
Leadership And Governance Challenges In Nigeria: Implications For Sustainable Development

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Abstract

This paper examines leadership and governance challenges in Nigeria and their implications for sustainable development. It identifies corruption, ethical deficits, political intimidation and political clientelism as major components of leadership and governance in the country. The paper further examines how these components have contributed to several inequality, infrastructure deficits, security deterioration, environmental degradation and institutional fragility, thereby impinging the outcomes of sustainable development. It also reviews measures undertaken at the international, federal, state and grassroots levels to enhance leadership and governance including anti-corruption reforms, public financial management, electoral reforms, institutional strengthening and community participation. Despite these efforts, ethnic particularism, political interference and electoral deficiencies continue to constrain their effectiveness. The paper argues that persistent weaknesses in leadership and governance undermine institutional performance, service delivery and the capacity of Nigeria to achieve sustainable development. It therefore recommends merit-based public sector appointments, greater institutional independence for accountability and regulatory bodies, as well as reforms to strengthen the credibility and independence of electoral administration.

Keywords: Leadership, Governance Challenges, Nigeria, Sustainable Development

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Across the world, societies have since time immemorial been guided by individuals who attained authority through election, heredity or forceful ascension, thus directing collective affairs towards the pursuit of shared objectives. Consequently, the practice and principles of leadership have been transmitted across generations, evolving in form and application to suit changing social, political and economic realities. The emergence of leaders has therefore remained central to the exercise of authority and the management of public affairs across nations. However, nations continue to grapple with diverse leadership and governance challenges, including weak institutions, and limited citizen participation (United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 2022; World Bank, 2024a). These challenges have significant implications for sustainable development by, inter alia, constraining economic growth and limiting the attainment of long-term development goals (United Nations, 2023). The interplay between the variables is evident across countries of the world.

For example, in 2021, the American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE) assessed infrastructure in the United States of America (USA) and assigned it an overall grade of "C-," while estimating a funding gap of approximately \$2.59 trillion over a ten-year period due to leadership and governance inefficiencies in infrastructure management (ASCE, 2021). The resulting deficiencies undermine transportation efficiency, constrain access to clean water and limit the resilience of critical infrastructure systems (U.S. Congress, 2021). In response, the USA enacted the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) in 2021, committing approximately \$1.2 trillion towards the modernisation of transportation networks, water systems, broadband connectivity, clean energy infrastructure and climate resilience initiatives (U.S. Congress, 2021). Consequently, over \$568 billion was announced for over 66,000 infrastructure projects across the country in 2024, improving economic opportunities and enhancing the quality of life of millions of Americans (The White House, 2024).

In Indonesia, disjointed municipal governance and weak enforcement of groundwater extraction regulations impeded effective urban resource management in the capital region (Apriansyah, 2026). This hindered sustainable development as excessive groundwater abstraction caused land subsidence of about 5 to 6 centimetres annually and increased the vulnerability of coastal communities to tidal flooding (Widodo et al., 2025). To address the crisis, the government introduced zero-groundwater zones through provincial regulations and strengthened water utility modernisation programmes (Kurmala, 2026). Consequently, ongoing investments in water distribution infrastructure are aimed at achieving 100% piped water coverage by 2030, reducing land subsidence risks and improving access to safe water for millions of residents (DW, 2023; Jakarta Investment Centre, 2026).

In Zambia, delays in diversifying the national energy mix and reforming electricity sector infrastructure weakened the country's energy security framework (Mundia & Kaluba, 2018). This hindered sustainable development by contributing to a 14.5% decline in electricity generation and causing recurrent power outages that disrupted economic activities and industrial operations (Global Legal Insights, 2025). To address these vulnerabilities, the government implemented reforms to attract private sector participation and secured a \$246 million investment to expand solar power generation capacity (Energy Review Africa, 2026). Consequently, projects such as the 100-megawatt Chisamba Solar Plant are strengthening energy reliability, supporting economic growth and increasing the contribution of clean energy to the national grid (Zambia State House, 2026).

Despite its vast human and natural resource endowments, Nigeria continues to experience widespread infrastructural deficits, poverty, unemployment, insecurity and declining public service delivery, reflecting

the composition of the fabric of the nation's leadership and governance (Oni & Excellence-Oluye, 2019). These challenges are reflected in international assessments, as Nigeria was ranked among the 11 African countries that recorded the greatest deterioration in governance between 2014 and 2024, declining from 30th to 33rd position on the continent within the period, just as it ranked 157th out of 189 countries in the 2017 Human Development Index (HDI), dropping to 164th out of 193 countries in the 2025 report (Addeh, 2024; UNDP, 2025). These reports indicate a persistent deterioration in leadership effectiveness, governance quality and sustainable development outcomes over the past decade. Consequently, there is a need to establish the nexus between leadership, governance and sustainable development in Nigeria. This underscores the purpose of this paper.

1.2 Aim

The aim of this paper is to examine leadership and governance challenges in Nigeria and their implications for sustainable development.

1.3 Scope

1.3.1 Time: This paper covers the period from June 2017 to June 2026. This is selected to capture a decade of governance and development dynamics in Nigeria.

1.3.2 Space: The paper is limited to Nigeria, focusing on leadership, governance and development conditions in the country.

1.3.3 Content: The paper examines leadership and governance challenges in Nigeria and their implications for sustainable development, with emphasis on institutional performance, policy outcomes, service delivery and socio-economic development indicators.

1.4 Operational Definition of Terms

The following terms are defined within the context of this paper.

- **Leadership:** This refers to the ability of individuals occupying political and administrative positions in Nigeria to influence, coordinate and direct national resources, institutions and policies toward the achievement of development objectives.
- **Governance:** This connotes the processes, institutions and mechanisms through which authority is exercised in Nigeria, including decision-making, policy implementation, accountability, transparency and management of public resources.
- **Leadership and Governance Challenges:** These mean persistent deficiencies in Nigeria's leadership and governance systems, including corruption, weak institutions, policy inconsistency, poor accountability and inefficiency in public service delivery that hinder effective national development.
- **Sustainable Development:** This refers to development processes in Nigeria that meet present socio-economic needs such as poverty reduction, infrastructure development and improved welfare without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs, particularly across economic, social and environmental dimensions.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Agency Theory

Ross (1973) and Mitnick (1975) produced the early ideas of Agency Theory through their works in economics and political science. However, Jensen and Meckling (1976) expanded the usage of the Theory for governance, finance and organisations purposes. Later, Fama and Jensen (1983) developed the Theory

by examining the separation between ownership and control. Their work was improved by Eisenhardt (1989) who applied it more broadly to organisational studies.

Agency Theory models the relationship between two parties, namely the principal who gives authority or resources, and the agent who acts on behalf of the principal (Jensen & Meckling, 1976). The core premises Theory rests on three main assumptions:

- i. **Different Goals:** The principal and agent may have separate interests and objectives.
- ii. **Information Advantage:** The agent often has more information about the organisation's activities and use of resources than the principal.
- iii. **Self-Interest:** Both parties generally pursue their own interest. Therefore, if there is little monitoring, an agent may prioritise personal benefits ahead of the principal's interests (Jensen & Meckling, 1976).

Since the principal cannot monitor all the actions and activities of the agent without incurring costs, it may lead to agency problems. These include moral hazard where the agent acts carelessly or avoids responsibilities after being appointed, and adverse selection where the agent provides misleading information about their abilities before being given the position (Jensen & Meckling, 1976).

Jensen and Meckling (1976) suggested ways to mitigate these problems as principals incur agency costs by:

- i. **Monitoring Costs:** Principals bear the expenditure to monitor the agent such as performance checks and audits.
- ii. **Bonding Costs:** Agents incur the expenses to assure the principal that they will be responsible like guarantees and compliance reports.
- iii. **Residual Loss:** The loss left when the agent's decisions are averse to the principal's interests.

2.1.1 Methods Used in Arriving at the Theory

Agency Theory was developed mainly through contract theory, utility theory and economic models (Jensen & Meckling, 1976; Ross, 1973). The theorists combined ideas from property rights theory with mathematical models of risk-sharing and organisational theory (Rose 1973). Their perspective of the governance institution or firm is that it is not a single unit, but rather a relationship of contracts involving individuals with different interests who enter into and manage agreements (Jensen & Meckling, 1976). Subsequent studies tested the Theory using assessments of organisational monitoring, comparisons of firms and quantitative statistical methods (Eisenhardt, 1989).

2.1.2 Scholarly Critiques of the Theory

Notwithstanding its wide use, scholars have criticised Agency Theory in political economy and organisational studies for different reasons. These are:

- i. **Overly Narrow View of Human Behaviour:** Critics argue that the Theory assumes people are mainly motivated by personal and financial interests, while giving little attention to factors like professional ethics, personal values and altruism (Perrow, 1986).
- ii. **Limited Consideration of Social Context:** Critics argue that the Theory overemphasises contracts and economic relationships, without sufficiently considering the influence of history, social norms, culture and informal relationships (Granovetter, 1985).
- iii. **Possibility of Creating Distrust:** Ghoshal (2005) posited that treating agents as naturally self-serving may lead organisations to create excessive controls and low-trust environments which can actually discourage the behaviour the controls are meant to prevent.

- iv. **Alternative Perspective:** It is believed that Stewardship Theory provides another angle, suggesting that agents can act responsibly in the interests of the organisation when they are trusted, given responsibility and allowed to operate independently (Donaldson & Davis, 1991).

2.1.3 Relevance to the Study

Agency Theory offers a useful way of understanding the nexus between governance and development in Nigeria. In public administration and democratic governance, citizens are the principals who give power, authority and public resources to elected leaders and public officials who act as agents saddled with promoting sustainable development. The Theory is a paradigm to examine how limited information and weak monitoring in the public sector aids political self-interest, misuse of public assets and diversion of resources meant for sustainable development initiatives.

2.1.4 Application to the Study Variables/Likely Outcome

Agency Theory links governance structures to sustainable development outcomes. The governance mechanisms are treated as the factors that influence development outcomes.

2.1.4.1 Independent Variables: Governance Mechanisms and Monitoring Controls

- **Public Financial Controls and Transparency Measures:** Systems like the Treasury Single Account (TSA) and Integrated Payroll and Personnel Information System (IPPIS) serve as monitoring mechanisms for the reduction of information gaps and misuse of public resources.
- **Electoral Technologies and Oversight Institutions:** Platforms such as the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) and INEC Election Result Viewing Portal (IREV) provide mechanisms through which citizens can monitor and hold political leaders accountable during elections.
- **Institutional Fragility and Political Interference:** These reflect weaknesses in monitoring systems, especially where institutions such as the judiciary and anti-corruption agencies are influenced or controlled by political actors.

2.1.4.2 Dependent Variables: Governance Mechanisms and Monitoring Controls

- **Agency Costs:** These include infrastructure deficits, inequality and environmental degradation which represent the losses suffered by citizens when political leaders prioritise personal or elite interests over public service delivery.

2.1.4.3 Likely Outcome

Weak monitoring mechanisms and political interference are expected to upsurge agency costs, thereby resulting in poorer development outcomes. These outcomes may be reflected in declining Human Development Index (HDI) performance, infrastructure deficits and increased social instability. On the contrary, mechanisms designed for stronger regulatory independence, rule of law, auditing and accountability are expected to reduce opportunistic behaviour and ultimately improve sustainable development outcomes.

3. CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS

3.1 Leadership: Ogunmilade, Nwoko and Akhigbe (2017) view leadership as a process through which one individual consistently exercises greater influence than others in the pursuit of group behaviour. Their definition emphasises the exercises of influence by an individual over others within a group. Although the exercise of influence is relevant to the present study, the definition is broader and does not specifically address political and administrative leadership or the direction of public resources, institutions and policies

towards development objectives. This definition is not adopted because its general focus on group influence does not sufficiently capture the political, administrative and development dimensions of leadership examined in this study.

Nwapi (2016) conceives leadership as a social influence process in which an individual or group intentionally influences other groups or groups to structure activities and relationships within a group, organisation or society. The definition therefore underscores intentional influence and the organisation of collective activities and relationships. The definition partly aligns with this study because leadership involves influencing and directing others. However, it does not specifically identify political and administrative office holders or their responsibility for coordinating public resources, institutions and policies towards development objectives. This definition is not adopted because its broad social-influence perspective does not adequately reflect the specific political, administrative and developmental focus of this study.

Ake and Olowojolu (2016) define leadership within the confines of the politico-bureaucratic officialdom comprising political office holders and public bureaucrats. Their definition therefore places leadership within the formal political and administrative structures through which public authority is exercised. This is tandem with the trajectory of this study as it focuses on individuals occupying political and administrative positions and their role in directing public institutions and resources meant for development goals.

3.2 Governance: Danyaya (2021) defines governance as the efficient and effective utilisation of human and material resources for the benefit of the majority. The definition focuses primarily on the efficient use of available resources to achieve broad societal benefits. While the contextualisation is line with the study, it does not appropriately cover the institutional processes and mechanisms through which authority is exercised. The definition is narrower than the focus of the present study because it mainly sheds light on resource utilisation and does not adequately address decision-making, policy implementation, accountability and transparency. This definition is therefore not succinct because its emphasis on resource utilisation alone does not fully capture the wider governance processes examined in this study.

Nwapi (2016) describes governance as the exercise of political, economic and administrative power or authority to manage a country's resources and affairs. Nwapi (2016) further explains that governance involves the mechanisms, processes and institutions through which citizens and groups exercise their rights, fulfil their obligations and manage their differences. This closely aligns with this study because it incorporates authority, institution, mechanisms, processes and resource management which are central elements of this study. As a result, the definition is adopted as its broad institutional and process-oriented understanding of governance mostly closely corresponds with the focus of this study.

3.3 Sustainable Development: Ekoja (2025) defines sustainable development as the continuous improvement of citizens' living standards coupled with structural transformation of the productive and distributive systems of the economy. The definition therefore emphasises improved welfare and economic transformation as critical components of sustainable development. This position is in line with this study's focus on socio-economic development and improved welfare but it gives less attention to the environmental dimension and the needs of future generations. Hence, it is not adopted because its primary emphasis on living standards and economic transformation does not aptly capture the economic, social and environmental factors of sustainable development.

Nwapi (2016) clarifies sustainable development in simple terms as the capacity to continue into the future. The definition prioritises the continuation and long-term nature of development and sustainability. Though this capture the intergenerational and long-term element of this study, it is too broad to adequately explain

the specific socio-economic and environmental dimensions of sustainable development examined in this study. This definition is not adopted in that its broad concentration on continuity does not sufficiently capture the specific development dimensions considered in this study.

Danyaya (2021) views sustainable development as the principles established to meet human development goals for the present, tomorrow and future generations. The definition therefore emphasises meeting human development needs, while maintaining a long-term perspective. This is consistent with this study as it captures the primary concern of meeting present development needs while ensuring that development remains sustainable for future generations. This definition is adopted because its attention on present and future human development is in line with the focus of this study.

4. OVERVIEW OF LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE CHALLENGES IN NIGERIA

Prior to Nigeria's independence, indigenous nationalists actively organised conferences and political engagements to advance the quest for self-governance and secure freedom from British colonial rule (Ogunmilade et al., 2017). As such, independence was attained in 1960, with leadership transferred from the British colonial administration to the indigenous population comprising over 400 ethnic nationalities, while a federal system with strong regional governments was adopted (Ogunmilade et al., 2017). However, the unity that characterised the nationalist struggle gradually gave way to ethnic rivalries, as political parties, public institutions and resource allocation became increasingly influenced by primordial and sectional interests (Ogunmilade et al., 2017). The resulting competition among the three major ethnic groups contributed to the collapse of the First Republic, the emergence of military rule and the eventual outbreak of civil war in 1967 (Ogunmilade et al., 2017; Oni & Excellence-Oluye, 2019; Afolabi, Adegbam, Omiwole, & Ojedokun, 2020).

Consequently, Nigeria was governed by military regimes for 16 years spanning from 1983 to 1999 under Generals Muhammadu Buhari, Ibrahim Babangida, Sani Abacha and Abdulsalami Abubakar, a period characterised by declining oil revenues, authoritarian leadership, human right abuses, weak institutions, administrative inefficiency, favoritism and widespread corruption that adversely affected the country's development trajectory (Ogunmilade et al., 2017; Oni & Excellence-Oluye, 2019; Afolabi et al., 2020). According to Ogunmilade et al. (2017), corruption in government transactions, estimated at about 10% during the 1966 coup led by Major Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu, escalated to 100% by the time the military handed over power in 1999, reflecting a significant deterioration in leadership and governance.

Since the advent of the Fourth Republic in 1999, Nigeria's democratic governance has been characterised by misrule, corruption, declining electoral quality, and intolerance of dissenting views, all of which have weakened the legitimacy of elected governments (Oni & Excellence-Oluye, 2019; Afolabi et al., 2020). The governing class has faced widespread criticism due to persistent socio-economic and political crises characterised by rising debt burdens, capital flight, infrastructural decay, food insecurity, poverty, currency depreciation and underdevelopment (Ogunmilade et al., 2017). Furthermore, the struggle for political power, weak institutions, mediocre leadership, divisive politics, corruption, electoral manipulation and recurring governance instability have continued to undermine democratic consolidation and exacerbate socio-economic challenges in Nigeria (Oni & Excellence-Oluye, 2019; Ogunmilade et al., 2017).

4.1 Components of Leadership and Governance Challenges in Nigeria

- i. **Corruption Dynamics:** Abuse of public office for private gain, diversion of public resources, bribery, nepotism and weak accountability systems have been deeply rooted in administrative structures since the British bequeathed power to Nigerians (Oni & Excellence-Oluye, 2019). Corruption has since remained pervasive across all levels of society in Nigeria, with anti-corruption

institutions such as the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) and the Independent Corrupt Practices Commission (ICPC) frequently enmeshed in political interference, thereby undermining their effectiveness in combating corrupt practices (Afolabi et al., 2020; Adekunle, 2023; Sukare & Usman, 2026).

Statistically, this condition is reflected in Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), where Nigeria ranked 148th out of 180 countries with a score of 27/100 in 2017, falling to 142nd out of 182 countries, with a score of 26 out of 100 points, indicating persistently high level of perceived public-sector corruption over the period (Transparency International, 2025). This pattern has persisted, reflecting the systemic nature of corruption within Nigeria's leadership and governance framework over time.

- ii. **Ethical Deficit:** Nigeria's leadership and governance culture has been shaped by colonial legacies and post-independence military cum political dynamics that gradually entrenched self-serving political behaviour and weak institutional norms (Oni & Excellence-Oluye, 2019). Leadership in the country is increasingly widely featuring a combination of self-interest over national interest and limited administrative competence, where governance is often driven by elite accumulation, political patronage, and the assumption of office without adequate preparation for policy and developmental responsibilities (Afolabi et al., 2020; Adekunle, 2023; Sukare & Usman, 2026). According to Afrobarometer's public attitude surveys, Nigerians' assessment of their leadership has significantly worsened since 2017, culminating in over 80% expressing little to no trust in the country's central leadership institutions. This absence of patriotic capacity is increasingly featuring in leadership and governance outcomes in Nigeria, reinforcing structural weaknesses in public administration and policy execution.
- iii. **Political Intimidation:** Intimidation, suppression and coercion were prominent features of military rule in Nigeria, where state power was frequently employed to enforce obedience and secure compliance from citizens, institutions and opposition groups (Oni & Excellence-Oluye, 2019). These practices continue to manifest within the democratic era, as political actors often use state institutions, security agencies and other instruments of power to intimidate opponents, influence electoral outcomes and consolidate political control, thereby weakening democratic norms and civil liberties (Oni & Excellence-Oluye, 2019). As result, the Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index ranked the country 108th out of 167 countries in 2017 and 106th globally in 2024, with its overall democratic score deteriorating from 4.44 to 4.16 out of 10 over the period, indicating a deterioration in democratic governance, political participation and civil liberties over the period (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2025). These elements continue to influence political behaviour and state-society relations in contemporary Nigeria.
- iv. **Political Clientelism:** Political appointments and public offices in Nigeria have often been influenced by patronage networks, whereby positions of authority are used to reward loyalty and political support rather than competence and merit (Oni & Excellence-Oluye, 2019). The use of public offices as instruments of political settlement now remains a recurring feature of governance, with appointments frequently criticized for prioritising personal loyalty, political affiliations, and patronage considerations over professional expertise and administrative capacity (Oni & Excellence-Oluye, 2019).

This challenge is reflected in Nigeria's weak performance on the World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators, particularly in government effectiveness, where the country remained below the global average throughout the 2017-2024 period, indicating persistent concerns about the quality of public administration and institutional performance (World Bank, 2024b). This practice

remains prevalent, fostering the perception that political office serves as a means of rewarding loyalty rather than advancing effective governance and public service.

5. IMPLICATIONS OF LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE CHALLENGES IN NIGERIA ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

- i. **Severe Inequality:** Leadership and governance challenges in Nigeria have fostered systemic corruption and resource mismanagement. These challenges have diverted public funds away from essential social services such as healthcare, education and social safety nets, leaving a large proportion of the population in extreme poverty. Consequently, between 2017 and 2026, the number of people living in poverty increased from about 79 million (40.1% of the population) in 2018 to 140 million (63%) in 2025, the country's HDI ranking declined from 157th out of 189 countries in 2017 to 164th out of 193 countries in 2025, while the number of out-of-school children rose from about 10.5 million in 2017 to 18.3 million by 2024, the highest globally according to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) (Addeh, 2024; World Bank, 2024c; UNDP, 2025; UNICEF, 2024).

Similarly, the under-five mortality rate remained among the highest in the world, increasing from about 107 deaths per 1,000 live births in 2018 to 115 deaths per 1,000 live births in 2025, while the maternal mortality ratio stood at approximately 1,047 deaths per 100,000 live births in 2020, and only 36% of children aged 12–23 months were fully immunised in 2025 (World Health Organization, 2024). These indicators reflect weak institutional performance, poor policy outcomes, inadequate service delivery and deteriorating socio-economic development conditions which are essential for sustainable development in Nigeria.

- ii. **Infrastructure Deficit:** Leadership and governance challenges in Nigeria have contributed significantly to infrastructural deficits arising from weak accountability mechanisms, poor project oversight and non-transparent procurement processes, resulting in abandoned projects and inadequate maintenance of public assets. As such, Nigeria's infrastructure stock remains among the lowest globally, with an estimated infrastructure deficit of over \$2.3 trillion as of 2025, while approximately 86.8 million Nigerians lacked access to electricity in 2025, and only about 40.2% of the population had access to safely managed drinking water services in 2025, indicating persistent deficiencies in critical infrastructure provision (World Bank, 2024c; International Energy Agency, 2024; World Health Organization & UNICEF, 2023). The indicators therefore highlight persistent leadership and governance gaps in infrastructure planning, implementation and maintenance, thereby limiting the capacity of critical sectors to effectively support sustainable development in Nigeria.
- iii. **Security Deterioration:** Leadership and governance challenges in Nigeria have contributed to heightened insecurity by fostering political exclusion, weak conflict-management mechanisms, youth unemployment and unresolved ethno-religious and resource-based disputes. As a result, insecurity has worsened considerably, as conflict and violence displaced about 1.8 million persons in North-East Nigeria in 2017, rising to over 3.3 million Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) nationwide by 2025, while 34.7 million Nigerians were projected to face acute food insecurity during the 2026 lean season, compared to about 7 million affected persons in 2017 (International Organization for Migration, 2025; Food and Agriculture Organization et al., 2025; United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs). These indicators reveal unabated leadership and governance deficiencies in addressing the underlying drivers of insecurity, thereby constraining sustainable development in Nigeria.

- iv. **Environmental Degradation:** Leadership and governance challenges in Nigeria have contributed to environmental degradation through the weak enforcement of environmental regulations, poor oversight of extractive activities and inadequate waste management systems, particularly in the Niger Delta and major urban centres. Consequently, between 2017 and 2025, Nigeria experienced severe environmental degradation, with oil spill incidents remaining consistently high at 600 cases in 2017, 589 cases in 2024 and over 400 cases in 2025, while the country lost approximately 1.4 million hectares of tree cover between 2001 and 2024, including 1.1 million hectares of natural forest between 2021 and 2025 (Punch Newspapers, 2023; Global Forest Watch, 2025; Nigeria Climate Watch, 2026). These indicators reveal persistent leadership and governance deficiencies in environmental management, thereby undermining environmental sustainability and the broader pursuit of sustainable development in Nigeria.
- v. **Institutional Fragility:** Leadership and governance challenges in Nigeria have weakened public institutions through the erosion of the rule of law, political interference in regulatory bodies and inconsistent enforcement of accountability mechanisms. This is reflected in Nigeria's performance on the World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators which has deteriorated over the period, with its Rule of Law estimate declining from about -1.08 in 2017 to -1.04 in 2024, while its Government Effectiveness estimate remained weak at approximately -0.84 in 2017 and -0.87 in 2024, indicating persistent institutional weaknesses (World Bank, 2025d). These indicators underscore the extent to which institutional weaknesses continue to impede effective governance and sustainable development in Nigeria.

6. EFFORTS TO IMPROVE LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE IN NIGERIA

- i. **International Partnerships:** Historically, Nigeria's efforts to improve leadership and governance have been supported by international organisations such as the UNDP, World Bank, African Union (AU) and Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) through governance reforms, anti-corruption initiatives, electoral support and public-sector capacity-building programmes. These partnerships continue through initiatives aimed at strengthening democratic institutions, improving public financial management, promoting transparency, enhancing electoral integrity and supporting the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (UNDP, 2024; World Bank, 2024d). These efforts have contributed to improvements in public financial transparency, with Nigeria's Open Budget Index score increasing from 17/100 in 2017 to 31/100 in 2023, while citizen participation in budgeting rose from 13/100 to 19/100 during the same period (International Budget Partnership, 2024).
- ii. **Federal Reforms:** Overtime, the Federal Government has pursued governance reforms through the establishment of anti-corruption agencies, public service reforms and institutional strengthening programmes. These efforts include the implementation of the National Anti-Corruption Strategy (NACS), Treasury Single Account (TSA), Integrated Payroll and Personnel Information System (IPPIS), the digitalisation of electoral processes through the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) and the INEC Result Viewing Portal (IREV), as well as the the Open Government Partnership (OGP) framework (Federal Government of Nigeria, 2024).

These initiatives have yielded measurable results, as the TSA reportedly consolidated over ₦10 trillion in government revenues by 2022, with IPPIS eliminating 70,000 ghost workers and generating cumulative savings of over ₦220 billion (Office of the Accountant-General of the Federation, 2024). Similarly, voter accreditation during the 2023 general elections was conducted electronically across over 176,000 polling units using BVAS, while INEC reported that the

technology reduced incidents of multiple voting, voter impersonation and manual manipulation that characterised previous electoral cycles (INEC, 2023).

- iii. **State-Level Reforms:** Historically, state governments have complemented federal governance initiatives through public-sector reforms, fiscal responsibility measures and localised anti-corruption and accountability mechanisms. Many states are increasingly implementing e-governance systems, digitised land administration, public procurement reforms, fiscal transparency measures and performance-based budgeting systems to improve governance and service delivery (Nigeria Governors' Forum, 2024). As such, state-level transparency has improved, as the States Fiscal Transparency, Accountability and Sustainability (SFTAS) programme enabled participating states to access over \$1.5 billion in performance-based grants between 2018 and 2023 for achieving governance and fiscal reform benchmarks (World Bank, 2023).
- iv. **Grassroots Participation:** Local governments were established to bring governance closer to the people and facilitate community participation in development planning and service delivery. Efforts to improve governance at the local level include community-driven development programmes, participatory budgeting initiatives, digital revenue systems and renewed calls for Local Government autonomy following recent judicial and policy reforms (Federal Ministry of Finance, 2024). As such, the multi-state intervention ultimately targeted and delivered micro-projects to approximately 8,800 micro-communities across 29 states, improving institutional access for roughly 23 million rural Nigerians (World Bank, 2024).

7. CHALLENGES TO THE EFFORTS TO IMPROVE LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE CHALLENGES IN NIGERIA

- i. **Ethnic Particularism:** This manifests in the prioritisation of ethnic representation over merit, the pursuit of divergent regional agendas, elite patronage through political cronies, rotational claims to political power and cultural orientations that place greater emphasis on personal and/or group interests than national integration (Adekunle, 2023; Sukare & Usman, 2026). Recent examples include the declaration by President Bola Ahmed Tinubu during the 2023 electoral cycle that it was his "turn" to become President of Nigeria, as well as reports cited by Adekunle (2023) that a prominent northern political figure threatened to make the country ungovernable for Goodluck Jonathan if power was not returned to the North. This situation undermines the measures adopted at all levels to improve leadership and governance in Nigeria in that it prioritises tribal loyalties and paralyses service delivery.
- ii. **Political Interference:** This remains a major challenge to efforts aimed at improving leadership and governance in Nigeria, manifesting in the undue influence of political actors on anti-corruption agencies, regulatory institutions and judicial processes. The problem assumes various dimensions, including selective law enforcement, partisan appointments, manipulation of accountability mechanisms and obstruction of institutional independence. The issue is evident, as Nigeria's Rule of Law score declined from 21.2/100 in 2017 to 17.5/100 in 2025, while Government Effectiveness deteriorated from -0.84 to -1.01 during the period (World Bank, 2025).
- iii. **Electoral Deficiencies:** Critics, including former Resident Electoral Commissioner Mike Igini, have alleged that certain provisions and the implementation of recent electoral reforms have been manipulated to weaken transparency and compromise the credibility of elections, while concerns persist over the appointment process of the Chairman of INEC, which is perceived by some stakeholders as making the office susceptible to executive and partisan influence. Consequently, electoral irregularities, vote buying, voter suppression, result management controversies and declining voter turnout have continued to produce leaders whose emergence is often questioned,

thereby weakening accountability and the capacity of governance institutions to effectively respond to the developmental needs of citizens.

8. CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the impact of leadership and governance challenges on sustainable development in Nigeria. Since independence, leadership and governance have remained below expectation, encompassing corruption, political intimidation, and political clientelism, among others. Consequently, sustainable development has been undermined, resulting in widening inequality, infrastructure deficits, and environmental degradation, to mention a few. Various measures, including international partnerships, federal reforms, and grassroots participation, have been undertaken to improve leadership and governance in the country. However, these efforts continue to be constrained by factors such as ethnic particularism, political interference, and electoral deficiencies. It is therefore imperative to take decisive steps to reposition leadership and governance in Nigeria to achieve meaningful and sustainable development.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

- i. The federal government should structurally institutionalise a merit-based public service appointment framework and implement a mandatory national civic integration curriculum across all tiers of government to eclipse identity-based political patronages.
- ii. The NASS should constitutionally decouple anti-corruption agencies, regulatory bodies, and the judiciary from executive control by granting them absolute financial autonomy and removing presidential powers over their operational leadership appointments.
- iii. The federal government should amend the Electoral Act to strip the Executive of the power to appoint the INEC Chairman and Commissioners, vesting that authority in an independent body while digitising the end-to-end result management process to eliminate human manipulation.

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