

## **An Assessment of Nigeria's Development Challenges and Dilemma: Beyond External Actors to Policy Responsibilities**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This paper critically assesses Nigeria's persistent development challenges by interrogating the dominant narrative that attributes the country's underdevelopment primarily to external forces. It argues that while external factors such as colonialism, imperialism, and globalization have undeniably shaped Nigeria's developmental trajectory, internal dynamics play a more decisive role in constraining sustainable development. The study identifies corruption, poor leadership, weak political institutions, ethno-religious divisions, cultural diversity, and the leadership styles of successive political elites as key internal factors that have collectively undermined Nigeria's development more than six decades after independence. Anchored on Elite Power Theory, the paper explains how the dominance of a privileged ruling class has influenced governance and policy choices in ways that have failed to translate into broad-based national development. The paper examines the concept of development, Nigeria's underdevelopment challenges, and provides a summary assessment of successive development programmes and policies implemented by various governments, highlighting the reasons for their failure and the implications for Nigerian citizens. It further interrogates the role of the Nigerian state in perpetuating backwardness and arrested development, with particular attention to bad leadership and the prevailing insecurity situation. The study also explores prospects for development and concludes with policy-oriented recommendations aimed at repositioning the state toward effective governance and sustainable development. The paper ultimately contends that Nigeria's development dilemma is rooted more in policy irresponsibility and governance failures than in external constraints.*

**Keywords:** Development Challenges, Governance, Elite Power Theory, Policy Failure, Nigerian State

### **Introduction**

There has been a strong tendency in Nigerian scholarship to attribute the country's lack of development primarily to colonialism and neo-colonialism. More recently, globalization has also been blamed, with some scholars describing it as the "highest stage of neo-colonialism." As Olorode (2001) aptly observes, it is difficult to examine the crises of underdevelopment, governance, democratization, and nation-building in Nigeria without situating their roots in colonial exploitation and the alliance forged between imperialism and the indigenous bourgeoisie. The contradictions inherent within this alliance, as well as those between the alliance and the exploited masses, have continued to deepen the crisis of governance and undermine genuine development and democratization in the country.

However, as several scholars have argued, it is equally important to look inward to identify the persistent internal factors responsible for Nigeria's continued underdevelopment decades after independence. While Nigeria's colonial legacy and that of Africa more broadly remains influential,

it is also evident that the political and economic elites have played a significant role in undermining the social and economic development of the majority of citizens. One way this has occurred is through the collaboration of local elites with international financial institutions, particularly Bretton Woods institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Trade Organization (WTO), and the World Bank, which are often viewed as agents of imperialism. Policies prescribed by these institutions have frequently been adopted and imposed on citizens without adequate consideration of their social consequences, thereby deepening poverty and underdevelopment. A notable example is the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) implemented in 1986 under the military regime of General Ibrahim Babangida, despite widespread opposition from experts and intellectuals who warned of its adverse long-term effects on the masses.

Similarly, other externally influenced policies such as privatization, deregulation, and liberalization have contributed to increased debt burdens, fiscal stress, and limited developmental outcomes. Beyond economic policy, Nigerian elites have also exploited socio-cultural diversity by manipulating ethnic, religious, and cultural differences to sustain patron–client networks through which state resources and favours are distributed. This instrumentalization of diversity for elite accumulation has further weakened social cohesion and obstructed inclusive development.

This paper therefore contends that Nigeria’s underdevelopment is the product of both external and internal forces acting in concert. However, the primary focus of the study is on internal factors, particularly the role of domestic political and economic elites in perpetuating governance failures and developmental stagnation.

### **The Concept of Development**

An empirical examination of the concept of development is essential to understanding the challenges confronting Nigeria’s developmental trajectory. According to Ake (2001), development is the process through which people create and recreate themselves and their life circumstances in order to attain higher levels of civilization in line with their own choices and values. In simple terms, development entails the progressive, qualitative, and sustained improvement of human labour and capacity (Chukwuemeka, 2013). Beyond material advancement and improved standards of living, development is required to achieve comprehensive socio-economic and political transformation, as well as technological mastery over the environment (Igbokwe-Ibeto, 2003). Consequently, development is widely regarded as a multidimensional concept encompassing positive changes that affect the majority of the population across the social, economic, political, and cultural spheres of societal life. For Rudeback (1997), development is fundamentally people-centred, beginning at the grassroots where the majority of Nigerians reside. It reflects a people’s ability to deploy their cultural values over time to transform their conditions such that each stage represents an improvement on the previous one—a process exemplified by countries such as China. Development, therefore, involves a clear departure from the past towards improved economic, social, educational, and political conditions.

Sustainable development, on the other hand, is defined as development that meets present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (UNDP, 2009). In their assessment of sustainable development, Anazodo, Igbokwe-Ibeto, Osawe, and Nkah (2014) argue that it can only be meaningful when citizens are actively involved in decision-making processes through a bottom-up approach. Popular participation, in this context, refers to the active involvement of citizens in goal-setting and decision-making processes, rather than mere acceptance of predetermined outcomes (Ake, 1994). This conception of popular participation aligns closely

with democratic principles such as freedom, equality, consent, and liberty, which constitute the core elements of national development. Popular participation further guarantees citizens the right to engage meaningfully in the political process, including the rights to vote and be voted for. In recognition of these ideals, Section 40 of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria guarantees every citizen the right to peaceful assembly and association, including membership of political parties, trade unions, and other associations for the protection of their interests. Broad-based political participation is therefore a key indicator of democratic development and good governance.

However, Nigeria's political reality sharply contradicts these ideals. Although citizens aspire for their votes to determine electoral outcomes, the political class has frequently undermined this process through manipulation and electoral malpractice. A notable example is the 2023 presidential election, during which the popular will of Nigerians was widely perceived to have been subverted by political elites and the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) through irregularities in the electoral process (emphasis, mine). As a result, popular participation has been relegated to the background, thereby distorting democratic norms, weakening governance, and impeding national development.

Scholars have further conceptualized national development as the capacity of a state to effectively harness its human and natural resources to improve the living standards of its citizens by addressing economic, political, and social challenges. This process necessarily involves the restructuring of social relations of production to eliminate exploitative practices and promote equitable distribution of goods and services (Philips, 1977). Rodney (1972) similarly views development as a multifaceted process. At the individual level, it entails increased skills, freedom, creativity, self-discipline, responsibility, and material well-being. At the national level, it denotes a country's enhanced capacity to manage its internal and external relationships. Crucially, Rodney's conception underscores that development transcends mere economic indicators.

In the same vein, Todaro (1982) defines national development as a multidimensional process involving the reorganization and reorientation of the entire economic and social system. This includes improvements not only in income and administrative structures but also in societal attitudes, customs, and beliefs. The fundamental objectives of national development, according to these scholars, are to increase the availability and equitable distribution of basic life-sustaining goods, raise living standards, and expand the pace of economic and social transformation. Ultimately, national development must address critical questions concerning inequality, poverty, and unemployment. Where these challenges persist, a country cannot be regarded as developed. Notably, these three conditions remain defining features of Nigeria's development experience.

### **Theoretical Framework**

A critical analysis of the challenges confronting Nigeria's development necessarily requires a solid theoretical framework to guide the inquiry. Accordingly, this study adopts the Elite Power Theory as its analytical lens. The Elite Power Theory, articulated by Thomas Dye (1981) in *Top Down Policymaking*, posits that public policy does not emanate from the collective demands of the people, but rather from a consensus among elites who dominate governmental decision-making processes. These elites operate through non-profit foundations, think tanks, special-interest groups, and influential lobbying networks, thereby shaping policy outcomes to reflect their interests.

Central to the Elite Power Theory is the argument that a relatively unified ruling elite, rather than a plurality of competing groups, determines critical national decisions, including those that have far-reaching consequences for society as a whole. While minor or less consequential issues may be delegated to mid-level actors, the masses are largely excluded from meaningful participation in policy formulation. This perspective presents a rather pessimistic view of democratic governance, suggesting that power is highly concentrated in the hands of a few.

C. Wright Mills, one of the most prominent proponents of the Power Elite Theory, further elaborates that in advanced democracies the governing elite is drawn primarily from three interrelated spheres: (i) top political leadership, including the president, key cabinet members, and close advisers; (ii) major corporate owners and directors; and (iii) high-ranking military officials. Together, these groups form an interconnected power structure that exercises disproportionate influence over national affairs.

A fundamental question that arises from this framework concerns the source of elite power. Essentially, this power is derived from control over the highest positions within the political and economic hierarchy. As Mills explains, elites occupy what he describes as the “top command posts” of society. These strategic positions confer immense authority not only over government but also over financial, educational, social, civic, and cultural institutions. Consequently, a small, cohesive group is able to initiate and implement decisions that profoundly affect the lives of the broader population, often without meaningful public input.

#### **Application of the Power Elite Theory to the Subject Matter in Question.**

In Africa, and particularly in Nigeria, elite power is largely derived from control of the highest political offices, the military establishment, and national economic institutions. This concentration of power explains why politics in Nigeria has evolved into a “do-or-die” affair. Former military generals have remained deeply entrenched in the corridors of power, refusing to relinquish influence even after formally leaving office. Figures such as Olusegun Obasanjo, Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida, and Muhammadu Buhari, among others, exemplify this pattern. Although some of these actors have exited public office, they continue to exercise considerable informal influence over political processes and outcomes.

At the subnational level, this trend is further reinforced by the re-emergence of retired military officers as senators, members of the House of Representatives, governors, and other key political office holders across several states of the federation. Additionally, Nigeria’s ruling political party, the All Progressive Congress (APC), has become another significant source of elite power, serving as a vehicle through which political influence and state resources are accessed and consolidated.

This concentration of power has intensified competition among Nigeria’s six geopolitical zones and thirty-six states over the allocation of strategic political offices, including the President, Vice President, Senate President, Speaker of the House of Representatives, Chief Justice of the Federation, Accountant-General of the Federation, and Secretary to the Government of the Federation (SGF). These struggles are often driven by sectional interests rather than merit, competence, or qualifications. The intensity and fatal consequences of this competition are reflected in the pervasive conspiracies within the political system ranging from plots to unseat duly elected office holders, to coordinated efforts to loot the national treasury, and to self-enrichment at the expense of the masses.

Such acts of self-aggrandizement have significantly undermined development across African states, including Nigeria, resulting in persistent underdevelopment and deepening inequality. This context necessitates the application of conspiracy theory as an analytical framework. Conspiracy theories, often situated in the realm of myth, seek to explain political, social, or economic events as outcomes of secret plots orchestrated by covert groups or powerful organizations. They describe situations in which critical decisions are made behind closed doors, largely hidden from public scrutiny. As Barkun (2003) notes, conspiracy theories are premised on the belief that complex events are driven by powerful, unseen forces seeking to control power, wealth, or freedom.

In the African and Nigerian context, a dominant conspiracy narrative is that political leaders systematically loot public treasuries while deflecting blame onto colonial legacies—despite the fact that colonial rule formally ended over six decades ago. Corruption within African officialdom, Nigeria inclusive, has continued to fuel degenerative underdevelopment, transforming many states into personal estates of entrenched political elites. These elites prioritize the siphoning of national resources into foreign accounts over genuine development. A striking example is the freezing of bank accounts in Luxembourg amounting to approximately 600 million US dollars linked to the late Nigerian military ruler, General Sani Abacha. This case illustrates the scale at which elite corruption has contributed to Africa's underdevelopment.

Furthermore, recent policy actions also demonstrate how state power can be exercised against citizens. The naira redesign policy introduced by the immediate past administration of President Muhammadu Buhari, through the Central Bank of Nigeria, resulted in severe hardship for millions of Nigerians. Many citizens were unable to access cash to meet basic needs, leading to widespread suffering and, in some cases, loss of lives. This episode underscores what can be interpreted as a form of state conspiracy against its own citizens, reinforcing the argument that elite-driven governance continues to undermine development and human security in Nigeria (Orokpo, 2012).

### **Nigeria's Underdevelopment Challenges: The Real Issues at stake**

It is important to emphasize that the principal factors driving underdevelopment in Nigeria are poor governance and ineffective leadership. These two variables constitute the foundation upon which other internal and external challenges are anchored. As Nnadozie (2010) aptly observes, any meaningful assessment of Nigeria's development challenges must focus squarely on the problems of leadership failure and bad governance. Nigeria's pervasive poverty and persistent underdevelopment can largely be attributed to poor, visionless, inept, and self-serving leadership (Achebe, 1998; Nnadozie, 2006).

Comparative experiences from other regions of the world, including parts of Asia and the Americas, reveal that societies which endured colonialism and external domination were only able to overcome underdevelopment when their leaders consciously rejected dependency and foreign domination through purposeful, visionary, selfless, and resilient leadership. For instance, South Korea's developmental transformation was driven by strong and visionary leadership that implemented comprehensive land reforms and rural development policies. These strategies empowered rural populations to engage in large-scale agricultural production, ensured food security, and enhanced foreign exchange earnings through an export-led industrialization strategy (Sorkaa, 2023).

Indeed, the enduring cause of Nigeria's underdevelopment lies in leadership failure specifically, the inability or unwillingness of leaders to rise to the demands of office and to lead by personal example, which is the hallmark of genuine leadership. Nigeria has been particularly unfortunate in

this regard. A fundamental aspect of this misfortune, as Achebe (1998) argues, is the near absence of intellectual rigor in the political thinking of many of the country's founding elites, characterized by a tendency toward "pious materialistic woolliness and self-oriented pedestrianism."

This raises a critical question: in what ways have Nigerian leaders sustained underdevelopment and frustrated the country's political and economic development objectives? First, the values, choices, and weak sense of nationalism among Nigeria's leaders have significantly contributed to the mismanagement of the country's abundant natural and human resources. Political leaders demonstrate a strong preference for foreign and luxury goods and services, thereby squandering national wealth. A striking example is their preference for sending their children to foreign schools, paying tuition fees in dollars, pounds, and euros often with funds derived from embezzlement, inflated contracts, and kickbacks. Similarly, political elites frequently seek medical treatment abroad in countries such as Dubai, India, Germany, and China, rather than investing in the improvement of Nigeria's healthcare system. This behavior fuels capital flight and deprives the domestic economy of resources that could have been used to strengthen local institutions.

Second, a substantial portion of national wealth is lost through inflated contracts, fraud, and other dubious practices. Beyond the direct theft of public funds, successive governments have embraced a distorted conception of development, resulting in the implementation of poorly conceived projects and programmes. Public investments are often diverted toward "white elephant" projects that yield minimal social or economic returns and generate little employment, as private interests routinely override public welfare. Consequently, enormous sums of public money have been squandered in this manner (emphasis, mine).

Furthermore, funds looted from state treasuries are typically transferred to foreign banks, particularly in Europe and North America. This practice not only robs the country of much-needed capital but also denies Nigeria the opportunity to reinvest these resources in productive sectors of the economy. Resources that should have been directed toward improving health care, education, infrastructure, and energy are instead captured by a small group of privileged officials, leaving the broader population worse off (Nnadozie, 2010).

Another critical factor sustaining underdevelopment in Nigeria is the poor work ethic within the public service. Many public servants lack discipline, commitment, and professionalism, resulting in low productivity. As the primary machinery for implementing government policies, programmes, and projects, the civil service ought to serve as the engine room of national development. However, in Nigeria, the civil service is often characterized by absenteeism, corruption, and rent-seeking behavior, with officials frequently demanding bribes to perform duties for which they are already salaried. This stands in sharp contrast to countries such as China, where a disciplined and efficient civil service has played a central role in driving national development (Ameh, 2012).

### **An Assessment of Policies and Programmes of Development of Successive Government in Nigeria that failed over the years**

Abah (2004) observes that since 1976, numerous public policies and development programmes introduced by successive Nigerian governments have largely failed to achieve their intended objectives. While some collapsed within a few months of their introduction, others failed over time due to a multiplicity of structural, political, and administrative factors. Ironically, many of these programmes, had they been effectively implemented and sustained, possessed the potential to significantly enhance the economic and social well-being of Nigerian citizens. Among the major

development policies and programmes that failed to deliver meaningful outcomes are the following:

- i) **Operation Feed the Nation (OFN):** Introduced in 1976 by the military administration of General Murtala Mohammed, the programme sought to ensure food sufficiency for Nigerians and to facilitate access to agricultural credit through commercial banks. However, OFN was abandoned shortly after the civilian administration of Alhaji Shehu Shagari assumed office in 1979. Its abandonment was largely attributable to what has been described as the “my-ownism” syndrome (regime identity crisis), a recurring factor responsible for policy discontinuity, project abandonment, and public policy failure in Nigeria.
- ii) **(ii) Green Revolution:** Formulated in 1979 as a replacement for Operation Feed the Nation, the Green Revolution Programme failed to achieve its desired outcomes. Its poor performance was mainly due to structural deficiencies compounded by political parochialism. Consequently, the programme degenerated into little more than a slogan, lacking substantive impact on agricultural productivity.
- iii) **Nigerian Agricultural Insurance Corporation (NAIC):** Established in 1987, the corporation was designed to provide insurance coverage for agricultural enterprises. In 2000, its policy objectives were merged with those of the Nigerian Insurance Corporation (NICON). However, the programme failed to make any meaningful impact both before and after the merger, as it was inadequately implemented and effectively designed to fail from inception.
- iv) **National Agricultural Land Development Authority (NALDA):** Established in 1989, NALDA was tasked with providing public support for land development, promoting optimal land utilization for food and fibre production, encouraging the development of economically viable villages, creating employment opportunities for rural populations, and addressing the challenges of Nigeria’s rural majority. The programme was eventually phased out, with its functions transferred to the Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (FMARD). There is little empirical evidence to suggest that NALDA achieved its core objectives before its dissolution.
- v) **Nigerian Agricultural Cooperative and Rural Development Bank (NACRDB):** Established in 2000, the bank was mandated to provide credit facilities for the production, processing, and marketing of agricultural products. Despite its strategic importance, its impact on agricultural development remained limited due to poor management and inadequate funding.
- vi) **Forestry Development Programme:** Formulated in 2000, this programme aimed to provide tree seedlings and other forestry development inputs to local communities across Nigeria’s five ecological zones. However, its implementation was weak and largely ineffective.
- vii) **Roll Back Malaria Programme:** Introduced in 2001, the programme sought to eradicate or significantly reduce the harmful effects of malaria parasites. Despite its

noble objectives, the programme recorded limited success due to implementation gaps and weak institutional support.

- viii) **Directorate of Food, Roads, and Rural Infrastructure (DFRRI):** Established in 1986, DFRRI was designed to coordinate rural development activities, accelerate integrated rural development, promote grassroots social mobilization, and ensure effective monitoring and evaluation of development projects. Nonetheless, the programme failed to achieve sustainable rural transformation.
- ix) **National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS):** Launched in 2004, NEEDS was inspired by the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals and Nigeria's long-term aspirations for poverty reduction, wealth creation, employment generation, good governance, and value reorientation. Despite substantial investments and institutional frameworks, NEEDS remained largely symbolic and failed to function effectively at the federal, state, or local government levels. It has since been phased out and replaced by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Similarly, other intervention programmes such as the National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP) under President Olusegun Obasanjo, the Subsidy Reinvestment and Empowerment Programme (SURE-P) under President Goodluck Jonathan, and the N-Power Programme under President Muhammadu Buhari also failed to deliver sustainable development outcomes before being discontinued (Aba, 2004).

**Some of the Factors Responsible for the Failures of these Programmes include among others:**

- (a) Those that were aimed at poverty alleviation were mostly not designed to alleviate poverty in the actual sense since they were mere policy prescription from World Bank and IMF on how loans granted to the Nigeria State will be spent.
- (b) All the programmes and policies lacked a clearly defined policy framework with no proper guidelines for development and poverty reduction, rather, were meant to enrich the pockets of political appointees and stooges.
- (c) All these programmes and policies suffered from political instability, political interference, policy and macro-economic dislocations.
- (d) They also lacked continuity as different regimes, both Military and Civilian, in Nigeria enunciated/initiated different programmes, policies and project of development because of the crisis of “**myownism**” (regime identity) is one the major causative agencies of project abandonment and public policy failure in Nigeria.
- (e) There is poor governance leading to abandonment of projects, policies and programmes.
- (f) There is lack of involvement of beneficiaries in project design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation; and there is also ineffective targeting of real beneficiaries. This led to leakage of benefits to unintended beneficiaries or targets.



- (g) Unwidely scope of policies and programmes which resulted in resources being thinly allocated to projects.
- (h) Overlapping of functions of the agencies/institutions which ultimately led to institutional rivalry and conflicts.
- (i) Lack of mechanisms in the various policies, programmes and projects to ensure sustainability.
- (j) Poor human capital development and inadequate funding.

### **Implications of Programmes, Policies and Projects, failures in Nigeria**

No doubt, development programmes, public policies and project failures have many consequences and implications for the country. As the consequences affects individual citizens, so it affects the generality of the country. The consequences of programmes and policy failures include:

- i. **Less Patriotism by Citizens:** Policies and Programmes failure can bring about less patriotism by citizens of a country. Many Nigerians have suffered from public policy and programmes failures which resulted in the non-improvement of their lives and wellbeing. Due to non-implementation of policies which can impact meaningfully on their livelihood, they become poor and poorer. For example, various policies and programmes which would have improved the rural dwellers failed after the euphoria that greeted the policies, programmes and projects.
- ii. **De-Motivation of Citizens:** Many policies and programmes that would have encouraged and energize Nigerians to have the spirit to do more or improve on their economic and social activities failed. Policies and Programmes like the Agricultural and Cooperative Bank which would have guaranteed credit and loans to farmers and agricultural businesses failed. The policy when it was reactivated were never meant for the poor and average Nigerians but were only accessible by those connected to government and powers that be (Abah, 2004).

### **Historical Overview of the State and their Role in Nigeria's Underdevelopment**

The state emerged in human history as an institutional mechanism designed to meet the needs of humans as social beings. Classical social contract theorists-Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679), John Locke (1632–1704), and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) conceived the state as a contractual arrangement between citizens and authority, established to guarantee a legitimate, orderly, and authoritative social, political, and economic framework necessary for societal growth and development. To actualize this arrangement, individuals voluntarily relinquish certain natural rights and freedoms to the state in exchange for security, development, and the creation of an enabling environment conducive to personal self-realization and human flourishing.

The social contract, as commonly explained, represents an intellectual framework for understanding the relationship between individuals and government. It presupposes that individuals form political communities through mutual consent, agreeing to abide by shared rules and obligations in return for protection from violence, insecurity, and other forms of social harm.

Since attaining independence in 1960, successive Nigerian governments have struggled to fulfil the expectations inherent in this social contract, particularly in the areas of development and nation-building. Given Nigeria's colonial legacy, the challenges associated with state formation and national integration have been especially daunting. Nation-building, as defined by Almond and Powell, refers to "the process by which people transfer their commitment and loyalty from smaller

social units such as tribes, villages, or petty principalities to a larger central political system.” This process does not require the erasure of ethnic identities whether Tiv, Idoma, Igbo, Yoruba, or Ijaw but rather the collective acceptance of the authority, legitimacy, and sovereignty of the federal government as the supreme political institution under which all groups coexist.

Throughout both the colonial and post-colonial periods, Nigeria’s development and nation-building efforts have been undermined by persistent challenges, including exclusion, marginalization, unequal participation, inequitable distribution of resources, political domination, and authoritarian tendencies. These challenges have frequently provided fertile ground for conflict, insecurity, and underdevelopment. It is within this context that the national development question becomes central to Nigeria’s political discourse.

Emphasizing the gravity of this issue, the late radical historian Bala Usman argued that for African societies, including Nigeria, the national development question is inseparable from the question of survival. He warned that unless this challenge is confronted decisively through deeper and more inclusive forms of national and continental integration across ecological, economic, social, cultural, and political dimensions a significant proportion of Africa’s population could face existential threats.

Although such warnings may appear alarmist or excessively pessimistic, subsequent developments across the continent lend credence to Usman’s concerns. Since his remarks in 1987, Africa has witnessed catastrophic conflicts and state breakdowns in countries such as Rwanda, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Somalia, the Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Zaire), Sudan and South Sudan, Mali, and more recently, Niger. Nigeria itself had already lost over three million lives during the civil war, and in contemporary times continues to grapple with violent insecurity arising from Boko Haram insurgency and the activities of other non-state actors, resulting in countless deaths and widespread displacement.

The central argument that emerges is the existence of a dialectical relationship between the state, its citizens, and the level of development, particularly as reflected in the provision of public goods and services. When this relationship becomes distorted or ruptured, the result is an inevitable crisis in the social order, manifested in instability, insecurity, and arrested development.

### **Bad Leadership and the Current Insecurity Situation in Nigeria**

The contemporary security situation in Nigeria is conceptually fluid and multifaceted. The country is confronted with a high incidence of armed robbery, kidnapping, targeted assassinations, train hijackings, herder–farmer conflicts, communal violence, inter- and intra-ethnic clashes, political and resource-based conflicts, religious violence, and terrorism. In effect, Nigeria is enmeshed in overlapping and recurring crises. It is in this context that the insecurity challenge is described as conceptually fluid, as it cannot be reduced to a single causal factor or isolated phenomenon. Indeed, attempts to address one dimension of insecurity often generate new and unintended problems. For example, the creation of the Ministry of Niger Delta, intended to address regional grievances, later inspired the establishment of the North-East Development Commission, which critics argue has become another conduit for the misappropriation of national resources (emphasis mine).

A defining characteristic of underdeveloped states is the prevalence of conflict, and conflict, in turn, fuels insecurity. Conflict, according to Coser (1999, p. 18), is “a struggle over values and claims to scarce status, power and resources in which the aims of the opponents are to neutralize, injure or eliminate their rivals.” Such conflicts may arise from diverse sources, including

competition over land, political power, economic resources, cultural identity, ideology, and religion, all of which are evident in the Nigerian context.

The manner in which a state manages the complex processes of nation-building and development, along with their attendant challenges, largely determines citizens' levels of political participation, civic engagement, and trust in governance. These dynamics, in turn, shape the nature of social development, social order, and national security. Since independence in 1960, Nigeria has experienced numerous crises, the most devastating being the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970). In response to these recurrent challenges, scholars and commentators have offered varying diagnoses of Nigeria's condition, often arriving at different conclusions.

Common explanations for Nigeria's national malaise include both internal and external factors, such as cultural diversity, large population size, religious pluralism, colonialism, imperialism, globalization, poverty, corruption, and leadership failure. While these perspectives are analytically useful, they largely represent symptoms rather than the root cause of the crisis. The underlying problem, as this study contends, is the failure of the state. Comparative experiences from countries such as China and South Korea demonstrate that states with similar histories of colonialism and conflict were able to overcome underdevelopment through effective governance, coherent policies, and sustained reforms. Nigeria, therefore, faces not an insurmountable challenge, but a deficit of political will and institutional capacity.

The erosion of the social contract in Nigeria has created space for citizens to resort to self-help and alternative forms of political expression. This development explains the emergence of ethnic militias and non-state armed groups such as the Odua People's Congress (OPC), the Movement for the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP), the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), and Boko Haram. These groups, while often rooted in legitimate grievances, have become major drivers of insecurity and underdevelopment in the country.

This position was succinctly captured by Hillary Clinton, then U.S. Secretary of State, during her visit to Nigeria in 2009, when she observed that "the most immediate source of the disconnect between Nigeria's wealth and its poverty is the failure of governance at the federal level... lack of transparency and accountability has eroded the legitimacy of the government and contributed to the rise of groups that embrace violence and reject the authority of the state."

### **Prospects for Development in Nigeria**

The prospects for development in Nigeria depend largely on the political will, commitment, and quality of leadership demonstrated by the country's political elites. In spite of its persistent development challenges, Nigeria's development potential remains significant, given its abundant human, land, mineral, water, and energy resources. If these resources are effectively harnessed and judiciously managed, Nigeria can meaningfully confront the challenges of development in the twenty-first century.

With visionary and committed leadership, many of the domestic constraints to development such as political instability, weak institutions, and policy inconsistency can be progressively addressed. Nigeria's vast landmass of approximately 923,768 square kilometres, combined with its geographical, social, economic, and cultural diversity, provides a strong foundation for industrial development and an agricultural revolution capable of ensuring national food security. Achieving

this potential, however, will depend largely on deliberate efforts by political leaders to diversify the economy and pursue an export-led growth strategy that maximizes foreign exchange earnings.

The forces of globalization, while offering opportunities, remain largely unfavourable to Nigeria due to its weak productive capacity and peripheral position in the global economic system. To effectively engage with the global economy, Nigeria requires far-reaching economic reforms rooted in self-reliant, home-grown development strategies. Such reforms are essential for achieving sustained economic growth, industrialization, and competitiveness in the twenty-first century. In addition, the education sector must be strengthened through the training and retraining of the productive population, with a view to mobilizing citizens for active participation in national development efforts (Aluko, 1994).

### **Concluding Remarks and Recommendations**

Nigeria's development predicament is paradoxical. Despite its vast oil wealth and abundant natural resources, successive ruling elites have shown limited commitment to developing the manufacturing and agricultural sectors of the economy. Instead, reliance on crude oil accounting for over 85 percent of government revenue and sustained by daily inflows of petrodollars has created a rent-dependent political economy. This oil wealth has become the "pot of gold" over which political elites fiercely compete, fostering corruption and rent-seeking behaviour. As Salimu (1998) observes, corruption and financial manipulation have become easier and more lucrative paths to wealth accumulation than productive investment in industry or trade.

Nigeria's persistent underdevelopment has therefore been widely attributed to poor leadership, greed, and systemic corruption. Addressing this challenge requires bold and decisive action. Former Lagos State Deputy Governor, Mr. Femi Pedro, has argued that only drastic measures can curb corruption, citing the "China option" as an example of stringent anti-corruption enforcement. China's transformation from a largely agrarian and impoverished society into one of the world's leading industrial economies underscores the importance of political discipline, strong institutions, and leadership commitment (Nnadozie, 2010).

Furthermore, Oguntola (2012) has advocated a significant reduction in the cost of governance, particularly within the executive and legislative arms of government. He contends that the excessive financial attractiveness of political office encourages self-serving behaviour among political actors and diverts attention from national development goals. Recent calls for downward reviews of the salaries and allowances of Nigerian legislators reflect growing public concern over this issue.

Nevertheless, the prospects for development in Nigeria are not foreclosed. What is required is a deliberate and coherent approach by the state to clearly define national development objectives and mobilize resources toward their systematic implementation. Nigeria must also critically reassess externally imposed economic recovery programmes, particularly those associated with Bretton Woods institutions, which have often proven incompatible with local realities and development needs.

Ultimately, Nigerian leaders bear primary responsibility for charting an autonomous and sustainable development path, one that prioritizes national interests, avoids external policy traps, and focuses on inclusive growth. With genuine commitment, accountable leadership, and people-centred policies, Nigeria can break free from the vicious cycle of poverty and underdevelopment and realize its long-standing development aspirations.

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