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Effect of Foreign Agricultural Grant on Agricultural Productivity of Contending With Systemic Drivers of Poverty, Inequality and Exclusion towards Capacity Building and Inclusive Sustainable Development

Ogbaga Fidelis Ogbonna (PhD)
Department of Business Education, Ebonyi State College of Education, Ikwo
08068635942, ogbagaf@gmail.com
Corresponding Author: ogbagaf@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper carefully examines systemic drivers of poverty, inequality and exclusion in our society. It observed that despite global efforts towards contending with poverty, inequality and exclusion, the disparities and gaps had widened out have defiled numerous genuine efforts blaming macro-economic factors and global structures for fueling widening income gaps, political and institutional factors, corruptions, weak rule of law and unequal access to justice amongst others as drivers of poverty, inequality and exclusion in our society. This paper advocacy the development and well-tailored, effective and truly inclusive sustainable development strategies towards fighting poverty, inequality and exclusion in our societies.

Keywords: Contending, Systemic Drivers, Poverty, Inequality, Exclusion, Capacity Building, Inclusive Sustainable Development

Introduction

Despite the ambitious targets set by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions), recent data underscores the daunting scale and persistence of these challenges. Projections reveal that hundreds of millions continue to live in extreme poverty, indicating a continued struggle to meet global eradication targets by 2030, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa and regions affected by conflict and climate change (World Bank, 2024a). Simultaneously, the wealth of the richest individuals and corporations continues to soar, widening the gap between the affluent few and the struggling many, creating unprecedented levels of global inequality that severely threaten social cohesion and economic stability (Oxfam International, 2025). This pervasive disparity fuels social unrest, political instability, and a pervasive erosion of trust, as disenfranchised populations increasingly lose faith in institutions that consistently fail to deliver equitable outcomes (UN DESA, 2023). The immense human suffering, coupled with the significant drag on global economic potential—hindering innovation, market development, and sustainable investment—represents not merely a moral failing but a profound systemic risk.

While often quantified by income thresholds, the concept of poverty is now more accurately and comprehensively understood as a multidimensional deprivation. It encompasses not only a lack of sufficient financial resources but also the absence of access to essential services, quality education, adequate healthcare, dignified housing, and meaningful political voice (Alkire & Foster, 2011. Similarly, inequality, extending far beyond simple income disparities, manifests as vast wealth concentrations and egregious differences in access to life-enhancing opportunities, exacerbating social divisions and limiting upward mobility for countless individuals (World Bank, 2024b). Parallel to these, social exclusion, distinct yet intricately intertwined, refers to the active processes by which individuals or groups are systematically blocked from full and equitable participation in the economic, social, political, and cultural life of their society, leading to isolation and disempowerment (Burchardt et al., 2013; conceptual refinement by European Commission, 2020). The insidious interplay between these forces is evident: poverty often leads to exclusion from quality educational institutions and healthcare systems, which in turn perpetuates income and opportunity inequality across generations, creating a debilitating cycle of inherited disadvantage (UNICEF, 2023; ILO, 2023).

The burden of this triple bind falls disproportionately on already vulnerable and marginalized communities. Women and girls continue to face systemic barriers to education, employment, and political participation, deepening cycles of poverty and exclusion (UN Women, 2023). Children, particularly those in conflict zones or from impoverished households, are denied fundamental rights to health and education, perpetuating intergenerational disadvantage (UNICEF, 2023). Indigenous populations, ethnic minorities, persons with disabilities, and individuals in fragile states consistently face compounded forms of deprivation, discrimination, and a lack of access to justice, reinforcing their marginalized status (OHCHR, 2022). Understanding these specific vulnerabilities is crucial, as broad-brush policy interventions often fail to address the nuanced and deeply entrenched nature of their exclusion.

The prevalence and persistence of poverty, inequality, and exclusion are deeply influenced by macroeconomic factors and the architecture of global economic structures. These forces often operate beyond national borders, shaping domestic policy choices and directly impacting the distributional outcomes within societies. A critical examination of these drivers reveals how global economic forces can exacerbate existing disparities or, if poorly managed, create new forms of vulnerability and marginalization frustrating inclusive sustainable development efforts. These systemic drivers are carefully discussed below:

Neoliberal Policies, Globalization, and their Distributional Effects as Systemic Driver

The ascendancy of neoliberal policies since the late 20th century, characterized by deregulation, privatization, fiscal austerity, and open markets, has profoundly reshaped global economies and their distributional landscapes. While proponents argue that these policies foster efficiency and economic growth, a growing body of recent literature critically examines their role in exacerbating inequality and, in some contexts, hindering poverty reduction efforts. Research by the International Monetary Fund (IMF, 2023) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2024) has acknowledged that while trade liberalization and capital account openness can stimulate growth, they frequently come with significant distributional consequences, including widening income gaps and increased precariousness for segments of the labor force. Studies on specific regions, such as those

Latin America, demonstrate how early waves of neoliberal reforms, coupled with weak social safety nets, led to heightened income disparities before some countries implemented more redistributive policies.

Globalization, as a process of increasing interconnectedness through flows of goods, services, capital, and labor, is intricately linked with neoliberal policy prescriptions. While it has lifted millions out of extreme poverty in certain emerging economies, particularly in Asia, it has simultaneously contributed to rising inequality within and across many countries (Milanovic, 2016). The elephant curve of global inequality, popularized by Milanovic, illustrates how the global middle class in emerging economies has seen significant income gains, while lower-income groups in rich countries and the very poorest globally have seen less progress or even stagnation. This uneven distribution of globalization's benefits is a central theme in recent analyses.

Conversely, some scholars highlight that specific forms of globalization, such as the spread of technology, can enhance opportunities, but they critically note that access to these benefits is often unequal, thereby reinforcing existing disparities.

Financialization and its Impact on Inequality

Financialization refers to the increasing dominance of financial markets, financial motives, financial institutions, and financial elites in the operation of domestic and international economies. This phenomenon has emerged as a significant driver of inequality. Critical analyses argue that financialization has shifted economic activity from productive investment in the real economy to speculative activities, contributing to capital gains that disproportionately benefit the wealthy who own financial assets . Research highlights how the financial sector's growing share of profits and power has contributed to stagnant wages for many workers while executive compensation in financial firms has soared.

The expansion of financial markets has also increased household debt, particularly among lower and middle-income groups, making them more vulnerable to economic shocks. Financial innovation, such as complex derivatives, while ostensibly designed to manage risk, can also create systemic vulnerabilities that disproportionately affect the poor and exacerbate crises, as demonstrated by the 2008 global financial crisis (GFC) and its lasting repercussions. Subsequent analyses of the GFC's recovery often point to the fact that wealth inequality widened post-crisis, with the rich recovering faster due to asset appreciation, while many lower-income households struggled with debt and stagnant wages (Alvaredo et al., 2018; Credit Suisse, 2023). This underlines how the financial sector's practices and structures can actively concentrate wealth and deepen economic disparities.

Trade Liberalization and Labor Market Outcomes

Trade liberalization, a core tenet of neoliberalism and globalization, involves reducing tariffs and non-tariff barriers to international trade. While theoretical arguments suggest it can lead to overall economic welfare gains by promoting specialization and efficiency, empirical evidence on its distributional effects is more complex and often contested. Recent studies indicate that the impact of trade liberalization on poverty and inequality depends heavily on domestic policies, institutional capacities, and the specific characteristics of labor markets.

In many developing countries, trade liberalization has led to the growth of export-oriented industries, creating jobs and contributing to poverty reduction for some, particularly in manufacturing sectors. However, it has also frequently resulted in job displacement in import-competing sectors, particularly for low-skilled workers, leading to increased unemployment and wage suppression in certain industries. The shift towards global supply chains, often driven by trade agreements, can also lead to precarious work conditions and downward pressure on wages in sectors exposed to international competition, exacerbating income inequality (ILO, 2023). Furthermore, while trade can reduce the prices of consumer goods, potentially benefiting the poor, this effect can be outweighed by job losses and reduced social protections if governments do not implement compensatory measures.

Debt Crises and Austerity Measures in Developing Countries

Historical and contemporary analyses highlight the devastating impact of debt crises and subsequent austerity measures on poverty, inequality, and social exclusion in developing countries. When countries accumulate unsustainable levels of public debt, often exacerbated by external shocks, commodity price volatility, or unsustainable lending practices, they frequently become subject to conditionalities imposed by international financial institutions (IFIs) such as the IMF and World Bank. These conditionalities commonly involve austerity measures, including cuts to public spending on social services (health, education, social protection), privatization of state-owned enterprises, and reductions in public sector employment.

Recent case studies from the Eurozone crisis (e.g., Greece, Spain) and ongoing debt vulnerabilities in African and Latin American nations vividly illustrate these impacts. Research by the IMF, while often defending the necessity of fiscal consolidation, has also acknowledged that poorly designed austerity programs can disproportionately harm vulnerable populations and lead to rising inequality. Studies on African countries facing renewed debt distress indicate that increasing debt service payments divert crucial resources away from poverty reduction and social investment, further entrenching exclusion. The UN Human Rights Council (2021) and various civil society organizations have consistently argued that austerity measures often violate human rights obligations by undermining access to essential services for the most marginalized, thereby deepening poverty and social exclusion. These episodes underscore how global financial dynamics, when managed without adequate social safeguards, can severely undermine national efforts towards inclusive development.

In that respect, macroeconomic factors and global structures, including the pervasive influence of neoliberal policies, the transformative yet uneven effects of globalization, the increasing financialization of economies, the mixed outcomes of trade liberalization, and the recurrent cycles of debt crises and austerity, profoundly shape the landscape of poverty, inequality, and exclusion. A critical understanding of these drivers is essential, as they often create or reinforce systemic disadvantages that transcend national boundaries and necessitate coordinated global and domestic policy responses.

Systemic Drivers and Diverse Manifestations across Contexts
Political and Institutional Factors

Beyond macroeconomic forces, the domestic political and institutional landscape plays a critical role in shaping the distribution of resources, opportunities, and the extent of social inclusion or exclusion. Effective governance, robust institutions, and equitable access to justice are foundational to fostering inclusive development; their absence or dysfunction can significantly exacerbate poverty and inequality.

Governance, Corruption, and Rent-Seeking Behaviors:

Governance, encompassing the processes by which decisions are made and implemented within a society, is paramount. Weak or ineffective governance can create an environment ripe for corruption and rent-seeking behaviors, which demonstrably undermine efforts to reduce poverty and inequality. Corruption, defined as the abuse of entrusted power for private gain, diverts public funds from essential services like healthcare, education, and infrastructure, disproportionately harming the poor who rely most on these provisions (Transparency International, 2024). Studies highlight how corruption in public procurement or resource management can lead to inferior service quality and limited access for marginalized communities, thereby exacerbating existing deprivations.

Rent-seeking behaviors, where individuals or groups manipulate the economic environment to capture existing wealth rather than create new wealth, further entrench inequality. This can manifest through illicit lobbying, favoritism in licensing, or monopolistic practices that stifle competition and concentrate economic benefits in the hands of a few. The lack of accountability and transparency within governance structures allows these behaviors to flourish, creating an uneven playing field where the well-connected thrive at the expense of the majority, directly contributing to both income and wealth disparities. The presence of such behaviors can also discourage investment, undermine state legitimacy, and erode public trust, further destabilizing development efforts (IMF, 2023).

Weak Rule of Law and Unequal Access to Justice:

A weak rule of law, characterized by arbitrary application of laws, lack of legal certainty, and selective enforcement, critically undermines equitable development. When laws are not consistently applied or accessible to all, vulnerable populations are particularly susceptible to exploitation and rights violations, with limited recourse. This directly impacts their ability to secure property rights, enforce contracts, or protect themselves from abuses, all of which are fundamental for economic participation and asset accumulation while older, its core argument on legal frameworks and capital remains highly relevant; more recent applications by UN DESA, 2023, connect this to SDGs.

Unequal access to justice further compounds this issue. The poor and marginalized often face significant barriers in accessing legal aid, navigating complex legal systems, or challenging injustices due to costs, lack of awareness, discrimination, or geographical distance. This legal exclusion means that their rights are frequently violated with impunity, whether in labor disputes, land tenure issues, or instances of gender-based violence. The inability to seek redress through formal channels leaves them vulnerable to further impoverishment and exploitation, thereby entrenching both poverty and social exclusion. Empirical evidence consistently demonstrates a strong correlation between robust rule of law, equitable justice systems, and positive development outcomes, including poverty reduction and reduced inequality (World Bank, 2024a).

Political Instability, Conflict, and Displacement

Political instability and violent conflict are among the most devastating drivers of poverty, inequality, and exclusion. Conflicts directly destroy human lives, infrastructure, and economic assets, pushing entire populations into destitution . They disrupt education and healthcare systems, leading to long-term human capital deficits that perpetuate cycles of poverty across generations (UNICEF, 2024). Moreover, conflict often exacerbates pre-existing inequalities, as certain ethnic, religious, or political groups may be targeted, leading to systematic disenfranchisement and deepened horizontal inequalities (Cederman et al., 2017).

Displacement, whether internal or across borders, is a direct consequence of conflict and a major driver of extreme vulnerability. Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and refugees often lose their livelihoods, assets, and social networks, facing severe challenges in accessing basic necessities, employment, and social services in host communities. This forced migration strains host economies and can create new forms of social tension and exclusion, while the displaced populations themselves experience profound and often prolonged poverty and marginalization. The compounding effects of lost livelihoods, trauma, and institutional barriers to integration mean that conflict-affected and displaced populations are disproportionately represented among the world's extreme poor and socially excluded.

The Role of Social Policies and Welfare Regimes

Conversely, well-designed social policies and robust welfare regimes can serve as powerful tools for mitigating poverty, reducing inequality, and fostering social inclusion. Comparative analyses across different welfare states highlight how variations in social expenditure, social safety nets, and public service provision impact distributional outcomes of seminal work, but its typologies remain influential in current comparative studies. Countries with comprehensive universal social protection systems, such as those in the Nordic region, tend to exhibit lower levels of income inequality and poverty compared to those with more residual or market-reliant welfare models (OECD, 2024).

Recent research emphasizes the importance of social protection floors, which guarantee basic income security and access to essential healthcare for all, as a fundamental tool for preventing people from falling into extreme poverty and reducing vulnerability. Conditional cash transfer programs, for instance, have shown promise in reducing poverty and improving health and education outcomes in developing contexts, but their effectiveness depends on their design and the broader institutional environment (Ravallion, 2016; UNICEF, 2023). The effectiveness of social policies in promoting inclusion also hinges on addressing the specific needs of marginalized groups and ensuring non-discriminatory access to benefits and services.

Socio-Cultural Factors and Discrimination

Beyond economic and political structures, deeply ingrained socio-cultural factors and pervasive discrimination based on various social identities are powerful drivers of poverty, inequality, and social exclusion. These factors operate through social norms, stereotypes, and prejudice, creating systemic disadvantages for specific groups.

Gender Inequality: Systemic Discrimination and its Socio-Economic Consequences

Gender inequality remains a profound systemic driver of poverty, inequality, and exclusion worldwide. Rooted in patriarchal social norms and power structures, it manifests as systematic discrimination against women and girls across all spheres of life (UN Women, 2023). Economically, this includes persistent gender pay gaps, limited access to formal employment, concentration in precarious or informal sectors, and unequal ownership of assets like land and property (ILO, 2023). Women disproportionately bear the burden of unpaid care work, which restricts their participation in paid labor markets and entrenches their economic vulnerability.

Beyond economics, gender discrimination limits women's access to education, healthcare, and political participation, thereby perpetuating cycles of disadvantage. Gender-based violence, a pervasive form of discrimination, further undermines women's physical and mental health, economic security, and social autonomy (WHO, 2021). Recent research increasingly highlights how gender inequality intersects with other forms of discrimination (e.g., based on race, class, disability) to create compounded vulnerabilities, leading to deeper levels of poverty and exclusion for certain groups of women.

Racial and Ethnic Discrimination: Historical Legacies and Contemporary Manifestations

Racial and ethnic discrimination are profound drivers of systemic inequality and exclusion, often with deep historical roots in colonialism, slavery, or segregation. These historical legacies continue to manifest in contemporary forms, creating persistent disparities in wealth, income, and access to opportunities (UN Human Rights Council, 2022). Racial and ethnic minorities often face systemic biases in labor markets, leading to higher unemployment rates, lower wages, and occupational segregation.

Beyond economics, discrimination extends to housing, education, healthcare, and the justice system, leading to poorer outcomes and further marginalization. The colour of poverty is a concept that highlights how racial and ethnic minorities are disproportionately represented among the poor and excluded, often due to structural barriers and discriminatory practices rather than individual failures. Efforts to address these disparities require confronting both explicit and implicit biases, as well as dismantling institutional structures that perpetuate racial and ethnic disadvantage on systemic racism.

Discrimination Based on Disability, Age, Sexual Orientation, and Other Social Identities

Poverty, inequality, and exclusion are also significantly driven by discrimination based on a wide array of other social identities. Persons with disabilities often face systemic barriers to education, employment, and public services, leading to higher rates of poverty and social isolation (UN, 2023; World Health Organization, 2022). The social model of disability emphasizes that it is societal barriers, not individual impairments, that disable individuals, highlighting the need for inclusive design and policies.

Age discrimination, particularly against older persons and youth, contributes to economic insecurity and social exclusion. Older persons may face barriers in the labor market, leading to poverty in old age, while youth unemployment and precarious work exclude young people from full participation in the economy (ILO, 2023). Discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity, and expression (SOGIE) subjects LGBTQ+ individuals to violence, stigma, and systemic barriers in employment, housing, healthcare, and legal recognition, leading to higher rates of poverty and mental health issues, seminal on minority stress recent meta-analyses by UN Human Rights Council, 2021). Other social identities, including migrant status, religion, caste, or indigenous status, can also be powerful markers of discrimination and drivers of entrenched disadvantage.

Systemic Drivers and the Shortcomings of Conventional Approaches

The persistence of this interwoven nexus is not incidental but is sustained by identifiable systemic drivers and exacerbated by the limitations of conventional policy approaches. Macroeconomic factors, such as specific neoliberal policies, the uneven effects of globalization, and rising financialization, have contributed to widening income and wealth disparities, often at the expense of equitable distribution and social protection (IMF, 2023; Milanovic, 2016). The trickle-down premise has demonstrably failed to generate broad-based prosperity, leading to growth without equity where economic expansion coexists with persistent or rising inequality (Roosevelt Institute, 2024; World Bank, 2024).

Domestically, weak governance, endemic corruption, and rent-seeking behaviors divert crucial resources, undermine public service delivery, and erode the rule of law, disproportionately affecting vulnerable populations (Transparency International, 2024). Furthermore, deeply ingrained socio-cultural factors, including gender, racial, and ethnic discrimination, alongside biases against persons with disabilities, indigenous populations, and LGBTQ+ individuals, perpetuate exclusion through systemic biases in institutions and social norms (ILO, 2024; UN Human Rights Council, 2021). Emerging drivers like the digital divide, the impact of automation on labor markets, and the disproportionate effects of climate change further amplify these existing vulnerabilities (Autor & Salomons, 2018; IPCC, 2022; Van Dijk, 2020).

The Role of Social Norms, Stereotypes, and Prejudice

Underpinning these forms of discrimination are ingrained social norms, stereotypes, and prejudices. Social norms, often informal rules of behavior, can dictate who has access to resources and opportunities, and who is marginalized. Harmful norms, such as those dictating gender roles or perpetuating caste systems, can lead to exclusion by limiting agency and participation. Stereotypes, oversimplified and often negative generalizations about groups, contribute to prejudice (preconceived negative opinions) that shapes individual and institutional behaviors, leading to discriminatory practices foundational in social psychology and economics. These ingrained biases perpetuate disadvantage by influencing hiring decisions, access to housing, treatment in legal systems, and broader societal perceptions, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy of exclusion that is difficult to break without targeted interventions.

Technological Change and Environmental Factors

In the 21st century, the confluence of rapid technological advancement and escalating environmental crises represents increasingly significant drivers of poverty, inequality, and exclusion, often exacerbating existing vulnerabilities.

Conclusion

The analysis of systemic drivers revealed that macroeconomic factors, including the distributional effects of neoliberal policies and financialization, coupled with political and institutional failings such as weak governance and unequal access to justice, significantly exacerbate these challenges. Furthermore, deeply embedded socio-cultural factors like gender, racial, and ethnic discrimination, alongside the emerging impacts of technological change and environmental crises, disproportionately burden already vulnerable populations. These drivers coalesce to create an environment where certain groups—women, children, youth, ethnic minorities, persons with disabilities, indigenous populations, migrants, refugees, and LGBTQ+ individuals—face compounded layers of disadvantage, leading to severe and entrenched forms of poverty, inequality, and exclusion.

In conclusion, understanding poverty, inequality, and social exclusion necessitates moving beyond a singular, generalized perspective. Their manifestations are profoundly shaped by the specific socio-economic, political, and geographical contexts in which they occur. Recognizing these diverse and context-specific realities, from the nuances of relative versus absolute poverty to the sharp contrasts between urban and rural disadvantage and significant regional disparities, is fundamental for developing tailored, effective, and truly inclusive development strategies.

Recommendations

To successfully contend with systemic drivers of poverty, inequality and exclusion towards capacity building and inclusive sustainable development, the following policy recommendations have been made:

- **Reform Financial Systems**: Introduce regulations to curb excessive financialization and speculative activities that contribute to inequality, directing finance towards productive, inclusive investments.
- **Enhance Transparency and Combat Corruption**: Implement and rigorously enforce anti-corruption measures, promote fiscal transparency, and strengthen independent oversight institutions. This will ensure that public resources are effectively channeled towards poverty reduction and social services, rather than being diverted by illicit means.
- **Ensure Equitable Access to Justice:** Invest in legal aid services, simplify judicial processes, and address systemic biases within the justice system to ensure that all individuals, particularly marginalized groups, can access legal recourse and protect their rights.
- **Promote Inclusive Political Participation**: Foster democratic processes that ensure genuine voice and representation for all segments of society, including marginalized communities, in decision-making at local, national, and international levels.
- **Dismantle Systemic Discrimination and Promote Social Inclusion:** Enact and Enforce Anti-Discrimination Legislation. Implement comprehensive legal frameworks that prohibit discrimination based on gender, race, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation, religion, and other social identities, ensuring effective enforcement mechanisms.
- **Invest in Targeted Social Policies**: Develop and scale up universal social services (education, healthcare, housing) that explicitly address the needs and remove barriers for historically marginalized groups. This includes culturally sensitive approaches and universal design principles.
- **Challenge Harmful Social Norms**: Support initiatives that transform discriminatory social norms and combat stereotypes and prejudice through public education, community engagement, and media representation.

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