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## Nigeria shows why sanitation is at the heart of both inequality and progress

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Nowhere is the erosion of development gains and sanitation more urgent than in rapidly growing Nigeria, where shrinking access to sanitation has denied tens of millions of people access to services essential to dignity and health. Inequalities expert and 2019-20 Atlantic Fellow for Social and Economic Equity Foluke Adetola Ojelabi examines the great potential for improved sanitation on equity.

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

Hot on the heels of *The Lancet's* **Global Burden of Disease** report on fertility, mortality, migration and population scenarios for 2100, which predicted that eight decades from now Nigeria would become the world's second most populous country after India, the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative published its **Global Multidimensional Poverty Index 2020**. Not only do both reports portend a dire situation for Nigerian demographics, but their revelations about the deep levels of multidimensional poverty and multidimensional inequality in this giant of Africa can leave us in no doubt about the urgent need to prevent them from deepening any further as the country's population grows.

These and other reports also highlight the need for measures that can accurately and effectively evaluate all different dimensions of well-being as we work to achieve improvements in human development indices and make progress on the **United Nations Sustainable Development Goals**. And of all these important indicators, it is sanitation, rather than health, nutrition or education, that is arguably the most neglected.

## Lost gains: why poor water quality washes progress away

Water, and everything we need it for, lies at the heart of human life and society. As *National Geographic* has noted, 'Poor water quality affects various aspects of society, from the spread of disease to crop growth to infant mortality. In some regions of the world, lack of sanitation infrastructure, water treatment facilities, or sanitary latrines lead to dire clean water crises.' Any progress that we make in health, nutrition and child survival without commensurate improvements in drinkable water, sanitation and hygiene (a set of core issues summed up by the apt acronym WASH) will never be sustainable progress, but a case of lost gains. Nigeria's situation is particularly concerning: despite its

growing economy and global profile, it is a country where **access to sanitation has actually declined over time**. As always, it is those who have the least who have suffered the most from the often little-noticed declines.

According to a **recent report** by the WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme:

‘between 1990 and 2015, Nigerians experienced an 8% decrease in access to sanitation in rural areas and 3% decrease in access to sanitation in urban areas. The decline in access is further pronounced for the poorest. As a result, there are over 70 million people without access to improved sanitation and more than 45 million people practicing open defecation in Nigeria.’

## Can India’s example help spur Nigeria’s progress?

Keen not to be shamed by India, whose dynamic campaign against open defecation has delivered tangible results, Nigeria’s president Muhammadu Buhari declared a state of emergency in Nigeria’s water supply, sanitation and hygiene sector in 2018. This declaration was backed by Executive Order 009, which **vowed to end open defecation** in Nigeria by 2025.

Among the evidence that informed this declaration was the **2018 WASH National Outcome Routine Mapping (WASHNORM) survey**, which revealed a situation even worse than the sanitation decline that had been reported in 2015. It noted:

1. ‘155 million Nigerians are off the SDG sanitation target: they have no access to improved sanitation facilities which are functional, private, accessible and with fecal sludge safely disposed and treated.’

2. '185 million Nigerians are off the SDG target on water supply: they do not have access to improved water supply, located on premises, available when needed and free from fecal and chemical contamination.'

The deterioration in sanitation is not unique to Nigeria, with the **2014 Ibrahim Index of African Governance (IIAG)** reporting that the Democratic Republic of Congo, Gambia and Madagascar also experienced losses in the Access to Sanitation indicator. In Africa, and around the world, acknowledgement is growing that adequate sanitation for all is essential to sustainable development, and not an afterthought that can follow it. And as we find ourselves in 2020 grappling with the multiple impacts of COVID-19, it is sobering to consider what Nigeria's sanitation situation will be like in 2100. Poor sanitation is an inequality intensifier, and addressing it is a task that would make even the wisest sages and crystal ball-gazers shudder.

## Three key steps to tackle the great inequality multiplier

The urgency is clear: it is time for all stakeholders to address the challenges of the future by re-imagining and improving Nigeria today, and to commit fully to implementing the steps necessary to address the current failings in WASH provision. These steps are:

1. Re-calibrate **Nigeria's existing open defecation-free road map**, which has argued that there should be a range of latrine options to meet the needs of people with diverse socio-economic characteristics. This road map relies on the calibration of 'extreme poverty' using the **World Bank measure of \$1.90 a day**. But in opting for this deeply flawed international poverty line, progress in eliminating poverty is gauged against a standard of miserable subsistence rather than even a minimally adequate standard

of living, as Philip Alston, the former UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights, has argued.

2. Adopt a framework focused on designing and implementing relevant, solid and effective context-specific sanitation solutions that aim to reduce inequalities at national and local levels, while ensuring that well-being and quality of life is prioritised over an exclusive focus on income and the financial capability of households. As I argued in [the first article](#) in this three-part series, this process could benefit from the use of the [Multidimensional Inequality Framework \(MIF\)](#).

3. Place a high-intensity focus on advocacy for behavioural change, beginning with the involvement of the children, adolescents, youths and peer group leaders who will be critical to ensuring community compliance. Meanwhile, the private sector, government and other actors must concentrate their resources and expertise on building the two million or more new toilets that Nigeria will need each year, every year from 2020 to 2025.

Only when all these essential initiatives aimed at providing adequate sanitation facilities for every citizen are being carried out will we truly see the giant of Africa arise. These undertakings are essential to achieving the sustainable and resilient development that will permit the 791 million people predicted to inhabit Nigeria in 2100 to realise their human rights. Ensuring that no Nigerian is left behind must begin with the collective commitment to meeting the most basic of our needs: clean and plentiful supplies of water, and the universal sanitation provision that is essential to human dignity and health.

[Foluke Adetola Ojelabi](#) is a 2019-20 [Atlantic Fellow for Social and Economic Equity](#).

*Photo: Drinking clean water at Nigeria's Fadama II project. Photo: Arne Hoel/World Bank licensed under creative commons.*

## About the author



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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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