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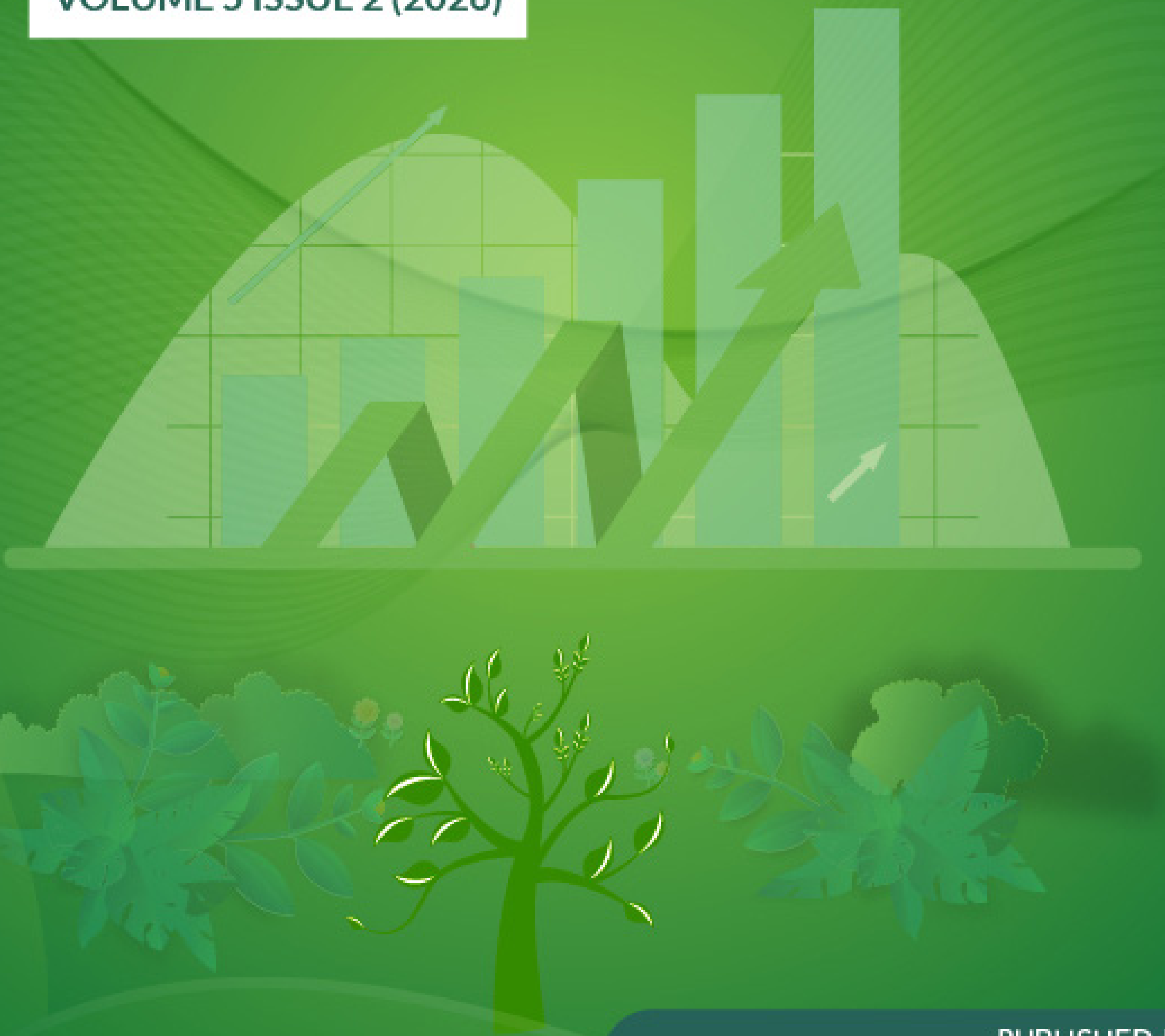

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The Power of Social Justice in Combating Poverty in Africa: An Empirical Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Despite decades of reforms to combat poverty in Africa, the incidence of poverty in Africa still remains a developmental challenge. This study examines the power of social justice in combating poverty in Africa using panel dataset comprises twenty countries, with data sourced from the World Development Indicators and the United Nations Development Programme covering the period of 2010 to 2024. The study employed the panel Generalized Method of Moments (GMM) to empirically examine the relationship between poverty reduction and social justice. The findings reveal a positive and significant relationship between lagged poverty reduction and current poverty reduction, indicating persistence and path dependence in poverty outcomes. However, social justice, as well as our control variable, which is unemployment, is found to exert a negative impact on poverty reduction, suggesting that an increase in social justice mechanisms and low unemployment rates lead to a reduction in poverty levels in Africa. The results highlight the importance of strengthening effective and inclusive social justice frameworks alongside employment-generating policies to achieve sustainable poverty reduction across the continent. It is recommended that African policy makers should increase and stabilize public financing for social justice programs, extend coverage to informal-sector and rural populations, and strengthen administrative efficiency through improved targeting and digital delivery mechanisms.

INTRODUCTION

Poverty in Africa remains a defining development challenge of the twenty-first century. Despite decades of economic reforms, foreign aid, and policy initiatives aimed at accelerating growth, a significant proportion of the continent's population continues to live in multidimensional poverty, lacking not only income but also access to fundamental rights such as education, healthcare, and social protection. This persistent poverty manifests in both urban and rural contexts and reflects deep structural inequalities that economic growth alone has been unable to eradicate. Research across sub-Saharan Africa underscores the complexity of poverty, linking it to factors such as weak institutions, social exclusion, inequality, and limited civic participation (Zhou, 2022). Traditional poverty alleviation strategies in African states have often prioritized macroeconomic growth and market liberalization. While these approaches have yielded mixed economic outcomes, they frequently fall short in addressing the underlying social and institutional barriers that perpetuate deprivation among the most vulnerable groups. Growing scholarship argues that poverty should be understood not merely as a lack of income but as a deprivation of capabilities and rights (Laxman, 2024).

Social justice, in the African context, encompasses the fair distribution of resources, equal recognition and protection of rights, and the inclusion of historically marginalized groups in socio-economic decision-making. It speaks to both distributive justice, that is, ensuring that wealth, services, and opportunities are shared equitably and procedural justice, which entails guaranteeing fair and inclusive governance processes. The pursuit of social justice involves addressing inequalities related to gender, ethnicity, geography, and class, which have historically shaped patterns of exclusion across the continent. (Murshed et al, 2024). Embedding social justice into poverty alleviation practices across Africa has proved uneven. Persistent structural inequalities, which are rooted in colonial legacies, weak governance, and limited institutional capacity, continue to constrain equitable development outcomes. Social justice initiatives often confront institutional hurdles such as fragmented policy implementation, inadequate funding for social protection, and exclusionary governance systems that fail to empower marginalized populations. These gaps highlight the need for integrative approaches that combine economic, social, and legal strategies to advance both equity and poverty reduction.

Despite the considerable efforts by African governments, regional organizations, and international partners to combat poverty, the continent continues to grapple with high levels of poverty and inequality. According to the World Bank (2021), over 40% of the population in Sub-Saharan Africa lives below the international poverty line, with many experiencing multidimensional deprivation in health, education, and living standards. While economic growth has contributed to some improvements, the benefits remain unevenly distributed, often exacerbating existing inequalities and social injustices (UNDP, 2020).

One of the persistent challenges in addressing poverty in Africa is the failure of development strategies to adequately incorporate social justice principles. Many poverty alleviation programs tend to focus on economic indicators such as GDP growth or income levels,

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neglecting the broader social inequalities that sustain poverty cycles (Kabeer, 2005). Structural factors such as gender discrimination, ethnic marginalization, uneven access to education and healthcare, and land ownership inequalities significantly hinder the effectiveness of poverty reduction efforts (Whiteside, 2010).

Furthermore, social injustice that is manifested through unequal access to resources, political marginalization, and discrimination perpetuates poverty among vulnerable groups, undermining the sustainability of development initiatives. For instance, women and girls often face systemic barriers that limit their economic opportunities and access to essential services, thereby constraining national development goals (Nussbaum, 2011).

Despite the recognition of social justice as a critical component of sustainable development, there remains a significant gap in understanding how social justice principles concretely impact poverty alleviation processes across different African contexts. Many existing policies are top-down, failing to address local realities and the specific injustices faced by marginalized populations (Cherly, 2024). This disconnect raises questions about the effectiveness of current strategies and highlights the need for a nuanced understanding of how social justice can be integrated into poverty alleviation frameworks to achieve equitable and sustainable development outcomes. Therefore, this study seeks to investigate the extent to which social justice influences poverty alleviation efforts in Africa and explore how integrating social justice principles can enhance the effectiveness of poverty reduction initiatives. Addressing this problem is essential for informing policies that promote inclusive growth, reduce inequalities, and foster social cohesion on the continent.

Poverty in Africa remains a persistent and multifaceted development problem that resists resolution through conventional economic strategies alone. Despite periods of economic growth and significant international aid, extreme poverty persists at disproportionately high levels in many African countries, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, where progress toward the Sustainable Development Goal of eradicating poverty has been uneven and, in some contexts, has stalled or reversed (Adukpo & Bethel, 2025). One core reason why economic policies have exerted limited impact on poverty reduction is that poverty in Africa is tightly interwoven with social inequalities and institutional exclusions that concentrate resources and opportunities among dominant groups while marginalizing vulnerable populations. A social justice lens emphasizes not just economic outcomes, but also procedural fairness, equitable access to rights, and inclusion in decision-making dimensions that are critical for both human dignity and sustainable development.

In addition the poverty–conflict nexus in sub-Saharan Africa illustrates how poverty and conflict mutually reinforce each other, with social injustice and marginalization often acting as root causes of instability. Addressing such dynamics requires more than economic interventions; it necessitates justice-based solutions that promote social inclusion, strengthen institutions, and mitigate exclusionary practices. (Saidi et al, 2024).

Despite this theoretical and empirical recognition, there is a notable gap in comprehensive research assessing how social justice principles concretely affect poverty alleviation outcomes across diverse African contexts. Existing studies often focus on isolated dimensions of inequality or specific interventions, leaving a broader, comparative understanding of justice-poverty linkages underdeveloped. This gap limits the ability of policymakers, civil society, and international development partners to design and implement poverty reduction policies that are both effective and equitable. Therefore, this study is justified on the grounds that a deeper understanding of the impact of social justice on poverty alleviation in Africa will address a critical knowledge gap, enrich policy discourse, and inform more equitable, inclusive, and sustainable development strategies. It will contribute to academic scholarship and practical policy design by linking social justice principles with measurable poverty outcomes, thereby offering actionable insights for achieving long-term human development goals on the continent (Abiodun et al, 2026).

The research questions of the study are firstly; "How does the application of social justice affect poverty alleviation outcomes across African countries?" This question is premised on the argument that poverty in Africa is not merely the result of low-income levels but is deeply rooted in structural inequalities and unequal access to opportunities. The question therefore seeks to examine whether social justice-oriented policies and government actions translate into sustained poverty alleviation. The second research question is, how does unemployment influence poverty reduction in Africa, and what are the underlying mechanisms through which unemployment affects poverty alleviation efforts across different African countries? This question is essential because unemployment remains a significant challenge in many African countries, directly impacting individuals' income, access to basic services, and overall economic stability. Understanding the specific ways in which unemployment affects poverty reduction can help policymakers to design targeted interventions to stimulate employment opportunities which in-turn leads to poverty reduction. (Aderounmu, et al, 2021).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptual review on social justice

Social justice is a multidimensional concept concerned with fairness in the distribution of resources, opportunities, rights, and responsibilities within society. At its core, social justice emphasizes equity rather than mere equality, recognizing that different social groups require different forms of support to achieve comparable outcomes. Classical and contemporary theorists view social justice as encompassing distributive justice, procedural justice, and recognitional justice (Mlambo, et al, 2022). John Rawls' theory of justice conceptualizes social justice as fairness, arguing that social and economic inequalities are justifiable only if they benefit the least advantaged members of society. This perspective is particularly relevant in Africa, where historical injustices, colonial legacies, and unequal power relations have shaped patterns of exclusion and deprivation.

The African context of social justice is shaped by colonial legacies, weak institutions, governance challenges, and socio-cultural inequalities. Issues such as gender discrimination, regional disparities, youth unemployment, and limited access to justice exacerbate poverty across the continent. The African Union's Agenda 2063 emphasizes inclusive growth, social protection, and human dignity as central pillars of Africa's long-term development vision. (Mlambo *et al.* 2022). However, the uneven implementation of justice-oriented policies across African countries has limited their impact on poverty alleviation. Weak governance, corruption, and inadequate fiscal capacity often undermine redistributive efforts, highlighting the need for context-specific and institutionally grounded social justice frameworks.

Conceptual review on poverty and poverty reduction

Poverty is no longer understood solely as income deprivation but as a multidimensional condition involving lack of basic needs, limited access to services, vulnerability, and social exclusion. UNECA (2019) defines poverty as the denial of choices and opportunities fundamental to human development, including long and healthy life, education, and a decent standard of living. In Africa, poverty alleviation refers to deliberate policies and interventions aimed at reducing both the incidence and severity of poverty. These include economic growth strategies, social protection programs, human capital development, and institutional reforms. However, evidence shows that poverty reduction efforts that focus narrowly on economic growth often fail to benefit marginalized groups, leading to persistent inequality and social exclusion (World Bank, 2018).

Conceptual linkages between social justice and poverty reduction

The relationship between social justice and poverty alleviation is grounded in the recognition that poverty is both a cause and a consequence of social injustice. Structural inequalities in access to land, education, employment, justice, and political power perpetuate poverty across generations in many African societies. Social justice addresses these structural barriers by promoting inclusive policies, equitable resource distribution, and institutional accountability. (Yerkes & Bal, 2022). Distributive justice mechanisms such as progressive taxation, social transfers, and subsidized public services help reduce poverty by reallocating resources toward disadvantaged groups. Procedural justice, including access to justice and participatory governance, ensures that the poor can claim their rights and influence decisions that affect their well-being. In Africa, social justice is also closely linked to social protection systems, gender equality, and youth inclusion. For instance, cash transfer programs and social grants have been shown to reduce poverty and inequality when they are rights-based, transparent, and inclusive (UNDP, 2016).

Conceptual gaps and implications for the study

Although existing literature acknowledges the importance of social justice in development, there remains a conceptual and empirical gap in systematically linking social justice dimensions to poverty alleviation outcomes across African countries. Many studies focus on isolated aspects such as income inequality or social protection without integrating distributive, procedural, and recognitional justice into a unified analytical framework. This study is therefore conceptually justified in examining how social justice, through equitable resource distribution, inclusive governance, and access to rights, shapes poverty alleviation in Africa. By adopting an integrated social justice lens, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of poverty as a structural and institutional challenge rather than merely an economic one.

Theoretical framework

The Utilitarian theory of social justice

Utilitarianism has played a pivotal role in shaping modern moral philosophy and theories of social justice. Rooted in the ideas of Jeremy Bentham (1789) and John Stuart Mill (1863), both cited in Broome (2002), utilitarianism advocates for actions and social arrangements that maximize overall happiness or utility. Bentham's principle of utility serves as the foundation for utilitarian thinking (Broome, 2002). John Stuart Mill refined utilitarianism by emphasizing qualitative differences in pleasures, arguing that intellectual and moral pleasures are superior to purely physical ones. He also stressed individual liberty and the importance of protecting personal freedoms as a means of promoting overall happiness (Liu, 2023). The major criticism of utilitarianism is that, firstly, utilitarianism can justify sacrificing the rights of minorities if doing so increases overall happiness. For example, it might endorse oppressive policies if they benefit the majority (Nozick, 1974, cited in Moroni, 2022). Secondly, it does not inherently respect individual rights or moral duties, risking the justification of morally questionable actions if they produce greater utility (Scanlon, 1998).

John Rawls's theory of social justice

John Rawls is widely regarded as one of the most influential political philosophers of the 20th century. His seminal work, "A Theory of Justice," in 1971, revolutionized debates on social justice by proposing a systematic and morally grounded framework for designing just societies. Rawls's theory is characterized by its emphasis on fairness, equality, and the protection of individual rights, articulated through innovative concepts such as the original position, the veil of ignorance, and the difference principle. (O'Neill, 2022). Rawls derived two fundamental principles. First is the equal basic liberties principle, which notes that each person is to have an equal right to basic liberties, such as freedom of speech, political rights, and freedom of conscience. These liberties are to be compatible with similar liberties for others (Rawls, 1971, cited in O'Neill, 2022). The second principle is the difference principle and fair equality of opportunity, which notes that social and economic inequalities are permissible only if they benefit the least advantaged (the difference principle) and if offices and positions are open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity. The implication is that the framework aims to balance individual rights with social and economic justice, emphasizing fairness and protecting the most vulnerable members of society.

The critiques of the Rawls theory include the following: i) Critics argued that the original position and veil of ignorance are overly idealized and detached from real-world complexities. ii) Some critics contend that the difference principle may still permit significant inequalities that are unjust, especially if they benefit the least advantaged but perpetuate systemic disparities.

The Marxist theory of social justice

Marxism, which is rooted in the works of Karl Marx (1818–1883), presents a radical critique of capitalism and offers a distinctive conception of social justice centered on economic equality and the abolition of class exploitation. Unlike liberal theories that emphasize individual rights and fairness within existing structures, Marxism seeks to fundamentally transform society by addressing the root causes of inequality, namely, the economic relations rooted in the mode of production (Xiaoping, 2022). The core principles of Marxist social justice are; i) The abolition of private property. Marx argued that private ownership of the means of production leads to exploitation and inequality. Social ownership or communal control over resources is necessary for justice. ii) A classless society: Marx argued that the ultimate goal is to establish a society without classes where wealth is redistributed according to need, and exploitation is eliminated. iii) Historical materialism: Marx notes the belief that social change occurs through dialectical processes driven by economic contradictions, culminating in a proletarian revolution (Marx & Engels, 1848, cited in Buissink, 2023). iv) From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs. Marx advocated for equitable distribution based on individual needs once class divisions are eradicated (Marx, 1875, cited in Buissink, 2023).

He proposed the Revolution and Transition process, where he noted that the transition involves the overthrow of private property, the establishment of collective ownership, and the redistribution of resources. Finally, he proposed the communist idea, which he noted as the ultimate stage in Marxism, that is, an egalitarian, stateless society where goods and resources are shared according to needs, and social justice is realized through the absence of class distinctions. Marxist theory has faced criticism, which includes the following: i) All historical attempts to implement Marxist principles have often resulted in authoritarian regimes, raising concerns about the suppression of individual freedoms (Hayek, 1944, cited in Stringham & Zywicki, 2025). ii) Critics also argued that abolishing private property may reduce incentives for innovation and productivity (Friedman, 1962, cited in Forder, 2019).

Theories of poverty alleviation

Redistribution and the welfare state theory of poverty alleviation

The redistribution and welfare state theory states that poverty can be effectively alleviated through deliberate government intervention aimed at redistributing income and wealth and providing social protection to vulnerable populations. According to this theory, markets alone are insufficient to ensure fair outcomes, as they often generate inequality, unemployment, and social exclusion. Redistribution involves transferring resources from higher-income groups to lower-income groups through instruments such as progressive taxation, subsidies, and social transfers (Woods, & Schmid, 2021). The theory is rooted in Keynesian economics, social democratic ideology, and principles of social justice. Philosophically, the theory aligns closely with egalitarian and Rawlsian ideas of distributive justice, which argue that inequalities should be addressed when they disadvantage the least privileged members of society. Welfare policies are therefore justified not merely as acts of charity but as matters of social rights and justice. The mechanisms of poverty alleviation under the welfare state are

Progressive taxation: Progressive tax systems require individuals with higher incomes to pay a larger proportion of their earnings in taxes. These revenues are used to finance public services and social programs that benefit lower-income groups, thereby reducing income inequality.

Social transfers and cash benefits: Welfare states provide direct income support through pensions, unemployment benefits, child allowances, disability benefits, and conditional or unconditional cash transfers. These programs help households meet basic needs and protect them from extreme poverty.

Public provision of social services: Access to free or subsidized education, healthcare, housing, and transportation reduces the cost of living for poor households and improves long-term human development outcomes.

Social insurance: Social insurance schemes protect individuals against risks such as illness, old age, unemployment, and workplace injury. By pooling risks across society, these systems prevent individuals from falling into poverty due to unforeseen events (Obomeghie & Bello, 2017). Despite its achievements, the redistribution and welfare state theory faces several criticisms: firstly, critics argue that generous welfare benefits may reduce incentives to work. Secondly, welfare programs require high levels of public spending and taxation. Thirdly, poor governance can lead to corruption and mismanagement. Fourthly, benefits may not always reach the intended poor populations. Finally, neoliberal critics contend that excessive state intervention distorts markets and hampers economic efficiency.

Human capital theory of poverty alleviation

Human capital theory views individuals' knowledge, skills, education, health, and competencies as forms of capital that contribute to economic productivity and growth. In the context of poverty alleviation, the theory holds that poverty persists largely because individuals lack adequate education, skills, and health needed to participate productively in the economy. According to this approach, poverty alleviation is achieved not primarily through redistribution, but through investment in human capabilities that raise productivity, increase employability, and improve income-earning potential (Omolara & Ogunro, 2022). The human capital theory is rooted in neoclassical economics and was formally developed in the mid-20th century. The key areas of intervention of the human capital theory include the following: i) Universal primary and secondary education. ii) Technical and vocational education and training (TVET). iii) Higher education and research. i) Skills development and lifelong learning.

The mechanisms of poverty alleviation through human capital are; i) education, which enhances cognitive skills, increases productivity, and improves adaptability in the labor market. Higher educational attainment is consistently associated with higher income levels and lower poverty rates. ii) good health and nutrition, which improves physical and mental capacity to work. Investments in healthcare and nutrition reduce absenteeism, increase labor efficiency, and extend working life. iii) Skills and training, especially vocational and technical training, equip individuals with marketable skills, improving employability and self-employment opportunities. iv) Intergenerational effect, which posits that human capital investment reduces poverty across generations, as educated and healthy parents are more likely to invest in their children's education and well-being. Despite its strengths, the human capital theory faces several criticisms, such as; i) critics argue that education alone cannot eliminate poverty in the presence of unemployment, inequality, and weak economic structures. ii) not all education guarantees employment or income, especially in saturated labor markets. Equally, poor households may lack resources to invest in education and health. Finally, the theory may undervalue social, cultural, and institutional barriers to poverty reduction. However, success depends on quality, relevance, and alignment with labor market needs (Obomeghie, 2025).

Empowerment and participation theory of poverty alleviation

The empowerment and participation theory views poverty as not only a lack of income or material resources but also as a condition characterized by powerlessness, marginalization, and exclusion from decision-making. According to this theory, poverty alleviation requires expanding the ability of poor individuals and communities to influence institutions, policies, and processes that affect their well-being. Together, empowerment and participation aim to transform the poor from passive recipients of aid into active agents of change. (Wen & Wu, 2023).

The mechanisms of poverty alleviation through empowerment and participation under the EP theory include:

Community-driven development (CDD): The CDD programs give communities control over development funds and decision-making. This increases ownership, relevance, and sustainability of poverty alleviation initiatives.

Decentralization and local governance: By transferring authority to local governments, poor communities gain greater influence over resource allocation and service delivery.

Social capital and collective action: Empowerment strengthens social networks and cooperation, enabling communities to collectively address poverty-related challenges.

Gender Empowerment: Empowering women through education, access to credit, and political participation has been shown to significantly reduce household and community poverty.

Critics of the empowerment and participation theory argue that empowerment strategies must be combined with economic growth and redistribution to produce substantial poverty reduction. In developing countries, empowerment-based poverty alleviation has been applied through participatory budgeting, microfinance groups, community health initiatives, and grassroots advocacy. International organizations such as the World Bank, UNDP, and NGOs increasingly emphasize participatory development as a core principle of poverty reduction strategies.

Microfinance and financial inclusion theory of poverty alleviation

The theory underlying microfinance and financial inclusion posits that poverty persists partly because the poor are excluded from formal financial systems. Without access to credit or savings mechanisms, poor individuals are unable to invest in education, health, or income-generating activities. Financial inclusion, therefore, is seen as a critical tool for empowering the poor, promoting entrepreneurship, and facilitating economic participation. (Chikwira *et al.*, 2022).

According to Su (2020), the microfinance and financial inclusion theory views poverty as a consequence of exclusion rather than incapacity. By providing financial tools, the poor are enabled to: i) Invest in small businesses and agriculture. ii) Smooth consumption during income shocks. iii) Accumulate assets and savings. iv) Improve access to education and healthcare. Financial inclusion thus supports both short-term coping mechanisms and long-term economic advancement. The mechanisms of poverty alleviation through microfinance and financial inclusion includes:

Microcredit: Small loans are provided without traditional collateral, often through group lending. These loans support income-generating activities and self-employment.

Savings services: Access to secure savings accounts allows the poor to manage income fluctuations, plan for emergencies, and build assets.

Microinsurance: Insurance products protect low-income households against risks such as illness, crop failure, and natural disasters, preventing them from falling deeper into poverty.

Digital financial services: Mobile banking and digital payments have expanded financial inclusion by reducing transaction costs and reaching remote populations.

Despite its promises, the microfinance and financial inclusion theory faces several criticisms: firstly, microcredit does not always lead to significant income growth. ii) Poor borrowers may accumulate unsustainable debt. iii) Profit-driven MFIs may exploit vulnerable clients. iv) The extremely poor may still lack the capacity to borrow. v) Lack of markets, infrastructure, and demand can limit effectiveness. Critics further argue that microfinance should complement, rather than replace, broader development policies such as education, infrastructure, and social protection (Obadire, 2022).

Empirical review on the impact of social justice on poverty alleviation

Empirical studies have increasingly explored how social justice mechanisms influence poverty alleviation efforts across different contexts. A study by Björkman & Svensson (2009) in Uganda demonstrated that social accountability interventions, which promote transparency and participation, improved health service delivery and reduced poverty-related health disparities. Their randomized controlled trial showed increased utilization of health services among the poor when communities had more say in resource allocation. This indicates that policies rooted in social justice principles such as equitable access to education, healthcare, and social protection have significant positive effects on poverty reduction. Equally, Fiszbein *et al.* (2009), in their evaluation of social safety nets in Latin America, found that targeted cash transfer programs like Brazil's Bolsa Família significantly reduced poverty and inequality, especially when combined with efforts to promote social justice through inclusion policies.

A similar study by Psacharopoulos & Patrinos (2004) found that investments in equitable education significantly contribute to poverty reduction by increasing human capital among disadvantaged populations. Their meta-analysis shows that each dollar spent on education yields substantial social returns in terms of reduced poverty. As well, a longitudinal study in India by Deininger & Squire (1996) revealed that policies promoting equitable access to education among rural and marginalized communities led to measurable declines in poverty levels over a decade. Also, Marmot *et al.* (2008) demonstrated that countries with more equitable health systems exhibit better health outcomes and reduced poverty-related health disparities. Their research in the UK showed that policies reducing health inequalities contributed to overall poverty alleviation. In sub-Saharan Africa, Sachs *et al.* (2004) observed that targeted health interventions and equitable healthcare access significantly decreased child mortality rates among impoverished communities.

Binswanger & Deininger (1997) analyzed land reform programs in Zimbabwe and South Africa; they found that equitable land redistribution improved productivity and reduced rural poverty. Conversely, De Soto (2000) argued that secure property rights empower the poor to leverage assets for economic activities, which empirical studies in Latin America and Africa support, showing that formal land titles increase access to credit and investment. A recent multi-country study using a difference-in-differences (DiD) approach and fixed effects regression found that social grants significantly improve household income and reduce poverty across ten African countries, including South Africa, Kenya, Nigeria, and Ghana. The study showed measurable poverty reduction and improved access to essential services within inclusive development frameworks, although it also noted fiscal constraints and targeting challenges as limitations to impact. (Ulriksen, 2023).

In addition, a study employing structural equation modeling (SEM) in Nigeria's agricultural sector found a statistically significant positive correlation between social empowerment initiatives for women and reductions in poverty among female entrepreneurs. The analysis revealed that empowered women farmers experienced better economic outcomes, highlighting the importance of resource access and social support in alleviating poverty. (Ogbari *et al.* 2024). An economic study analyzing poverty levels across various countries in Sub-Saharan Africa found that strong economic institutions and governance structures are significantly connected with lower poverty levels. This work suggests that institutions that promote equitable economic participation and maintain accountability are crucial for translating social justice principles into tangible poverty reduction outcomes (Kilishi *et al.*, 2023).

Empirical research further highlights that inequality and exclusion are critical mechanisms through which poverty persists or is reduced. Sociological analyses note that exclusion from opportunities such as quality education, health care, and formal employment reflects systemic injustices that make poverty persistent when unaddressed. Addressing these structural barriers is thus central to social justice approaches to poverty alleviation (Roblek & Kejžar, 2025). As well, empirical work around poverty and conflict in Sub-Saharan Africa shows how structural marginalization and grievances related to injustice can perpetuate poverty via instability and reduced economic activity, further reinforcing the need for inclusive and equitable policies. (Fuseini *et al.*, 2025). In conclusion, empirical evidence affirms that social justice-oriented policies significantly contribute to poverty alleviation across various domains: health, education, land reform, and social protection. However, the success of these initiatives hinges on effective implementation, political will, and context-specific adaptation.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employs a GMM estimator to analyze the impact of social justice on poverty reduction across countries from 2010 to 2024. A panel dataset comprising twenty countries is used for the study and the data were collected from both the World Bank and UNDP data bases. The theoretical framework for this study is anchored on endogenous growth theory, welfare economics, and labour market theory which jointly explain the dynamic process of poverty reduction across countries. From the standpoint of endogenous growth theory, improvements in income per capita, and by extension poverty reduction exhibit strong persistence over time, as current economic outcomes are shaped by past levels of income, capital accumulation, productivity, and institutional continuity (Aghion & Howitt, 1998). This theoretical insight justifies modelling poverty reduction as a dynamic process that depends partly on its own lagged values. Social protection right plays a central role in poverty reduction through the lenses of welfare economics and social protection theory. Social protection mechanisms such as, cash transfers, social insurance, and safety nets reduce income vulnerability, smooth consumption, and enhance human capital accumulation among poor and vulnerable populations (Devereux & Sabates-Wheeler, 2009). By mitigating exposure to shocks and promoting inclusive participation in economic activity, social protection contributes positively to income growth and sustained poverty reduction. Unemployment influences poverty reduction through the labor market channel. Labor market theory posits that unemployment represents underutilization of productive labor, resulting in lower household incomes and higher poverty incidence (Fields, 2011). Persistent unemployment weakens skill formation and earnings capacity, thereby slowing improvements in per capita income and undermining poverty reduction efforts.

The relationship between poverty reduction, social protection, and unemployment is inherently dynamic and endogenous because economic performance affects both social protection spending and employment outcomes, while unobserved country-specific factors such as institutional quality and macroeconomic stability simultaneously shape poverty reduction, social protection, and unemployment. To address endogeneity, reverse causality, and unobserved heterogeneity, this study adopts a dynamic panel Generalized Method of Moments (GMM) estimator, which is consistent with the theoretical structure of the model (Arellano & Bond, 1991; Blundell & Bond, 1998).

The model

Accordingly, the theoretical relationship is expressed as: Equation 1 is transformed to a GMM model and presented as equation (2).

$$\mathrm{PP}_{it} = f(\mathrm{GDPPP}_{i.t-1}, \mathrm{SPRO}_{it}, \mathrm{UMP}_{it}) \text{ ---------eqn 1}$$

Again equation 2 is further modifies into a dynamic difference GMM model and presented below as equation

$$GDPPP_{it} = \alpha DGPPP_{it-1} + \beta_1 SPRO_{it} + \beta_2 UMP_{it} + \mu_{it} + \lambda_{it} + + \mathcal{E}_{it} \text{ -------eqn 2}$$

3

ΔGDPPP$_{it}$ = $\alpha\Delta$DGPPP$_{(it-1)}$ + β_1 ΔSPRO$_{it}$ +GPPP$_{it}$+ β_2 ΔUMP$_{it}$ + ΔE$_{it}$ -----eqn 3

$$\Delta GDPPP_{it} = \alpha \Delta DGPPP_{it-1} + \beta_1 \Delta SPRO_{it} + GPPP_{it} + \beta_2 \Delta UMP_{it} + \Delta\mathcal{E}_{it} \text{ -----eqn 3}$$

Where:

$GDPPP_{it}$ = Gross domestic product per capita based on purchasing power is a measure that divides the total economic output of a country (GDP) adjusted for price level differences across countries by its population. It reflects the average economic output per person, considering the cost of living and purchasing power, enabling more accurate comparisons of living standards between countries. This represents the poverty level in the different countries of this study

$GDPPP_{(it-1)}$ = This represents the lag of GDPPP. The model incorporates a lagged dependent variable to capture persistence in poverty.

$SPRO_{it}$ = Social protection rights refer to the entitlements and guarantees that individuals have access social security services and support systems designed to promote their well-being, security and dignity. This variable represents social justice.

UMP_{it} = Unemployment refers to the situation where individuals who are willing and able to work are actively seeking employment but are unable to find a job. It is used as an economic indicator to measure the health of an economy.

E_it = Error term

i=1,…,N(countries)

t=1,…,T(time)

μ_i= unobserved individual (country) effects

λ_t= time effects

ε_it= idiosyncratic error term

The justification for using panel GMM in this study is that, the panel Generalized Method of Moments (GMM) estimator because the empirical model is dynamic and subject to endogeneity concerns. Poverty reduction is influenced by its past realizations, and the inclusion of a lagged dependent variable in a panel framework renders conventional estimators such as pooled OLS and fixed effects biased and inconsistent due to the correlation between the lagged dependent variable and unobserved country-specific effects. In addition, panel GMM addresses these issues by using internally generated instruments derived from lagged values of the variables, thereby producing consistent estimates in the presence of endogeneity (Arellano & Bond, 1991 The use of GMM further improves efficiency by combining equations in levels and first differences, especially when variables exhibit persistence over time.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

From table 1, it can be seen that all the probabilities are less than 1% at first difference. The panel unit root test results indicate that the null hypothesis of a unit root is rejected at the 1% level, because all probability values are less than 0.01, suggesting that the variables are stationary. From table 2, The Arellano–Bond test indicates the presence of first-order serial correlation but no evidence of second-order serial correlation in the differenced residuals AR(2) p-value = 0.0556), confirming the validity of the instruments. When instruments are valid, it ensures that the GMM estimator provides consistent and unbiased estimates of the parameters, leading to reliable inference about the relationships being studied

From table 3, one can observe that all the p-values for the independent variables are less than 1%; this indicates that each variable is highly statistically significant in explaining variations in the dependent variable, which in this case is poverty reduction. The p-value of 0.001 suggests that there is only a 0.1% probability that the observed relationship could have occurred if the true effect were zero.

The lagged dependent variable is statistically significant, indicating that past levels of poverty reduction have a strong and persistent influence on current poverty reduction outcomes. This suggests that poverty reduction is, to a large extent, affected by its historical state. With respect to social justice (SPRO), the findings indicate that

Table 1: Panel unit root test

Series: D(GDPPP)				
Newey-West automatic bandwidth selection and Bartlett kernel				
Balanced observations for each test				
			Cross-	
Method	Statistic	Prob.**	sections	Obs
Null: Unit root (assumes common unit root process)				
Levin, Lin & Chu t*	-6.39603	0.0000	20	240
Null: Unit root (assumes individual unit root process)				
Im, Pesaran and Shin W-stat	-3.90806	0.0000	20	240
ADF - Fisher Chi-square	80.8031	0.0001	20	240
PP - Fisher Chi-square	138.398	0.0000	20	260

Source: Authors computation using E-view econometric packages

Table 2: Serial Correlation Test

Arellano-Bond Serial Correlation Test				
Included observations: 240				
Test order	m-Statistic	rho	SE(rho)	Prob.
AR(1)	-3.167180	-2521752.411277	796213.716005	0.0015
AR(2)	-1.914091	-1918961.893977	1002544.872392	0.0556

Source: Authors computation using E-view econometric packages

Table 3: The GMM result

Dependent Variable: GDPPP				
Method: Panel Generalized Method of Moments				
Instrument specification: @DYN(GDPPP,-2) SPRO(-1) UMP(-1)				
Variable	Coefficient	Std. Error	t-Statistic	Prob.
GDPPP(-1)	1.052062	0.011769	89.39326	0.0000
SPRO	-57.66265	8.110320	-7.109787	0.0000

UMP	-38.14845	2.591039	-14.72322	0.0000
Effects Specification				
Cross-section fixed (first differences				
Mean dependent var	77.17434	S.D. dependent var		185.3863
S.E. of regression	187.1579	Sum squared resid		9002218.
J-statistic	17.51220	Instrument rank		20
Prob(J-statistic)	0.420220			

Source: Authors computation using E-view econometric packages

social protection rights are significantly associated with a decrease in poverty levels, suggesting that stronger social justice contributes to more effective poverty reduction. In the case of unemployment, the study shows that higher unemployment associated with reduction in standard of living (increase in poverty). Overall, the results strongly support the hypothesis that variables used in the study are key determinants of poverty. The positive coefficient of the lagged dependent variable implies that poverty reduction is a cumulative and path-dependent process rather than a transitory outcome. Once poverty levels decline, households and communities tend to experience improvements in income stability, consumption capacity, and access to basic services such as education, healthcare, and social protection. This empirical result aligns with the view that escaping poverty creates self-reinforcing welfare dynamics (World Bank, 2018). From a theoretical perspective, this finding is consistent with poverty trap theory, which posits that individuals and households may be locked into persistent poverty due to limited access to capital, education, and opportunities (Azariadis & Stachurski, 2005).

With respect to social justice, the findings suggest that the enhancement of social justice is associated with a reduction in poverty levels, as evidenced by the significant negative coefficient. This relationship indicates that stronger social justice parameters, such as social safety nets, unemployment benefits, and access to healthcare, play a crucial role in alleviating poverty (Niño-Zarazúa *et al.*, 2012). When social protection rights are effectively implemented, they can directly improve the well-being of vulnerable populations by providing financial assistance and social services, thereby reducing the incidence and depth of poverty (Devereux & Sabates-Wheeler, 2009). The significant negative coefficient emphasizes the importance of social protection rights as a policy lever to reduce poverty levels effectively. Policymakers should thus prioritize the expansion and strengthening of social protection frameworks to achieve more substantial and sustained poverty reduction outcomes.

Finally, with respect to unemployment, the findings indicate that higher unemployment rates are significantly associated with reduced standard of living (increase in poverty). Specifically, the negative coefficient on unemployment implies that as unemployment increases, the rate of poverty reduction diminishes. This relationship aligns with economic theory and empirical literature, which posit that unemployment constrains household income and consumption, thereby impeding efforts to escape poverty (Dehejia & Gatti, 2002). Furthermore, elevated unemployment may lead to increased vulnerability among the poor, reducing their capacity to invest in health, education, and productive activities, which are essential for sustained poverty alleviation (Ravallion, 2016). Ensuring low unemployment levels can accelerate poverty alleviation by improving income stability and economic security for vulnerable populations (ILO, 2020). Overall, the evidence suggests that policies aimed at reducing unemployment are vital not only for economic growth but also for achieving sustainable poverty reduction (World Bank, 2018).

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that social justice plays a significant and effective role in reducing poverty. Strengthening access to social protection such as cash transfers, social insurance, health coverage, and labor protections enhances household welfare, reduces vulnerability to economic shocks, and improves income security. Equally, when social protection rights expand, poverty levels decline, indicating that social protection is a critical policy instrument for poverty alleviation and inclusive development (World Bank, 2018; UNDP, 2020). With respect to unemployment, the result is consistent with theoretical and empirical literature emphasizing that job creation and labor market inclusion are central to sustainable poverty alleviation. This underscores the need for employment-centered development strategies. Policies aimed at reducing poverty should therefore prioritize decent job creation, skills development, and inclusive labor markets alongside social protection measures (World Bank, 2018).

From the above conclusion it is recommended that policymakers in Africa should prioritize the expansion of inclusive rights-based social justice systems. Governments should increase and stabilize public financing for social justice programs, extend coverage to informal-sector and rural populations, and strengthen administrative efficiency through improved targeting and digital delivery mechanisms. (Obomeghie & Obomeghie, 2025). Policy interventions should prioritize employment-centered poverty reduction strategies, including job creation, skills development, and labor market inclusion, especially for youth and vulnerable groups. This is because, without access to stable and productive employment, economic growth and social interventions are unlikely to translate into sustained poverty reduction, particularly in labor-dependent economies. Strengthening the employment–poverty nexus is essential for achieving inclusive and durable poverty alleviation outcomes (Fields, 2011; World Bank, 2018).

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