

THE DATA DIVIDE

Why Northern Nigeria Risks Becoming Invisible in Nigeria's Digital
Economy

Hussaini Umar

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Abstract

Nigeria's digital economy is being narrated as a national success story: rising broadband penetration, a fast-growing fintech sector, and an increasingly ambitious policy architecture built around the National Digital Economy Policy and Strategy (NDEPS), the National Data Strategy, the National Artificial Intelligence Strategy, and the Nigeria Data Protection Act (NDPA) 2023. Yet the data that increasingly determines who receives investment, infrastructure, and social protection is itself unevenly produced across the federation. Drawing on official statistics from the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), the Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC), the National Population Commission (NPC), EFInA, UNICEF, the World Bank's Statistical Performance Indicators (SPI), and bibliometric and humanitarian-sector evidence, this paper maps nine interlocking fault lines — digital infrastructure, statistical capacity, open datasets, data-science talent, geographic information systems (GIS) capacity, research institutions, digital literacy, government data portals, and administrative records — along which Northern Nigeria consistently trails the rest of the federation. It argues that this is not merely a digital-access problem but a data-governance problem with direct policy consequences: a region that produces insufficient quality data risks receiving poorer policy decisions, because planners, investors, and increasingly automated allocation systems can only act on the evidence available to them. Recent evidence — including a 2026 federal admission that the North West and North East absorbed roughly 80 percent of a decade of donor education investment yet still record the country's lowest literacy rates — suggests this dynamic is already visible in outcomes. The paper closes with a policy and institutional agenda for closing Northern Nigeria's data divide before it hardens into permanent exclusion from Nigeria's digital economy.

Keywords: data divide; statistical capacity; digital economy; Northern Nigeria; data governance; evidence-based policy; Nigeria Data Protection Act; digital literacy

1. Introduction

Nigeria talks about its digital economy in the language of arrival. Broadband subscriptions have grown from roughly 90 million in 2015 to well over 98 million broadband connections by January 2025, with overall internet penetration climbing past 45 percent (National Communications Commission [NCC], 2025). Lagos hosts one of Africa's most valuable startup ecosystems, home to unicorns whose payment rails now move money across dozens of African countries. The federal government has assembled an increasingly sophisticated data-governance architecture: the National Digital Economy Policy and Strategy (NDEPS) of 2019, built on eight pillars including digital literacy and soft infrastructure; the Nigeria Data Protection Act (NDPA) of 2023 and its enforcement arm, the Nigeria Data Protection Commission (NDPC); a National Data Strategy; and, more recently, a National Artificial Intelligence Strategy and a pledge to train three million tech talents by 2027 (Federal Ministry of Communications and Digital Economy, 2019; Nigeria Data Protection Commission, 2023).

But a digital economy is, at bottom, a data economy. It runs on the statistics that guide public investment, the administrative records that establish who is eligible for what, the open datasets that let entrepreneurs and researchers build new services, and the geospatial and demographic data that increasingly feed the credit-scoring, logistics, and targeting algorithms of both government and the private sector. A region can have excellent physical connectivity and still be functionally absent from this economy if it does not also produce, hold, and control good data about itself.

This paper argues that Northern Nigeria — the North West, North East, and North Central geopolitical zones — faces exactly this risk. Across nine dimensions that together constitute a region's capacity to generate and use data — digital infrastructure, statistical capacity, open datasets, data-science talent, GIS capacity, research institutions, digital literacy, government data portals, and reliable administrative records — the North consistently trails the South. The consequence is not simply that Northern Nigerians are under-connected; it is that Northern Nigeria is under-measured, and therefore at growing risk of being under-served by a policy and investment system that can only respond to what it can see.

The paper's central policy claim is straightforward but consequential: a region that produces insufficient quality data risks receiving poorer policy decisions. Weak data does not simply reflect underdevelopment; it actively reproduces it, by starving planners, investors, and international

partners of the evidence they need to allocate resources accurately, and by leaving the region poorly represented in the datasets that increasingly train the automated systems that govern access to credit, logistics, and services. Section 2 sets out a conceptual framework for understanding this "data divide" as distinct from, but layered on top of, the more familiar digital divide. Section 3 explains the paper's method. Section 4 maps the nine fault lines with the best available current evidence. Section 5 develops the policy argument in detail, drawing on concrete cases where data gaps have already distorted outcomes. Section 6 considers what is at stake if the divide is left unaddressed, and Section 7 sets out a policy agenda.

2. Conceptual Framework: From Digital Divide to Data Divide

The idea of a "digital divide" — unequal access to connectivity and devices — is well established in Nigerian policy discourse, and is visible in the country's own communications statistics: internet penetration in conflict-affected Borno and Yobe states, for instance, has been estimated at under 25 percent even as national broadband penetration approaches half the population (NCC, 2025). This paper argues that a second, less visible divide sits on top of the first: a data divide, concerning not whether a region can get online, but whether it can be counted, mapped, studied, and represented in the datasets that shape policy and investment.

The World Bank's Statistical Performance Indicators (SPI) framework offers a useful analytic scaffold for this idea. Developed to replace the older Statistical Capacity Index, the SPI measures a country's statistical system across five pillars — data use, data services, data products, data sources, and data infrastructure — on the premise that "strong statistical capacity is a prerequisite for producing reliable statistics that help monitor a country's governance and economic performance" (Dang, Pullinger, Serajuddin, & Stacy, 2023, p. 1). The same five pillars can usefully be applied sub-nationally: a Nigerian geopolitical zone with weak data infrastructure, thin administrative data sources, and few data products or services is, in effect, a statistically under-governed region, regardless of how connected its telecoms network becomes.

This framing builds on a longer scholarly tradition concerned with what has been called Africa's "statistical tragedy" — the observation that many African states must rely most heavily on statistics for planning and donor accountability at precisely the moment their statistical systems are weakest (Devarajan, 2013). Within a single federation like Nigeria, this tragedy is not evenly distributed: some states and zones have denser survey coverage, more research institutions,

more administrative digitisation, and more private-sector data generation than others. The result is an intra-national statistical gradient that mirrors, and in places widens, the country's older North-South development gradient.

Two implications follow. First, closing the digital divide (more towers, more devices, cheaper data) will not by itself close the data divide; a well-connected region can still be poorly measured if its administrative systems, research institutions, and statistical offices are weak. Second, and more importantly for policy, the data divide is not a passive consequence of underdevelopment — it is an active contributor to it, because modern governance, investment, and increasingly artificial-intelligence-driven decision systems allocate resources on the basis of available data. A region invisible in the data is, functionally, a region invisible to decision-makers.

3. Methodology

This paper is a desk-based policy synthesis rather than a primary empirical study. It draws together the most current publicly available official and donor statistics as of January 2026, across nine dimensions chosen to correspond to the major building blocks of a functioning sub-national data ecosystem: telecommunications and electricity infrastructure; national statistical capacity; open government data; data-science and technology talent; geographic information systems; university research output; digital and basic literacy; government data portals; and civil registration and vital statistics. Sources include the National Bureau of Statistics' General Household Survey panel, Nigerian Communications Commission subscriber data, National Population Commission civil-registration statistics, the EFINA Access to Finance survey, UNICEF and UNESCO education data, the World Bank's Statistical Performance Indicators, Scopus-based bibliometric studies of Nigerian universities, GRID3/NASRDA geospatial reporting, and recent Nigerian and international reporting on humanitarian data gaps in the North East and North West.

Where possible, the paper reports the most recent available figures and flags their vintage, since Nigerian sub-national statistics are collected at irregular intervals and some indicators (particularly literacy and out-of-school-children estimates) are contested between government and international agencies. The analysis is organised around Nigeria's six geopolitical zones — North Central, North East, North West, South East, South South, and South West — with "Northern Nigeria" used to refer collectively to the three northern zones unless a more specific

zone or state is named. The paper's limitations are those of any desk synthesis: it cannot independently verify contested figures, it depends on the quality of the underlying official statistics it critiques, and it is necessarily a snapshot of a fast-moving policy landscape.

4. Mapping the Fault Lines of Northern Nigeria's Data Divide

The sections below examine nine dimensions of sub-national data capacity in turn. Individually, each is a familiar development-policy concern. Together, they describe a compounding pattern: a region that is less connected, less counted, less mapped, less researched, less digitally literate, and less administratively documented than the rest of the country.

4.1 Digital Infrastructure

Nigeria's national broadband penetration reached 45.6 percent by January 2025, with total broadband subscriptions approaching 99 million (NCC, 2025). But this national average conceals a sharp zonal gradient. NBS General Household Survey data covering 2023–2024 show household electricity access — a basic precondition for reliable connectivity and device use — ranging from 74.6 percent in the South East and 71.7 percent in the South West down to 46.8 percent in the North Central, 32.1 percent in the North West, and just 29.5 percent in the North East, a 45-percentage-point gap between the best- and worst-served zones (as reported in Legit.ng, 2026, citing NBS data). Internet penetration follows a similar pattern at the state level: Borno and Yobe, the two states most affected by the Boko Haram/ISWAP insurgency, have internet penetration estimated at under 25 percent, well below the national average, reflecting both physical destruction of telecoms infrastructure and the security-driven network shutdowns that have periodically affected the North East.

Fibre and tower investment decisions are themselves data-driven: operators size infrastructure rollouts against population density, income, and existing usage data. A region with thinner commercial and demographic data is, other things equal, a harder business case to make — which helps explain why infrastructure investment continues to concentrate around Lagos, Abuja, and the South West even as national broadband targets are met on paper.

4.2 Statistical Capacity

Nigeria's own national statistical system, coordinated by the NBS, has been investing in a more integrated approach to administrative statistics, including the Integrated System of

Administrative Statistics (ISAS) and coordination meetings that bring together state bureaus of statistics from across the federation (NBS, 2025). Yet Nigeria's overall statistical performance, measured through the World Bank's SPI framework, remains comparatively weak on the "data sources" pillar — which captures the availability of census, survey, administrative, and geospatial data — with Nigeria's Pillar 4 score sitting in the mid-thirties out of 100 across recent years (World Bank SPI data, cited in CEIC, 2025). Within this already-constrained national picture, state-level statistical offices in the North are typically smaller, less funded, and less able to conduct independent surveys than their southern counterparts, meaning that whatever national capacity exists is disproportionately generated by, and concentrated in, southern institutions and Abuja-based federal agencies.

The consequence is a familiar one in low-capacity statistical systems: national indicators are often modelled or extrapolated for areas where primary data collection is difficult — including much of the North East and parts of the North West affected by banditry — using assumptions calibrated on better-covered areas. This is compounded by security constraints, which physically prevent NBS and NPC enumerators from safely reaching parts of Zamfara, Katsina, Sokoto, and Borno.

4.3 Open Datasets and Government Data Portals

Nigeria has real open-data infrastructure: the federal Open Data Portal (data.gov.ng), maintained by the Ministry of Communications, Innovation and Digital Economy, publishes datasets across agriculture, budget, economics, education, environment, finance, health, and national statistics categories, and the country participates in continental open-data indices. The Nigeria Geospatial Reference and Information Database (GRID3) programme — now run by Nigeria's National Space Research and Development Agency (NASRDA) after transitioning from donor management — hosts 980 datasets across 37 states and 12 sectors, including subnational boundaries, schools, health facilities, markets, and settlements, integrated with agencies such as the Independent National Electoral Commission, NBS, the National Primary Health Care Development Agency, and the National Population Commission (GRID3, 2023).

The problem is less the absence of a national portal than the unevenness of what feeds it. Datasets on federal open-data platforms are disproportionately generated where administrative digitisation, research institutions, and NGO/donor presence are densest — largely the South West, South South, and Abuja — while equivalent datasets for northern states are often older,

coarser in resolution, or absent altogether. A national open-data portal is only as representative as its weakest-covered region, and the weakest-covered regions in Nigeria are disproportionately northern.

4.4 Data Scientists and Digital Talent

Nigeria's technology-hub geography remains heavily concentrated in Lagos and, to a lesser extent, Abuja and Port Harcourt. One widely cited mapping found roughly 35 tech hubs in Lagos alone against 14 in Abuja and eight in Port Harcourt out of 75 identified nationally, with only sixteen states hosting any hub at all (Nwose, 2019). More recent reporting suggests the picture is slowly diversifying: Kano now accounts for an estimated 25 percent of the North's startup activity, its local tech community growing from roughly five startups in 2021 to about sixty by 2024, while Jos hosts nHub — the first technology innovation hub established in Northern Nigeria — and Abuja's Kuje district hosts TD4PAI, described as the North's first technology hardware incubator (Nairametrics, 2026; Skynob Digital Solution, 2026).

These are genuine and welcome developments, but they remain a fraction of the density found in Lagos, where an estimated 77 people move into the city every hour, further concentrating both population and the commercial data that population generates (Rest of World, 2021, cited context). A smaller pool of data scientists, analysts, and GIS technicians based in or trained on Northern Nigerian problems means fewer locally-led data products — dashboards, models, risk scores — that reflect Northern realities, and a continuing dependency on Lagos- or Abuja-based teams to interpret and represent the North in national datasets and digital products.

4.5 GIS and Geospatial Capacity

Geospatial data is disproportionately important in the North, where poor road networks, insecurity, and displacement make location-based planning essential — and where humanitarian and stabilisation programming has, out of necessity, generated some of the country's most granular geospatial datasets for the North East in particular, coordinated through OCHA, ACAPS, and NASRDA's GRID3 platform (ACAPS, 2025; GRID3, 2023). Even so, this geospatial capacity is heavily conflict- and donor-driven, concentrated in humanitarian response zones such as Borno's Local Government Areas, rather than reflecting a systematic, sustained state-level GIS capability across the North West and North Central. Once humanitarian funding contracts, as has already

begun to happen amid shifting donor priorities, much of this geospatial data-generation capacity risks contracting with it, leaving a data legacy but no ongoing production capability.

4.6 Research Institutions and Scholarly Output

Nigeria's most research-productive universities by Scopus-indexed output are concentrated in the South. Recent bibliometric data show the University of Nigeria, Nsukka leading with 7,025 publications (2020–2023), followed by the University of Ibadan (6,978) and the University of Ilorin (3,714), with the University of Lagos, Obafemi Awolowo University, and Covenant University rounding out the top six — none based in the three northern zones (Business Day, 2024, citing Scopus data). Ahmadu Bello University, the North's flagship federal university, has accumulated roughly 6,484 Scopus-indexed documents since inception, compared with 18,408 for the University of Ibadan over the same measurement window (Business Day, 2017).

It is worth noting a genuine nuance in this evidence: a rigorous comparison of citations-per-paper (a quality rather than volume measure) across Nigeria's top 76 universities found no statistically significant difference between northern and southern institutions, or across the six geopolitical zones, once quality rather than sheer output is considered (Okagbue, Az-Abiazem, & Teixeira da Silva, 2024). In other words, where northern researchers do publish, their work is not systematically lower quality — but there is measurably less of it, and fewer institutions producing it, which is precisely the volume problem this paper is concerned with: a smaller regional evidence base, not a lower-quality one.

4.7 Digital Literacy and Basic Literacy

The NDEPS sets a national target of 95 percent digital literacy by 2030 (Federal Ministry of Communications and Digital Economy, 2019), but digital literacy is built on a foundation of basic literacy that is itself sharply unequal. UNICEF estimates that 18.3 million Nigerian children are out of school — the highest such figure in the world — with the North West alone accounting for an estimated 8 million out-of-school children and the North East a further 5 million, against roughly 240,000 in the South East (Guardian Nigeria, 2025, citing UNICEF/UBEC data). An UBEC state-by-state study found that 66 percent of all out-of-school children nationally are concentrated in the North East and North West alone (cited in Nwoke et al., 2024). UNICEF further notes that Qur'anic education, which reaches an estimated 29 percent of Muslim children in the North East and 35 percent in the North West, is not counted by government as formal

schooling because it does not include basic literacy and numeracy instruction — meaning millions of northern children are simultaneously in an educational system and absent from the literacy statistics that would otherwise capture them (UNICEF Nigeria, n.d.).

Nigeria's Education Minister disclosed in May 2026 that NBS data placed the North West and North East as the country's lowest-ranked zones on both literacy and numeracy — a finding made more striking by the accompanying admission that these two zones had absorbed approximately 80 percent of development partners' education-sector investment over the preceding decade (Guardian Nigeria, 2026). Separately, the National Commission for Colleges of Education warned in April 2026 that more than 92 percent of Nigerian children cannot read and understand simple, age-appropriate text by age ten, a crisis reported to be markedly worse in the northern zones (Daily Trust, 2026).

4.8 Government Data Portals and Interoperability

Beyond the federal open-data portal discussed in Section 4.3, functioning sub-national data portals — state-level dashboards for budgets, health facilities, school censuses, or IGR (internally generated revenue) — are more common among southern and Middle Belt states with stronger civil-society and donor engagement than among many North West and North East states. Where northern states do publish data, it is more often through federal or donor-run platforms (GRID3, NPHCDA dashboards, humanitarian OCHA products) than through state-owned, state-maintained infrastructure — an important distinction for data governance, since data a state does not own or control is data it cannot easily sustain, update, or use to hold its own agencies accountable.

4.9 Reliable Administrative Records

Civil registration is perhaps the starkest illustration of the divide, because it is both a data problem and a rights problem. The National Population Commission disclosed in July 2026 that only about 40 percent of births in Nigeria are officially registered, against an administrative estimate of 57 percent — a discrepancy the Commission itself attributes to the difference between household-survey and administrative measurement (National Population Commission, 2026; Blueprint Newspapers, 2026). The 2024 Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey found birth registration at 59 percent in urban areas against just 27 percent in rural areas nationally — and rural populations are disproportionately concentrated in the North West and North East,

where insecurity, distance to registration centres, and lower female literacy compound the gap. Death registration nationally remains below 20 percent (Blueprint Newspapers, 2026).

The Commission's response — a Partnership Compact Agreement with the Association of Local Governments of Nigeria, the National Identity Management Commission, UNICEF, and private technology partners to decentralise registration — had reached roughly 4,000 of the country's 8,809 wards by mid-2026 (Leadership, 2026). This is a genuine and welcome acceleration, but it also confirms the scale of the starting gap: more than half the country's wards had not yet been reached by digital civil-registration infrastructure as of the most recent disclosure. Without a legal birth record, a citizen is effectively invisible to identity systems, financial inclusion programmes, and — increasingly — the digital public infrastructure Nigeria is building its digital economy on.

4.10 Summary: The Nine Fault Lines at a Glance

Table 1 summarises the headline evidence for each of the nine dimensions mapped above.

Dimension	Northern Nigeria evidence	Key source
Digital infrastructure	Electricity access: NE 29.5%, NW 32.1% vs SE 74.6%; internet <25% in Borno/Yobe	NBS 2025; Legit.ng 2026
Statistical capacity	Nigeria SPI data-sources score ~35/100; weaker state bureaus in the North	Dang et al., 2023; CEIC 2025
Open datasets	GRID3: 980 datasets/37 states, but denser coverage in the South	GRID3, 2023
Data-science talent	Lagos 35 tech hubs vs Kano/Jos/Kaduna emerging from a small base	Nwose, 2019; Nairametrics, 2026
GIS capacity	Geospatial data mostly conflict/donor-driven in NE, thin elsewhere	ACAPS, 2025; GRID3, 2023
Research institutions	No northern university in Nigeria's Scopus top 6 by volume	Business Day, 2024
Digital/basic literacy	NW ~8.0m and NE ~5.1m out-of-school children; lowest literacy zones	Guardian Nigeria, 2025/2026
Government data portals	State portals more common in South; North relies on federal/donor platforms	Author's synthesis
Administrative records	Birth registration ~40% national; rural 27% vs urban 59%	NPC, 2026; Blueprint, 2026

5. The Policy Argument: When the Map Is Missing, the Territory Is Misgoverned

The nine dimensions above are not independent problems; they compound. A ward with unreliable electricity is less likely to have functioning health-facility data systems. A state with few data scientists is less able to translate GRID3 geospatial layers into usable planning tools. A zone with low birth registration produces demographic projections that are themselves estimates built on thin foundations, which in turn feed the resource-allocation formulas, humanitarian caseload figures, and private-sector market-sizing exercises that determine where investment goes next. This section develops the paper's central claim — that a region producing insufficient quality data risks receiving poorer policy decisions — through four concrete illustrations already visible in the current evidence.

5.1 The Funding-Literacy Paradox

The clearest illustration is the one the federal government itself disclosed in 2026: the North West and North East received approximately 80 percent of a decade's development-partner investment in education, yet remain the country's lowest-performing zones on literacy and numeracy (Guardian Nigeria, 2026). This is not, on its own, proof that funding was wasted — insecurity, displacement, and the scale of the out-of-school-children crisis in these zones mean the investment need was genuinely greatest there. But it is strong evidence of a targeting and measurement failure: without reliable baseline literacy data, disaggregated school-census information, and functioning administrative monitoring systems in the recipient zones, funders and government alike have had limited ability to verify whether interventions reached their intended beneficiaries, adjust programme design in response to evidence, or distinguish genuine progress from reporting gaps. The Education Minister's own proposed remedy — using NBS to obtain an accurate headcount of out-of-school children — is itself an admission that a decade of major investment proceeded without the basic data infrastructure needed to manage it well (Daily Trust, 2026).

5.2 Humanitarian Targeting Under Data Scarcity

A peer-reviewed study of humanitarian data practices in North East Nigeria found that "most countries, including Nigeria, with internally displaced people have the problem of incomplete, inaccurate, and unreliable data," concluding that these gaps directly constrain the accuracy of humanitarian targeting and raise ethical concerns about how displaced populations are counted, classified, and served (Journal of International Humanitarian Action, 2023). Separately, researchers modelling conflict-attributable mortality in Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe between 2016 and 2019 had to rely on small-area statistical estimation techniques precisely because many of the datasets collected by humanitarian actors were too sparse, inconsistent in geographic coverage, or limited in time period to support direct measurement (medRxiv, 2022). When the population most in need of accurate, timely data — displaced and conflict-affected Northern Nigerians — is also the population hardest to collect reliable data on, humanitarian and stabilisation resources are necessarily allocated on the basis of best estimates rather than verified need, with all the risk of misallocation that implies.

5.3 Financial Inclusion and the Limits of National Targets

Nigeria's Financial Inclusion Strategy (NFIS 3.0) set a national target of reducing exclusion to 25 percent by 2024. The 2023 EFINA Access to Finance survey found the country nearly there in aggregate, at 26 percent excluded — but exclusion remained at 38 percent in the North East and 47 percent in the North West, against just 5 percent in the South West and 10 percent in the South South (EFInA, 2023, cited in The Cable, 2023). A national target met on average while two entire zones remain roughly four to nine times more excluded than the best-performing zone suggests that policy design, product design, and agent-network deployment decisions — all of which rely on granular data about population density, income, mobility, and trust in formal institutions — have been calibrated against a national or southern-weighted picture that underrepresents northern conditions, including the religious and cultural considerations around interest-based banking that EFInA and state officials have specifically flagged as under-addressed in the North West (The Cable, 2023).

5.4 The Coming Risk: Algorithmic Under-Representation

The three cases above concern human policy decisions made on thin data. A fourth, forward-looking risk concerns automated decisions. As Nigeria's digital economy matures, an increasing

share of consequential allocation decisions — credit scoring by fintech lenders, route and pricing optimisation by logistics and e-commerce platforms, risk models used by insurers, and eventually AI-assisted public-service triage under the National Artificial Intelligence Strategy — will be built on whatever administrative, transactional, and geospatial data is available at the time these systems are trained. A region that is thinly represented in national datasets today risks being thinly and inaccurately represented in the training data of the automated systems built tomorrow, reproducing today's data divide as a harder-to-see, harder-to-correct algorithmic divide. This is the sharpest version of the paper's central claim: insufficient data does not only mean fewer human policymakers paying attention to a region; it increasingly means fewer machine-made decisions accounting for it correctly either.

6. What Is at Stake If the Divide Is Left Unaddressed

The three northern geopolitical zones are not a demographic afterthought. The North West alone had an estimated population of over 60 million by 2022 — larger than most African countries in its own right — while the North East, despite fifteen years of insurgency, covers nearly a third of Nigeria's total land area (Wikipedia-sourced NPopC estimates; North East [Nigeria], n.d.). A federation whose digital economy, statistical system, and increasingly its AI-assisted governance tools are calibrated against a data picture that under-represents a third of its geopolitical zones and a large share of its population is not simply under-serving those zones; it is building national planning, national budgeting, and eventually national AI infrastructure on an incomplete map of the country itself.

Left unaddressed, the risks compound in three directions. First, a continuing misallocation risk: resource-allocation formulas, whether for federation-account transfers, constituency projects, or donor programming, will keep being calibrated on demographic and outcome data that is systematically less reliable for northern states, producing exactly the kind of well-funded-but-ineffective outcomes already visible in the education sector (Section 5.1). Second, a deepening investment gap: private capital, like development capital, follows visible, well-documented markets; a region with thinner commercial, demographic, and infrastructure data will continue to look — on paper — like a smaller and riskier opportunity than it may actually be, reinforcing the tech-hub and venture-capital concentration already documented in Section 4.4. Third, a security-development feedback loop: in the North East and parts of the North West, poor data already constrains both humanitarian response (Section 5.2) and long-term stabilisation

planning, and continued underinvestment in statistical and administrative infrastructure in these areas will make it correspondingly harder to demonstrate — to citizens, to legislators, to donors — that stabilisation investments are working, undermining the case for sustaining them.

7. Toward Closing the Divide: A Policy and Institutional Agenda

Nigeria already possesses much of the policy architecture needed to close this divide; the task ahead is less about writing new strategy documents than about deliberately, measurably directing existing instruments — NDEPS, the National Data Strategy, the NDPA 2023, and the National Artificial Intelligence Strategy — toward the specific sub-national gaps mapped in Section 4. The following seven measures follow directly from that evidence.

7.1 Ring-fence statistical capacity investment for northern states

NBS's Integrated System of Administrative Statistics (ISAS) rollout and its state-bureau coordination mechanism (NBS, 2025) should carry explicit, published targets for closing the North-South gap in survey frequency, sample size, and administrative-data digitisation — not simply national averages that can be met by over-investing further in already better-covered southern states.

7.2 Accelerate and fully fund civil registration decentralisation

The National Population Commission's Partnership Compact, which had reached roughly 4,000 of 8,809 wards by mid-2026 (Leadership, 2026), should be prioritised for completion first in the wards with the lowest current registration coverage — disproportionately rural North West and North East wards — rather than expanding evenly, so that the citizens most at risk of administrative invisibility are reached soonest.

7.3 Build sustained, state-owned GIS capacity beyond humanitarian response

NASRDA and GRID3's subnational geospatial infrastructure (GRID3, 2023) should be paired with dedicated funding and training for state-level GIS units in North West and North Central states that currently rely almost entirely on donor- or humanitarian-funded mapping, so that geospatial data production continues after conflict-driven donor funding contracts.

7.4 Direct tech-talent pipelines deliberately toward the North

The federal pledge to train three million tech talents by 2027 under the ministry's digital-economy blueprint (Arise News, 2025) should carry an explicit regional allocation, anchored in partnerships with northern universities such as Ahmadu Bello University, Bayero University Kano, and Usmanu Danfodiyo University, and in support for emerging hubs such as Kano's growing startup community and Jos's nHub, rather than allowing training capacity to concentrate by default in Lagos and Abuja.

7.5 Mandate subnational disaggregation on open-data platforms

Federal and state open-data mandates under the NDPA and National Data Strategy should require that datasets published on data.gov.ng and successor platforms be disaggregated to at least state, and ideally LGA, level wherever the underlying data permits, so that thin northern coverage is visible and correctable rather than smoothed away in national averages.

7.6 Support independent, regionally rooted data journalism

Civil-society and media organisations that specialise in interrogating, visualising, and publishing sub-national Nigerian data — including data-journalism platforms based in or focused on the North — play a distinct accountability role that government statistics offices cannot substitute for, by surfacing gaps such as the funding-literacy paradox documented in Section 5.1 well before they become national embarrassments. Public and donor support for this capacity should be treated as part of the data-governance agenda, not a separate media-development concern.

7.7 Adopt a subnational statistical-performance indicator

Nigeria could adapt the World Bank's SPI methodology (Dang et al., 2023) into a domestic, state-by-state statistical-performance index — covering data infrastructure, sources, products, services, and use — published annually by NBS. Making the data divide itself measurable, zone by zone and state by state, is the precondition for managing it down over time.

8. Conclusion

Nigeria's digital economy is real, and it is growing. But an economy built on data can only be as inclusive as the data itself. This paper has shown that across nine interlocking dimensions — infrastructure, statistics, open data, talent, geospatial capacity, research, literacy, government

portals, and administrative records — Northern Nigeria remains systematically under-measured relative to the rest of the federation, and that this data gap is already producing the kind of misallocated, hard-to-evaluate policy outcomes that a decade of well-funded but under-monitored education spending in the North West and North East illustrates starkly. The risk ahead is not only that Northern Nigeria stays behind; it is that the region becomes progressively less visible to the very systems — human and, increasingly, algorithmic — that decide where Nigeria's next investments, services, and opportunities go. Closing this divide is a data-governance task as much as an infrastructure one, and it is one Nigeria has both the institutional architecture and, as this paper has argued, the evidence base to begin correcting now.

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