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After COVID-19 inequality frameworks in Nigeria must address children's rights and dignity

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As we battle COVID-19 and the toll it has taken on the world today, we must listen to the often-overlooked voices of those who will inherit the world of tomorrow. Inequalities expert and 2019-20 Atlantic Fellow for Social and Economic Equity [Foluke Adetola Ojelabi](#) looks at the youngest victims of COVID-19 and its countless impacts – and of the unequal social order that long predates the pandemic.

This post is the third in a [three-part series](#) on Nigeria and the [Multidimensional Inequality Framework](#).

Many months after COVID-19 first upended our lives, our attention is understandably still dominated by its ever-intensifying impact on economies around the world, the social systems facing collapse, and

governance that is defying all expected theories and models. But as we count the social, financial and human costs of a pandemic unprecedented in our lifetime, one group remains discounted, unheard and unseen. Our children are stumbling through these times even more neglected and invisible.

In Nigeria, this is the generation that had to learn urgent lessons on handwashing and public health practices as our nation battled and overcame the dreaded Ebola virus after it sneaked its way into Lagos on 22 July 2014. Less than six years later, as the whole world was upended by the novel coronavirus, Nigerian children were locked out of schools and confined to living spaces where their voices and rights – like their very presence – so easily becomes invisible.

Our children are an overlooked group, but they are by no means a small one. Nigeria is a 'country of the young', with almost half of our population (46%) under the age of 15, **according to UNICEF**. There are nearly 31 million children under the age of five, and each year at least seven million babies are born. And while a little over one in three of Nigeria's population lives below the poverty line, among children this proportion surges to 75%. The picture painted by these numbers is already a bleak one; now, let us imagine the impact of COVID-19. Millions of Nigerian children will not be able to return to their schools; many will suffer abuse in a variety of forms; great numbers of them will be deprived of their rights. As **Save the Children and UNICEF** have reported: 'The economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic could push up to **86 million more children into household poverty** by the end of 2020, an increase of 15% ... this would mean the number of children living in poor households across low- and middle-income countries could reach 672 million'.

We do not need to be clairvoyant to understand the depth of inequality driving this rise in poverty, and how it serves to make children invisible as they face a difficult present and uncertain future. Inequality, as the **UN Secretary General has said**, defines our times, made worse by many

decades of ignored risks at a global scale. At heart we all understand, as António Guterres has said:

'income, pay and wealth are not the only measures of inequality. People's chances in life depend on their gender, family and ethnic background, race, whether or not they have a disability, and other factors. Multiple inequalities intersect and reinforce each other across the generations. The lives and expectations of millions of people are largely determined by their circumstances at birth.'

But it is not enough to know that inequality is many-faceted and intersectional. If we are to act in our unequal present to ensure our future is not more unequal still, we must commit to measuring these multiple dimensions of inequality as they intersect and reinforce themselves and affect the well-being of every individual.

It is for this reason that tools such as the **Multidimensional Inequality Framework (MIF)** will be so important in this undertaking. The MIF is designed to measure inequality in individual well-being, while reflecting the many important dimensions that play a part in it: our health, our relationships, our ability to have influence, our knowledge, and many other facets. As Amartya Sen's capability approach showed us, we must reject an exclusive focus on income or subjective well-being, but instead assess inequality as it is manifested in the quality of individual lives. As COVID-19 forces us not only to battle a pandemic but to reimagine the world our children will inherit, this innovative framework looks ever more valuable as a tool both globally and, for Nigerians, in our own country. If we are willing to listen, we will hear our children's desperate plea for us to put our hands to the plough and change their life course by ensuring their well-being.

As I argued in the **first of these three articles**, it is time to reflect on the implications of the **Global Burden of Disease Study's population scenario for 2100**, which suggests that, 80 years from now, Nigeria will be the world's second most populous country. Like Nigeria, many other countries will have significantly larger populations. Given these predictions, our responsibility to address inequality today to build a better future for the

children of tomorrow is greater than ever. The New Global Deal proposed by the UN Secretary General and the **most recent report** of the Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights, Philip Alston, are urging us to 'avoid the greatly exaggerated claims about the impending eradication of extreme poverty and downplaying of the parlous state of impoverishment in which billions of people still subsist'.

So, what do Nigeria's children today, and our children yet unborn, need?

1. The generation of accurate, complete and clean data by adapting existing methodology for measuring multidimensional inequality, as other countries have done in a similar context; for example, the MIF has been used in Burkina Faso
2. Devolving and streamlining the methodology for current data collection, analysis and reporting by the bureaus of statistics at state and local government levels
3. Leveraging the available technical expertise for the UN Human Development Index and the UN Sustainable Development Goals, which are already available in Nigeria, in combination with the MIF, in order to develop a bespoke multidimensional inequality and poverty reporting framework
4. A commitment to developing and publishing an annual status of childhood poverty and inequality report for Nigeria, which will track the key well-being indicators for Nigeria's children.

Nigeria, the 'giant of Africa', may well become the second most populous country in the world by 2100. Will it be a country where the rights and dignity of every human being are assured, living in balance with nature, taking account of the rights of future generations, and where we measure success in human rather than purely economic terms? Will today's children survive to build a better Nigeria than the one we have handed to them? It is our responsibility to ensure that they do. Arise Nigeria!

'While we are all floating on the same sea, it's clear that some are in superyachts while others are clinging to the drifting debris,' António

Guterres has observed. To which I must add: not only are we all on the same sea, but we are all facing the same storm. We must work together if we are to survive it.

Photo: 'Family Planning and Newborn Care': health care workers vaccinating their babies in Akure, Nigeria. Credit: Dominic Chavez/The Global Financing Facility (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0).

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Foluke Adetola Ojelabi is a 2019-20 Atlantic Fellow for Social and Economic Equity. An epidemiologist by training, she started her career as a teenage volunteer supporting people living with HIV/Aids in northern Nigeria. She joined the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) as social policy officer in Nigeria, and she currently works at UNICEF's headquarters in New York. All views and opinions expressed herein are those of the author, and do not reflect the policies or views of UNICEF.

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