

# **Child Poverty Crisis: A Childhood Living Below the Line in Nigeria and Uganda**

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## ***Abstract***

*This article looks at the crisis of excluded and invisible children in Nigeria and Uganda. It examines the evolution of some key indicators, including infant mortality, under-five mortality, birth registration rates, children out of school, and the percentage of employed children at primary school age. These indicators show that both countries have made some progress in reducing multidimensional child poverty, but much more remains to be done. The article also reviews government plans and programs in Nigeria and Uganda, and then discusses some recommendations and ethical concerns.*

## **I. Introduction**

In 1989, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Convention of the Rights of the Child to establish the civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights of every child, no matter their race, religion or abilities.<sup>1</sup> This Convention was a turning point in how the world was going to treat children of lesser backgrounds; establishing rights relating to disabilities, economic status and mental health; virtually stating that each child is entitled to basic needs to help them reach their fullest potential.<sup>2</sup> Though this is an acknowledged piece of international legislation, there are still many children who fall between the cracks, including in Nigeria and Uganda.

Every human on the planet is born with a name, each of them has a face, and every single one of them has a story. Whether society chooses to recognize that story is another concern. The term ‘invisible children’ refers to children who have disappeared from the view of the public. They have vanished from view of their families and communities. They also vanish from the knowledge of the government, civil society and the media, leaving these organizations unable to help the children who need their support most. Invisible children are located mostly in the world’s poorest countries, but frankly, some of them are hidden in every shadowy corner of the world: in abandoned alleys of New York City, in cut-off villages of Uganda, and the slums of Lagos (Nigeria’s largest city).

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) (1990).

<sup>2</sup> Human Rights Watch (2014).

In addition to some children being invisible, many more are excluded in terms of not getting the nutrition, education and health services they need to live a decent life.

This article analyzes multi-dimensional childhood poverty by examining the scope and magnitude of situations children face in Nigeria and Uganda. It also examines to what degree Nigeria and Uganda have ignored the issues related to excluded and invisible children. Too often children are left to fend for themselves, creating a circle of despair seen from generation to generation. This article is structured into six sections. The next section (Section II) provides a brief literature review. Following the literature review, Section III compares Nigeria and Uganda with each other with regards to the evolution of three key development indicators. Section IV examines some key facts related to children in Nigeria and Uganda, while Section V discusses some ethical issues of child poverty, before the last section provides some conclusions.

## **II. Literature Review**

There is a growing literature on the crisis of child poverty in Nigeria and Uganda. Angucia (2005) and Klein (2013) exemplify the crisis in Uganda, showing how child poverty is related to terrorism and a lack of education. Aderinto (2000), Robson (2003), and Paquette (2019) examine the situation of poor children in Nigeria, which also discuss the effects of terrorism on child poverty.

- Angucia (2005) discusses the role of children and war in Africa, specifically in Uganda. The author notes that children do not start wars, nor do children understand the complexities of how the wars they are in were started. Yet, the consequences children face includes (among many others) being orphaned, abducted, traumatized, and displaced. This destruction of children's self, their health and their world implies that the children in these situations are deprived of education and health. Angucia (2005) highlights that there are no exact figures for how many children are involved with armed groups, though there are approximations for children involved in warfare for most countries. The author also points out that in Uganda, the existence of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) depended heavily on the abduction of children to fight battles. These abductions were deliberately strategized, aimed to systematically terrorize and subjugate the population of already impoverished people, and using them as political tools.
- Klein (2013) highlights that Uganda has (after Niger) the second youngest population in the world, with 78 percent of its population under 30 years old. Klein exemplifies the problems that Uganda has faced in making primary education mandatory without having provided enough classrooms and qualified teachers. Furthermore, Klein provides extensive details on how the younger generation has been used as a political factor in Uganda. She also mentions that despite grave and desolate circumstances, younger generations no longer want to remain on the sidelines; they want to be involved in making their situation better. Klein speculates that it will only be a matter of time that the more organized and more connected youth of today will demand more changes.
- Aderinto (2000) examines the coping measures of street-children and non-street children in south western Nigeria. The main objective of Aderinto's research is to identify the social correlates that are distinct to street-children in this area of Nigeria, and further dissect the predisposing factors of their behavior. Furthermore, the research tries to uncover the survival mechanisms of these street children. Aderinto's study included 202 street-children and 201 non-street children. Aderinto explains that the street-children were mostly males,

have little education and come from families with five or more siblings. The parents of these street children also had low levels of education, had unskilled occupations and were often experiencing marital disruptions. Overall, the study found that polygyny, large families, family disruption and child labor were central issues and the major predisposing factors to the children living on the streets of south western Nigeria.

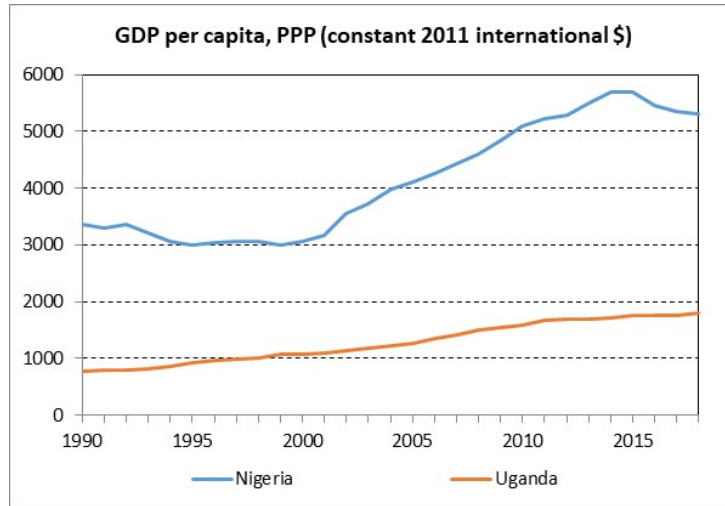
- Robson (2003) researches the use of children in the workplace in northern Nigeria. As valuable assets to the country's economic standing, children are used to perform various tasks around their homes and villages. Robson highlights how children in these arrangements work both independently and alongside adults in agriculture, domestic tasks, and within trade. Robson documents the variety of the children's work activities in order to examine the concept of childhood in northern Nigeria. She pays particular attention to the concept of gender, age and other factors that shape a child's experience in rural areas of northern Nigeria. Based on the data collected, Robson concludes that the missing formal education of children in these rural environments lead to generations of families living in poverty.
- In a Washington Post news story, Paquette (2019) reports on the treatment by the Nigerian armed forces of children who escaped the terrorist group Boko Haram. Based on interviews with such children, this news report indicates that the military detention following these children's escape was worse than how they were treated by Boko Haram. Though Nigerian defense officials deny claims of abusive confinement, various human rights advocates concluded that conditions in the holding centers are so appalling that they thwart the military's goal of protecting and deradicalizing young people.

### **III. Socioeconomic Background**

Despite a variety of misinterpretations of what income and income per capita measures, GDP per capita remains an important indicator when comparing the level of development across countries, especially if correcting for differences in prices (i.e., using purchasing power parity (PPP)-based GDP per capita). Figure 1 shows the evolution of PPP-adjusted GDP per capita in Nigeria and in Uganda from 1990 to 2018. After stagnating from 1990 to 2001, Nigeria's GDP per capita increased drastically from 2001 (\$3,170) to 2014 (\$5,688), though it then fell slightly back to \$5,316 in 2018. Uganda's GDP per capita increased consistently during the whole period, from \$773 in 1990 to \$1,808 in 2018.

While Uganda's increase in income per capita has been less than that of Nigeria's GDP per capita in absolute terms, it increased far more in relative terms. From 1990 to 2018, Uganda's GDP per capita increased by a cumulative 134 percent (i.e., it more than doubled), while Nigeria's GDP per capita increased only by a cumulative 58 percent. Hence, though the absolute difference in GDP per capita increased between Nigeria and Uganda, it decreased in relative terms: in 1990, Nigeria's GDP per capita was more than four times higher than of Uganda's; in 2018 Nigeria's GDP per capita was less than three times higher than Uganda's GDP per capita.

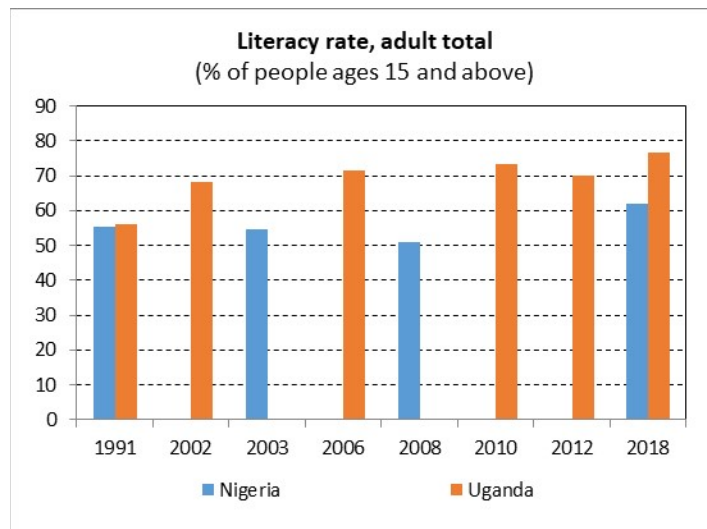
**Figure 1: PPP-adjusted GDP per capita (constant 2011 international \$), 1990-2018**



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2020).

As shown in Figure 2, Uganda’s adult literacy rate has been higher than Nigeria’s for all the years such data is available. In 1991, which is the first year such data is available, Nigeria’s literacy rate was 55.4 percent, compared to 56.1 percent for Uganda, which is a relatively small difference, which however increased over time. By 2018, which is the last year such data is available for both countries, Nigeria’s literacy rate had increased by 6.6 percentage points, while Uganda’s had increased by 20.4 percentage points, hence, making adult literacy rates very different across these two countries. Comparing Figures 1 and 2, one interesting observation is that Uganda has outperformed Nigeria in terms of literacy even though Uganda’s GDP per capita is still far below that of Nigeria.

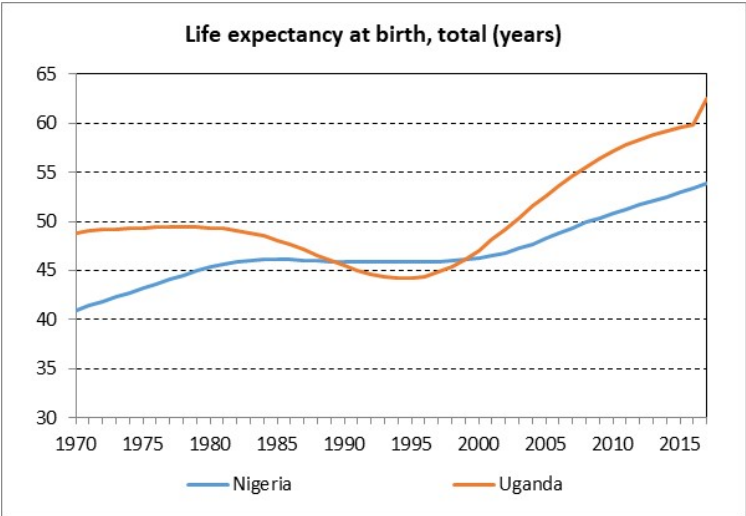
**Figure 2: Adult Literacy Rates in Nigeria and Uganda, all available years**



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2020).

Life expectancy at birth, shown in Figure 3, provides another piece of useful information when comparing socioeconomic development of Nigeria and Uganda. The evolution of these countries' life expectancy is different from what we would expect it to be based on information provided in Figure 1 (GDP per capita) and Figure 2 (literacy). Excluding the period of 1990-1998, Uganda's life expectancy has always been higher than Nigeria's. Uganda's higher life expectancy is consistent with Uganda's higher literacy, but it is surprising that Uganda's life expectancy in 2017 is 8.6 years longer than Nigeria's, even though Uganda's GDP per capita (\$1,768) was roughly only one third of Nigeria's GDP per capita (\$5,351) in the same year (2017). As will be detailed in the next section, these differences in terms of relative progress made in literacy and life expectancy help to understand the differences in progress these two countries made in improving the lives of their children.

**Figure 3: Life Expectancy at Birth (in years), 1970-2017**



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2020).

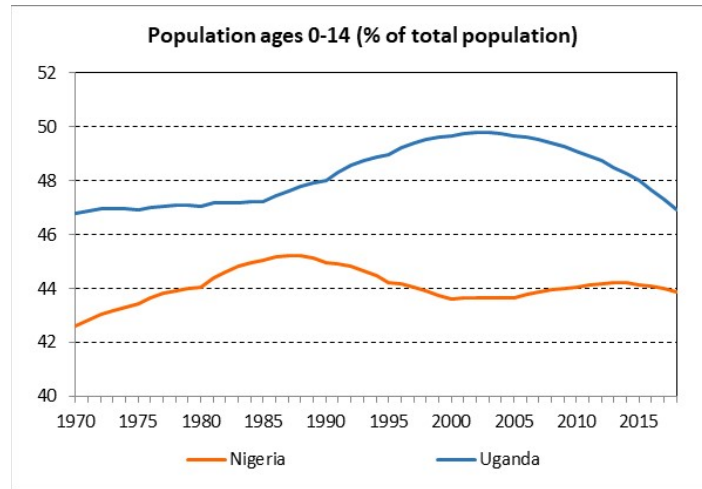
**IV. Analysis of Facts**

The foundational years of a child's life typically indicate the path of her/his subsequent life. For so many children in poverty, that path leads them to generational poverty, adding to the seemingly unbreakable cycle of a disenfranchised existence. By looking at the evolution of key indicators such as infant mortality, completeness of birth registration, children out of school, and children employed, government officials can pinpoint if their actions are making a difference or if they need to increase their efforts.

Before examining these indicators, it is useful to mention that children ages 0 to 14 constitute nearly 50 percent of the population in Nigeria and Uganda. As detailed in Figure 4, in 2018, children constituted 43.9 percent of the total population in Nigeria and 46.9 percent of the total population in Uganda. In Nigeria, the percentage of children ages 0 to 14 has been increasing from 1970 to 1987, after which is decreased until year 2000. From 2000 to 2018, it varied slightly between 43.6 percent and 44.2 percent. In Uganda, the percentage of children ages 0 to 14 increased moderately from 1970 to 1985, then grew rapidly from 1985 to 2003 (reaching a maximum of 49.8 percent in 2003), and then decreased to 46.9 percent in 2018. From a policy

perspective, the faster decline in Uganda makes the policy interventions more effective than in Nigeria. However, Uganda still has a higher percentage of children than Nigeria.

**Figure 4: Percentage of Children (ages 0-14) in Total Population, 1970-2018**

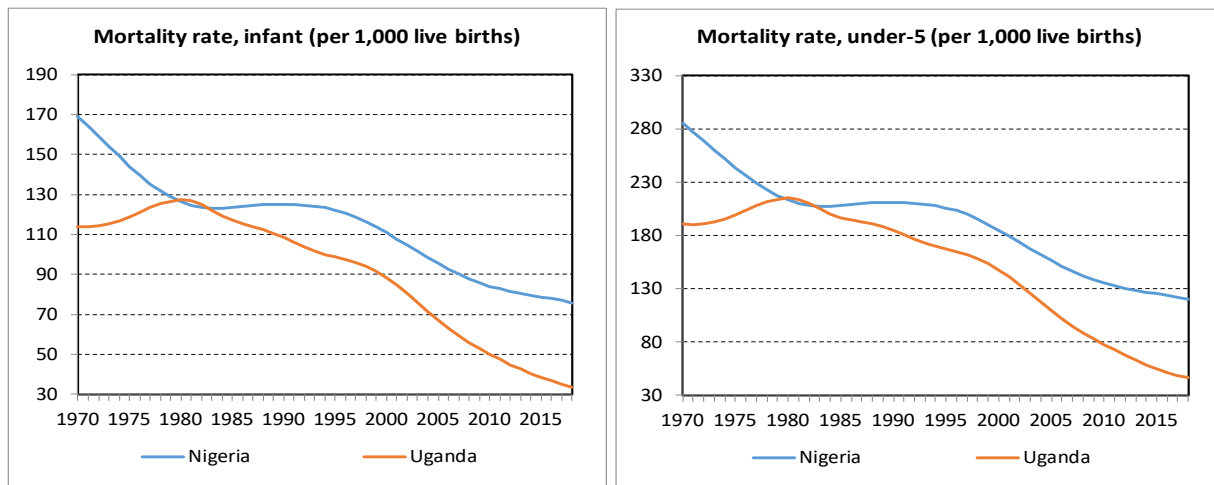


Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2020).

#### IV.1. Infant Mortality and Under-Five Mortality

Figures 5 and 6 show, respectively, infant mortality rates and under-five mortality rates, which are useful as this data is available for every year from 1970 to 2018. Though infant mortality is obviously lower than under-five mortality (as infants are a sub-group of the children under the age of five), the trends for infant mortality and under-five mortality are highly consistent. With exception of the early 1980s, Nigeria’s mortality rates were always higher than Uganda’s. Excluding Uganda’s increase in mortality from 1970 to 1980, these mortality rates have decreased significantly in both countries. This is not only good news, it also indicates that the variety of initiatives adopted during the last few decades have been successful.

**Figures 5 and 6: Infant Mortality and Under-Five Mortality, 1970-2018**



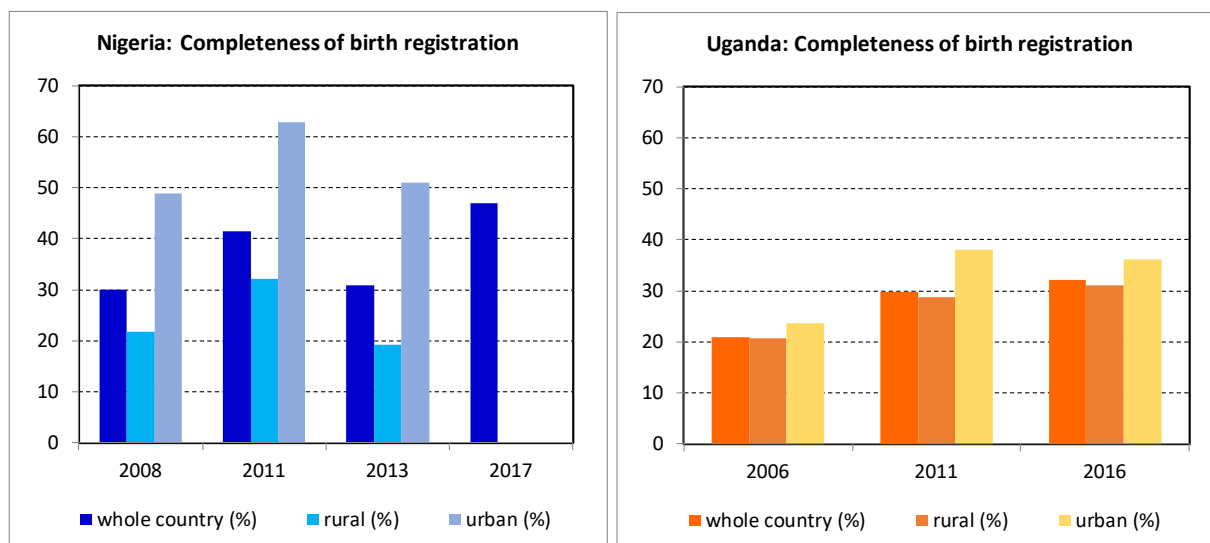
Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2020).

## IV.2. Completeness of Birth Registration

An important indicator in the conversation on invisible children is the completeness of birth registration. Figures 7 and 8 show, respectively for Nigeria and Uganda, the available data on completeness of birth registration for each country as a whole, for each country's rural population, and each country's urban population. Despite the limited data and the years with available data not matching exactly for the two countries, comparing Figure 7 with Figure 8 shows that the completeness of birth registrations is overall far higher in Nigeria than in Uganda. Looking at the last year such data is available, the completeness of birth registrations was 47.0 percent in 2017 in Nigeria, and 32.2 percent in 2016 in Uganda.

Hence, despite some progress over the last few decades, more than half of the births are still not recorded in Nigeria and Uganda. In other words, in stark difference to the progress made in terms of child mortality shown in Figures 5 and 6, these numbers indicate that children continue to “fall through the cracks” in Nigeria and Uganda. Another observation is that birth registrations are always higher in urban areas than in rural areas, as long as we compare the same year and same country. This urban-rural divide is relatively small in Uganda, but considerable in Nigeria. In any case, this invisibility of children creates a challenge to provide children the basic elements that define a safe and productive life.

**Figures 7 and 8: Completeness of Birth Registration, all available years**



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2020).

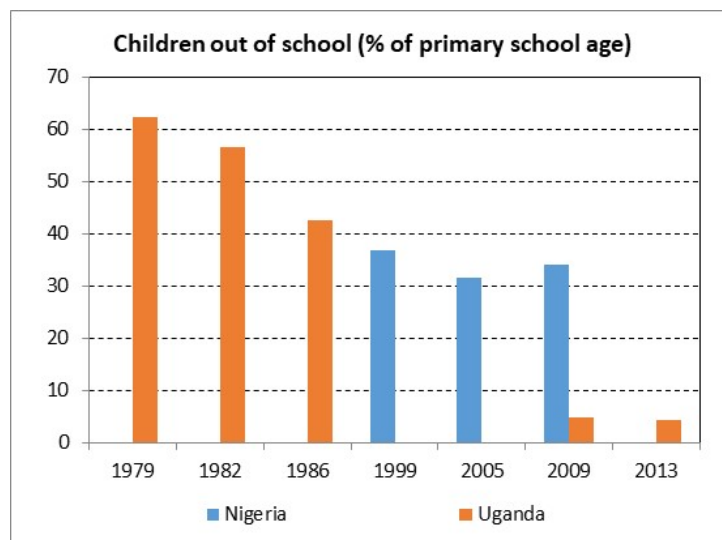
## IV.3. Primary School Children Out of School

The primary school age years (which typically range from age 6 to age 11 in Nigeria and from age 6 to age 12 in Uganda)<sup>3</sup> are critical to the foundation of a child's life. They are the building blocks in which children learn the necessary tools for later years, especially for work. Figure 9 presents the percentage of primary school children who are out of school in Nigeria and Uganda. Despite the limited data, Figure 9 shows a drastic decline (i.e., huge progress) over time in Uganda, where

<sup>3</sup> World Bank (2020).

the children out of school declined from 62.4 percent in 1979 to 4.4 percent in 2013. On the other hand, Nigeria does not seem to have made much progress, with the percentage of primary school children out of school varying between 34 percent and 37 percent within 1999 to 2009. Though not shown in Figure 9, the available data in the World Bank (2020) database indicates some gender bias, with the percentage of girls out of school (among the girls at primary school age) being higher than for boys (among the boys at primary school age) for both Nigeria and Uganda, though this gender bias has been reversed in Uganda since 2009, with slightly less girls than boys being out of school.

**Figure 9: Children Out of School (percent of primary school age)**



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2020).

#### IV.4. Employment of Children

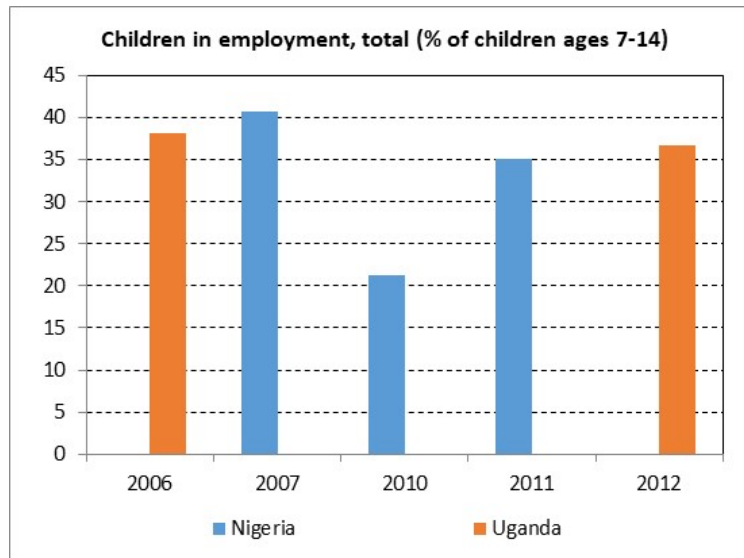
Figure 10 shows all the available data for the percentage of Nigerian and Ugandan children 7-14 years old, who are employed. In 2006, 38.2 percent of Uganda’s children were employed, which is very close to the 40.7 percent of Nigeria’s children in 2007. The data then shows a very sharp decline for Nigeria in 2010 (21.2 percent), which is however questionable as the data for the following year states that 35.1 percent of Nigeria’s children were employed. Nigeria’s data for 2011 is close to Uganda’s data for 2012, with 36.2 percent of Uganda’s children having been employed.

Based on the data available, we can conclude that both countries have made very limited progress in reducing child labor, with more than one third of children being employed in both countries. It should also be mentioned that Uganda’s data for 2012, stating that 36.7 percent of the children were employed, seems inconsistent with the only 4.4 percent of children being out of school in 2013, shown in Figure 9 above. However, given that children in employment is defined as “children involved in economic activity for at least one hour in the reference week of the survey”,<sup>4</sup> it is easily possible, actually likely, that many of the Ugandan children attending school are still employed.

<sup>4</sup> See World Bank (2020).



**Figure 10: Children in Employment (percent of children ages 7-14)**



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2020).

## V. Ethical Analysis

### V.1. Government Plans and Programs

The topic of children in poverty is not a new dilemma in the developing world. Unfortunately, it is something that has been highly discussed and documented, yet, for a long time little action has been taken to change it. As was shown in Figure 4 above, nearly half of Nigeria’s and Uganda’s population are children below age 15. This shows how large the child poverty crisis is in these two countries. Governments need to make public investments to safeguard the children’s future. This is important because the children growing up now will be the future adults, and they must be given a chance to succeed.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child was adopted by the United Nations as an international treaty just over 30 years ago. It outlines global standards to ensure the protection, survival, and development of all children, without discrimination. Countries that ratify the treaty pledge to protect children from economic and sexual exploitation, violence, and other forms of abuse and to advance the rights of children to education, health care, and a decent standard of living.

According to Human Rights Watch (2014), this convention has improved the rights of children in contributing factors that have left children much better off than they were 25 years ago. For example, kids born today are twice as likely to reach their fifth birthday and child labor rates have dropped from what they used to be. The convention also served as a valuable tool and asset for citizens and nongovernmental organizations to hold their governments accountable on ethical standards in their treatment of children. Both Uganda and Nigeria ratified this Convention.<sup>5</sup> The positives trends seen for Nigeria and Uganda can be related to the implementation of this treaty

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<sup>5</sup> As stated in Human Rights Watch (2014), Answer to Question 1: “The Convention on the Rights of the Child is the most rapidly and widely ratified human rights treaty in history—with 194 countries as ‘states parties.’ The only countries that have not ratified the treaty are Somalia, South Sudan, and the United States.”

and receiving aid from more developed countries. They had made positive strides in many aspects by following the proven milestones of pathways to address child poverty.

There also were some national laws adopted to improve the lives of children. In 1997, Uganda saw the development of the Children Act, a law created to reform and consolidate the laws relating to children, and therefore providing for the protection and care of the country's youth. In 2016, the Ugandan president signed amendments to the Children Act that included changes in guardianship and adoption laws. The aim of this was to help the children whose families are not in the picture and to help children find permanent homes. Similarly, in 2003, Nigeria adopted the Child Rights Act (CRA), which served to domesticate the Convention on the Rights of the Child. This law was passed at the federal level and used to institute legal documentation and protection of children's rights in the country. Being the far most populous country in Africa and having such a large portion of its population being children, this act was critical for Nigeria and Africa. Uganda's Children Act and Nigeria's Child Rights Act have had positive effects that can now be seen as more and more children's poverty issues are being addressed, even though actual progress has been limited.

## **V.2. Recommendations and Ethical Concerns**

In order to combat invisible and excluded children, both Nigeria and Uganda have implemented plans in the effort to mitigate issues relating to the futures of their country's children. Through the planning, execution and financing of policies and ethical frameworks, change has been established over the most recent decades. However, children living in poverty and falling between the cracks of society continue to be an enormous problem in these two countries. Overall, there are proven solutions to eliminate the child poverty crisis.<sup>6</sup>

As detailed in the Report by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the Global Coalition to End Child Poverty (2017), one milestone that is deemed critical to abate child poverty is to put the issue on the map. This essentially is child poverty advocacy and building national pathways to end child poverty. Furthermore, there is need for policy and program change, which is, for example, what UNICEF has set out to do in their annual flagship publication, entitled "The State of the World's Children". The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted at the Sustainable Development Summit in September 2015 are also relevant as they include goals like zero hunger, quality education, gender equality, peace, justice and strong institutions. While these may seem like simple goals to achieve, there are many steps and underlying factors that hamper achieving these widespread goals. Countries are working to achieve them as they know they hold tremendous value in the betterment of their country and humanity.

One of the most important resources that countries like Uganda and Nigeria are implementing into their society is the education of young girls. Historically, girls have been the most marginalized group, often expected to perform unsightly tasks or jobs to benefit their families. By investing in girls' education, there are proven economic returns and positive intergenerational impacts. Empowering young women increases productivity and has longer-term implications in terms of making better choices with regards to population growth, reproductive health, and the education of subsequent generations. It breaks the cycle of generational poverty, and can lead to a more inspired, informed, and connected life later on.

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<sup>6</sup> United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the Global Coalition to End Child Poverty (2017).

One of the main ethical issues that experts are battling with when dealing with child poverty is the role of terrorist groups like Boko Haram (which is active in Nigeria) and the Lord's Resistance Army (which is operating in northern Uganda and other neighboring countries). The challenges faced when dealing with these terrorist groups include maintaining human rights but not putting innocent civilians in harm's way. The problem of abductions, child soldiers and needless killings further inhibit the measures governments are trying to take to reduce child poverty. Many times, these terrorist groups target small villages, schools, busy markets and other places where people are in close quarters trying to make the best with the little they have. Civil war, conflict, and violence related to these terrorist groups make it exceedingly difficult for governments to deal with child poverty.

Furthermore, the measures taken to reduce child poverty in countries like Nigeria and Uganda are strongly linked to assistance from industrialized countries. Industrialized countries have to draw a fine line in being a resource for these countries without overstepping the assisting country's sovereignty and/or without harming local initiatives that may have different approaches and priorities.

## **VI. Conclusion**

UNICEF considers childhood to be a period when children are given an opportunity to grow and develop their fullest potential. At the period between birth and adulthood, childhood concerns itself with the quality of this period and this means that a safe space for children to grow, play and develop is necessary. Countries like Nigeria and Uganda have the majority of their population being children, hence they have huge needs, yet overall little progress has been made.

This article has shown that Nigeria continues to have an at least three times higher GDP per capita than Uganda, while Uganda continues to have higher adult literacy rates than Nigeria, with the difference between the two countries rising. Furthermore, excluding the period of 1990-1998, Uganda's life expectancy has been higher than Nigeria's life expectancy ever since 1998.

Both countries have made similar large progress in terms of decreasing infant mortality and under-five mortality rates, though Uganda's mortality rates were less than half of Nigeria's in 2018 (the last year we have such data), and hence, there is a need for Nigeria to work on. On the other hand, when looking at the completeness of birth registrations, Nigeria has higher percentages than Uganda for nearly all years such data is available. Nigeria also made overall more progress over time in increasing birth registration. Still, more than half of the children do not have a birth certificate in either country as of today (based on the latest available data).

While Uganda has made huge progress in reducing the number of children out of school (from 62.4 percent in 1979 to 4.4 percent in 2013), Uganda does not seem to have made much progress with reducing child labor. Nigeria has made very limited progress in reducing the number of children out of school and equally limited progress in reducing child labor. Based on the latest available data, about one third of children between ages 7 to 14 are still employed in each country.

Comparing these two countries helps to understand the factors that contribute to multi-dimensional child poverty. And comparing the efforts and initiatives taken by these two countries helps to understand the steps that can be taken to effectively eliminate child poverty. There are many organizations and groups that have been involved in Nigeria and Uganda, with the hope of providing ways for these countries' leaders to take action and enact legislation that will help promote and enforce change for the daily struggles of children.

Better access to education is one of the proven strategies not only to solve child poverty but overall poverty, and particularly providing education to young girls has proven to be effective. Moving forward, it is important that the general public is aware of what their resources are and how to maintain child safety in times of need and struggle. Looking back on the situation a few decades ago, Nigeria and Uganda have seen some progress on matters relating to child poverty, but there is still so much more that can and needs to be done.

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