Harnessing Artificial Intelligence to Achieve Sustainable Development Goal in Nigeria: Exploratory Notes

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Abstract

This paper is developed to answer this question. The paper explored how technological outcomes of AI can mitigate the causal factors of poverty in Nigeria , and subsequently take people out of poverty as envisaged by the SDG goal 1. The analysis revealed that if adequately harnessed, AI has the potential to serve as a catalyst that could bring Nigeria closer to achieving SDG 1. But it highlighted its limitations in dealing with antisocial, cultural, value and religious issues that also underpin the causes of poverty is in the country; in addition to challenges of implementation such as the inadequate ICT infrastructure in the country, disruptions in energy supply, low ICT literacy rate, low investments in ICT, privacy and ethical breaches concerns. The paper ended by making suggestions to mitigate the challenges.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Sustainable Development Goals, Poverty Alleviation, ICT, Nigeria.

Introduction

Can artificial intelligence (AI) , the endowment of machines to perform human tasks (Mienye, Sun, and Ileberi , 2024) , support measures to achieve sustainable development goal (SDG) 1 (zero hunger) in Nigeria? This paper is developed to answer this question. The literature (Eke, Wakunuma and Akintoye, 2023; Nwoye, 2023, Thurslund and Lindsjo, 2023; Kuzmina, Podbiralina1 , and Baburina, 2024; Thanyawatpornkul, 2024) appear to be building consensus that AI holds one of the keys to development in emerging countries like Africa. This implies that with AI, development challenges such as poverty can be dealt with . Based on this thought, the paper argues that if adequately harnessed, AI has the potential to serve as a catalyst that could bring Nigeria closer to achieving SDG 1.

In Nigeria, poverty is not only high but also on the increase, as individuals and households have continued to fall into the poverty basket over the years. Due to years of socioeconomic neglect, policy reform such as removal of petrol subsidy, increases in electricity and telecommunication tariffs, inflation has risen and subsequently reduced the purchasing power and income of many Nigerians; thus exacerbating poverty. The World Bank had estimated that at the end of December 2024, 47% of Nigerians lived in poverty, based the international $2.15/day purchasing power parity (PPP) (Conversation with ChatGPT, 04/04/2025). This implies that about 111 million of the 236 million estimated populations live in poverty.

The Nigerian government has responded to the poverty scourge over the years, with variants of policy intervention programmes and policies, including the Operation Feed the Nation; Green Revolution; National Directorate for Employment; Peoples Bank of Nigeria; Better Life for Rural Women; Family Economic Advancement Programme; National Poverty

Eradication Programme (NAPEP) ; National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS); YouWin! Programme; National Social Investment Programmes (N-Power: Employment for graduates and non-graduates; Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT): Financial support for poor households. Government Enterprise and Empowerment Programme (GEEP): Microcredit (e.g., MarketMoni, TraderMoni).;Home Grown School Feeding Programme (HGSFP): Meals for public primary school pupils); Economic Recovery and Growth Plan (ERGP) – 2017 (Aibieyi and Dirisu, 2010; Ofure, Adesina, Essien, Efe-Imafodon, & Deninde-Adedeji,, 2024)

In spite of huge revenues and efforts put into these programmes, the poverty rate has continued to be on the rise. At the global level, the United Nations launched the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and later the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The MDGs had south to reduce poverty by half in 2015, and the seriousness with which this goal was taken made it goal one of the MDGs. Again, the SDGs have also made ending poverty goal one of the 17 point development agenda; even though from a closer, look, all other goals converge on tackling poverty. The implementation framework to achieve zero poverty is anchored on social protection programmes, promote equal access to socioeconomic resources, basic amenities and financial resources, build climate resilience among the vulnerable segment of the population, mobilise national and global resources and encourage pro-poor budgeting.

The implementation pillars of SDG one includes social protection, equal access to socioeconomic resources, including financial services and basic amenities, and building resilience in populations that are vulnerable to climate change. But this paper explore how technological outcomes of AI can mitigate poverty in Nigeria , and subsequently take people out of poverty as anticipated by the SDG goal one.

Nigeria and the Poverty Question

Why are People Poor in Nigeria? This section attempts to answer this, and to enhance understanding, it begins by describing poverty

(1) What is Poverty?

Although poverty means different things to different persons, and different things to same persons in different locations, raising debates on absolute poverty and relative poverty, there is agreement that poverty is a condition/state of lacking security in basic human needs- food, shelter, clothing, medical care, potable water, energy and basic education. How much of these variables an individual has or not is used to indicate whether he/she is poor or not. But the commonly   used and widely accepted indicator is the purchasing power parity (PPP); which measures or translates the number of units of a country's currency that is needed to buy the same amount of goods and services in that country as one U.S. dollar would buy in the United States. Presently $2.15 per day is used as the threshold for determining poverty by the World Bank, and this implies that an individual who earns below $2.15 per day is poor; based on the assumption that $2.15/day would buy almost the same basket of goods and services in any country as $2.15 would buy in the United States. If converted, using official rates, $2.15 would translate to N3,225 in Nigeria; suggesting that what N3,225 can buy in Nigeria will be obtainable in the United States. Conversely, it could also mean that the individual who earns N3,225 in Nigeria is not below the poverty line.

Clearly, this does not only capture reality, but also underestimates poverty in Nigeria, as the sum of N3,225 can hardly afford a decent meal for an individual (See table 1 for cost of selected food and essential items), not to talk of a family (World Bank, 2023; Authour, 2025).

Table 1: Selected Food Price Watch (November 2024)

Items Label	Average of Nov-23	Average of Oct-24	Average of Nov-24
Agric eggs medium size	1,202.18	2,671.60	2,833.97
Agric eggs(medium size price of one)	110.10	235.67	247.26
Beans brown,sold loose	838.85	2,798.50	2,720.96
Beans:white black eye. sold loose	800.49	2,603.32	2,546.70
Beef Bone in	2,630.02	4,914.62	5,073.74
Beef,boneless	3,029.50	5,858.58	6,001.32
Bread sliced 500g	814.53	1,550.24	1,588.03
Bread unsliced 500g	795.83	1,454.44	1,486.25
Broken Rice (Ofada)	940.16	2,428.65	2,485.14
Catfish (obokun) fresh	2,231.23	4,148.74	4,259.99
Gari white,sold loose	548.95	1,198.05	1,205.39
Gari yellow,sold loose	581.09	1,266.31	1,311.03
Groundnut oil: 1 bottle, specify bottle	1,738.96	2,928.92	3,165.38
Rice agric sold loose	916.69	2,023.68	2,042.35
Rice local sold loose	867.18	1,944.64	1,959.98
Rice Medium Grained	936.25	2,068.20	2,104.43
Rice,imported high quality sold loose	1,137.40	2,471.28	2,489.15
Sweet potato	490.80	898.53	942.24

Source: NBS, 2024. www,nbs.gov.ng

The cost of basic items and needs are clearly far above the income level of many households, and the costs are not only exorbitant, but have also continued to rise due to inflation (See Figure 1). Given the above, it is not difficult to understand that the $2.15 or N3,225 per day PPP measure of poverty does not adequately capture the Nigerian reality.

Figure 1: Inflation Rate in Nigeria (January-December 2024)
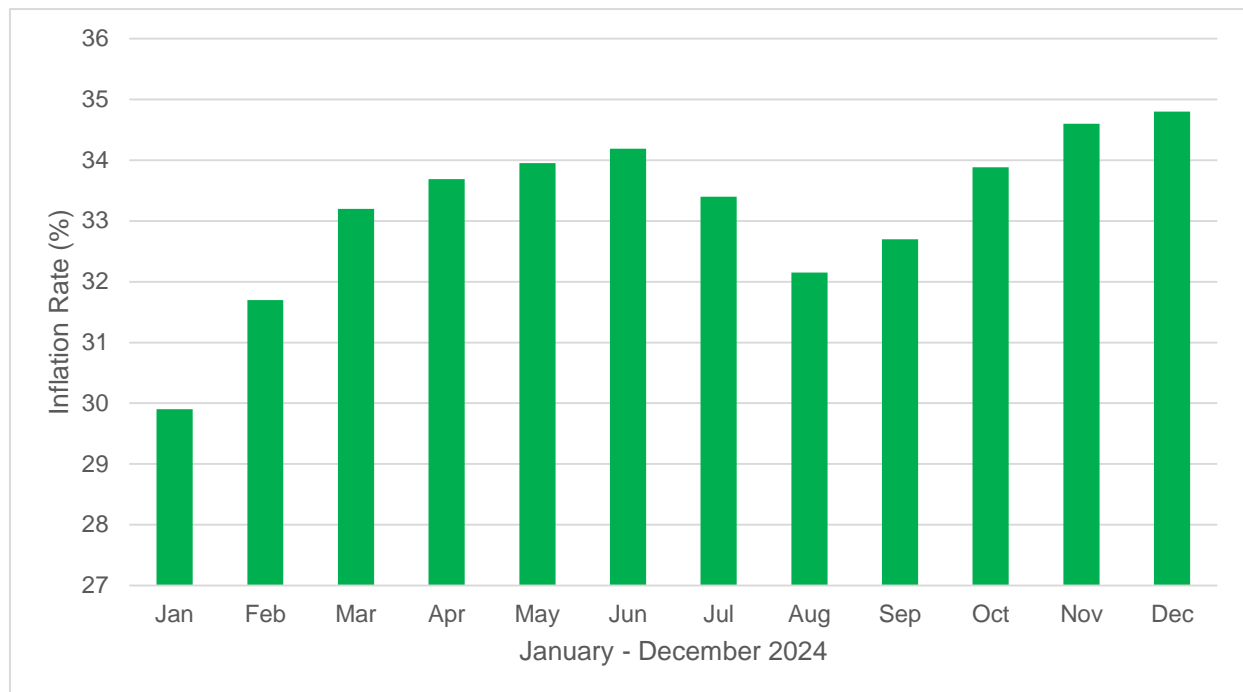
Source: Adaptations by Authour, 2024

Furthermore, on the basis of the $2.15 per day or N3,225 per day, all public servants who earn the national minimum wage of N70,000.00 live below the poverty line as it translate to N2,333.00 daily earnings per month. On the basis of the national family planning policy of four children to a woman, a hypothetical example would be that six persons (husband, wife and four children will shareN2,333.00 for their needs. Even if this expanded to assume that the wife earns similar sum, the entire family will only have N4,666.00 to share. That the incidence of poverty is high and increasing is not in doubt (see Figure 2). What is however in doubt is whether all the causal factors have been adequately identified to guide policy intervention.

Figure 2: Poverty Rate in Nigeria (2014-2024)
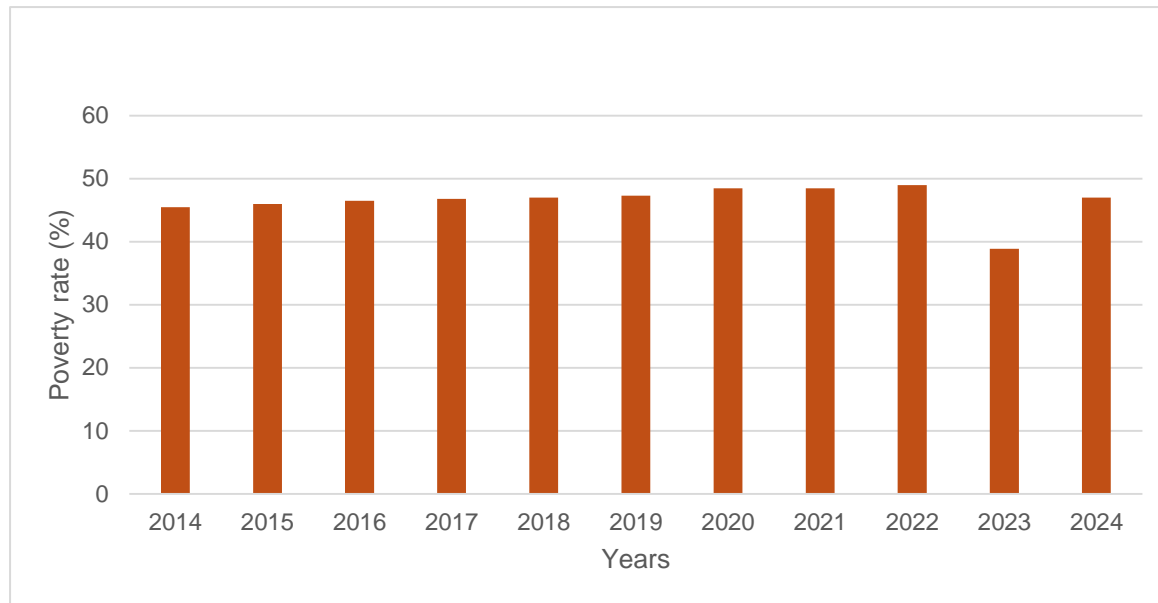
Source: Adaptations by Author, 2025

(2) Key Causes of Poverty in Nigeria

In Nigeria, poverty is attributable to intersecting factors related to zero income, low income and expenditures that outstrips income. While unemployment necessarily leads to zero income, poor public sector wage structure, underemployment and absence or limited access to banking and financial resources for investment contributes to low income. Furthermore, the dearth of basic social-amenities such as potable water, education, health, electricity, etc., and state policies such as removal of subsidies, increase in tariffs and devaluation of the nation's currency has raised expenditures far above incomes; leaving households with insufficient funds to meet basic needs. The interactions among these factors have defined the present high and increasing level of poverty in the country. These are further reinforced by social, cultural and religious factors, and antisocial behaviours that results in gender discrimination, low inclusivity, wastage, poor work culture and low productivity that reinforces poverty outcomes.

These causal factors of poverty have been discussed widely by the literature, and I do not intend to repeat the issues here. However, it is important to highlight the issue of poor public sector wages and anti-social behaviour, because they have been under indicated in the analysis of poverty in the country. Public wage structure has been a key causal factor of poverty in Nigeria since independence in 1960. Significantly, wage increase has not been considered as poverty reduction policy or strategy. Rather, it is seen as a ritual that takes place whenever the national minimum wage law expires; usually every five years, and usually under pressure by labour unions. Because the motive for increase is not to address poverty, minimum wage increase and the associated consequential adjustments makes no significant impacts on poverty. Despite the increase of the national minimum wage from N30,000.00 to N70,000.00 in year 2024, analysis

of the wages and emoluments structure clearly shows that accepting to work in the public sector is an invitation to poverty.

Table 2: The Consolidated Public Service Salary Structure (CONPSS)

Grade Level	Annual Salary by Grade Level	Monthly Income by Grade Level	Daily Income by Grade Level	Daily Income per head by Family of Six	Income per meal per family member
01/1	930,000	77,500	2,583	430.50	143.50
02/1	934,166	77,847	2,594	432.33	144.11
03/1	937,713	78,142	2,604	434.00	144.66
04/1	950,243	79,186	2,639	439.83	146.61
05/1	973,123	81,093	2,703	450.50	150.16
06/1	1,041,786	86,815	2,893	482.16	160.72
07/1	1,277,667	106,472	3,549	591.5	197.16
08/1	1,479,276	123,273	4,109	684.83	228.27
09/1	1,641,226	136,768	4,558	759.66	253.22
10/1	1,806,041	150,503	5,016	836.00	278.66
12/1	2,007,152	167,262.	5,575	929.16	309.72
13/1	2,182,637	181,886	6,062	1,010	336.66
14/1	2,358,936	196,578	6,552	1,092.00	364.00
15/1	3,014,528	251,210	8,373	1,395.50	465.16
16/1	3,611,689	300,974	10,032	1,672.00	557.33
17/1	6,918,560	576,546	19,218	3,203.00	1,067.66

Source: NSIWC, 2024; Adaptations by Authour, 2025

Analysis of Table 2 shows the miserable income earned by public servants in Nigeria. Based on the assumptions that a public servant will spend his/her entire monthly salary on food alone, and again on the assumption that a household is made of six persons (parents and four children) based on the country's family planning policy of four children to a woman, a public servant on grade level one step one for example, will have just 143.50 per meal for each member of the family; for a country where the smallest loaf of bread now costs N400.00. For a public servant on grade level 17, step one, which is the last grade point, he/she will have about N 1,067.66 to

provide a meal for each member of a household. Significantly, the minimum wage is not raised regularly, and when it is reviewed, it fails to capture economic realities. In recent history, it was raised in 2011 to N18,000.00, and later to N30,000.00 in 2019; even when the laws require a review after every five years. The recent increase in 2024 to N70,000.00 and with a time frame of three years for revision marked three reviews in 13 years.

Significantly, public servants have defined years of service. For example, individuals without School Certificate starts at 01 and gets to the bar at level 4 and can retire at age 60 or 35 years of service; Holders of School Certificate starts at 04 and gets to the bar at 06 and can retire at age 60 or 35 years of service; Holders of National Diploma start at 06 or 07 depending on the role and MDA and gets to the bar at 14, and can retire at 60 or 35 years of service; Holders of Higher National Diploma start at 07 or 08 depending on the role and MDA and gets to the bar at 14, and can retire at 60 or 35 years of service; Holders of First Degree starts at 08 and gets to the bar at 17, and can retire at 60 or 35 years of service; Holders Masters Degree start at level 08 or 09 depending on the role and MDA, or level 12-13 based experience/specialisation and role, and gets to the bar at 14, and can retire at 60 or 35 years of service. This implies that public servants will live in perpetual penury while in service, and this is compounded by irregular pension and gratuity payments. This point is vindicated by Table 4, which illustrates the low incomes earned by public servants over the years. For example, a public servant on grade level 4, step one who earns N950,000.00 only receives a paltry salary increase of N10,786.00 after a year; while that of the individual for grade level 17 step one, the highest grade level, is N244,045.

Table 4: The Consolidated Public Service Salary Structure (CONPSS): Comparing Salary Differences in Steps

Grade Level	Step 1	Step 2/ Annual Difference	Step 3/ Annual Difference	Grade Level	Step 1	Step 2/ Annual Difference	Step 3/ Annual Difference
04/1	950,243	961,029 **10,786**	971,815 **10,786**	12/1	2,007,152	2,072,878 **65,726**	2,138,605 **65,727**
05/1	973,123	985,653 **12,530**	998,183 **12,530**	13/1	2,182,637	2,252,124 **69,487**	2,321,611 **69,487**
06/1	1,041,786	1,057,060 **15,274**	1,072,334 **15,274**	14/1	2,358,936	2,433,743 **74,807**	2,508,549 **74,807**
07/1	1,277,667	1,306,546 **28,879**	1,335,425 **28,879**	15/1	3,014,528	3,118,646 **104,118**	3,222,765 **104,119**
08/1	1,479,276	1,512,756 **33,480**	1,546,235 **33,480**	16/1	3,611,689	3,736,821 **125,132**	3,861,954 **125,133**
09/1	1,641,226	1,680,755 **39,529**	1,720,285 **39,530**	17/1	6,918,560	7,162,585 **244,025**	7,406,630 **244,045**

10/1	1,806,04 1	1,848,415 **42,374**	1,890,788 **42,374**				

Source: NSIWC, 2024; Adaptations by Author, 2025

The above suggests that the Nigerian public servant will be in permanent poverty, unless he/she earns second income through investments, farming, trading, corruption, etc; and paradoxically, this has negative consequences on productivity of the public service, health of public servants and that of the economy.

The other significant causal factor of poverty that is treated tangentially to analysis is anti-social behaviour, which compounds the problems of low income and productivity. Anti-social Behaviour means different things to different people, due largely to differences in culture, values religion, among others. For example, whereas Homosexuality, Gay marriage and Lesbianism are widely accepted in the United States and some European countries, it is seriously frowned at, and not accepted by an overwhelming number of countries in Africa (Ikediashi & Akande, 2015). Also, even within particular groups, some accepts it as normal while others see it as anti-social behavior. However, the common thread which runs through the different explanations or descriptions sees it as "the destructive, harmful, negative actions or maladaptive behaviour of an individual towards himself, other individuals or things in the society" (Khaliq & Rasool, 2019, 116). It is considered to be both overt and covert, and in this regard, Hallahan (2006, cited in Ojo, 2015, 39). The question to ask is, how is this connected to poverty? Excessive love for entertainment, and affluent living, leads to diversion of monies meant for investment in education, housing, business, etc., into the stomach, and also results in low productivity as valuable man hours are lost to the effects of alcoholism and drug addiction.

Given the discourse on the causes of poverty in Nigeria, and highlight of the key elements, what can AI do to mitigate poverty and help promote the realisation of SDG one? The next section attempts to answer this question.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) for Development: Achieving SDG one (Zero Poverty) in Nigeria

Artificial Intelligence or AI has varied definitions that converge essentially as the use of computer driven technologies with intelligence to perform human tasks such as roles in factories, teaching, traffic management, agriculture, language translation, education, collection and interpretation of large data sets, etc. Current thinking considers it as a veritable tool for socioeconomic development (Federal Government of Nigeria, 2020; International Telecommunication Union, 2021; Ndukwe, & Okereke, 2021; United Nations Development Programme, 2022; Adeleke & Oyeyemi, 2022; Agboola, & Olaoye, 2023;World Bank. 2023; ECOSOC, 2024).

The Nigerian government acknowledged this, and in its National Digital Economy Policy and Strategy (2020-2030) enunciated eight pillars to promote the Development of the Nigerian Digital Economy; a police that coincides with the overall national development goals, including poverty reduction that is in sync with SDG one.

Table 4: The Eight Pillars to Accelerate the Development of the Nigerian Digital Economy

Pillar	Policy Direction	Pillar	Policy Direction
1. **Development Regulation**	Effective regulation of the ICT and digital sector in a way that enables development	**5.Digital Services Development and Promotion**	Development of a vibrant digital ecosystem that supports Innovation Driven Enterprises (IDE) and Micro Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) in a way that engenders innovation); strengthening public confidence in the use of digital technologies and participation in the digital economy
2 Digital Literacy and Skills	Providing policy backing for massive training of Nigerians from all works of life in order to enable them obtain digital literacy and other digital skills. This pillar will also facilitate the training of Nigerians.	**6 Soft Infrastructure**	Strengthening public confidence in the use of digital technologies and participation in the digital economy);
3.Solid Infrastructure	Deployment of fixed and mobile infrastructure to deepen the broadband penetration in the country	**7.Digital Society and Emerging Technologies**	Focus on tying the development of the digital economy to indices of well-being in the lives of the ordinary citizens; mentoring startups on emerging technologies and deploying their solutions
4. **Service Infrastructure**	support for Government Digital	**8.Indigenous Content**	Provision of a policy framework that gives

	Services and the provision of robust digital platforms to drive the digital economy);	**Development and Adoption**	preference to digitally skilled Nigerians for government funded projects

Source: National Digital Economy Policy and Strategy (2020-2030), 2019, p.18

Although the National Digital Economy Policy addressee key issues in achieving national productivity and development, including economic empowerment, wealth creation and poverty reduction, it is imperative to note how they interact with the targets of SDG one, which includes eradication of poverty measured with all those who live with less than $2.15 a day; reduce poverty by at least half among all gender and ages, and in all dimensions of poverty; adequately implement national social protection programmes or systems; ensure equal rights to economic resources and basic amenities with emphasis on the vulnerable and women; build resilience in the poor and vulnerable towards climate-related and economic shocks (United Nations, 2015). It is appropriate to note that there is significant nexus between the SDG one targets and the national digital economy policy; but they are not adequate to address all the SDG one targets.

Importantly, AI can be used enhance agricultural production through precision farming, enhance access education to the disadvantaged children , and provide linkages to technology employments to make employment available to youths, and thus provide inclusive and sustainable economic growth (Kuzmina1, Podbiralin and Baburina, 2024). Table 5makes a graphic presentation on how AI can be harnessed to facilitate the achievement of each target

Table 5 Harnessing AI to achieve targets of SDG one in Nigeria

SDG 1 Outcome Tragets	Application in Nigeria	How AI can be Harnessed in Nigeria
1.1 Eradicate extreme poverty	Over 60% of Nigerians live below the poverty line, especially in rural areas and conflict-affected regions like Borno, Yobe, and Zamfara	AI-powered satellite imagery and mobile data can help identify the most vulnerable communities for targeted government and NGO interventions such as cash transfers or food aid
1.2 Halve poverty based on national definitions	Nigeria's multidimensional poverty includes lack of education, clean water, healthcare, and job opportunities	AI can process national survey data (e.g., NBS reports) to track poverty beyond income and guide multisectoral policies (e.g., combining job creation and education access)
1.3 Expand social protection	Many Nigerians lack access to	AI can support biometric

systems	welfare due to ID issues and corruption in distribution	systems like NIN-linked databases to verify beneficiaries and detect fraud, improving platforms like the National Social Investment Programme (NSIP)
1.4 Ensure access to basic resources and financial services	Many Nigerians, especially women and rural dwellers, are financially excluded	AI can power mobile fintech platforms (e.g., Flutterwave, Paga) with chatbots in local languages, help assess credit risk for microloans, and promote inclusive banking
1.5 Build resilience to shocks (e.g., climate, conflict)	Nigeria faces floods, desertification, and violent extremism, especially in the North	AI-driven climate models and conflict prediction tools can help pre-position aid, design climate-smart agriculture plans, and support early-warning systems in disaster-prone areas
SDG 1 Implementation Tragets		
1.a Mobilize resources for poverty reduction	Nigeria depends heavily on oil revenues and foreign aid, which are often mismanaged	AI can track spending in real-time, improve donor coordination, and evaluate impact of interventions through dashboards and predictive analytics
1.b Promote pro-poor, gender-sensitive policies	Nigerian women and girls are disproportionately affected by poverty and cultural barriers	AI can analyze disaggregated data to shape gender-inclusive policies, target maternal health, education, and entrepreneurship programs where needed most

Source: Adaptation from Open AI. **ChatGPT based on GPT-4 architecture**, using the **April 2024** model update (often referred to as GPT-4-turbo).www.

It is clear that AI holds some potentials to support the achievement of SDG one, but whether it can deal with the antisocial, cultural, value and religious issues underlying the causes of poverty is in doubt. Furthermore, the challenges of inadequate ICT infrastructure in the country, disruptions in energy supply, low ICT literacy rate, low investments in ICT, privacy and ethical breaches concerns are draw backs that needs attention. This calls for action, and the following policy issues are suggested.

1. Investment in training programmes and innovation labs (e.g., via NITDA or TETFund) to foster youth-led AI projects focused on solving poverty and inequality challenges.

2. Use AI to analyse gender-based poverty data and guide pro-poor, pro-women policy-making in education, maternal health, and MSME support

3. Deploy AI in environmental monitoring to predict floods, droughts, and displacement—integrating with NEMA and relevant MDAs to better prepare and respond to shocks.

4. Partner with AI-driven fintech firms to deliver microloans and savings to the unbanked, using alternative data to assess credit worthiness, especially for women and youth

5. Support AI-powered tools for precision farming, pest prediction, and weather forecasting through NASRDA and NIRSAL to boost productivity among smallholder farmers

6. Expand and integrate AI into biometric ID systems (e.g., NIN) to improve targeting and reduce fraud in social protection schemes such as Conditional Cash Transfers.

7. Partner with AI research centers to use satellite imagery and machine learning to map poverty hotspots and track real-time socioeconomic data, especially in conflict and rural areas.

8. Develop a national AI policy that prioritizes poverty reduction and social protection systems, with guidelines on ethical AI, data privacy, and inclusion. (Conversation with ChatGPT based on GPT-4 architecture, using the April 2024 model update (often referred to as GPT-4-turbo), 10/04/2025, 10/04/2025

Mainstreaming this issue in national poverty reduction policy, and in particular, policies designed to support the SDGs will help makes advances towards realizing SDG 1

Conclusion

This paper explored how technological outcomes of AI can mitigate poverty in Nigeria , and take people out of poverty as envisaged by the SDG goal 1; which seeks to eliminate poverty. Based on the exploratory analysis, the paper concludes that AI has great potentials to support the achievement of SDG 1, but highlighted its limitations in antisocial, cultural, value and religious issues underlying the causes of poverty are in the country. Furthermore, it noted challenges of implementation such as inadequate ICT infrastructure in the country, disruptions in energy supply, low ICT literacy rate, low investments in ICT, privacy and ethical breaches concerns.

The paper ended by suggesting policy responses to address National AI-for-Development Strategy, AI-Driven Poverty Mapping & Monitorinn, Digital Identity & Beneficiary Verification of social inclusion programmes, smart agriculture to improve on rural Income, financial inclusion using FinTech and AI, using AI for early-warning and crisis prediction systems, using AI to promote gender-sensitive AI programmes, using AI to secure public-private data infrastructure, and establishment of local AI Talent and Innovation Hubs.

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