

Rural-Urban Migration and Socio-structural Challenges for Sustainable Development in Nigeria

¹Queen Orokonwo Worgu, PhD

Email: queen.worgu@ust.edu.ng

²Ikuru, Sampson Ernest, PhD

^{1,2}Department of Sociology, Faculty of Social Sciences,
Rivers State University, Port Harcourt, Nigeria

Abstract

The study sought to investigate the socio-structural problems of rural-urban migration and its implications for sustainable development in Nigeria. It examined the role of migration in socio-economic problems in urban and rural communities, especially in the areas of housing, infrastructure, agricultural productivity and local industries. The research was carried out using a qualitative approach, sourcing secondary data from textbooks, journal publications, government reports, newspapers, and international news outlets. These data were subjected to content analysis in order to identify key themes and socio-structural impacts related to migration patterns in Nigeria. The study found that rural-urban migration has resulted in serious socio-economic challenges. In urban areas, the sudden influx of migrants has led to overcrowding, poor housing, and strained public services. In rural areas, the migration has caused the loss of human capital, with the consequent loss of agricultural productivity and the collapse of local industries. The research also pointed out the way this migration contributes to the poverty and underdevelopment of rural areas while urban centres continue to struggle with resource allocation and sustainable development. The study concluded that rural-urban migration in Nigeria poses complex socio-structural problems that impede achievement of sustainable development. Without proper planning and intervention, both urban and rural areas are at a great risk of long-term threats to their economic and social stability. To reduce rural-urban migration and its consequences, the study suggests investment in rural infrastructure, education and health care to make rural areas more viable for economic activities. Additionally, it recommends better urban planning and infrastructure in cities to cope with the increasing population and ensure the equitable distribution of resources.

Keywords: Rural-urban migration, socio-structural challenges, sustainable development, human capital depletion, urban planning.

1. Introduction

Rural-urban migration has risen as one of the hallmark characteristics of socio-economic change in many developing nations, Nigeria being one of the leading examples of this phenomenon where growing cohorts have moved from rural areas to urban centres. This

*Corresponding author
Article history

: queen.worgu@ust.edu.ng

: submitted; 2025/12/15 revised; 2025/12/03 accepted; 2026/01/10 published; 2026/02/06

exodus is often driven by poverty, lack of employment opportunities, poor educational systems and inadequate health services that prevail in the countryside. Individuals from agrarian communities seek better living conditions and economic opportunities in cities, which are perceived as repositories of promising futures [1]. Although our collective experience suggests that this trend continues for decades, recent analyses bear testimony to the fact that the magnitude and speed of rural-urban migration in Nigeria have increased significantly. Urban conglomerates like Lagos, Abuja and Port Harcourt are expanding at an unprecedented rate with the influx of migrants fueling the growth of informal settlements and worsening overcrowding. The move to the cities represents not only a demographic change but also a reflection of broader structural changes in the economy and society that make urbanisation symbolic of development. Nevertheless, the consequences of this massive migration are complex, as both rural and urban settings face challenges of many kinds. Rural areas experience depopulation, leading to the decline of agricultural productivity, while urban centers are battling infrastructural pressure, strained social services, and housing shortage [2]. Consequently, the migration path highlights the urgent need for comprehensive policies that balance the needs of rural and urban populations in a balanced and sustainable manner.

Sustainable development is a permanent paradigm that aims at an equilibrium between economic, social and environmental imperatives, meeting current needs without jeopardizing the ability of future generations. It highlights the integration of policies and practices that strengthen environmental stewardship, social inclusion and catalyse economic growth. The concept gained prominence with the 1987 Brundtland Report, which argued that development should meet the requirements of the present, as well as future challenges. In more recent times, sustainable development has crystallised as a foundation focus in global efforts, notably the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations, which outline 17 pivotal goals aimed at fostering prosperity while protecting the planet [3]. These goals span a spectrum of concerns - from poverty eradication and quality education to climate action and clean energy - each of which aims to create a more equitable and resilient world. Yet, the path towards sustainability is full of obstacles and includes the need for significant investment in green technologies, sustainable agrarian practices, and inclusive economic growth without aggravating social inequalities [4].

Rural-urban migration has continued to dominate the Nigerian scene over the decades, characterized by the movement of citizens from rural areas to urban centres in search of better economic opportunities, access to better living conditions and social services such as health care and education. Driving forces include unemployment, poverty, and poor rural infrastructure, compared to the lure of urban prosperity [5]. While urbanisation promises opportunities for economic progress, at the same time it places significant pressure on urban resources, leading to increased overcrowding, housing demand and excessive pressure on public services. As a result, the migration pattern reveals salient socio-structural challenges that have the potential to block the achievement of sustainable development goals in Nigeria. Urban locales, despite their economic potential, often fail to provide requisite infrastructure - in this case affordable housing and effective waste management systems - to accommodate the influx of rural migrants. These obstacles are further compounded by deficient policy responses that have yet to adequately mitigate the socio - economic disparities engendered by rapid urbanisation [6].

The socio-structural challenges associated with rural-urban migration in Nigeria are multifarious and have profound implications for sustainable development. As the rural-urban

migration picks up pace, cities face challenges like creation of slums, poor living conditions and limited employment opportunities in the face of a growing population. The lack of affordable housing and the inability of urban infrastructure to meet rising demands contributes to the growth of informal settlements crisis. Additionally, rural areas suffer a decline in agricultural productivity because of depletion of human capital, as a large portion of the rural workforce moves to urban centres in search of better opportunities [7]. These demographic shifts increase social inequality, with urban migrants often facing discrimination and limited access to essential services. The complex nexus of rural-urban migration and socio-structural dynamics require the development of comprehensive strategies that integrate rural and urban necessities. Lacking strong urban planning and policies conducive to rural development, the sustainable development goals of Nigeria are in danger of being hampered by the same migration patterns that are meant to spur development.

Statement of the Problem

Rural-urban migration in Nigeria is a major socio-economic phenomenon, mainly driven by the ills that are endemic to rural sectors. These include limited access to quality education, healthcare, and basic infrastructure such as roads, electricity, and water. Many Nigerians living in agrarian settings view urban territories as sanctuaries with better employment opportunities, modern amenities and improved calibre of life. Nevertheless, this migration comes with a cost. Urban areas, despite being considered epicentres of economic activity, are frequently ill-prepared to cope with the influx of rural migrants. Rapid population growth in cities like Lagos, Abuja and Port Harcourt engenders overcrowded slums, strained health and educational systems, and escalating poverty rates [5]. As the population pressure mounts, a vicious cycle of poverty, inequality and environmental degradation unfolds. Unchecked growth in urban areas of Nigeria results in an explosion of informal settlements that are lacking in sanitation, security and affordable housing [6]. This situation exacerbates socio-structural disparities, as migrants have difficulty assimilating into the urban labour market because of a lack of education, skills or legal recognition, making them vulnerable to exploitation.

Moreover, the migration trend imposes a decline of rural economic productivity. The exodus of the rural workforce directly undermines agriculture - the fundamental pillar of the rural economy. Consequently, rural communities face reduced production, loss of indigenous knowledge and the breakdown of social cohesion as more people leave for urban centres [7]. The attrition of human capital makes it difficult to sustain local industries and infrastructure and thus fuels the migratory impetus. In addition, the concentration of resources within urban spaces creates inequality between urban and rural areas, perpetuating regional imbalances. Although cities provide economic opportunities, they are not always inclusive or sustainable. The growing gap in living standards between the urban and rural population could eventually stall Nigeria's efforts to achieve its sustainable development goals. How can a nation achieve inclusive growth when rural areas are abandoned and cities are overrun? Should governmental efforts continue to focus on urban development or is it wise to invest in revitalising rural areas to break the cycle of migration?

These challenges raise critical questions about the balance of urban and rural development in Nigeria. How would urban areas be able to accommodate the increasing population without compromising the quality of life of the residents? Is it possible to revitalize the countryside to offer opportunities equal to those in the cities, or is the migration trend an inevitable result of economic disparity? Against this background, the present study was undertaken to scrutinise the impact of rural-urban migration on socio-structural challenges for

sustainable development in Nigeria. To this end, the following research questions were stated to guide the study:

1. How does rural-urban migration in Nigeria contribute to the socio-structural challenges in urban areas, particularly in terms of housing, infrastructure, and public services?
2. What are the socio-economic impacts of rural-urban migration on rural communities, and how does the depletion of human capital affect agricultural productivity and local industries?

Conceptual Explications

Rural-Urban Migration

Migration is a dynamic and on-going process that played a fundamental role in shaping human history and continuously restructured societies and economies around the world. The shifting of populations, which is by definition based on the search for better conditions of existence or for stronger economies, or at least to escape an area of conflict, is one of the most representative phenomena of the twenty-first century. In the realm of scholarly inquiry, there is a plethora of ways that migration can be described, depending on the analytical lens as well as the particular problem being considered. Its entry into the areas of other countries, other regions and other cities underscores its importance as a central issue for individuals, communities, nations and international relations architecture. Nevertheless, the concept defies a singular, all pervading definition, given its complex multifarious economic, social, political and environmental dimensions that are all interlinked in complicated ways.

Tsegay describes migration as the translocation of human beings across the geographical borders, and it is often done to improve one's economic condition or to escape unwanted living conditions such as natural disasters and armed conflicts [8]. This broad definition includes different typologies of migration, internal migration, where mobility is within the borders of a sovereign state, and international migration, which is the crossing of national borders in search of better opportunity. However, by concentrating primarily on physical displacement, the definition overlooks, unintentionally, socio-cultural, psychological and relational motivations for moving, upon which people's relocation is based. Scholars may disagree that this omission results in an incomplete understanding of migration processes because it ignores important motivational factors such as family reunification or academic aspirations that may be as influential as economic incentives. Ignoring these dimensions leads to a superficial analysis, where a more integral and nuanced view by acknowledging both extrinsic forces and intrinsic motivations that drive human mobility is needed.

Amelina provides a different definition whereby migration can be defined as a process involving either a permanent or a temporary change of residence whereby people move under influence of social, economic or environmental pressures either voluntarily or not voluntarily [9]. This commendable account leaves room for treatment of voluntary and forced migration both, addresses the situation of refugees and internally displaced persons and recognizes the diversity of migration patterns. Nevertheless, the comprehensiveness of this definition is open for critique in terms of its vague demarcation between various forms of migration, and the different scales involved. For example, it has been felt that urban migration is not as important as international migration, even though it has major socio-economic consequences for both the migrant and the urban fabric. Such a gap, reflecting a lack of appreciation for heterogeneous scales of migration, is a limiting factor in the utility of the definition for

operational use, especially for policy makers concerned with addressing specific problems related to urbanisation and rural depopulation.

In light of the above mentioned criticisms the paper proposes the following definition of migration: it is the movement of individuals or collectives from one geographical location to another, motivated by a constellation of factors - in search of better economic opportunities, education, safety or as a consequence of a socio - political upheavals. Migration may be voluntary or forced; internal or international, and temporary or permanent. This definition takes into account the complexity of the migratory process by including the drivers that are tangible and intangible, thus recognising the diversity of situations that envelope migratory events.

Sustainable Development

Sustainable development has occupied a prominent position in academic discussions ever since the Brundtland Report was first published in 1987, and since then, its meaning has always been disputed and reinterpreted. At base, the idea focuses on meeting the needs of current generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs, and it attempts to achieve a balance in a triad of economic growth, environmental stewardship, and social equity. The difficulty inherent in giving a pithy definition rests in the broadness of its ambit, which cuts across disciplines from economic and political to ecological and such fields of the social sciences. Academics and policy makers continue to develop the construct in response to changing world exigencies: climate change, poverty, inequality, and resource depletion to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of its practical application.

Ruggerio categorises sustainable development as a paradigm to incorporate economic advancement, environmental sustainability and social inclusion to help in ensuring that societal advancement does not wipe out natural resources or create further inequalities [10]. While in harmony with the basic Brundtland definition, Ruggerio emphasizes the necessity of balance amongst the three pillars of development practice in the present day. A possible shortcoming of this kind of definition is the broad brush we are painting here; trying to do many things at once, trying to solve problems in many different interlinked dimensions might not be as precise as we need it to be in order to inform actionable policies, especially when having pillar priorities in a group of different regions, that are at different stages of development. Consequently, a framework that is more specific could be more useful for facilitating a move from theory to practice, particularly in lower-income or developing settings where real challenges are grouped into one or several sectors.

Hajian and Kashani take a different position claiming that sustainable development represents the ability of a society to continue in the future balancing the needs of environment, social and economic dimensions [11]. The authors argue that the sustainable development must be responsive to changes in environmental condition and changing values of society. Nonetheless, this demarcation has been criticised for its idealism; the notion of perpetual continuity may underestimate the role of unsustainability in industrialised systems characterised by environmental degradation and social inequity. While the call for adaptability is laudable, the definition does not go far enough to propose concrete remedial measures to surmount the entrenched barriers to achieving sustainability. One of the possible ways to do this could be establishing a set of achievable targets to sectors and governments on environmental footprint reduction, as a shift from the business-as-usual paradigm.

Finally, Vinuesa, Azizpour, Leite, and Balaam explicitly anchor sustainable development to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), in which progress towards these globally agreed upon goals, including poverty reduction, climate action, gender equality

and sustainable cities, constitute the essence of sustainable development [12]. This view focuses on international consensus and collective action. Nevertheless, critics say that this definition risks reducing the complexity of sustainability by imposing a predefined set of objectives which may not do justice to the unique challenges different regions face, especially those that are not as integrated into the global economy. For example, rural populations in the developing world have problems that are not sufficiently addressed by the SDGs.

Based on these diverse definitions, the paper defined sustainable development as a process that aims at providing social welfare in the long-term future through an integrated economic, environmental and social policy that provides equal opportunities to all, while preserving natural resources for future generations. This definition recognizes the interdependency of needs within society and argues for flexible and context specific solutions rather than a template in blanks, therefore thinking of sustainable development as a constant dynamism of continuous adaptation and transformation and not a pursuit to reach a certain goal set.

Theoretical Underpinning

The study is placed within the frame of the Systems Theory of Migration as envisaged by Akinlawon Mabogunje (1970) and is considered to be one of the most encompassing frameworks for analysing rural-urban migration in Nigeria. Mabogunje who is highly regarded by geographers, argued that description of migration is not merely an act of relocation, but rather a complex process with different subsystems such as origin, destination, and relocation process itself. The theory makes three basic assumptions: first, migration includes the interaction of subsystems, second, immigration is modulated by feedback mechanisms, such as remittances, communication, and return flows, and third, institutional and policy structures may facilitate or hinder migratory flows. By transcending the bounds of crass models of push and pull, Mabogunje's model factors in the roles of institutional governance, urban planning and social networks in migratory decisions and fortunes [13]. In the Nigerian context, with its issues of rural neglect and acute urban congestion, the theory provides a holistic perspective for understanding issues of regulating developmental trajectories through socioeconomic systems and spatial structures.

Eze explains that this application of Systems Theory to Nigeria scenario presents rural-urban migration as a symptom and also a cause of systemic imbalance in Nigeria [13]. Urban centres such as Lagos and Abuja have continued to grow into areas that are not planned due to inadequate regulatory bodies, investments not being made in rural areas and the lack of feedback loops between zones. These urban centers face housing shortages, unemployment and infrastructural issues, while rural areas are faced with depopulation and economic stagnation. The theory's emphasis on feedback and institutional roles is particularly relevant: the lack of re-investment by the government in urban gains in rural areas speed up the rate of underdevelopment, in turn providing stimulus for further migration. Consequently, Mabogunje's model is especially suitable for sustainable development discourse because it recognises the cascade significance of issues of disruptions such as poor rural roads, poor education, poor urban planning which affect the stability of the socioeconomic equilibrium at large [13]. Thus, any policy intervention that ignores these interdependencies is unlikely to have long-term sustainability.

Considering the relevance to Sustainable Development, the systems theory is directly related to several goals of the SDGs notably Goal No.10 (Reduce Inequalities), Goal No.11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) and Goal No.1 (No Poverty). The theory states that

sustainable development is impossible without integrated approaches to deal with disparities between rural and urban sectors. It supports a vision of development in which policies encourage circular migration, rural revitalisation and decentralized economic planning. By getting policymakers to think of migration as an important part of a dynamic system rather than a linear drain on urban areas, Mabogunje's theory lays emphasis on the structural changes required to balance population distribution and resource allocation. It further reiterates the demand for participative governance and spatial equity and asks planners to think in systemic, long term ways. Accordingly, the research takes the form of Systems Theory of Migration because of its good explanatory capability and its compatibility with the socio-structural problems and sustainability aspirations driving Nigeria's developmental path.

2. Research Method

The research methodology is qualitative in nature and involves the study of rural-urban migration in its socio-structural challenges vis-a-view sustainable development situation in Nigeria. Data were obtained from a variety of secondary sources, such as textbooks, peer-review journal articles, government reports, newspapers, and the international news media. These sources together were used to give an overall overview of the migratory movements and the urban planning implications and the socioeconomic consequences thereof. The collected data were subjected to careful analysis of content and as such, we were able to closely analyze all available information and to make a holistic input into all the impacts on sustainable development in Nigeria by far.

3. Results and Discussion

Research Question One: How does rural-urban migration in Nigeria contribute to the socio-structural challenges in urban areas, particularly in terms of housing, infrastructure, and public services?

Rural-urban migration in Nigeria has become one of the most critical factors contributing to socio-structural problems facing urban centres, particularly in the areas of housing, infrastructure and public services. Throughout recent decades, this migratory trend has placed further strain on urban cities, again in relation to housing, infrastructure and public services. According to Nwalusi, et al., urban areas have witnessed a rapid increase in population due to the migration of millions of rural dwellers in search of better economic opportunities [2]. Indeed, as of 2021, about 52.8% of the Nigerian population was living in urban areas - a percentage that is still growing at an exponential rate, they added. This rapid urbanisation has led to overcrowded cities, where housing demand exceeds supply, leading to the emergence of slums and informal settlements. A study by Oketayo and Olaleye shows the metropolitan areas like Lagos and Abuja have experienced a significant urban sprawl, which has culminated in a huge housing deficit [14]. Moreover, the influx of migrants has placed a great deal of stress on infrastructure (including roads, water supply and sanitation) and thus increases the socio-structural challenges that plague Nigerian urban centres.

Table 1. Population Distribution of Major Nigerian Cities and Identification of Highly Populated Urban Centres Influenced by Rural–Urban Migration

	Cities	Population	Highly Populated Urban Cities			
0	Lagos	23500000	Yes			
3	Kano	4600000	Yes			
1	Abuja	3520000	Yes			
4	Ibadan	3500000	No			
12	Ilorin	1800000	No			
6	Kaduna	1700000	No			
11	Jos	1700000	No			
5	Benin City	1500000	No			
8	Zaria	1200000	No			
2	Port Harcourt	1180000	Yes			
7	Enugu	1100000	No			
9	Aba	1040000	No			
10	Maiduguri	1000000	No			
13	Warri	600000	No			
14	Onitsha	500000	No			

Source: Author’s compilations: Abubakar and Dano [15]; Auwalu & Bello, [16]:

The table outlines the population of fifteen major cities in Nigeria with special focus on those urban centres that are most densely populated, in particular those that are significantly impacted by rural-urban migration. Among these, Lagos, Abuja, Port Harcourt and Kano are classified as the "Highly Populated Urban Cities," each of which is home to millions of people, with Lagos becoming the leading urban center, with a population of more than twenty-three million. This highly concentrated nature is mainly due to migratory flows from rural areas in search of better economic opportunities and improved living standards. The table also brings other prominent cities such as Ibadan, Benin City and Enugu in the foreground; though these places are populous, they do not show the same level of population growth due to migration. Evidently, the strain upon infrastructure, housing and public services within these highly populated cities is apparent, as the burgeoning migrant demographic continues to outpace the development of requisite urban amenities and services, thereby contributing to a spectrum of socio- structural challenges within these urban centres.

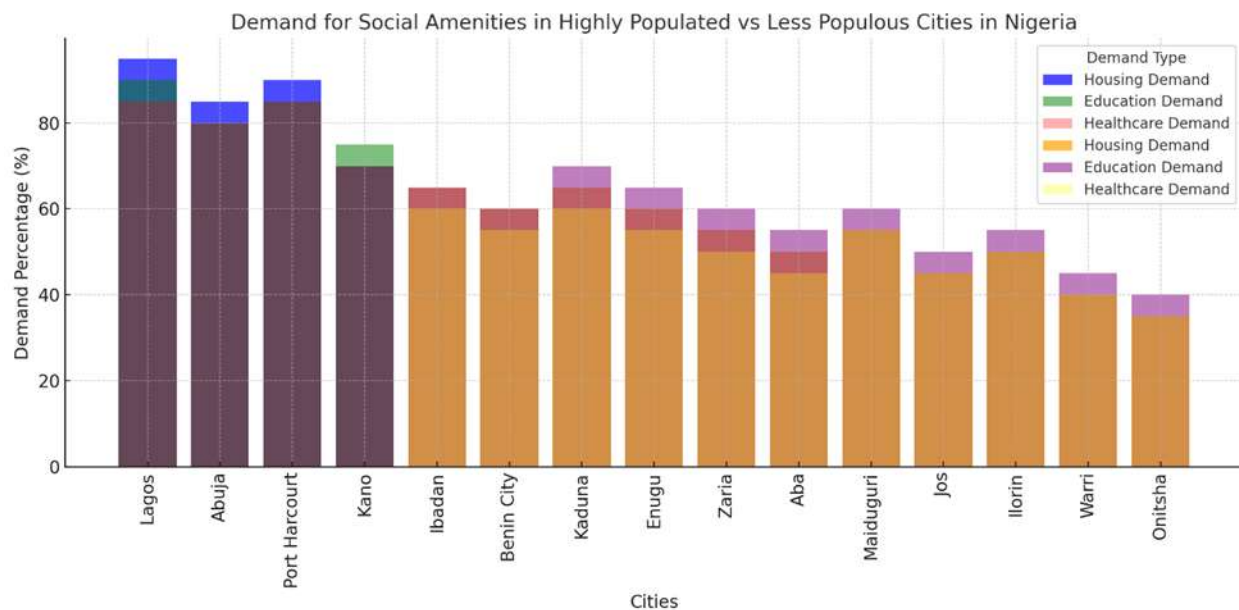


Figure 1. Comparative Demand for Social Amenities in Highly Populated and Less Populous Urban Centres in Nigeria

Author’s compilation from; Nwalusi, et al. [2]; Ezeudu and Tukur [1]; Auwalu & Bello, [16].

The revised histogram now uses different chromatic schemes to increase visual differentiation. Bars representing highly populated urban centres (Lagos, Abuja, Port Harcourt and Kano) are marked in blue, green and red to indicate demand for housing, education and healthcare respectively. In contrast, less populous municipalities such as Maiduguri and Yola are colored in orange, purple and yellow to represent the same service demands. This chromatic differentiation makes comparative analysis across cities easier and thus helps to shed light on the disproportionate pressure on social amenities in densely populated urban centres due to migration pressure. The graph clearly shows the high demands on housing, education and healthcare services in populous cities compared to their less populous counterparts. As Nwalusi et al. argue, accelerated population growth in these urban hubs has led to overcrowded informal settlements, strained infrastructure and pressure on public services [2]. Lagos, for example, is the best example of the most important housing deficit and limited access to healthcare and education, which can be attributed to its large population [2].

Conversely, less populous cities, such as Maiduguri, Yola and Kano, have relatively low levels of strain on housing and public services. This marked contrast between densely populated and sparsely populated urban areas highlights the uneven distribution of the impacts of migration across Nigeria. Studies by Ezeudu and Tukur posit that the strain on urban resources is a direct result of migration patterns, with urban areas struggling to cope with an influx of migrants while rural regions face depopulation and stagnant economic growth [1].

As these cities continue on their growth trajectories, tackling the socio-structural challenges arising from rural-urban migration requires specific policy interventions that can bridge the infrastructure and social service gaps within urban locales, while at the same time promoting development in rural regions to curb excessive migration.

The rapid movement towards Nigerian urban centres - including Lagos, Abuja and Port Harcourt - has greatly increased the problems with housing, infrastructure and public services.

The compounding explosion in population brought about by rural-urban migration has led to overcrowding and increased pressure on urban resources. According to Abubakar and Dano, this migration has created imbalance in the distribution of resources especially in terms of housing and public services [15]. Lagos, for example, was projected to become a "hyper-city" by 2025 as a result of the continued influx of people, which is almost complete [16]. The overwhelming population increases have inflicted infrastructural strains, making it difficult for the authorities to keep up with the demand of sustainable cities and thus leading to significant gaps in service provision [17].

Additionally, the burgeoning urban populations in cities such as Abuja and Kano have resulted in a surge in healthcare demands that have been difficult for urban health systems to meet [18]. As migration patterns continue, particularly towards these large urban centers, policymakers struggle to develop sustainable urban environments. Migration not only contributes to the problem of urban congestion, but also to social inequality as migrants tend to settle in informal settlements with poor access to education, healthcare and sanitation services [19]. This move towards larger cities puts immense pressure on governmental services and emphasises the need for comprehensive urban planning and resource allocation strategies.

Ojo and Adams report that migration to urban areas in search of better economic opportunities has led to overcrowding, which has culminated in inadequate housing, limited access to basic amenities and strained public services [5]. This trend is especially apparent in cities such as Lagos, Abuja, and Port Harcourt where the influx of migrants has exceeded the development of necessary infrastructure [5]. The lack of affordable housing has triggered the emergence of slums and informal settlements, which are characterised by poor living conditions, lack of sanitation and limited access to essential services, including healthcare and education [20]. As a result, social inequality has been exacerbated and the quality of life of migrants and long-term residents has worsened.

Moreover, rural-urban migration has put significant pressure on urban infrastructure, which was originally designed for a much smaller population. Okoye and Flead believe that urban infrastructure (roads, water supply, electricity etc.) is unable to meet the growing demand brought about by rapid migration [21]. The process of urbanisation in Nigeria has caused cities to grow beyond their planned boundaries, leading to traffic congestion, pollution and other environmental problems. Poor urban planning and inefficient utilisation of resources add to the poor distribution of essential services, further stressing urban infrastructure [21]. Furthermore, urban areas are often unable to deliver sufficient public services, such as healthcare, education, and waste management, which widens socio-economic disparities between rural migrants and the established urban population [5]. The lack of an integrated approach to urban planning and development exacerbates these challenges, hindering the achievement of sustainable development in these regions.

Finally, migration has had profound effects on the public services sector, especially in terms of healthcare and education provision. As more people move to urban centres, the strain on social services has increased resulting in overcrowded classrooms and hospitals. Ojo and Adams corroborates the above position when they argued that this disproportionate demand for public services has made it difficult for urban authorities to provide adequate facilities, which has led to a decline in the quality of services [5]. The health systems in urban centres are often overwhelmed by the influx of migrants with no access to proper healthcare, which may help the spread of diseases in crowded informal settlements.

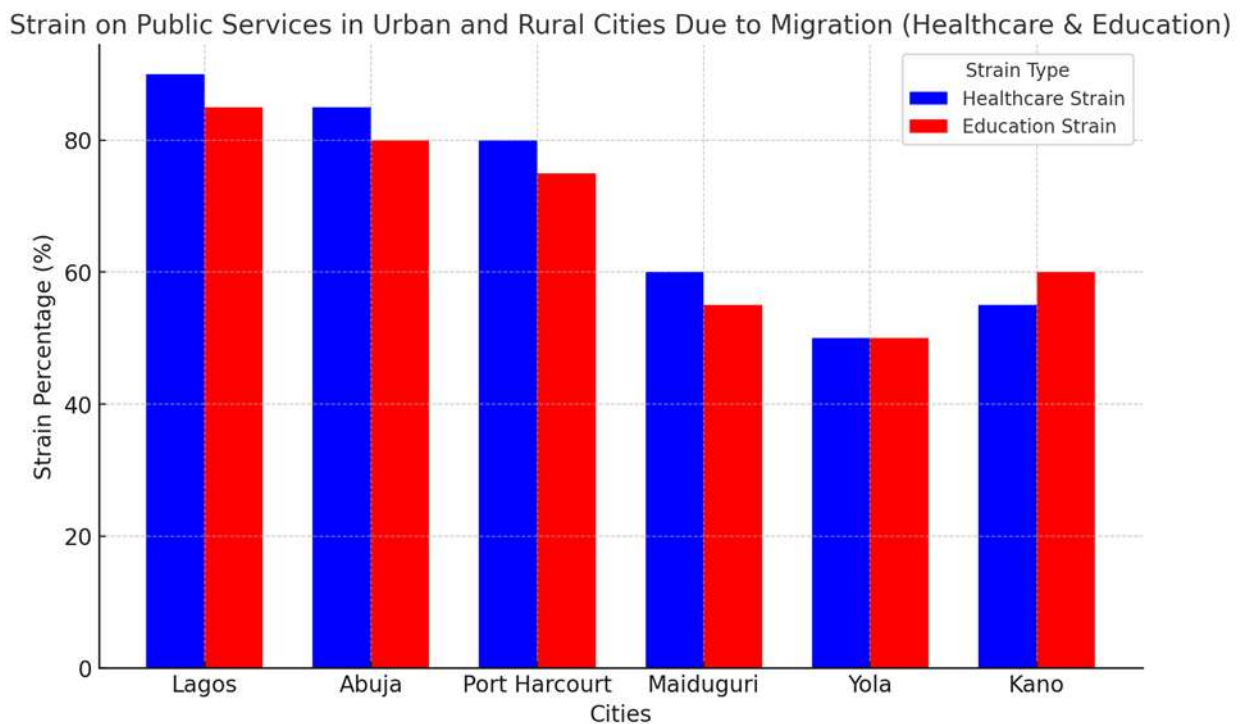


Figure 2. Impact of Rural–Urban Migration on Healthcare and Education Service Strain in Selected Nigerian Cities

Source: Author's compilation from; Ojo and Adams [5]; Nwalusi et al. [2];

The histogram presented above vividly illustrates the burden placed on healthcare and educational services in both urban and rural Nigerian cities as a consequence of rural - urban migration. The data shows that metropolitan centres like Lagos, Abuja and Port Harcourt are facing significantly higher strains in both healthcare and education compared to less populous cities like Maiduguri, Yola and Kano. This gap highlights the disproportionate pressure on public services in rapidly growing urban areas, where the influx of migrants has exceeded the development of adequate infrastructure. According to Ojo and Adams, it has been difficult for authorities to provide adequate healthcare and educational facilities due to the uneven demand for public services in urban centres [5]. No difference, the increased migration to the cities often leads to overcrowded schools and hospitals, which contributes to a decline in the quality of service.

Mushi further explains how the pressure on the urban education systems is reflected in inadequate resources, and many children from migrant families are not able to access quality education [20]. Moreover, Nwalusi et al. point out that health systems in urban areas are often overwhelmed, leading to poor care for migrants, which can lead to a worsening of public health challenges [2]. These findings support the diagram's description of the growing pressure on services in urban areas and highlight the importance of sustainable urban development to correct these imbalances.

In addition, the pressure on educational institutions has resulted in a lack of educational resources, with more children unable to access vital education due to overcrowded schools and a lack of facilities [20]. The inability of urban governments to address

these challenges not only undermines the quality of life in cities, but also hinders the country's progress towards sustainable development.

Research Question Two: What are the socio-economic impacts of rural-urban migration on rural communities, and how does the depletion of human capital affect agricultural productivity and local industries?

Rural-urban migration has deep socio-economic consequences for rural communities, especially in terms of human-capital loss, agricultural productivity and local industrial activity. As the younger generation moves more and more to urban centres in search of better life chances, rural areas suffer a significant loss of key human resources. Eze highlights the fact that the migration of skilled and able-bodied workers from these areas inevitably leads to the loss of human capital essential for agricultural production [22]. Consequently, with a reduced workforce, agricultural output in rural settings is a precipitous decline, as fewer hands are available to usurp farmlands [22]. This downturn goes beyond the immediate agricultural yields to the long-term food security where the reduced labour force will affect the continued farming activities and will lead to shortages of locally produced food.

The erosion of human capital also affects local industries which rely on manual labour and agricultural inputs for their operations. Iderawumi and Abiodun elucidate that rural-urban migration precipitates the scarcity of workers in sectors such as food processing, textile and other indigenous crafts [23]. As these industries lose skilled labour, they are forced either to reduce their operations or stop operating altogether, contributing to economic stagnation within rural communities. The resulting decline makes it difficult to attract new investment and growth, furthering the cycle of poverty and underdevelopment [23].

Moreover, the depletion of human resources through migration has far-reaching implications for the agricultural economy, disturbing the labour-intensive practices that sustain it. According to Odey and Ogo, the lack of a stable and skilled workforce results in under-utilisation of the arable land and poor management of agricultural resources [24]. This is particularly strong in rural communities where farming is the main source of livelihood. In the absence of adequate manpower, crop yields decline and agricultural systems dependent on the experience and knowledge of local farmers deteriorate. The loss of experienced agrarians also creates a disruption in the intergenerational transfer of agricultural wisdom, which further complicates the challenge of sustaining effective farming practices [24].

Finally, the socio-economic consequences of rural-urban migration are not limited to economic variables but go decisively into the social domains. As rural areas shrink demographically, they are simultaneously facing deficits in critical social services, such as education, healthcare, and infrastructure, which in turn, is driving more migration. Ayiti and Adedokun write that the migration of the younger generation leaves a shrinking, ageing population behind, creating a demographic imbalance that further hinders rural economic and social recovery [25]. The perpetuating cycle of migration makes rural areas less attractive, due to the reduction of opportunities and depletion of important resources, which accelerates urbanisation at the expense of rural development [25].

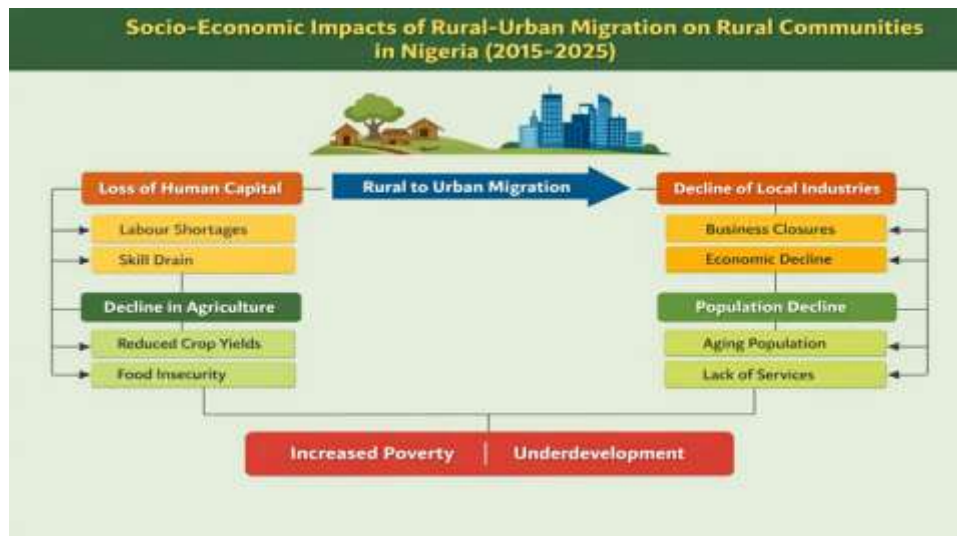


Figure 3. Socio-Economic Consequences of Rural–Urban Migration on Rural Communities in Nigeria (2015–2025)

Sources: Author’s compilation from: Iderawumi and Abiodun [23]; Ayiti and Adedokun [25], Ezeudu and Tukur [1];

The diagramme is a visual representation of the socio -economic impacts of rural - urban migration on rural communities in Nigeria between 2015-2025. It draws attention to some important consequences such as depletion of human capital resulting in smaller workforce in agriculture and local industries. This migration leads to a reduction in agricultural productivity as fewer young people are left to manage farms. Local industries are affected by labour shortages, leading to closures and economic stagnation. The diagramme ends with poverty and underdevelopment in rural areas, and a declining population, thus perpetuating the cycle of economic decline and migration.

Loss of Human Capital: Rural - urban migration leads to a serious loss of human capital in rural communities. As younger, educated people move to urban areas in search of better economic opportunities, rural areas lose the workforce. This dearth of skilled workers is a direct blow to agricultural productivity, considering the high reliance of the sector on manual labour and expertise. According to Ezeudu and Tukur, the departure of skilled agricultural workers leads to the low availability of labour for farm management and hence, the hampering of productivity [1]. Furthermore, the phenomenon is a "brain drain," where younger generations, who would otherwise contribute to the innovation of the local economy, seek opportunities elsewhere [1]. As urban centres swallow the youth, rural areas stagnate, with ageing populations unable to fulfil socio- economic roles in a rapidly modernising world. This loss of human capital makes the rural economy weak, making it less competitive and unable to sustain long-term growth [22]. The migration of educated people also reduces the possibilities of developing new local industries, making rural communities prone to economic decline [25].

Decline in Agriculture: Agriculture, which forms the backbone of rural economy in Nigeria, is greatly affected by the impact of rural-urban migration. The out-migration of younger people to the cities leaves rural communities with a lower agricultural workforce, deflating productivity and a threat to food security. Ayiti and Adedokun affirmed that rural communities are increasingly dependent on an ageing workforce to work on farms, leading to reduced crop yields [25]. This migration trend also contributes to soil degradation as fewer people stay

behind to properly manage the agricultural land [22]. In addition, migration results in the loss of agricultural knowledge, traditionally passed on from one generation to the next. The absence of younger and skilled people engaged in modern farming techniques further limits agricultural innovation, and thus stalls production [23]. The lack of manpower also affects the ability to practice sustainable farming practices, which in turn creates long-term challenges in food production and security [25].

Rural - urban migration in Nigeria, hastened by the oil boom since the 1970s, has seriously affected rural areas [26]. Agriculture is plagued by acute labour shortage as able bodied youths migrate to major national cities in search of better opportunities, leaving behind the elderly, women and children [27]. This devaluation of human capital impedes farm cultivation and crumples bountiful crop yields, further contributing to food insecurity and a decline in national GDP. Researches in Osun and Sokoto states have confirmed the reduced family and hired labour which impedes productivity [28] [29]. This trend is further aggravated by the perception of agriculture as a less lucrative venture in comparison to urban employment, which creates a virtuous cycle of rural economic deterioration [28].

Decline of Local Industries: The loss of human capital in the rural areas due to rural-urban migration leads to the collapse of local industries which are highly dependent on a regular supply of labour. As young workers leave, industries like food processing, textiles and handicrafts suffer severe labour shortages with disruptions to operations and reduced output. Odey et al. acknowledged that rural industries that used to flourish on local agricultural products are now struggling to maintain production levels because of lack of skilled workforce [30]. This identified shortage causes the closure of local businesses, which further contributes to rural poverty [30]. The lack of workers also discourages new investments in rural industries, which impedes economic diversification and growth.

According to Iderawumi and Abiodun, the closing or reduction in the activities of local businesses leads to a reduction in employment opportunities, which in turn perpetuates a cycle of poverty and underdevelopment in these communities [23]. Without adequate labour, rural industries cannot grow or modernise and this stifles economic development. Industrial effects include stagnation of rural small-scale manufacturing and agro-processing as a result of exodus of workforce and neglect [27]. Urban bias in policies gives priority to cities, increasing rural-urban inequality and perpetuating migration [31]. This pattern of out-migration, especially of young and able-bodied people, feeds into a vicious cycle where the rural areas are further neglected by governmental bodies, thereby reinforcing underdevelopment and discouraging investment in rural industrialisation and infrastructure [27]. This makes rural economic decline even worse, resulting in general development crisis, even as the remaining populace struggles to keep agricultural output up. The loss of skilled and educated minds, commonly known as "brain drain," translates into incessant depletion of agrarian productivity, which directly undermines community resilience, social cohesion, and development efforts aimed at reducing inequality, thereby making it difficult for rural areas to attain sustainable development [32].

Population dynamics: Migration of younger population from rural to urban areas reinforces demographic shift, leaving the rural areas with a burgeoning ageing population. According to Iderawumi and Abiodun, this demographic imbalance puts a tremendous pressure on the population left behind, in which case, consists mainly of the elderly to maintain agricultural productivity, and further care for the vulnerable [23]. This shift lowers the ability of rural communities to maintain socio-economical activities because the aged are less capable

of performing important tasks, such as farming and resource management. Additionally, the migration of working age individuals leads to the shortage of qualified professionals to provide essential services such as healthcare and education in rural setting [25]. Without the necessary skills in the rural areas, the development of indigenous communities remains stagnant and the gap between rural and urban development widens [1].

Increased Poverty and Underdevelopment: The theming population tend to be unemployed in the cities, burdening urban infrastructure and resources whilst remittances offer little rural respite [33]. The sum total of loss of human capital, decline of agriculture, collapse of local industries and reduction in population result in increased poverty and underdevelopment in rural areas. Ezeudu and Tukur suggest that the constant movement to the urban centres wears down the social fabric of rural communities, making it increasingly hard to sustain economic activities [1]. With fewer skilled workers and lower agricultural productivity, rural areas are not able to grow economically and are trapped in poverty. This economic decline weakens the resilience of rural economies, making them less adaptable to external shocks, such as market fluctuations or environmental disasters [23]. Furthermore, rural communities have come to rely more heavily on the remittances of migrants in urban centres which offer only temporary relief, rather than long term development. As migration still appears as an attractive option for people seeking better economic security, the cycle of underdevelopment and poverty persists, making it more difficult for rural areas to achieve sustainable growth and poverty alleviation [22].

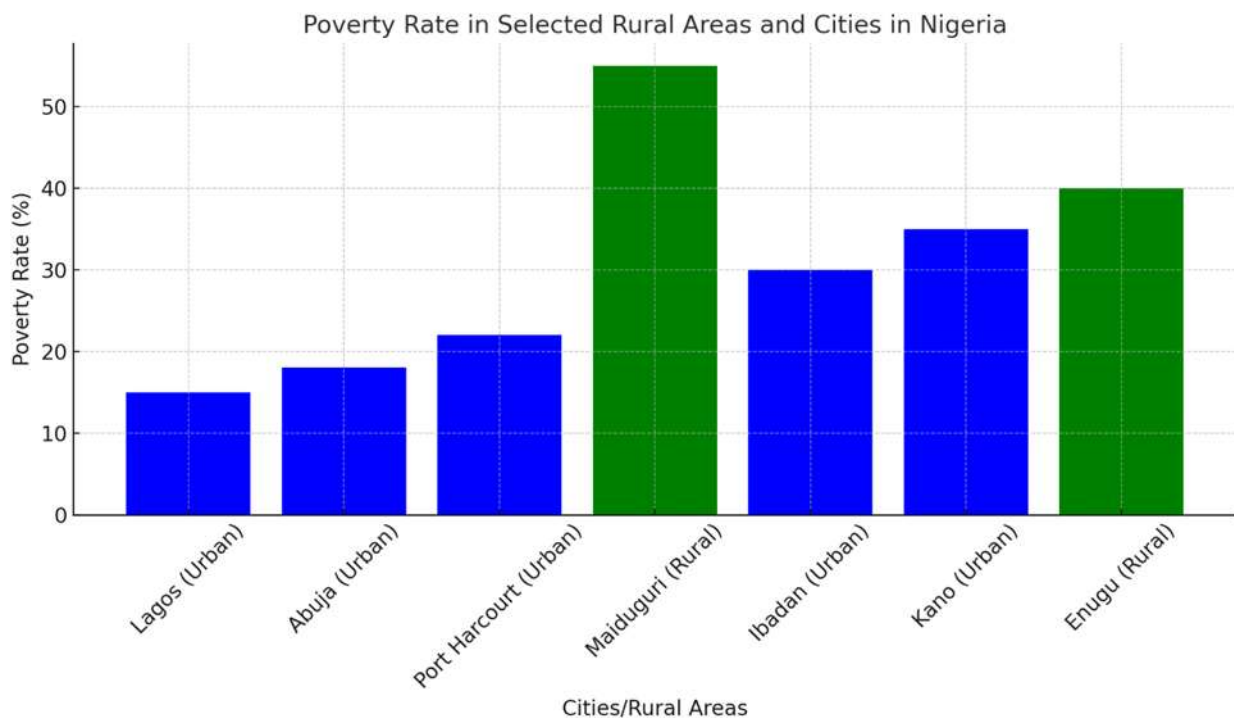


Figure 4. Comparison of Poverty Rates between Selected Urban and Rural Areas in Nigeria
Source: Author’s compilation from:

The bar chart given above outlines the rates of poverty in selected urban and rural localities in Nigeria. It brings to the fore the stark disparity between metropolitan hubs such as Lagos, Abuja and Port Harcourt and from among the rural settlements of Maiduguri and

Enugu. Urban precincts tend to show lower indices of poverty, with Lagos and Abuja having the most favourable figures. In contrast, the rural sprawls of Maiduguri and Enugu reflect significantly higher proportions of poverty and thus highlight the socio-economic dilemma that plagues these communities. The graphic therefore shows how migration dynamics and other side effects condemn rural areas to a long cycle of destitution, hindering their achievement of lasting development and economic resilience.

The difference in poverty rates between rural and urban zones in Nigeria continues to be extremely pronounced, with the latter suffering from significantly reduced levels of poverty. Recent empirical investigations show that urban centres like Lagos, Abuja and Port Harcourt exhibit relatively low poverty statistics as they register 15 %, 18 % and 22 % respectively. These metropolises enjoy better developed infrastructure, increased access to economic opportunities and a diversified labour market [34]. Nonetheless, rural areas, typified by Maiduguri and Enugu, are contending with much higher poverty rates of 55 percent and 40 percent respectively. This disparity is further compounded by the outmigration of a youthful and highly skilled cohort of people from rural to urban centres, precipitating a labour drain and a concomitant decline in rural economic productivity.

Rural poverty is largely driven by limited access to basic services, such as healthcare, education and infrastructure, which drives people to urban centres in search of better opportunities. As a result, rural places become stagnant and feature less opportunity for local development and economic diversification. On the other hand, urban migration may help to reduce poverty in cities; however, this is often at the cost of the rural communities which become increasingly dependent on remittances for subsistence [35][36][37][38][39]. These remittances, although providing some short-term relief, ultimately perpetuate the cyclical nature of poverty among rural populations [40][41][42][43].

This stark contrast between urban and rural poverty highlights the urgent need for targeted interventions to reduce poverty and promote sustainable development in rural communities. Policies that focus on infrastructure upgrade, establishment of local employment opportunities, and investment in education and healthcare, can help in bridging the socio-economic divide and contribute to balanced national growth [2].

4. Conclusion

The study on rural-urban migration and its socio-structural challenges for sustainable development in Nigeria revealed significant insights on the complex dynamics between migration patterns and socio-economic trajectories of the urban and rural domains. The findings highlight the fact that the massive movement of people from rural areas to urban centres is largely driven by the search for better economic opportunities, social services and living standards. Nonetheless, this migration trend has created complex problems, which pose threats to the sustainability of urban and rural areas in Nigeria.

The Systems Theory of Migration, which was adopted for this study, was found as an efficacious framework for elucidating these dynamics. According to the theory of Mabogunje (1970), migration is not a mere physical movement but a complex process that is affected by other factors such as economic conditions, infrastructural development and socio-political structures. This viewpoint supported a nuanced contextualisation of the problems faced by urban and rural regions in Nigeria. For urban areas, the growing tide of migrants has caused significant pressure on infrastructure, housing, health care and education services. Cities like Lagos and Abuja are now facing challenges of overcrowding, the growth of informal

settlements and public service, making it difficult to achieve sustainable development. Meanwhile, rural communities are faced with depletion of human capital, where the younger and more skilled workers migrate to urban centres, precipitating a decline in agricultural productivity and the erosion of local industries. This exodus has culminated in rural depopulation, thus reducing the ability to grow the economy and making rural areas less competitive. The resulting economic decline in these areas has further impoverished them, perpetuating the cycle of migration and underdevelopment.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions above, the following recommendations were made:

1. **Enhancing Rural Development:** In order to reduce rural-urban migration, the government should focus on investing in rural infrastructure, education and healthcare. Revitalising agricultural practices through modern farming techniques, incentivising young entrepreneurs and improving basic amenities can create economic opportunities within rural regions. This would reduce the reliance on urban migration for economic survival, promoting long term sustainable growth and reducing socio-economic inequities.
2. **Urban Planning and Infrastructure Development:** Urban centres struggling with overcrowding and infrastructural stress should implement holistic urban planning strategies. This includes increasing affordable housing, improving public transportation systems, and upgrading healthcare and educational facilities. Implementing sustainable urban development policies will ease the pressure on resources, improve the quality of life for migrants and residents, and advance the achievement of sustainable development goals in cities across Nigeria.

5. References

- [1] T. S. Ezeudu and B. Tukur, "Examining the effects of high poverty and unemployment on rural–urban migration in Nigeria and its consequences on urban resources and rural decline," ResearchGate, 2024. [Online]. Available: <https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Tochukwu-Ezeudu>
- [2] D. M. Nwalusi, F. O. Okeke, and C. M. Anierobi, "A study of the impact of rural–urban migration and urbanization on public housing delivery in Enugu Metropolis, Nigeria," *European Journal of Sustainable Development*, vol. 11, no. 3, pp. 37–47, 2022.
- [3] G. Halkos and E. C. Gkampoura, "Where do we stand on the 17 Sustainable Development Goals? An overview on progress," *Economic Analysis and Policy*, vol. 69, pp. 132–144, 2021.
- [4] C. A. Ruggerio and M. Temiz, *Energy, Environment, and Sustainable Development*. Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2024.
- [5] O. M. Ojo and T. A. Adams, "Migration and urban violence in Nigeria: Imperative of peace culture," *International Journal of Migration and Development*, 2021.
- [6] K. Eboraka, D. Alaci, and T. Lawanson, "Industrialisation, access to land transition, and conflict in Obajana, Nigeria," *African Journal of Human and Social Development*, vol. 10, no. 2, pp. 67–85, 2025.
- [7] C. F. Nwosu, "Socio-political and theological focus of sustainable development narratives from the Nigerian context," in *Sustainable Development Narratives*, Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2024.
- [8] S. M. Tsegay, "International migration: Definition, causes and effects," *Genealogy*, vol. 7, no. 3, Art. no. 61, 2023.
- [9] A. Amelina, "After the reflexive turn in migration studies: Towards the doing migration approach," *Population, Space and Place*, vol. 27, no. 2, 2021.

- [10] C. A. Ruggerio, "Sustainability and sustainable development: A review of principles and definitions," *Science of the Total Environment*, vol. 788, Art. no. 147681, 2021.
- [11] M. Hajian and S. J. Kashani, "Evolution of the concept of sustainability," in *Sustainable Resource Management*. Amsterdam, The Netherlands: Elsevier, 2021.
- [12] R. Vinuesa et al., "The role of artificial intelligence in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals," *Nature Communications*, vol. 11, pp. 1–5, 2020.
- [13] B. U. Eze, "A review of models of rural–urban migration and implications for policy options for regional development in Nigeria," *JournalServers*, 2021.
- [14] A. O. Oketayo and Y. L. Olaleye, "Effect of rural–urban migration of youths on rural development in Ogbomoso South LGA, Oyo State, Nigeria," *Journal of Humanities, Social Science, and Creative Arts*, vol. 6, no. 1, pp. 24–32, 2016.
- [15] I. R. Abubakar and U. L. Dano, "Socioeconomic challenges and opportunities of urbanization in Nigeria," Hershey, PA, USA: IGI Global, 2018.
- [16] F. K. Auwalu and M. Bello, "Exploring the contemporary challenges of urbanization and the role of sustainable urban development: A study of Lagos City, Nigeria," *Journal of Contemporary Urban Affairs*, 2023.
- [17] S. Fox, R. Bloch, and J. Monroy, "Understanding the dynamics of Nigeria's urban transition," *Urban Studies*, vol. 55, no. 6, pp. 1349–1369, 2018.
- [18] A. A. Aliyu and L. Amadu, "Urbanization, cities, and health: The challenges to Nigeria," *Annals of African Medicine*, vol. 16, no. 4, pp. 213–220, 2017.
- [19] A. O. Ayeni, "Increasing population, urbanization, and climatic factors in Lagos State, Nigeria," *Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, vol. 23, no. 9, pp. 118–124, 2017.
- [20] C. A. Mushi, *Urban Poverty, Inequality and Human Capability Development*. Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania: Open University of Tanzania, 2013.
- [21] C. U. Okoye and F. Flead, "Institution building for grassroots community and rural development in Nigeria," *Public Lecture*, 2016.
- [22] B. U. Eze, "Understanding the impacts of rural–urban migration on the agricultural economy of Nigeria," *International Journal of Agricultural Research and Social Sciences*, vol. 6, no. 3, pp. 16–23, 2019.
- [23] A. M. Iderawumi and I. M. Abiodun, "Effect of rural–urban migration on education and economic development in Nigeria," *American Journal of Trade and Policy*, vol. 8, no. 2, pp. 78–90, 2020.
- [24] S. A. Odey and U. I. Ogo, "Environmental implication of overpopulation and rural–urban migration on development in Nigeria," *Academic Research International*, vol. 4, no. 6, pp. 27–40, 2013.
- [25] O. M. Ayiti and O. C. Adedokun, "Impacts of rural–urban migration on agricultural development in Ekiti State, Nigeria," *International Journal of Botany and Agricultural Research*, vol. 11, no. 4, pp. 12–25, 2023.
- [26] N. Emezie and A. Anthony, "Impact of exchange rate volatility on selected macroeconomic variables in Nigeria," *NG Journal of Social Development*, vol. 16, no. 1, Art. no. 13, 2025.
- [27] K. E. Johnson and F. I. Ukonze, "Rural development as a panacea for rural–urban migration in Nigeria," *Arts & Humanities Open Access Journal*, vol. 2, no. 5, 2018.
- [28] A. K. Ango et al., "Impact of youth rural–urban migration on household economy and crop production," *Journal of Agricultural Extension and Rural Development*, vol. 6, no. 4, p. 122, 2014.
- [29] J. Ayinde, D. Torimiro, and G. Koledoye, "Youth migration and agricultural production," *Journal of Agricultural Extension*, vol. 18, no. 1, p. 121, 2014.
- [30] S. A. Odey and U. I. Ogo, "Impact of rural–urban migration on poultry production in the Niger Delta region," *Journal of Rural Development*, vol. 9, no. 1, pp. 11–22, 2016.
- [31] M. Umar, "Analysis of the causal link between economic growth and development in Nigeria (1960–2019)," *Bullion*, vol. 44, no. 2, Art. no. 2, 2020.
- [32] A. Abubakar, N. I. Bello, and A. H. Ismail, "Navigating environmental migration in Nigeria," *International Journal of Environmental Policy and Management*, 2024.

- [33] T. Kofi and J. Joseph, *Migration in West Africa*. Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2022.
- [34] P. N. Mba, E. O. Nwosu, and A. Orji, "Effects of exposure to risks on household vulnerability in Nigeria," *SAGE Open*, 2021.
- [35] I. R. Abubakar, "Multidimensional poverty among Nigerian households," *Social Indicators Research*, 2022.
- [36] F. Adegboye and T. Adesina, "Women's access to housing finance in Nigeria," London, U.K.: Taylor & Francis, 2024.
- [37] A. K. Boucher, "How 'skill' definition affects skilled immigration policies," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, vol. 46, no. 2, pp. 249–267, 2020.
- [38] M. O. Folayan et al., "Socioeconomic inequality and health inequity of transgender people during COVID-19 in Nigeria," *BMC Public Health*, vol. 23, Art. no. 1247, 2023.
- [39] O. J. Ovharhe, S. O. Ebewore, and S. O. E. Alakpa, "Rural–urban migration of farmers in Delta and Edo States," *Migration and Development*, vol. 11, no. 2, p. 163, 2022.
- [40] S. O. Sennuga, "Impact of migration on rural social structures," *Journal of Biotechnology & Bioinformatics Research*, 2025.
- [41] R. Sharpley, "Tourism, sustainable development, and the theoretical divide," *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, vol. 28, no. 7, pp. 1171–1186, 2020.
- [42] V. O. Ugwu and I. V. Ekechukwu, "Gender and crimes in urban Nigeria," *Unizik Journal of Gender Research*, vol. 11, no. 1, pp. 56–70, 2025.
- [43] N. Yoshino, F. Taghizadeh-Hesary, and M. Otsuka, "COVID-19 and optimal portfolio selection for SDGs," *Finance Research Letters*, vol. 38, pp. 101–113, 2021.