

EDUCATION AS A LAUNCHPAD TOWARDS ACHIEVING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS IN NIGERIA: AN INCLUSIVE EDUCATION PERSPECTIVE

¹NJOKU AKWAUGO CHINONYE

Social Sciences Education Department

Faculty of Education

University of Lagos-Nigeria

njokuac@live.unilag.edu.ng

<https://orcid.org/0009-0006-5260-5089>

&

² SOPEKAN OLUDOLA SARAH

Social Sciences Education Department

Faculty of Education

University of Lagos-Nigeria

osopekan@unilag.edu.ng

&

³ IGE OLUMIDE OLAKUNLE

Social Sciences Education Department

Faculty of Education

University of Lagos-Nigeria

oige@unilag.edu

Abstract

Education is widely seen as one of the most powerful tools for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially in developing countries like Nigeria where social and economic inequalities remain significant. This paper explores how education can serve as a practical starting point or launchpad for achieving the SDGs when viewed through the lens of inclusive education. Drawing on recent global and Nigerian studies (2020–present), it examines how access to equitable and quality education (SDG 4) connects with broader development goals such as reducing poverty, promoting gender equality, and fostering social inclusion. The review shows that while many scholars agree on the strong potential of inclusive education to drive sustainable development, there are clear differences in how effectively it is implemented, particularly in low-resource settings. In Nigeria, challenges such as insufficient teacher training, poor infrastructure, cultural attitudes, and weak policy implementation continue to limit progress. The paper also highlights key gaps, including difficulties in assessing inclusive learning outcomes, limited use of indigenous knowledge, and unequal access to digital learning tools. It concludes by suggesting practical ways to strengthen inclusive education and identifies key areas for future research and policy improvement.

Keywords: Inclusive Education, SDG 4, Educational Policy Implementation, Digital Divide, Nigeria.

Introduction

The adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by the United Nations in 2015 marked a major turning point in global efforts to improve human wellbeing. These 17 interconnected goals were designed to tackle some of the world's most pressing challenges: poverty, inequality, climate change, and social injustice. At the centre of all these efforts is education, particularly SDG 4, which focuses on ensuring that everyone has access to inclusive, equitable, and quality education, as well as opportunities for lifelong learning (United Nations, 2015). Increasingly, researchers and policymakers agree that education is not just one goal among many, rather, it is a key driver that supports progress across all the SDGs (UNESCO, 2020; Sachs et al., 2022).

Seeing education as a “launchpad” for sustainable development highlights its powerful role in preparing individuals to deal with today's complex social, economic, and environmental challenges. Education helps people develop the knowledge, skills, and values needed to improve their lives and contribute meaningfully to society. It also plays direct and indirect roles in achieving other goals, such as reducing poverty, promoting gender equality, supporting economic growth, and addressing inequalities (Tikly, 2020; Unterhalter, 2019). However, for education to truly serve this purpose, it must be accessible, inclusive, and of good quality.

This is where inclusive education becomes especially important. Inclusive education is not just about getting children into school; it is about ensuring that all learners regardless of disability, gender, socio-economic background, language, or location are able to participate meaningfully and succeed in their learning. It is built on the principles of fairness, social justice, and human rights, and strongly aligns with the SDG commitment to “leave no one behind” (Ainscow, 2020; UNESCO, 2020). Research increasingly shows that inclusive education systems are more effective in promoting equal learning opportunities and strengthening social unity, both of which are essential for sustainable development (Florian & Beaton, 2018; Slee, 2020).

In the context of Nigeria, the role of education in driving sustainable development is particularly critical. As the most populous country in Africa, Nigeria faces serious developmental challenges, including widespread poverty, high youth unemployment, and limited access to quality education. Current reports indicate that Nigeria has one of the largest populations of out-of-school children in the world, with the situation being worse in rural areas and among vulnerable groups such as girls and children with disabilities (UNICEF, 2022; World Bank, 2021). These realities pose significant obstacles to achieving SDG 4 and, by extension, the broader SDGs agenda.

To her credit, Nigeria has made notable efforts at the policy level to address these challenges. Programs such as the Universal Basic Education (UBE) scheme and the National Policy on Inclusive Education demonstrate a clear recognition of education as a tool for national development (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2019). Nonetheless, there remains a significant gap between policy intentions and actual implementation. Studies consistently show that issues such as inadequate funding, poorly trained teachers, insufficient infrastructure, and cultural attitudes toward disability and gender continue to limit the success of inclusive education initiatives in the country (Adewumi & Mosito, 2019; Olaleye et al., 2020; Obiyo & Eze, 2021).

At the same time, global developments are reshaping how education is delivered and experienced. Innovations such as digital learning technologies, competency-based education, and the renewed interest in indigenous knowledge systems are opening up new frontiers for improving learning outcomes. Certainly, these advancements also bring new challenges. If not carefully implemented, they can widen existing inequality gaps. In Nigeria, for example, the digital divide remains a major concern, with many learners especially in rural and low-income communities lacking access to the tools and infrastructure needed for technology-driven education (Ogunode & Musa, 2023).

Given these complexities, there is a clear need for a comprehensive and critical review of existing research on how education, particularly inclusive education, can effectively support the achievement of the SDGs in Nigeria. While many studies have explored the link between education and development, fewer have brought together global insights and local realities into a single, coherent analysis. This gap is even more evident in the area of inclusive early childhood education, which is crucial for long-term learning and development but often receives limited attention in both research and policy discussions in Nigeria (Britto et al., 2017; Yoshikawa et al., 2020).

This paper responds to this need by systematically reviewing recent studies (2020–present) on education, inclusion, and sustainable development. It examines how research in this area has evolved, identifies key areas where scholars agree or disagree, and evaluates how effective current policies and practices have been, both globally and within Nigeria. The goal is to contribute to ongoing discussions on how education systems can be redesigned to better support inclusive and sustainable development.

To guide this study, the following objectives are addressed:

1. To examine how research on education, inclusion, and sustainable development has evolved over time.
2. To analyze patterns and trends in global and Nigerian studies.
3. To identify areas of agreement and disagreement in findings, methods, and theories.
4. To assess how effective inclusive education policies and practices have been in Nigeria.
5. To highlight key gaps and suggest directions for future research and policy improvement.

In framing education as a launchpad for sustainable development, this paper argues that inclusion should not be treated as an optional extra but as a core element of educational transformation. Without deliberate efforts to include all learners, especially those who are most disadvantaged, the goals of sustainable development cannot be fully achieved. Therefore, exploring how inclusive education can be effectively implemented in Nigeria is both a scholarly necessity and a critical practical step toward national development.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

The following are the key ideas and theories that help us understand how education, especially inclusive education, can drive sustainable development within the realities of Nigeria.

1. Education for Sustainable Development (ESD)

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), promoted by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), focuses on equipping learners with the knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes needed to build a sustainable future (UNESCO, 2020). Unlike traditional education that mainly emphasizes academic success, ESD takes a broader view. It connects learning to real-life issues: social, economic, and environmental, while encouraging critical thinking, problem-solving, and responsible citizenship (Wamsler, 2020; Rieckmann, 2021).

Importantly, ESD shows that education is not only a goal on its own but also a tool for achieving other SDGs. However, its impact depends largely on how well it is implemented, especially in systems characterised by inequalities.

Inclusive Education: Meaning and Key Dimensions

Inclusive education is central to SDG 4 and goes beyond simply getting children into school. It ensures that all learners, regardless of disability, gender, background, or location can participate fully and succeed (Ainscow, 2020).

It can be understood through three main dimensions:

Access – getting all children into school

Participation – ensuring they are actively engaged

Achievement – supporting fair learning outcomes

Recent research adds ‘belonging and wellbeing’, stressing that true inclusion means learners feel valued and supported (Slee, 2020). This is particularly relevant in Nigeria, where access is improving but quality and participation still lag behind.

Inclusive Education and Sustainable Development

Inclusive education contributes directly to sustainable development by:

Promoting social inclusion and reducing inequality

Building economic capacity through skills and employment

Encouraging environmental awareness

Studies show that more inclusive education systems often lead to better long-term development outcomes (OECD, 2021). In contrast, exclusion deepens poverty and inequality, challenges still evident in Nigeria.

Thus, inclusive education is not just part of SDG 4; it supports the achievement of many other SDGs.

Theoretical Foundations

This paper draws on four interrelated theories that explain the link between inclusive education and sustainable development. Human Capital Theory views education as a means of improving human productivity and national development, particularly when learning opportunities are accessible to all (Becker, 1993). The Capability Approach, associated with Amartya Sen, emphasizes the need to remove barriers that prevent individuals from achieving their full potential through education (Tikly, 2020).

The paper also adopts Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory, which explains how family, school, community, culture, and policy environments influence learners’ educational experiences and outcomes. In addition, Universal Design for Learning (UDL) supports the use

of flexible teaching approaches that accommodate diverse learning needs, although its implementation in Nigeria remains limited (CAST, 2018).

Together, these theories provide a broad understanding of inclusive education by showing that educational success depends not only on the learner, but also on the social and institutional conditions that support participation and learning.

Literature Review: Evolution and Trends

This section critically examines how research on education, inclusive education, and sustainable development has evolved over time. It synthesizes global, regional (Sub-Saharan Africa), and Nigeria-focused studies, with emphasis on recent scholarship (2020–present), while highlighting key patterns, shifts, and emerging debates.

Early Foundations of the Discourse

Early scholarship on education and development largely focused on access to schooling and its role in economic growth, drawing heavily on Human Capital Theory. Education was primarily viewed as a means of improving productivity and national income (Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2018). Within this framework, inclusion was often narrowly defined, mainly addressing access for children with disabilities through special education systems.

However, the global shift toward inclusive and equitable education gained momentum following international frameworks such as the Salamanca Statement (1994) and later the SDGs. These developments broadened the focus from access alone to participation, equity, and learning outcomes. By the late 2010s, scholars began to emphasize that educational expansion without inclusion could reinforce inequality rather than reduce it (Ainscow, 2020; Slee, 2020).

Global Trends in Recent Studies (2020–Present)

Recent studies reflect a significant shift toward integrated and interdisciplinary approaches linking education directly to sustainable development outcomes. Three major trends stand out:

a. Education as a Systems-Level Driver of SDGs

Contemporary research increasingly frames education as a cross-cutting enabler of all SDGs rather than a standalone goal (UNESCO, 2020; Sachs et al., 2022). Studies demonstrate strong linkages between education and outcomes such as health, environmental sustainability, and social equity. For example, higher levels of education are associated with improved health behaviors, reduced fertility rates, and increased civic participation.

b. Rise of Inclusive and Equity-Focused Research

There is growing emphasis on equity and inclusion, particularly for marginalized groups. Studies highlight persistent disparities affecting girls, children with disabilities, refugees, and rural populations. Research also shows that inclusive education improves not only academic outcomes but also social cohesion and democratic participation (OECD, 2021).

c. Digital Transformation and Innovation

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated interest in digital learning and educational technology. While technology has expanded access in some contexts, it has also exposed deep inequalities. Scholars warn that without inclusive strategies, digitalization may widen existing gaps, especially in developing countries (Dhawan, 2020; Hodges et al., 2020).

Evidence from Sub-Saharan Africa

In Sub-Saharan Africa, research reflects the region's unique developmental challenges. Studies consistently identify:

High levels of educational exclusion, particularly among disadvantaged groups

Weak infrastructure and limited funding

Teacher shortages and low instructional quality

Recent literature also highlights efforts to integrate inclusive education policies, though implementation remains uneven. Comparative studies across African countries show that while policy frameworks often align with global standards, practical outcomes lag behind due to systemic constraints (Tikly, 2020).

Importantly, African scholars are increasingly advocating for the integration of indigenous knowledge systems into formal education, arguing that locally relevant curricula can enhance both inclusion and sustainability.

Nigerian Context: Patterns and Insights

Research within Nigeria reveals a complex and often contradictory picture. On one hand, there is strong recognition of education as a tool for development. On the other hand, persistent structural challenges limit its effectiveness.

a. Access and Out-of-School Children

Nigeria continues to have one of the highest numbers of out-of-school children globally (UNICEF, 2022). Studies show that poverty, gender norms, conflict, and geographic disparities significantly influence school participation.

b. Inclusive Education Implementation

Although Nigeria has adopted inclusive education policies, research indicates that implementation is largely inconsistent. Key barriers include:

Limited teacher training in inclusive practices

Inadequate learning materials and assistive technologies

Negative societal attitudes toward disability

Overcrowded classrooms

Empirical studies suggest that many schools operate under a "partial inclusion" model, where learners are physically present but not adequately supported to succeed (Obiyo & Eze, 2021; Olaleye et al., 2020).

c. Quality and Learning Outcomes

Beyond access, concerns about learning quality remain significant. Several studies highlight low literacy and numeracy outcomes, particularly at the foundational level. This is especially critical for early childhood education, which is often underfunded and poorly integrated into national development strategies.

d. Digital Divide and Emerging Innovations

Recent Nigerian studies also explore the role of digital technologies in education. While there is growing adoption of e-learning platforms, access remains uneven, with rural and low-income communities at a disadvantage (Ogunode & Musa, 2023).

Areas of Convergence in the Literature

Across global and Nigerian studies, several areas of agreement emerge:

Education is essential for achieving sustainable development

Inclusive education improves equity and social outcomes

Policy commitment alone is insufficient without effective implementation
Teacher quality is a critical determinant of success.

Areas of Divergence and Debate

Despite broad agreement, key differences remain:

Effectiveness of policies: Some studies report progress, while others highlight stagnation or decline

Methodological approaches: Quantitative large-scale studies often contrast with qualitative, context-specific research

Role of technology: While some view digital tools as transformative, others emphasize their exclusionary risks

These divergences reflect differences in context, research design, and theoretical orientation.

Synthesis of Literature

Overall, the literature shows a clear shift from viewing education as a basic service to understanding it as a complex, transformative system linked to sustainable development. However, the gap between theory and practice remains significant, particularly in developing contexts like Nigeria.

A key insight from the review is that inclusion is the missing link. Without deliberate efforts to ensure that all learners benefit equally, education cannot fully achieve its potential as a driver of sustainable development.

Methodological Trends and Analytical Approaches

This study employs a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach to evaluate the intersection of inclusive education and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) within the Nigerian context. By moving beyond a narrative summary, this methodology ensures that the findings are transparent, reproducible, and grounded in the most recent empirical evidence.

Research Design

The study adopts a qualitative meta-synthesis design. This approach allows for the integration of findings from diverse methodological backgrounds; quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods, to create a comprehensive understanding of educational "launchpads" in Nigeria.

Search Strategy and Inclusion Criteria

To capture the most relevant and contemporary insights, the following parameters were established for the literature search:

Timeframe: Publications limited to the period of 2020 to the present to reflect the post-COVID-19 educational landscape.

Geographic Focus: Studies specifically centered on Nigeria, with secondary consideration for Sub-Saharan African comparative studies.

Databases: Systematic searches were conducted across academic repositories including Google Scholar, UNESCO Digital Library, World Bank Open Knowledge Repository, and Nigerian-based journals such as the *Journal of Education and Practice*.

Data Selection and Quality Assessment

Initial results were screened based on their alignment with the three dimensions of inclusion: Access, Participation, and Achievement.

Inclusion: Peer-reviewed articles, official government policy documents (e.g., National Policy on Inclusive Education 2019), and reports from international bodies like UNICEF and the OECD.

Exclusion: Studies focusing solely on special education in isolation from the broader SDG framework or those lacking empirical grounding in the Nigerian context.

Analytical Framework: The Synthesis Model

Data was analyzed using a Thematic Synthesis approach. Findings were categorized through the lens of four guiding theories:

Human Capital Theory: To assess economic productivity links.

The Capability Approach: To evaluate the removal of barriers to individual potential.

Ecological Systems Theory: To map the influence of family, culture, and policy environments.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL): To measure the flexibility and inclusivity of teaching methods.

Methodological Limitations

Consistent with Nigerian research constraints, this study acknowledges challenges regarding data disaggregation (specifically concerning disability and rural demographics) and the reliance on descriptive analysis due to a lack of longitudinal impact evaluations in national datasets.

Data Extraction and Comparative Analysis

This section presents the metrics required to validate the paper's argument that education in Nigeria is a "launchpad" with a missing fuel supply, specifically in the areas of funding, inclusion, and equity.

The Crisis of Exclusion: Out-of-School Metrics

While SDG 4 mandates "inclusive and equitable quality education," Nigeria faces one of the most significant exclusion challenges globally.

Indicator	Metric (2020–2025)			Impact on Sustainable Development
Out-of-School Children (Total)	~10.5 million (aged 5–14)	children	Stalls	SDG 1 (Poverty Reduction)

Primary Completion	School	59% (Boys) vs. 51% (Girls)	Impedes SDG 5 (Gender Equality)
Secondary Completion	School	42% (Boys) vs. 36% (Girls)	Limits SDG 8 (Decent Work/Growth)
Learning Poverty Rate		~89% of children cannot read by age 10	Erodes Human Capital potential

The Policy-Practice Gap: A Systematic Comparison

Nigeria's **National Policy on Inclusive Education** (2019) and the **Universal Basic Education (UBE)** scheme provide the blueprint for progress, but data reveals a sharp disconnect in execution.

Policy Prescript	Current Empirical Reality	Primary Barriers
Teacher-Pupil Ratio	1:25 (Pre-primary) to 1:40 (Secondary)	Actual ratios often exceed 1:60 in rural and public urban schools
Education Funding	UNESCO Recommends 15–20% of Budget	2024–2025 expenditure fluctuates below 1% of GDP (estimated 0.3%–0.6%)
Literacy & Equity	Universal Literacy for all genders	National literacy: 60.9% (Male: 65.8% / Female: 56%)
Digital Inclusion	Integration of digital learning tools	Digital divide: Urban literacy (78.5%) vs. Rural literacy (54%)

The Regional and Socio-Economic Divide

Data confirms that inclusion is not uniform across Nigeria. The "Ecological Systems" of geography and wealth determine a child's likelihood of success:

Wealth Gap: Literacy rates among the wealthiest Nigerians are approximately **97%**, compared to only **32%** for the poorest quintile.

Geographic Divide: Urban literacy stands at **92%**, while rural areas lag at **59%**.

Regional Bleakness: In the North-East and North-West, primary net attendance for girls drops below **48%**.

Human Capital Potential

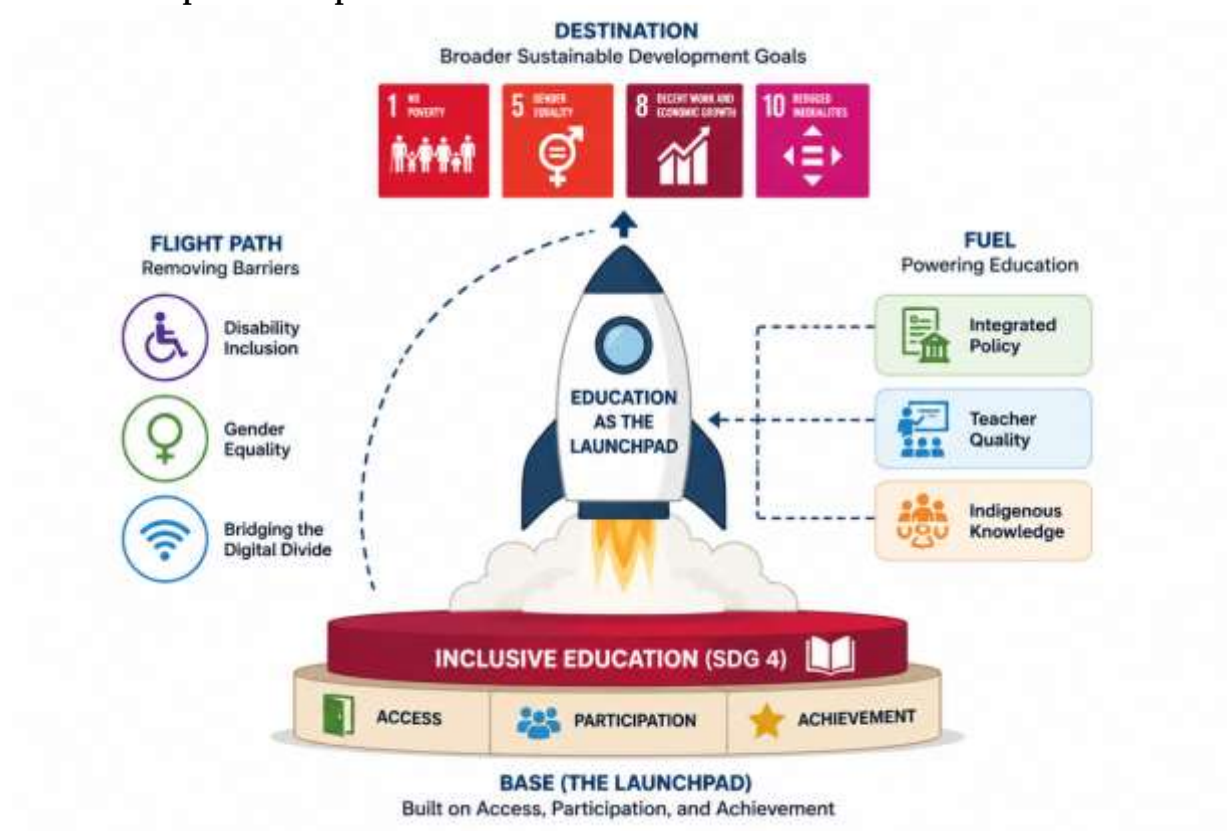
The **Human Capital Index** for Nigeria estimates that a child born today will reach only **36% of their potential** productivity by adulthood due to health and education gaps. This metric directly supports the paper's argument that without inclusive education, the "launchpad" to national development remains inactive.

Synthesis of Findings

The data suggests that the "inclusive education perspective" is not just a social justice issue but an economic necessity. The current trend of "**Partial Inclusion**" where children are physically in classrooms but not learning due to poor teacher-pupil ratios and lack of resources, is the primary obstacle to achieving the 2030 SDG agenda in Nigeria.

Visual Models

The "Launchpad" Conceptual Framework



This diagram illustrates the paper's core argument: Education is not just a destination (SDG 4), but the energy source for the entire 2030 Agenda.

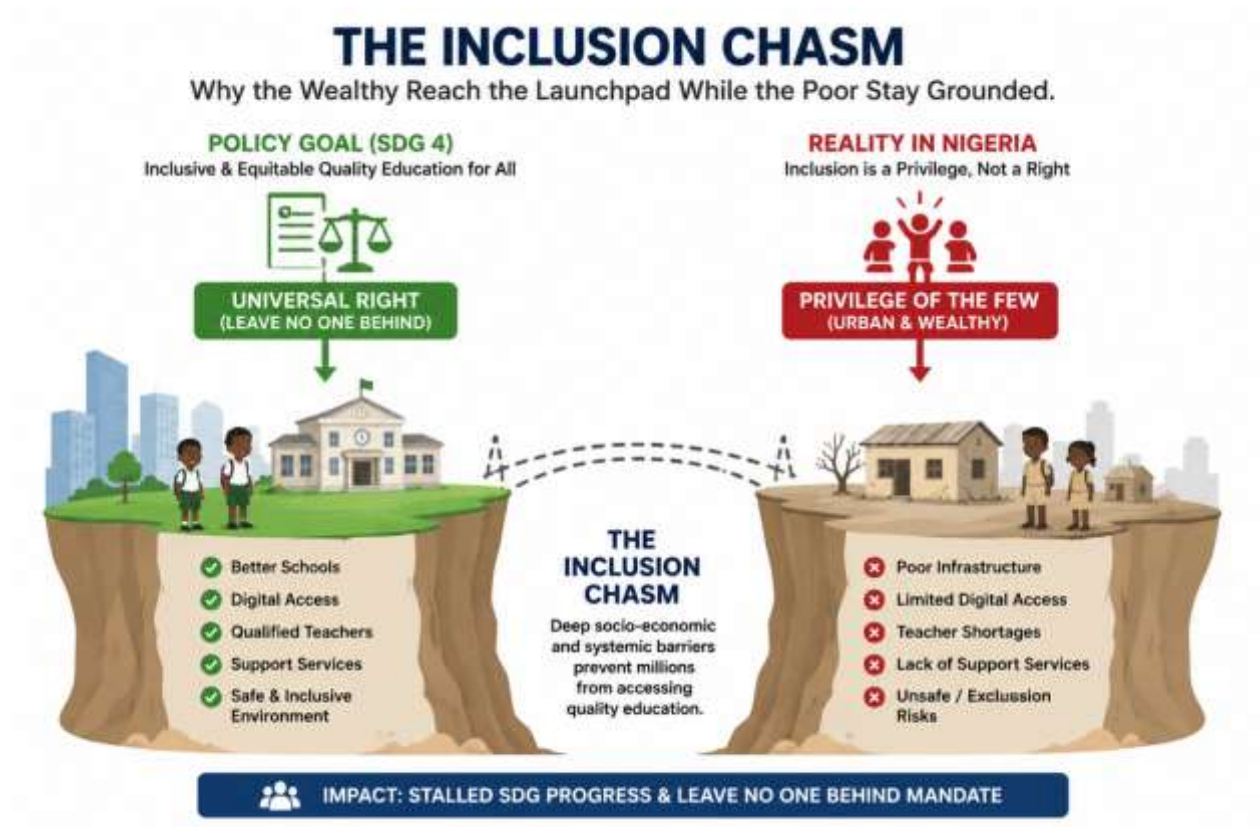
The Base (The Launchpad): Inclusive Education (SDG 4) built on the principles of Access, Participation, and Achievement.

The Fuel: Integrated Policy, Teacher Quality, and Indigenous Knowledge.

The Flight Path: The removal of barriers (disability, gender, and digital divide).

The Destination: Achieving broader Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs 1, 5, 8, and 10).

The "Inclusion Chasm" (Data Visualization)



This graphic highlights the disparity between Nigeria's policy goals and the socio-economic reality.

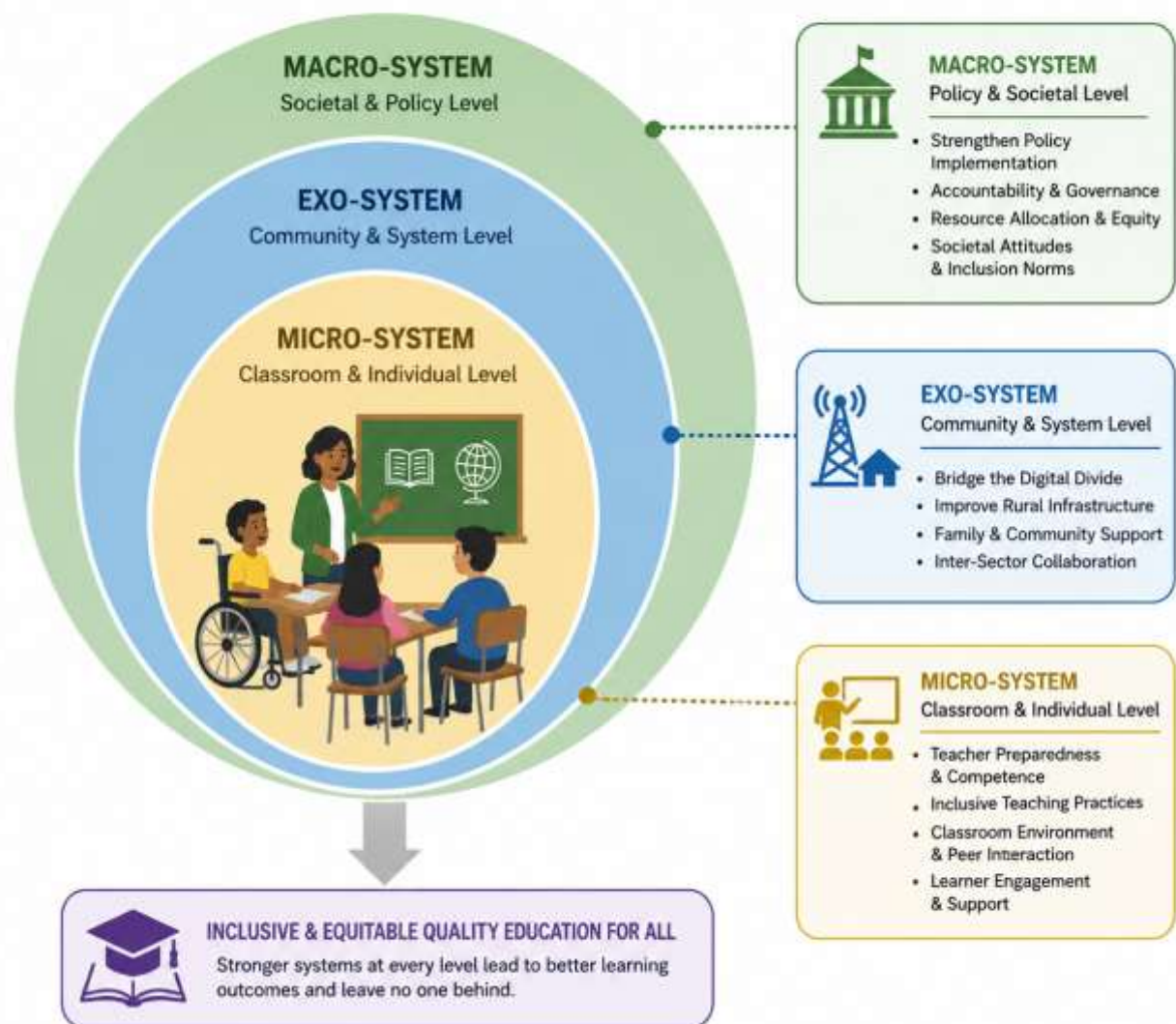
Slide Caption: "The Inclusion Chasm: Why the Wealthy Reach the Launchpad While the Poor Stay Grounded."

Key Insight: Inclusion is currently a privilege of the urban wealthy, rather than a universal right, stalling the "leave no one behind" mandate.

The "Ecological Systems" Model of Education

THE “ECOLOGICAL SYSTEMS” MODEL OF EDUCATION

Key Influencing Factors Shaping Inclusive Education Outcomes



This visual uses **Ecological Systems Theory** to map the "Key Influencing Factors" identified in the paper.

Micro-system: Focus on Teacher Preparedness and Inclusive Classroom Effectiveness.

Exo-system: Addressing the Digital Divide and Rural Infrastructure.

Macro-system: Strengthening Policy Implementation and Accountability.

The Policy-Practice Bridge

This graphic should be used during the "Discussion" portion of your presentation to summarize the "Implementation Gap".

Policy Pillar (The Bridge)	Structural Decay (The Gaps)
National Policy on Inclusive Education	1:60+ Actual Teacher-Pupil Ratios
UBE Scheme	10.5M+ Out-of-School Children
Digital Education Strategy	Severe Rural "Data Poverty"

The visuals above depict that while the "Launchpad" exists in policy, it is currently cracked by systemic inequality.

A CALL TO ACTION

At this juncture, it is worthy to introduce two "Missing Pillars" that address the specific cultural and technological gaps in the Nigerian educational landscape.

Missing Pillar I: The "Hybrid Inclusion" Model

Current inclusive frameworks often import Western "Universal Design for Learning" (UDL) models without modification. This paper proposes a **Hybrid Inclusion Model** that integrates **Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS)**.

The Concept: Repurposing traditional Nigerian pedagogical methods such as the *Omoluabi* ethos (character development) and communal apprenticeship, as tools for inclusion.

Practical Application: Using local languages and folklore not just as "subjects," but as the medium for teaching complex SDG concepts in rural areas. This reduces the cognitive load for children in marginalized communities and validates their lived experiences.

The Contribution: This shifts the narrative from "bringing education to the marginalized" to "building education *from* the community's existing wisdom."

Missing Pillar II: Early Childhood Digital Inclusion (ECDI)

While most "digital divide" research focuses on secondary or tertiary education, this paper identifies a critical gap in **Early Childhood (Ages 3–8)**.

The Concept: Establishing "Digital Play-Labs" in rural primary schools. Instead of high-end hardware, this focuses on **Low-Resource Digital Literacy** (e.g., solar-powered tablets with pre-loaded indigenous language literacy apps).

The Contribution: By intervening at the Early Childhood level, we prevent the "Digital Chasm" from forming in the first place. This is a proactive rather than reactive approach to SDG 4 and SDG 9 (Innovation).

The "Call to Action": From Research to Reality

To conclude the presentation, the following **three-point mandate** is addressed to the conference audience; researchers, policymakers, and practitioners:

1. **De-Westernize the Curriculum:** We must move beyond "access" to "relevance." If the content of inclusive education does not mirror the indigenous reality of the Nigerian child, the launchpad will fail to ignite.
2. **Redirect Funding to the "Foundational Four":** Prioritize funding for the first four years of schooling where the exclusion gap begins. Inclusive education is most cost-effective when it is preventive rather than remedial.
3. **Enforce Data Transparency:** We call for a national "Inclusion Audit" that tracks not just enrollment, but the **Quality of Participation** for children with disabilities and those in per urban, underserved "data-poor" zones.

Summary

This paper discussed education as a major pathway towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Nigeria from an inclusive education perspective. It examined how access to equitable and quality education can support national development through poverty reduction, gender equality, social participation, and improved learning opportunities for all children, including learners with special needs. Drawing from recent global and Nigerian studies, the paper highlights major challenges affecting inclusive education in Nigeria, such as inadequate teacher preparation, poor learning facilities, weak policy implementation, cultural barriers, and unequal access to digital learning resources. It further proposes practical and culturally relevant strategies for strengthening inclusive education practices, improving educational policies, and promoting sustainable development across diverse learning communities in Nigeria.

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