusive development underpins the global policy agenda reflected in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the principle of “leave no one behind” (United Nations, 2015). This marks the latest phase in the evolution of development thinking. The field has shifted from a narrow focus on economic growth to a broader concern for human development, and, more recently, to a central emphasis on inclusion (Omoyiola and Fofana N’Zué, 2024). However, while theoretical progress has expanded the scope of development, it has also introduced conceptual ambiguities and practical challenges in defining and applying the concept of inclusive development (Gupta, Pouw, and Ros-Tonen 2015).

Historically, development theory has evolved through distinct paradigmatic shifts. In the post-war and decolonization period, development was primarily equated with economic expansion, measured by increases in Gross Domestic Product (GDP), and was driven by large-scale industrialization and infrastructure investment (Aluko et al., 2024; Zhu, 2022). This approach was grounded in theories such as the “big push,” which assumed that rising national wealth would eventually benefit all segments of society through a “trickle-down” effect.

By the 1970s, it became increasingly clear that economic growth could occur alongside persistent poverty, unemployment, and inequality (Aghion et al., 1999). This led to strong critiques of growth-centric models and a reconceptualization of poverty as a lack of income and deprivation of basic capabilities. This view gained prominence in the 1990s with the introduction of the United Nations’ Human Development Index (HDI), which broadened the definition of progress to include education, health, and living standards (Dörffel and Schuhmann, 2022).

During this period, the focus shifted to building human capital, primarily through investments in education and health. A notable example is Brazil’s Bolsa Família program, which linked cash transfers to children’s school attendance and family health check-ups, an approach aimed at reducing intergenerational poverty while promoting inclusive development (Balasubramanian et al., 2021).

The rise of inclusion emerged in the 2000s and gained prominence with the SDGs. This concept argues that human development metrics will be considered insufficient if the outcomes of development are not beneficial to all social echelons, particularly the most marginalized. The goal of inclusive growth is to be comprehensive in its political, social, and ecological aspects (Gupta and Vegelin 2023; Zhu 2022). It goes beyond integrating people into existing systems but also involves restructuring those systems to be sustainable and equitable (Gupta and Vegelin, 2023). The concept of

inclusion acknowledges that improvements in human development metrics can still mask entrenched inequalities.

Inclusive development extends beyond the expansion of capabilities to ensure that all groups, particularly the marginalized, have access to opportunities and can meaningfully influence development (Gupta and Vegelin, 2023). Contemporary scholarship emphasizes that inclusion itself is a normative goal of development policy, not just significant for growth. It also addresses concerns about social justice and environmental sustainability, arguing that ecological transitions, such as decarbonization, should be tailored to keep vulnerable populations safe while creating new opportunities for social engagement and decent work (Scheja and Kim 2024).

Recent research places inclusive development within the context of global transformations steered by digitalization, climate change, and shifting labor markets. According to scholars, green structural transformation, inclusive innovation, and participatory governance must be united to ensure that ecological transition and technological change do not exacerbate existing inequalities (Scheja and Kim 2024). For example, new frameworks emphasize aligning environmental goals with training programs, robust social protection systems, and labor market reforms that promote decent work for marginalized communities (Klingler-Vidra et al, 2022). This integrated perspective reveals that sector-specific reforms alone will not suffice in achieving inclusion; instead, systemic change is required across social, economic, and ecological dimensions.

### *Limitations of current models*

Despite numerous development initiatives, existing models of inclusive development face significant limitations. These challenges are not only theoretical but are also evident in global outcomes, where economic growth often coexists with persistent inequality and exclusion (Scheja and Kim, 2024). Traditional approaches tend to focus on aggregate economic gains or sector-specific programs, yet they frequently overlook the structural drivers of disparity embedded in socio-political systems (Lynch et al, 2024). This results in a wide gap between the rhetoric of inclusion and the lived experience of exclusion.

According to the World Bank’s Poverty and Shared Prosperity Report (2022), the most significant global setback to poverty reduction in decades has been driven by the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, and violent conflict. Eradicating poverty by 2030 is now considered unrealistic, and progress on shared prosperity had slowed even before the pandemic (World Bank, 2022).

Furthermore, the United Nations’ 2023 report on SDG progress presents a bleak outlook. The report indicates that, in pursuit of the objective to eliminate poverty by 2030, only about 15% of the Sustainable Development Goals are progressing as intended, with several regressing, and the commitment to ensure no one is left behind remains ambiguous (United Nations, 2023). This stagnancy results from structural deficiencies. A working paper by the International Monetary Fund highlights that there is no one-size-fits-all model for achieving inclusive growth, as national

contexts differ significantly in terms of institutional capacity, governance, and social cohesion (Balasubramanian et al., 2021). Research also indicates that current patterns of production and consumption, without transgressing ecological limits, will make it challenging to meet the minimum access needs for water, food, and energy for specific populations (Gupta and Vegelin 2023; Rammelt et al. 2023). Vast inequalities in resource use further complicate the challenge, making it unattainable to achieve universal welfare without significant redistributive measures and a rethinking of global sustainability frameworks.

The evolution of inclusive development theory has broadened its perspective, shifting from a focus on economic growth to human development and culminating in a focus on inclusion and justice. This initiative recognizes the necessity to enhance personal competencies and the economy. Contemporary models are more comprehensive than their predecessors; yet they present several obstacles. Future research should incorporate inclusion into political and institutional strategies, develop practical tools for disaggregated measurement, and tailor transition programs that integrate social protection with sustainability. This will ensure the realization of inclusive development as both a normative objective and a pragmatic framework for contemporary concerns.

### **Intersectionality**

The intersectionality theory, first introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw in the late 1980s, is essential for understanding how overlapping systems of inequality shape life outcomes and access to opportunities (Crenshaw, 1989). It emerged from the insight that the experiences of Black women in the United States could not be fully understood through either race or gender alone. Instead, it is the interaction of structural inequalities and multiple identities that produces distinct forms of disadvantage (Collins and Bilge, 2020).

Contemporary understandings of intersectionality have expanded beyond race and gender to include class, geography, disability, sexuality, religion, and other markers of difference (Romero, 2023). The theory's foundations lie in Black feminist work and critical race theory traditions, with a focus on exposing and challenging systems of power and oppression (Collins and Bilge, 2020). Since the 2000s, intersectionality has gained significant traction across disciplines such as law, sociology, political science, and development studies. It is now widely recognized for revealing how seemingly neutral policies can reproduce inequalities when they fail to account for intersecting social positions (Omotoso and Kolawole, 2025). Over the past decade, the theory of intersectionality has evolved into both a methodological and a critical tool. This extends beyond evaluating inequalities to assess how various structures of power, including capitalism, patriarchy, and colonial legacies, contribute to the marginalization of certain groups in society (Davis and Lutz 2024). According to Bermúdez et al. (2023), intersectionality serves as a lens for evaluating human development across the lifespan, recognizing that vulnerabilities and identities change according to social location and context. This theory highlights how intersections between marginalized social identities, such as being displaced and female, increase vulnerability, resulting in unique forms of disadvantage. It provides a lens for

recognizing structurally embedded disadvantages and managing structural problems (Baird et al. 2021).

Intersectionality offers a framework for understanding inequality and its effects. It challenges the notion that identity groups are uniform. For example, the experience of an educated Yoruba woman in Lagos is vastly different from that of an uneducated Kanuri woman in a rural northern village. Intersectionality reveals how such positional differences produce varying forms of exclusion (Baird et al. 2021). As an analytical tool, intersectionality impels policymakers to examine where systems of oppression, such as patriarchy, ethnic bias, and classism, converge. It challenges additive approaches that treat inequalities separately and instead promotes an integrated understanding of how these forces interact to shape experiences and outcomes (Omotoso and Kolawole, 2025).

Nigeria offers a compelling case for applying intersectionality to inclusive development. The country's diversity is evident in its regional inequalities, over 250 ethnic groups, and gender discrimination, which makes a singular approach ineffective (Omotoso and Kolawole 2025). For example, considering poverty and gender, women form the greater number of the informal labor force with restricted access to land and credit rights. Furthermore, rural women in northern Nigeria experience triple exclusion due to geographical location, gender, and religious-cultural restrictions reflected by intersectionality (Afolabi 2022). In urban contexts like Lagos, individuals with disabilities experience compounded marginalization not only from inaccessible infrastructure but also from poverty and systemic neglect. Similarly, ethnic minorities in the Niger Delta region suffer from educational disparities intensified by economic and environmental marginalization. (Omotoso and Kolawole 2025). These examples highlight why intersectionality should inform Nigeria's inclusive development agenda. Policies need to be responsive to the intersecting identities of marginalized populations, whether rural women, ethnic minorities, or people with disabilities, rather than assuming uniform experiences of exclusion. Intersectionality offers both a critique of mainstream development models and a practical guide for crafting context-sensitive policies across health, education, and social protection.

Within the context of the Inclusive Development Framework for Nigeria (IDFN), intersectionality plays a foundational role. It strengthens the framework's emphasis on equity by helping policymakers identify which combinations of identity and structural barriers result in the levels of exclusion. It also supports IDFN's focus on decentralized planning, as local implementation hubs can use intersectional insights to tailor interventions to specific community realities. While barriers, including limited data, weak political will, and capacity constraints, persist, intersectionality offers a transformative lens for shifting from growth-focused models to equity-driven inclusion. Hence, there is a need for future research and policy design that focuses on developing intersectional indicators and embedding them into Nigeria's planning systems. Only by doing so can the principle of "leave no one behind" move from rhetoric to reality.

### *Spatial justice*

The theory of spatial justice is fundamental to understanding how social equity is influenced by geography, space, and access to resources. Fundamentally, spatial justice emphasizes that justice extends beyond economic and legal affairs to encompass spatial dimensions, specifically the allocation of services, opportunities, and resources across different places (Jian et al., 2020). The origins of the theory date back to Henri Lefebvre's work on the "right to the city" in the 1970s and, later, to Edward Soja's formulation of spatial justice in the early 2000s. Soja argued that space is not a passive ground for social life but an active agent in forming power relations and inequality. Research indicates that viewing justice in spatial terms reveals that geography can confer privilege to some groups while excluding others (Ho, 2022). Social processes, such as economic investments and political decisions, are influenced and shaped by geography (Jingi A.A et al, 2025). Space is not just a passive background for social activity; space is powerful and can create or amplify injustice.

In modern discourse, spatial justice is often linked to broader issues of environmental justice, urban planning, and equitable access to public goods. Research shows that people's geographic location determines their access to safety, education, healthcare, and mobility. Recent works highlight the similarity between spatial justice and social and economic justice, as spatial arrangements reveal profound structures of class, power, and exclusion (Fainstein and DeFilippis 2016). This highlights the importance of incorporating spatial justice into development policies that aim for sustainability and inclusion. Although Nigeria's development agenda often aligns rhetorically with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the "Leave No One Behind" framework, the realities on the ground reveal that these global models do not adequately address Nigeria's unique socio-spatial inequalities. As Adedeji (2023) argues, the SDG framework assumes a universal pathway to inclusion, depending on economic development metrics that overlook deep-rooted institutional weaknesses and regional disparities. In Nigeria, exclusion is often determined by geography, where one's birthplace significantly influences access to education, infrastructure, and economic opportunities, thereby perpetuating structural inequities (Omotoso and Kolawole, 2025). The concept of spatial justice thus becomes more relevant to Nigeria's context, as it emphasizes that justice and injustice are not abstract ideals but are produced through power relations and spatial arrangements (Uwayezu and De Vries 2020). Therefore, Nigeria's policy framework should integrate context-specific approaches that recognize spatial inequalities as necessary to inclusive development rather than uncritically adopting the SDG model.

The principles of spatial justice can be fundamental in building an inclusive development in Nigeria. It helps answer the fundamental question of "where?" The inclusive development discourse is more concerned with who is left behind, such as women and persons with disabilities (Niewohner, Pierson, and Meyers 2019). Spatial justice emphasizes the need to ask where they are being left behind, arguing that their geographic location is a determining factor in their exclusion. Spatial justice also questions the logic of development by emphasizing structural processes over

symptoms. A traditional approach to addressing the lack of healthcare in a rural area would be a distributive one, involving the construction of a clinic. The spatial justice approach asks why there has not been investment in the area. It evaluates budgetary allocations, institutional failures, and land-use policies that led to the area's desertion and underinvestment (Moroni and De Franco 2024).

Furthermore, spatial justice also cuts across environmental sustainability. For example, in the Niger Delta, environmental degradation has been caused by oil extraction, which is detrimental to local communities and highly beneficial to large corporations (Uwayezu and de Vries 2020). This indicates spatial injustice, in which economic advantages and ecological burdens are unequally distributed. Incorporating spatial justice into Nigeria's green transition policies would ensure that marginalized communities, who are often resource-rich but marginalized, are protected from ecological harm and included in benefit-sharing and decision-making plans (Chancel 2020). An approach aligned with environmental sustainability would also align with social equity, emphasizing inclusive development.

Spatial justice provides a framework for promoting inclusive development in Nigeria. The theory emphasizes how infrastructure and geography shape access and opportunities, and how they perpetuate inequalities, by acknowledging that justice has a spatial dimension. Nigerian policymakers would be empowered to promote equitable urban development, address regional disparities, and integrate environmental sustainability with social justice by embracing this theory (Jones et al, 2020). Ultimately, integrating spatial justice into Nigeria's development strategies would help build an equitable and sustainable society.

### *Digital equity*

The concept of digital equity has emerged as a more nuanced and justice-oriented extension of the earlier notion of the digital divide. While the digital divide primarily focuses on first-level gaps, such as disparities in physical access to internet connectivity and digital hardware, digital equity broadens the conversation to include issues of affordability, skills, policy inclusion, and the meaningful use of digital technologies (Gottschalk and Weise, 2023). It emphasizes that digital access is not intended to reinforce or exacerbate existing inequalities, but rather to enable all individuals to participate fully in social, economic, and civic life (Bailey and Nyabola, 2021). Digital equity rests on three foundational pillars: universal access, digital literacy, and meaningful use. It refers to a condition in which all individuals, regardless of gender, location, income, or ability, can effectively access and use digital technologies, not only for communication but also for social mobility, education, and economic participation (Robinson et al, 2020). Crucially, digital equity shifts attention from merely providing infrastructure to the quality and inclusiveness of digital engagement.

In the Nigerian context, digital equity is central to achieving inclusive development, as disparities in digital access mirror and reinforce wider socio-economic inequalities. Nigeria's digital landscape reflects significant disparities along geographic, gender, and income lines. Rural communities often lack reliable infrastructure, women face barriers to

access and digital skills, and affordability remains a key constraint for low-income households (Robinson et al, 2020). However, digital equity holds transformative potential. It enables farmers to access market prices and real-time weather forecasts. Entrepreneurs can also reach new markets through e-commerce platforms, and unemployed youth acquire digital skills that enable them to participate in the global gig economy (Barrero et al, 2021). The rapid rise of Nigeria's fintech sector illustrates this potential: digital financial services have expanded access to banking and credit for previously unbanked populations, offering pathways to economic empowerment.

Digital equity can also serve as a powerful enabler of social inclusion. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the essential role of connectivity in accessing public services and social protections. For instance, telehealth platforms have helped bridge healthcare gaps in underserved areas by providing remote consultations in areas with weak physical health infrastructure (Mann et al., 2020). Similarly, e-learning platforms expanded educational access during lockdowns, providing continuity of learning to students who had access to the necessary devices and internet (Auxier and Anderson, 2020). Beyond health and education, digital equity also reinforces political and civic inclusion. The internet offers citizens new channels to voice their concerns, access real-time information, and facilitate collective action. Moreover, digital tools are critical for participatory governance and accountability. A striking example is Nigeria's 'End SARS Movement', where young citizens mobilized online to demand police reform. However, the reach and effectiveness of such civic action remain limited to those with stable digital access, highlighting how connectivity itself becomes a condition for political voice (Bailey and Nyabola 2021).

To harness digital equity for sustainable and inclusive development, Nigeria needs to invest in broadband expansion, inclusive digital literacy programs, and strategic public-private partnerships. Such efforts should aim to improve digital access and ensure the meaningful and equitable use of digital technologies across all segments of society.

#### ***Development as systemic capability, not distribution***

In the postcolonial era, traditional approaches to development were framed in distributive terms. These approaches emphasized allocating goods, resources, and opportunities to reduce inequality through redistribution (Robinson et al, 2020). While this perspective addresses some dimensions of poverty and marginalization, it often overlooks the deeper structural conditions that shape human well-being. In a context like Nigeria, characterized by significant disparities in education, healthcare, political participation, and economic opportunity, a distributive framework is inadequate (Uwayezu and De Vries, 2022). This section argues that development must instead be conceptualized as systemic capability: the ability of communities, institutions, and individuals to build and sustain equitable, resilient, and participatory systems. This argument draws from the capability approach advanced by Amartya Sen and later expanded by Martha Nussbaum, as well as John Rawls's theory of justice and insights from feminist economics

(Deneulin, 2012) to offer an ethical foundation for inclusive development that extends beyond distribution.

Sen's capability approach (2021) represents a significant shift in development thinking from resource allocation to expanding human freedoms. Rather than judging development by the quantity of goods distributed, Sen emphasizes valuing people's freedom and autonomy. This approach goes beyond income or material measures of well-being to focus on how people function and their capabilities. Functioning refers to the "doings and beings" that constitute a flourishing life, such as being well-nourished, educated, healthy, and respected. Capabilities are the fundamental freedoms or opportunities individuals need to achieve these functions (Jacobson and Chang 2019, 9–11). Building on Sen's foundation, Martha Nussbaum integrates classical philosophy with modern development ethics. She emphasizes that systemic capability requires institutional structures that safeguard central human entitlements, including bodily integrity, affiliation, and practical reason (Nussbaum, 2020). In the Nigerian context, this means that rights to health, education, and civic participation should not only be included in budget lines but also be institutionalized as enforceable social rights for every individual. Without structural transformation, distributive policies will remain ineffective in dismantling existing systems of exclusion such as patriarchy, classism, and ethnic hierarchies (Nussbaum, 2020).

The concept of justice, as expressed in John Rawls' theory of "justice as fairness," offers another foundational pillar (Rawls, 1971). He views justice as fairness, in which institutions are designed behind a "veil of ignorance" to ensure impartiality (D'Amodio, 2020). From this framework, two core principles of justice emerge. The first is that all individuals must have equal fundamental rights and liberties. The second is that inequalities are acceptable only if they benefit the least advantaged, and access to positions of power and wealth must be open to everyone under conditions of fairness and equal opportunity (Kasirzadeh, 2022). Justice, therefore, is not a byproduct of development but a precondition. Furthermore, the Feminist economic theory contributes a crucial perspective by challenging the gendered assumptions embedded in mainstream economic thought. Originating in the 1970s and gaining prominence in the 1990s, feminist economics critiques the devaluation of unpaid care work and the invisibility of household production in national accounts (Bergeron, 2021; Folbre, 2020). It reveals that gender inequality is not only a social issue but a structural economic distortion. Feminist economists emphasize social reproduction, the unpaid labor that sustains life, such as caregiving and household work, as central to any model of equitable development (Eşim, 2021). In Nigeria, women disproportionately carry the burden of unpaid care, low-paid domestic labor, and subsistence farming, especially among poor, rural, and minority communities (Kabeer, 2021; Ilodigwe, 2025). Any meaningful shift toward systemic capability must include transformative gender policies, institutional support for care work, and structural interventions to alter social norms. Applying this to the IDFN implies that Nigeria's institutions, such as the judiciary, electoral bodies, and public services, should be fair, transparent, and redistributive in purpose, not just in output (Ikejiaku, 2025).

Taken together, the theories discussed above inform the Inclusive Development Framework for Nigeria (IDFN) by positioning systemic capability as its central objective. This represents a conceptual shift from delivering services to building inclusive systems that enable individuals and communities to flourish. The IDFN therefore serves as a guide to equitable distribution and an ethical framework for justice-based development. It demands that every policy, program, and investment be evaluated not merely by how much it distributes, but by whom it empowers. IDFN lays the basis for a Nigeria where every citizen can build a life of purpose, dignity, and value by defining development as the development of systemic capabilities.

### **Critique of the Nigerian development landscape**

Over the years, Nigeria has had various national development plans, with each government launching its own to achieve economic growth and development. The numerous plans over the years include; the colonial-era Ten-Year Plan of Development and Welfare (1946–1956), followed by post-independence fixed five-year National Development Plans (1962–1968, 1970–1974, 1975–1980, 1981–1985), the after 1985 transition to a National Rolling Plan (1990–1992) and a 20-year perspective plan, and later plans like the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS) (2004–2007) and the 7-Point Agenda. The recent plans include Vision 20:2020 and the National Development Plan (NDP) 2021–2025 (Momoh et al. 2025). This vision 20:2020 emphasizes a globally competitive economy, economic development, stable democracy, equitable social development, and sustainable natural resource management (Akinyetun and Oyelade 2022). The National Development Plan (NDP) 2021–2025 is structured around the following areas: infrastructure, economic growth and development, social development, human capital development, and public administration. Federal authorities have called for resilient, inclusive, and digitally enhanced development since the adoption of the National Development Plan (NDP) 2021–2025 and the National Digital Economy Policy and Strategy (2020–2030) (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2021; Federal Ministry of Communications and Digital Economy, 2020).

The Nigerian development landscape has been subjected to significant critique, primarily stemming from misalignment between policy rhetoric and its implementation, structural causes of exclusion, and pronounced gaps in participation, resource allocation, and design (Momoh et al. 2025). Nigeria continues to struggle with governance shortcomings that hinder socio-economic progress and sustainable national development, despite being Africa's largest economy.

### ***Misalignment between policy rhetoric and execution***

Nigeria's development landscape is characterized by a persistent misalignment between public policy rhetoric and implementation (Agbazuere 2020). Although policy formulation is generally comprehensive, the major problem remains in the implementation and continuity of these policies (Agbazuere 2020). The World Bank (2025) reports that, despite economic development, the number of Nigerians living in extreme poverty has increased, mainly due to low job creation and inflation. This rhetoric-execution gap is recurrent and stirred by corruption and weak institutional capacity (Akinyetun and Oyelade 2022). Consequently,

national plans, rather than being actionable strategies, primarily function as aspirational documents. Nigeria has numerous policies designed to foster national development and good governance; yet, their implementation often fails. For instance, the National Development Plan (2021–2025) and the Petroleum Industry Act (2021) were designed to enhance transparency and drive socio-economic progress in the oil sector (Federal Ministry of Finance, Budget, and National Planning, 2021; Momoh et al., 2025; National Planning Commission, 2022). However, there is always a contrast between reality and the policy goals. Nigeria continues to struggle with stalled development, poor governance, and pervasive socioeconomic inequalities.

A critical issue is the lack of continuity across successive administrations, in which new administrations or governance bodies often abandon policies enacted by their predecessors (Agbazuere 2020). This practice creates numerous abandoned policies and their relevant projects, resulting in purposeless developments. A significant gap exists between policymakers and the citizens for whom policies are made, leading to public disapproval (Momoh et al. 2025). Several factors contribute to this misalignment, including corruption, ethnic favoritism, political instability, and poor resource management. The consequences often lead to reduced public trust, stalled human capital development, and widespread underdevelopment. The effects of misalignment are severe, demonstrated in reduced citizen patriotism, underdevelopment, and a lack of improvement in human capital. Ultimately, for Nigeria to bridge the gap between policy formulation and diligent execution, it should emphasize inclusivity. Addressing the structural causes of implementation failure is crucial for achieving inclusive and sustainable development, as outlined in the Inclusive Development Framework for Nigeria (IDFN) (Akinyetun and Oyelade, 2022).

### ***Structural causes of exclusion***

The failure to achieve inclusive development is not solely due to poor implementation but also stems from structural arrangements that perpetuate exclusion.

### ***Federalism***

Ideal federalism is characterized by an equal distribution of power between the central and regional governments, ensuring that all units have equal access to development without any form of marginalization. However, Nigeria's federal system operates differently from these principles (Chinedum, 2022). The Federal Character Principle, designed to ensure representation of all ethnic groups in public office, has resulted in an elite-level bargain for political appointments, refusing to tackle exclusion at the grassroots (Okoye et al. 2021). More critically, the system of fiscal federalism, established to concentrate on the allocation of oil revenue, has inadvertently created perverse incentives. Although the derivation principle has yielded revenue for oil-producing states, it has also contributed to sustainable development in the Niger Delta. In essence, the structural flaws entrenched in Nigeria's federal system, inherited mainly from its colonial past and perpetuated by political actions, have hindered development and progress among its constituent units, resulting in political and economic marginalization for specific groups and regions (Chinedum,

2022). Hence, federalism is a structural barrier that perpetuates both social and economic exclusion in Nigeria.

### ***Gender inequality***

Gender inequality is a prevalent issue that contributes significantly to social and economic exclusion. This inequality extends beyond individual biases and is a systemic problem embedded in historical and societal frameworks that are detrimental to women (Adieze, 2025). Although Nigeria has adopted several gender-related policies, its development landscape remains entrenched in patriarchal norms that limit women's full participation in political, economic, and social spheres. These policies often fail to address the structural barriers women face. For example, agricultural support programs frequently require land as collateral, a condition that most rural women cannot meet due to discriminatory inheritance customs and land ownership systems (Itojong Anthony Ayamba et al., 2024). Women's political representation also remains limited, which constrains their influence in policymaking and weakens gender-responsive governance. Additionally, the unpaid care economy, which women predominantly dominate, is often overlooked in economic planning, thereby restricting their ability to participate in formal employment and entrepreneurial opportunities. As a result, women in Nigeria face multiple layers of exclusion, including economic marginalization, restricted access to productive resources, limited political voice, and systemic workplace discrimination (Ukaegbu and Oguejiofor 2022). Gender inequality as a structural form of exclusion requires more than policy declarations; it demands structural reforms that recognize and dismantle the underlying systems that perpetuate exclusion.

### ***Digital divide***

Digital divide is another structural barrier to inclusive development, reflecting disparities in access to and the effective use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) among individuals, businesses, and geographic regions across different socio-economic levels. In Nigeria, this divide is particularly pronounced in rural areas, where the lack of broadband infrastructure, unreliable internet connectivity, and low levels of digital literacy combine with poverty to restrict access to digital tools and services (Ye and Yang, 2020). Many rural residents are unable to afford mobile devices or internet subscriptions and often lack the basic ICT skills necessary to navigate digital platforms. These limitations reduce their social connectivity, impede access to critical information, and restrict their ability to utilize essential public services, such as e-health, e-learning, and digital financial platforms (Adekoya and Abdul-Ghani, 2023). As a result, the digital divide in Nigeria exacerbates broader societal inequalities, including urban-rural income disparities, educational and healthcare inequities, and rural depopulation. It systematically excludes rural populations from full participation in social, political, and economic life, entrenching existing patterns of marginalization (Adekoya and Abdul-Ghani, 2023). Furthermore, addressing the digital divide as a structural cause of exclusion requires more than infrastructural upgrades. It demands institutional reforms that decentralize digital access, empower local communities, and invest in inclusive ICT policies that prioritize affordability, literacy, and access (Ye and Yang, 2020). Embedding digital inclusion into broader development strategies, such as the

IDFN, can help improve participation in Nigeria's digital economy.

### ***Urban bias***

Urban bias is a structural factor contributing to exclusion in Nigeria's development landscape. National investment patterns disproportionately favor urban centers, with large-scale infrastructure projects such as airports, highways, and power plants often concentrated in a few major cities, particularly Abuja and Lagos (World Bank, 2022). In contrast, rural areas are consistently marginalized in public spending and planning priorities. This spatial inequality deprives rural economies of the infrastructure and resources necessary for development. The lack of investment in rural roads, electricity, health, and education systems perpetuate poverty and continues to fuel youth migration to overcrowded urban areas in search of better opportunities. Due to these issues, communities remain underdeveloped and underserved. At the same time, urban centers become overburdened, resulting in informal settlements, strained public services, and growing socio-economic disparities within cities that are often used to showcase national development. To address urban bias as a structural cause of exclusion, development planning should adopt a more spatially balanced and equity-driven approach, as emphasized in the IDFN. Ensuring infrastructure parity and community-led investment in rural areas is critical to achieving inclusive and sustainable development for Nigerian communities.

### ***Gaps in participation, resource allocation, and design***

Research reveals significant gaps in community participation, resource allocation, and the design of policies and programs aimed at promoting inclusive development. Nigeria's development plans are criticized for their limited stakeholder engagement, which hinders the implementation, effectiveness, and sustainability of projects aimed at improving people's living standards (Mela and Bello, 2023). Development efforts are most effective when grounded in active citizen participation. However, in the absence of institutionalized mechanisms for public engagement, policies are frequently formulated without adequate understanding of local realities, thereby limiting their relevance and impact (Jingi A.A et al., 2025). Inclusive development requires greater participation (Moses et al., 2025). Furthermore, Nigeria's development plan faces criticism regarding gaps in resource allocation, which hinders its progress towards inclusive development (Kareem and Olatunji, 2024). A significant obstacle is Nigeria's increasing reliance on loans and foreign aid for development, which has resulted in unsustainable debt burdens. This is worsened by corruption and the mismanagement of public funds (Adewole et al., 2025). Fiscal misalignment is also evident in the Medium-Term Expenditure Framework (MTEF), which often fails to align with long-term development goals, resulting in underfunded and abandoned projects (Egiyi, 2025).

Over the years, Nigeria's development plans have been widely criticized for gaps not only in execution but also in the design and formulation processes. While implementation failures are often emphasized, a deeper analysis reveals that many policies are structurally flawed from inception (Agbazuere, 2020). Too often, policies are developed using a "one-size-fits-all" approach, failing to account for the

country's socio-cultural diversity. For example, youth employment programs that do not address the specific barriers faced by persons with disabilities, young women, or youth from marginalized ethnic groups are inherently limited in scope and impact (Ekhtator et al, 2021).

This absence of intersectional and context-sensitive design undermines inclusivity and effectiveness. Additionally, the persistent issue of policy discontinuity, in which successive

governments abandon or overhaul their predecessors' policies, thereby weakening institutional memory and obstructing long-term development planning. These structural flaws in policy formulation underscore the urgent need for participatory, inclusive design processes within Nigeria's development architecture.

**Theoretical framework: Inclusive development framework for Nigeria (IDFN)**

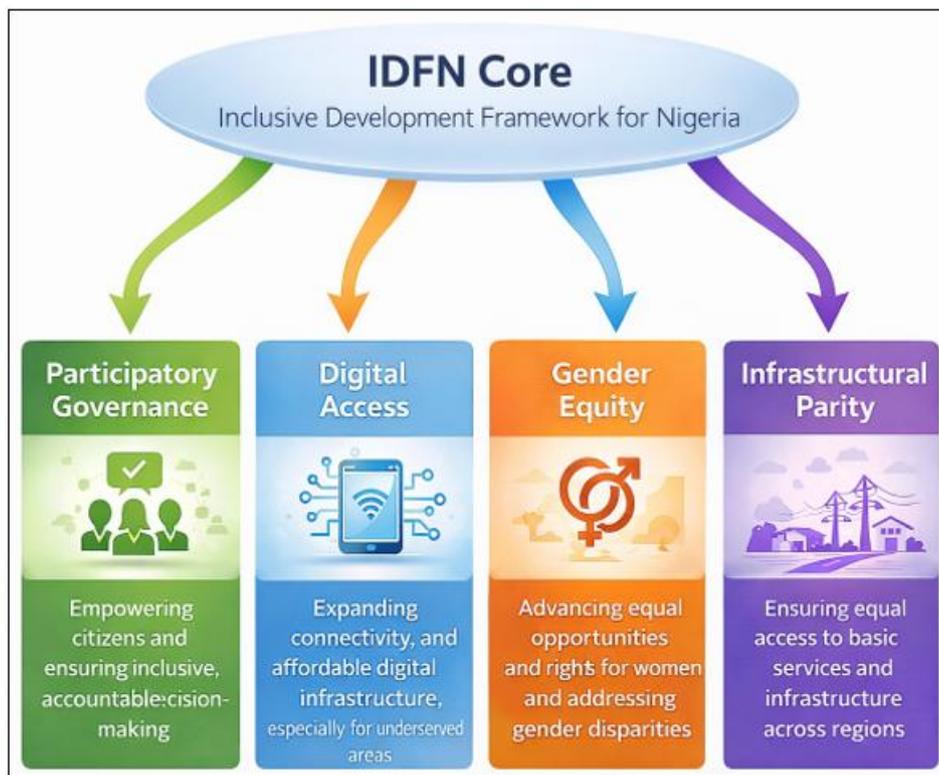


Figure 1: Diagram showing IDFN Framework

### ***Pillars of the Inclusive Development Framework for Nigeria (IDFN)***

This theoretical framework establishes a context-specific structure for inclusive development in Nigeria, emphasizing that equity and sustainability are not achieved through one-off redistribution, but by strengthening capacities across multiple, interrelated domains that expand people's substantive freedoms. The Inclusive Development Framework for Nigeria (IDFN) is built on the principle that development should be participatory, accessible, and beneficial to all Nigerians, particularly marginalized communities. This can only dismantle inequality and foster social cohesion (Oladapo and Oyaromade 2025).

This paper proposes four foundational pillars for the Inclusive Development Framework for Nigeria (IDFN): participatory governance, digital access, gender equity, and infrastructure parity. These pillars are not standalone components but interdependent elements within a dynamic system; also, progress in one area reinforces the others, while failure in any can undermine overall inclusion and sustainability. The framework, therefore, emphasizes the importance of institutional pathways, integrated systemic design, and continuous learning as critical enablers for building equitable and resilient communities.

### ***Participatory Governance***

Participatory governance is a central pillar for fostering inclusive development in Nigeria, as it directly supports community engagement and human empowerment (Mela and Bello 2023). However, the notion of participation in Nigeria should not be interpreted solely through imported global paradigms, but rather through constitutional obligations and indigenous governance systems that emphasize the representation of everyone. Furthermore, reclaiming and adapting these local practices allows for more culturally resonant and sustainable participation models that align with citizens lived realities. As (Imo, 2024) argues, participatory governance in Nigeria is frequently undermined by institutional weaknesses and elite capture, which significantly constrain citizens' ability to engage meaningfully in decision-making processes. This limitation demonstrates a structural imbalance between the actual mechanisms available for civic participation and government rhetoric on inclusion. This perspective is further supported by Aneke, Ewurum, and Owoh 2025), who argued that a more authentic and culturally relevant model for participation can emerge through community-based governance practices, informed by traditional systems of consultation and consensus-building. Therefore, rethinking participatory governance through these indigenous frameworks allows Nigeria to engage with its own local realities of exclusion, making governance people-

centered rather than policy-centered or driven solely by international benchmarks (Popoola, 2013).

This approach emphasizes active citizen engagement, ensuring that individuals within a community are not just passive recipients of development projects but have a genuine voice in planning and implementation processes (Olko et al., 2020). Meaningful participation involves transparent decision-making procedures, the incorporation of public opinion in budgetary priorities, and feedback mechanisms that hold implementers accountable (OECD, 2022). Participatory governance is fundamental to inclusive development because it promotes local autonomy and agency. When communities are empowered to define their priorities and implement plans, it fosters more equitable rural development, reduces costs through local resource mobilization, and encourages long-term sustainability through a shared sense of ownership (Dahl, 2020).

However, a significant barrier to participatory governance in Nigeria is the entrenched top-down approach, in which policy directives are imposed by higher authorities with minimal community involvement. This often leads to political alienation, weak local ownership, and implementation gaps. To counter this, a bottom-up approach is necessary, as it prioritizes grassroots participation and enables communities to shape their own development trajectories (Mela & Bello, 2023). Strengthening participatory governance requires institutional innovations, including digital citizen dashboards for monitoring local performance, community-driven planning frameworks with budgetary influence, and targeted capacity-building for traditional and elected local leaders (OECD, 2020; Nigeria | World Bank Group, 2025).

### **Digital Access**

The second pillar of IDFN digital access is equally critical to inclusive governance. Nigeria's National Digital Economy Policy and Strategy (2020–2030) articulates a vision for broad-based digital inclusion, encompassing access to public services, connectivity, and digital literacy (Federal Ministry of Communications & Digital Economy, 2020). Digital access empowers citizens to participate fully in economic, social, and civic life, thereby supporting inclusive governance by enhancing opportunities and quality of life. In its absence, individuals face restricted access to healthcare, education, and employment, perpetuating cycles of exclusion (Okocha & Dogo, 2023). Despite this, access remains limited due to unstable networks, weak infrastructure, low digital literacy, and unreliable telecommunications and power systems. Issues such as high connectivity costs and language barriers further widen the digital divide.

To achieve inclusive governance, policymakers and stakeholders need to prioritize targeted interventions, such as ensuring stable internet and electricity, increasing government investment in infrastructure, and financing digital technologies (Idowu, Adewoyin, and Adewumi 2020; Okocha and Dogo 2023).

### **Gender Equality**

Gender equity is a key component of the Inclusive Development Framework for Nigeria (IDFN). An inclusive society demands the equal representation, participation, and

empowerment of all groups, particularly women, in economic, political, and social spheres (National Gender Policy, 2025). However, in Nigeria, the nation's progress towards sustainable development and inclusive development is impeded by gender inequality (Abolade 2021). Patriarchal norms and structures dominate the nation's legal, customary, and institutional frameworks, often positioning women as subordinate and reinforcing male privilege. These dynamics manifest in widespread discriminatory practices, such as denial of inheritance rights and limited access to leadership and decision-making positions (Moronkeji, 2025). Addressing these entrenched inequalities requires a systemic capability approach, which recognizes that unpaid domestic labor and caregiving responsibilities are not mere personal burdens for women but also represent structural barriers to women's autonomy. This approach advocates for more gender-responsive social protection policies, including accessible childcare and community care systems, gender-equity budgeting, and targeted economic support to redress historical and systemic imbalances (World Bank, 2022).

To build an inclusive nation, Nigeria needs to ensure equal treatment, opportunity, and access for women across all sectors of society. This entails removing legal and institutional barriers more consciously and transforming the underlying social norms that perpetuate exclusion in practical ways. As Abolade (2021) argues, inclusive development is unattainable without the full and equitable participation of women in shaping the nation's future.

### **Infrastructure Parity**

Infrastructure parity constitutes the fourth pillar of IDFN. It seeks to address the spatial dimensions of exclusion in Nigeria's national development. Infrastructure investment in Nigeria continues to exhibit a strong urban bias, with a focus on cities like Lagos and Abuja. At the same time, rural communities continue to be underserved in areas such as electricity, digital access, transportation, and clean water (World Bank, 2023). These disparities limit economic opportunities and restrict access to essential services in marginalized regions.

The IDFN approach emphasizes shifting capital expenditure toward last-mile infrastructure, especially in lagging and rural regions. Rather than focusing solely on high-visibility urban megaprojects, the framework supports locally tailored solutions, such as mini-grid electrification, rural broadband rollout, and sustained infrastructure maintenance programs (Calderón et al., 2018; World Bank, 2023). This redirection ensures spatial equity and enhances community-level resilience and inclusive access. IDFN's focus is on restructuring national infrastructure priorities to ensure every Nigerian, regardless of location, can access essential services and opportunities needed for their daily lives.

### **Executive implementation mechanism**

To ensure the practical realization of the Inclusive Development Framework for Nigeria (IDFN), an executive implementation mechanism is required that enables coordinated center-to-periphery flows and maintains systemic coherence. The IDFN proposes a three-tier executive mechanism: (a) a National IDFN Coordination Council (N-ICC) presided by a superior cross-ministerial official (e.g.,

Office of the Vice President or National Planning Minister) to mobilize finance, establish strategy and sort out cross-sectoral obstructions; (b) State Inclusive Development Units (SIDUs) entrenched in state planning ministries to manage result-driven and contingent transfers, integrate national frameworks to local contexts, and gather participatory planning councils; and (c) Local Implementation Hubs (LIHs) at the local government area (LGA) level responsible for service delivery oversight, community participation, and quick feedback systems to the N-ICC and SIDUs (OECD 2020).

The center-to-periphery flow works as follows. The N-ICC identifies national priorities, performance goals, and national concerns, as well as subsidizing envelopes, which are obtained from an integrated national budget line for inclusion. Tentative performance transfers from federal to state (and to LGAs through SIDUs) are integrated with assessable local results (for example, reliable power supply in targeted communities, constant rise in 30-day active school registration, or women's economic participation rates). SIDUs design performance metrics to inform technical aid packages, identify realities, and allocate part of the transfer to LIHs to support initiatives designed for communities (OECD, 2020). LIHs use interoperable digital dashboards to report performance indicators and implement interventions such as rural broadband co-investment, community microgrants, and local childcare facilities. Civil society auditors and independent monitoring bodies print open performance reports to enable corrective action and ensure transparency. The design of this mechanism incorporates scientific principles, emphasizing adaptation, allegiance, and continuous learning in everyday contexts (OECD, 2020).

#### **Normative principles and guiding questions for evaluation**

Normative principles provide a foundation for evaluation and a premise for IDFN. The framework proposes five guiding normative principles which are; gender responsiveness (integrate gender in budget and design) (World Bank 2022), subsidiarity (allow the smallest effective unit make decision) (OECD, 2020), equity (ensure the marginalized are recognized and prioritized) (Rawls 2023), capability orientation (evaluate outcomes through substantive freedoms, not only inputs) (Sen 2021), and accountability and transparency (participatory audits, open data) (OECD 2020). These principles guide the evaluative questions used to evaluate interventions.

The guiding evaluation questions include: Are the significant freedoms for targeted groups, such as mobility, education, and economic agency, expanded by the intervention? Does the allocation of resources reduce inequalities between genders and across regions? Are local capacities strengthened by intervention to procure, design, and maintain essential services (OECD 2020)? Does design reflexive show up and adapt to unplanned consequences through participatory monitoring? Finally, safety considerations and affordability are integrated by digital and infrastructure investments, and they explicitly address gendered impediments to access (time poverty, device affordability, digital literacy) (GSMA 2024).

These guiding questions translate into measurable operational indicators. For instance, indicators for piloting under IDFN

include: percent change in households with reliable basic electricity hours; change in 30- and 90-day active usage of digital public services by rural residents and women; share of conditional transfers spent on schedule; ratio of local participatory budget items to sum LGA budget; and measures of local procurement capacity building (procurement cycle time, number of trained procurement officers). Data collection must integrate community scorecards, administrative data, and periodic household surveys to capture distributional dynamics and validate outcomes (Moronkeji 2025).

Long-term transformations require reinforcing institutions (LIHs and SIDUs), transforming norms (including informal power and gender), and establishing credible fiscal paths. The policy literature highlights that reforms that fail to integrate incentives or ignore subnational capacity are at risk of poor execution (Budget Office of the Federation 2023). Thus, the IDFN proposes a staged implementation, which includes an initial set of demonstration states with planned investment to implement coordinated strategies, thorough implementation assessment, and well-funded capacity building (OECD, 2022). Successful implementation influences national scaling, with fiscal rules and flexible governance systems that trench result-oriented transfers.

#### **Comparative Theoretical Application**

The Inclusive Development Framework for Nigeria (IDFN) must be examined in the context of broader global experiences and international contexts. This is to validate its theoretical foundation and affirm the framework's credibility as a systemic approach to inclusion, while also highlighting the need to adapt strategies to local realities. Some countries have implemented pillar-like approaches to inclusive development with varying degrees of success, offering instructive parallels. For example, Rwanda is recognized for embedding gender parity into national development planning, resulting in the world's highest proportion of women in parliament (Devlin and Elgie 2008; OECD 2020).

This outcome stems from intentional structural reforms that integrated gender considerations into both budgetary and programmatic decision-making, illustrating how national development trajectories can be transformed through equity-centered governance (Palmer 2022). India and Brazil also offer compelling insights into how large, diverse, and institutionally complex countries can scale inclusive interventions in areas such as digital access, conditional cash transfers, and participatory governance. Their experiences demonstrate that state-led reforms in digital inclusion, social protection programs, and gender equality initiatives can significantly expand human capabilities. However, these international models also reveal limitations when transposed directly to different sociopolitical contexts, underscoring the need for Nigeria to have a uniquely contextualized framework, such as the IDFN, rather than a transplanted model. The following sub-sections explore cases in Rwanda, India, and Brazil, extracting applicable strategies and cautionary lessons for implementing IDFN.

#### **Rwanda: An example of gender parity**

Rwanda provides a compelling example of how deliberate political will can reshape social and institutional frameworks

to promote gender justice, as evidenced by the government's sustained commitment to inclusive policymaking across various sectors (Murebwayire et al., 2025).

According to the 2023 Global Gender Gap Report, Rwanda ranks among the top performers in sub-Saharan Africa in terms of gender parity and is positioned among the top 15 globally (WEF 2023). This progress is not incidental but the outcome of deliberate legal and institutional reforms that have entrenched protections against gender-based violence and advanced women's political and economic participation (WEF 2022). After the 1994 genocide, gender equality was integrated into Rwanda's development agenda by the government and integrated into its post-conflict constitution. A notable example of this commitment is the constitutional mandate requiring a minimum of 30% female representation in all decision-making bodies. Today, Rwanda consistently leads the world in the proportion of women represented in its national legislature, a testament to the efficacy of its gender-focused state-building strategy (Devlin and Elgie 2008). However, the Rwandan model has had limitations. According to critics, this top-down approach has not always turned into significant empowerment for women at the local level. Patriarchal norms are prevalent in rural communities and the private sphere, suggesting that political representation alone is insufficient (Burnet 2020). Rather than treating gender equity as a secondary concern, Rwanda's model demonstrates how state-led initiatives can use legal and policy instruments to dismantle entrenched patriarchal norms and restructure access to power in the public sphere. For Nigeria, the lesson is clear: gender parity needs to be positioned as a foundational element in the architecture of inclusive governance and national development.

#### ***India: An example of digital inclusion***

India's approach to digital inclusion offers a compelling example of how state-led digital transformation can serve as a vehicle for systemic inclusion. The Digital India program was launched in 2015 by the Indian government to reduce inequality, bridge the digital divide, and enhance access to basic digital services by increasing internet connectivity, strengthening online infrastructure, and promoting digital literacy nationwide (Madar and Basavaraja, 2023). The public digital infrastructure, known as the "India Stack," was developed by the government through its Digital India program (D'Souza and Sadana, 2021). This includes a Unified Payments Interface (UPI), the Aadhaar biometric identity system, and a network of Common Service Centers (CSCs) to provide digital services in rural areas (Sharma and Singh, 2024). This strategy exemplifies the principle behind IDFN's pillar of equitable digital transformation by treating digital access as a component of social infrastructure. The establishment of interoperable platforms and infrastructure at scale in India has facilitated access to government services for millions of people, making significant strides in financial inclusion and identity-based welfare delivery (D'Souza and Sadana 2021).

The Indian experience illustrates that digital inclusion efforts can unintentionally reinforce exclusion. Vulnerable groups such as the elderly, undocumented individuals, and those with low digital literacy often struggle to access essential services, despite expanded infrastructure (D'Souza and Sadana 2021;

Sharma and Singh 2024). This highlights the IDFN's emphasis on a comprehensive approach that combines access to infrastructure with justice and digital literacy to ensure that technology serves all citizens equitably.

#### ***Brazil: Bolsa família and conditional equity***

Brazil's Bolsa Família program offers a compelling example of how social safety nets were designed to reduce poverty and strengthen human capabilities (Paes-Sousa, Osorio, and Soares 2021). The program provides conditional cash transfers (CCTs) to low-income families, tied to specific human development outcomes such as children's school attendance and vaccination schedules (Sacchet et al., 2020). This approach aligns with the IDFN's "Development as Systemic Capability" principle, which asserts that sustainable inclusion requires more than income redistribution and calls for strategic investment in the intergenerational human capital of marginalized populations (Paes-Sousa, Osorio, & Soares, 2021). Bolsa Família is a program recognized for its effectiveness in reducing extreme poverty and inequality, as well as improving access to education and healthcare among Brazil's poorest citizens. It demonstrates how social protection can function as a transformative instrument to promote equity and empower the most vulnerable segments of society (Paes-Sousa et al., 2021).

Nevertheless, the program also reveals the limitations of conditional transfers when operated in isolation. While Bolsa Família addresses immediate household needs and supports basic human development, it does not directly address structural inequalities such as land concentration, regressive tax systems, or labor-market exclusion (Sacchet et al., 2020). These enduring systemic barriers underscore the need for integrated, multidimensional frameworks like the IDFN, which focuses on combining income support with broader reforms that target spatial equity, participatory governance, and economic empowerment. Only through such a comprehensive approach can inclusion become a sustainable reality.

#### ***The Nigerian imperative: A unique construct for a unique context***

While international examples affirm the foundational principles of the Inclusive Development Framework for Nigeria (IDFN), they also demonstrate the limitations of directly transplanting foreign models into the Nigerian context. Rwanda's impressive strides in gender parity emerged from a post-conflict landscape in which political will enabled sweeping institutional reforms, an enabling environment not currently present in Nigeria. Similarly, while India's digital strategy has achieved remarkable scale, it relies heavily on a bureaucratic and infrastructural capacity, particularly in broadband and rural electrification, that remains significantly underdeveloped in Nigeria (World Bank, 2022). Likewise, Brazil's Bolsa Família program, with its proven track record of addressing poverty and inequality, relies on a stable federal coordination mechanism and consistent social protection financing, both of which are complicated by Nigeria's fragmented federalism and resource politics (Hunter and Sugiyama 2021).

The lesson for Nigeria is clear: while international experience offers valuable insights, an inclusive framework should

selectively draw from them without ignoring the country's peculiar socio-political realities. Nigeria's context, characterized by uneven gender inclusion, structural federal fragmentation, persistent urban bias, and digital divides, necessitates a model that is both context-specific and structurally adaptable. Imported models, when applied without modification, often fail to address these underlying challenges. The Inclusive Development Framework for Nigeria (IDFN), therefore, conceptualizes inclusion not as a borrowed template but as a locally grounded approach that reflects the nation's demographic diversity. It is structured to advance both equity and sustainability within Nigeria's complex development landscape (Akinyetun and Oyelade 2022).

### 3. Policy implications

Translating the IDFN from theoretical proposition to policy requires coordinated action by lawmakers, local governments, and civil society. A systemic, equity-driven framework requires strong political will and institutional structures that are designed for accountability and adaptability (World Bank, 2024). Lawmakers need to embed equity principles into legislative and budgetary processes, ensuring that policies in health, education, and infrastructure prioritize marginalized groups across regions, genders, and generations. As Rawls (1971) argues, justice requires institutions that secure equal fundamental liberties while directing resources to benefit the least advantaged. This means evaluating investments based on their input and the ability to expand substantive freedoms, thereby reducing inequality. Civil society organizations should function as co-designers and watchdogs of inclusive interventions. Their role transcends advocacy into social accountability and participatory monitoring, ensuring that implementation, design, and adaptive learning enable community voices to influence international evidence and transparency. Civil society involvement in budgetary processes also enhances transparency, reinforcing public trust in government (Murphy et al., 2022). In Nigeria, CSOs can help integrate national frameworks with local realities, particularly in strengthening the voices of marginalized groups excluded from formal governance processes.

Local government authorities (LGAs) are influential within the IDFN. As the grassroots tier of governance, LGAs should operationalize subsidiarity by making decisions at the local level and designing service delivery to meet unique community needs (OECD, 2020). However, their effectiveness depends on adequate fiscal decentralization, capacity development, and a fair system of intergovernmental transfers (Okorie et al., 2022). Ensuring that LGAs are guided by adaptive governance processes is key to achieving equity and inclusion from the ground up. To institutionalize these linkages, the IDFN introduces the concept of Policy Translation Units (PTUs). These units would serve as intermediaries between normative ideals, such as gender responsiveness, digital equity, and participatory governance, and field-level execution. Drawing on insights from social scientists, community actors, and digital inclusion experts, PTUs would localize national goals into specific, measurable interventions. Their responsibilities would include designing

inclusion scorecards, tracking fiscal equity metrics, and supporting LGAs in project design and monitoring.

Nigeria can avoid the frequent misalignment between policy rhetoric and execution that has hindered its development approach over the years by establishing PTUs (World Bank, 2022). PTUs serve as institutional translators, aligning the abstract goals of inclusive development with the concrete realities of Nigeria's intricate socio-economic landscape and multi-layered governance.

### 4. Conclusion

The need for a theoretical reinvention of inclusive development in Nigeria is fundamental, given the persistent disparities between policy ambitions and outcomes in areas such as gender inclusion, poverty alleviation, and infrastructure provision (World Bank, 2022). Prevailing development models often rely on external plans without sufficient consideration of Nigeria's diverse demographics, federal complexities, and socio-economic inequalities, thereby failing to address systemic inequities. The Inclusive Development Framework for Nigeria (IDFN) bridged this gap by demonstrating a multi-dimensional approach that incorporates infrastructure parity, gender equity, governance, and digital access into an integrated system (OECD 2022). The framework bridges the gap in Nigeria's development thinking, which has historically prioritized distribution over systemic empowerment, by highlighting capability development, subsidiarity, and gender equality (Nussbaum, 2020).

Furthermore, IDFN provides practical structures for normative principles, such as Policy Translation Units (PTUs), which can translate equity principles into practical, actionable programs with assessable outcomes. This situates the framework as both implementable and conceptually innovative, aligning policy rhetoric with actionable practice in Nigeria's multi-layered governance landscape. To empirically evaluate the IDFN, future research is required. Pilot research on selected states can produce comparative data on whether planned, pillar-based interventions lead to substantive freedoms, reduce inequality, and strengthen local capacities (Xu et al. 2025). Such empirical work will be significant in providing proof of its scalability, in developing the framework, and in positioning Nigeria within international discourses on inclusive and sustainable development.

Ultimately, the IDFN signifies a significant shift in Nigeria's development paradigm. It provides a way to build more equitable and sustainable communities by including equity as a systemic capability (Rawls 1971; UN Women 2022).

#### Disclosure statement

Dr. Titilayo Ogunbambi and Dr. Abiodun Omowunmi Essiet declare that there are no financial or non-financial competing interests arising from the direct applications of this research.

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