

**UBUNTU AND CHILD POVERTY IN NIGERIA:
AN AFRICAN PHILOSOPHICAL ANALYSIS OF COMMUNAL RESPONSIBILITY****Authors & Affiliations****Dr. Osazee David Egbenusi**

Department of Religious
Management and Cultural Studies,
Ambrose Alli University,
Ekpoma, Edo State, Nigeria &
All Saints' Chapel,
University of Benin*
egbenusi@gmail.com

&

Prof. Celestina Omoso Isiramen

Department of Religious
Management and Cultural Studies,
Ambrose Alli University,
Ekpoma, Nigeria
cesiramen@yahoo.com

Abstract

Nigeria's child poverty crisis is widely interpreted through economic and developmental lenses, yet such interpretations leave the moral and metaphysical dimensions of the crisis largely unexamined. This study adopts qualitative philosophical analysis, using conceptual interpretation, textual analysis, and comparative ethical analysis of African philosophical traditions and religious literature. We draw on *Ubuntu*, the African relational philosophy of personhood, to argue that the persistence of severe child deprivation in Nigeria should be understood primarily as a failure of communal responsibility rather than a mere shortfall in income or service delivery. Read alongside its Nigerian cultural expressions in *Omoluabi* (Yoruba), *Omenani* (Igbo), and *Tarbiyya* (Hausa-Fulani), *Ubuntu* discloses a sustained, indigenous moral tradition that has historically treated the child as a shared trust rather than a private burden. The paper traces how social, economic, political, and religious changes have eroded the communal structures that once enacted this conviction, leaving millions of Nigerian children exposed to hunger, educational exclusion, labour, displacement, and neglect. It concludes by proposing *Ubuntu*, read together with the ethical resources of Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religion (ATR), as a constructive framework for rebuilding social solidarity. The paper contributes a philosophical reframing of child poverty as a problem of communal failure, with implications for religious engagement, cultural renewal, and public policy in Nigeria and beyond.

Keywords: *Ubuntu*, child poverty, communal responsibility, African philosophy, Nigeria, comparative ethics

Introduction**When the Village Stops Raising the Child**

Across Africa, one of the most enduring moral convictions is that a child belongs to the community. Long before modern welfare systems emerged, African societies developed intricate networks of responsibility through which the vulnerable were protected and nurtured. Among the Igbo, it is often said that *ora na azu nwa*—the community raises the child (Achebe, 1975). The Yoruba ideal of *Omoluabi* teaches that good character is demonstrated not only by personal virtue but by one's commitment to the welfare of others. Among the Hausa-Fulani, the concept of *Tarbiyya* emphasizes communal participation in the moral and social formation of children. Although these traditions differ in language and cultural expression, they share a family resemblance: a common conviction that no child should suffer alone because every child belongs to the community.

For generations, these values shaped social life across Nigeria in informal but binding ways. A hungry child could find food in a neighbour's house; an orphan was absorbed into the extended family rather than processed through an institution; community elders kept an eye on the behaviour and welfare of the young. Religious institutions, age-grade associations, and kinship networks did much of the work that formal social protection systems do elsewhere. Childhood, on this understanding, was never a private responsibility borne solely by biological parents, but a collective trust held by the whole community.

Yet contemporary Nigeria presents a troubling contradiction. The language of community remains deeply embedded in public discourse, but the lived experience of millions of children suggests that the communal ethic itself has been severely weakened. Across urban slums, rural villages, internally displaced persons' (IDP) camps, and conflict-affected communities, children confront conditions that sit awkwardly beside the values African moral traditions claim to celebrate: denial of quality education, chronic malnutrition, inadequate healthcare, exploitation, trafficking, and neglect. Millions remain outside the formal school system altogether, and countless others survive through street hawking, domestic labour, and other forms of precarious work that quietly rob them of childhood.

Professed Values	Lived Reality
Ubuntu / shared humanity	67.5% child poverty rate
Ora na azu nwa (Igbo)	20.1 million out-of-school children
Omoluabi character (Yoruba)	Severe acute malnutrition
Tarbiyya formation (Hausa-Fulani)	Exploitative child labour

The tragedy of child poverty in Nigeria is not merely that children suffer deprivation. Poverty exists in many societies. The deeper tragedy is that such deprivation occurs within communities that continue to affirm cultural philosophies built upon solidarity, mutual care, and collective responsibility. The crisis therefore raises a disturbing question: what happens when a society proclaims communal values but abandons communal obligations?

Recent statistics reveal the scale of the challenge. The 2022 National Multidimensional Poverty Index Survey found that approximately 67.5 percent of Nigerian children between zero and seventeen are multidimensionally poor, and that children make up nearly half of all poor Nigerians nationwide (National Bureau of Statistics, 2022, p. 28). UNICEF reports that Nigeria carries one of the largest out-of-school populations in the world, estimated at over 20.1 million children, while severe food poverty continues to threaten the health and development of millions of children (UNICEF, 2023, pp. 4-9; World Bank, 2024a). Taken together, these figures describe more than economic hardship; they point to a rupture in the moral relationships that have traditionally sustained African communities.

Existing literature predominantly explains child poverty through economic, political, and developmental perspectives, focusing on GDP growth, budgetary shortfalls, and institutional inefficiencies (World Bank, 2024b). While valuable, these analyses leave a significant research gap: they treat child poverty as a technical problem of resource allocation while paying insufficient attention to indigenous African moral philosophies as explanatory and diagnostic frameworks.

This study addresses this gap by using *Ubuntu* philosophy to analyze this socio-ethical rupture. *Ubuntu*, commonly expressed in the maxim *Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* ("a person is a person through other persons"), presents a vision of human existence grounded in relationality, solidarity, and mutual responsibility. At its core lies the conviction that individual well-being is inseparable from communal well-being. Human flourishing is not achieved in isolation but through relationships characterized by care, recognition, and shared responsibility.

From this perspective, child poverty cannot be understood merely as an economic problem or developmental challenge. It must be understood as evidence of communal failure. When children are denied the conditions necessary for healthy development, the community itself is diminished. The suffering of children becomes a measure of the moral health of society. The child abandoned by the community exposes the community's abandonment of its own humanity.

The central argument of this paper is that the persistence of child poverty in Nigeria represents a betrayal of *Ubuntu* and its Nigerian expressions in *Omoluabi*, *Omenani*, and *Tarbiyya*. The crisis reflects not only failures of governance and economic policy but also the erosion of communal structures of care that once protected vulnerable children. Recovering these traditions does not require romanticizing the past or ignoring the limitations of traditional societies. Rather, it requires critically retrieving the moral insights embedded within African philosophies of personhood and social responsibility and applying them to contemporary realities.

2. Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, conceptual, and interpretive philosophical methodology. Because the research addresses the intersection of cultural philosophy, religious ethics, and social reality, it employs a multi-pronged analytical framework consisting of:

- **Conceptual Analysis:** Clarifying the metaphysical and ethical contours of *Ubuntu* and its Nigerian cognates (*Omoluabi*, *Omenani*, *Tarbiyya*), examining how these concepts define personhood, agency, and obligation.
- **Textual and Hermeneutical Analysis:** Interpreting primary African philosophical texts (e.g., Menkiti, Gyekye, Wiredu, Metz) alongside sacred and ethical texts from Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religion (ATR) regarding communal obligations to children.
- **Comparative Ethical Analysis:** Evaluating the "family resemblances" and ethical convergence among these diverse traditions, resisting the assumption of strict equivalence while identifying a shared moral core.
- **Critical Social Diagnosis:** Juxtaposing these conceptual frameworks against contemporary empirical data on child poverty in Nigeria (drawing from the National Bureau of Statistics, UNICEF, and World Bank reports) to expose the gap between professed communal values and actual social practices.

Conceptual Analysis	Comparative Ethical Analysis	Critical Social Diagnosis
Clarifying the metaphysical contours of African personhood and agency.	Evaluating the convergence of Ubuntu, Omoluabi, Omenani, and Tarbiyya.	Juxtaposing ethical ideals against NBS and UNICEF child poverty data.

The study relies on secondary data sources, including peer-reviewed academic literature in African philosophy, religious ethics, development reports, and policy documents on child protection in Nigeria. No human participants were involved in this study, satisfying standard institutional ethical clearance requirements for conceptual research.

Ubuntu as Moral Philosophy and African Personhood

The growing global interest in *Ubuntu* has transformed it from a cultural expression commonly associated with Southern Africa into one of the most significant contributions of African philosophy to contemporary moral and political thought. Although *Ubuntu* finds its most familiar expression in the Nguni saying *Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, its underlying principles resonate across numerous African societies. At its heart, *Ubuntu* is a philosophy of relationship. It insists that human beings do not become fully human in isolation but through meaningful participation in a community of mutual care, respect, and responsibility.

This understanding stands in contrast to dominant Western philosophical traditions that often begin with the individual as the primary unit of moral analysis (e.g., Cartesian egoism or raw contractarianism). While African philosophy does not deny individuality, it maintains that personhood is fundamentally relational. The individual exists within a web of relationships that shape identity, character, obligations, and opportunities. Human beings flourish not merely through personal achievement but through participation in a community committed to the well-being of all its members.

According to *Ubuntu*, one's humanity is revealed through one's relationship with others. To care for others is not merely to perform a charitable act; it is to affirm one's own humanity. Conversely, indifference to the suffering of others diminishes both the victim and the observer. Human flourishing therefore becomes a shared project rather than an individual pursuit.

African philosophers have developed this insight along several different lines:

Radical Communal Ontology	Moderate Communalism
Associated with Menkiti Personhood is earned through communal incorporation Community has ontological priority	Associated with Gyekye and Wiredu Personhood is inherent at birth Retains individual rights and moral agency to dissent

For Mogobe Ramose, *Ubuntu* is rooted in an African ontology in which being itself is relational rather than individualistic; humanity, on this account, is not a possession but an ongoing achievement, continuously realized through participation in communal life (Ramose, 1999, p. 49). Thaddeus Metz takes an analytical approach, proposing that an action is morally right roughly to the degree that it promotes harmonious relationships characterized by solidarity and goodwill, and wrong to the degree that it does the opposite (Metz, 2007, pp. 334-336). Augustine Shutte arrives at a similar conclusion, arguing that the self emerges through relationship rather than existing, fully formed, prior to it (Shutte, 2001, p. 26).

Ifeanyi Menkiti pushes the point further: personhood is not given at birth but achieved gradually, as the individual is incorporated more fully into the community through the stages of life (Menkiti, 1984, pp. 172-173). Kwame Gyekye and Kwasi Wiredu are more cautious about how far this incorporation should go, insisting that even a thoroughly relational account of personhood must leave room for individual moral agency and the capacity to dissent from communal norms (Gyekye, 1997, pp. 35-40; Wiredu, 1996, pp. 21-22). These positions disagree about the details, but they converge on a single point: a human being becomes who she is through other human beings, not in spite of them.

The Kenyan philosopher and theologian John Mbiti captured this worldview in his classic formulation: "I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am" (Mbiti, 1969, p. 106). This claim is exacting. It describes a vision of society in which personal identity does not detach from communal belonging, so that the suffering of one member is never a private matter, since every person's welfare bears on the moral health of the whole community.

This understanding has important implications for children. Children occupy a special place within African moral thought because they represent both the continuity of the community and its future. In traditional African societies, a child was never regarded as the exclusive responsibility of biological parents. Rather, every adult shared some degree of responsibility for the protection, education, and moral formation of the young. The extended family, age-grade associations, religious communities, and neighbourhood networks all participated in raising children.

Such arrangements were not merely practical responses to economic challenges. They reflected a deeper philosophical conviction about human interdependence. The welfare of children mattered because children were understood as communal assets rather than private possessions. Their success strengthened the community; their suffering weakened it.

If *Ubuntu* teaches that humanity is realized through caring relationships, then the denial of adequate food, education, healthcare, and protection to millions of Nigerian children is not a peripheral failure but a direct contradiction of that teaching. It reveals a deep moral crisis when large numbers of children survive on the margins while political and economic elites enjoy extraordinary wealth.

Ubuntu compels us to ask uncomfortable questions because it refuses to separate individual suffering from communal responsibility. Within an *Ubuntu* framework, poverty is never simply the problem of the poor. The suffering of vulnerable children becomes a reflection of the moral condition of society itself. A community that tolerates widespread child deprivation cannot claim to be fully faithful to the values of solidarity and mutual care that define African personhood.

This move from conceptual description to normative judgement is deliberate rather than incidental. Consistent with the critical social diagnosis outlined in the methodology above, the paper treats *Ubuntu*'s descriptive claims about personhood as a warrant for moral evaluation only once they are read alongside the

empirical record examined in Section 5; the normative force of the argument is thus anchored in that comparative reading, not asserted independently of it.

Ubuntu in Nigerian Cultural Thought: Omoluabi, Omenani, and Tarbiyya

Although *Ubuntu* is often discussed as a Southern African philosophy, its central values are deeply rooted in Nigerian cultural thought. Across Nigeria's diverse cultural and religious traditions, moral systems affirm communal responsibility, mutual care, and the protection of vulnerable members of society. While these traditions differ in language and history, they converge in their understanding that the welfare of children is a collective concern. Three examples are the Yoruba concept of *Omoluabi*, the Igbo notion of *Omenani*, and the Hausa-Fulani principle of *Tarbiyya*.

Omoluabi (Yoruba)	Omenani (Igbo)	Tarbiyya (Hausa-Fulani)
Ethics of character and social duty; the child as a shared trust.	Collective responsibility for the child; <i>ora na azu nwa</i> (the village raises the child).	Holistic character nurturing; the child as a divine trust.

4.1 Omoluabi and the Yoruba Ethics of Social Responsibility

Among the Yoruba people, moral excellence is captured by the concept of *Omoluabi* (Gbadegesin, 1991). The term refers to a person of integrity, discipline, wisdom, compassion, and good character. However, *Omoluabi* is far more than a description of personal virtue. It reflects an entire moral vision in which the individual's worth is measured by his or her contribution to the welfare of others.

A person cannot claim to be *Omoluabi* while remaining indifferent to the suffering of neighbours. Character is demonstrated not only through honesty and self-control but also through generosity, responsibility, and communal service. In traditional Yoruba thought, one's humanity is revealed through relationships and obligations.

This understanding extends naturally to the welfare of children. Yoruba proverbs consistently emphasize communal responsibility for the young. One such proverb states: *Omo ti a ko ba ko ni yoo gbe ile ti a ko ta*—the child we fail to train will eventually sell the house we built. As Kwesi Yankah has shown in his study of proverbial rhetoric, sayings of this kind are not merely decorative; they function as a form of moral argument, compact enough to be remembered and authoritative enough to settle a dispute (Yankah, 2012, pp. 18-22). This particular proverb recognizes that neglecting children ultimately harms the entire community.

The implication is clear: the welfare of children is not merely a family concern; it is a communal investment. A society that abandons its children undermines its own future. Consequently, the existence of large numbers of out-of-school children, child labourers, and vulnerable youths raises serious questions about the extent to which contemporary society continues to embody the values associated with *Omoluabi*.

4.2 Omenani and the Igbo Tradition of Collective Care

Among the Igbo, the concept of *Omenani* refers to the customs, norms, and moral expectations that govern

communal life. More than a collection of traditions, *Omenani* provides a framework through which social harmony, justice, and responsibility are maintained.

Central to *Omenani* is the conviction that individuals exist within networks of obligation. Human beings are not isolated actors pursuing private interests but members of communities bound together by mutual responsibilities. This understanding is reflected in numerous Igbo proverbs and practices that emphasize cooperation, solidarity, and collective welfare.

Perhaps no expression captures this ethos more clearly than the popular saying: *Ora na azu nwa*—the community raises the child. This proverb reflects a social reality that characterized many traditional Igbo communities. Child-rearing was not confined to biological parents alone. Grandparents, uncles, aunts, neighbours, age-grade associations, and community elders all played important roles in nurturing, disciplining, educating, and protecting children.

In such a context, a hungry child was everyone's concern. A neglected child attracted communal intervention. An orphan was rarely left without support because the wider kinship network assumed responsibility. The principle that every child deserves communal care challenges the growing culture of social indifference that often accompanies urbanization, economic hardship, and individualism.

4.3 Tarbiyya and the Hausa-Fulani Vision of Moral Formation

In northern Nigeria, the concept of *Tarbiyya* occupies a central place in moral and social life. Derived from Islamic educational traditions, *Tarbiyya* refers to the holistic formation of character, values, behaviour, and spiritual maturity. It emphasizes the nurturing of individuals who are morally responsible, socially conscious, and committed to the welfare of others.

Unlike narrow understandings of education that focus primarily on academic achievement, *Tarbiyya* encompasses the total development of the person. It involves intellectual growth, moral discipline, social responsibility, and spiritual formation.

Importantly, the responsibility for *Tarbiyya* extends beyond the immediate family. Religious leaders, teachers, neighbours, and the broader community all share responsibility for raising children who contribute positively to society.

Within this framework, children are regarded as a trust (*Amana*) entrusted by God to the community. Their welfare therefore carries both social and spiritual significance. To neglect children is not merely to fail society; it is to fail in a sacred responsibility.

The persistence of severe child poverty, educational exclusion, street begging, and the challenges associated with the *Almajiri* system raise difficult questions concerning the practical implementation of *Tarbiyya* in modern Nigeria. The issue is not whether *Tarbiyya* contains adequate moral resources. It clearly does. Rather, the challenge lies in translating those resources into effective social structures capable of protecting children within rapidly changing economic and political contexts.

4.4 Convergence Across Traditions

Despite their differences, *Omoluabi*, *Omenani*, and *Tarbiyya* share several important assumptions:

1. **Relational Personhood:** All three traditions understand personhood as fundamentally relational. Human beings become fully human through participation in community.
2. **Responsibility Over Individualism:** All three traditions emphasize responsibility over radical

individualism. Personal success is inseparable from communal well-being.

3. The Child as a Shared Trust: All three traditions assign special importance to the welfare of children. The protection and formation of the young are regarded as communal obligations rather than private choices.

4. Moral Accountability for the Vulnerable: All three traditions affirm that communities bear moral responsibility for their most vulnerable members. The condition of children therefore serves as a measure of the community's moral health.

These shared assumptions reveal that *Ubuntu* is not an isolated Southern African concept but part of a broader African moral vision that transcends ethnic and regional boundaries. They also provide the foundation for a powerful critique of contemporary Nigerian society, exposing a widening gap between what communities profess and what they practice.

5. Empirical-Social Diagnosis of Child Poverty in Nigeria

To understand the scale of the communal failure in contemporary Nigeria, we must move from conceptual analysis to an empirical-social diagnosis of the child poverty crisis. This section examines four critical dimensions of child vulnerability: street children, educational exclusion, child labour, and internal displacement, highlighting how each reflects a breakdown of traditional communal protection mechanisms.

5.1 The Child on the Street: A Visible Sign of Communal Failure

Perhaps no image captures the crisis more vividly than the growing number of children who spend their days and nights on the streets of Nigerian cities. Whether in Lagos, Kano, Port Harcourt, Abuja, Onitsha, Benin City, or Calabar, children can be seen selling goods, washing vehicles, carrying loads, scavenging refuse dumps, or begging for survival.

Public discussions often frame these children as social problems or security concerns, using labels like "street children," "area boys," or "delinquents." Yet *Ubuntu* philosophy invites a different perspective. Rather than asking what is wrong with the child, *Ubuntu* asks what has gone wrong within the community.

No child is born to live on the streets. The presence of children in such conditions points to failures that extend far beyond individual families. It reflects breakdowns in social protection systems, failures of public policy, economic inequalities, and weakening communal networks. Most importantly, it reveals a society that has become increasingly comfortable overlooking the suffering of its most vulnerable members. From an *Ubuntu* perspective, the child on the street is a mirror reflecting the moral condition of society.

5.2 Out-of-School Children and the Loss of Collective Investment

Education has long been regarded within African societies as a communal investment. Traditional communities may not have possessed modern schools, but they recognized that the formation of the young was essential for collective survival and progress.

Today, Nigeria faces one of the largest populations of out-of-school children in the world, estimated by UNICEF at over 20.1 million (UNICEF, 2023, p. 4). Behind these numbers are children whose opportunities for personal development are severely restricted.

For *Ubuntu*, education is not simply a means of acquiring knowledge; it is a process through which individuals become capable of participating meaningfully in communal life. There is a useful point of contact here with Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum's capabilities approach, which insists that development be measured not

by income alone but by what people are actually able to do and become, the capability for practical reason and social participation chief among them (Sen, 1999, pp. 87-90; Nussbaum, 2011, pp. 33-34). An uneducated child is not merely disadvantaged economically; the entire community loses a potential contributor to its own future flourishing.

Economic Metric	Capabilities Metric
Focuses on GDP and income; poverty as low household consumption; ignores structural and moral deprivations of the child.	Focuses on what people can do and be (Sen/Nussbaum); poverty as deprivation of essential human capabilities (education, health, agency).

The persistence of educational exclusion therefore raises an uncomfortable question: why do communities that celebrate children as blessings tolerate educational systems that leave so many of them behind? Governments repeatedly proclaim education a priority even as schools remain underfunded and inaccessible to large numbers of children, a gap between rhetoric and resourcing that is not accidental. When education ceases to be viewed as a shared obligation, children become vulnerable to exclusion and society gradually forfeits its future.

5.3 Child Labour and the Commodification of Childhood

Another manifestation of communal breakdown is the widespread prevalence of child labour. Across Nigeria, children engage in various forms of economic activity ranging from domestic service and street trading to agricultural labour and informal sector employment.

It would be simplistic to attribute all child labour solely to parental irresponsibility. Many families rely on children's labour because they themselves struggle under severe economic pressure: poverty, unemployment, inflation, and inadequate social protection routinely leave households with few other options, a pattern the World Bank's recent assessments of the Nigerian economy describe in detail (World Bank, 2024b, pp. 12-15). Nevertheless, *Ubuntu* philosophy compels society to examine the broader structures that normalize such realities. Childhood is meant to be a period of growth, learning, creativity, and development. When children are compelled to assume adult economic responsibilities prematurely, they are deprived of opportunities essential for flourishing. The issue is not merely that children work; it is that society has accepted conditions in which children must sacrifice their futures to ensure present survival. This acceptance reveals a deeper moral failure. A community committed to *Ubuntu* should not permit economic arrangements that place the burden of survival upon those least equipped to bear it.

5.4 Internally Displaced Children and the Fragility of Community

The rise of insecurity across various parts of Nigeria has further exposed the fragility of communal protection mechanisms. Armed conflict, insurgency, banditry, kidnapping, and communal violence have displaced millions of people, many of whom are children.

Displacement disrupts almost every aspect of childhood at once: schools are abandoned, healthcare becomes difficult to access, family structures are strained, and the social networks that once provided support are weakened or destroyed outright. Children who recently lived within stable communities suddenly find themselves navigating uncertainty and loss.

Within internally displaced persons' (IDP) camps, many children continue to demonstrate resilience. Yet resilience should not become an excuse for neglect. The ability of children to endure hardship does not absolve society of responsibility for preventing that hardship. *Ubuntu* reminds us that vulnerability creates obligation. The greater the vulnerability, the stronger the obligation to respond. Displaced children therefore represent an urgent moral challenge because they embody multiple forms of deprivation simultaneously.

5.5 Religion, Wealth, and the Moral Contradiction

One of the most striking features of contemporary Nigeria is the coexistence of intense religiosity with persistent child poverty. Churches and mosques occupy central positions within social life. Religious language permeates public discourse. Faith remains a powerful force shaping individual and communal identity. Yet despite this religious vitality, millions of children continue to experience severe deprivation.

This contradiction deserves careful attention. Virtually all major religious traditions represented in Nigeria affirm obligations toward vulnerable persons. Christianity emphasizes care for "the least of these." Islam places significant emphasis on charity, social justice, and protection of the weak. African Traditional Religion similarly promotes communal solidarity and responsibility.

The persistence of child poverty therefore raises a difficult question for religious communities: how has such widespread suffering remained so compatible with such widespread religious commitment? Communities capable of constructing magnificent places of worship often struggle to provide basic opportunities for the most vulnerable children among them.

These questions are not intended to dismiss the substantial contributions made by churches, mosques, and faith-based organizations. Across Nigeria, religious institutions provide schools, hospitals, orphanages, scholarships, and humanitarian assistance. Their contributions remain indispensable. However, *Ubuntu* encourages a deeper form of self-examination. It challenges religious communities not merely to alleviate suffering but also to confront the structures that produce suffering. Genuine solidarity requires more than acts of charity; it requires commitment to justice.

6. Religion, Culture, and the Reconstruction of Communal Responsibility

If child poverty partly reflects the breakdown of communal values, then the recovery of those values must become part of the solution. *Ubuntu* offers a valuable framework for such recovery, providing resources for reimagining how Nigerian society responds to vulnerable children. Importantly, *Ubuntu* does not operate in isolation. Its values resonate with the teachings of Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religion, making it relevant within Nigeria's religiously diverse environment.

6.1 Ubuntu and the Recovery of Moral Imagination

One of the greatest challenges facing contemporary society is the weakening of moral imagination. Many social problems persist because people gradually lose the ability to see them as moral problems. Child poverty risks becoming one such problem. As deprivation becomes increasingly common, society may begin to accept

it as normal.

Ubuntu resists this normalization. Because human beings are bound together in relationships of mutual dependence, the suffering of another person is never something one can simply look past. Metz argues that this relational conception of dignity can do much of the philosophical work that Western rights talk does, grounding claims against exclusion and degradation without needing to import a separate, individualist theory of rights (Metz, 2011, pp. 545-549). The hungry child, the displaced child, the out-of-school child, and the exploited child are not strangers standing outside the community; their welfare is bound up with the welfare of society as a whole.

Recovering this perspective requires a renewed moral imagination—one capable of seeing every child as a bearer of dignity and every instance of child suffering as a communal concern. Such an imagination challenges the tendency to privatize social problems and reminds citizens that genuine development involves caring for those who are most vulnerable.

6.2 Christianity and the Ethics of Care for Children

Christianity possesses profound resources for addressing child poverty. Throughout Scripture, concern for the vulnerable occupies a central place in God's dealings with humanity. The prophets consistently denounced societies that neglected widows, orphans, and the poor. Justice was not measured by religious rituals alone but by the treatment of vulnerable persons.

The ministry of Jesus reinforces this emphasis. Children occupied a prominent place in his teaching and practice; at a time when they held little social status, he welcomed them, blessed them, and held them up as examples of the disposition required to enter the Kingdom of God, declaring, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them" (Mark 10:14, NRSV). Few sayings in the history of religious thought affirm childhood dignity quite so directly.

Moreover, Christian ethics places love of neighbour at the centre of moral life. This love is not merely emotional affection but active concern for the welfare of others. Consequently, child poverty presents a challenge not only to governments but also to churches and Christian communities.

Across Nigeria, churches have made significant contributions through schools, hospitals, orphanages, scholarship programmes, and humanitarian initiatives. Yet the scale of child poverty demands a deeper response. Churches must also embrace a prophetic role by speaking against policies, structures, and practices that perpetuate deprivation. Christian discipleship cannot be reduced to personal spirituality while ignoring the suffering of children. Faithfulness requires both compassion and justice.

6.3 Islam and the Protection of the Vulnerable

Islam likewise provides a strong ethical foundation for child welfare. The Qur'an repeatedly enjoins compassion, social responsibility, and care for vulnerable members of society, instructing believers to show kindness to orphans and the needy as a condition of true righteousness (Qur'an 2:177). Children are regarded as blessings entrusted by Allah, and their welfare is a matter of both social and spiritual significance.

The institution of *Zakat* demonstrates Islam's commitment to social justice. By requiring the redistribution of wealth to support vulnerable persons, Islam seeks to prevent the concentration of resources among a privileged few while others suffer deprivation. Similarly, *Sadaqah* encourages voluntary generosity and communal solidarity.

The life and teachings of Prophet Muhammad also reveal a deep concern for children. Numerous traditions highlight his kindness toward the young and his insistence that children be treated with dignity, mercy, and respect. Within the Nigerian context, Islamic institutions have historically contributed to education, welfare, and social support. Mosques, Islamic schools, charitable organizations, and community networks continue to play important roles in addressing social needs.

However, as with Christianity, the challenge extends beyond charitable assistance. Islamic communities must also engage questions of justice, governance, and accountability. Child poverty cannot be addressed solely through acts of generosity; it requires transformation of the structures that perpetuate deprivation.

6.4 African Traditional Religion and Communal Solidarity

African Traditional Religion (ATR) provides another important resource for understanding communal responsibility. Although often overlooked in contemporary discussions, ATR has historically shaped many of the values that continue to influence African social life.

A central feature of ATR is its emphasis on interconnectedness. Human beings are understood as existing within a network of relationships involving family, community, ancestors, and the spiritual world. Individual well-being is inseparable from communal harmony. Within this worldview, neglect of vulnerable persons threatens the balance and cohesion of the community. Care for children therefore becomes more than a social obligation; it becomes part of maintaining the moral fabric of society.

Many traditional practices reflected this commitment. Extended family systems provided support for orphans and vulnerable children. Community members shared responsibility for discipline and moral formation. Mutual aid networks ensured that families facing hardship were not abandoned. Although modern social changes have weakened some of these structures, their underlying values remain relevant. They remind contemporary society that communal solidarity is a deeply rooted African response to human vulnerability.

Christianity	Islam	Yoruba / Igbo / ATR
Care for "the least of these"; prophetic justice.	Zakat and Amana (trust); kindness to the orphan and needy.	Communal bond and ancestor harmony; ora na azu nwa.

6.5 Rebuilding Communities of Care

The reconstruction of communal responsibility requires practical action. Communities must move from acknowledging child poverty to actively confronting it.

Religious institutions can collaborate across denominational and faith boundaries to address issues affecting children. Churches, mosques, and traditional institutions possess extensive grassroots networks capable of supporting educational initiatives, nutritional programmes, mentorship schemes, and child protection efforts. Local communities can also revive traditions of mutual assistance adapted to contemporary realities. While

urbanization and modernization have altered social relationships, they need not eliminate communal responsibility. New forms of solidarity can emerge through neighbourhood associations, youth organizations, women's groups, and community development initiatives.

Educational institutions likewise have an important role to play. Schools should not merely transmit knowledge but also cultivate values of empathy, citizenship, and social responsibility. Young people must be taught that success carries obligations toward others and that leadership involves service to the community.

Ultimately, rebuilding communities of care requires intentional effort to restore trust, cooperation, and shared responsibility within society.

7. Conclusion

This paper has argued that child poverty in Nigeria is far more than an economic challenge: it is, at bottom, a moral and communal crisis. Through the lens of *Ubuntu* and its Nigerian expressions in *Omoluabi*, *Omenani*, and *Tarbiyya*, this study has demonstrated that the widespread deprivation experienced by millions of Nigerian children represents a profound contradiction of the values that have historically shaped African social life.

Across African societies, the child has traditionally occupied a privileged moral position. Children were not regarded as private possessions belonging exclusively to their biological parents; they were understood as communal treasures whose welfare concerned the entire community. The extended family, religious institutions, neighbourhood networks, and cultural associations collectively participated in the nurture, protection, and formation of the young. Such arrangements reflected a deeper philosophical conviction that human beings flourish through relationships of mutual care and shared responsibility.

Yet contemporary Nigeria reveals a troubling departure from this moral vision. The persistence of out-of-school children, child labour, street children, internally displaced children, and widespread childhood deprivation points to more than economic hardship. It exposes a gradual weakening of communal solidarity and a growing disconnect between cultural ideals and social realities. While many Nigerians continue to celebrate the values of *Ubuntu*, *Omoluabi*, *Omenani*, and *Tarbiyya*, the conditions under which countless children live suggest that these values are no longer consistently reflected in public life.

The paper has further shown that religion occupies a critical place in addressing this crisis. Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religion each contain rich moral resources that affirm the dignity of children and the responsibility of communities to protect the vulnerable. Their teachings converge remarkably with the ethical vision of *Ubuntu*. Together, they provide a powerful foundation for confronting child poverty not merely through charity but through sustained commitments to justice, solidarity, and social transformation.

At the heart of *Ubuntu* lies a simple but profound truth: our humanity is bound together. A society cannot claim to be flourishing while large numbers of its children are denied opportunities to flourish. The suffering of children is never an isolated problem. It is a reflection of the moral condition of the wider community. When children are neglected, excluded, or abandoned, society itself is diminished. Conversely, when children are protected, educated, nourished, and empowered, the entire community benefits.

The challenge before Nigeria, therefore, is not simply how to reduce poverty statistics but how to recover a culture of responsibility. It is how to rebuild communities in which every child is valued, every child's dignity is respected, and every child's future is regarded as a collective concern. This task requires more than

governmental intervention. It demands the active participation of families, religious institutions, educational systems, traditional authorities, civil society organizations, and citizens.

Ubuntu reminds us that social renewal begins with a recognition of shared humanity. The future of Nigerian society depends not only on economic growth, technological advancement, or political stability but also on the extent to which it remains committed to the welfare of its most vulnerable members. Children are not merely beneficiaries of development; they are the measure of development itself.

Ultimately, the persistence of child poverty in Nigeria calls for a renewed moral imagination—one that refuses to normalize suffering and refuses to accept exclusion as inevitable. Such an imagination is deeply embedded within African cultural and religious traditions. The task before contemporary society is to reclaim these traditions and translate their insights into concrete social action. For if *Ubuntu* teaches that "a person is a person through other persons," then the future of Nigeria will be determined, in no small measure, by how faithfully Nigerians choose to become persons through their care for their children.

Contribution to Knowledge

This study makes five important contributions to scholarship in African philosophy, religion, culture, and social ethics:

1. **Reframing Child Poverty:** It moves the discourse on child poverty beyond predominantly economic explanations and reframes the phenomenon as a crisis of communal responsibility and moral failure, broadening the analytical framework through which child poverty is understood within African contexts.
2. **Comparative African Ethics:** It demonstrates that *Ubuntu* is not merely a Southern African philosophical concept but one whose core principles resonate with Nigerian cultural traditions such as *Omoluabi*, *Omenani*, and *Tarbiyya*. This comparative approach highlights shared ethical foundations across diverse African societies.
3. **Interfaith Convergence:** The study establishes a connection between religion and social responsibility by showing how Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religion converge in their concern for child welfare and communal care, strengthening the relevance of religious studies to contemporary social challenges.
4. **Capabilities-Based Critique:** By integrating Sen and Nussbaum's capabilities approach with *Ubuntu*, it provides a fresh interpretive lens for scholars examining childhood, poverty, and social justice in Africa.
5. **Constructive Ethical Framework:** The study offers a constructive framework for social renewal by proposing *Ubuntu* as a practical resource for rebuilding communal solidarity and strengthening collective responsibility toward children.

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