

An Empirical Study on Social Exclusion, Institutionalized Corruption, and Insecurity as Threats to Nigeria's Sustainable Development

OSUGBA Sylvester *

Department of Sociology, Faculty of Social Sciences, Delta State University Abraka Nigeria.

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Abstract

This study examines the interlinked threats of social exclusion, institutionalized corruption, and insecurity to Nigeria's sustainable development. Despite abundant resources, Nigeria continues to lag in human development due to structural and governance weaknesses that hinder inclusive growth and institutional stability. Drawing on documentary analysis, secondary data, and empirical evidence, the study demonstrates how exclusionary practices, corruption networks, and insecurity reinforce one another to perpetuate cycles of underdevelopment. Social exclusion, evident in ethnic marginalization, gender inequality, and youth unemployment, alienates large segments of society, undermining cohesion and fueling grievances exploited by extremist groups. Institutionalized corruption, entrenched across political, judicial, and economic systems, diverts development resources, weakens institutions, and sustains inequality. Insecurity, manifested through insurgency, banditry, kidnapping, and communal clashes, further deepens these challenges by displacing communities, disrupting agriculture, discouraging investment, and diverting funds from essential services to defense expenditures. Trend analyses of Nigeria's Peace Index, Corruption Perceptions Index, and Human Development Index reveal persistent instability, systemic corruption, and only modest improvements in human development. The findings show that insecurity remains the most severe barrier, followed by corruption and exclusion. The study concludes that achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) requires holistic reforms that integrate inclusive governance, strong anti-corruption measures, security sector restructuring, and empowerment of marginalized groups.

Keywords: Social exclusion; Endemic corruption; Corruption; Insecurity; Sustainable development; Governance; Nigeria

1. Introduction

Sustainable development is recognized globally as a multidimensional process encompassing economic growth, social inclusion, environmental protection, and institutional stability (United Nations, 2015). For developing nations such as Nigeria, achieving this goal remains a critical imperative given widespread poverty, inequality, and fragile governance systems. Despite its abundant natural resources and human capital, Nigeria continues to rank low in human development indices, largely due to entrenched structural and governance challenges (UNDP, 2022). Among these challenges, three interrelated phenomena, social exclusion, institutionalized corruption, and insecurity, stand out as formidable obstacles to the attainment of sustainable development objectives. Nigeria's aspiration to achieve the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030 requires addressing systemic governance weaknesses and creating inclusive socio-economic opportunities. However, the persistence of exclusionary practices, corruption networks, and pervasive insecurity has thwarted meaningful progress. These issues not only impede economic growth but also deepen societal inequalities, perpetuate political instability, and create an environment hostile to human development (Akanle and Omobowale, 2019).

* Corresponding author: OSUGBA Sylvester

Social exclusion refers to the systematic denial of participation in social, economic, and political life to specific groups or communities (Silver, 2015). In Nigeria, social exclusion manifests through ethnic marginalization, regional disparities, gender discrimination, and youth unemployment. Structural inequalities in access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities have created a cycle of poverty and alienation for large segments of the population (Akinola, 2020). This phenomenon fuels grievances, weakens national cohesion, and provides fertile ground for violent extremism and political unrest. Institutionalized corruption has become a defining feature of Nigeria's governance landscape. The country consistently ranks among the most corrupt nations globally, with Transparency International (2022) ranking Nigeria 150th out of 180 countries in its Corruption Perception Index. Corruption permeates critical sectors such as public procurement, oil and gas, and security, diverting resources meant for development and entrenching rent-seeking behaviour. This systemic corruption undermines trust in state institutions, discourages foreign investment, and perpetuates cycles of underdevelopment (Ojukwu & Shopeju, 2010).

Nigeria faces complex security challenges, including Boko Haram insurgency in the Northeast, armed banditry in the Northwest, herder-farmer conflicts in the Middle Belt, and secessionist agitations in the Southeast. These conflicts have resulted in mass displacement, destruction of infrastructure, and severe disruptions to agricultural production and trade (International Crisis Group, 2021). Insecurity not only claims lives but also erodes investor confidence, hampers service delivery, and diverts scarce public funds from development to defence expenditures. While numerous studies have examined corruption, insecurity, and poverty in Nigeria separately, few have holistically analysed their interconnectedness as systemic threats to sustainable development. This study fills that gap by exploring the interdependencies among social exclusion, institutionalized corruption, and insecurity, and their combined implications for Nigeria's development trajectory. Understanding these linkages is crucial for designing integrated policy responses that can address root causes rather than symptoms. Nigeria possesses vast human and natural resources and is the largest economy in Africa, yet its sustainable development trajectory remains constrained by overlapping structural challenges social exclusion, institutionalized corruption, and insecurity that collectively erode prospects for inclusive growth.

Firstly, social exclusion in Nigeria manifests through entrenched systems of indigeneity, ethnic marginalization, and educational disparities. Millions of Nigerian citizens are labelled as "non indigenes" in states where they reside, limiting their access to jobs, university admissions, scholarships, and local political representation. This exclusion reinforces regional inequality, diminishes social cohesion, and undermines equitable participation in the development process. The institutionalized corruption remains deeply embedded across public sectors—from oil revenue management to government procurement, civic services, and judicial systems. Estimates suggest Nigeria has lost over \$400 billion in oil revenues to corruption since independence. Scholars identify corruption as an existential threat to development, arguing that systemic misuse of resources skews investments, erodes public trust, and weakens institutional capacity for service delivery and governance.

Insecurity rooted in violent conflict, kidnapping, pipeline vandalism, farmer herder clashes, and insurgency exacerbates development setbacks. One recent empirical study showed that a 1% increase in insecurity causes up to a 0.31% decline in agricultural output in Benue State. Furthermore, the broader pattern of insecurity is widely attributed to institutional failure fuelled by corrupt governance, blind spots in public policy, and under resourced law enforcement. Together, these three interlinked dimensions threaten Nigeria's ability to achieve equitable, durable development in alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Corruption undermines institutional trust; insecurity displaces citizens and disrupts economic activity; and social exclusion denies large groups the capacity to contribute to national progress. Despite pro SDG efforts and adoption of anti corruption strategies like the National Anti Corruption Strategy (NACS) 2017–2020, progress has been uneven and public confidence remains fragile.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Conceptual Framework

Sustainable development is recognized globally as a multidimensional process encompassing economic growth, social inclusion, environmental protection, and institutional stability (United Nations, 2015). For developing nations such as Nigeria, achieving this goal remains a critical imperative given widespread poverty, inequality, and fragile governance systems. Despite its abundant natural resources and human capital, Nigeria continues to rank low in human development indices, largely due to entrenched structural and governance challenges (UNDP, 2022). Among these challenges, three interrelated phenomena social exclusion, institutionalized corruption, and insecurity stand out as formidable obstacles to the attainment of sustainable development objectives. Nigeria's aspiration to achieve the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030 requires addressing systemic governance weaknesses and creating inclusive socio-economic opportunities. However, the persistence of exclusionary practices, corruption

networks, and pervasive insecurity has thwarted meaningful progress. These issues not only impede economic growth but also deepen societal inequalities, perpetuate political instability, and create an environment hostile to human development (Akanle & Omobowale, 2019).

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Sustainable development in Nigeria hinges on economic growth, social equity, and institutional integrity. However, systemic challenges such as social exclusion, institutionalized corruption, and insecurity have significantly undermined progress toward achieving sustainable development goals (SDGs).

Social Exclusion refers to the systematic marginalization of certain groups from economic, social, and political participation. In Nigeria, ethnic and religious disparities, gender inequality, and regional imbalances perpetuate poverty and limit access to education, healthcare, and governance opportunities. Social exclusion creates a vicious cycle of deprivation, weakening human capital development and reinforcing socio-economic inequality, which are critical determinants of sustainable growth.

Institutionalized Corruption represents the entrenchment of corrupt practices within governmental and organizational structures. This manifests through embezzlement, bribery, nepotism, and policy manipulation. Corruption undermines the rule of law, reduces trust in public institutions, and diverts resources meant for development projects. It stifles foreign investment and distorts market dynamics, leading to inefficiencies in infrastructure, education, and healthcare systems. Ultimately, institutionalized corruption erodes the foundational pillars of governance required to drive inclusive and sustainable development.

Insecurity, driven by insurgency, banditry, kidnapping, and communal clashes, further exacerbates Nigeria's development challenges. The proliferation of armed groups and weak security frameworks displace populations, disrupt agricultural production, and discourage investment. Insecurity increases the cost of governance as resources are diverted from social services to security expenditures. Consequently, sustainable development is compromised as instability hampers poverty reduction, quality education, and industrial growth.

Interrelationship of Variables: The conceptual nexus between these variables reveals a mutually reinforcing dynamic. Social exclusion fuels grievances that often escalate into violence and insecurity. Corruption weakens security institutions, enabling crime and insurgency to thrive. Conversely, insecurity fosters conditions conducive to corruption, particularly in defense procurement and humanitarian aid management. Together, these factors generate a structural trap that perpetuates underdevelopment, widening inequality and reducing institutional effectiveness.

Implications for Sustainable Development: Addressing these threats requires a multi-pronged approach encompassing inclusive governance, institutional reforms, and robust security architecture. Effective anti-corruption strategies, social policies that promote equity, and conflict resolution mechanisms are essential for breaking this cycle. Without addressing these systemic issues, Nigeria's path toward sustainable development remains uncertain.

3. Exclusion Processes in Politics and Government in Nigeria

3.1. Position of Chief Executives:

For the position of chief of executive such as President, Governors, LGA Chairmen and their Deputies; the exclusion criteria used by the major parties for selection of candidates include: education, ethnicity, religion, secret cult membership, beneficial social connections, funds (individually sourced and sourced from sponsors). We want to refer to these as the six includes /excluders.

3.2. Other Executive Positions in the Politics

Other executive arms, such as minister, commissioner, adviser, personal assistant, etc, are also included and excluded based on the first five of the six excluders but also how much fund was contributed to fund for the election of the chief executives under reference.

3.3. Legislature

The members of the national assembly; state assemblies and LGA assemblies are also selected by the main political parties for election using the same six exclusion/inclusion criteria as used for selecting candidates for elective chief executive positions.

3.4. Judiciary, Civil/Public Services, Armed Forces and Security Services

For access to positions in the above, the six inclusion and exclusion criteria operate with the first four as above as constant and remaining of the six as slot purchasing ability and quota system lopsidedly applied in favour of the dominant ethnic groups and religion.

3.5. Reactions of the Excluded and Unemployed

The reactions of the excluded and unemployed is logically anger, frustration; a feeling of hopelessness and general alienation. This psychological reaction, which becomes widespread as the "system" continues, unchanged and unchanging, is the context which is "Insecurities genic". In the context of Northern Nigeria, we point out that since Nigeria got political independence in 1960, the northern political elite has been in power for most of the years, from 1960 to the present for at least forty-three (43) years out of the sixty one (61) years. These are, 1963-1966; Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, General Yakubu Gowon, 1966-1975; General Muritala Mohammed, 1975-1976; Shehu Shagari, 1979-1983; Muhammadu Buhari; 1983-1985; Ibrahim Babangida, 1985-1993; Sani Abacha, 1993-1996; Abdusalam Abubakar, 1998-1999; Umar Musa Yar'adua, 2007-2010; Mohammadu Buhari, 2015-date.

Through newspapers and other news media statements, and one-on-one discussions, northern youths lament that apart from the period of the regime of Sir Ahmadu Bello (when all northerners, irrespective of ethnicity or religion benefitted and enjoyed from the governance process) the common man in the north has not benefitted from the processes and benefits of governance. They argue with much justification that the ruling political elite has ensured through the exclusion processes listed above, that only members of their families and a few hangers-on, monopolize true involvement in and access to the benefits of their many years of dominating governance in the country.

The ordinary youth, who have no family or other beneficial social connections, feel that they are just cannon fodders in the battles of the political elite to dominate and monopolize the benefits of governance for themselves and their family members who live in unimaginable opulence in the sea of mass poverty.

It is argued in this paper that Boko Haram and other insecurity challenges manifest in the north (and to a lesser extent, in the south) because governance has not improved significantly the lives of the common man, and existential conditions have remained the same or even deteriorated comparatively.

These governance exclusion processes have lead systematically through multi-level exclusions which include

- Exclusion from running for political office;
- Exclusion from appointments into the judiciary, civil and public service, the armed forces and the security services;
- Exclusion from the processes and proceeds of contract award and other corruptible transaction processes.

4. Institutionalized Corruption as a Structural Barrier

Corruption in Nigeria has evolved from isolated misconduct to a deeply entrenched culture within public and private institutions. It manifests in embezzlement, bribery, nepotism, and procurement fraud.

Scope and Impact: From colonial times to the present democratic era, corruption has diverted billions of dollars meant for development. Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index has consistently ranked Nigeria among the most corrupt nations globally.

Public Institutions and Governance: The police, judiciary, civil service, and political offices have been heavily tainted by corruption. Funds intended for education, health, infrastructure, and security are often misappropriated, leading to decay in essential services and increasing public disillusionment.

Developmental Impact: Corruption discourages foreign investment, misallocates resources, and reduces government effectiveness. It perpetuates inequality and deepens public distrust in governance.

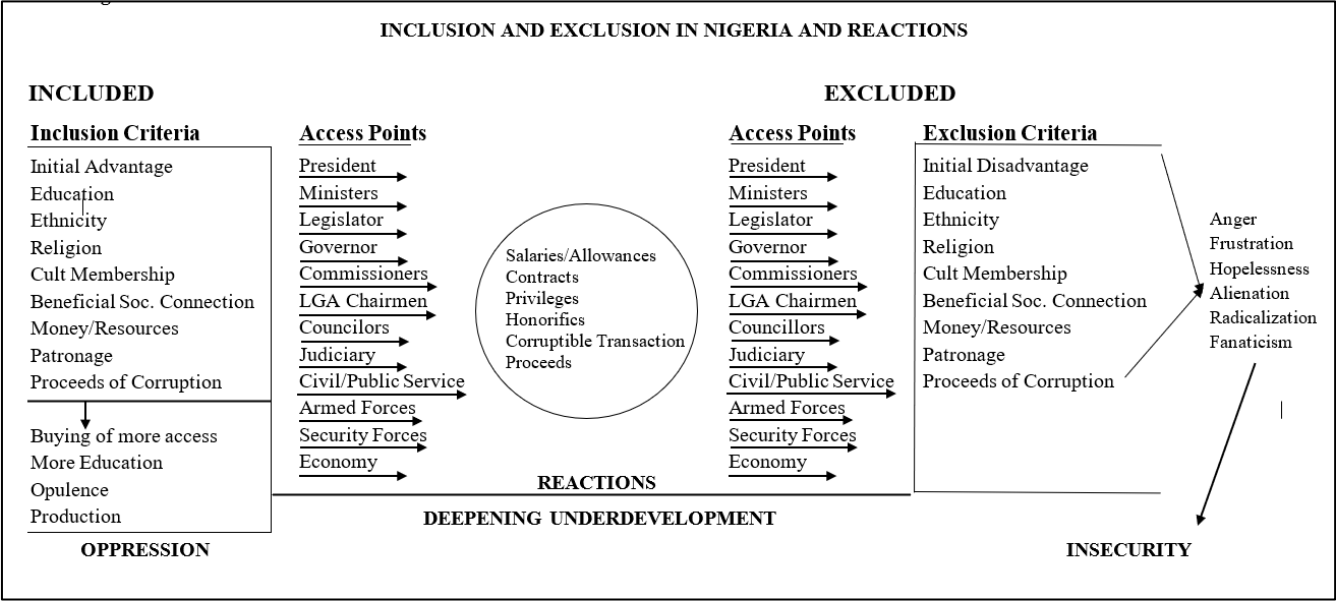


Figure 1 Empirical Evidence Supporting the Research Model

4.1. The Road to Insurgency in Nigeria

We preface this section with the assertion.

The type of political leadership practised in Nigeria is based on total dependence on redistribution of oil wealth and centralization/concentration of political and financial power in the presidency. The perceived need to access the presidency or indeed to hold on to the presidency is the driver for fixing elections, realignment of political party affiliations and alliances and escalations of political violence (Hassan and Iwuamadi, 2015:5).

4.2. Boko Haram: In the Beginning.

After the demise of Maistatsine (which flourished in the 1970s until December 1980) another group, Jama’atuAhlis Sunna Lidda’awatuWal-Jihad, now known as boko haram emerged in the early 2000s. Early popularly known as the Nigerian Taliban, it had the same ideology as the Maitatsine group and had as members radical clerics, such as Muhammadu Yusuf. The group led by Yusuf and which metamorphosed into Boko Haram started as Ecomog (Tishau, 2011). It was a political thuggery group used by the political leadership in Bauchi, Yobe and Maiduguri, which was made up of unemployed young people who withdrew from regular society in Borno state and moved into the mountains in Yobe state in protest against the bad leadership which had inflicted unfold hardship on the people, evidenced by the collapse of the economy and widespread unemployment (Hassan and Iwuamadi, 2015:10).

They claimed that,

They as young people had willingly subscribed to the social processes recognized by the social order of Nigeria and upon completion of their education; they became misfit (Hassan and Iwuamadi, 2015:10).

It is reported that many of the original members who isolated themselves as a group in the mountains of Yobe state, had degrees and even masters degrees. Their first act was to surrender and destroy their certificates as a symbol of protest against their state of unemployment and poverty. This is a classic case of perceived exclusion.

They gathered and established a commune near Kanama village in Yobe state at a parcel of land between two rivers. This became known as the Kanama commune. Apart from the Kanama commune;

Residents stated that they were later informed that the same group had previously established a commune on the outskirts of another village called Tarmowa (Bukarti, 2021).

This Tarmowa commune was disbanded after a confrontation with the local government authorities which saw its growth as a threat to the government. The narrative from former members of the group stated that by 2003,

There appeared an ideological crack in the ranks of the group. This crack formed into two main camps; one led by Muhammed Ali and the other by Muhammed Yusuf. The break was over two related issues, the first being whether a Muslim is permitted to live in Nigeria which is viewed as dar al-kufr (abode of unbelief). The second concerned the timing for the launching of a Jihad (Bukarti, 2021).

As further reported by the Bukarti, what led Yusuf to part ways with the Ali group was the opposite answers:

On the first issue, Ali believed it was not permitted-the only option was to do hijrah to a purer place and prepare for jihad (Bukarti, 2021).

But Yusuf took a contrary position, albeit with a caveat.

But Yusuf contended that it was possible, provided they did not obey man-made laws and institutions and that they dissociated from the country's secular system. Further, that it was necessary to first preach against un-Islamic society and attempt to call it back to Islam before initiating Jihad against them (Bukarti, 2021).

This probably explains why the Yusuf group became involved as thugs for political leaders in Bauchi, Yobe and Borno states, culminating in its role as 'Ecomog' for the election victory of Sheriff. It may also be because Yusuf believed in working in the secular society to win recruits and source funds to arm and train in preparation for Jihad.

At this point, it is important to note that the initial coming together of the young people who gathered and went to Yobe state to live in a commune was not ideology but a gathering of the 'excluded' disgruntled and alienated, hence their initial act was to surrender and burn their educational certificates. This is explained in Merton's 'social structure and anomie' as a reaction of 'alienation', leading to rebellion against an unjust system.

As Bukarti (2021) put it:

The Kanama commune was not an AL-QUIDA training centre, as some have speculated, nor was it a pacific religious community as suggested by others (Bukarti 2021).

Thus, one can argue, with the evidence available, that the coming together of the Yusuf group to launch violent attack was not primarily motivated by religious ideology but the religious ideology of establishing a sharia state appears to be a rationale under which the non-ideological and more immediate material existential demands were conflated. For example, they claimed at the onset that the government was consumed by the vices such as corruption, marginalization, injustice, poverty, hunger, neglect, joblessness, and poor governance, and inequality, absence of government, economic decline, human rights violation, political violence and tax evasion.

They desired a sharia state where all the above will be absent (Hassan, 2007). Abubakar, one of their leaders was even more specific about the non-ideological and more material existential factors. He said:

Their grievances resolve around three demands: justice for the slain leaders that died in 2009 attack of their enclave by the security forces; compensation for the lives and properties of their leaders and members destroyed in 2009 and introduction of pure sharia state in the northern parts of Nigeria (Monalum, 2012).

Similar findings were reported by Nkwede, Moliki, and Daunda (2017) in their study: corruption, insurgency and Nigeria's development challenges. According to Osaretin Idahosa (2015), Signe Cold-Ravnkilde and Signe Plambech (2015).

Three of the most prominent perspectives shared on these radical movements are poor socioeconomic infrastructures, poor governance and poverty as major catalyst to the rapid increase in membership of these three groups. (Osaretin Idahosa, 2015).

Signe cold-Ravnskilde and Signe Plambech (2015) reported that feelings of injustice by the Nigerian states, which they consider to have terrorized them, were very common among members of Boko haram and who:

Seem to easily recruit young destitutes as members by offering them money, jobs and networks; by addressing their grievances related to failed governance, corruption, absence of the possibility to have future aspirations and underdevelopment. (Signe Cold-Ravnskilde and Signe Plambech, 2015:24).

We will now report with same details on the study conducted by freedom .C. Onuoha, sponsored by the United States Institute for Peace carried out under the CLEEN foundation of Nigeria. The study examined the factors contributing to youth radicalization and recruitment into armed groups.

The study reviewed media reports, databases, policy reports, newspapers, and the academic literature on the subject. In addition to all the above, the study carried out primary research including survey, interviews and focused group discussions.

Consultants and experts conducted field studies in two towns each of the six states of Northern Nigeria: Borno (Maiduguri and BIU), Gombe (Gombe town and Akko), Kaduna (Zaria and Kaduna), Kano (Nassarawa and Tarauni), Sokoto (Sokoto town and Shagari town), and Yobe (Damaturu and Pofiskum), in June to November, 2013. Specifically, the field studies included interviews with traditional leaders, religious leaders, of all religious groups, security officials, women leaders, political leaders, and focus group discussion (FGD) with youth, women, and faith groups. Semi-structural questionnaires were administered to teachers, community leaders, religious leaders, youth organizations, civil society organizations, security agents (officials in police, state security, immigration, defence, prisons, customs, army and vigilante groups) and women groups.

Among its findings are the following:

- Personal engagement with Boko Haram varies widely among its membership. Some are foot soldiers, others are bomb makers, strategists, ideologists, and others are just criminals.
- The reason a young boy agrees to spy on police may be completely different from the reason other members abduct school girls and different from a boy or girl who carries out suicide bombing at a police station and different from the one who makes little money helping the organization out.
- The main causative factors which are economic, social, political and religious in nature, cut-across all six states included in the research. More specifically these are the following in order of frequency of reporting by respondents and interviewees and FGD groups:
 - Unemployment and poverty make youth vulnerable to radicalization. The reports states that unemployment and poverty are socioeconomic challenges that are not only intricably interconnected but glaringly evident, particularly in Northern Nigeria. The reports cites the rate of unemployment reported in 2006 which was 14.60%, increased rapidly to 23.9% by 2011 as evidence of growing unemployment. By second quarter of 2020, the NBS reported a rate of 27%. (NBS, 2021).
 - Even more potent is the reported poverty rate. The National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) reported that despite favourable economic growth and performance, Nigeria's poverty rate increased from 54.7% in 2004 to 60.9% in 2010 and that by 2011, 100 million Nigerians lived in absolute poverty. The NBS report state that out of the ten poorest states in Nigeria (that is where the majority live below the poverty line) reported for Nigeria in 2020, nine are from Northern Nigeria as follows: Sokoto (87.73%), Taraba (87.73%), Jigawa (87.02%), Ebonyi (79.76%), Adamawa (75.41%), Zamfara (73.98%), Yobe (72.34%), Niger (66.11%), Gombe (62.31%), Bauchi (61.53%).

It is also reported that the worst afflicted by the growing poverty are the young people especially in Northern Nigeria. It would therefore appear that unemployment and poverty are the main factors in radicalization in Northern Nigeria.

More interestingly, it has been shown that the tendency to produce suicide bombers is greater in a community defined by the mass misery and joblessness than the one in which basic needs of food, education, health, housing and sanitation are met for the majority of the people (komolafe 2012:56).

- Children with difficult upbringing are more vulnerable to extremist views

The growing numbers of children without adequate parental guidance, is a societal condition that has contributed to the problem of youth radicalization in Northern Nigeria. Children who lack a protective social environment are more likely to be exploited. The study points out that across the states of Nigeria, especially in the north, millions of school-age children are not enrolled in school, exacerbating illiteracy levels and vulnerability to manipulations by the extremist groups.

Widespread poverty in northern Nigeria has contributed to a growing population of destitute children.

5. Empirical Findings

The empirical findings of this study reveal a complex interplay between social exclusion, institutionalized corruption, and insecurity as major obstacles to Nigeria's sustainable development. Evidence indicates that widespread social exclusion fosters marginalization and deepens inequality, limiting access to opportunities and social justice. Institutionalized corruption emerges as a systemic barrier, eroding governance structures, misallocating resources, and undermining public trust. Similarly, persistent insecurity disrupts socio-economic activities, discourages investment, and heightens vulnerability across communities. Collectively, these factors reinforce one another, creating a cycle of underdevelopment. The findings underscore the urgent need for inclusive policies, transparent governance, and security reforms to achieve sustainable progress.

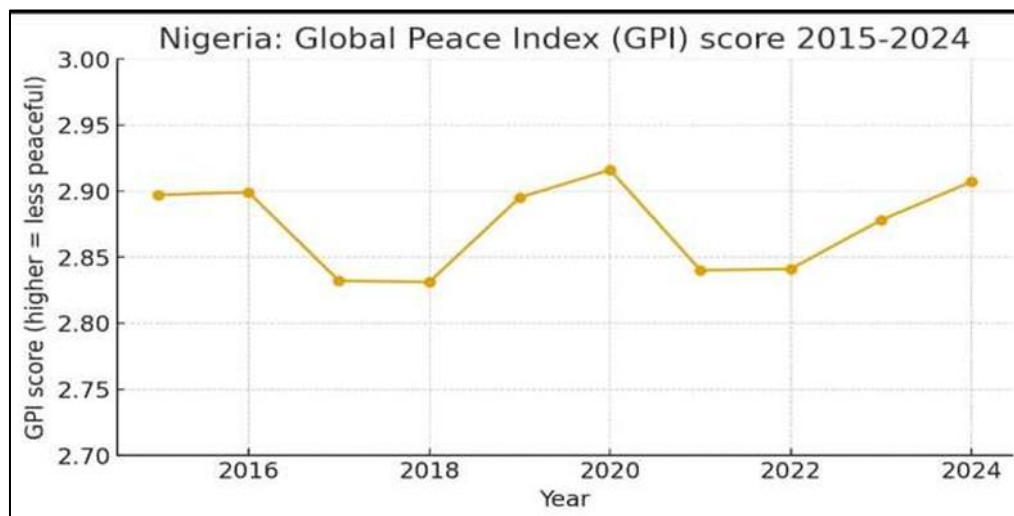


Figure 2 A trend analysis of Nigeria Peace Index score (2015-2024)

The graph depicts Nigeria's Global Peace Index (GPI) scores between 2015 and 2024, where higher scores indicate lower levels of peace. The trend shows fluctuations rather than steady improvement, reflecting the persistent and cyclical nature of insecurity in the country. Between 2016 and 2018, there was a modest decline in the score, suggesting a slight improvement in peace conditions, likely due to relative containment of insurgency in the northeast. However, from 2018 to 2020, the index worsened again, coinciding with heightened banditry, farmer-herder conflicts, and kidnapping for ransom. The sharp dip around 2021 reflects temporary improvements, possibly linked to intensified security operations, but this progress was not sustained as the scores climbed again from 2022 to 2024.

In the context of Nigeria's sustainable development, these variations highlight how insecurity, institutionalized corruption, and social exclusion reinforce instability. Corruption undermines resource allocation for security, social services, and economic reforms, while exclusion fuels grievances that militant groups exploit. Insecurity then disrupts education, agriculture, and investment, eroding development gains. As such, the graph is not just a measure of peace but a mirror of Nigeria's governance crisis, showing that without tackling corruption and exclusion, sustainable peace and development remain elusive.

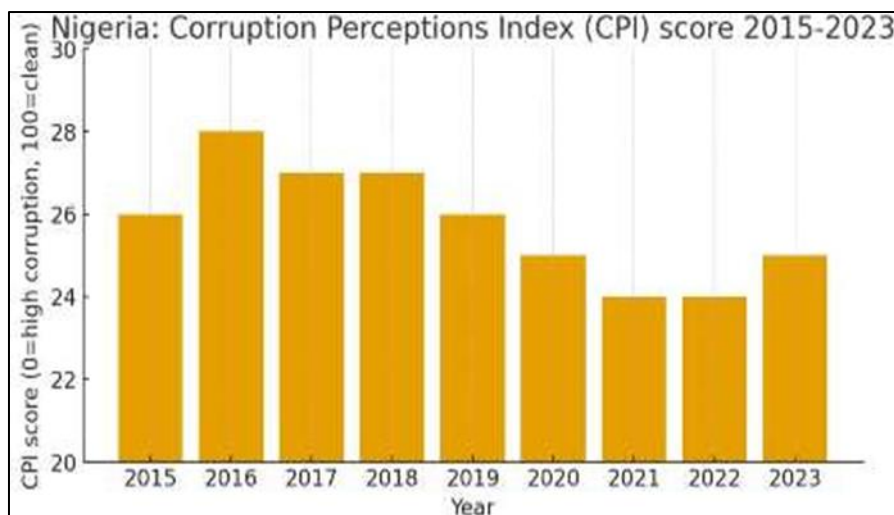


Figure 3 A chart of Nigeria Corruption perceptions Index (CPI) score 2015-2023

The Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) chart for Nigeria (2015–2023) reveals a pattern of persistent, systemic corruption with only marginal year-to-year variation. After a modest high around 2016 ($\approx 28/100$), Nigeria's perceived cleanliness declined gradually through 2019–2021, reaching a nadir near 24 in 2021–2022 before a slight uptick to 25 in 2023. These scores—well below global and regional averages signal entrenched governance deficits: diversion of public funds, weak transparency in procurement and irregularities in social-program delivery, which UNDP identifies as direct impediments to achieving the SDGs.

Practically, the CPI trend implies chronic underinvestment in public goods and social protection that disproportionately harms excluded groups, deepening multi-dimensional poverty and social exclusion. Corrupt practices within security institutions also erode operational effectiveness and public trust, creating perverse incentives that exacerbate insecurity and criminality. For policymakers, the chart underscores two priorities. First, anti-corruption reforms must target fiscal transparency, procurement, and politically exposed persons with measurable safeguards to prevent leakage of funds intended for health, education and livelihoods. Second, anti-corruption and security-sector reforms should be coordinated: strengthening accountability inside security agencies reduces impunity and improves citizen protection. Together these measures would help break the feedback loop where corruption fuels exclusion and insecurity, which in turn sustain corrupt networks and advance Nigeria's sustainable development agenda. Practical steps include publishing procurement records in open-data formats, strengthening independent audit and anti-graft agencies, protecting whistleblowers, and legally earmarking recovered assets for community-level social investments that reduce exclusion and rebuild trust. Monitoring and civil-society engagement are essential to ensure reforms translate into concrete service improvements for marginalized communities, and sustainably.

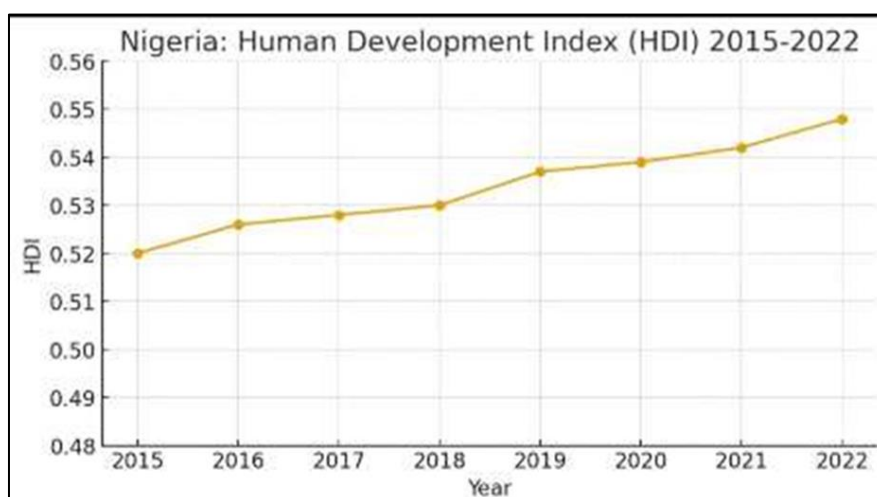


Figure 4 Nigeria's Human Development Index (HDI) 2015-2022

The Human Development Index (HDI) chart for Nigeria (2015–2022) shows a gradual upward trend, rising from about 0.52 in 2015 to 0.55 in 2022. This improvement suggests incremental progress in health, education, and income indicators. However, the growth is modest compared to global averages, placing Nigeria within the “low human development” category (UNDP, 2022). The slow pace reflects the persistent impact of social exclusion, corruption, and insecurity on human development outcomes. Social exclusion remains evident as large populations, particularly in rural areas, lack access to quality education, healthcare, and economic opportunities. Corruption has siphoned resources meant for human capital investments, weakening institutions that should drive equitable progress (Transparency International, 2023). Meanwhile, insecurity ranging from insurgency to communal conflicts has disrupted schooling, displaced populations, and undermined livelihoods, limiting the extent of HDI gains (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2024).

Thus, while Nigeria’s HDI shows steady progress, the marginal improvements highlight systemic barriers to sustainable development. Without addressing institutionalized corruption, reducing social exclusion, and tackling insecurity, the pace of human development will remain insufficient to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

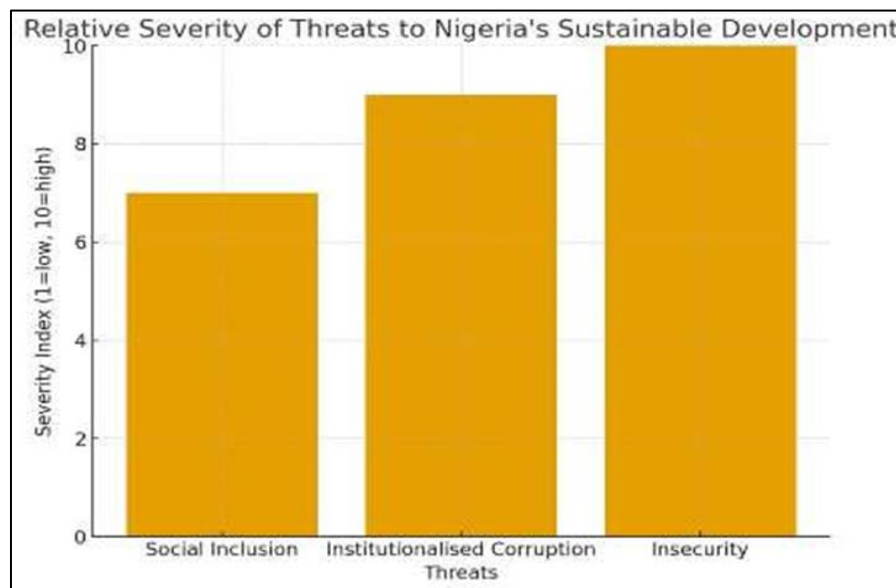


Figure 5 Relative severity of Threats to Nigeria’s sustainable development

The chart illustrates the relative severity of three key threats to Nigeria’s sustainable development: social exclusion, institutionalized corruption, and insecurity. Each is rated on a severity index (1–10), with insecurity scoring the highest (10), followed by corruption (9), and social exclusion (7). These findings underscore how deeply entrenched governance and security challenges undermine Nigeria’s progress toward achieving inclusive and sustainable development.

Insecurity, with the highest severity rating, remains the most destabilizing factor. Persistent insurgency in the northeast, widespread banditry, farmer–herder conflicts, and mass kidnappings continue to displace communities, disrupt education, and weaken agricultural production, threatening food security and livelihoods (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2024). This level of violence not only causes human suffering but also deters investment, undermining economic growth. Institutionalized corruption, rated nearly as severe, perpetuates inefficiency and mismanagement in both public and private institutions. Transparency International (2023) consistently ranks Nigeria poorly on the Corruption Perceptions Index, showing how elite capture of resources erodes public trust and deprives critical sectors such as health, education, and infrastructure of needed investments. Corruption also intersects with insecurity, as funds allocated to security are often diverted, reducing the state’s ability to respond effectively to crises (Akinola, 2020).

Social exclusion, while relatively lower in severity compared to the other two, remains a significant barrier to development. Excluded groups particularly women, youth, and rural communities often lack access to education, employment, and healthcare (UNDP, 2022). This exclusion fosters cycles of poverty and vulnerability, making marginalized populations more susceptible to recruitment by extremist groups, thereby indirectly fueling insecurity.

Together, these three threats form a mutually reinforcing cycle: corruption undermines state capacity, exclusion fosters grievances, and insecurity destabilizes development gains. Addressing them holistically through governance reforms, inclusive policies, and enhanced security sector accountability is critical to breaking this cycle and steering Nigeria toward sustainable development.

6. Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that exclusionary practices entrenched within Nigeria's political and governance processes systematically marginalize the majority of citizens, amounting to a de facto repudiation of the social contract enshrined in the constitution. Such institutionalized exclusion delegitimizes governance in the eyes of ordinary Nigerians, as exemplified by the pervasive manipulation of recruitment and appointment processes in public institutions, where merit is sidelined in favor of nepotism, patronage, and elite capture. The consequences are visible in the growing ranks of unemployed and underemployed youths who, despite meeting formal qualifications, are denied opportunities. This sustained alienation fuels anger, frustration, and hopelessness, creating fertile ground for radicalization, violent extremism, and political instability.

At its core, exclusion in Nigeria is inseparable from corruption and nepotism, which distort governance, erode institutional credibility, and perpetuate cycles of poverty and insecurity. While numerous legal frameworks and policy instruments formally mandate equity, justice, and meritocracy, these provisions remain largely decorative, observed more in breach than in practice. Successive administrations, whether military or civilian, have failed to reverse this culture of impunity. The optimism that accompanied political transitions—such as the election of the Buhari administration in 2015 has repeatedly given way to disappointment, as governance continues to be characterized by patronage networks, elite bargaining, and the unchecked accumulation of public resources. In fragile states like Nigeria, governance is less about the exercise of sovereign authority for collective welfare and more about transactional appeasement between dominant social forces. This dynamic sustains corruption, weakens institutions, and entrenches exclusionary politics. Breaking this cycle demands more than rhetorical commitments to reform. It requires a deliberate reconfiguration of governance to prioritize inclusive participation, transparency, and meritocracy, coupled with the dismantling of patronage systems that perpetuate inequality. Without such transformative changes, Nigeria risks remaining trapped in a vicious cycle of exclusion, corruption, insecurity, and underdevelopment, thereby undermining its capacity to achieve sustainable development and national cohesion.

Policy Recommendations

- Inclusive Governance and Federal Character Reform:

Revamp the federal character principle to ensure merit-based but regionally balanced representation in public institutions. Empower marginalized groups through affirmative action in education, employment, and political participation.

- Strengthening Anti-Corruption Agencies:

Enhance the independence, funding, and capacity of anti-graft agencies like the EFCC and ICPC. Implement digital governance to reduce human discretion and opportunities for corruption.

- Security Sector Reform:

Train and equip security forces with modern tools and community-based intelligence mechanisms. Address root causes of insecurity through economic empowerment and education in conflict-prone areas.

- Civic Education and National Reorientation:

Promote national unity and civic responsibility through educational curricula and media campaigns. Encourage whistleblower protection and citizen involvement in governance.

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